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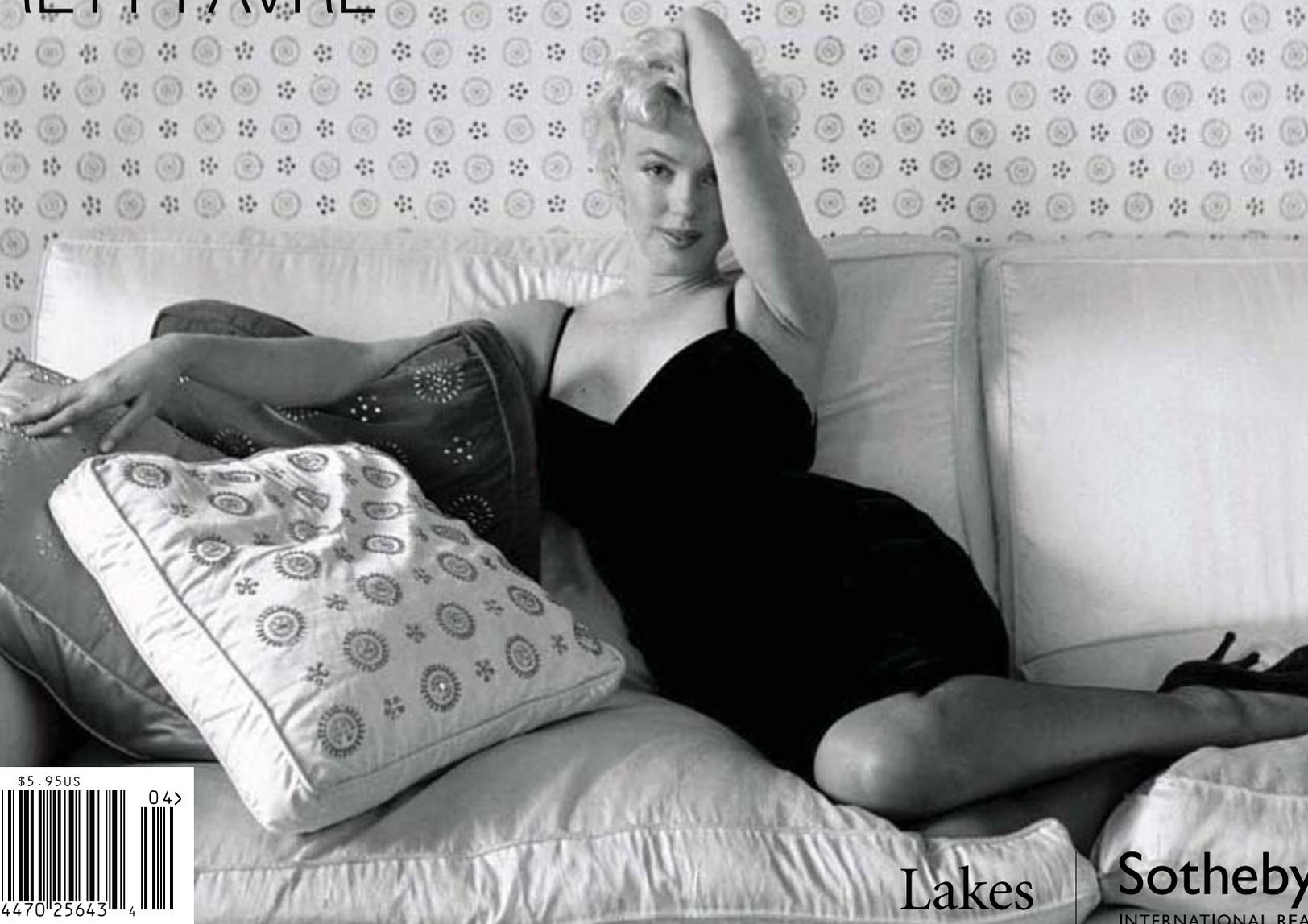
APRIL 2010

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TINSELTOWN  
WITH RUDY MA

CONVERSATION WITH  
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Childe Hassam *The White Dory* (detail)  
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from the publisher ||

# Here's to Hollywood

**T**hroughout its history, the term Hollywood has become a metonymy for American cinema. The Hollywood sign is one of the world's most evocative symbols and a universal metaphor for ambition, success and glamour. Who would have guessed that the famous sign started as an advertisement for a failed real estate development called Hollywoodland?

Our feature story reveals the connection between this iconic symbol and Minnesota artist Bill Mack, who is turning the original sign into collectible art. The theme continues throughout this issue, as Rudy Maxa and Anthony Dias Blue take us tooling around L.A. in movie star fashion. Then, designer Billy Beson shows us how a few home accents can bring Hollywood glam to any home, and Mitchell Wherley of Spalon Montage applauds the revival of classic movie star styles. Minnesota native Noah Longo shares his silver screen dreams and Ana Scofield takes us behind the scenes of the hit show *Glee*.

Of course, fame can be found on the field as well as the screen, and we're excited to bring our readers a conversation with Minnesota's newest star, Brett Favre. A special thanks to former Viking Esera Tuaolo for this interview.

In this issue you will also discover some of the best properties available with Sotheby's International Realty along with a special group of advertisers that bring you this magazine every quarter.

Thanks for reading and spending time with *Artful Living*.



Cheers,

**Frank Roffers**  
Publisher  
*Artful Living Magazine*

# The Hidden Story of an Icon

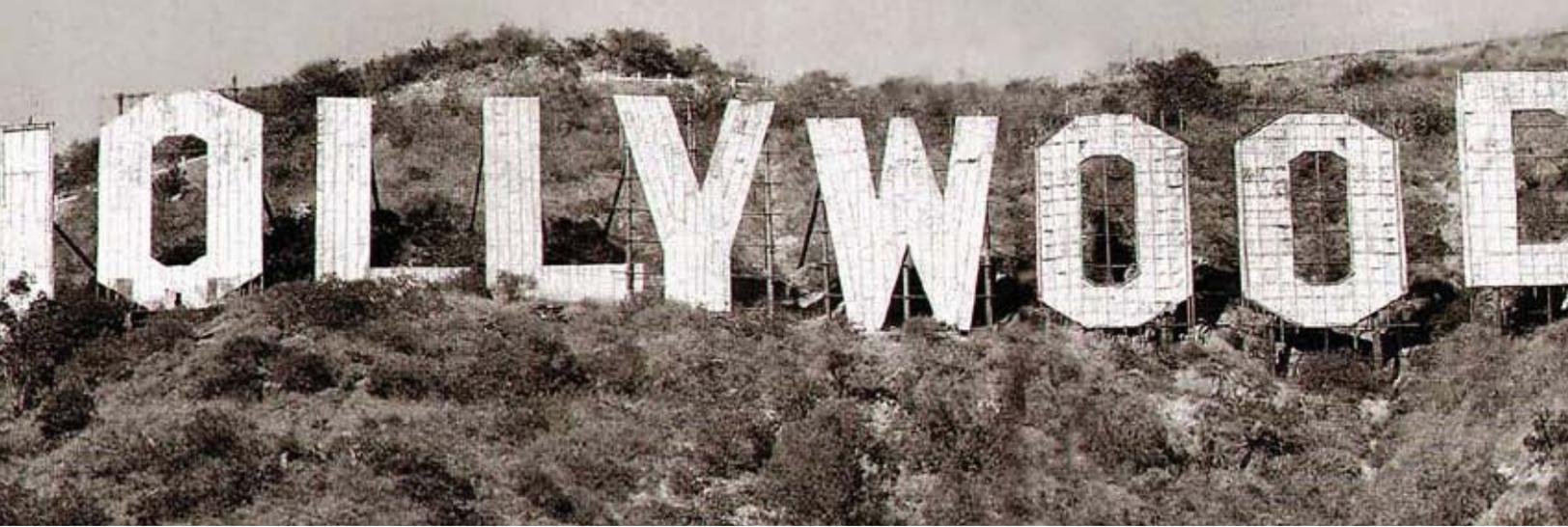
Most people don't know the original Hollywood sign was built as an advertisement, meant only to last for a year. Even fewer people know that 87 years later, a Minnesota artist is giving that original sign a new life. | BY MARNI GINTHER



**R**usted sheets of metal and rotting timbers. It's not exactly the stuff dreams are made of. But that's what local artist Bill Mack found in a Los Angeles warehouse when he rented a 53-foot trailer and drove out west to pick up the Hollywood sign he'd purchased in 2007 from L.A. producer and entrepreneur Dan Bliss. "It was so gnarly looking," Mack says. "It was all rusty and it had 55 years of paint on it and holes in random places." Even with all their wear and tear—and perhaps also because of it—Mack and Bliss are ensuring the 87-year-old pieces of what was once the Hollywood sign live on in a new incarnation.

The sign that stands on Mount Lee today was built in 1978, after the original had fallen into such disrepair that a group of celebrities led by Hugh Hefner raised the money to rebuild it. The letters were "auctioned off" for about \$28,000 apiece at a gala held at the Playboy mansion, according to the Hollywood Sign Trust, which is the nonprofit organization now responsible for care and maintenance of the sign. Hefner's plan not only worked, but truly demonstrated the landmark's universal appeal by drumming up support from a rather motley crew of celebrities. Cowboy crooner Gene Autry paid for an "L," Andy Williams shelled out for a "W" and Alice Cooper dedicated his "O" to Groucho Marx.

Unveiled in November of that year, the new sign has since undergone several face-lifts. Once accessible to aspiring film actors, tourists and



“What’s there now is *A* sign. It’s not *THE* sign.”

BILL MACK

vandals alike, the sign is now protected by a host of security measures including a razor wire fence, 24-hour surveillance cameras and motion sensors. In Mack’s words, “What’s there now is *a* sign. It’s not *the* sign.”

The original sign was built in 1923 for \$21,000. It was meant as a billboard to advertise an upscale real estate development backed by *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler. At the time, it read “Hollywoodland” and the 30-by-50-foot letters were illuminated by 4,000 light bulbs. Constructed with metal panels, scaffolding and telephone poles, the sign was never meant to last much more than a year.

By the early 1920s, major film studios like Paramount, Columbia and Warner Brothers had already set up shop in Hollywood. Just four years after the sign was erected, Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*, the first “talkie” that popularized sound films. Hollywood’s Golden Age was well underway and the massive sign gleaming down from the hillside became the icon that defined a new era of glamour and fantasy.

**B**ut all fantasies eventually end. The 1929 stock market crash and subsequent Great Depression hit the Hollywoodland developers as

hard as any other real estate project. By the mid 1940s the company sold its remaining acreage, which included the sign, to the City of Los Angeles. The sign was left unattended, its magic fading as the letters began to rust and crumble. Even before its physical decay, the sign’s aura as a symbol of dreams of stardom realized had been marred when in 1932, struggling actress Peg Entwistle leapt to her death from the top of the letter “H.” Like so many others, she’d left behind the New York stage in pursuit of a film career that never took off. After the “H” fell over completely in 1949, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce stepped in to remove the last four letters and repair those that remained—thus the birth of the icon as we know it today.

The repairs lengthened the sign’s lifespan but by the end of the 1960s the sign was once again in a sorry state. When the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board named it an official landmark in 1973, it was a rusty, dilapidated sight. Not until 1978 did the chamber of commerce decide the sign needed to be completely rebuilt to the tune of \$250,000. That’s where Hefner and company stepped in. According to the Hollywood Sign Trust, when the new sign was built, “the old sign was scrapped in August ’78, and yes, for three lonely months Hollywood had no sign.”

**reincarnated** OPPOSITE PAGE: Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and Greta Garbo on an “H” Bill Mack reconstructed out of material from the original Hollywood sign. THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: The original sign before it was rebuilt. Audrey Hepburn and Paul Newman are just two of the many stars of Hollywood’s Golden Age that Mack has painted on the sign.



There's not much else widely known about the original sign after that. "It's a dead-end story," Bliss says. "The fun part is that most people haven't thought about what happened to the original sign." When Bliss was working in the hospitality business in Cleveland, Ohio, he bought a concert club through a broker named Hank Berger. "He had a *People* magazine article about him from the '70s about how he owned the Hollywood sign," Bliss recalls. He told *Artful Living* that he ended up buying the sign, which was stored in an L.A. warehouse, from Berger in 2003 for a six-figure sum. Having been an avid collector of sports memorabilia, Bliss appreciated the historical and cultural significance of the sign.

"I took photos of unique pieces," Bliss says. "The graffiti gave me goose bumps. I felt like I uncovered a piece of history." He took these photos along with Berger's article and an affidavit to the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, where he says the staff referred him to a company that has licensing of the Hollywood sign copyright. This company helped gather his evidence and documentation, then presented it to the chamber for authentication. One of the strongest indicators of authentication, Bliss says, was the graffiti on the right leg of the letter "H," which was matched to historic photos. "The graffiti and markings matched perfectly," he says. He started selling small pieces in 2004, and shortly thereafter, caught wind of a Minnesota artist who was also a movie memorabilia collector.

Aside from his work in relief sculpture, Mack has had a passion for Hollywood memorabilia for decades. In describing his collection, he notes Clark Gable's coat from *It Happened One Night*, multiple artifacts from Marilyn Monroe's life (the gates to her house; the chair from her last photo shoot with *Life* magazine), more than 400 signed photos of silver screen stars and, until several years ago, the lion's costume from the *Wizard of Oz*. "[Bliss] heard about when I sold the lion; there was a lot of publicity around the lion because it sold for so much," Mack says. (The amount, he says, was between \$800,000 and \$900,000.) Bliss thought he had found an ideal home for his sign. "Bill's not just an artist, he's a Hollywood collector, and it just seemed like a great fit."

When he heard about the opportunity, Mack was floored. “It was unbelievable,” he says. “It’s an iconic structure that so clearly represents glamour, excitement, style, entertainment. It represents all those good things. And the thought that someone can actually own that, and have that wonderful sign is just amazing to me.” Excited as he was, Mack had no idea what he might do with a 150-foot-long, nine-letter metal sign. He had Bliss send him a 30-by-36-inch piece to start brainstorming, and was about to give up the project for lack of ideas. But at the last minute, he found inspiration in a black-and-white photo of Jean Harlow. Although he’s primarily a sculptor, Mack thought he’d paint the Hollywood icon’s portrait on the piece of the sign and see how it turned out. “I knew as a collector there was a connection between the image and the metal,” Mack says.

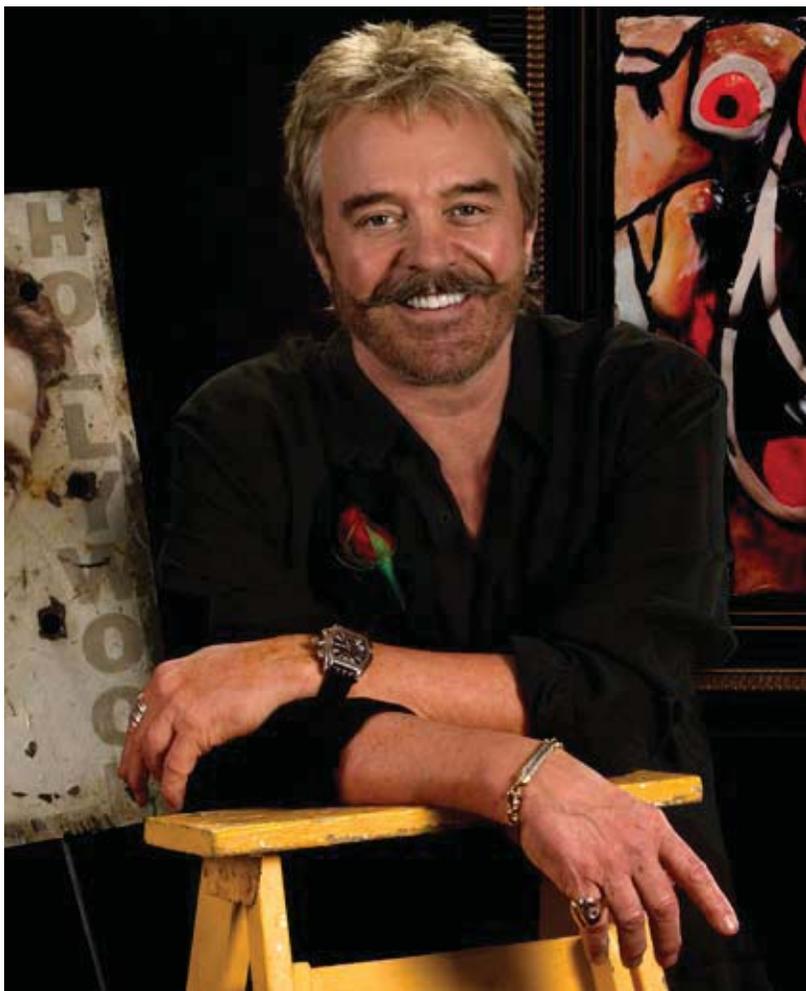
“If I put Harlow on canvas, a couple thousand people could probably do as good or a better job. But when I put her image on that metal, the connection is what people get. I mean, I got it, but I didn’t imagine other people necessarily would.”

But they did. Mack sent the Harlow piece to an art show in Florida where he says a woman walked in off the street and immediately bought it. That’s when he decided to go ahead with the project he’s working on now—painting classic Hollywood stars on the pieces of the massive sign.

When Mack brought the sign back to Minnesota, “the timber was pretty much rotten and couldn’t be identified as being part of the sign, whereas the metal actually can from photographs,” he says. Before painting on them, Mack sends the panels to a sheet metal company to be rolled out flat, and then mounts them on backing material. But the years of rust, holes and graffiti stay intact. “When I paint them I try and work around the holes and rust,” he says. “And after I’m done painting then I’ll go back and sand through my paint to bring some more of that character through, because I want the paintings to have a sense of the time when the sign went up.”

Of course an obvious question remains: How much is the sign worth? Mack says that buying the sign from Bliss is an ongoing transaction, but that the sign’s value really depends on how you define it. Is it a pile of rusted metal and rotting timbers? Or is it an icon that inspired generations of entertainers and audiences alike? “Everybody’s interested in what it cost,” Mack says. “But that’s really sort of meaningless because it wasn’t really worth much as it was.”

Through his project, Mack is helping restore some of the magic the sign originally had when it stood, glistening from the Hollywood hills. Bliss also has stepped in to partner with Mack on a documentary about the sign, which he anticipates will be finished in March. It’s clear that both Mack and Bliss see this project as something bigger than their individual careers—bigger than a work of art and bigger than a documentary. “The Hollywood sign has the same explosive meaning in Moscow and Mumbai and Tokyo and Frankfurt that it does in Cleveland and St. Louis and South Beach,” Mack says. “It’s a global project in a sense.” As Bliss said, “it’s a piece of history.” **AL**



“If I put Harlow on canvas, a couple thousand people could probably do as good or a better job. But when I put her image on that metal, the connection is what people get.” **BILL MACK**

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**an artist’s vision** OPPOSITE PAGE: Mack’s portrait of Marilyn Monroe, the original Hollywood sign after having fallen into disrepair. TOP: The original name of the sign was a reference to a real estate development, which fell through although the sign remained standing for decades. BOTTOM: Artist Bill Mack.

# Pieces of Marilyn

Three items in Bill Mack's memorabilia collection give a glimpse into the private life of a very public figure.

## The final photos

Monroe posed on this chair for photographer Allan Grant in the summer of 1962. The photos and accompanying interview were published in Life magazine on August 3 of that year. Two days later Monroe passed away in her home. "Virtually every photograph in the piece had her on this chair," Mack says.

## Hidden home

The Brentwood, Calif. house where Monroe passed away was hidden behind these large wooden gates. "If people came by to see her home, this is really all they'd see," Mack says. "So when people thought of Marilyn's home, these gates are what came to mind." Mack bought the gates in the 1980s, when the owners of the Monroe home were looking to get rid of the iconic gates, which often attracted fans and visitors.

## A new name

Born Norma Jeane Mortenson on June 1, 1926 in Los Angeles, Monroe was baptized with the surname of her mother, Gladys Baker. This document shows her authorization to change her stage name to Marilyn Monroe, taking her grandmother's last name.

