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BILLY B.

Unquestionably the most influential American designer of this century, Billy Baldwin had a fresh look that was the prototype for today's style

BY MARGARET KENNEDY

I used to see him quite often at the front of the line in the New York Women's Exchange, almost on tiptoes, his erect carriage making the most of his five-foot, three-inch frame. Although

I instantly recognized the slender, impeccably tailored Billy Baldwin, I never dared talk to the king of decoration, but did note his standing order of a martini and codfish cakes. The good, honest food served by aproned ladies in that quaint tearoom suited him on the off days when he was not lunching at Passy or La Grenouille with his high-profile clients. In a way, his choice of this unpretentious place was a clue to his straightforward but snappy decor.

Billy Baldwin came from Baltimore where, after a dancing-school upbringing and Princeton education, he waltzed into the social whirl. At the parties of worldly bohemian Alice Warder Garrett, Baldwin met such luminaries as Anthony Eden, Leopold Stokowski, and Frank Lloyd Wright. He was mad about debutante Pauline Potter who, the smitten Billy said, "could have recited the alphabet with that voice and been bewitching." Pauline may have been too exotic for

Baltimore but in France, after her marriage to Baron Philippe de Rothschild, she was the height of chic. Add Wallis Simpson, Duchess of Windsor, and the inventive gardener Harvey Ladew to Baldwin's list of Baltimore pals and give the city credit as a breeding ground of taste.

Baldwin went to work for the best decorating firm in town. Right from the start, his spirited style turned heads. For his first house in this bastion of good brown furniture, he risked orange satin on Louis XV settees against walls of lemon Chinese paper. Black lacquer tables grounded creamy >

Taste-shaping decor, clockwise from top left: Billy Baldwin at home in the 1950s. Edward Zajac's watercolor of Speed Lamkin's Turkish corner, one of eight great rooms he saw on his first day with Baldwin. Baldwin's flat in 1963 with brass bookshelves originally designed for Cole Porter and coromandel screen. For Woodson Taulbee's San Juan house, Baldwin lacquered lacy chairs and elephant tables from India and sparked copyists. Matisse drawing inspired tree fabric for Taulbee's sitting room, later recolored in every rainbow hue. Tulipomania strikes in 1959; Jamaican 1938 fantasy with fringed table, stenciled curtains. For answers to your decorating questions, visit our Web site at <http://homearts.com/mail/hbpeggy.htm>





yellow satin upholstery afloat in a pale absinthe-colored room. Bowled over by such flair, decorator Ruby Ross Wood offered him a job in New York. From 1935 until her death in 1950, Baldwin was her associate. He absorbed her credo—insist on comfort, constantly innovate, avoid trends, and never overdecorate. Although her own clients expected formality, they both fell in love with the clear colors of Parisian Paule Marrot's fabrics, using them immediately. Oh, that first sight of those bold tulips on a red ground with white-painted furniture—so young, so happy, so American!



And that was his genius.

Until Baldwin, decorators worshipped French or English interiors. He refused to do a room all in one style of *anything*. Instead, he would add to antiques a lacquered Parsons table, a rattan Jean-Michel Frank chair, or an Okada abstract painting. Often he used banquettes as a sleek means to more seating. He would paint Venetian chairs white and cover them in tan leather. "My all-time favorite fabric is cotton—it has such life, freshness, and variety," said Baldwin. His own apartments were usually a symphony of neutrals, from barely beige to rich chocolate—with lots of pure white—but he would give clients any color they loved. Collaborating with friend Woodson Taulbee, who owned a fabric and wallpaper firm, Baldwin pushed the American palette from muted to Matisse. He stressed function and simplicity without forgoing a touch of fantasy or a shot of modern. In the process of developing and refining his own style, he created a whole new American look. What Bill Blass did for fashion, Billy B. did for decoration.



In his autobiography, Baldwin speaks in nothing but superlatives—*good-looking! glamorous! wonderful!*—and practically shouts his zest for life. How exciting it certainly was with clients like Bill and Babe Paley, Diana Vreeland, and Jackie Onassis, for whom he made sure every detail was perfect. "We all learned from him," says Albert Hadley, whose own timeless look is similarly lean. "Michael Taylor used to sit at his feet going over scrapbooks, taking in every word," he adds. "I learned lots more than interior design," claims Edward Zajac, his assistant for eight years. "He taught me about food, conversation—he was pure fun to be with." Zajac chuckles. "Billy was amused when cab drivers frequently mistook him for Fred Astaire or the Duke of Windsor." And why not? After all, Baldwin danced a mean tango in his princely tails. ■



Fashionable backdrops, clockwise from top left: Babe Paley in a St. Regis Hotel suite made personal with Shirred Indian cotton walls and slipcovers. Edward Zajac's painting of his mentor's ruffled taffeta curtains on glass rods. Billy Baldwin's last apartment on Nantucket—the essence of pared-down comfort. Raw silk chairs, bold dhurrie rug, Knoll tables, mirrored mantel, and Mogul finials animate New York triplex for Harding and Mary Lawrence, 1973. La Fiorentina on the French Riviera with lyrical sepia murals, local pottery. Mollie Parnis adored her azalea-pink curtains. Neutral comfort for a revolving art collection.



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