

Let There Be Pink!



BY JURA KONCIUS



Decorator Dorothy Draper, circa the 1930s.

“We like Dorothy Draper because she turned up the volume. She lived out loud. Things have become too beige for a lot of people.”

When I rented my first Washington apartment in 1976, I hadn't a clue who Dorothy Draper was. But it turned out that the bold green, black and white lobby and exotic banana-leaf paper hallways at the Carillon House on Wisconsin Avenue had been installed 25 years earlier by Draper, then the most famous decorator in the country.

One morning not too long after I moved in, I walked into the lobby and my world had been de-Draperized. The dramatic white plaster mirror, the faux fireplace and the black glass-top tables were gone. Men were unloading teak from a Scan truck. It was the end of an era. And if only I'd been able to snag one of those fabulous oversize table lamps with giant drum shades!

Today, the owners of the Carillon House wish they had put all of Draper's fabulousness into storage. Because in 2006, the woman who believed pink, red and acid green looked great together, who loved wallpaper with cabbage roses the size of bowling balls, and who made her mark on hotels, resorts, restaurants, homes and department stores from 1925 to 1960 is having a major revival. A splashy new coffeetable book, a museum exhibition and reproductions of her trademark furniture, fabric and wallpaper designs — even her favorite over-the-top paint colors — are bringing back the name of the formidable tastemaker, decorator, author. The original domestic diva, she out-Marthaed Martha by spreading her gospel of big, bold style to housewives eager for some glitz in their lives.

“The lesson here is that people are looking for glamour again,” says Stephen Drucker, editor-in-chief of *House Beautiful*, who likened Draper's larger-than-life personality to that of Diana Vreeland. “We like Dorothy Draper because she turned up the volume. She lived out loud. Things have become too beige for a lot of people.”

For Draper, who died in 1969, beige was a dirty word. The monumental Greenbrier resort, the red, green, pink and coral fantasy she decorated in 1948, still stands in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., as a living monument to Draper style, thanks to the careful tending of her successor, New York decorator Carleton Varney, who took over the Draper company in the 1960s.

And in show houses and design magazines, a move beyond minimalism to a modern rococo and baroque revival harks back to one of the godmothers of American design.

“Dorothy Draper was to decorating what Coco Chanel was to fashion,” says Varney. “She brought color into a world which was sad and dreary. Today, the world is in terrible shape, and everyone wants color around them again.”

Born Dorothy Tuckerman in 1889, Draper had an upper-crust upbringing in Tuxedo Park, N.Y. The Tuckermans were well connected in social circles — Dorothy's younger cousin, Sister Parish, would also become a major interior designer of the 20th century. Little Dorothy, whose nickname was “Star,” grew up with a debutante's sense of glamour and privilege. Her family money allowed her to maintain her own identity even after she married George Draper

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in 1912, a doctor whose patients included his Groton classmate Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Drapers lived briefly in Washington during World War I. The couple had three children, and Draper developed a reputation as having a flair for decorating, as they bought and sold houses.

She was already running her own design business when, at age 40, she found herself divorced. But at nearly six feet tall and packing a formidable punch, she had no trouble mining her Social Register connections. She began taking on high-profile projects such as hotels, apartment houses and hospitals. At the Hampshire House hotel, on New York's Central Park South, she painted the rooms in watermelon, turquoise and mustard yellow, put in giant checkerboard black and white marble floors and even designed the pink and red rose-covered menus.

Her career took off and soon she was designing for major hotels all over the country, from the Drake in Chicago to the Fairmont in San Francisco and the Carlyle in New York. She created the interiors of jets and cars and wrote books and columns on entertaining and decorating.

In addition to the Carillon House, her Washington projects included the Mayflower Hotel and the lobby of the Westchester apartment building in Northwest, where a few of her architectural details remain. Model homes in Crofton, Md., once boasted color schemes and wall coverings by Draper.

Her pronouncements were legendary. "The color of your front door announces your personality to the world." Or, "If it looks right, it is right."



The oversize proportions of the Greenbrier resort enabled Draper to indulge in colorful opulence on the grandest scale. Photo by Donald Riddle Images, courtesy the Greenbrier.

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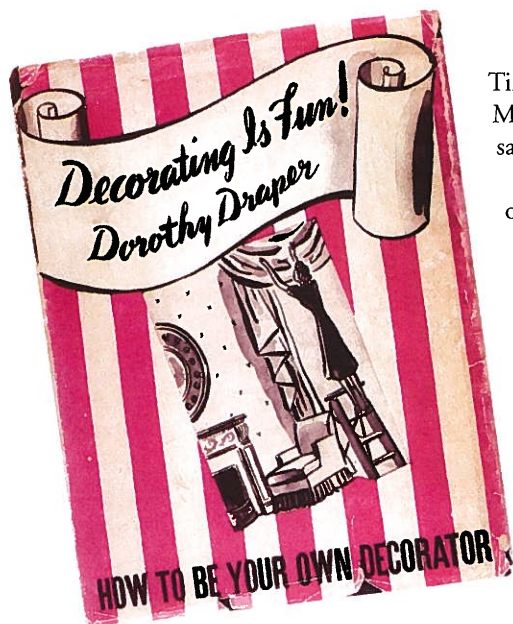
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She didn't always play to rave reviews. A 1954 article in *The Washington Post* and *Times Herald* reviewed her famous makeover of an old Roman court in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art into a new restaurant. "The kindest thing that can be said is that it looks like a bad Joan Crawford movie," wrote the critic.

By the time Draper retired in 1960, Varney had signed on to continue the legacy of Dorothy Draper & Co., as he does to this day.

"Dorothy Draper was the one who made decorating and design a business," says Varney. "Her fantasy was just enormous. Now, she is an icon."

I tracked down Ednee Taylor, now 79, whose late husband, Waverly Taylor, had built the Carillon House, to see what she recalled of Draper. "My husband loved her big bold style and was very fond of her," Taylor recalls. "I remember the lobby as being a little flamboyant, but in very good taste. The doormen all wore green uniforms, and it all had a certain elegance. I think we've lost that today. When we did the lobby over it just didn't look like much."

Jura Koncius is a writer for The Post's Home section.

Above left, cover of Draper's 1939 decorating book. Below, an explosion of baroque plasterwork surrounds the imposing door of the Camellia House restaurant at the Drake Hotel in Chicago. Photos courtesy of Dorothy Draper & Co., the Carleton Varney Design Group and Pointed Leaf Press.

There's a whole lot of Dorothy Draper going on this year.

- Carleton Varney has just published "In the Pink: Dorothy Draper, America's Most Fabulous Decorator" (Pointed Leaf Press, 219 pp., \$95).
- The Greenbrier resort (www.greenbrier.com) is sponsoring special 2006 Draper weekend packages with design seminars, historical exhibits and signature rhododendron cocktails to match the wallpaper she designed for the hotel. (There's even a special children's class on painting Draper wallpaper.)
- Until August 27, the Museum of the City of New York (www.mcny.org) is hosting an exhibit "The High Style of Dorothy Draper," which will highlight some of her large public commissions and show her influence on shaping America's view of home decor and design.
- Benjamin Moore Paints has compiled a Dorothy Draper Color Collection of 15 shades (Pretty in Pink, anyone?) reflecting her favorites (www.benjaminmoore.com).
- Varney has created a line of Draper-inspired furniture for Kindel and a line of high-voltage Draper fabrics for Carleton V and Carleton Varney by the Yard.

-Jura Koncius



Pretty in Pink

Apple Green

At Sea

Three color chips from Benjamin Moore's Dorothy Draper Color Collection.

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