

# ELSIE DE WOLFE

b. December 20, 1865

d. July 2, 1950

## INTERIOR DESIGNER

*“I opened the doors and windows of America,  
and let in the air and sunshine.”*

**Her clients included  
Amy Vanderbilt, Cole  
Porter and  
the Duke and  
Duchess of Windsor.**

Elsie de Wolfe, later known as Lady Mendl, introduced the world to the art of interior design. She saw the home as a medium for self-expression.

The native New Yorker began her career as an actress before becoming a prominent figure in London and Parisian high society. After a decade in the theater, she shifted her creative energies to decorating. She started a business in 1905 and quickly landed her first big job: New York’s Colony Club, an exclusive new club for women.

As an interior designer, de Wolfe’s clients included Amy Vanderbilt, Cole Porter and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. She helped set the style for the world’s elite, introducing

a light color scheme and chintz fabrics at a time when dark wood and heavy Victorian curtains were in vogue. She also helped popularize animal prints, faux finishes and chaise longues. In her autobiography, “After All,” she called herself a “rebel in an ugly world,” saying, “I opened the doors and windows of America, and let in the air and sunshine.”

De Wolfe regularly wrote for popular magazines of the day, such as Good Housekeeping and The Delineator. Her articles were assembled into an influential book, “The House in Good Taste” (1913), which became a best seller.

During World War I, she volunteered as a nurse in France and was awarded the Croix de Guerre for her heroism.

In 1926 at the age of 61, de Wolfe surprised many when she married Sir Charles Mendl, a British diplomat in Paris. Since 1892 de Wolfe had been living openly in a lesbian relationship with Elisabeth Marbury—a successful theatrical and literary agent, who became one of the first female Broadway producers. The women remained together until Marbury’s death in 1933.

