



THE
BIG SIX

ELSIE DE WOLFE
JEAN-MICHEL FRANK
BILLY BALDWIN
SISTER PARISH
ALBERT HADLEY
DAVID HICKS

3

Billy Baldwin

1903–1983

“I’m against the all-English house or the all-French house or the all-Spanish house—any of these must be translated into terms that suit the American Way for the America today.”

Before World War II it was the Europeans who influenced American decorating, but by the 1950s, it was a home-grown talent defining American design: Billy Baldwin. A Southerner who was short of stature but made an outsize impression, Baldwin ventured to New York City in 1935, training with the legendary Ruby Ross Wood before founding his own firm. Quickly establishing himself as both a gifted decorator and a man-about-town, Baldwin assembled a glittering clientele, which included Cole Porter, Babe Paley, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and the Paul Mellons. Among his unforgettable projects were the tented Kenneth hair salon, the beehive of New York society in the Jet Set era; one of the world’s great trophy houses, La Fiorentina, for the Harding Lawrences; and perhaps most notably, Diana Vreeland’s red “garden in hell” living room on Park Avenue.

What set Baldwin’s style apart was a feeling of “Americanness.” He reveled in comfort and simplicity. His cotton fabrics, signature upholstery like the St. Thomas sofa, and affection for clear, strong colors—he said he did not believe in starting out half dead—spoke to the modern, relaxed atmosphere of

post-World War II America, while contemporary art, lacquered surfaces, and gleaming brass accents supplied the polish that his worldly clients required. **Under Baldwin’s influence, high society, which once perched daintily on silk-covered fauteuils, began lazing on cotton-covered ottomans and slipper chairs.**

He was not an easy man. It was said that “his sting was deep.” He hated the self-aggrandizing term “interior designer,” preferring the more straightforward “decorator.” He did not mince his opinions: “The word that almost makes me throw up is satin. Damask makes me throw up.”

No doubt the purest example of his vision was his own final apartment in Manhattan, which remains a pivotal moment in the history of American style. It was just one room, but its lacquered chocolate-brown walls, off-white cotton upholstery, rattan tables, and brass étagère bookshelves proved a groundbreaking combination that set the standard for modern American design. What greater compliment is there than to say this apartment looks every bit as good today as it did fifty years ago?



Left A cheerleader for humble cotton, Baldwin custom-designed his most recognizable fabric for the Manhattan living room of Woodson Taulbee, whose Matisse drawing, hung above the sofa, inspired the print. **Opposite** “You almost feel as if you’re walking on a bridge, so airy and full of light is the living room” was how Baldwin described La Fiorentina, the quintessential French Riviera getaway of the Harding Lawrences. (To see Roderick Cameron’s version of La Fiorentina, turn to pages 98–99.) **Overleaf** Baldwin’s one-room Manhattan apartment is still hugely influential due to its mix of chocolate-brown-lacquered walls, gleaming brass bookcases, and slipcovered seating, including his signature slipper chairs.







