

Friday, February 22, 2019

## Maureen Footer



By Sian Ballen & Lesley Hauge  
Photographs by Jeff Hirsch

A detailed and historically informative interview this week with designer and writer **Maureen Footer**, author of the new book, *Dior and His Decorators: Victor Grandpierre, Georges Geffroy, and the New Look (Vendome)*. Meticulously researched and replete with glamorous illustration, it tells the story of how the fashion design legend, Christian Dior combined forces with two very different Parisian interior designers to create the iconic post-war 1950s New Look in both clothes and interiors.

We'll get to the book but you're not



decorating anymore. Did you just decide you had had enough?

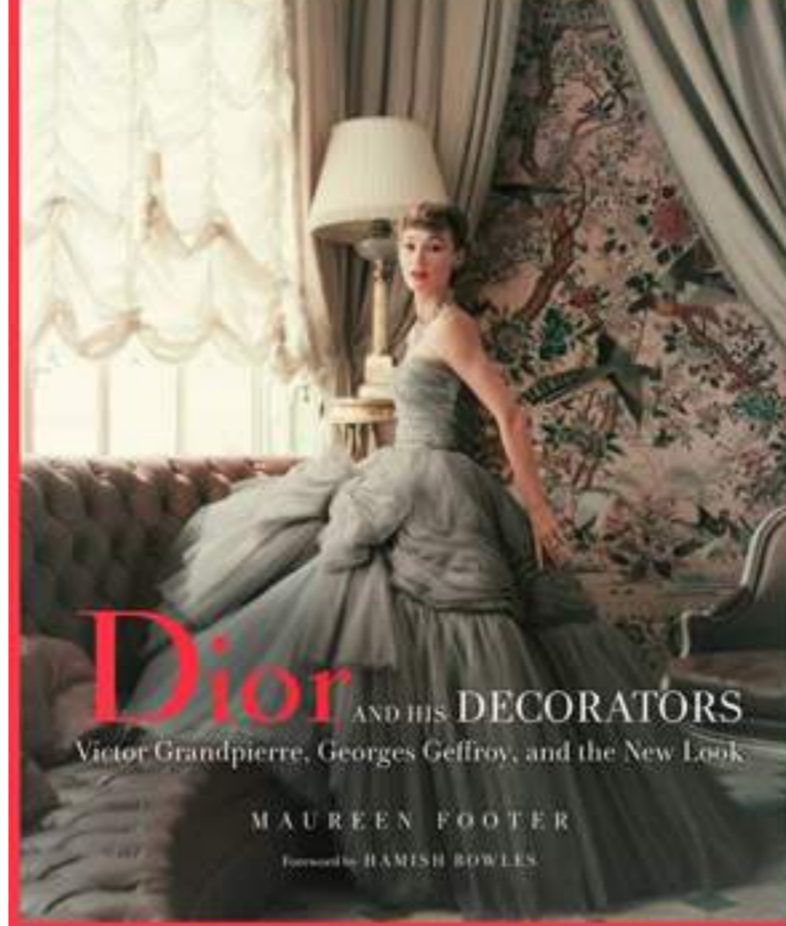
I am not decorating ... it was really that the demands of the book are so unpredictable and there's always a deadline. And I wasn't just slapping together a monograph—there was research and real historic content. The Dior book required going to Paris at least once a month for research. I worked on trying to get an interview with Pierre Bergé [*the long-time partner of Dior's successor, Yves St Laurent*] for months and when he said yes, it was like, "You name your date and I'll be there!" And these research trips take weeks to set up. Everything is as tightly scheduled as possible. Then you come back and you have to write all the thank you notes. I just realized I couldn't do everything.

**How long were you working on the book?**

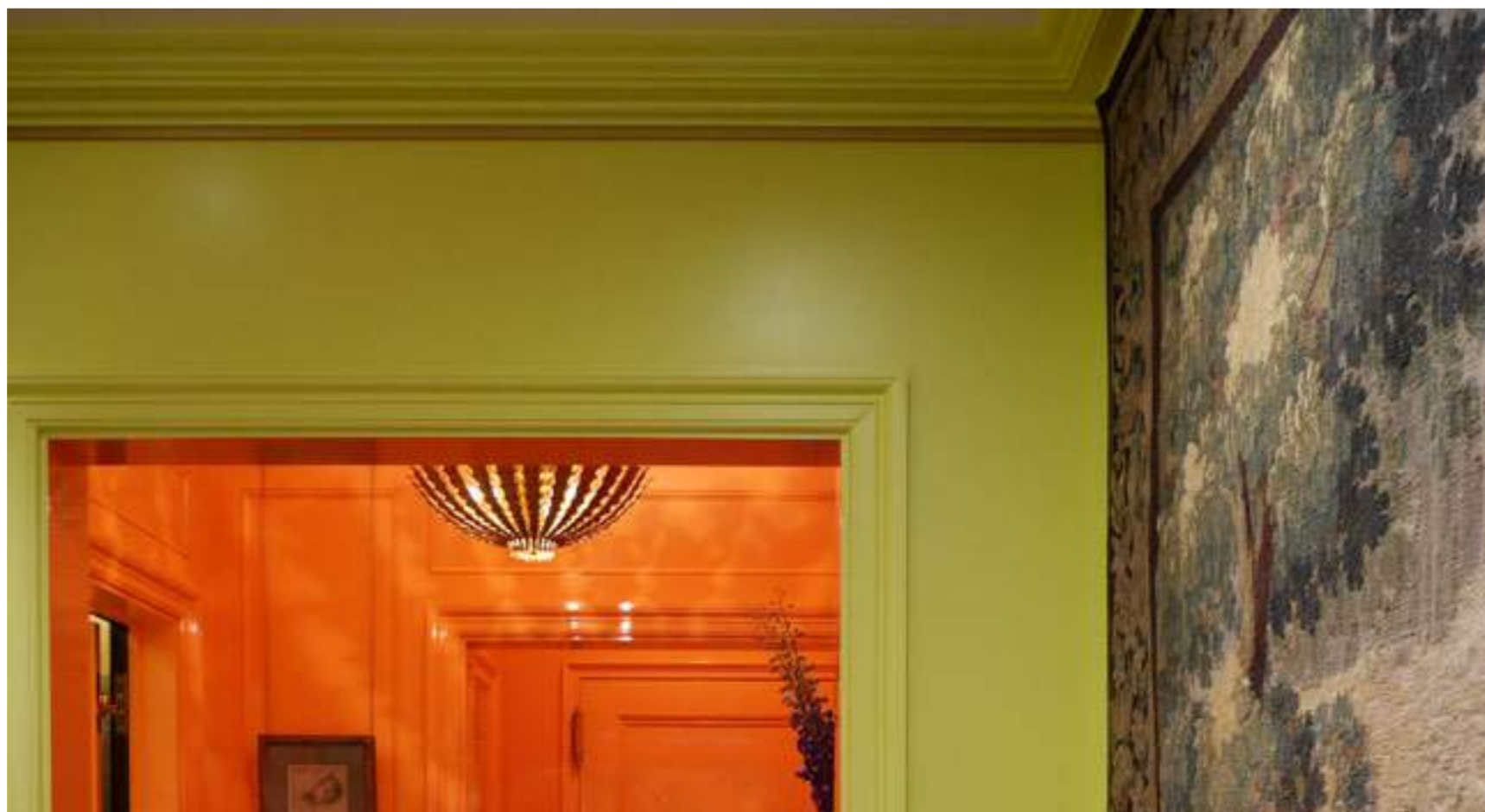
It was about four years. Mainly it was the research. Once you have the story and you kind of have the structure you can get going ... but I'm not good with the blank page!

**What would you say the story is?**

Well there are like four stories going on there. The primary story is that every dress and every room has a history and it connects you to a point in time. And it wasn't surprising that given that Dior had this close relationship with these interior designers [*Victor Grandpierre and Georges Geffroy*]*—Dior had wanted to be an architect—he was very sensitive to his interiors. There are these interiors that developed with the same sort of inspiration as his clothes. We've got these two mediums going in parallel—that was sort of the exploration, that synergy between couture and interiors.*



[Click to order](#) *Dior and His Decorators: Victor Grandpierre, Georges Geffroy, and the New Look (Vendome).*





A view into the foyer from the living room of Maureen's Upper East Side apartment. Lacquered walls in hues of brilliant coral and apple green from Fine Paints of Europe are a bold backdrop for her collection of fine art and antiques.





An 18th century Aubusson verdure tapestry hangs behind a pair of signed Louis XV chairs and a Louis XV chest signed "Migeon". The ceramic sculpture arranged on top of the chest is "Neon Lava, 2004" by Brooklyn artist Julia Kunin.





Above the fireplace mantel a lively abstract painting by Melissa Meyer hangs between a pair of sconces from Urban Archeology. A pair of brass palanquin pole finials from India have found a new home on the mantel.

### What did you discover?

One of the things I really loved is that these three men, [*Victor Grandpierre, Georges Geffroy and Dior*] were all trained as modernists, Dior was a contemporary art gallerist and he studied musical composition; Victor Grandpierre had been a photo-journalist and Georges Geffroy had done set design and graphic design. They had broad culture and they had all developed a modern eye. They were looking at the past through a modernist lens and making things that were relevant to the moment.

### How would you characterize that particular filter—how did recast say the 18th century or Empire furniture they were using, for example?

There were really two things going on, I think. One was simply that these fellows were all born at the turn of the twentieth century and they were adolescents during World War One, so their formative years were [filled with] all the exoticism of Bakst and Poiret and then the 1920s, which was all enchanted with aviation and technology and thinking this was a key to a better life, streamlined, pared down. Then came the crash, and then this pared-down baroque à la Cecil Beaton. So they kept on seeing different elements re-cast and pared down. They brought that “pared-down-ess”.





In the front corner of the living room mixed artwork by Louise Bourgeois, Betty Parsons and Melissa Meyer hangs above an ebonized desk with ormolu mounts from Le Lerebours Antiques.





A large abstract painting by artist Bryan Burkey hangs between the living room windows. Nearby a bejeweled enameled elephant from Gem Palace, Jaipur stands on small red lacquer table from Todd Romano. The Louis XV serving table is from Bermingham and Co.



A painting attributed to the circle of Giovanni Paolo Panini purchased at Christie's Robert de Balkany sale—and previously acquired by Victor Grandpierre for a Parisian client in the 1950s—hangs above a custom banquette covered in Chenille fabric from Bergamo. (MAYBE SKIP 7).





The sofa pillows are in a mix of fabrics from Fortuny and silk velvet from Scalmandré; the swing arm lamps are from John Boone.

### Can you suggest some examples?

Dior's haute couture interiors with—in the book I used the Hôtel de Crillon Room at the Met as an example—the color has been drained out of it; the number of decorative elements are really judiciously stripped out and then perfectly put back but with much less surface decoration. If you look at say, Cecil Beaton and his faux-baroque thing, you see them working with that too. The other thing that is happening in post-war Paris, even though Paris was really challenged by World War Two in every way ... it was still Paris. All these internationals with money were getting footholds, if not primary residences, in Paris, and they were insisting on English bathrooms or American notions of comfort. They loved French things but they didn't have this reverence that a French person has, where this goes with this. They broke the rules. So it was two things, the arc of the twentieth century and Internationalism coming to roost in design.

### Do you think Dior and these decorators were conscious of trying to revive or even reassert French cultural superiority?

Well, I don't think so. It wasn't like the Chamber of Commerce ... for Dior I don't think he cared so much for reviving it but he realized that there were these craft industries, all this beading, the flowers, the boning, the techniques that came from Versailles and Worth or whatever. They had really disappeared in the corset-less, bias cut, flapper styles and if Dior hadn't rescued them, who knows if they would have just completely atrophied and died?







A Louis XVI chair signed by ébeniste, "Pluvinet", is covered in a silk fabric from Pierre Frey and was once acquired by Victor Grandpierre for a client in the 1950s. The Kerman rug is from A. Davoodzadeh & Son.



A view across the living room seating area towards a stunning Louis XV gilt-and-marble top table console. Hanging on the wall behind the console are French, 18th century red chalk drawings.





Brightly colored tulips pop off a 1960s French chinoiserie lacquer table.





"Fungold Rock" by Brice Marden hangs above a Louis XVI secretary signed Birkle, acquired in Versailles.



**So it seems that they were also reacting against the boxy clothes of the 1940s, and the drabness of the interiors too, perhaps, the whole drab post-war weariness.**

Yes, in that boxy 1940s line you just see that whole militaristic spirit through it. It looks like a WAC uniform. But that was wartime design. The other thing interesting thing, very much Victor Grandpierre and Dior, they grew up in this haute bourgeois climate in Paris and they knew all of that optimism and graciousness of pre-war life. [However] Dior's father went bankrupt with the [1930s] crash and Dior was "homeless", diplomatically sleeping on friends' sofas for years. So that [period prior to losing money] was always this golden age I think he was trying to create for himself.

#### **How did he live then?**

He believed in proper French cuisine. He set his table—kind of an austere but very correct, traditional French way. Chanel was truly more modern ... as women tend to be when it comes to women's clothes.





Peeking into the dining room from the living room. The handsome Malayer rug is from Persian Gallery.



A French crystal chandelier from Nestle hangs above a Tulip Table by Eero Saarinen and chairs by Mies Van Der Rohe recovered in custom orange leather from Edelman. A painting by Lincoln Seligman "Saffron Turban," purchased from Gerald Bland picks up the pink and orange tones of the chairs as well as the balloon shades fabricated out of Jim Thompson silk. The Kerman rug is from A. Davoodzadeh.





An 18th-century bust of sculptor Cornelius Van Cleve after Jean-Jacques Caffieri stands in front of an 18th century Aubusson verdure tapestry.





On the far wall a "Two Identified Forms" by Scottish abstract artist Callum Innes from Frith Street Gallery in London hangs on walls covered in silk velvet from Lee Jofa.



A view across the dining table towards the living room and front entrance hall. Louis XVI candlesticks are arranged near a colorful bouquet of flowers.





**Do you see his style and what he wanted as escapist?**

It was certainly dreamy. It was certainly romantic and I think that was part of the incredible success of the New Look. After deprivation and in this uncertainty when men were gone and now [they were back] and things were flirty and sexy and [his designs] suddenly signaled “the war is over.” I think everybody responded to it.

**Did it trickle down to what we would now call “the high street”?**

Absolutely. I was just talking to Harold Koda [formerly] from the Costume Institute and Dior’s biographer, Marie-France Pochna and they were saying the war had forced people to learn how to sew their own clothes and so everybody was suddenly refashioning New Look skirts. It took every level of society by storm.

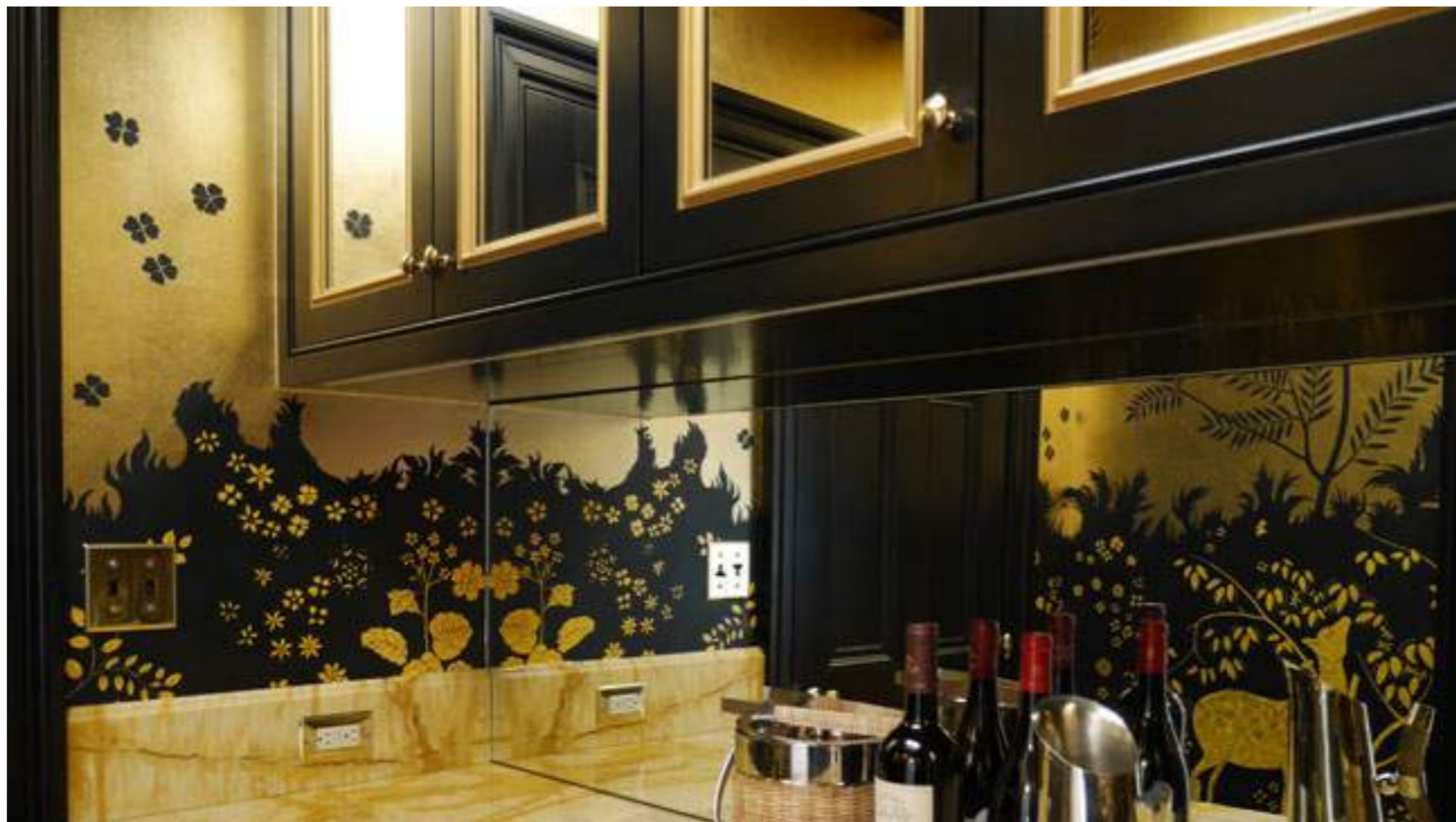
**The thing I thought was really fascinating and I’d never heard of was the way all the clothes were made in perfect miniature and displayed on dolls because they couldn’t send models overseas or anywhere.**

Right, there was no room on boats because soldiers were being transported. They’re now displayed in a museum outside of Portland, called the Maryhill Museum of Art. Some collector bought the entire thing.





Looking beyond the bar area into the foyer. A Régence mirror hangs above a Louis XVI table both purchased in Paris. The hanging fixture is by Aerin for Circa Lighting.







Maureen created an elegant bar area next to the dining room and ordered a custom De Gournay wallpaper, which was inspired by an Armand-Albert Rateau lacquer screen that had once graced Jean Lanvin's dining room.



**They're in Oregon? That's amazing! Now, what would you say that Dior was trying to get from each of these two interior designers?**

I think he really felt that Grandpierre intuitively understood him, his vision, his inspiration. He created these perfect Dior couturier interiors that are modified but still recognizable as Grandpierre's work to this day. He did neo-classical, grey-and-white, pared down, luminous, light-filled, the white Louis XVI chair—you still see them in Peter Marino's interiors. He would put in his little modernist things too. He introduced caning, which became a motif and houndstooth, which Dior used in one of his first collections.

**And the iconic houndstooth packaging of the perfume, of course.**

The perfume itself was almost a unisex perfume—it was sandalwood and chypre—it was before its time. Also super-important was this *noeud de fontange*, which was the little bow with trailing ends. "Fontange" was a mistress of Louis XIV, I think, and the story was that when she was out hunting, she lost her hat and so tied a ribbon like that to cover her hair.



Favorite objects including two Pre-Columbian Peruvian Chancay pottery figures, a Spanish colonial polychrome figure and a Tang Dynasty figure are arranged on top of a Louis XVI secretary.





A compelling and slightly spooky portrait by Lordan Bunch hangs at the end of the bedroom hallway.





Maureen, age 18.





A charming toile wallpaper from Pierre Frey lines the walls of the guest bath. The hardware is from Dornbracht.





Peeking into the Maureen's bath with a photo of her husband on top of the marble counter.

### **What about Geffroy?**

Geffroy as a former couturier always loved these sensual, rich fabrics, as did Dior. A room was very sensual, color-infused and very comfortable. It's the 18th century responding to the 1950s. There are the little side tables and Louis XVI chairs but there's also this overarching sense of comfort, tufted upholstery, upholstered walls, which wasn't typically an 18th century thing, and lots of velvet. Geffroy was more calculating—he had this nightly salon and part of the reason for the salon was, “What's going in Paris and who should I be calling for lunch?”

### **And all the exoticism, the lions and tigers and so forth?**

Both Geffroy and Grandpierre did that. It became a leitmotif of glamorous café society chic.

### **So these are the kinds of storied interior designers that are of an era that probably isn't coming back?**

Yes, they were the sort who said, “I don't like the bouquet! Tear it down!” They don't exist anymore. I think the clients then were people like Gloria Guinness and these Russians and they just so wanted to be chic and probably they didn't have that confidence. You know, [they would say] “Oh Geffroy *insists!*”



Handpainted wallpaper from the Grecian provides a soothing backdrop in the master bedroom.

Handpainted wallpaper from the Graceie provides a soothing backdrop in the master bedroom.



Maureen designed the shutters to simulate Chinese fretwork.





More views of the bedroom. A ceiling fixture from Chameleon hangs above a bed with bed linens from Casa del Bianco.







Maureen's dresser from John Rosselli was the first piece of furniture she purchased after graduating college.



On the bedside chest family photos share space with a Christopher Spitzmiller lamp.





Handsome built-in closets with mirrored fretwork doors provide extra storage and open up the space of the master bedroom.



**I'm not sure people are that bothered about conveying sophistication anymore but back then, it was important, wasn't it?**

I think you're so right. I just don't think that's an objective for anybody under forty-five. And the internet has democratized design. Don't you think now it's either owning a sports team or art that is how people establish their stature, not necessarily their interiors?

**Yes, definitely. Was Dior one of the first people to really look at what he was doing with these decorators and then attempting to create a distinctive brand?**

Regarding the brand, I think that was not a programmed, conscious thing. I think the brand only happened because of the way Grandpierre conveyed Dior.

**What did you want to know from Pierre Bergé?**

Everything! He was one of the only people who knew Grandpierre. I wanted to know what their dinners like together. What did Grandpierre read? What was his temperament like? Wasn't his color sense phenomenal? And Bergé, ever protective of St. Laurent said, "Well Yves was a rather good colorist too."





Maureen transformed the second bedroom into a chic and cozy library. A pair of slipper chairs, once belonging to Bunny Melon, face a sofa topped with pillows out of Fortuny silk and a tiger silk velvet from Brunschwig & Fils.





Handsome bookcases in grained oak were designed by architect Anthony Minichetti and are edged with scalloped leather by Dino Fallotico. The bookcase lighting is from Modulighter Inc.





Bright red anemones add a burst of color to the Chinese chest, a family heirloom. The Sultanabad rug is from Persian Gallery.



**So having done all this research, what have learned about Christian Dior? What is your impression of him?**

I adore Dior. His culture was so broad and that is something that is so rare. He studied musical composition, he was conversant in art, he worked in the theater. This I find so appealing. And he drew on all of this to create this romantic style. They say in French, "He was always the master of himself," which means, soft-spoken, he never lost his temper and he was very charming but also very guarded.

**What would you have liked to ask him yourself if you could sit down with him?**

Oh what an interesting question! You know I'd be very interested in knowing if he had lived longer than 1957, where he would have sent his designs in the 60s and the 70s because he

did have this modernist filter. The New Look was so successful because he had his finger on the pulse of the time and understood what everybody was dreaming of and gave voice to it in his clothes. I think it's very possible that he would have completely understood what St. Laurent was doing with motorcycle jackets and safari jackets and smoking (tuxedo) ... but we don't know that because he stopped when we were still in elegant-land.



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