

Barbara D'Arcy White, Interior Design Guru, Dies at 84

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Barbara D'Arcy White, an interior decorator whose eclectic sense of style helped change Americans' taste in home furnishings in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, when she was a design and merchandising guru at Bloomingdale's, died on May 10 in Southhampton, N.Y. She was 84.



One of Ms. D'Arcy's creations.

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Another one of her designs. Ms. D'Arcy was the decorator for hundreds of model rooms at Bloomingdale's.

Her death was confirmed by her husband, Kirk White.

Ms. D'Arcy, as she was known professionally, made an early mark as the chief decorator of the model rooms in the furniture department of Bloomingdale's flagship store at 59th Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. Those rooms, usually seven or eight roped-off areas on the fifth floor, became a mecca in the 1950s for those who aspired to learn what was stylish, sophisticated, well-made but not too expensive in a living room set or a window treatment.

From 1958 until 1973 she designed [hundreds of model rooms](#). Each was like a stage vignette, with the decorating trend of the moment its star: sleek Danish teak and rosewood living rooms in the 1950s; rooms painted pink, outfitted with inflatable orange furniture and shag rugs in the 1960s; brightly tiled Valencian kitchens in the 1970s; and rooms in rattan, wicker and cane in every decade.

"I would go through the rooms we were doing at the time and dream up personalities, to be able to develop a room's personality around a kind of person — say, 'I think this would be a perfect setting for Ernest Hemingway,'" Ms. D'Arcy said in a 1986 oral history interview for the Fashion Institute of Technology Archives, describing how she came up with her ideas.

But no matter how fanciful the creative process, she said in another interview, in 1978, the goal was always solidly commercial — "to present things so that people see something and feel that they can't live without it."

Ms. D'Arcy was credited with creating or popularizing several styles that still resonate in the American home, including steel and glass furnishings, plaid curtains for children's rooms, and what she called the Country French look, consisting of faux antiques and cozy clutter.

In the '50s and '60s [she gave the color orange](#) — her favorite, she said — one of its early moments in the high-style spotlight.

"If European-accented country furniture and glass and steel tables have become national decorative clichés," Marilyn Bender wrote in *The New York Times* in 1974, "it is because Barbara D'Arcy pioneered and pushed them in her lavish model room settings in the '60s."

Ms. D'Arcy, who became a merchandising executive in 1975, traveled in Europe and Asia as part of a Bloomingdale's team of design scouts. She was among the first Americans to visit the People's Republic of China on business after its relations with the United States were normalized in 1972. When she found a piece of furniture or an object she liked — she and others sometimes bribed

museum guards to let them carry historic pieces of furniture into a courtyard for better light in sketching, photographing and measuring them — she arranged for it to be reproduced, usually by Italian manufacturers. “She and I visited furniture factories in Italy, where she would have to teach them to make a piece of furniture that looked old instead of new, how to stress it,” Marvin Traub, the former chief executive of Bloomingdale’s, said in an interview on Thursday. “It was a new idea to them, but they caught on.”

Mr. Traub, who coined the concept of “retail as theater,” said Ms. D’Arcy was modest about her work early on. “But over time she came to recognize her influence,” he added. “She had enormous impact on the entire American home furnishings industry.”

Barbara D’Arcy was born on April 3, 1928, in Manhattan, the youngest of three children of Ida Marie and James J. D’Arcy. Her mother was an art teacher, her father a manager for a Manhattan moving and storage company whose clients included many of the city’s wealthiest families.

“He moved people back and forth among their various homes,” said Mr. White, Ms. D’Arcy’s husband. “In the process he became quite a discerning judge of furniture. Barbara learned a lot from him.”

She joined Bloomingdale’s as a junior decorator in the fabric department in 1952, shortly after graduating from the College of New Rochelle, a Roman Catholic college for women, where she studied art and made sets for a student puppet theater. (She remained with the company until her retirement in 1995.)

In 1958 she was named coordinating designer of the store’s model rooms, which The Times characterized at the time as “dream rooms that the consumer knows she cannot afford to duplicate in toto but that contain practical ideas she can modify with an eye on the budget.”

The model rooms acquired a must-see cachet among New York designers and decorators and a loyal following of shoppers drawn to their dreamlike decorative perfection, some of it whimsical. Two of her best-known and most imaginative designs were the all-cardboard room she created with help from the architect Frank Gehry, and the Cave Room, a Flintstonesque room made from a frame of chicken wire and wood, sprayed with urethane foam and painted white. The furniture was built into the foam.

In the late ’70s Ms. D’Arcy directed the redesign of Bloomingdale’s entire first floor, a three-year project that Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic for The Times, described as “perhaps the most daring piece of large-scale store design in a decade.”

The palatial expanse of black marble and brass-lacquered surfaces, which she conceived and saw to completion in 1979, and which remain in place, have become a landmark in the retail world, said Mark Bradin, who teaches interior decorating at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. “That design has become Bloomingdale’s signature,” he said. “If she had done nothing else, she would be remembered just for that.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 30, 2012

Because of an editing error, an earlier version misstated the name of one of the styles Barbara D’Arcy White was credited with popularizing. It is Country French, not Country Fresh.