

# House Beautiful

## Carleton Varney Wants You to Stop Decorating with Beige

Trust the designer to the Regans, Bushes, Joan Crawford, Ethel Merman, and the Carters.

BY HADLEY KELLER    MAY 31, 2019



MICHEL ARNAUD

If there's one thing Carleton Varney hates in this world, it's beige. After all, the legendary decorator—and heir to the firm of perhaps the *most* legendary American decorator, [Dorothy Draper](#)— has spent his life creating colorful, pattern-filled homes for White House and Hollywood royalty alike. Aside from designing personal spaces for the likes of the Regans, Carters, Bushes, Joan Crawford, and Ethel Merman (to name a *very* few), Varney has also taken his eye for joyful style to several of the world's best hotels. And, somehow, he's also managed to write 36 books.

The latest of these, *Rooms to Remember* (out this September from Shannongrove Press), is a tour of one of Varney's grandest projects: the iconic Grand Hotel on Michigan's Mackinac Island, where he designed 43 suites named for and inspired by some of America's most prominent figures—including the First Lady Suites, many of which were designed in collaboration with their namesake first lady.



The Jacqueline Kennedy Suite. The red room above is the Nancy Regan Suite.

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"When I thought of doing a new book on decorating, I said, 'there are so many different styles, so many different looks,'" the designer tells *House Beautiful* of the range of his work. "I saw this as a decorating book using the hotel as a tour."

And yet, throughout the room's 397 rooms, 7 restaurants, and many public spaces, visitors and readers alike will notice a striking lack of one thing popular in many American homes: beige.

"Beige is a sad color," the designer proclaims. "I so don't understand the need for this, these white and beige and gray rooms. I'll tell you, no one ever became a decorating movie star as Dorothy did by creating beige rooms."



The Laura Bush suite.

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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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