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# Decorating Legends

If the past is indeed prologue, why reinvent that which is time-honored and true? Designer Eric Cohler shares his list of seminal decorating books that have stood the test of time.

It all began with Edith Wharton, the novelist and social commentator, who expatriated herself to France in the early 20th century. Wharton, along with architect Ogden Codman, Jr., published *The Decoration of Houses* in 1897 (reprinted by Norton in 1998). It was a groundbreaking book that called for banishing 19th-century clutter to the attic and urged Americans to open their windows to let in a sea change in decorating. Wharton and Codman wrote of decorating's primary tenants—all of which form the basics of good design today: proportion, scale, symmetry, and harmony of color and balance. This decorating duo looked to Europe, especially Italy and France, for lessons in how Americans should design their homes. The book is summed up nicely in their aphorism that proportion is the good breeding of architecture, and if the effect produced is satisfactory to the eye, "then the material used is a matter of indifference." And even though Wharton and Codman can be a bit pedantic, they do point out that "simplicity is at home even in palaces, and this is perhaps not the least service that may be rendered to the modern decorator."

Never one to pass up an opportunity at self-promotion (she began her career as an actress), Elsie De Wolfe wrote *The House in Good Taste* in 1913, and Rizzoli reprinted it in 2004. Considered America's first true decorator, De Wolfe, there is little doubt in my mind, was directly influenced by Wharton and Codman. If their mantra was "simplify," De Wolfe's was "suitability." She believed in decor that was stripped of unnecessary ornamentation but that was appropriate to its surroundings, favoring 18th-century French furniture, light colors, and creamy woodwork. De Wolfe advised her readers to eschew Victoriana in favor of uncluttered surfaces; to pull down draperies, and to let light into as many rooms as possible. "I believe in plenty of optimism and white paint, comfortable chairs with lights beside them, open fires on the hearth, and flowers where they belong, mirrors, and sunshine." She even went so far as to place mirrors at the end of small gardens to make the space seem larger. Her interiors were among the first modern ones in this country, and she referred to herself as a "modernist"—always observing three fundamental rules: "simplicity, suitability, and proportion."

Fast-forward two decades and hop across the Atlantic to England, where interiors were being redefined by Derek Patmore, publisher of three books on color and decoration. My favorite is *I Decorate My Home* from 1936. His books were notable for helping readers confront decorating challenges such as choice of color scheme, selection of fabric and accessories, the arrangement of furniture, and the proper use of lighting. These were books for the masses and were geared to people with smaller homes. He wrote in clear, concise language that was, and remains, easy to understand.

In fact, most good books on design and decoration are rather like a favorite cookbook, brimming with ideas and recipes to satisfy almost any reader. Patmore summed it up best: "One can not please all tastes, one can only try to guide and stimulate the ideas and tastes of others."



Photographer: Scott Little

A few years later Dorothy Draper published *Decorating Is Fun*. Draper is perhaps best known for her vivid use of color and pattern, which is alive today at the Greenbrier Hotel in New York City. She pushed the decorating envelope by favoring bold cabbage rose chintz and overscale Georgian furniture painted white and silhouetted against black or crimson walls. Her books are filled with suggestions on how to furnish a small studio or a large home and also on how to give the perfect dinner party. I love one of her quotes: "Is the door freshly painted?" Make sure that it is before you host your next dinner. Draper was full of sage advice, and although a bit dramatic and heavy-handed, her sense of interior design was also far ahead of its time.

Moving through the world of 20th-century interior designers who were equipped with typewriters, floor plans, and plenty of wit is Billy Baldwin; he penned two books, *Billy Baldwin Decorates* and *Billy Baldwin Remembers*. Baldwin went on to help the Kennedys and other illustrious families (and reveals all). Baldwin favored lacquered walls in shades of Coca-Cola brown, ocher, or cream. His fabrics were graphic, and he was passionate about art and how it acted as a foil for quality antiques. His rooms were truly comfortable and livable, underscoring his belief that if you trust your eye, all else will follow. To Baldwin, it was as simple as "making up your mind."

David Hicks, the preeminent English "designer," wrote several books on design, but perhaps his best is *Living with Design*. This book united all of his theories and principles. Hicks shows us how to marry color and texture and how to pay close attention to architecture. He was steeped in art history and the classics, and he knew how to corrupt a space to give it an interesting jolt. His best advice: "Good design is in no way dependent upon money. Style is not what you do, but how you do it."

Mark Hampton, David Hicks's American partner for several years, expressed his ideas about decorating in his book, *Mark Hampton on Decorating*. Hampton brings his readers the essential aspects of design, all illustrated with his own wonderful line drawings, renderings, and watercolors. He summed up his chosen career by saying that "to transform the bleak and the barren into welcoming places where one can live seems to me an important and worthwhile goal in life. Sometimes this transformation can stun the eye, sometimes gladden it, but these are not frivolous pursuits." I couldn't agree more. □

Eric Cohler, an interior designer in New York City, is at work on his own decorating book: *Learning from Lucy, Lessons in Interior Design*.



**Opposite:** A few classic decorating books that are still relevant today. **Above:** *Billy Baldwin Remembers* recounts the decorator's 40 years of experiences with famous and fascinating clients. **Left:** *The Decoration of Houses* is considered required reading by many designers.