

THE HISTORY OF

# LA CIENEGA DESIGN QUARTER

The Slow but Steady Evolution  
of a Destination for Design

It may very well be the most chic four-tenths of a mile in all of Los Angeles, packed from one end to the other with a plethora of design and art history and vintage architecture, interwoven with foodie, fashion and cultural hotspots. Decades ago, city planners had no idea that the stretch of La Cienega Boulevard from Melrose Avenue and running north to Santa Monica Boulevard, along with the short, smart block of Melrose Place at its eastern flank, would become the core of what is now known as the La Cienega Design Quarter. It was designated in 2008 by an organization of the same name, which now represents 57 merchants along Melrose Place and La Cienega as far south as Beverly Boulevard, as well as a western and eastern stretch of Melrose Avenue.

If one could wave a magic wand and bring back such iconic designers as Elsie de Wolfe, Billy Haines, Frances Elkins or Tony Duquette, who frequented this area starting in the 1950s, they would no doubt feel right at home again among the shops, showrooms and galleries. Little has changed visually here. And even though the previous designations of “Gallery Row” and “La Cienega Center” have been replaced by today’s LCDQ, the feel and the

ambience have never left. The main offerings are still the same: antiques, contemporary furniture, textiles, lighting, art, rugs and design services, and the cognoscenti of taste from around the globe still turn to the LDCQ in search of the best of the best.

Paul Ferrante opened his antique lighting store on La Cienega in 1958, but moved to Melrose Place in 1960 when a storefront became available. According to the Ferrante company’s general manager, Grace Saroya, “Back then, when my brother Tommy, who later became a business partner, worked for Paul, the now-glamorous Melrose Place block was a hodgepodge of machinist shops and houses.” Melrose Place was not refined, and it was without a clear plan of development in those early days. But a handful of merchants there had a vision—a small one, but a vision nonetheless. “We loved the idea of what was going on at Maiden Lane in San Francisco, which was the height of boutique shopping in the early ’60s,” Saroya said, “and we wanted that appeal here as well.”

During this same time, around the corner on La Cienega, art galleries tucked in and amongst the design shops were taking the art

world by surprise, leading Los Angeles into the modern age with a slew of groundbreaking exhibits and transforming the area by bringing in thousands for the weekly Monday night art walks.

Andy Warhol’s first-ever exhibit in Los Angeles was in 1962 at Ferus Gallery at 723 North La Cienega Boulevard and only five Campbell soup can canvases sold during that exhibit—for a mere \$100 each. Imagine....

European antiques dealer John Nelson was ready for a change in those days. His shop, which opened in 1962 on Melrose Avenue several blocks west of La Cienega, was okay but a bit too quiet for his liking. “Gallery Row was alive and beautiful,” Nelson recalled, using the term that described the area of La Cienega between Melrose Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard in the 1960s.

“It was full of charm and, most of all, there was activity happening there.” So in 1965, Nelson pulled up stakes and moved to Melrose Place—just doors from Paul Ferrante. “It was an exciting time,” says Nelson, “because it was the first time that so many design showrooms and shops came together—and that is what excited our clients to shop here.”

BY GREG FIRLOTTE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICO MARQUES & MIKE ALLEN



JOHN NELSON



ALEX MENEGAZ, ELIZABETH KAPLAN, GRACE SAROYAN (SITTING), TOMMY RAYNOR, JULIE URBANEK, PAUL FERRANTE ANTIQUES



RICHARD SHAPIRO

By the time the 1980s rolled around, a new group of players in the design industry were beginning to get noticed. Richard Shapiro, Gina Berschneider and Dimitri Agrapiotis were among those eventually opening new shops on La Cienega. And later in the 1990s, movers and shakers like Patrick Dragonette, Robert Wilson and David Serrano would open their doors there

Shapiro has become the “new kid on the block”—having just opened his corner showroom at 800 North La Cienega this past January. But he is by no means a newcomer. It was in 1981 that Richard Shapiro began collecting iconic post-war contemporary art, which eventually led to a stint on the Museum of Contemporary Art board of trustees. All the while, he was expanding his reach into the worlds of antique Italian and twentieth century Moderne furniture. Like John Nelson before him, Shapiro had a shop filled with fine furnishings for many years on the western edge of Melrose Avenue. He closed the doors in 2013, but not long afterward a space on La Cienega became available. “Location!” proclaims the always-enthusiastic Shapiro as the impetus for his move. “I wanted to be in the heart of the district, and this corner storefront provided exactly that. I wanted my next move within the greater L.A. design community to make a positive addition to the neighborhood.” And that cannot be denied, given the bold and colorful layout of the showroom set in the virtual center of the Melrose-to-Santa Monica Boulevard stretch.

As for Gina Berschneider, the journey to La Cienega began in 1968

when this Swiss-born designer started to become known for providing impeccably upholstered goods for some of the biggest names in the industry. Eventually, it became apparent that she needed a newer space to showcase this growth. “We opened our La Cienega space in 2012,” Berschneider said, “because we always wanted to be in a destination-oriented shopping district. And this location fit the bill.” Just one door south of Berschneider is Compas, a shop specializing in antique marbles and limestone—most of it reclaimed from ancient European and Middle Eastern sources. Owner Dimitri Agrapiotis has spent the majority of his business life roaming his native France and all parts of the Mediterranean in search of the perfect stone goods to bring back to L.A. It was in 1982 that he opened his first business, La France Imports, on the city’s Westside. Of his current location, Agrapiotis said, “La Cienega has always been the heartbeat of Los Angeles.”

Robert Wilson and David Serrano created a buzz on La Cienega in 1996, but they thought at the time that they were on the wrong side of the street with their shop Downtown. “The big antique dealers and design firms were on the east side of the street, and we were concerned that being on the west side wasn’t the preferred location,” Wilson recalled. But that all changed quickly when people noticed that Downtown was actually open to the *public*—not just “to the trade,” as had been the custom. Visitors didn’t have to be buzzed in through locked doors. But it was Wilson’s and Serrano’s adroit mix of antique and contemporary furnishings that really upped the design ante on the boulevard.

“La Cienega has always been the heartbeat of Los Angeles.”

Dimitri Agrapiotis, Compas



GINA BERSCHNEIDER



ROBERT WILSON, DOWNTOWN

A year later in 1997—and literally next door to Downtown—Patrick Dragonette set up Dragonette Ltd in the hope that one day he would be as successful as his antique dealer friends with shops already on La Cienega.

But the other reason was more personal: “I loved knowing that so many design icons of mine had walked this street and frequented the showrooms,”

he said. In fact, Dragonette has become one of the country’s leading sources for mid-twentieth century design—including vintage pieces by the late William Haines, the actor-turned-designer who created furnishings for such luminaries as actress Joan Crawford and Ronald and Nancy Reagan. By all measures, Dragonette has exceeded his initial hopes with his now-international success.



KATIE LABARGE, MARGE CARSON SHOWROOM

“What the formation of LCDQ has done is to create a design destination that has put this area on the map once again with its world-class shops and events.”

Philip Stites

Antiques dealer Lee Stanton was already a solid fixture in the L.A. design scene long before he opened his eponymous shop on La Cienega in 2005. But it was his contributions above and beyond offering fine antiques that has brought this area global attention. In 2008, Stanton, along with Philip Stites of Therien & Co. (now Dessin Fournir) and other showroom leaders not only established the La Cienega Design District as a non-profit business organization, but also launched the first-ever, multi-day event Legends of La Cienega, offering panel discussions, book signings, parties and the biggest kick-off celebration of all: The Legends Gala. “Both the names La Cienega Design Quarter and Legends Gala were inspired by our legendary heritage here,” Stanton said, “and we created both during tough economic times to pull our community together.” Stites added, “What the formation of LCDQ has done is to create a design

destination that has put this area on the map once again with its world-class shops and events.”

Katie LaBarge of the Marge Carson showroom, itself a sixty-year-strong resource to the design community, opened her La Cienega space in 2008 after years of contemplation on where to move the company and update its connection to the design community. “What drew me here was the camaraderie,” she said. “I found that there was less competition among the merchants and more of a neighborhood feeling here, which was exactly what I wanted. We often send clients to each other’s showrooms.”

In fact, the Marge Carson showroom hosts a much-anticipated annual luncheon at the Legends of La Cienega event; such is LaBarge’s dedication to the LCDQ community.



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Lee Stanton

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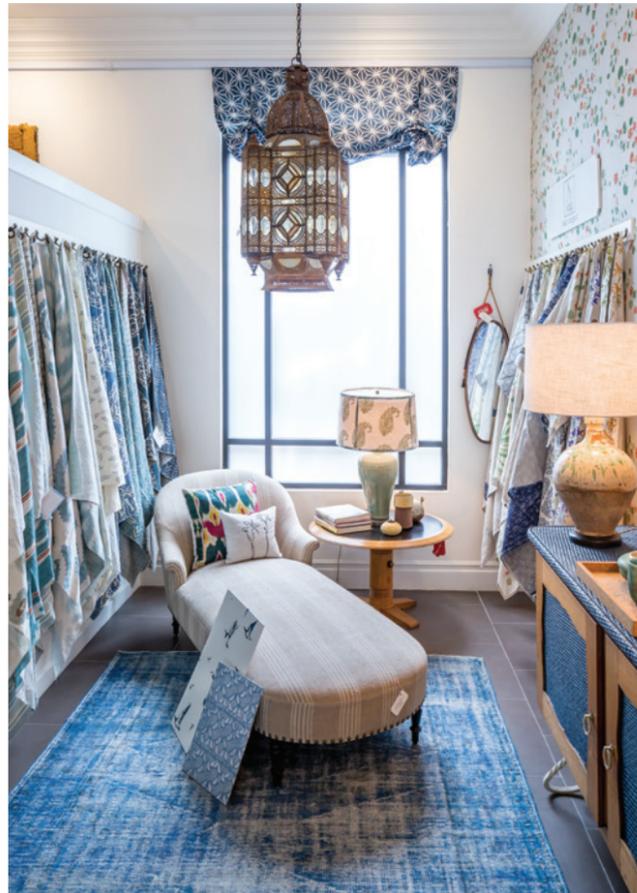


Peter Dunham, who was raised in France, spent his summers in Spain and was educated in England, opened his Hollywood at Home shop on the east side of La Cienega in 2007, but quickly found that he needed more space, which prompted his move across the street to even larger quarters to showcase his acclaimed hand-printed textiles and vintage furniture collections.

"I've lived in L.A. since 1998, and I've always loved the vintage architecture of this area," Dunham said. With a wide range of celebrity clients including Johnny Depp, Sharon Stone and Drew Barrymore calling on his shop regularly, Dunham is among those merchants bringing back the excitement and energy that John Nelson experienced in the area in the early 1960s.

With so many resources to be found here—Baker Furniture, Barclay Butera, Farrow & Ball, Harbinger, Suzanne Rheinstein's Hollyhock, Nathan Turner, Rose Tarlow Melrose House, Sherle Wagner and Tufenkian Carpets and many more—the district has been transformed above and beyond its Gallery Row beginnings into its own creation. That vision put forth by a handful of merchants back in the day has been surpassed in size and scope.

LCDQ co-founder Stanton said, "I believe this is all due to the heart and soul of businesses past and present in our district who have always shared the same goals—to enrich, inspire and celebrate great design."



ABOVE & RIGHT: HOLLYWOOD AT HOME

# WINDOWS OF LEGEND

LCDQ'S SHOP WINDOWS,  
FROM THE ANNUAL LEGENDS OF DESIGN EVENTS



LEGENDS 2016 "One of a Kind" - Left: Designer Jamie Bush for Richard Shapiro, Studiolo; Right: Designer Melinda Ritz for Hollywood at Home  
LEGENDS 2015 "Where Muses Dwell" - Left: Designer Jeff Andrews "Proportion" for Fuller & Roberts; Right: Designer Ken Fulk "The Movie Inside My Mind" for Therien  
LEGENDS 2014 "Novel Interiors" - Left: Designer Christian May "1001 Nights" for Woven Accents; Right: Designer Clements Design for Lee Stanton Antiques