

RENOVATION STYLE

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Summer 2007
Display Until September 3, 2007



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precious metal

Old stuff is eternally new in Nicki Huggins' eyes. A rusty chair parked outside a tottering shack is a sleekly powder-coated, comfortably cushioned perch for a chic outdoor room. A crusty metal airport hangar abandoned to the North Dakota elements is a roof for a contemporary loft-style home in the mountains of Los Angeles. And summer, even when you're more than a few days past stuffing bugs in a Mason jar, is still fresh with the promise of firefly dreams.

art print of Shack Chair by Nicki Huggins



As founder of Retropatio, renovator of vintage outdoor furniture, Nicki has made it her business to ensure we can glide through a summer's evening, bare feet dangling from a perch atop solid American steel.

"I love seeing the possibilities," says Nicki, who fell for the furniture at the tender age of 5. "I can remember sitting in a glider on my grandmother's porch in Alexander City, Alabama, and playing cards with her. I'd stretch down my little legs, push off, and swing."

Back then, it was all about fun. And it should still be that way today. "As kids, we were all told to go outside and play," Nicki says. "That's good advice. It's my personal philosophy and my design mandate."

Design has been part of Nicki's life since those childhood days, when she would sketch outfits and her seamstress mother would put the ideas to fabric. Nicki studied art and ran a fashion-textile design company before moving to Los Angeles, where she met and married television producer Scott Sternberg. Together, they set about

building an indoor-outdoor home in the Santa Monica Mountains. "We trucked an old metal airplane hangar from North Dakota to serve as a floating roof over loft-style living quadrants," Nicki says. "I started to wonder about antique outdoor furniture as a way to soften and give history. Then I remembered the gliders from my childhood."

She found one that matched her grandmother's and lovingly restored it. "That was the genesis," Nicki says. Retropatio was born.

"There are so many memories attached to these pieces of furniture—family memories, good memories," Nicki says. "I love the stories."

That's why working with the time-worn never gets old for Nicki, whose house—under its weathered, salvaged-metal crown—is a revolving gallery. A visitor spies a piece that evokes memories of summer days gone by. And an old metal glider or spring chair once again becomes a prized possession. "That's how it should be," Nicki says. "The originals really are treasures, and I hope people do treasure them."



Nicki Huggins, *top middle*, restores and sells vintage outdoor furniture such as Howel bouncers, *top left*, and Gulf Breeze gliders, *top right*. She lives in an indoor-outdoor house built under a salvaged airplane hangar, *above*, and is also a photographer who captures images of antique chairs "in the wild" and sells the art prints (page 13).

the roots of retropatio

If you assume that metal gliders share a birth date with post-World War II suburbia and the baby boom, think again. "These pieces are not from the '50s as everyone thinks," says Nicki Huggins of Retropatio (www.retropatio.com). "The Roaring '20s is when outdoor life in America really began."

World War I was over and American assembly lines were turning their production from armaments to items for the American home, including outdoor furniture. Previously, American manufacturers replicated French bistro furniture or British steamer chairs, Nicki says. But this marked the birth of true American outdoor furniture.

"The first pieces looked like Victorian sofas—with upholstery and fringe," Nicki says. Produced by the J.R. Bunting Co., the patio line grew out of the manufacturer's baby swing business. Other companies, including Howell Manufacturing, picked up on the glider idea, creating outdoor furniture with embossed and cutout steel motifs. Howell introduced its first line featuring Bauhaus-style modern design to rave reviews at the 1932 Chicago World's Fair. "Their spring chairs had steel backs that look just like cane," Nicki says. "It's extraordinary what they were able to do with steel."

Today, Retropatio finds these metallic gems, sandblasts and powder-coats them, and returns them, some covered in new outdoor fabrics, to a place of honor on America's patios.