

# Brazilian chromatic identity: Dorothy Draper's work in Brazil

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This research is dedicated to the work of Dorothy Draper in Brazil, considered the pioneer of the interior decoration profession in the United States in the early 20th century. Her office, established in New York City since 1925, remains operational to this day, making it one of the oldest design firms in the world. A proponent of colourful and extravagant interiors, she was recognised for creating a style known as "modern baroque." She published two books, "Decorating is Fun!" (1939) and "Entertaining is Fun!" (1941), both of which referenced the use of colours in interior spaces. Draper was invited by an influential Brazilian businessman to design the interiors of the Quitandinha Hotel in Petrópolis, located in the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Initial contacts took place in early 1942, and the project was developed in her New York office but executed by Brazilian artisans, with the hotel opening in 1944. The hotel, which also functioned as a casino, became a landmark for the society of that time and preserved a significant example of Brazilian interior design history. This study analyses the colour scheme chosen by Draper for this endeavor, based on national and international literature, interviews, a technical visit to the site, and a chromatic survey. Considering the possibility of still accessing Draper's legacy, this research examines her work to identify chromatic references in a palette that may highlight a Brazilian chromatic identity. According to some authors, the shapes of Brazilian baroque architecture and the vibrant local flora served as references for the project. Literature suggests that Draper's work was, in some way, influenced by her experiences during her stay in Brazil. Later, Draper would go on to sign a line of products openly inspired by Brazil, such as chintz fabrics and accessories with cheerful prints.

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## Introduction

Despite the chaotic moment of World War II in the 1940s, the growing enthusiasm for casino environments became a curious phenomenon among Brazil's middle class. This movement fueled the ambitious plan of Brazilian entrepreneur Joaquim Rolla to build the largest hotel and casino complex in Latin America, the Quitandinha Hotel (Figure 1). In the 1930s, Luiz Fossati developed the architectural project with contributions from Alfredo Baeta Neves, in a Norman style. The landscape designing was led by Burle Marx, the most important Brazilian landscaper. According to Boralli [1], "the locals referred to this area, which also sold fruits and vegetables, as 'Quitandinha,' which became the name of the hotel and the neighborhood where it was built".



Figure 1: View of the Quitandinha Palace façade by its frontal lake. Source: The authors, 2024.

The American Dorothy Tuckerman Draper (1889–1969), one of the first and most prestigious interior decorators in the United States, was hired in 1942 to design the interiors of the ambitious hotel-casino in Petropolis, located in the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro. Her international prestige drew attention to the Brazilian project at a time when discussions about the need to create a Brazilian identity were emerging. Although being a foreigner, Draper incorporated a collection of elements that can be considered a sketch of a Brazilian national identity in interior decoration, as the field had been predominantly influenced by European historicism until then.

During her first visit to Brazil in 1942 to inspect the hotel, Draper stated that although the project would be developed in New York, everything would be produced in Brazil. According to Varney [2], “We shall design all the furniture, the fabrics, everything that pertains to the hotel here in New York. They will carry out our designs in Brazil, using Brazilian products. We are selecting only Brazilian woods – those beautiful blonde woods of their forests, as well as their rare mahogany. Tiles, which Brazilians make so beautifully and use so lavishly, will lend their charm to the plans ... South American colors will predominate – sharp yellows, limes, cochineal, and a galaxy of greens, which we shall steal from the irresistible magnificence of the jungle with its great splashy leaves.”

The work on the construction and decoration lasted two years, and the hotel opened its doors in 1944. The inauguration party gathered the Brazilian high society of the time. However, in 1946, President Eurico Gaspar Dutra, through Decree-Law 9.215, banned casinos in the country, abruptly ending the short-lived trajectory of the Hotel – the Quitandinha’s business never recovered from that. Around 1954, to address financial crises, 220 of the hotel’s 318 apartments were sold. Later, it ceased operating as a hotel and was converted into a condominium.

In 1963, the Quitandinha was definitively sold and transformed into a club, owned by the company Santa Paula Melhoramentos S/A, which took full responsibility for labor costs and building maintenance. Finally, in 2007, part of the hotel was acquired by SESC (Social Service of Commerce) and transformed into a cultural center.

Considering the above and the possibility of accessing chromatic information from Quitandinha today, this research focused on Dorothy Draper’s work, aiming to identify a possible Brazilian chromatic

identity, redefining aspects of the history of Brazilian interior design. The methods adopted for this endeavor involved bibliographic review of national and international sources, interviews, site visits, and photographic and chromatic surveys.

This research proves to be essential as it highlights the need to discuss chromaticity in interior design. In Brazil, the study of colour in design and architectural projects is often neglected, despite its pivotal role in creating the atmosphere of spaces. The former hotel-casino stands resilient against time, and this research can contribute to historical preservation and provide a foundational resource, particularly since the building is in a constant process of restoration and preservation.

## Discussion

Interior decoration became a way for women to establish economic independence from their parents and husbands. According to Gibbs [3], the profession was “[...] indeed, a 20th-century innovation, and residential decoration became an increasingly popular hobby. Many of these early interior decorators were members of the aristocracy who saw an opportunity to leverage their taste and sophistication to assist the nouveaux riches, who had the purchasing power for luxurious decorations but needed guidance to achieve the desired effects.”

It was a time when economic and social influences drove the decoration landscape. In Massey’s view [4], decorators of this period “consistently worked within past styles, and until World War I, decoration was almost synonymous with the antiques trade.” Decorators were responsible for selecting furniture, coverings, fabrics, ornaments, lighting effects, and the composition of colours.

Among historians, Dorothy Draper was a pioneer in the professionalisation of decoration and highly respected for her entrepreneurial spirit. She was highly influential in America, born in 1889 into a high-society New York family, and opened her own office in 1925.

Draper broke away from the historicism that dominated the period, laying the groundwork for what would later be called modernism. She worked on designing interiors for various project types, including residences (apartments and houses), commercial establishments, hospitals, hotels, restaurants, theaters, tv backdrops, department stores, and even the interiors of airplanes and cars.

She used diverse patterns: colourful stripes, white plaster elements, black-and-white floors, floral chintz in varying sizes, and checkered fabrics. Ingrid Fetell Lee [5], in her book “Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness”, wrote that “Draper was an unrestrained maximalist and quickly established her own style, defined by boldness, graphic patterns, and vibrant colors—often all at once.”

In 1939, Draper published “Decorating is Fun!”, and in 1941, “Entertaining is Fun!”—both of which served as self-help manuals designed to help homemakers decorate on a budget. According to Lee [5], “her advice consistently aimed to enhance the sense of texture in the home while reminding homemakers that the goal was joy, not perfection.” Draper was a master of layering and an expert in unexpected compositions.

After her death in 1969, her office, Draper & Company Inc., was taken over by her most loyal assistant, Carleton Varney. He inherited her passion for colour, being a lover of cheerful and luminous interiors. Dorothy Draper’s office remains active and is one of the oldest interior design firms still in operation in the United States. Varney passed away in 2022 during the coronavirus pandemic.

In 2006, the Museum of the City of New York held a retrospective of Draper’s work. The accompanying book, “In the Pink: Dorothy Draper – America’s Most Fabulous Decorator”, gathered

unpublished images of her main projects, samples of her product designs, and sketches of some studies. The exhibition attracted a remarkable number of visitors, exceeding one million people.

More than half a century after her death, Draper continues to captivate with the exuberance of her work. Between the 1920s and 1960s, the American decorator completed hundreds of projects. The atmosphere of the spaces she designed was joyful, defying the conventions of the time as she sought to create sensitive environments in her own way.

For Draper, colour was one of the fundamental elements to consider in space planning. Her success, however, lay in her chromatic compositions. For Draper, colour was a tool capable of evoking emotion. According to Varney [2], “Draper used decoration as a means to consciously manipulate people’s moods and was genuinely interested in human happiness.”

“Now we know that beautiful, bright colors have a vital effect on our mental happiness. Modern doctors and psychiatrists are convinced of it!” [2] Draper’s signature style, the “Draper Touch,” featured exaggerated floral chintz, white-painted plaster elements contrasting with the walls, checkerboard floors, striped wallpaper and paintings, lighting integrated into architecture with tropical plant-like elements, and saturated colours in a wide range of hues. The unexpected was the key to her aesthetic.

According to Roiter [6], for the interiors of the Quitandinha Hotel, “[...] she created an allegory mixing Brazilian baroque architecture with Art Deco geometry, using the colours of tropical flora. In the screens, fabrics, and wallpapers: stripes, lots of stripes! On the floor, geometric designs counterbalanced the volutes of the trimmings, the Hollywood-style chandeliers, and the grand columns in white plaster and stucco. The entire project, including its detailing, came from Dorothy Draper’s drawing board in her New York office, executed exclusively by Brazilian artisans.”

Contrasting colour schemes were among her favorites. Varney [2] suggests that “[...] she always tested a color sample on a wall before painting the entire space. She would say you could never judge a paint tone by the liquid heat in the can. You must apply it to a wall, let it dry, and then decide”. To Draper, colour was the cheapest element in a room.

For the Quitandinha, even though the projects were developed in her New York office, Draper incorporated baroque elements and motifs, and colours inspired by Brazilian flora. She insisted on using local woods and materials and ensured that the pieces were made by Brazilian artisans. The Quitandinha Palace, as Draper preferred to call it, has somehow withstood the test of time, preserving parts of its cheerful and theatrical interiors. The colour schemes provide a separate dimension, used strategically to create unforgettable spaces.

She developed a collection of fabrics and wallpapers inspired by the Brazilian landscape, potentially contributing to the foundation of a national interior design identity. Dantas [7] supports this idea in a fragment of his book “Brasil Porta Adentro: Uma Visão Histórica do Design de Interiores”, stating, “There are several things only a Brazilian can understand. A Brazilian and Dorothy Draper.”

The diversity of colours in her projects aligns with the cultural formation of Brazilians, resulting from the blending of people from different parts of the world. According to Mahnke [8], “Greeks find all colors to be equally refined, while Swedes consider saturated color to be more vulgar than unsaturated ones. The Japanese respond deeply to the gentle colors of water, sky, and wood, whereas Indian crafts have a common theme of vivid color.”

Some regions and even countries display a strong, well-defined chromatic identity, reflected in their landscapes, architecture, and interiors. Examples include the saturated hues of Guatemala and Mexico, the minimalism of Nordic design and traditional Japanese architecture, the colourful patterns of some African countries, the vibrant orange representing the Netherlands, the monochromatic tones of Jerusalem, and the dazzling colours of ancient Eastern cities. However, it remains a question: what would be the Brazilian colour palette?.

## Method

This research was structured using different methods. In the first stage, available literature was reviewed, including both national and international books, which provided accounts of the historical context of the time, the intricacies of the building's construction, the implementation of Dorothy Draper's project, and the trajectory of the Quitandinha Hotel after the prohibition of casinos in Brazil.

The second stage took place on-site through an exploratory visit to the Quitandinha Hotel facilities, involving a chromatic survey of areas accessible to the public. For colour readings, two types of colour sensors were used: the Colourpin by the Natural Colour System (NCS) and the NiX Color Sensor Mini 2. Chromatic information was systematically collected from the materials of the floors, walls, ceilings, as well as the colours of the frames and furniture.

The third and final stage of the research involved interviews with former employees, those responsible for maintenance at the Cultural Center, and tour guides. During this stage, access was granted to written documents, plans, sections, perspectives, and old black-and-white photographs, which made it possible to identify the luminosity of the original colours used in the 1940s.

## Data analysis

The chromatic survey of the former casino hotel in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro, was conducted on July 27 and 28, 2024. The structure, now occupied by a cultural center, hosts various activities throughout the year.

Some of the spaces have been previously restored to preserve the formal and chromatic characteristics of their golden age, despite the profound transformations in the patterns and types of materials used since the Quitandinha's inauguration. For the analysis, four spaces were selected based on their degree of preservation and descriptions found in the available literature detailing their chromatic characteristics. These spaces were: the main hall (at the building's entrance), the secondary hall on the side of the building, the galleries, and the library.

























TABLE 1: QUITANDINHA HOTEL'S CHROMATIC EXAMINATION									
SPACE		CHROMATIC DATA			SPACE		CHROMATIC DATA		
Name	Picture	Nº	Hue	NCS	Name	Picture	Nº	Hue	NCS
CENTRAL HALL		1		NCS S 8010-Y70R	GALLERY		1		NCS S 8505-B20G
		2		NCS S 3020-Y60R			2		NCS S 2005-G20Y
		3		NCS S 2060-Y10R			3		NCS S 2020-B10G
		4		NCS S 2060-Y10R			4		NCS S 2020-B10G
		5		NCS S 8010-Y70R			5		NCS S 8505-B20G
SECONDARY HALL		1		NCS S 8010-Y70R	LIBRARY		1		NCS S 5040-Y60R
		2		NCS S 1505-Y40R			2		NCS S 7020-R
		3		NCS S 1030-R10B			3		NCS S 6020-G30Y
		4		NCS S 2005-G20Y			4		NCS S 0500-N
		5		NCS S 8010-Y70R			5		NCS S 0500-N

Table 1: Quitandinha Hotel's chromatic survey. Source: The authors, 2024.



Table 1 provides images of these spaces alongside a sequence of chromatic notation codes organised as follows: numbers 01 and 02 for floor finishes (no. 1 – darker material and no. 2 – lighter material), number 03 for wall colours, number 04 for ceiling colours, and number 05 for baseboard materials. The sample of spaces aims to present the essence of Draper's chromatic choices.

It is evident that Draper's project reflects a certain chromatic diversity while being limited by the historical constraints of the time, both in terms of available paints and materials. The finishes of doors, floors, and baseboards integrate the spaces, almost always in neutral tones. The most frequented areas of the hotel feature black-and-white marble floors (checkerboard style), while more restricted spaces have bicolour wooden floors, often made from "Pau-Marfim," "Ipê," or "Pau-Brasil." The gallery floors are decorated with an arabesque pattern in black-and-white marble mosaic. The baseboards follow two patterns: they are either crafted from black stone or painted white wood.

"The main reception hall, which was beige and white with accents of tropical green, depended upon a huge chandelier and muscular plasterwork to give it character." [2]. According to Varney [2], "Draper chose sky-blue sofás, green-and-white-upholstered chairs, and black-lacquer coffee tables for the main lobby. The tall flower-bedecked screens are similar to those she used at the Coty Salon in New York." The library was described as having "[...] a huge Venetian mirror hung over the simple mantel, whose shape echoed the wall's molding detail – a trick the decorator used to fill the void on the high wall. The contrast of striped and flowery chintz fabrics was also a signature Draper device." "The grand entrance hall to the casino was appropriately majestic.", [2].

The chromatic visual synthesis (see Figure 2), presented in the shape of a flower, illustrates the interaction among the hues chosen by Draper. A brief comparison of historical images with current photos reveals that some of the chromatic solutions adopted during the restoration of the Quitandinha Palace did not reproduce Draper's original palette. This may be due to the lack of visual records from the era or missing documentation of the project. Beyond hues, differences in luminosity can also be identified, reinforcing that during the restoration, colour was not a significant factor in preserving the building.

At a time when the use of colour was still limited and unstable compared to today, Dorothy Draper made a difference by designing exuberant and joyful spaces, using colour strategically to positively influence people. Her creative legacy is inevitably tied to her daring combinations, with her genius lying in her ability to compose improbable combinations creatively.



*Figure 2: Quitandinha Hotel chromatic visual synthesis, with tones arranged by its hue and lightness. Source: The authors, 2024.*

## Conclusions

Beyond her ability to choose unexpected colours and create exuberant spaces, Dorothy Draper's work in Brazil left a lasting legacy in the history of interior design. She embraced the purest essence of Brazilian identity in her design for the Quitandinha Hotel. This was expressed through the fluidity of her forms and references to Brazil's fauna and flora, which became the backdrop for the project. Draper likely recognised that a Brazilian palette could not be purist or minimalist but should instead be diverse and joyful, reflecting the multicultural influences that shaped Brazil, brought by immigrants from different parts of the world.

Draper was a pioneer in seeking elements that pointed to a sense of "Brazilianness," attempting to craft a national identity. Subsequently, other designers replicated Draper's strategies, reinforcing the fact that an attentive and sensitive American designer captured the essence of Brazilian identity in an interior design project, inevitably brought to life with the aid of colour.

Given this context, it is fair to assert that a Brazilian palette could not be purist or minimalist but would predominantly be maximalist.

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