

Montgomery Meets Modernism

Two Americas

The Spirit of the West

Long after the Western frontier was settled, many Americans were engaged in the notion of the “the spirit of the West.” Following the hardships of World War II, many Americans yearned for a simpler time and lifestyle. Looking to the past, there was nostalgia for the ideals and traditions of the American West.

Hollywood was no exception, and the film genre of “Westerns” dominated theaters from the early 20th century to the 1960s. With a mythic vision of the West, these films celebrated cowboys, romanticized (or vilified) Indians, and featured the vast untamed landscapes of the American frontier.

Known for his characterization of the handsome cowboy in films that featured the “Old West,” George Montgomery was also an art collector, sculptor, and furniture craftsman. Many of the objects in this gallery were either collected by or created by Montgomery himself. In 1943 Montgomery married singer/actress Dinah Shore and they divided their time between Hollywood and Palm Springs. Soon after he established a cabinet shop and worked with as many as 20 cabinet makers for nearly 40 years designing and crafting traditional furniture that favored historical American styles. Influenced by the work of master artist Charles Russell, Montgomery also began creating bronze sculptures of fellow actors as well as “cowboys” and “Indians.” The art he collected, including Navajo weavings and paintings of the American West, featured traditional Western themes and motifs.

The Modern Spirit

While many Americans embraced historical ideals and traditions, others looked toward the future. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States experienced unparalleled economic growth and development inspired by advances in science and technology. By the 1950s-60s, America found its place on the world stage and was developing its identity as a global superpower.

In the arts, modernists abandoned traditional decorative and representational forms. With roots in early 20th-century European movements in painting and architecture, American modernists employed bright colors, elegant geometric forms, and new industrial materials. This postwar spirit of optimism expressed itself with an unprecedented sense of possibility in the future.

Southern California was a hotbed for midcentury modernism in art, architecture, furniture, and design. On the West Coast, artists such as Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg epitomized the best of abstract modernist painting. Palm Springs became known for its innovative modernist architects such as Albert Frey (pictured above),

William Cody, Richard Neutra, Donald Wexler, and E. Stewart Williams (architect of the Palm Springs Art Museum), to name a few. They adapted contemporary materials, styles, and techniques that became as much of a tourist attraction as Palm Springs's dry climate, mountain vistas, and swimming pools. Integrating indoors and out, their modernist buildings transformed this small desert village into a model for new designs for living.

Palm Springs

Incorporated in 1938 (the same year as Palm Springs Art Museum), early 20th-century Palm Springs was a typical Southwestern desert town known as a place for healing and renewal. Just over 100 miles from Hollywood, it became increasingly popular as a stylish community for the entertainment industry. Many moving here built houses that celebrated the past, combining Spanish Colonial style with adobe building traditions of Native Americans. Others brought a passion for the new, designing sleek, modern houses notable for their clean lines, use of glass, and their inventive use of industrial materials. By the 1950s, Palm Springs was American's foremost desert resort. Today, Palm Springs has again become a top tourist destination known for its confluence of historical and modern styles, spirits, and attitudes.