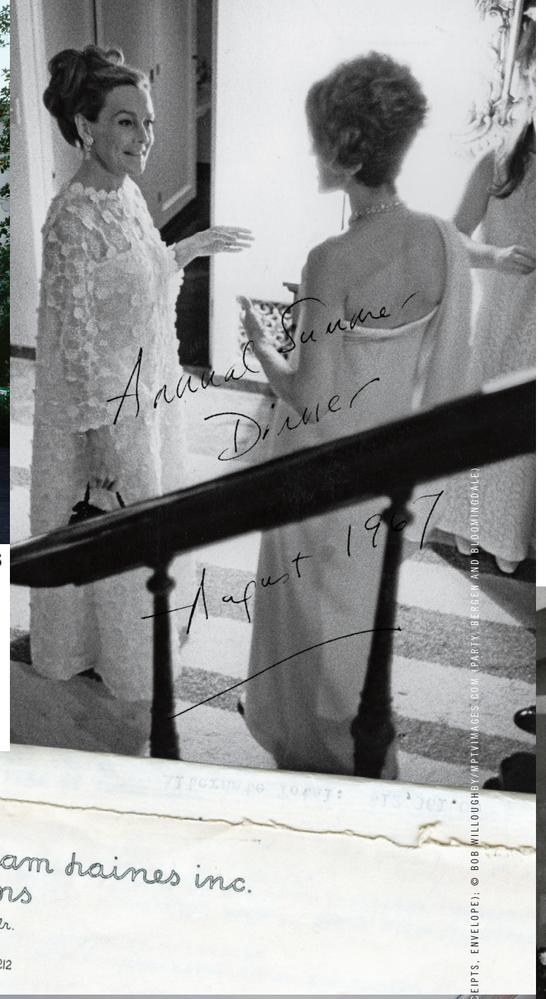

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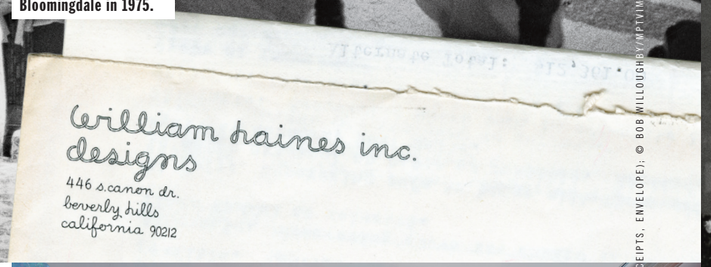
CABINET MEETINGS The Bloomingdale estate, decorated by Billy Haines and visited by movie stars, politicians, and society swans like Mrs. Edgar Bergen (*right*). *Opposite:* Tom Ford; Bloomingdale in 1975.



william haines inc.
designs
446 s.canon dr.
beverly hills
california 90212

. and Mrs. Alfred Bloomingdale
North Delfern
os Angeles, California 90024

DINING ROOM

AB-164-A - Draperies.
Four custom side panels of yellow satin, French headed, lined with two white and one black sateen, trimmed down face and across bottoms with yellow and white braid and tassel fringe set in edge. Draperies hang on rosettes and tie back with custom made yellow and white tassels.

$ 4,080.

Estimate 1/26/73

BREAKFAST ROOM

AB-175-B - Draperies.
Two pairs of custom yellow and white print draperies in the style of Fortuny, French headed, lined with opaque blackout lining. Traversed on owner's own ceiling track.

1,33

Estimate 1/26/73

AB-176-A - Chandelier.
One imported manufactured eight-light chandelier of finely wrought iron stems and leaves, with white porcelain flowers in the style of Meissen china, as shown. Wired approved wiring and completely repainted in and antiqued in the 18th century

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE Original decorator receipts, kept safely by the Bloomingdale family for years and shared exclusively with the writer and *Town & Country*.

TIM STREET-PORTER (HOUSE); INTERIOR COURTESY ESTATE OF BETSY BLOOMINGDALE (RECEIPTS, ENVELOPE); © BOB MILLOUGHBY/AMPTVIMAGES.COM (PARTY, BERGEN AND BLOOMINGDALE)

A HOUSE DIVIDED

BETSY BLOOMINGDALE PRESERVED A BYGONE AGE OF ELEGANCE AT HER LEGENDARY *LOS ANGELES ESTATE*. NOW THAT ITS CONTENTS ARE UP FOR SALE—AND *TOM FORD* IS MOVING IN—A CLOSE FRIEND PONDERS WHAT WILL REMAIN.

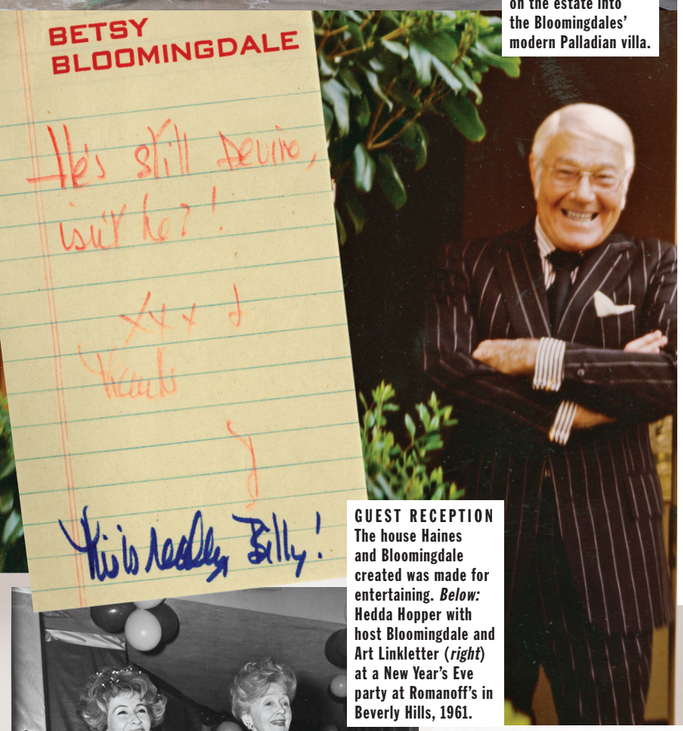
COURTESY ESTATE OF BETSY BLOOMINGDALE (BLOOMINGDALE); © CHRIS CLARKE/FILMMAGIC (FORD)

By Alex Hitz

"Her style came with a smile," proclaimed the *New York Times* in one of Betsy Bloomingdale's many obituaries last July. Socialite, philanthropist, and hostess, Betsy, who died at 93, was synonymous with 20th-century café society. To some she may have been best known as "first friend" to first lady Nancy Reagan. Her tasteful influence on Nancy in matters of dress, decorating, and entertaining was inestimable: a come-hither cocktail of Hollywood-in-its-heyday high style for all the world to see. And Betsy reigned over a magnificent palace of her own creation, in the Holmby Hills section of L.A., that palace being the highest and best example of midcentury American elegance on the West Coast.

Betsy's private collection—the contents of her house—comes to auction April 5 at Christie's New York. The sale features, among other things, the spectacular gilt mirrors, chandeliers, and Billy Haines lamps that lit and reflected the tens of thousands of luminous guests she entertained over the years. Her David Webb and Harry Winston jewelry brought millions on the auction block in December, around the time the residence changed hands. If the fashion, food, and decorating trend prognosticators are correct, 2017 is the year elegance returns. And these items, more than 300 ➳

MAN POWER
Below: **Billy Haines, the decorator who transformed the existing Spanish house on the estate into the Bloomingdales' modern Palladian villa.**



GUEST RECEPTION
The house Haines and Bloomingdale created was made for entertaining. *Below:* Hedda Hopper with host Bloomingdale and Art Linkletter (*right*) at a New Year's Eve party at Romanoff's in Beverly Hills, 1961.

Betsy Bloomingdale

New Year's Eve 1961
Romanoff's Twist Party

lots, are emblems, trophies, and souvenirs of an elegant life in a stylish world. A fun life. A life well lived. Betsy and her husband Alfred, whose family started the eponymous department store and who himself invented the credit card, cared deeply about every detail of the house. And then along came their high style priest of a decorator, Billy Haines.

Last December fashion designer and movie director Tom Ford purchased Betsy's house. It's a jaw-dropping 3.5-acre spread—house, pool, pool house, tennis court, rose garden, and, at one time, lake—that sold for upward of $40 million in a super-secret transaction. Ford boasts to friends that he won't be tearing the house down, an idea that would be all too easily imaginable in the era of zillion-square-foot gold-plated megamansions. But clearly Ford, a man with such a strong aesthetic point of view, understands the importance of the house, the importance of Betsy's style. It makes perfect sense that someone who comprehends the power of glamour and visual history as Ford does has chosen this special house—but even so, his tenancy raises the same questions a new owner of a Vaux-le-Vicomte or Versailles might face. Will this always be the marquis's, the king's, or…Betsy's house? Can he make it his own without compromising the elegance that is its hallmark?

It was Joan Crawford who introduced the Bloomingdales to Billy Haines in the early 1950s, and their collaboration turned out to be the centerpiece of Haines's entire career—his Mona Lisa. They took a Spanish house on a large lot in the poshest part of town, tore it apart, and turned it into a "modern" Palladian villa with glass walls, hand-painted Chinese wallpaper, and fine English antiques. Betsy often said they made the round arches square and went from there. The result was a masterful backdrop for the splendid life of the Bloomingdales: formal dinners for Merle Oberon, Cary Grant, the Jimmy Stewarts. Lunches for Prince Charles or the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Large buffets and cocktail parties for the Reagans, Merv Griffin, the Ray Starks. Among the highlights were an Empire dining room festooned with the finest French gold moiré, and an orchid-filled outside atrium with a retractable glass ceiling.

It was no mistake that every inch of the house was carefully choreographed for glamour, for the discerning eye, perhaps even for a camera. There's no bad angle. Like the ideal of Hollywood itself, everything was just exactly as it should be. Betsy's delicious food: cold beet soup with caviar, exquisite beef short ribs, and the very first homemade caramel ice cream molded in the shape of a porcupine with almonds I ever saw. The parties—balls, more like it—for Queen Elizabeth or Prince Rupert and Princess Josephine Loewenstein, down by the now-extinct lake, where all the provisions from the house were delivered on a funicular. The flowers: cat-head-size dahlias straight from Betsy's garden strewn throughout in silver Revere bowls—a gesture so simple but so glamorous.

I write about the sale with more than a tinge of nostalgia. Betsy was my close friend. When I first went to California more than two decades ago, Betsy, whom I had met through friends in New York, gave lunches and dinners to introduce me around—to Nancy, Joan Collins, Nolan Miller, David Niven, Kelly and Robert Day—you name it. She was a funny, blithe spirit, a kind person with a light touch who was delicious to talk to, and I spent many evenings in that dining room, many afternoons in that atrium. I was there for numerous holidays, and I feel that three generations of her family—an army of luminaries of whom she was intensely proud—are my West Coast family. But looking at these lots, the photographs, and the clippings, I can't help wondering if my nostalgia is just for dear Betsy or also for a different world. A world where manners, elegance, style, and refinement weren't outmoded, obsolete, out of favor, maligned. Tom Ford seems poised to carry on and preserve that world. And that world can be purchased, parts of it, on April 5 at Christie's. Certainly, if Betsy's style was a scepter of elegance and grace, here's hoping those trend prognosticators are spot-on. «

HEAD TABLE
From left: **Vincent and Denise Minnelli; the dining room, decorated by Haines; Rosalind Russell at Bloomingdale's annual summer dinner, 1967.**

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEYS
Bloomingdale with former ambassador to the U.K. Anne Armstrong returning from Princess Diana and Prince Charles's wedding, in 1981. *Below:* Haines filled the house with English antiques and covered the walls with hand-painted paper.