
Syrie Maugham: Staging Glamorous Interiors explores the life, society, and work of British decorator Syrie Maugham (1879-1955). The initial chapter introduces the turn-of-the-century world of the young, beautiful, and privileged daughter of a London doctor, who through marriage (first to wealthy American chemist Henry Solomon Wellcome in 1901 and later to writer W. Somerset Maugham in 1917), entered the world of trendsetters, socialites, actors, designers, and literary figures of the day in Europe and America. Syrie Maugham, knowledgeable about both traditional and modern furniture, fabrics, color, and the antiques market, was also able to produce contemporary reproductions and began a decorating firm in London at age forty-two catering to an emerging chic middle-class clientele. Later chapters detail the evolution of her career and style—the development of design shops in London, New York, and Chicago; showcasing her designs with the personal residences and glamorous interiors she staged for movie and theatre personalities. A descriptive analysis of major commissions in America, France, and England from 1925-1950s is provided, ending with a summation of her design legacy.

This is a well researched and an enjoyable read. Pauline Metcalf, author of other works on interior decoration notably Ogden Codman and the Decoration of Houses (1988) and David Adler, Architect: The Elements of Style (2002), has cleverly interlaced the life and career of Syrie Maugham with intimate accounts of a coterie of star-studded friends and clients, which are the strengths of this work. As a biography, the book provides a very readable account of Syrie Maugham as an energetic and resourceful businesswoman with a sense of taste who, like Elsie de Wolfe and Francis Elkins, pioneered a distinct style of interior decoration in the twentieth century. Anecdotes about trendsetters like Noel Coward, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and Cecil Beaton, provide a rich and often whimsical picture of the personalities that Syrie befriended and for whom she created interiors that enhanced their glamorous lifestyles. The technical aspects that document the processes and the distinctiveness of her style, whether it be her all white interiors or her ability to successfully mix traditional and modern styles, can best be discerned by a study of the high quality drawings, paintings and photographs found throughout the book.

Though geared to the general reader interested in twentieth century interior design, it is far more readable and extensive study than Richard Fischer’s Syrie Maugham (Duckworth, 1978). It is produced on high-quality paper with a good binding, decorated end papers, and includes an index, a select bibliography, significant end notes, and a list of clients and commissions.

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