



HOUSE BEAUTIFUL

Yet still, the depressing palette persists as an American staple. Varney recalls one particularly troubling run-in that cemented his disdain: "I was staying at an airport hotel in L.A., and the walls were a beige grasscloth, the curtains at the windows were beige on beige and the carpet was beige," he says. "I went to take a shower in this travertine bath and I said to myself, 'Carleton, you are naked in a bowl of oatmeal.'"

Drowning in oatmeal guests at the Grand Hotel are not, that's for certain: "The hotel is filled with color and gardens—it is, as I am, a maximalist," Varney says proudly.

The designer first began work on the property 43 years ago and, as he recalls, "set along creating an American fantasy where you could go and sleep in the rooms like the first ladies did." As luck would have it, that task was an easier one for Mr. Varney than most: he was a decorator to many of them. "Betty Ford I knew, of course I was Rosalynn's decorator. I had the personal experience with Barbara Bush and Laura Bush."

"They all were quite active," in the design of their space, Varney says. "They all gave me letters! And those letters are in the rooms hanging on the walls."

The Dolley Madison Suite.
COURTESY OF GRAND HOTEL

And where Varney didn't know the subjects, he did his research: Dolley Madison's room is inspired by a replica of her inauguration gown in Varney's collection (which includes replicas of every gown up until Jackie Kennedy). For Mamie Eisenhower, he placed a call to her granddaughter, a friend. "I called Annie and she was the one who spoke to me on everything her granny did," Varney says. "She remembered it to the T."

As for what Mr. Varney would say to the critics of his overly-colorful style? Well, he has an answer prepared. "The White House has a red room, a blue room, a gold room; there's nothing beige about it," he tells me. "Recently, I heard a person say to me that they felt the White House interiors were gaudy." Varney, who writes a syndicated newspaper column for the *Palm Beach Daily News* responded with an installment titled "[Gaudy Not Always a Negative Term.](#)"

"The adjective 'gaudy' comes from an old French term, 'gaudir,' which means to rejoice and to make merry," he writes. "Let's all re-examine the word gaudy and relate it to things of beauty and happiness. One man's gaudy, it seems, is another's delight."

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