

The Fascinating Design History of the Greenbrier, Which Graced House Beautiful's Cover in August, 1948

The grand hotel was outfitted by design doyenne Dorothy Draper. Seven decades later, her protégé, Carleton Varney, talks about its design influence.

BY HADLEY KELLER AUG 9, 2021



For House Beautiful's 125th anniversary this year, we're digging into some of our favorite spaces from our archive—including, so far, decorator Sister Parish's New York Apartment, the Clinton White House, and a Palm Beach home to two generations of successful designers. Here, we talk to Carleton Varney about the Greenbrier, whose Dorothy Draper-outfitted interiors graced the cover in August, 1948.

In 1946, decorator Dorothy Draper was tapped for what would become the biggest interior design job in history: Transform the sprawling Greenbrier Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, into a grand resort representative of American style. It was a tall order: For the last few years, the hotel had served as a hospital tending to American soldiers returning from combat during World War II (25,000 soldiers were treated here). Its redecoration would symbolize the country's postwar boom. After a lavish opening weekend which saw a guest list including the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, the hotel became a destination for vacationing families from across the country, and also a frequent political meeting place; The Greenbrier has hosted 26 U.S. presidents. In August of 1948, following its grand reopening that spring, it featured on the cover of *House Beautiful*.

Over the course of the last six decades, the hotel's decoration has been left in the expert hands of Draper's protégé, Carleton Varney. Varney first arrived at the Greenbrier by train in the early 1960s with Draper and various members of her staff—"Mrs. Draper would always travel by sleeper car to White Sulphur Springs," he recalls—and has stayed on as the hotel's resident decorator throughout the ensuing decades. In that time, Varney has ushered the hotel through the years, adding his own stamp while maintaining trademark Draper details (like overscaled black-and-white floors). In a telling indication of the timelessness of Draper's designs, though, the space that graced *House Beautiful's* cover 75 years ago—a writing room in a deep forest green—remains virtually unchanged since that time.

Now, some seven decades after its grand opening, *House Beautiful* catches up with Varney to hear about the hotel's past, evolution, and what has remained perfectly unchanged. Read the interview below (and scroll down for the original story from 1948!).



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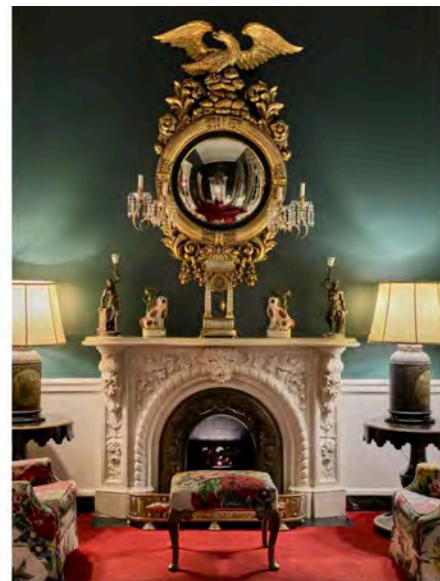
The Greenbrier Today



1 of 17 Greenbrier Avenue, in the hotel's lower-level reception area. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The main hotel lobby. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The Victorian Writing Room. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



Antiques in the Writing Room. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



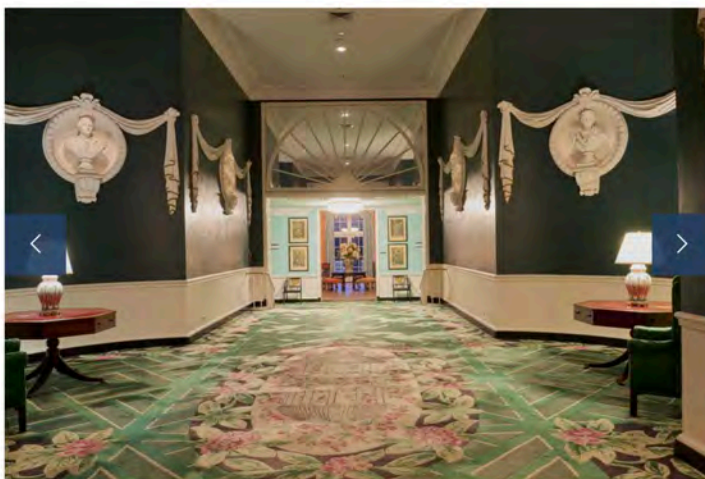
A portrait of Princess Grace of Monaco in the hotel's North Parlor. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The North Parlor. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



Draper separated one painting into two to flank the fireplace in the North Parlor. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The hotel's "Celebrity Corridor." COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The Trellis Lobby. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



Draper's iconic Brazilliance wallpaper outside the entrance to one of the hotel's dozen eateries. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



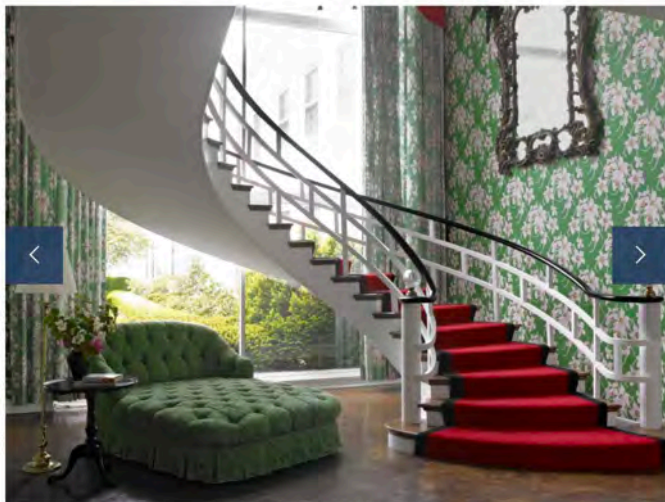
The reception lobby. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



Oversized curtains topped with bows in the hotel's Colonial Hall. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The dining room in the hotel's Presidential Suite. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



A grand spiral stair into the Presidential Suite. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The Presidential Suite's primary bedroom. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



The formal living room in the State Suite. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



A bedroom at one of the hotel's cottages. COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY

House Beautiful: Can you tell us about your first visit to the Greenbrier?

Carleton Varney: Well, let me begin by telling you that anything Dorothy Draper represents is color and everything pretty. Dorothy was always a person who was very colorful. Then she had the office, the walls and ceilings were black and the carpets were bright green. And on the black walls were beautiful Venetian mirrors over malachite-topped console tables that were gold. All the desks were white and all the conference chairs throughout the office were covered in black patent leather.

When Dorothy presented there were spotlights on each of the billboards in the office. She was very theatrical; she presented wearing a Cerise turban and a long cape and white gloves. It was like watching a Broadway show.



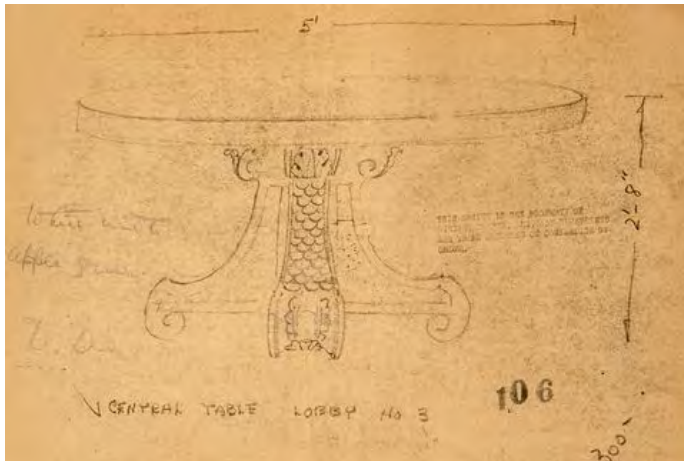
A watercolor sketch by Draper of the green reading room.
COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY

HB: There's definitely a lot of color and theatricality in her designs at the Greenbrier.

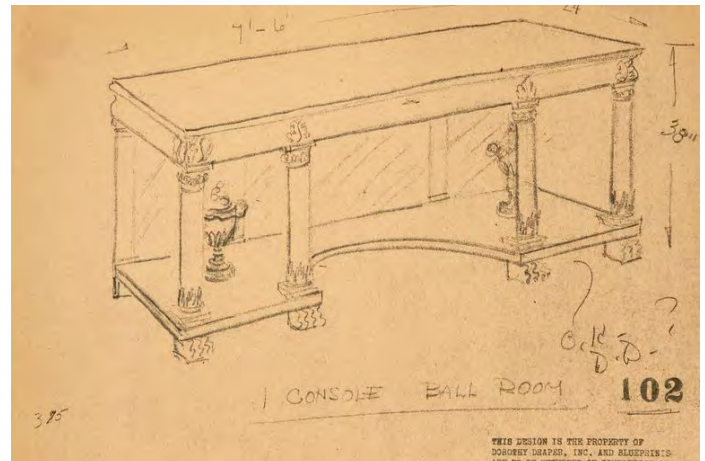
CV: Some hotels look like bedroom factories. If you go to a great historic house in Europe, you don't want to see gray and beige. You want to see how the family evolved from one generation to the other. That's what the Greenbrier is all about.

HB: Speaking of evolution, how have you evolved the hotel over time but kept within Dorothy Draper's vision?

CV: We're managing to retain the dignity of that history; going to the dining room in a jacket and a tie. There's still that sense of glamour—that's what Dorothy was all about.



Draper's original sketch of tables for the hotel lobby.
COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY



A sketch for the ballroom consoles, with notes and measurements by Draper.
COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY

HB: And what were some of her most enduring style lessons, besides color?

CV: She was baroque and black-and-white floors and color—and she was scale. She always had the overscale. She thought the most important thing was to look over the crowd and know that the backgrounds were beautiful.

HB: Was there anything at the Greenbrier you wouldn't ever change from the original design?

CV: I keep everything we've got! I do that in my private decorating, too. I inventory everything the client has. We find a new place for it.

HB: What do you think is the most important lesson to impart from Draper's decorating?

CV: I hope the world gets happier and more colorful. I also think people think decorating is done. But people age, and



Carleton Varney, left, with Dorothy Draper and Leon Hegwood (onetime Dorothy Draper & Company CEO) in the early days of decorating the Greenbrier.

COURTESY DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY

and what they like when they're 20, they don't necessarily like when they are 50, or when they're 80. It has to evolve. And you have to keep adding and multiplying.

HB: Right, it's all about personality.

CV: Everybody has their own view. I've always said, I don't believe in good taste or bad taste. I only believe in taste. And you can never see it or touch it—you can only feel it.

From 1964: Travel to Improve Your Decorating

by Laura Tanner

Vacations in the right places can do as much for your taste and your decorative ability as a college course. A holiday mood makes you receptive, sharpens your awareness to your surroundings, gives you a wealth of ideas to take home and make your own. The newly redecorated Greenbrier Hotel at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, is a perfect example of this principle.



Released from war duties, the Greenbrier Hotel begins another chapter in its illustrious record of innkeeping. Redecorated by Dorothy Draper who has a way with hotels, it radiates warm and friendly glamour, from the homey red pippins in the Chinese bowl on the big table in the main lobby to the elegant, yet intimate writing room, pictured on our cover. It is full of copy for the embryonic decorator, for anyone with homemaking instinct, for a hotel is only a home on a more cast scale, and what is successful in one is applicable to the other.



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The writing room, for instance, is a room to analyze and remember with a color scheme that never misses—greens and reds balanced off with white, just a bit of blue and the drama of black. Here, too, is a nice study of the scale of oversize chintz roses and tiebacks, right for the height of the windows. Notice, also, the pairing off of antiques with contemporary tables and upholstered comfort. In such charming rooms, sociability flourishes.

Luxurious appearance can be down to earth, too, as with the Greenbrier's white satin-striped bedcovers, extravagant-looking but entirely washable. Unexpected are the underscoring of the immaculate white baths with lipstick-red face cloths and rug, the painted linings of drawers, the scarlet tapes on chrome luggage racks. These imaginative elements cost no more, are simply the result of attention to detail, the understanding of which can be but a bright luster on your own efforts at decorating.