

Carleton Varney captures The Greenbrier's colorful style in new book

Patricia Sheridan Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Jan 10, 2021

Almost as prolific a writer as he is a decorator, Carleton Varney has penned his 37th book, "Romance & Rhododendrons: My Love Affair with America's Resort, The Greenbrier."

Varney arrived at The Greenbrier in the early 1960s to work with his mentor, Dorothy Draper.

"I did everything from vacuum the floors to listen to Dorothy pontificate," he recalled, laughing.

The resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, is one of his most beloved and longest-running projects. The hotel has operated since the late 18th century and has hosted many American presidents, world leaders and celebrities. After World War II, Draper was hired to revive the resort, which had seen better days, especially after being used as a military hospital during the war. In 1946, she gave The Greenbrier its distinctive style — large florals, bright colors, bold stripes. Its technicolor modern drama is as fresh now as it was more than 70 years ago.

"Dorothy became famous because she created a look," Varney said. "No other decorator has been able to achieve that. It is a happy look, and that is why people come there.

"There is a generation out there that doesn't understand color since they have grown up in this gray and beige world," observed Varney, who is known as Mr. Color.

He sees fear of color as fear of living. Neutral design is safe but won't be remembered, embraced and cherished the way The Greenbrier has been for generations, he said.

Varney is the official curator of The Greenbrier. He is also the owner and president of Dorothy Draper & Co., the oldest decorating firm in the country. His years of experience have earned him other titles as well. He serves on the National Council of the Arts and is a member of the White House Historical Association as well as the National Council on White House History.

"I am happy about it all," he said.

But what really thrills him is the enduring interest in the Draper look, which is so much of what The Greenbrier is about. It was Varney who seamlessly connected the new casino with the original main hotel via the concourse called Greenbrier Avenue.

With more than 50 years of hands-on design expertise at the resort, Varney understands the iconic property's historic and design significance better than anyone. He explores it all in the book, the pages of which are filled with photos of the Cameo Ballroom, the cottages, the indoor swimming pool, the Victorian Writing Room and other well-known spaces.

The writing room is pictured on the cover of the book, and it has been on the cover of numerous magazines throughout the decades. Its dark green walls set off by a white fireplace, and the Fudge Apron draperies are quintessential Dorothy Draper.

In "Romance & Rhododendrons" (Shannongrove Press, \$87.95), Varney explains why the floral pattern is called Fudge Apron. Draper said its colors are the ones that would appear on a candy maker's apron. Varney has designed a scarf that depicts the room.

"Dorothy would have been 131 years old Nov. 22, and Gov. Jim Justice has done such a great job preserving Mrs. Draper's design legacy," he said.

The West Virginia governor purchased The Greenbrier in 2009 before he ran for political office. In doing so, he not only preserved the resort's unmistakable style, but

also he saved hundreds of local jobs.

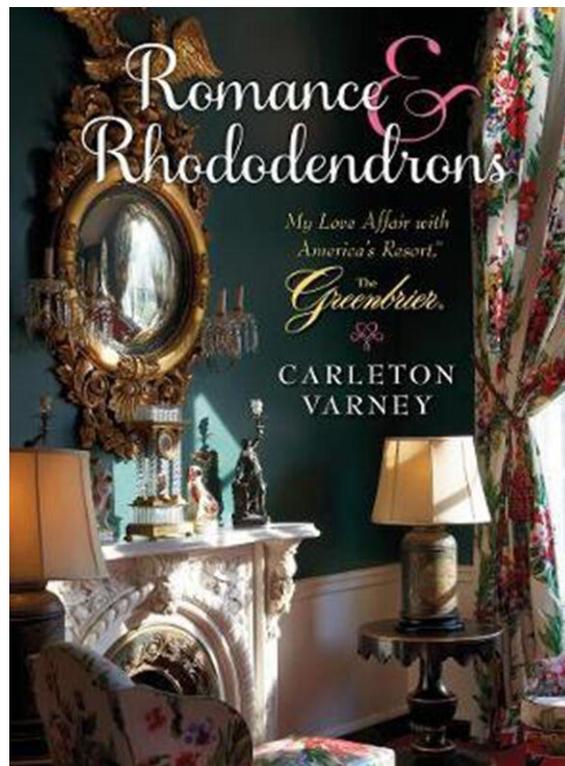
"We are in the process of renovating the rooms," Varney said.

Don't expect any bland whites, beiges and grays.

"The Greenbrier is one big Kodak moment or today — you would call it an Instagram moment," he said.

A Dorothy Draper store opened at the resort last July and its highlights include the Dorothy Draper Collection from Kindel Furniture. The store, which stocks signature fabrics, lighting fixtures and clothing, is operated by Brinsley Matthews, executive vice president of Dorothy Draper & Co.

"It really has all you would want from the Greenbrier to carry home, including "Romance & Rhododendrons," said Varney.



"Romance & Rhododendrons: My Love Affair with America's Resort, The Greenbrier," by Carleton Varney.