PHOTO: VAN NES-DE VOS, COURTESY COLLECTION OF DOROTHY DRAPER & CO. INC., THE CARLETON VARNEY DESIGN GROUP

ABOVE: The dramatic lobby of the Hampshire House in New York City, in 1937, showcased what came to be Draper's trademark style. AT RIGHT: A halo surrounds the domineering decorator in a 1930s portrait. A promotional note card from the 1950s.

Dorothy Draper

TEXT NINA KORMAN

"IF IT LOOKS RIGHT, IT IS RIGHT." That was the motto of superstar interior decorator Dorothy Draper, according to Carleton Varney, one of her trusted inner circle of employees. But it was never that easy. Varney, author of the 1988 biography *The Draper Touch: The High Life and High Style of Dorothy Draper*, goes on to clarify in that book: "If it looks right to Dorothy Draper, it is right, and if does not, it is wrong."

What sounded like imperiousness on Draper's part was more an innate confidence, a self-assurance born of a wealthy upbringing and a fertile imagination. The decorator, known to never let her commercial clients have opinions, possessed an inflexible poise. It was a quality that should have repelled prospective employers. Instead, she won over those paying her for residential work (Walter Winchell and Clare Booth Luce among them) and large public commissions, and captivated the masses as well.

A name very likely foreign to those who associate interior decorating with the outlandish showmanship of Philippe Starck or the subdued meditative style of Yabu Pushelberg, Dorothy Draper was perhaps the world's most famous interior decorator from the 1930s to the 1950s. Espousing what she called the "decoration of independence," or using decorating as a means of self-expression, she embraced bright colors, over-scaled architectural details, splashy fabrics, and revamped antiques.

PHOTOS: COURTESY COLLECTION OF DOROTHY DRAPER & CO. INC., THE CARLETON VARNEY DESIGN GROUP

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE GREENBRIER

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The popularity of modern-day designers such as Diamond Baratta and Kelly Wearstler—who owes part of her panache to Draper without even realizing it—and the recent impetus for ordinary homeowners to own and decorate oversized spaces, are perhaps instrumental in the current renewed appreciation of Draper's work. On March 30th Pointed Leaf Press published *In the Pink: Dorothy Draper, America's Most Fabulous Decorator*, also written by Varney who joined her company in 1960. This season Kindel Furniture Company joined with Varney to add 15 new pieces to its Dorothy Draper Collection for Varney & Sons. Introduced last year, the line, available through to-the-trade showrooms like Robb & Stucky, revives some of Draper's signature pieces such as a demilune sofa she created for the café in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a revolving bar inspired by the 2004 re-release of her book, *Entertaining is Fun!*

OPPOSITE PAGE: The post-World War II re-do of The Greenbrier Resort at White Sulphur Springs. West Virginia, was a high point of Draper's career.

BELOW: New pieces from Kindel Furniture Company's Dorothy Drraper Collection for Varney & Sons.

But the main thrust behind a revival of interest in Draper is the first-ever major museum exhibition solely dedicated to her work, "The High Style of Dorothy Draper," which opened in early May at the Museum of the City of New York and runs through August 27th. Utilizing vintage photos, never-before-seen drawings, advertisements, furniture, and accessories, the show, curated by Donald Albrecht, highlights the life and career of the self-taught designer, born in 1889 and raised in Tuxedo Park, New York, a ritzy enclave north of New York City that was America's first gated community.

As much as Draper tried to escape the claustrophobic atmosphere of her Gilded Age childhood in Tuxedo Park, the interiors of the imposing Gothic piles and commanding Tudor mansions would have a lasting effect on her. Periods would be mixed liberally, with elements from the Renaissance, Greece, and Second Empire France all co-existing harmoniously in one dark, dreary room. Draper came to adopt a similar decorating philosophy, retaining some of the classicism but rendering it in her own lightened, brightened, cheerful way.

Draper began her career in the late 1920s by redecorating the lobby of the Carlyle Hotel. Unlike her predecessors' unwelcoming work in other hotels, she created a cozy room with a muted palette. Boldly patterned chintz, soft curtains and furniture in rich fabrics, busts and friezes of Roman emperors, marble columns and floors offered minor glimmers of what was to come.

More hotel jobs would follow, but the decorator's mission to transform, or "Draperize," structures began in earnest during the height of the Depression with the Sutton Place project. Owned by the Phipps family, four nondescript tenement row houses in a then-unfashionable area of New York City were inhabited by low-rent-paying residents. On a small, limited budget, Draper overhauled them by painting the exteriors black with white trim and covering fire escapes with intricate white scrollwork. Abundant plantings revitalized backyards and a different bright color marked each front door. Seemingly overnight, rents more than tripled. Sutton Place became a fashionable address, and Dorothy Draper was a hit.

Major recognition came for Draper during her work at the Hampshire House, a 37-story apartment hotel on Central Park South. It was a job Varney describes in *The Draper Touch* as "a larger version of home-sweet-home

PHOTO: COURTESY COLLECTION OF DOROTHY DRAPER & CO. INC., THE CARLETON VARNEY DESIGN GROUP

The clean and classical lobby of New York City's Carlyle Hotel, circa 1930, the first major commercial space to be "Draperized."

with a punched-up color wheel." There, Draper's vision came to fruition, and her trademark style was established. Floors were covered with enormous 2-by-2 foot black-and-white marble tiles. Walls boasted glossy black paint or bright colors—coral, turquoise, magenta, kelly green, ruby red—and were trimmed with huge rococo plaster motifs (giant white scrolls and shells resembling sugar icing on a wedding cake). Antiques were swathed in glossy white lacquer paint. Fake trees were made of white plaster. Furniture was upholstered in Draper-designed chintz featuring large clusters of cabbage roses. (It would be a look that proved so popular, the textile company F. Schumacher & Co. released a million yards of the fabric on the market and enjoyed one of its all-time bestsellers.)

Columnists in the early 1940s dubbed Draper's style "modern baroque," and it wasn't for everyone. "Either a prospective client hears my ideas and has an attack of apoplexy or he gives me carte blanche," she was known to say.

Carte blanche couldn't have come cheap. Varney notes in *The Draper Touch* that his former boss saw decorating jobs "in total, as an entity in which each individual part harmonized with another…. She would not only do the walls and floors but also the patterns on the china, the liveries, the stationery and everything that was displayed, right down to the swizzle sticks in the cocktail bar and the buttons on the vests of the busboys!"

By the time World War II rolled around, Draper, an international celebrity, was unstoppable. She had

become an industry, pounding out a series of self-help lessons; penning how-to books such as *Decorating is Fun!* (1939) and *Entertaining is Fun!* (1941); counseling women on positive living through a weekly radio broadcast on New York's WOR; and providing home and design advice through a daily syndicated column in Hearst newspapers and a monthly spot in *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Fond of being the center of attention (her father had nicknamed her "Star") and making provocative statements, she once said, "Begin by thinking of your rooms in the nude." Whether it was the designer who was unclothed or the room itself was never made clear.

Plenty of competitors existed in the world of decorating, but Draper was unfazed. According to Varney, "she thought their work was piddling, with no drama and scale." Elsie de Wolfe's designs were "faddish and too occult." Syrie Maugham's all-white rooms were impractical; Draper yearned to splash around her own wild color palette in them, said Varney in her biography.

Despite World War II's massive shortages of material goods, Draper still found a way to do her job on a small and grand scale. Creating packaging for Dorothy Gray perfume and designing the interiors for the enormous hotel/casino Quitandinha in Petropolis, Brazil, were among the tasks that kept her studio busy. After the War, commissions came from San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel and one of her last huge undertakings, redoing the spectacular Greenbrier Resort at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

PHOTO: MAYNARD PARKER, COURTESY OF THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY, SAN MARINO, CALIFORNIA

A "Draperized" dining room at California's celebrity haunt, the Arrowhead Springs Resort in 1939.

The corporate atmosphere of the 1950s took much of the fun out of work for Draper, who preferred to deal one-on-one with single-minded CEOs instead of attempting to convince corporate boards that her designs were worth the vast dollars it would take to execute them. Smaller jobs included designing a passenger rail car for the C&O Railroad; creating an entire program for Convair Company from the flight attendant uniforms to air sickness bags (none of which was executed); and fashioning the interior of the 1952 Packard automobile.

By 1960, Norman Vincent Peale's Power of Positive Thinking, of which Draper was a disciple, wasn't doing much for her any more in business or personal matters. Her single-minded focus on her career had resulted in the end of her marriage many years before, and she never again wed. And now her lackadaisical attitude toward money was finally coming to haunt her. Running constantly in the red and having to often dip into her own personal fortune to keep her business afloat, she retired and sold Dorothy Draper, Inc., to Varney and colleague Leon Hegwood.

The audacious Draper died in 1969 at the age of 80. "No matter how iconoclastic her ideas were, she could never be accused of being in bad taste," wrote Varney in *The Draper Touch*. As if to emphasize that point, some of her interiors—most notably at Brazil's Quitandinha—still exist intact to this very day. H