



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE DIANI

# David Phoenix

Quality And Comfort Are The Hallmarks Of This Los Angeles Designer

BY DIANE DORRANS SAEKS

**WITH A LIFELONG PASSION FOR** America's cultural and architectural heritage, David Phoenix leaves a lasting impression on those who seek modern interpretations of classic tailoring.

A native Bostonian, Phoenix has rightfully earned his reputation as one of the country's most prominent designers with a fresh approach to California traditional elegance. He was recently honored with a prestigious appointment to the State Historical Resources Commission of California (SHRC).

Currently Phoenix and his firm are working on a contemporary and elegant 40,000 square foot residence designed by architect Richard Landry, for a member of the Saudi royal family. In addition, he embarked on the design for a 15,000 square foot Malibu residence on a three acre site, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was built ground up for Nancy Riordan, well known philanthropist and children's rights activist. Also on Phoenix's roster is

a beautiful Tuscan style farmhouse in Carpinteria for a wealth manager.

As a young man, David Phoenix arrived at LAX with one suitcase, \$2,000 in his pocket, and uncertain about what to do next.

Phoenix was offered a position as a sample librarian at Brunswick & Fils, the prodigies of fabric, in the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles. From there, Phoenix began his design journey. He worked (and learned) at the high profile Ralph Lauren flagship store in Beverly Hills. From clients, he developed great contacts and had a steppingstone to branch out once again.

The pivotal career starter was a custom Christmas basket Phoenix created for producer Joel Silver. The rarely impressed Silver was so astounded by the gift, that he personally made an appearance at the Terra Cotta Interiors store to thank Phoenix, whereupon Silver asked him to arrange his entire



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID PHELPS



In a grand old Montecito estate, the designer restored the interiors to give them a relaxed English country feeling. The rug is a jumbo abaca from Stark. The walls were given a green Venetian plaster finish. The upholstery is linen velvet; antique paisley covers the ottoman from Ralph Lauren; and the back of the house has wonderful walking paths with almost 100 oak trees.

Christmas list. Years of hard work and discovery had led up to this moment. Phoenix began offering his design services to his small but growing client base.

At the PDC, Phoenix had a brief encounter with Maria Shriver. After convincing Phoenix to help with fabrics for her office, Shriver was hooked by his signature aesthetic. From that point on, David became the choice

designer for the Shrivvers, as well as designer for Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Governor Schwarzenegger, former Mayor Richard Riordan, and other notable individuals.

Phoenix excels at updated traditional interiors. "My projects are inspired by the lush, diverse landscapes of New England and California," he notes. "I want my interiors to truly signify what it means to feel at home."



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEAN RANDAZZO

▶ **CH** Who has been the most important design inspiration for you?

**DP** The late, great Michael Taylor. When I first moved to California, I spent a lot of time at a ranch he designed in Santa Ynez, La Quinta Norte. It was a magical place situated in a three hundred acre vineyard. For the interiors, Michael Taylor's sense of scale and use of materials were perfect. Michael's classic approach changed my perspective on design. California's rich heritage of design is very inspiring. Once you discover a hidden find like this one, it's like discovering a treasure.

The late designer Kalef Alaton is a decorator I admire for his use of antiques. He was very glamorous and chic, and I met him while working at Brunswick & Fils as a sample librarian. On a side note, the massive number of those fabric samples I had to file away still haunts me to this day! I often assisted Kalef and was impressed by his great sense of style and his confidence.

**CH** You did not have formal design training and yet clearly you always have great style. What gave you the confidence to launch into the interior design world?

**DP** Confidence really never came into the picture.

That was the beauty of being young I guess. I jumped in feet first without a second thought. One day, I was discussing my interest in opening an office with my mentor, Barry Diller. Without hesitation he said, "How can I help?" He was very encouraging. And, just as Maria Shriver was my first client, she has always been my biggest supporter. I have been very blessed with exciting projects and great clients ever since opening my business.

**CH** Who is your favorite designer?

**DP** I respect many designers from a wide spectrum of aesthetics, but I admire Rose Tarlow the most. I love her use of fabrics, sense of scale, and use of antiques. I have known her for many years, and she has always encouraged me. The interiors she designs have warmth and elegance; they look undecorated, and timeless.

**CH** Other designers who inspired you?

**DP** Sister Parish and Albert Hadley of Parish-Hadley. Sister Parish used the term "quality and comfort" as her mantra, and that is something that has stayed with me in my practice. No one wants to enter a room and feel they are strangers in their own home. As a designer, I



create interiors that are chic, yet so comfortable clients don't want to leave.

**CH** When seeking inspiration for your international roster of clients, which are your favorite rooms?

**DP** I don't specifically look at historic rooms for inspiration, however some extraordinary homes that I personally love are Hearst Castle and Versailles. They are over-the-top but there are details and finished concepts that can be adapted with a light hand.

**CH** Which design books do you treasure the most?

**DP** The *Finest Rooms by America's Great Decorators*, (Viking Press), introduction by Russell Lynes, edited by Katharine Tweed. This is an out of print book that I refer to. It features some of the great decorators, including Michael Taylor, who paved the way for the design community.

Sister: *The Life of Legendary American Interior Decorator Mrs. Henry Parish II* by Apple Parish Bartlett and Susan Bartlett Crater (St. Martins Press, 2000). I love Sister Parish, and this book has so many great stories. She had a great sense of humor. She had a vision and stuck to it.

**OPPOSITE LEFT** In the library, the cocktail table is Rose Tarlow, the antique Oushak carpet from Illouliaan rugs rests on sisal from Stark, and the ladder in the corner, as well as the globes, are from Paul Ferrante, Los Angeles. The chair is covered in an antique fabric from Rose Tarlow's personal collection. **OPPOSITE RIGHT** The "Lennox" sofa is upholstered in linen velvet, with the vintage pillow from Villa Melrose, and the silk velvet pillows are from Ebanista. An antique onyx urn lamp is from Paul Ferrante. The flowers are by David Jones.

**LEFT** The master bathroom in a Brentwood ranch style house has a freestanding "candide" tub from Waterworks. Fixtures are from the Waterworks "Etoile" collection. The braided rug is a custom design from Stark and the flooring from Exquisite Surfaces is antique French oak. The side table was made from an antique marble bowl from India and the iron base was made by Quatrain. The walls are paneled and painted in "Wood Lily" from Dunn Edwards and the ceiling and trim is "Mayonaise" also by Dunn Edwards. Walls were upholstered in a Cowtan and Tout fabric. The painting above the tub is by Tracy Grayson.

**Class Act: William Haines: Legendary Hollywood Decorator** by Peter Schifando and Jean H. Mathison (Pointed Leaf Press 2006). Haines was a California designer with original and glamorous interior concepts. I recently had the pleasure of hearing Jean Mathison speak about Mr. Haines and her stories were wonderful. She gave a great description of his firm that she was a part of for many years.

Bunny Williams' *Point of View* written with Dan Shaw (Stewart, Tabori & Chang 2007). I have always been a fan of Bunny Williams who is a descendent of Parish-Hadley. Her attention to detail is fantastic. I always find inspiration looking through this book.

**CH** Your favorite architect?

**DP** I love the timeless and elegant residences David Adler built in Chicago. In particular, the Armour residence (1931); I love the formality and symmetry of the house. It is so innovative for its era. Another favorite Adler house is in Lake Forest on the Lasker estate (1925). His use of subtle detail and beautifully symmetrical rooms add to the richness.

**CH** What is the best advice you've ever had as a designer?

**DP** A friend once told me, "You don't have to be right about everything." It's useful for creative people to keep this in mind.

**CH** What advice would you give to aspiring designers?

**DP** Pay utmost attention to quality and comfort, and have fun and enjoy every day to the fullest. It is a gift being invited into people's homes. It is an honor to create beautiful spaces in which they will live their lives. ☺