

## An All-American

*Dorothy Draper's Greenbrier Hotel | Photos courtesy The Greenbrier*

by Susan W. Morgan August  
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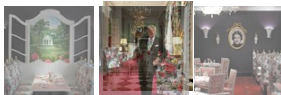
*Designed for the Victorian Writing Room, this curtain fabric was called Fudge Apron by Dorothy Draper, after the colors on a candymaker's apron.*

The atmosphere in the Chesapeake Room visibly buzzes with excitement as we greet new friends met the night before and take our seats to peruse the class handouts — The Dorothy Draper School of Decorating Color Wheels, a Dorothy Draper coloring book and a brochure for Dorothy Draper/Carleton Varney paints from Fine Paints of Europe. There are 100 of us, colorfully clothed men and women who have traveled from points north, south and west to attend the Dorothy Draper Decorating Weekend at [The Greenbrier](#) resort, hosted by legendary interior designer Carleton Varney. This celebration of design highlights the integral role of color in the hotel's iconic interiors, originally designed by Dorothy Draper in 1946 and cultivated by Varney since the mid-1960s.

"Well, here I am after coming here for 60 years," Varney begins. "It almost feels like it's the first year. Because I think if you do something you love to do, time just goes so quickly. I still feel like [I did] coming here on that first day with Mrs. Draper."

Varney, who traveled by train from New York with Dorothy and her crew on his first visit to The Greenbrier, has been the president of [Dorothy Draper & Company](#) since acquiring the firm in 1964. He was a 20-something assistant in the design department when he arrived on that first visit, while Dorothy was the A-list decorator of the day — a pioneer as the first woman to open a commercial decorating firm. Her use of vivid color, bold stripes and oversized florals topped with a touch of Hollywood glam was considered quite modern at the time. The Greenbrier, Varney says, is quintessential Dorothy Draper.

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## The Consummate Teacher

Varney is in his element in front of the class, weaving anecdotes about Draper (she reminded him of a Roman gladiator, because she wore long capes and always had a bright-colored hat on her head); the clients he's designed for (Hollywood stars, presidents and European royalty); the experiences that have shaped his career; and his passion for color, with pointers for aspiring designers and professionals alike.

Like his mentor, Varney loves color in his interiors and his attire (he's known for wearing the colorful scarves he designs as ties) — so much so that he's been dubbed Mr. Color by his fans. "I've had 63 years trying to open the windows and doors of America and the world to color," he says. "I can't remake the world, but I have to dream of pretty.

"Decorating is about you. It's about the color you like," says the designer, who eschews beige, gray and white as neutrals, opting instead for light blue, sunny

yellow, soft melon and light pink. He recommends setting the tone for your design in the foyer with a trellis paper or a colorful floral wallpaper, then pulling the colors into other rooms.

*"It's a total Kodak, or should I say, Instagram moment."* —  
Carleton Varney

Varney approaches every project individually. To learn more about his clients' tastes, he asks them to describe the first room they really remember in detail. He says that those memories of color and style form the basis of your style and taste, and that by incorporating some of those remembered elements into your design, you create a welcoming, comfortable and happy environment. He also likes to study a room after a party is over to see how the furniture has been moved around. "The furniture groupings should be so that people connect to one another," Varney says.



*The oil paintings flanking the fireplace in the North Parlor were once a single larger piece that Dorothy Draper cut in two, because it works better in the space that way.*

## Modern Baroque

"What made Dorothy Draper famous, really, was the look," Varney says. "She created a look that is very identifiable, like Frank Lloyd Wright created a look, you know his houses. When you walk into a Draper project, you can know it by the baroque look of it: the white plaster, all the things that she did, the colors. She loved color. That aqua blue color, she loved. In fact, when Tiffany & Co. made their boxes that blue, she was very, very upset because that was her blue, and Tiffany had taken her blue and made boxes of it, can you believe that?" Draper blue can be found throughout The Greenbrier.

In 1946, Draper was given carte blanche to reimagine the aging yet still aristocratic Greenbrier resort for its grand reopening after the war. Her theme for



the project was "romance and rhododendrons" — rhododendrons because she adored them and they're the state flower of West Virginia, and a romanticized look at the resort's history.

After redesigning the floor plans for the interior space, Draper brought the colors of the garden inside: designing custom chintz fabrics and carpeting emblazoned with oversized rhododendrons and cabbage roses; anchoring the spaces with bold black-and white-marble checkerboard floors; embellishing the walls with large plaster ornaments; and layering vivid color (lots of Draper blue) in solids, oversized stripes and houndstooth, with touches of brass. None of the 600 guest rooms were given the same decor, and a special work crew was created to fabricate Draper's designs for the upholstered and wood furniture. Draper sourced the antiques, paintings and objets d'art, and she was known to have cut a large oil painting in two, because she thought it would look better that way in the room. The hotel reopened with a star-studded gala and rave reviews from the press, dubbing Greenbrier style "Modern Baroque."

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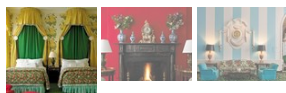
## Timeless Style

"For 60 years, we've been making this hotel layered," Varney says. "A house [or hotel] is never all done. Because it deteriorates a little bit, like the wrinkles on my face, and there may be wrinkles that grow on your walls. And people need to update, and you see new people and new things out there, and you want to look at something pretty. So you buy a new thing, it reminds you of yesterday. So acquiring new accessories over the years makes you know you're still living."

Through the years, Varney has continually updated and refreshed The Greenbrier's interiors, adding his own imprint where appropriate. He's replaced several of the original crystal chandeliers with larger fixtures from the set of "Gone With the Wind," added colored crystals to some, and changed the color in the main dining room from the original Jefferson Blue.

Varney also designed the casino and chapel. The Victorian Writing Room, which is considered the most photographed room in the world, still looks as it did when Draper designed it, with deep green walls and rich red carpeting.

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## Romance & Rhododendrons

The prolific designer is also a prolific author. At 84, Varney's creative process is still in high gear. He just published his 39th book, "Romance & Rhododendrons," a memoir of his 60 years at The Greenbrier, and he has no plans to slow down. (His other titles include books on decorating and entertaining, novels and children's books.) Of his latest book release, Varney says, "It's a favorite of mine, because I

think it tells the story of what has gone on here ... well, not everything," he concedes with a smile.

"But you know, the thing about The Greenbrier is, regardless of those people who don't like all this color, it's a total Kodak, or should I say, Instagram moment," Varney says. "People just take pictures of it all the time."

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