

Dorothy Draper

A PENCHANT FOR
BOLD GESTURES AND AUDACIOUS SCALE



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With great flair and perhaps the most individual point of view, Dorothy Draper was one of the early female decorators who, along with Elsie de Wolfe, Eleanor McMillen Brown and Ruby Ross Wood, set the standards that turned decorating from an avocational service into a full-fledged and very public profession.

Draper, née Dorothy Tuckerman, was born in 1889 in

LEFT: Dorothy Draper (1889–1969), a scion of an old New York family, was seminal in bringing public notice to the field of interior design with her bold décor and absolute self-confidence. In the 1930s and 1940s she made her mark refurbishing numerous high-profile hotels.



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By Jeffrey Simpson

Tuxedo Park, New York, an enclave of long-established wealth. She simply “came from the right people,” and she let others know it her whole life. Her assurance and her resulting self-confidence in design—expressed in her dictum, “If it looks right it is right”—were a tremendous asset in her business.

In 1912 Tuckerman married George “Dan” Draper, a doctor (and a brother of monologist Ruth Draper), and by the early 1920s she had opened the firm Architectural Clearing House. (It eventually became Dorothy Draper & Company, now headed by Carleton Varney.) Too dictatorial to be happy working with private parties, she took a commission to decorate the lobby of the Hotel Carlyle. Draper began to define her style there, with black, white and gray geometric marble floors and classical busts.

Another important early project was a new exterior for some flats on Sutton Place that were to become luxury apartments. Draper had the brick façades painted black with dead-white trim (a combination she would often use) and had each front door painted a brilliant color.

It was with the Hampshire House hotel on Central Park South that her mature style came into its own. She first used one of her trademark motifs, oversize applied white

LEFT: The living room of Draper’s residence at Manhattan’s Hotel Carlyle, decorated in the 1940s, had aubergine walls and white trim (Draper hated brown—even mahogany). RIGHT: In the library, Draper’s signature cabbage-rose chintz was juxtaposed with a striped wallcovering.



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OPPOSITE: Draper redecorated the lobby of San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel in 1935, creating a glittering space with girandole wall sconces in mirrored niches, polished pierced-brass lampshades with black-and-white bases, and upholstered rollback sofas.

BELOW: For a room in the Gideon Putnam Hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York, redesigned in 1933, Draper combined strong colors with pure-white trim and objects. (She would often add oversize white plasterwork.) The desk had a Greek-key motif, a Draper favorite.



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ABOVE: The bedroom of Mary Lasker's house near Millbrook, New York, which Draper decorated in the early 1950s, was a rare residential job. "Either a client hears my ideas and has an attack of apoplexy or he gives me carte blanche."

The hotel opened with a spectacular three-day party. In the 1950s, with the advent of high modernism, Draper's style went out of fashion to a degree. Her bold mixing of colors, however, and her surreal sense of scale made her a true artist of the design world. Dorothy Draper's advocacy of design as an essential part of life helped to establish the interior design profession. □

BELOW: In 1954 Draper created a Roman-inspired cafeteria in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Black-and-white columns surrounded a pool. The walls and ceilings were a dark blackberry hue, and the chandeliers and chairs were white.

plasterwork in swags and scrolls. Her characteristic upholstery and draperies in chintz printed with enormous cabbage roses, in tones that included scarlet, grass green, watermelon and coral, appeared as well. Huge black-and-white-marble tiles covered the floors.

Draper also wrote a column of decorating advice for the Hearst newspapers, and she appeared on the covers of both *Life* and *Time* magazines. She became a celebrity in the modern sense of the word, virtually creating the image of the decorator in the popular mind.

The climax of Draper's career came with the 1948 renovation of the Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia. She adopted a typical red-and-green palette and added overscale plaster elements.



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