



Left: MacLean, Miss Greater New York 1926. **Above:** MacLean and her much-mourned poodle Bibi gaze down on the dining table. **Below:** MacLean's dolls of Dietrich, Monroe and herself

She's been a refugee, a film star and Garbo's stylist. For Barbara Barondess MacLean, one life just isn't enough. By Sarah Wise. Photographs by Laura Resen

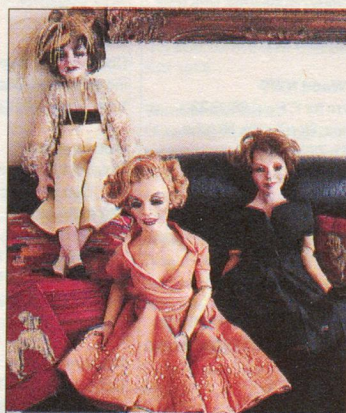
Leading lady

She has an illustrious list of former clients: Garbo, Monroe, Jean Harlow, Gloria Swanson, Errol Flynn, Ronald Reagan. For Barbara Barondess MacLean, now 92, fitting out the mansions of the stars was a natural progression after her own Hollywood career ended in 1938. Her movie-star colleagues had always sought her advice on matters of style, and when she'd had enough of being in front of the camera, MacLean turned her hobby into a business. "I was never a star but I did play some important roles," she says. "Then I got bored, so I went back to college to study art and design."

In her New York apartment — four sunny, south-facing rooms in a Midtown block — memorabilia from her nine decades peeps from every corner. High on a shelf sits a large, bright-green papier-mâché

figure of MacLean as the Statue of Liberty, clutching a copy of her 1986 autobiography, *One Life Is Not Enough*; below are three dolls made by MacLean, of herself, Monroe and Dietrich; a display cabinet holds a collection of her sculpture; on a trestle table are posters of her films (including *Hold Your Man*, with Harlow and Gable, *Eight Girls in a Boat* and *Summer Bachelors*) alongside an ancient Fox newsreel of her win at the 1926 Miss Greater New York Modern Venus contest. The walls are filled with her paintings, many of Bibi, her much-mourned poodle; another Marlene doll grins, rather sinisterly, from one of two vast sofas.

But this is not a museum; it's very much a home, close in spirit to the cosy opulence of the Ukrainian farmhouse where she lived with her Russian Jewish



parents until the age of 11. By the time she reached Hollywood, MacLean had experienced enough off-stage drama to fill several celluloid extravaganzas. She was born on Independence Day, 1907, in Brooklyn, though six months later her parents returned to Russia; after the Revolution, the family home was confiscated and

they fled, with Barbara having been shot through the shoulder; they made it back to New York in 1921, after living as destitute refugees in Poland and Germany. MacLean is the only American citizen to have been detained at Ellis Island; it was only because she was born in the US that her family was allowed to stay. That's why Barbara/The Statue of Liberty looks across the living-room ("She taught me hope," says MacLean) to a large, propeller-like object that salutes back ("I call that my V for Victory"); MacLean rescued the chunk of metal, function unknown, from a disused factory in the 50s and painted it a defiant crimson.

She escaped the dreariness of 20s Brooklyn by glamorising anything she could lay her hands on. "I designed morning, noon and night — I just couldn't help it," she says. Miss Greater New York made her first film in 1926 (*A Kiss For Cinderella*), moving to Hollywood in 1932. She took Garbo to furniture auctions ("The dullest woman I ever met: she never enjoyed spending one nickel"), having played opposite her in *Queen Christina* (MacLean's the sexy maid at the inn); she gave style advice to Jean Harlow ("A nice girl; a gentle, educated lady"); and decorated the marital home of Ronald Reagan and Jane Wyman. She tracked down an antique four-poster for Monroe and Di Maggio and was working on Monroe's Brentwood home when the star died.

Now she's tiny and frail, but her energy and acumen still flicker: "Yes, it's been a strange life," she says, trying to sum up such a dramatic personal history. "Some people, things happen to. Some people, things never happen to."