

House Beautiful

How the Legacies of Iconic Interior Designers Are Being Preserved—and Adapted—Over Time

Design greats like Dorothy Draper, Sister Parish, and Tony Duquette are still as influential as ever.

BY MARY ELIZABETH ANDRIOTIS AUG 31, 2020



They say that good design is timeless. The creatives who carry on the legacies of design stars like Dorothy Draper, Sister Parish, and Tony Duquette would be inclined to agree. Decades after these luminaries first left their creative marks on houses,

hotels, and more, their influence continues, thanks to successors who are saving and adapting their work today. *House Beautiful* spoke to Carleton Varney, Eliza Crater Harris, and Hutton Wilkinson to learn what it means to conserve (and reimagine) the creative visions of these design legends.

Carleton Varney, the President of Dorothy Draper & Company, first met Mrs. Draper shortly after attending graduate school at New York University to become a teacher. Although he graduated with a master's degree in education and worked as a teacher for a year, he always knew he wanted to work in set design. By a stroke of luck that led to a perfect match in what must be design destiny, Varney met Draper and began working as her mentee shortly thereafter. In 1964, he purchased the firm and became its president, beginning his reign at what is one of the oldest design firms that is still in existence—this year marks 95 years since Dorothy Draper & Company's inception.



An indoor pool at the Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia.

MICHEL ARNAUD

During his tenure at this esteemed company, Varney has added his touch to Draper's own designs, including those seen in the Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia

and the Grand Hotel in Michigan. These celebrated sites still resemble their appearance when Draper first left her magical, colorful mark on them, as does the Colony Hotel in Palm Beach. All of these hotels feature Draper's famous Brazilliance design in the form of wallpaper, which has since been made into face masks, leggings, towels, throw pillow covers, scarves, robes, and even phone cases, all available for purchase on carletonvarney.com.

Today, the Greenbrier Hotel honors both Dorothy Draper and Carleton Varney with its in-house restaurant, Draper's, and the Café Carleton. As for design-obsessed aficionados seeking a way to bring the Hollywood Regency aesthetic home, there is even a Dorothy Draper home decor store in the hotel, which also includes books and apparel, complete with black and white checkered floors that Draper was known to incorporate into her designs.



An opulent space at the Greenbrier Hotel.

MICHEL ARNAUD

When asked how he makes sure that Dorothy Draper's legacy and designs are kept alive, Varney says, "I don't have any problem with that, because, as you know, everything on 1stDibs and all of the things that are on eBay and so forth—anything designed by Dorothy Draper is, at the moment, a hot item. Everybody wants it." (For proof, look no further than *House Beautiful's* latest Rufino Report, whose inspiration was Draper's Regency style).



The Grand Suite at the Grand Hotel.

KIM SARGENT

"Dorothy gave to the world a thing called glamour." Varney says. She also popularized an exuberant style which Varney has made it his mission to continue over the decades: "I have spent 53 years opening the windows and doors of America to color, and I'm still doing it," he says ("Beige is sad," Varney once told *House Beautiful*).

"Color is magic. What it does to people who live with it—to live in a beautiful soft yellow room, as opposed to a beige room, is a difference in your mentality. I like America to be happy."



Jacqueline Kennedy's bedroom at the White House, designed by Sister Parish.

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Dorothy Draper's design genius must have run in the family, because her first cousin was none other than fellow interior design legend Sister Parish (who, incidentally, shared the same first name as Draper, but went by the childhood nickname given to her by her brother). Parish is probably best known for being hired by Jacqueline Kennedy to design the private family quarters of the White House during President John F. Kennedy's administration. It took only two weeks for Parish and Mrs. Kennedy to spend all of the \$50,000 redecorating budget.



A bedroom that features Dolly Wallpaper by Sister Parish Design.

SISTER PARISH DESIGN

Today, Sister Parish's great-granddaughter, Eliza Crater Harris, is the creative director of Sister Parish Design. Harris tells *House Beautiful*, "everything we do comes back to Sister Parish's philosophy"—and, specifically, to Parish's statement that "innovation is often the ability to reach into the past and bring back what is good, what is beautiful, what is useful, what is lasting." This quote, Harris adds, "is our company's north star. We have continued her legacy by really pursuing new designs along under this idea."



A bedroom inside Sister Parish's former home in Maine.

SISTER PARISH DESIGN

Clearly, design is very much an integral part of the family for Harris, who says that she, her mother, and her grandmother all adore Sister Parish's former home in Maine—"a beautiful, eye catching yellow house right on the coast" where Harris spent her summers as a child—because it connects four generations of women in their family, both living and departed.



Home accessories by Sister Parish Design.

SISTER PARISH DESIGN

Design is not exclusive to interiors, which is why Parish's legacy is continued today beyond what we see in a home. One of Sister Parish Design's newest products is a range of charming sun hats which feature a treillage pattern that was inspired by a garland lattice—the same pattern that was created by Sister Parish and Albert Hadley (whose legendary firm, Parish-Hadley, launched the careers of Mario Buatta, Bunny Williams, and Mark Hampton, to name a few) exclusively for their clients.

SisterParishDesign.com recently relaunched, with a new look and line of products that are influenced in part by grandmillennials, who Harris wanted to connect to now more than ever, because of how responsive they are to the design firm's social media posts. The company's prior product offerings were trade only, but now, a

range of fabrics, wall coverings, tabletops, linens, pillows, and apparel can be purchased through the brand's [website](#), which "has been fortified with more access to information," including pricing and allowing for quicker access to the design team, to make the shopping process easier.

Just as Carleton Varney became protégé to Dorothy Draper, Hutton Wilkinson came up under Tony Duquette. Wilkinson first learned of Duquette as a seventh grader, when he read an article in the Sunday morning *Los Angeles Times* home magazine section. "It was an article about [Tony] and his wife, Elizabeth, and how they lived in a silent film studio," recalls Wilkinson. "He was sitting on the stage of his studio, on a throne from the Chapultepec Castle wearing the robes of a cardinal and surrounded by crystal chandeliers, mother of pearl, and mirrors." Wilkinson showed the article to his father—who was "a very square architect in Los Angeles"—and said, "This is what I'm interested in," to which his father responded by saying that Wilkinson was "100% crazy."



Tony Duquette's Dawnridge.

LADOLCEVITABLOG.COM

This exchange lit somewhat of a fire in the young Wilkinson, who began asking “parents’ friends if they knew Tony Duquette, and many did, but none would introduce me.” Years later, when Wilkinson was 17 years old, his art teacher—who also admired Duquette’s work—left a note in his locker telling him that Tony Duquette was looking for volunteers. Upon hearing this news, Wilkinson quit his job and left school that day to go work for the designer, marking the beginning of a decades-long partnership. Following two years of working as a volunteer apprentice and three years as an assistant designer, Wilkinson started his very own interior design firm. Duquette and Wilkinson would later become investment partners “on a series of office buildings, apartments [and] houses that [they] rented out, and a series of spec houses that [they] would fix up and sell,” says Wilkinson.

During their 46 years of working together, Duquette and Wilkinson not only collaborated on interiors, but also on a collection of fine jewelry that is just as uniquely opulent and eye-catching as their maximalist rooms. The Duchess of Windsor (also known as Wallis Simpson) was one of many glamorous women who wore Tony Duquette jewelry.

Five years before Tony Duquette’s passing in 1999, Hutton Wilkinson purchased “the entire business, his name, and his trademarks and copyrights,” thereby becoming the owner, creative director, and president of Tony Duquette Inc. Wilkinson notes that he was not Duquette’s heir—his brothers, sister, nieces, and nephews were. To ensure that Dawnridge was saved, Wilkinson purchased the house, in part because it “was the only house built by Tony Duquette from the ground up.”



The cabinet that Tony Duquette designed for Elsie de Wolfe.
HUTTON WILKINSON

All of the 17th to 19th century furnishings found in Dawnridge were auctioned off at Christie's, so that Wilkinson could "pay the heirs and the government." He then redecorated the historic home "using furniture, decorations, sculptures, and paintings made by Tony and Elizabeth Duquette."

Wilkinson has hopes to open Dawnridge as a historic house museum one day. "I always say, "The definition of decoration is 'Doomed to destruction!,'" says Wilkinson. "Dawnridge is all there is, and I'm hoping to give it as a gift to a university or institution interested in keeping it as a house museum. I've added more land to the estate since purchasing it and it now totals four and a half contiguous lots with three houses on it."

Dawnridge was even mentioned on an episode of *Million Dollar Listing Los Angeles* a few years ago when Wilkinson listed and sold other, lesser known homes that previously belonged to Duquette. When the possibility of selling Dawnridge came up, real estate agent Josh Flagg told Wilkinson that he would never help sell that house because it could wind up being destroyed if it fell into the wrong hands.



Tom Hiddleston in a Gucci ad campaign shot at Dawnridge.

GUCCI

As for how Tony Duquette's interior designs live on today, Wilkinson tells *House Beautiful* that one of his favorite examples of updating Tony Duquette for the 21st century is a fabric he designed for Jim Thompson, called 'Duquetterie,' which is an interpretation of the two carved and painted door panels from a cabinet Tony made for Elsie de Wolfe in 1940.

In addition to Wilkinson's modern-day adaptation of Duquette's genius, the designer has overseen the production of original Duquette designs that are now sold through the likes of Maitland-Smith, Remains Lighting, Patterson Flynn, Martin, Mottahedeh, Jim Thompson, and more. Just a few years ago, in 2017, Dawnridge served as the backdrop for a Gucci ad campaign starring actor Tom Hiddleston.

Another key element in preserving these legacies? Books. Each of the designers cited in this story has published odes to their mentors; Carleton Varney authored *In the Pink: Dorothy Draper—America's Most Fabulous Decorator* and *Mr. Color: The Greenbrier and Other Decorating Adventures*, Hutton Wilkinson penned *Tony Duquette's Dawnridge* and *More Is More: Tony Duquette*, and Susan Bartlett Crater and Apple Parish Bartlett collaborated on *Sister: The Life of Legendary Interior Decorator Mrs. Henry Parish II* and *Sister Parish: The Life of the Legendary American Interior Designer*.

The voracious appetite for these—and for the creations of the designers whom they profile—proves not only the incredible influence of their subjects, but also the idea that a good legacy can stand the test of time. That is, so long as the right people are there to carry it forward.