

# CALIFORNIA LIVING

LOS ANGELES HERALD EXAMINER  
OCTOBER 3, 1982

## SPECIAL HOME FURNISHINGS ISSUE

### **High Art:**

*Visionary furniture created by artists*

### **High Economy:**

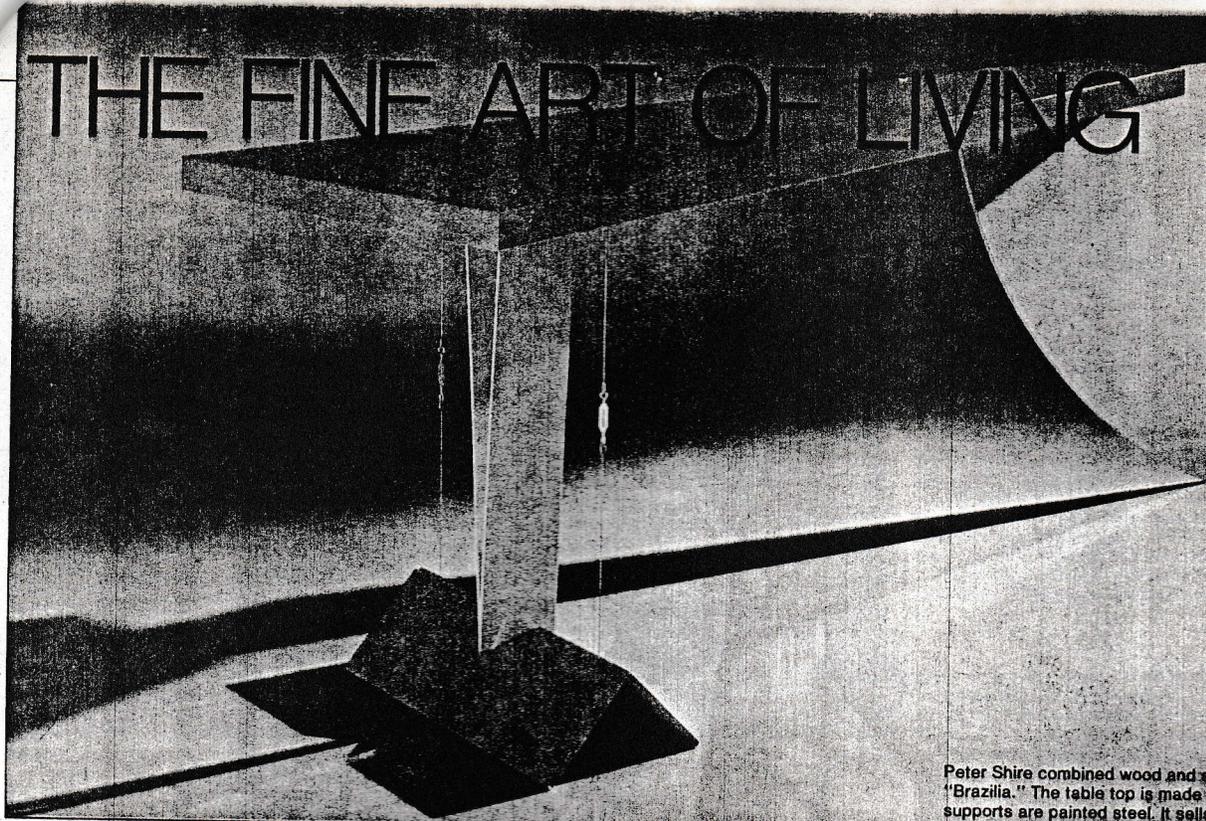
*Smart new rooms that grow up with baby*

### **High Style:**

*The classy woman who  
invented interior design*

Artist/craftsman Peter Shire in his studio

# THE FINE ART OF LIVING



Peter Shire combined wood and steel to create "Brazilia." The table top is made of particle board. The supports are painted steel. It sells for \$3,500.

## L.A. artists redefine the meaning of furniture as they turn their talents to tables, chairs and beds

By Hunter Drohojowska

**A**rtists have been making furniture for as long as human beings have been using it. But can that furniture be called art? Ever since the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp placed the responsibility of defining art squarely in the lap of the artists, it has been felt that *anything*, including furniture, can be considered art, if the artist says that it is.

Duchamp was speaking from the perspective of the first decades of this century, when the boundaries between high and popular culture or art and craft, were beginning to blur. The Industrial Revolution had replaced the individual artisan with mass production for mass consumption. Artists of the Russian Constructivist movement and the German Bauhaus school supported the integration of art with the disciplines of architecture, design and industrial technology. Today's modern furniture boutiques are crowded with the results of their explorations — Marcel Breuer-derived chairs and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy-inspired lamps.

Artists who make furniture today have accepted this merger of disciplines and are concerned with defining their work as art. Their furniture often

seems to be built in opposition to the efficient Bauhaus tenet that "form follows function." This tendency can be seen in the ceramics and furniture of Peter Shire. In fact, Shire's teapots make so few concessions to function that they have to be described as sculpture, a categorization he accepts with the quip, "Who drinks tea anyway?"

Shire, 34, is a puckish, bearded and bemused fellow given to lowbrow jokes and high ideals. He earned a measure of notoriety last summer for designing the elaborate sets for the Hollywood Bowl's glitzy production of Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex." He is a fourth generation Californian, and a second generation native of Echo Park. The Latin architecture and shrill, tropical colors of that predominantly Hispanic neighborhood inform his style.

Standing in a house cluttered with the products of the evolution of his career, Shire examines his slow acceptance of furniture as art. "My father and grandfather were cabinetmakers, so I always made furniture. I stopped because it seemed that the only avenue of presenting pieces was the sort of stuff that all the crafts people were doing in the 1960s. Like music stands made out of one piece of walnut, or a table out of the trunk of a tree. I always thought it was bogus. Also, I already had enough stigma to overcome by working with ceramics."

Shire has long been interested in Italian design; his bookshelves are stacked with copies of the glossy magazines *Domus*, *Casa Vogue* and *Abitare*. But he didn't get a chance to view Italian design at the source until 1980. That was when a couple of well-known Italian furniture designers came to Los Angeles and were shown Shire's ceramics.

They insisted he come to Italy to work, offering as explanation, "We make furniture that isn't furniture, and you make teapots that aren't teapots." Shire, who had never been to Europe,

picked up the gauntlet. "I think that the trip to Italy just changed everything," he muses. "It was a revelation to have such a sense of history." His perspective changed from "seeing ceramic sculptors of the 1950s as history, to seeing *everything* old. All of a sudden I had a perspective. Things I was doing unintentionally had historical relevance. I took a lot of notes there."

This new sense of the historical roots of ideas, of the European integration of fine art and design, freed Shire to expand his ceramic concepts to the area of furniture. "There came a certain validation, a permission to work in this medium because there were people and ideas that I respected being used."

Shire gestures at his first piece of furniture, just a year old, a sideboard of well-joined natural wood, topped with grey Italian marble and supported on four sides with columns of different styles, resting on feet of different shapes, all painted different bright lacquer colors. It is a useable, if bizarrely appointed, piece of furniture.

Shire has since graduated to designing chests, tables and lamps, each with varying degrees of utility. Of course, just as his teapots have no cups, neither do the tables have chairs. "Once you get into chairs," says Shire, "it becomes 'matched sets.'"

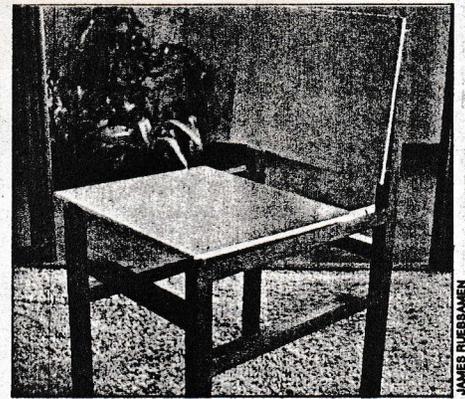
Explains Shire: "My naive overview is that things *should* be a little bit absurd. Being in essence an abstract artist, I've always been amused by 'functionalism' being a meaning. 'What does it do?' people ask. 'It's a teapot.' And that being an explanation instead of its being a group of shapes, which it is, and has to be first."

In the Janus Gallery, where Shire will exhibit his furniture and teapots in November, there stands a table with a trapezoidal black lacquer top supported by geometric shapes in aqua, orange, and purple. A local art collector expressed interest in buying the

Hunter Drohojowska is a Los Angeles-based free-lance writer with a special interest in art.

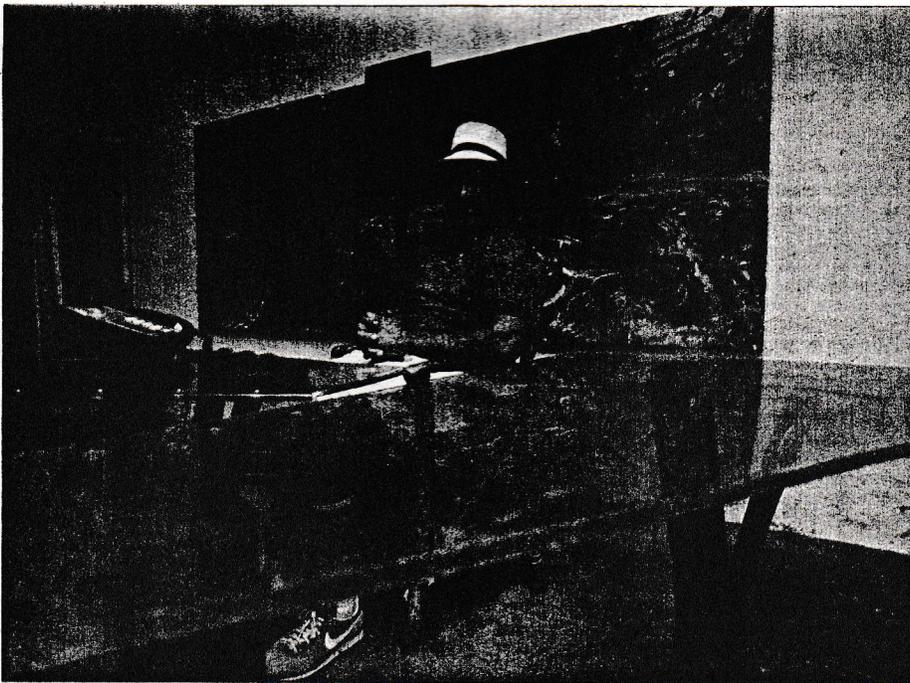


Bob Wilhite sits at a table he made out of bubinga (an African rosewood), maple and ebony. While it looks like the legs are supporting the glass top, it's actually being held up by the cross members. The cost: \$4,000.



Bob Wilhite says there aren't any other chairs in the world like the eight he made in this style. The frame is bubinga and the seat and back are aluminum, held at comfortable angles by ebony tabs. Wilhite says the chair's uniqueness explains its \$1,500 price.

JAMES RUEBSAMEN



Venice artist Jim Ganzer rests on one of his "Palm Chopper Tables," plexiglass on palm fronds, which retails for \$1,500.

ROB BROWN

piece to use as a desk, but Shire discouraged such a mundane future. "I envision that table overlooking the Mediterranean, where you don't have anything else to do but eat toast and drink coffee. No feelings of 'I have to be here or there.' You're just there with the toast . . . and you don't even give a damn if your coffee cup leaves rings." As a second thought, he adds, "I want to make furniture with a presence of its own."

**S**hire designs his furniture and has it built at a workshop in Echo Park. There he met two other artists creating painted wooden furniture and accessories, Mo McDermott and Lisa Lombardi, collaborators who've been working together since 1976.

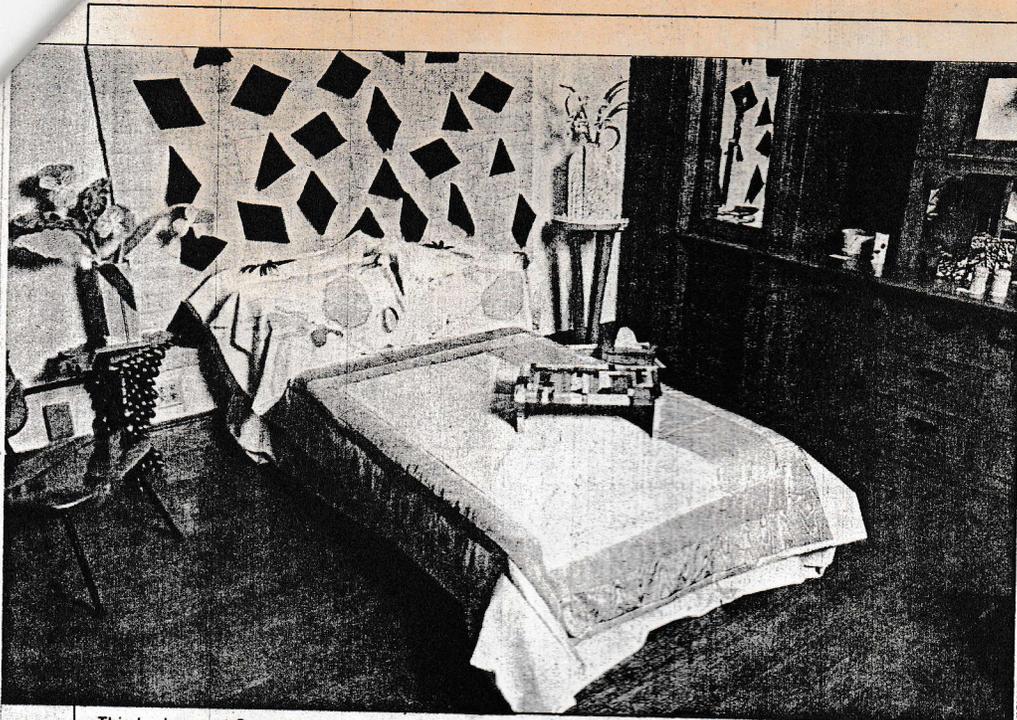
Their relationship began when McDermott — his arm in a cast due to a broken wrist — enlisted Lombardi's assistance to complete painting on his wooden sculpture for an exhibition at the now-defunct Nick Wilder Gallery. The exhibition never materialized, but the artists' relationship did.

McDermott, 41, is a small, round-faced Englishman, sporting large glasses which lend him a rather owl-like appearance. He was trained as a fabric and interior designer. And during the early 1960s in London he acted as model and assistant to David Hockney. That was when he began his own painted wooden sculpture.

The 37-year-old Lombardi, an angular, handsome woman, is a native of San Francisco. She gained her affinity for working in wood while studying at the Berkeley School of Environmental Design, Architecture and Urban Planning.

Together, they live in an apartment in East Hollywood, beyond a blue wrought-iron arch that reads: "La Maria." Gates open to a courtyard planted with a jungle of banana trees and iris and a goldfish pond sprouting bulrushes.

The cozy interior of the artists' home looks much the same, filled with an ambiance of flora and fauna evoked by painted wooden screens, tables, lamps, doorstops and wooden vases holding cut wooden flowers. The childlike quality of the work echoes the artists' exuberance. A painting on the wall reads "Mo Na Lisa." It is referred to as McDermott's



MICHAEL EDWARDS

This bedroom at Santa Monica's Functional Art Store is the creation of several artists. The bed tray (priced at \$550) is a Mo McDermott-Lisa Lombardi collaboration. At the bed's right is McDermott's \$800 "Taschist Lamp Vase." The wall quilt, titled "Black Flag," is by Ros Cross and is priced at \$750. The Gretchen Corners bed quilt, a mix of several fabrics, is \$500. The linen Paula Sweet pillow slips are \$125 a pair.

"simulated Ed Ruscha," but it tells of their unusually close collaboration as artists.

Excitedly talking at once, McDermott and Lombardi describe the nature and process of working together. "Either of us will make the drawing," begins Lombardi. "While I'm sanding, she's cutting," adds McDermott. "Both of us do the finishing work, sealing it with white lacquer," Lombardi continues. "She'll come up with some beautiful shapes, then I'll grab one of them and paint it," explains McDermott. "And I might paint it over, and add bits," says Lombardi.

"We're really a marvelous team, though we do bitch," McDermott comments. "I'll say 'God! I hate those blobs there!' The architectural strength is Lisa. I'm proud to be associated with it. My stuff tends to be all clunky lilies and tulips in pots."

McDermott pulls out a book on 16th-century dummy board figures saying, "Minor painters of the 16th century would cut out a figure and glue on a painted countenance, making cheery little dummy people to create shadows and the effect of having people around a big castle. They were doing 16th-century fake people and we're doing 20th-century fake dogs, pigs and goats." He points to a small wooden piglet propping open the door. "We're following that tradition, but they're our toys, and our lives are whimsical... We have a low threshold for boredom."

Most of the artists' past work has been frontal, two-dimensional, but Lombardi notes a progression to work that is more sculptural — an end table built of painted grape clusters, a table lamp constructed from orange slices, a stool that looks like a potato. Lombardi concludes: "Our work has always had a

vague function. I think of it as art that *happens* to function." Laughing, she adds, "You wouldn't want to use any of the lamps that we've made for safe passage to the bathroom!"

**T**hree blocks from Venice Beach, flanked by palm trees and surf shops, stands Jim Ganzer's studio. Ganzer himself is bronzed and blue-eyed, his beard is grizzled and he wears a pair of tailored white surf trunks. Still surfing after 37 years. Therefore it's not so surprising to find his warehouse studio crowded with furniture made from palm branches.

Inverted tripods of palm wood support an eclectic variety of table tops and lampshades. Ganzer paces about identifying the various species. Gaudy, gangly "Surf Tables" are topped with poured, multicolored resin from the Natural Progression Surf Shop. The "Palm Chopper Tables" are topped with leftover slabs of blue, ultraviolet resistant, plexiglass used for helicopter windows. Ganzer notes that the "Palm Chopper Table" design is "ultracool," for use as a three-piece executive desk set.

In a remote corner there stand "Les Musicians," palm branches topped by old guitars that serve as lamps. The majority of the tables, however, are topped with slabs of such stone as marble, granite or slate, providing an unexpected meld of elegant materials and California funk. Ganzer recalls, "This goes back to my sculpture, when I used broken glass and natural elements. They had the same tension between opposites."

Like Ganzer's past sculpture, the tables and

lamps are largely comprised of cast-off, remaindered materials. "They started with the slate. I went to a stone yard and this slate was supposed to be used for pool tables, but they'd dropped the crate in San Pedro. I bought every bit of it." Pointing to some tables topped with marble, Ganzer continues: "The ellipse tops are the leftovers from when they cut-out sinks, so I get them real cheap. The others, with the jagged edges, are the outtakes of the marble companies. Their failures. I think the unpolished, broken edge is spectacular. It is the face of the mountain."

Ganzer had put aside his sculpture a year ago and was trying to concentrate on his painting when he got the idea for the first table. "I was literally looking across the street at the palm trees. I went over, picked up the fronds and just did it. Since then, I've made over 100."

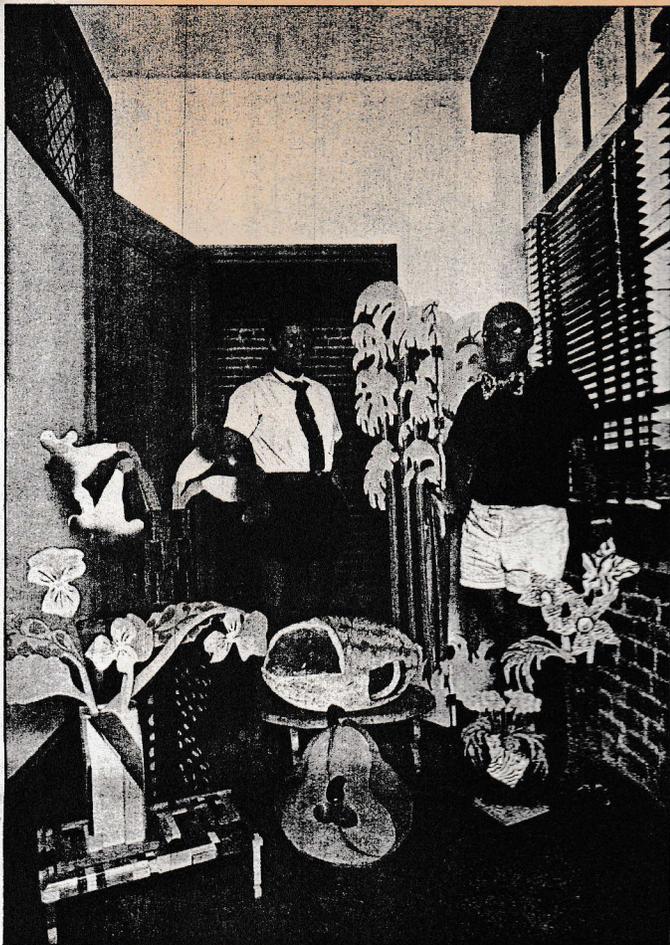
Ganzer's first attempts were tripods topped with records. Then came the realization that the tripods could be inverted. Delightedly, the artist explains, "It's so classical, it's the way that they discovered column heads, by looking at a tree. The Grecian columns were based on a tree or plant form."

The furniture is Ganzer's first attempt to create a functional product. "I think high art is about ideas and states of mind, not just about objects. With a gesture toward the furniture, he continues, "It functions as a table or a lamp but it also functions as an object that is unlike anything you've ever seen before. Which is what it's about. The thing I love is when people have to ask, 'What is that?' I love that. The only danger in making art is when you manufacture things, basically making the same object or painting over and over again. That's the trap of the artist."

**B**ob Wilhite keeps a studio on West Pico, living with his wife in the front. It's a modest storefront space but every aspect of the three rooms is detailed meticulously and painted white. An overhead skylight bathes the area in a light that is almost iridescent, highlighting the delicate angles of Wilhite's furniture. The desk, dining table and side chairs are built of natural maple inlaid with such exotic woods as ebony and purple heart wood — a combination of luxurious materials and spartan, almost Quakerlike design. The lean, spare lines of the furniture owe to the Bauhaus sensibility in that each element of the geometric constructions acts as a functional support.

Nothing is simply ornamental. Yet Wilhite works in subtle complexity so that every angle, side and view of a single work will be slightly altered. Of this aspect, Wilhite feels "Most of the time with furniture, you look at it and you get an initial take... you know pretty much the way it is. So I started changing things, making every side different and experimenting with asymmetry. The objects became something else. They didn't have to be overwhelming but you'd walk into a room and you couldn't help noticing them." Grinning with satisfaction, Wilhite adds, "If you do it right, a table top can read as a horizontal painting."

Wilhite, 36, is a square-jawed man of gentle, stalwart bearing. His words are chosen with great care, as though he were watching every one. As a musician and performance artist, Wilhite worked from 1975 to 1980 building non-traditional instruments which produced very non-traditional sounds, such as a six-foot-high column with a single string inside. "You've never heard one before so you don't know what to expect, or what's right or wrong," he reveals.



MICHAEL EDWARDS

Lisa Lombardi and Mo McDermott in a garden of their creations, all enamel on wood. From left: "St. Tropez Vase"; "Clunky Lily Vase," by McDermott, \$550; "Pear Bed Tray," by Lombardi, \$550; "Watermelon Slice Table," by Lombardi, \$550; "Katanga Flowers," a collaboration, \$550; and "Red Octopus Vase," by McDermott, \$550. Behind the artists is "Palm Screen," a collaboration, \$1,000.

Wilhite also built sets for himself, and in collaboration with performance artist Guy de Cointet. The artist pulls out a set of small maroon chairs with steel seats tilted to dump the sitter on the floor, the set for Cointet's performance "Iglu" in 1977. "Iglu" was done two nights and all that's left are the sets. "Performance is a lot of work and then the effort is over, as opposed to an object you put in a particular place, that is *there*, and doesn't just evaporate. I don't know if I consider myself a performance artist anymore. I like making objects and sticking them in an art gallery," concludes Wilhite.

The transition from the least to the

most utilitarian of arts was natural for Wilhite both physically and philosophically. "I've always considered furniture to be serious. It's something that everyone has to have around. Most artists feel that if something's functional, it can't be art somehow. I don't agree with that. I think it can be both. If you had an original Breuer chair in your house, it would be sculpture. When something is that special, it switches over and becomes art. I think things are changing. When people can appreciate the furniture, clocks and rugs at the Getty Museum, as well as the paintings and sculpture, that will be a good day."

## Observations

**Dating game.** If you catch the Monday-morning blahs tomorrow, *imagine you could just erase the next 10 days.* That really happened 400 years ago, when Pope Gregory XIII ordered a new calendar to replace one that had Easter gradually slipping toward summer. The "Gregorian" calendar simply *skipped 10 days*, so Thursday, October 4, 1582, was followed by Friday, October 15. So you don't miss two important dates this year, mark them on your calendar: Sunday, October 10, for the start of another "Masterpiece Theatre" season on PBS with *To Serve Them All My Days*—a remarkable drama about a remarkable man who turns from war to teaching. Then, check October 12 for the start of an all-new "Mystery!" season with *Sweeney Todd, "the demon barber"* who guaranteed customers a close shave.



**School daze.** Adapted from novelist R. F. Delderfield's "unashamedly autobiographical" novel of the same name, *To Serve Them All My Days* tells the tale of a shell-shocked World War I vet who teaches history in a private school. His rich and rare life unfolds—and enfolds you—over 13 weeks, and you'll come to see why the series won star John Dutttrine the British equivalent of an Emmy Award for Best Actor.



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**4 and 20 black beards . . .** *Sweeney Todd* opened on Broadway in 1979 to chills and cheers. Now "Mystery!" will give you a seat "front row center" in your living room for a brand new version based on the original 1846 story. It's about a London barber with a deadly razor—and the friendly proprietress of a bakery shop who fancies pearls, and grisly "meat pies." Better mark that October 12 Tuesday in bright red... for the "crime of your life."



**Gore, and more.** Anthony Skipling knows he's going to die, and when. Problem is, no one believes him—until one murder follows another, and another. . . . Whodunit? "Mystery!" knows. You will too, if you watch *Dying Day*. It starts October 19. Next, try *Father Brown*, a truly "divine" detective. His down-to-earth sleuthing comes your way on November 2 for a three-week stay. Beginning on November 30, you've got a date with *Melissa*, a series about a man accused of murdering his wife—at a birthday party he never attended. Then, starting December 21, it's *Quiet As A Nun*, a tale of murder most foul. . . in a convent. All from "Mystery!"—the best of the bloody lot, brought to you, by a grant from Mobil, on Public Broadcasting Service stations. Check local listings for broadcast schedules.

**It's a fact:** "Masterpiece Theatre" is one of the most honored programs on television, winning 20 Emmys since 1970.

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