



## Haines, William "Billy" (1900-1973)

by Benjamin Trimmier

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William "Billy" Haines in a MGM promotional photograph for the film *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1928).

More than thirty years after the Stonewall Riots, it is difficult to conceive of creating an openly gay identity in a world with few precedents or examples, but such was the world in which actor and decorator William Haines was born.

As a motion picture actor, William "Billy" Haines is largely forgotten today, but in 1930 he was the number one box office draw and was among the top five motion picture actors from 1928 to 1933. After the end of his acting career, he became one of the country's most successful interior decorators.

Haines was born in Staunton, Virginia on January 1, 1900. The eldest of four children, he was a product of a respected upper middle class family. At the age of fourteen he ran away from home, accompanied by a boy Haines in later life referred to as "his first boyfriend." After a brief return to Virginia, Haines became a resident of Greenwich Village, where he pursued a life unfettered by provincial constraints.

In New York, he became friends with Boston-born Mitchell ("Mit") Foster and Australian artist Jack Kelly (professionally known as Orry-Kelly), who was then the boyfriend of English circus performer Archie Leach, later known as Cary Grant. These early friendships became significant lifelong relationships.

Foster moved to California and in 1928 became Haines' business partner in an antiques store there, which evolved into Haines' decorating business. Orry-Kelly also went to Hollywood, where he became an Oscar-winning costume designer for such films as *An American in Paris* (1951), *Les Girls* (1957), and *Some Like It Hot* (1959).

Haines' journey to Hollywood films began in New York where he won a national talent search, the "new faces" of 1922, sponsored by Samuel Goldwyn Studios. After a successful screen test, he was signed as a contract player; and in 1922 he departed for California with the female winner, Eleanor Boardman.

Boardman and Haines arrived in Los Angeles amid studio-orchestrated fanfare that presaged Boardman's immediate placement in a starring vehicle. Haines' welcome was less auspicious, as he was given uncredited and non-speaking bit parts from 1922 to 1924. His first real opportunity was 4½ minutes of credited screen time, ironically in an Eleanor Boardman vehicle, *Souls for Sale* (1923).

Haines' first success and leading role came in 1924 with *Midnight Express*. The melodrama offered a glimpse of the character who would be his trademark: the irresponsible or easy-going smart aleck who is redeemed by crisis or tragedy.

Haines' status as a leading man was not confirmed until *Brown of Harvard* and *Mike* in 1926. These films, and *Tell It to the Marines* the following year, propelled him to the top of his profession.

Haines was one of the few silent film actors to make the transition to sound with little trauma. He possessed an easy Southern-edged baritone that matched his affable movie persona. His sound debut, *Alias*

*Jimmy Valentine* (1929), was a financial as well as artistic triumph for MGM.

Subsequently, Haines' films became formulaic but they remained popular. By 1930 he was receiving more mail than any other male star at MGM.

Despite his successful transition to talking pictures, however, his career was cut short. According to Hollywood legend, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio chief Louis B. Mayer allegedly forced Haines to choose between his film career and his homosexual lifestyle. It may be, however, that Haines himself decided to retire gracefully from films when he began to lose his youthful good looks. He had always wanted to pursue his other love, interior design.

Beginning in 1926, Haines lived openly as a couple with Jimmy Shields (a former movie stand-in). The public relations "solution" for most acknowledged gay actors and actresses in the studios was the conspiratorial sham marriage affecting an outwardly "respectable" and heterosexual facade. Haines, however, refused to give up Jimmy Shields for the sake of his film career and the relationship endured until Haines' death in 1973.

Haines' transition to full-time interior designer coincided with the loss of his MGM contract in 1934. Using his antiques business as a base, Haines became a prominent interior decorator whose clients included the elite of Hollywood's Golden Age: Carole Lombard, Joan Crawford, Claudette Colbert, William Powell, George Cukor, and Jack Warner.

Haines exorcised the pseudo-Spanish motif that had dominated the grand movie industry residences since the 1920s. He single-handedly created the "California Style": one in which pristine antiques and his signature hand-painted Chinese wallpapers and ceramics coexisted in astute eclecticism with the West Coast lifestyle, incorporating modern art deco materials and movie-star splendor.

In addition to decorating the homes of Hollywood royalty, Haines also decorated the homes of other wealthy clients. Retail magnates Alfred Bloomingdale and Tom May and their wives had several residences decorated by Haines.

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