



ARTHUR ELROD

desert modern
design

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cygelman



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Arthur Elrod was the most successful interior designer working in the Palm Springs area from 1954 to 1974. His forward-thinking midcentury interior design appeared in primary homes, second homes, third homes, spec houses, country clubs, and experimental houses—in the desert and across the U.S. He was charming and handsome, and worked tirelessly for his A-list clientele, which included Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Lillian and Walt Disney, and Hoagy Carmichael. Perhaps his most famous work was done in his own home, known as the Elrod House, in Palm Springs, built by architect John Lautner in 1968.

His rise paralleled the growing modernist movement in desert architecture, and he worked alongside the leading California architects of the day, including E. Stewart Williams, William F. Cody, Paul R. Williams, Buff & Hensman, A. Quincy Jones, Wexler & Harrison, Palmer & Krisel, Howard Lapham, Richard Dorman, Edward Fickett and, most famously, John Lautner.

This in-depth biography of the midcentury's wunder-kind interior designer, Arthur Elrod, is the first and only of its kind.

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PALM SPRINGS PART ONE

1947—1952

Elrod could have spent a few weeks or a couple of years at Chouinard; it's difficult to know because no attendance records from the period exist. By 1947 he had departed Los Angeles for Palm Springs. And by this point he had taken elocution lessons to lose his southern accent. "He was always working on himself, always wanting to improve himself," says furniture designer Charles Hollis Jones. He may have tamed his accent, but he never lost that innate southern charm, and it would serve him in good stead throughout his career. Everyone who knew him remembers him as a true gentleman—always polite, always respectful, always gracious.

What was the allure of Palm Springs? From spending time in Los Angeles, he would have heard or read about how inviting this desert resort was. How all the movie stars and industrialists headed there during the season, from November through April, and how they were all building houses. What better way to improve himself than in an affluent resort town surrounded by wealth?

He rented an apartment at 470 Avenida Olancha and found a job as a junior staff decorator in the home furnishings department at the newly opened Bullock's Palm Springs. Until it moved to its location on Palm Canyon Drive in October 1947, Bullock's had operated a seasonal shop on the grounds of the Desert Inn. The store's new Streamline Moderne building by Wurdeman & Becket stood out for many reasons. Bullock's was the first full-scale department store in Palm Springs and featured the village's first elevator, which led up to the second-floor home furnishings department. It was a harbinger of other modern department stores that moved to Palm Canyon Drive—Robinson's, Saks Fifth Avenue, I. Magnin—that catered to an increasingly urbane, cosmopolitan clientele.

OPPOSITE: In 1947 Elrod moved to Palm Springs where he worked as a junior decorator in the home department of the newly opened Bullock's department store. **RIGHT:** Elrod in his early 20s at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles.

"The new store will be unique in its expression of desert living," architects Walter Wurdeman and Welton Becket told the *Desert Sun* (December 14, 1945). "The building is being planned so that a feeling of out-of-door freedom enters every major selling area. Glass walls from floor to ceiling will be bordered by flower and shrub gardens, while opaque walls will be of heat-resistant Thermopane faced with adobe and desert stone. The new store will include a home



OPPOSITE LEFT: Beginning in 1955, the Sunday *Los Angeles Times Home* magazine frequently published Elrod’s projects. The lanai of Marie Green’s house in Rancho Santa Fe on the cover of the August 24, 1958, issue. OPPOSITE RIGHT: Elrod contributed articles to *Home* magazine; his first on February 1, 1959, talked about wood grilles (decorative screens) as room dividers. OPPOSITE BELOW: He also served as the editor of the Desert Home Section for *Palm Springs Life*. A model home his firm decorated for the Alexander Construction Co. in Racquet Club Road Estates, with Palmer & Krisel as the architects, was featured on February 12, 1959.

Editorial, Publicity, and Advertising

Along with the *Desert Sun*, *Palm Springs Villager*, and *Palm Springs Life*, the Sunday *Los Angeles Times Home* magazine became an early and regular advocate of Arthur Elrod’s work, beginning in 1955. “One day Barbara Lenox swept in in her breathless way and told me, ‘Jim, there’s this young decorator down in Palm Springs who combines the sand and the dusty gray of the desert with the blue of the sky in his decorating, and I think he’s got a lot of promise and we should show him.’ That was Arthur Elrod. I don’t know how many times we worked with Arthur after that, and it was always a pleasure,” recalled James Toland, editor of *Home*, in a 1974 tribute to Elrod. “One reason was that you were not to worry, ever. There were no problems. He was always smiling, always happy about things, and especially about you. Everything you said was important to him. You had the feeling that he was intensely interested in you, above all people.”

From 1955 to early 1974, the mass-circulation *Home* magazine featured Elrod’s work on a regular basis and frequently on the cover. His debut on January 16, 1955, featured photos of two of his rooms for Bow and Nancy Herbert with white vinyl floors and black floor-to-ceiling shutters; Elrod’s own Valmonte Sur home, with a Ruth Asawa mesh sculpture and raised fireplace hearth in the living room; and the new house he had done for Joe and Joyce Pawling.

Barbara Lenox, the contributing design writer for *Home*, would include Elrod in a steady stream of how-to articles on decorator items or “what’s new in the decorating world” features. These included introducing a new double vanity for the bathroom, a “trick of the week” that showed a corner table with a rack for magazines, or space-saving ideas like accordion-fold shutter doors that concealed a mini-kitchen in a bachelor apartment. It was a period of exuberant color, and for any article that talked about the latest

color combinations, *Home* featured Elrod’s rooms front and center, whether he was mixing lime green and acacia yellow with turquoise in a lanai, using red-and-yellow striped wallpaper on ceilings to create the effect of an awning, or combining straw, citron, orange, red, and green leaf in a recreation room.

Elrod had firm ideas about how people should be living and how decorating could improve their lives, and as Toland related, “he felt that *Home* and other shelter magazines were too impersonal, that we should be reflecting how people lived.” To get his message across, Elrod wrote a design column for the *Palm Springs Villager*. One of his first articles on February 15, 1958, was about Frank and Melba Bennett’s house on Camino Mirasol. He was listed on the masthead as the associate editor of the Desert Home section, and then as the editor of the Desert Living column in *Palm Springs Life* after the two publications merged in 1959. He oversaw the magazine’s design coverage, which included articles on other designers and developments that highlighted resort living at its finest.

He also contributed articles to the *Los Angeles Times Home* magazine. His first bylined article on February 1, 1959, talked about the scale of furniture in a room. He discussed the idea of pierced wood grilles, which were prevalent as patterned room dividers. “Personally, I like a free-standing sofa as a refreshing switch from the usual wall placement. Here especially the light, airy quality of the grille lightens the scale of the large sofa,” he wrote. His articles stressed proportion, scale, and continuity. “The mark of perfection in decorating must remain—as it does in many lines of art and design—an understatement,” he wrote about the *Home* magazine house he designed with architect Richard Dorman.

Elrod was equally savvy at advertising. From the moment he set up shop, the firm placed ads in the *Desert Sun*, *Palm Springs Villager*, and *Palm Springs Life*. The ads appeared on a regular basis, with hand-drawn illustrations of



THE 1960s



LOUISE AND LIONEL STEINBERG HOUSE

300 Merito Place, Old Las Palmas

Louise and Lionel Steinberg already had an Elrod-designed house in Palm Springs at 797 Via Vadera, but around 1972 they bought the house at 300 Merito Place that actor Laurence Harvey had commissioned from Buff & Hensman. “The house wasn’t completed for Harvey—he was going through a divorce,” said their son, songwriter Billy Steinberg. “My parents moved in and finished the interiors, but they divorced after a year. I remember Arthur Elrod well from the many meetings at the house. When he walked in the door you felt his creative presence. He was impressive, passionate. He and my mother had a great rapport, one of mutual respect.

“My mother was entirely involved in the interiors—she was a very sophisticated, very social woman with fine taste in design and food and very passionate about art. She wasn’t someone who could be convinced to like something. She would never say ‘Get me a dining table’ without being involved in its selection.

“The front was very austere, but when you walked inside, the house took your breath away. To the left was the pool with granite rocks. To the right you walked under a covered walkway past glass windows alongside the house and through sliding glass doors into the living room. She and my father had put together a pre-Columbian art collection, and the display case—an enormous custom-designed case with sliding glass shelves—was stunning.” With a sunken tennis court, a massage room with sauna, and various entertaining areas, the house was described in *Town & Country* as a “private country club.”



A house commissioned from Buff & Hensman by actor Laurence Harvey, but not occupied by him, was completed by Louise and Lionel Steinberg. BELOW: The entrance was reached by walking under the overhang alongside the pool to the front door. OPPOSITE: The covered walkway, which continued left, bridged the pool and the tennis court, and housed a bar and outdoor lounge, sauna, and massage room.



Adele Cygelman is a longtime writer and editor who has covered interior design, architecture, and real estate for numerous magazines, including *Architectural Digest* and *Robb Report*. She is the author of *Palm Springs Modern* and *Secret Gardens of Hollywood*.

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