

THE DAPPER HEAD OF DRAPER



“Decorating is Fun,” according to the title of Dorothy Draper’s 1939 book — often credited as America’s first interior decorating book.

Not that you’d necessarily know it, though, talking to Carleton Varney, Draper’s mentee, who still runs the business he took over from her on her death in 1969, and who has recently overseen the republication of the book. For the wonderfully old-school yet also dazzlingly contemporary Varney, who dispenses insight, charm and mordant wit in equal measure, decorating is actually quite a serious business.

One of America’s favorite decorators, Varney brings a fascinating combination of unbridled enthusiasm and practiced world-weariness to his role as president of the company, making it his personal mission to carry on Draper’s bold tradition of colorful and pattern-filled design. He is also a prodigious writer himself, the author of a celebrated biography of Draper, two novels and a clutch of decorating books. In addition to this, he pens a much-loved weekly decorating column, “Your Family Decorator,” in the Palm Beach Daily News.

If this seems a dizzying workload, Varney airily dismisses it. “I’m 83,” says the self-appointed high priest of black-and-white-with-a-splash-of-color decorating, a style inherited from Draper and still practiced to this day. (It’s also trending on the runway for spring as well. See the “Neiman Marcus Trend Report” in our Watch pages.) “But really, the numbers should be reversed. I feel like I’m 38.” He regrets how times have changed

and bemoans the fact that “people no longer have sensibilities or decorum,” but a healthy — never mawkish — nostalgia and appreciation of the past seems to keep him going.

With a home and office in Palm Beach, Varney has a penchant for Palm Beach-style, pastel-colored or cream blazers, which he wears over richly patterned long silk scarves, tied as voluminous ties, in what has become something of a signature look. Those ties are as famously loud as Varney himself is cultivated, low-key and debonair. Along with those great splashes of color, there are even — heavens to Betsy — horizontal stripes, a decorating no-no that would have Syrie Maugham and Elsie de Wolf, those mistresses of cream design and Draper’s precursors, spinning in their graves, yet somehow, on Varney, they look good.

“I’m a color person,” he says, almost superfluously. “I remember coming back from Papeete (capital of French Polynesia) and landing in LA. The hotel room was all beige and gray. I felt I was naked in a bowl of oatmeal,” he laments, still recoiling at the memory.

His decorating canon is vast and prodigious. There have been castles in Ireland (where Varney also has a home), governors’ mansions, ambassadorial residences and even airplane interiors. “I recently flew from Denver on United,” he tells me, by way of introducing the subject. “In first class, they served mushroom soup, then a burger with a ramequin of button mushrooms. Imagine.” Whether it is the mushrooms themselves, or their lack of color, to which he objected, I fail to establish, but what is abundantly clear is that Varney did not care for them. “I think back to the planes we did with white ceilings and gold stars, with bright red seatbelts, or to the era of Braniff,” he says with a sigh.

He has done The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Musuem and the former presidential yacht USS Sequoia. And then there are hotels — more than 400 of them — from Hawaii to London, from the Midwest to Japan, which are always at the fore. His parents instilled a strong work ethic in him. Firmly grounded and disciplined, his great skill has been to combine a highly attuned aesthetic with unswerving pragmatism. “Interiors,” says Varney, “are all about looking at pretty things but they must always be practical.” And he says he has to be “surrounded by beautiful things,” just as he also likes “to be around people that are happy.”

Gardens have a special place in Varney’s heart. He waxes lyrical about his garden in Ireland and says that, no matter where he is, he is “never without a flower.”

While he celebrates the past and grieves over a certain seemliness that has been lost, modern is not necessarily taboo. He has just done a property in Armonk that is “a little bit sleek. Wood floors, stencils, no drapery and (deep breath) panels of photography as art,” as well as a 10,000- square-foot-home (‘compound’ might be a better word) in Greenwich, for Mark and Arlene Comora. As for decorating, “it is never finished.” But Varney maintains he is not into “novelty decorating,” meaning that a classic interior will always win out over fad and fashion. Practicality is not only one of his guiding principles, it was also one of Draper’s. Doubtless, the company owes much of its longevity and success to the fact that design and style never trump comfort and functionality.

The truth is, in the world of the extraordinary Carleton Varney, they must be part and parcel of it.

For more, visit carletonvarney.com(<http://carletonvarney.com>) and dorothydraper.com(<http://dorothydraper.com>).