

# Haines rose to Hollywood fame in the 1920s

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William "Billy" Haines lived an improbable life on his way to becoming a world taste-maker.

He was devastatingly handsome. His wit was trenchant. He starred in some 50 movies and was sought out by the most glamorous, wealthy, talented and influential people in the world as a dinner companion.

But interestingly, his most-lasting legacy is that of his keen aesthetic.

Haines, who initially rose to fame as a Hollywood movie star in the 1920s, had such a stylistic eye for elegant, modern design that his influence persists today, decades after his death. And of course, his story intersects with Palm Springs.

Born in a very small town in Virginia, Haines ran away from home at age 14 with a young man he called a "boy-friend" to the lawless, sin city of Hopewell, where he learned about the world. Eventually matriculating to New York City and Greenwich Village, his good looks landed him modeling and small acting jobs. He was discovered by a talent scout and won a Goldwyn Studios contest in 1922, sending him to Hollywood at the dawn of its golden era.

His characters were witty and wise-cracking, not unlike Haines himself. He eventually would star opposite some of the biggest stars in the Hollywood firmament: Joan Crawford with whom he would be lifelong friends, Marion Davies, and Mary Pickford.

On a trip back to New York in 1926 he met Jimmie Shields and convinced him to travel back to Los Angeles with him. They lived together for the next 47 years as the first openly gay couple in Hollywood.

In 1930, he was rated the biggest box-office attraction in the country.

In 1933, after Haines was arrested at a YMCA with a sailor, Louis B. Mayer, then the head of Goldwyn Studios, gave



**Lucille Ball as Desert Circus Queen in 1964. She was a good friend of William Haines.** PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Haines an ultimatum — choose either Shields or a "lavender marriage" in which Haines would marry a woman, in name only, to conceal his homosexuality.

Haines refused to hide the fact he was gay and was subsequently fired from the studio, effectively ending his career. Undaunted Haines and Shields partnered in business as interior designers and antique dealers.

Haines' friends were clients: Joan Crawford, Gloria Swanson, Carole Lombard, Rosalind Russell, Constance Bennett, Marion Davies, Lucille Ball, Ann Rutherford, Jack Benny and George Cukor. Cole Porter, another friend, rented Haines' Brentwood house. Orry-Kelly was a close pal too.

Haines was regularly collaborating with the most important architects of the age, on lavish homes in Beverly and Holmby Hills, and New York.

And as the ultra-stylish crowd regularly traveled to Palm Springs, so did Haines.

He bought his own houses here, and decorated them with his distinctive style, which looked deceptively insouciant.

In 1939, he created a desert living room for the San Francisco World's Fair, the Golden Gate International Exposition. As a consummate businessman, he would often lease his desert home to others, even advertising in *The Desert Sun* newspaper.

"William Haines Offers for Lease or Sale His New Deluxe Furnished Home, 3 Bedrooms, 3 Baths, 2 Maids' Rooms. Refrigerated Air and Heat, Terrazzo and Parquet Floors, Fine Antiques and Modern. Heated Pool, 2 Televisions. \$2500 Per Month, 3 Month Minimum. Adults."

Jack Warner, the mogul at his eponymous studio, was a customer at Haines' Palm Springs home.

Haines knew Warner from his movie days, and had already spent two years decorating two floors of the venerable Sherry-Netherland Hotel on the corner of 5th Avenue kitty-cornered from The Plaza in New York, for Warner, and had also designed his 10-acre Beverly Hills estate.

When Jack Warner wanted his own desert digs, he turned to Haines.

In 1958, they found land in Old Las Palmas with two small shabby houses on it.

Years later, Warner's daughter Barbara explained to *Palm Springs Life Magazine*, "Mother and Billy assured my father it would be a simple, fast renovation. Nothing major. Cheap and cheerful."

The resulting *Villa Aujourd'hui*, (French for on the day of today,) took two years and Haines and Mrs. Warner went wild ending with five buildings and two pools.

Haines designed every bit of the furniture, splashed the rooms with Asian antiques and the rarest of antique European landscape-scene wallpaper.

The grounds were strewn with Greek statuary, and the pool was bound by a Roman temple cabana. Mixed themes somehow blended seamlessly in the hot sun. The furniture was truly remarkable, having the most gracious of proportions. The seats were deeper than expected, the backs slightly rounded, comforting and comfortable, but low-slung, denoting quiet elegance and sophistication.

Haines designed five homes, including one in Palm Springs, for Mr. and Mrs. Tom May, who had 49 department stores across the nation at the time, and were described by *The Los Angeles Times* as "so popular their friends won't let them rest over weekends."

Notable in an already exceptional list of prominent clients, were Nancy and Ronald Reagan and Walter and Lee Annenberg. Working with Los Angeles architect A. Quincy Jones (who with Paul R. Williams had designed the Town and Country Center in Palm Springs in the 1940s), Billy Haines designed the interiors of the Annenberg home in Rancho Mirage named Sunnylands, and appointed it with his signature furniture. The project took three years and was finished in 1966. The Annenbergs were so pleased that they imported Haines to London to redecorate Winfield House ahead of Annenberg's residence there starting in 1969 as the United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom at a cost of one million dollars.