

“No decorator ever became famous for doing beige or white.” This Acclaimed Designer To The Stars Reveals Why Bold Rules



Jeryl Brunner

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“The will to be dreary is a morose little imp which whispers to us that something which we know would be fun, would be too much trouble, will take too much time, is too expensive and probably wouldn't be as amusing after all,” writes trailblazing interior designer Dorothy Draper in her book, “Entertaining is Fun! How to Be a Popular Hostess.”

“Now don't listen to that voice,” Draper advises. “Tune it out.”

Throughout his six decade career Carleton Varney has carried that dynamic “don't be dreary” mantle. As an interior designer he upholds Draper's legacy of unfurling vibrant colors, daring contrasts and floral patterns.



Carleton Varney (Photo by Michel Arnaud)

In fact, Varney's roots with Dorothy Draper run deep. Very deep. He began his career as an apprentice to Draper herself. Fifty-eight years ago he took over her firm, Dorothy Draper & Co., the first professional design firm in the United States.

All these years Varney and the firm have maintained Draper's mantra of maintaining a joyful spirit in design. "These days, there are a lot of controversies regarding color," says Varney. "This is not the age of pretty in design. People want rooms that look like the interior of a refrigerator or a hospital kitchen. This moment in time is a moment of mechanical, industrial living, and many people don't care about making a collection in their homes."

As Varney explains, people don't like pieces that are heavily ornate. They prefer spaces that are far more subtle, in silver and beige. "But no decorator ever became famous for doing beige or white," he adds. "I grew up with happy in my heart and I

bring that happy to my designs. Fortunately there are still enough people out there who want pretty, happy, colorful spaces, and they are the ones who have kept Dorothy Draper alive.”

Considered one of the country’s most distinguished interior designers, Varney not only has an impressive client roster but also amassed friendships with some of the world’s most fascinating figures including Joan Crawford, Princess Grace of Monaco, Van Johnson, Esther Williams, Pauline Trigere, Jimmy Carter and First Lady Rosyln Carter.

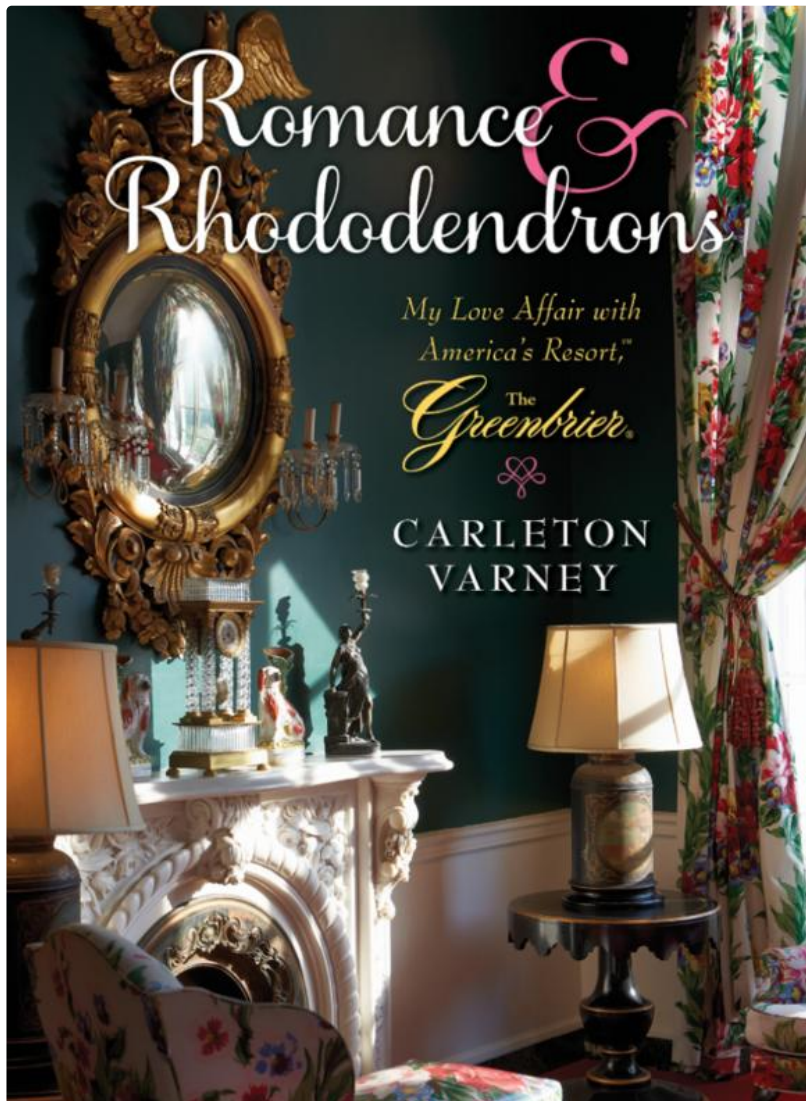
For the past forty years Varney has been the sole interior designer for [The Greenbrier](#) and The Grand Hotel. A prolific designer, he also led design projects at Dromoland Castle, Ashford Castle, Adare Manor, The Breakers, The Plaza, and The Waldorf Astoria Towers. And he has completed a number of special projects including the Green Room at the Oscars, the Governor's Mansions in Connecticut and West Virginia, the Presidential Library for President Carter and the Embassy Residences in Ireland and Japan

Varney recently released his 37th book: [“Romance & Rhododendrons: My Love Affair with America’s Resort The Greenbrier.”](#) Published by Shannongrove Press, the book highlights the design and history of the storied resort and contains over 200 photographs of the interiors in this fanciful world where the imagination runs wild.

“Romance & Rhododendrons” also includes archival images from events at The Greenbrier throughout the years with special appearances from Jennifer Garner, Serena and Venus Williams, Jessica Simpson, Christine Ebersole, Tiger Woods and the late Debbie Reynolds, Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco, and Jerry West.

“This book has been in the works for 53 years now, ever since I started working on the hotel with Dorothy,” shares Varney. “There is so much of her in the book, and so much of myself and the team who works tirelessly to keep The Greenbrier beautiful every day. It is really structured around all the wonderful images of the hotel and the people who made it.”

Varney shared more about The Greenbrier, Dorothy Draper's legacy and how to easily create a joyful holiday vibe at home.



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

Jeryl Brunner: When did you know you had to be a designer?

Carleton Varney: I think I have always been a designer at heart. Growing up, my mother and father always surrounded themselves with beautiful things. Their house was full of beautiful pieces that they had collected around the world, and there was love in every corner of that house. Also, my mother was an excellent gardener. She knew everything about every flower, and always had the most magnificent gardens,

so I think that's where my love of color came from. Thanks to my parents, I knew when I was six or eight years-old that I was interested in color and beauty. My love has only grown since then.

Jeryl Brunner: What inspired you to write a book about The Greenbrier? And why is the resort special?

Carleton Varney: The Greenbrier is iconic. It is the last of America's great year-round resorts, and it's a city in itself. The Greenbrier has it all: two swimming pools, tennis, archery, a bowling alley, horseback riding, 11 restaurants, a casino; It's the full package. The other thing that makes The Greenbrier special is its unforgettable style. It's almost like a living museum, and the vibrant colors and prints make every corner a photographable moment. People from around the world, from European royalty to American presidents, want to go there because it's such a joy. Especially in these unhappy times, people love The Greenbrier's magic.

Jeryl Brunner: You began your career as an apprentice to Dorothy Draper and went on to take over the firm fifty-eight years ago. What would you like people to know about Ms. Draper?

Carleton Varney: I was the designer for the Carter family, so I remember Christmas at the White House many times. It never fails to be a treat. This year, there was a tree in the library devoted to the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which had ornaments of 50 women who changed the world. I was very moved to see that Dorothy Draper was one of them. It is thrilling to think that Dorothy Draper, along with so many other women, really made a difference in defining womens' places in the world, and that she did it by bringing color and joy. Dorothy really believed that a home should be a place of personality and happiness and pattern and I have spent 53 years of my life following in her footsteps. She was really an incredible woman.

Jeryl Brunner: What would you like people to know about the new shop, the very first Dorothy Draper Home that you opened at The Greenbrier?

Carleton Varney: The goal of the store is to offer people a way to take the Greenbrier home with them after their stay. Even before you set foot inside the shop, you feel that you are in a Dorothy Draper world. The exterior has yellow walls and beautiful windows. The store sells a variety of items I love, including decorative pillows, throws, linens, and accessories, Dorothy Draper & Co Fabric and Wallpapers and a selection of hand-picked antique and one-of-kind items. One of my favorite pieces is a selection of masks in classic Dorothy Draper fabrics. I love that the store offers a number of products in our iconic fabrics that you can use every day.

Jeryl Brunner: What was one commission that made you stop and think, Wow! I cannot believe I get to do this?

Carleton Varney: The biggest honor is working in the White House. I was the official designer for President Jimmy Carter and First Lady Roslyn Carter, and once worked on the Blue Room tree at Christmas. As the Carters' White House design consultant, I enjoyed designing events for first lady Rosalynn Carter and created holiday decor for the late Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to the White House in the 1980s. That was definitely one of those pinch me moments.

Jeryl Brunner: What touches can people add to their homes to make them more festive and cheery for the holidays?

Carleton Varney: Fresh flowers make all the difference in brightening up a room, an entry or tablescape. It does not have to be a special occasion to pick up some flowers and bring some color and joy into a space. Flowers have the ability to elevate a table setting instantly.

During the holidays there are so many options from traditional poinsettia plants to bouquets, red roses, red peonies, red Gerbera daisies. And I love bringing in paperwhites for their perfume. They are perfect for welcoming your guests and yourself home. I also look forward to adding touches of fresh greenery on surfaces such as consoles and tables paired with white lights and or tea light candles. This also

adds a warm touch. If you have a staircase I always love wrapping the railing in a fresh green garland and bright white lights.

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