

OH, DIOR!

Classic design looks as fresh today as it has in the past. *Our style adventurer Lance Avery Morgan* caught up with interior design historian Maureen Footer, author of *Dior & His Decorators: Victor Grandpierre, Georges Geffroy, and The New Look* on how you can add more glamour into your own space.



What inspired you to write *Dior & His Decorators*?

A peek in a 1950s *Vogue* at Christian Dior's Paris home unleashed my interest in the two glamorous men responsible for its decoration: Victor Grandpierre and Georges Geffroy. Dior's house was at once French and worldly, sumptuous and smart. Not only were its creators revolutionary in their field, they translated Dior's New Look vision into an interior design idiom.

Did Dior's fashion aesthetic mirror that of his interior design aesthetic? What are some of the common imagery and themes that appear in both his fashion portfolio and the interiors of his homes?

Dior's aesthetic was consistent, whether for houses or ballgowns. An artist and his vision are never separable from their era, so the very

atmosphere Dior breathed, his friendships with Jean Cocteau, Christian Bérard, Etienne de Beaumont, and Roger Vivier, his rosy memories of the long-vanished Belle Époque, the hardships and disillusionment of World War II, all inspired the Dior aesthetic (aka The New Look) in clothes and interiors: gracious, refined, romantic rooms and gowns that speak to the greatness of France, while embracing modern reality.

Everything was inviting, seductive, yet surprising. We see in Dior's interiors a new emphasis on comfort rather than decorum—individuals rather than rules triumph (although being French, style is never compromised.) As Dior famously said, a room without personal elements is like a pretty woman without charm.

Walk us through some of the standout features of Dior's elegant couture house, designed by Victor Grandpierre?

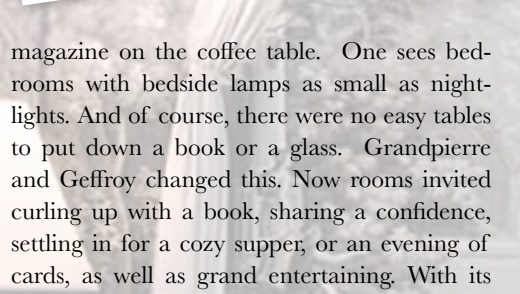
After the studied modernism of the 1930s, design effectively stopped during the war. Recovering from a war is not instantaneous, so after the war, Paris was down-at-the-heels and depressed for years. Therefore, Dior's pristine new couture house in 1947—light-filled and gray and white—was a sensation, a breath of fresh, chic air. Grandpierre dared to build on the modernist ideal of simplicity while adding elements of the great French periods: Louis -XV chairs, paneling, limestone floors, and antiques, all assembled in a clean context. Instead, although he employed old things, Grandpierre used them in a new, spare way and made interiors that looked

spectacularly new and different. And, just as every couturier now made lavish skirts in response to the Dior phenomenon, they now also wanted gray and white, up-to-date couture houses.

In your preface, you state that Grandpierre and Geffroy's work "captured the moment and, often, predicted the future." How did these two iconic figures in the world of fashion and interiors change the concept of decorating? Please elaborate on the term "New Look Chic." While a modern movement at the time, "New Look Chic" seemed to also pay homage to past.

New Look decorating represents a watershed phenomenon. The key to Grandpierre and Geffroy—as well as Dior—was independent vision: they dared to reach into the past, contrary to prevailing notions of accepted taste, and adapt it to their moment. This inspiration produced a look that was entirely new. Grandpierre and Geffroy also pioneered the radical idea of comfortable, eclectic, personal rooms—without sacrificing an iota of panache.

Up to that moment, French residential design had been quite codified. Rooms were often elegant and poised, but stiff. They tended to ignore the down-to-earth needs of living. Telephones were never next to a comfortable chair; they were in drafty long halls. Furniture was rarely arranged for intimate conversation; when you look at design magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, it looks as if you would have to scream to communicate or pull a back muscle to put a



Eastern Europeans to the cultural capital of the world. People and their point of view had evolved. Now, French interiors began to incorporate these new influences. The precise traditions relaxed. Salons could be interlaced with artifacts from all four corners of the world. Geffroy might mix a Finnish rug with signed French furniture, Grandpierre would provide sumptuous bathrooms once only found in America. The same trend was influencing fashion too: Dior designed a dress that mimicked the sinuous drape of a sari.

But whereas eclecticism could have resulted in a hodge-podge, French heritage reined all these influences into something sophisticated and sparkling. The New Look decorating brought all these trends together—function, eclecticism, personal decorating, woven with old-world culture and confident chic.

Did Grandpierre's design of New Look interiors for Dior's couture house affect the look of Dior's product design and corporate branding?

As Dior grew into an empire—with larger headquarters, new boutiques overseas, specialized boutiques for gifts, shoes, menswear, baby clothes, licenses, and ready-to-wear—Grandpierre designed consistent, gray and white neoclassic interiors with caning, fluting, neoclassic bows, and Louis XVI chairs to house them. One instantly and instinctively knew when one



entered the world of Dior. It was “branding” before the term was even invented—and such a successful interpretation of the Dior ethos, that Grandpierre's design vocabulary, to this day, is part of every Dior boutique around the world.

What would be Grandpierre's and Geffroy's five take-away design lessons for the current generation of interior designers and style seekers?

- Make independent design choices. Inform your eye by looking, but never copying. Striking originality, be it in Dior's New Look, Geffroy's or Grandpierre's posh interiors stems from being true to a personal point of view.
- Be curious about the world around you. Without curiosity design can't move forward, and it certainly can't capture its time. Learn from the past, incorporate the present. Interiors will be rich, resonate, and connect the occupant to a larger spectrum.
- Remember that a home should be a haven. A living space should welcome and embrace its owner and nurture the soul. Upholstered walls create soft spaces; fabrics that feel good are welcoming; color creates mood. Reach for quality whenever you can.
- Incorporate antiques. Not only are antiques beautiful, they connect us to our past and remind us of who we are. They are like family photos on our desktop.
- For a little zip, reach for tiger silk velvet and a glass of Champagne. **S**

