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The Full Monticello

Thomas Jefferson's dining room was restored recently to its original zingy chrome yellow. Decorator and former White House design consultant Carleton Varney digs into the space's many colorful ideas

By JEN RENZI



Monticello/Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., photograph by Philip Beaurline

Monticello Dining Room

Dorothy
Draper,
the

legendary mid-century decorator behind the Carlyle Hotel's original Art Deco flourishes, brought her high-octane, prints-on-speed aesthetic to mediums as varied as airplanes and cosmetic packaging. Her protégé Carleton Varney, the current president and owner of her firm, has carried on that tradition. He's designed yachts, governors' mansions, castles, a royal palace, exclusive resorts, television-show sets, a 15-car train and homes for Hollywood icons (Joan Crawford, Ethel Merman and Fay Wray among them). Lines of eyeglasses, china, potpourri and home textiles have borne his label. He has released a CD and written 20-odd books. He has styled state dinners as the White House design consultant under

Bio in Brief: Carleton Varney



Michel Arnaud

Carleton Varney

His résumé: Mr. Varney joined Dorothy Draper & Co. Inc.—one of the longest-running American interior design firms—in 1962 and has been its president for the last 40 years. While helming the firm's offices in London and New York, he also hosts a television show on HSN and is the curator and decorator of the Greenbrier resort, for which he just completed a casino and is designing a luxury train.

His clients: Politicians, hospitality bigwigs and color lovers come to Mr. Varney for the Draper touch: riotous hues, large-scale patterns (heavy on the florals and awning stripes), oversized white moldings and a winking sense of traditionalism. Test-drive his designs by checking into the Breakers Palm Beach, the Stoneleigh in Dallas or Michigan's Grand Hotel.

His goods: Signature lines include rugs for Elson & Company and fabric and wallpapers produced under the Carleton V Ltd. and Carleton Varney By the Yard labels—plus pillow, drapes, bed linens, carpets and furnishings available through HSN. His latest book, "Mr. Color," debuts next month. For more information, see dorothydraper.com.

mention his Queen Anne–style 17th-century estate in Ireland, which he's been fine-tuning for 31 years. "When it's your life's work," he says, "your house is never finished." And even when you get close, there's the temptation to repaint.

See monticello.org for visiting information and a virtual tour.

Another U.S. president, as it happens, has served as Mr. Varney's inspiration in the polymath lifestyle: Thomas Jefferson. "In my next life—and I do believe in reincarnation—I'd like to come back as Jefferson," Mr. Varney declares. "He was a genius, and one of very few presidents to leave behind a lasting style legacy." By this he means Monticello, the neoclassical Virginia home that the self-taught architect built from 1769 to 1809. "Not only was Jefferson a classicist and a Palladian, he was a very practical person," says Mr. Varney, noting clever details like dumbwaiters, multitasking furniture and energy-efficient triple-sash windows. "Plus he knew how to have fun!"

And like Mr. Varney—who is known for interiors awash in flamboyant shades like cosmos pink, saffron and mint green—Jefferson had an eye for color. To wit: the dining parlor of Monticello. Last year, the room's subdued Wedgewood-blue walls were repainted a zingy chrome yellow to match an exuberant hue that Jefferson had applied in 1815. Although brights were common in the early Federal period, this particular yellow—derived from a synthesized pigment—was cutting edge, having been commercially available for only three years. "He understood how color effects the brain," says Mr. Varney. "That yellow is like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, so shiny and alive." It also makes the framed art and white woodwork pop, explains the designer, who's used similarly sunny shades in his own Manhattan living room and on the ceiling of his Palm Beach bedroom.

There's another parallel between the two. Like his hero, Mr. Varney has spent decades tweaking his signature projects: the famed Greenbrier resort in West Virginia, begun under Ms. Draper's tutelage in the '60s, and the Grand Hotel on Michigan's Mackinac Island. Not to



1. Design Should Support Socializing

"Having dumbwaiters [the tiered trolley tables] was



Monticello/Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., photograph by Philip Beaurline

Monticello Dining Room

very ahead of the times. They facilitated conversation by ensuring less obtrusive service. At a meal, everything should support conversation—even the music. You don't want to fight to be heard! Music should be in the background, something symphonic. If I were dining at Monticello, I'd choose Beethoven or Bach, something that would transport me to the era, make it real to me."

2. *The Genius of Pocket Doors*

"Jefferson designed a pair of elliptical arches for the room, one fitted with double pocket doors. These could be shut to keep the dining parlor warm, closing it off from the adjacent tea room, which was located on the northwest corner and thus the coldest room of the house." The pocket doors abetted not only climate control, but crowd control as well: "He could also slide open the doors and annex the tea room for parties, even extending a table into both spaces."



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

3. *Go For the Gold*

"The yellow is so much more vibrant than the blue that previously covered the walls, and which was not original to Jefferson's time. Candlelight would have just sparkled against that gold. The paint was also a symbol of his wealth: A bright color like this would have been very pricey. It's an optimistic hue! A similar shade covers the living room of my New York apartment: Benjamin Moore's Nacho Cheese, which has a little more orange in it." Polo Ralph Lauren helped support the room's refurbishment; choose its Monticello Yellow for a similar look.

4. *Choose Flexible Furniture*

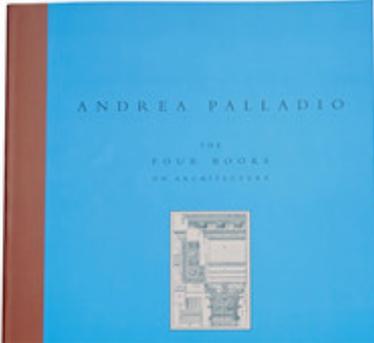
"In Dorothy Draper's day, houses had a flower room, sitting room, living room, staircases, a formal room, a dining room, etc. Now, most of us combine all the functions of life in fewer spaces. Jefferson understood the beauty of adaptable space and multifunctional furniture. For instance, the pair of English drop-leaf tables could be moved against the wall and used as consoles to keep the room open, or expanded and pushed together to accommodate many diners." Mr.



Varney notes that companies like Baker and Kindel Furniture make nice reproductions, although original drop-leafs at auction are often more affordable. The antique mahogany table shown is from the Stanley Weiss Collection.

Courtesy the Stanley Weiss Collection

Antique mahogany table from the Stanley Weiss Collection



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

"The Four Books on Architecture"

5. Moldings Add Polish

"Jefferson chose a Palladian version of the Doric order for the crown molding and the frieze above the window: an ox scull and rosette detail based on a pattern from Roland Fréart de Chambray's "Parallèl de l'Architecture avec la Moderne." A crown molding is the most important detail in a space; it connects the ceiling and the walls. I don't think a room is finished without a crown molding—I find it unhappy, like a woman without a hat." For molding inspiration, Mr. Varney suggests picking up a copy of Andrea Palladio's "The Four Books on Architecture."



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

"The Four Books on Architecture"

6. Soften With Sheers

Although Mr. Varney typically favors elaborate window treatments (think pelmets, swags and fringe), he praises Jefferson's light touch. "He was smart to avoid heavy drapes. To show off the white-painted woodwork of the window's pediment and frieze, he chose cotton dimity sheers in a matching hue. Dimity is great for drapes since it never yellows; these were designed to last. I'll often use sheers on black-framed windows; it cuts the reflectivity at night and heightens intimacy." Mr. Varney recommends Copa MB105-0 White on White sheer from Carleton V Ltd.





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Corrections & Amplifications

The photo of the table from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello is courtesy of the Stanley Weiss Collection. An earlier version of this article misspelled Stanley as Staley.

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