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BILLY BALDWIN'S TIMELESS STYLE

Re-Emergence Of A Design Legend

TEXT Kate Premo, New York, NY



ABOVE: Billy Baldwin's most famous piece, the slipper chair, is among the Baldwin pieces recreated by Billy Baldwin Studio.

Almost 100 years after his birth in Baltimore, Maryland, the style of legendary American designer Billy Baldwin is returning to prominence. Natural materials, clean, simple designs and classic shapes are once again gaining widespread popularity with several designers, while others say that Baldwin's timeless aesthetic never really went out of fashion.

Although Billy Baldwin was beloved by clients and admired by design aficionados throughout the United States and Europe, Maryland played an especially

important role in his style. He was born in Baltimore in 1903 and lived and worked in Baltimore in the 1930s. Even after he moved to New York, the mid-Atlantic region influenced his style. Hunt-country living served as an ideal to which many of his designs aspired.

Baldwin combined natural materials and pared down shapes in simple yet stunning decorating schemes. He used textiles in new and inventive ways; for example, he often used cotton or silk that resembled cotton, and he pioneered the use of raffia upholstery. The materials in his rooms, such as raffia,

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ABOVE: Pieces in Billy Baldwin Studio's Billy Baldwin collection include the step table, Turkish ottoman, tuxedo sofa, *étagère* and the studio loveseat.

straw and bamboo, brought a light, airy element to these spaces, while the shapes and lines he incorporated into his designs enhanced the natural textures of these materials.

While Baldwin's look was distinct, it was neither trendy nor locked into a certain time or place. As Mark Hampton wrote in his book *Legendary Decorators of the Twentieth Century* (Doubleday), "A characteristic of Billy's work is the fact that he never abandoned the trademarks that he loved so much; on the other hand, he did not allow them to become dull-looking and ossified." Baldwin's designs were more about style than fashion, and as a result his aesthetic is as relevant today as it was years ago.

The clean, simple aesthetic of Baldwin's decorating extended to his home furnishings designs. Like many designers, he worked with clients to develop unique pieces for their homes, which complemented the rest of their décor. Each of his furniture designs features the economy of line and scale for which he was so well known and many have become classics. While he created several pieces, his best-known and most easily recognized design may be the slipper chair.

Like Xerox machines and Palm Pilots, Baldwin's slipper chair was the first product of its kind and the one against which all similar designs are measured. This small, low, armless chair has become an

archetype since its creation in the 1930s.

According to Baldwin, the chair's versatility is the secret of its success. "Small women and football linebackers find it equally comfortable," he once said. "It can be covered in anything from leather for a man's study to pink flowered chintz for a ladies bathroom and still look good. Several of them can be used in one room and not make it look the least bit like a movie house. They are light as a feather, people find them easy to drag about. Those little chairs have a way of making everyone feel at home."

Today Billy Baldwin's classic slipper chairs are part of the Billy Baldwin Collection by Billy Baldwin Studio available through the Niermann Weeks showroom at The Washington Design Center. Each piece in the collection is created by hand to the precise standards of the originals.

To ensure accurate reproduction, "we acquired pieces from the original manufacturer and clients, then measured each piece so we could recreate them exactly," explains Susan Dempsey of Billy Baldwin Studio. Each standard piece of Their Billy Baldwin Collection is an exact replica of an original Baldwin design. While pieces are also available custom, "the only change we really did was when we took his exact designs and re-scaled them for kids, to create our children's collection."

The enduring appeal of Baldwin's designs rests in their timeless style, according to Ms. Dempsey. "These designs are simple and classic," she says. "They fit in with any décor. They look just as great standing next to something modern as they do next to an antique."

Like his legendary slipper chair, Billy Baldwin's visionary style is at once elegant and basic. His time-tested aesthetic is as appropriate today as it was decades ago, and as it will be for decades to come.