

HOMEDESIGN

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A black and white photograph of George Hansen, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is looking down at a small, white, conical lampshade he is holding in his right hand. The lamp is attached to a metal arm that is mounted on a wall. The background is dark and out of focus.

George Hansen,
the designer of the
swing-arm wall lamp

Larger Than Life

Design Legends

Gio Ponti • Albert Hadley
George Hansen • Eleanor Lambert
Philippe Starck • Andrée Putman

They Did Windows

MEREDITH ETHERINGTON-SMITH traces the rise of the society decorator, who draped the rich in good taste.

Just over a century ago, a struggling actress — the more artistic of two women sharing a New York town house — read “The Decoration of Houses” by Edith Wharton and the architect Ogden Codman Jr. This subversive volume recommended a return to European ideals of purity and elegance — Vanderbiltian baroque was labeled out; Versailles or 18th-century English country style was going to be in. The actress took a long look at her dark rooms decorated in gloomy, overstuffed 1890’s style and made some very radical changes.

That would-be stage star was Elsie de Wolfe, and what she did was revolutionary. She banished dark wallpapers, heavy paneling, potted palms and gloomy rugs. She used white paint, mirrors, gray velvet, French cane chairs, transparent lampshades and muslin curtains to bring in light and air. Her refurbished house attracted guests like Wharton herself and Oscar Wilde, and before long, de Wolfe decided to start decorating for unlucky people — those who had no taste.

Without realizing it, de Wolfe had devised a new profession for herself and for the many who would follow her down the profitable allées of taste for sale. She had invented the role of society decorator.

In the years since, society decorators have be-

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Above: The decorator Elsie de Wolfe, at left, became a friend as well as a social and style mentor to the Duchess of Windsor, at right.

Far left: Billy Baldwin, one of the first men to make it big as a decorator, among the brass bookcases that were one of his trademark designs.

Near left: The Virginia belle Nancy Lancaster became a monarch of British decorating when she bought the firm that became Colefax & Fowler.

come the dictators of taste. For taste (or the lack of it) has become a defining factor in social acceptance. You are what your living room says you are, and the people with the vocabulary are the decorators. Today you see them patrolling the aisles of fashionable antiques shows, towing rich clients in their wakes like tugs taking home the prize ships. They represent entree to a more rarefied world for clients with money so new it almost squeaks.

The number of society decorators began to grow after 1913, when de Wolfe, still the only one in America, published “The House in Good Taste,” largely ghostwritten by Ruby Ross