

The image shows a richly decorated room. In the foreground, a golden column stands next to a white vase with a portrait of a man in a blue coat, and a tall golden candlestick with a single candle. The walls are covered in colorful, patterned wallpaper featuring various motifs like birds, flowers, and a figure holding a globe. A wooden door is visible on the left, and a framed picture hangs on the wall in the background.

THE FINEST ROOMS *in America*

Thomas Jayne

THE MONACELLI PRESS



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*Fifty Influential Interiors from the
Eighteenth Century to the Present*

Thomas Jayne
with Anne Walker

THE MONACELLI PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

My earliest consideration of the elements of a refined interior was the living room of my parents' house in Pacific Palisades, California, a small postwar filled mostly with family furniture from the nineteenth century. The year I was born, my mother had the room redecorated; the walls were painted in dusty rose to offset plain and patterned teal blue fabrics, and comfortable seating arrangements lay beneath an atmospheric watercolor of Metro Goldwyn Mayer's grand Beaux-Arts studio. Later, her decorator admitted she had used the same scheme in Marilyn Monroe's dressing room, which both horrified and amused my mother. She never used a decorator again, but regardless of how our living room came to be, its comfort, handsome coloration, personal associations, and even its modest size make it one of the finest I have known. Today it is gone, but it was the genesis of a lifetime analyzing what makes a fine room and an appreciation of the value in recording them.

When I left home for the University of Oregon to study architecture and art history, I already had a small collection of books on design, including a first edition of *The Finest Rooms*, by America's Great Decorators, published in 1964. The book's prominent designers included Billy Baldwin, Rose Cummings, Eleanor Brown of McMillen, Michael Taylor, and Sister Parish. Every room was traditional—the style we now call “mid-century” or “modern” was not shown, nor were historic rooms. “This book presents a fabulous cross section of America's most beautiful houses and apartments,” the jacket flap reads. “Characteristic of all the interiors is the lived-in, nondecorated look which is the hallmark of the decorators represented here.” The book, only twelve years old when I purchased it, epitomized the taste of the well-to-do in mid-twentieth-century America. Yet I wanted it for historical, not current, reference, for in the decade following its publication the world of decoration, even traditional decoration, had changed markedly.

My professors fostered my interest in the history of interiors, encouraging me to attend the Attingham Summer School, an intensive, three-week program of private visits to English country houses. Attingham was designed for museum curators and other professionals so the telephone call offering me a place that summer as an undergraduate was distinctly thrilling. Just a few months later I had left my spartan college room behind and was meeting the Duchess of Devonshire in her private rooms at Chatsworth. That summer I visited more than forty country houses and

was steeped in the British design tradition, and subsequently I found myself regularly pondering what constituted the American design tradition.

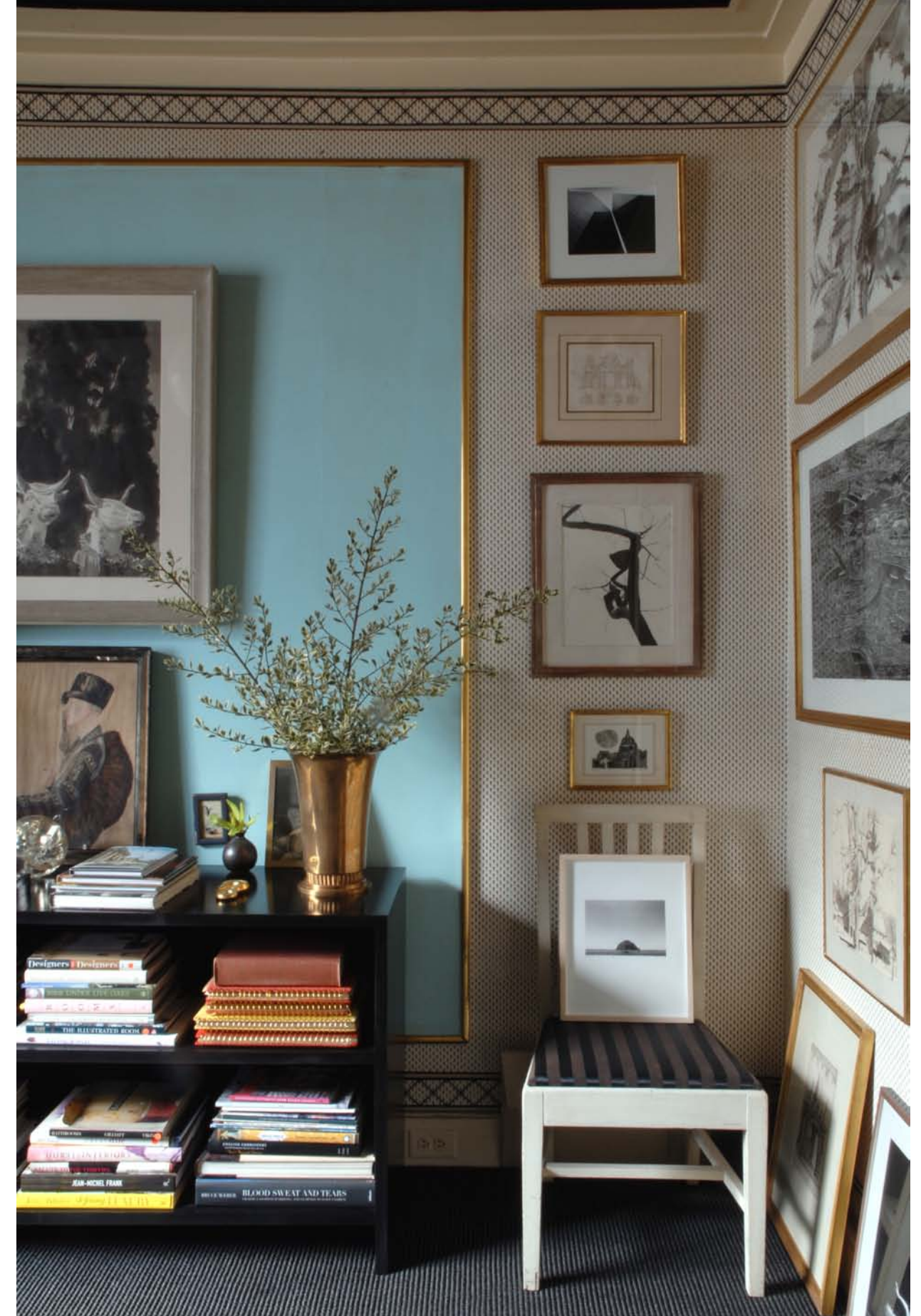
Later, in graduate school at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum and during a fellowship in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I continued distilling what “American” means, especially in terms of decoration. Winterthur, founded in 1951, is the premier museum dedicated to American decorative arts, and the question “What is American?” is at the heart of the academic effort there.

The lack of a definitive answer, though, is telling. Wendell Garrett, a great expert on American material culture, believes the problem is rooted in the intersection of a variety of cultures here, the stream of immigration, and the amount of change this country has seen in its history. As a result, there is no singular decorative tradition in America. Still, it may be said that some particularly American aspects of design are invention, personal expression, and an unabashed mixture of foreign decorative influences.

At the core of Winterthur’s training—and of the consideration of what is American—is connoisseurship of objects and rooms, the result of a process where every object or place is studied and compared to related examples. We learned to ask, “What does this object say about the people who made and used it?” Most of what is preserved at Winterthur contrasts with today’s informal lifestyles. Until the mid-twentieth century, Americans employed fashion, houses and manners to present a formal ideal of refinement, but today comfort reigns. Often the great room—with kitchen, television and feet-up seating—supplants the parlor, drawing room, and living room of the past. And even when contemporary rooms are elaborate, they are relaxed and flexible, rarely approaching the upright formality of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Du Pont saw this change, and he wanted to preserve the history of early American life and decorative arts, arranging his vast collection in Winterthur’s ninety rooms with painstaking attention to making the decoration of the rooms beautiful. Today, du Pont is recognized as one of America’s great influences on interior design and its history. In 1962, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy asked him to advise on the redecoration of the White House, and he assured the Francophile who favored European decoration that “an American house could be swell.”

The giltwood frame of the turquoise wall echoes the gold surface of the lamp. A drawing by Van Day Truex, Hadley’s great friend, perfectly suits the scale and personal nature of the room.





*From the left:
formal living room
in Charleston;
modern living room
in Southampton;
territorial style
sitting room in New
Mexico*

Once I had completed my academic training, I decided to become a practitioner rather than a design historian and joined Parish-Hadley, the firm founded by Sister Parish and Albert Hadley, where I apprenticed as David Kleinberg’s assistant. Parish-Hadley codified American taste into a sophisticated amalgamation of traditional Anglo-American style, tempered with the influence of twentieth-century Paris. Their rooms were original, inventive, beautifully crafted, and comfortable, and my education in the many refinements of American decoration continued.

At Parish-Hadley, the value of good architecture and architectural detail, as well as the suitability of a room’s location and its use, received particular stress. Furniture was selected both for decorative appeal and for the beauty of its construction: while it need not be expensive, it had to be well made. Fabrics were similarly considered, in that they had to represent the best of their type. Color was thoughtfully used, and though both principals liked fresh, bright colors, they were always modulated, never loud. Of primary importance were works of art, whether historically important or simply a reflection of their owner’s taste. In fact, I cannot remember a significant room by Parish-Hadley that didn’t have at least one meaningful work of art.

Another legacy of my time there is a preference for using the title “decorator,” a term reaching back to ancient times, in lieu of “interior designer.” Some say interior designers not only decorate but also are responsible for interior architecture. But I suggest that a decorator, in alliance with architects, is also responsible for the architecture of rooms.

The principles instilled through academic training and practical apprenticeship continue to manifest themselves as my own design practice develops. The consideration of quality and authenticity is particularly meaningful to me each time I approach the decoration of a room. For me, this formal living room for a collector of American paintings is a tribute to those rooms I first studied in college, for even though it is, as

I like say, archaeologically correct, I have presented a fresh take on a historic style. There is a more modernist approach to the Southampton living room, consonant with the collection of sheets from Matisse’s *Jazz* and the Asian ceramics. Similarly, a sitting room at the center of a large ranch in New Mexico is executed in the territorial style of the American West, with adobe walls and neo-classical details.

This book presents fifty rooms that I know personally, all extant and domestic, and that I place among the finest in America. I have selected a group that represents the best American decoration from the eighteenth century to the present and that exemplifies the qualities of fine rooms. I hope this volume will serve as a reference work for rooms that exist today. All the rooms are decorated in the classic sense. Some are formal, such as the Tea Room at Monticello and Frank Lloyd Wright’s living room at Hollyhock House, and reflect courtly manners. Others are informal and reflect more the lifestyle of today, such as living room of the Eames House or Bunny Williams’s great room in her Connecticut barn. Some reflect changing tastes in color, with the vivid schemes in the Mount Vernon dining room mellowing into the Colonial Revival decoration at Williamsburg’s Bassett Hall and Rose Tarlow’s earth-toned living room in Los Angeles.

It is also notable that even within the classic nature of these rooms, the designers could not escape their generation—each room absolutely expresses the decade in which it was created. The dining room at Kingscote could only have been made in the 1880s, and John Saladino’s Santa Barbara living room is a 1990s archetype. I have also included among these admittedly grand examples others that are relatively simple because, just as in my parents’ house, rooms that are small and not expensive can also be among the finest. I am sure every reader could make worthy additions to this exceptional group, and it is my hope that this book will inspire us all to consider what makes *The Finest Rooms*.