

DESIGN & DECORATING

By KATHRYN O'SHEA-EVANS

MY FAVORITE ROOM

How to Do 'Old Money' Décor

Designer Carleton Varney on emulating the look of a famously posh Rhode Island powder room

THE ONLY child of a tobacco tycoon, Doris Duke had tripled her inheritance to \$1.2 billion by the time she died in 1993 at age 80, leaving most of it to charity. No surprise that displays of wealth dot her personal bathroom at Rough Point—the 39,000-square-foot estate in Newport, R.I., in which she summered. Blingy light fixtures illuminate gilt French antiques. But unlike, say, a “Real Housewives” McMansion, the décor avoids nouveau riche peacocking thanks largely to the earthy, leaf-strewn wallpaper, which clambers from floor to ceiling. The pattern evokes the extensive grounds that

‘People didn’t like to admit they had a toilet in those days.’

Duke’s pet Bactrian camels, Princess and Baby, roamed during her summer sojourns.

“It’s so wonderful, like Irish heather,” said decorator Carleton Varney of the wall covering. The powder room is a favorite spot of Mr. Varney, who worked with design luminary Dorothy Draper from 1962 until 1969, and bought her namesake company. From offices in Palm Beach he carries on her mission of merrily undercutting the predictability of fairly traditional furniture with juicy-hued patterns and jolting contrasts.

Rough Point, built in 1891 for Frederick W. Vanderbilt, is now a museum, with this room exactly as Duke left it: the simple, checkered marble floor grounding the sort of sparkle Mr. Varney believes the house demands. Here, he offers ways to approximate that old-money balance.



HER SECRET GARDEN Organic, vine-patterned wallpaper offsets the glitz of antiques in heiress Doris Duke’s personal bathroom at Rough Point, her family’s oceanfront estate in Newport, R.I. A mirrored door reflects the rest of the room.

ADD A ‘NATURAL’ LIGHT

Duke brought a bit of Paris home with her in the form of a souvenir chandelier that dates to the 1750s, festooned with glass rosettes and gilt faux candles. Though fanciful, its emerald-glass leaves align visually with the down-to-earth wallcovering. Hang a comparable—though admittedly less glittery—French 19th-Century Painted Tôle Three-Light Chandelier with Flowers and Vines. \$2,950, 1stdibs.com

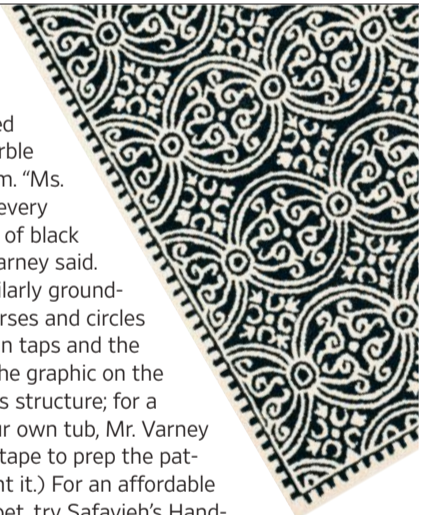


EMPLOY THE WELL-WORN

Tatty surfaces smack of gentility: See Duke’s patinated mirrored frame hung above the tub. “It looks used, and it looks like yesterday, and in that kind of a space to have [something] sparkling new—I don’t think she was the person who would do that,” Mr. Varney said. The Catarina Frame, shown here with a 1930 portrait of Duke, has the same aged finish. \$24, arhaus.com

LAY THE GROUNDWORK

The classic checkered black-and-white marble floor moors the room. “Ms. Draper always said every room needs a touch of black as an anchor,” Mr. Varney said. Woven into the similarly grounding wool rug: sea horses and circles that echo the dolphin taps and the motif on the tub. (The graphic on the marble tub also adds structure; for a similar touch on your own tub, Mr. Varney would use masking tape to prep the pattern, then spray paint it.) For an affordable stand-in for the carpet, try Safavieh’s Handmade Cambridge Myrtis Modern Moroccan Wool Rug. \$165 for 6-feet-by-6-feet, overstock.com



AIM HIGH ON THE BLING

When Duke did succumb to flashy pieces, she made sure they were quality. “The glass dressing table in the room is an early 19th century French piece that Doris purchased at auction in 1959 for the house

and for that space,” said Kristen Costa, curator of the Newport Restoration Foundation. This simpler Alice Glass Desk dials down the ornament, fitting given its lack of provenance. \$684, jossandmain.com

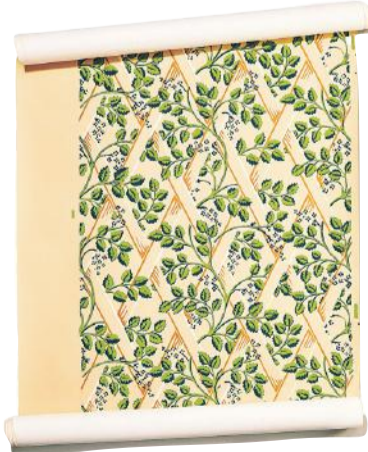


STOW UNMENTIONABLES

Stately built-in cabinets with screened glass panels flank Duke’s tub, one housing towels and the other the commode. “People didn’t like to admit they had a toilet in those days,” said Mr. Varney. Though we’re less squeamish today, we still appreciate discretely stashed supplies. Try this Casa Florentina Brandisi Armoire with Mirrored Door. \$1,699, ballarddesigns.com

PLANT TASTEFULLY

Ms. Duke had paper from Colonial Williamsburg’s collection hung in 1978; the effect, Mr. Varney said, is “like bathing under trees.” Even if you lack a garden through which pet camels trot, you can hang the same Jefferson Trellis block-printed wallcovering, still in production, a pattern found in Colonial Williamsburg’s archives from 1780-1810. \$580 per 11-yard roll, adelphipaperhangings.com



BE OUTDOORSY

Ms. Duke channeled her estate’s grounds with the framed antique avian watercolors over the gilt chairs, said Mr. Varney: “She really was an out-of-doors person.” A print of John James Audubon’s Long-legged Avocet soars as well. \$350, princetonaudubonprints.com



FILL YOUR TUB WITH A DOLPHIN

As if in deference to the nearby Atlantic Ocean, the brass fixtures and spout on the tub (and pedestal sink, not shown) are in the shape of dolphins; this brass Phylrich K1101M Dolphin 12 1/4” Two Lever Handle Widespread/Deck Mounted Roman Tub Faucet speaks the same squeaky language. \$1,334, decorplanet.com

BIO IN BRIEF / CARLETON VARNEY

Palm Beach-based interior designer Carleton Varney purchased Dorothy Draper & Company—famous for “Draperizing” West Virginia’s nearly 250-year-old Greenbrier resort and bringing maximalism to the masses—in 1964. He is still wielding Ms. Draper’s Technicolor magic today. “Dorothy would go around looking at [her decorating staff’s] tables and say, ‘Show me nothing that looks like gravy,’” Mr. Varney said. “If



you had something that looked like gravy, you didn’t work there.” He has written 37 books; the latest is “Romance & Rhododendrons” (*Shannongrove Press, Inc., 2020*). Last July, Mr. Varney opened a new store, Dorothy Draper Home, at the Greenbrier. The shop sells everything from furniture handmade by Kindel to leggings in the Brazilliance banana leaf pattern Ms. Draper designed in 1937.

SAM BOLDON (BATHROOM); F. MARTIN RAMM/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (WALLPAPER); PICTURE FRAME; GETTY (DUKE PORTRAIT)