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Terrence Robsjohn-Gibbings

A few designers produced a hybrid style of furniture that was a mix of historicism and Modernism. One of these was Terrence Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905-1976), an Englishman who immigrated to the U.S. in 1930. He was trained as an architect but had worked as an art director for a British movie production company. He also worked with London antique dealer Charles Duveen and spent time in the British Museum studying the vast collection of ancient Greek material. By the time he set up his own interior decorating firm in New York in 1936, Robsjohn-Gibbings was uniquely positioned to reinterpret classicism in contemporary terms.

Many of his commissions in the 1930s seem to have been deluxe showrooms in an understated Moderne style. Furniture forms were simplified, materials were sumptuous. A showroom for Antoine de Paris on Fifth Avenue, opened in 1940, featured polished rubber floor tiles, floor-to-ceiling glass doors with bronze fittings, side chairs in bleached birch with pigskin seating surfaces and blocky torchères with bronze urns. A period photograph shows a carved hand with long fingernails, palm upturned, brimming with free cigarettes—a Surrealist touch.

Occasionally, Robsjohn-Gibbings indulged in unbridled fantasy. Between 1934 and 1938, he designed more than 200 pieces of furniture for Mrs. Hilda Boldt Weber's 23,000-square-foot neo-Georgian mansion, Casa Encantada, in Bel Air, California. He mined Greco-Roman and Egyptian imagery for inspiration, including sphinxes, dolphins, lion's paws and Ionic columns. A console table is supported by a carved griffin, the heavy tabletop balanced incongruously on the beast's head and wingtips. In a *Low Table with Carved Ram's Head*, circa 1936, the ram's head and the leafed pedestal that sprouts from it are beautifully carved. (Current information does not

record who did the work.)¹ The incorporation of animal imagery into furniture was not Robjohn-Gibbings's invention, but a distinctly modern touch makes this piece unique: the tabletop is an unadorned slab of glass. The painted imitation molding on the base also gives an up-to-date flavor. It adds a note of restraint, too: if the molding had been three-dimensional, it would have competed with the head.

Robjohn-Gibbings said he hated the machine aesthetic of the 1930s, even as he incorporated parts of it in his designs. His imaginative recycling of motifs from antiquity remains highly unusual, and the marriage of playful classicism with streamlined modernism in the Casa Encantada pieces is probably unique, but his quirkiness was not widely emulated.