



Wolfe, Elsie de (1865-1950)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Although interior decorating is now widely considered--indeed, stereotyped--as a career for gay men, an American lesbian was, in fact, to a great extent responsible for the creation of this profession. Not only did Elsie de Wolfe spearhead a cultural movement of home aesthetics, she was also one of the central figures of an elite New York "Amazon enclave" that included some of the most glamorous figures of the Broadway stage during the early years of the twentieth century.

Nor were these her only accomplishments: she also has the distinction of being the inventor of both the Pink Lady cocktail (consisting of gin, grenadine, egg whites, and cream) and the infamous blue hair rinse favored by many graying ladies.

She was born Ella Anderson de Wolfe on December 20, 1865, the daughter of a wealthy New York family. Her parents sent her to a finishing school in Edinburgh, and after her education she "came out" (in the older meaning of the term) as a debutante at the court of Queen Victoria. Until the age of twenty-five, she led the life of indolence usual for young, unmarried women of her background and occasionally participated in amateur dramatics.

In 1890, de Wolfe's father, a prominent physician, died and left the family with considerable debts from his compulsive gambling. Rather than marry for money, she chose to be independent and self-supporting, and thus she began her career as a stage actress, although at the time it was at best a dubious profession for a woman of genteel upbringing. In the theatrical world, de Wolfe was known for her striking mode of dressing, and she drew audiences for her clothes as much as for her acting.

During this period, de Wolfe became the lover and partner of Elisabeth ("Bessie") Marbury, a prominent Broadway agent and producer. Theirs was an almost prototypical "butch-femme" relationship, and they became the objects of constant gossip in high society, as they were alleged to have hosted "Sapphic orgies" at the Sutton Place home of their friend Anne Morgan, the daughter of financier J. P. Morgan. Beyond any doubt, they mentored many young lesbians in the New York theatrical world, including Katherine Cornell, Eva Le Gallienne, and Mercedes de Acosta.

At the age of forty, de Wolfe had passed her prime as an actress. She had already achieved some acclaim as a set designer and for decorating the house in which she lived with Marbury. Thus, at her partner's urging, she retired from acting to devote herself to creating a new career, that of decorating interiors for wealthy clients whom she knew through her social circle.

De Wolfe's first major commission was the decoration of the Colony Club, an exclusive New York social club for women, and her services were soon very much in demand. She created a vogue for light and airy open space, as opposed to Victorian styles then predominant, which favored overstuffed furniture and an abundance of *objets d'art*. To achieve this airy effect, she utilized mirrors and light colors, particularly



Interior designer Elsie de Wolfe (top, in 1894) began a career as an interior designer at the age of 40. This Morristown, New Jersey living room (above) was one of her projects. The photograph of the Morristown living room is reproduced from Elsie de Wolfe's *The House in Good Taste* (1913). Courtesy Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

beige. (Indeed, she was said to have exclaimed upon first seeing the Parthenon in Greece, "Beige! It's my color!")

Although de Wolfe's influence was initially felt in the homes of the New York elite who formed her first clientele, her dictates on home aesthetics soon reached mainstream middle-class Americans by means of her newspaper and magazine columns. These writings were collected and published as *The House in Good Taste* (1913).

De Wolfe had a lifelong love of France and, with Marbury and Morgan, bought and restored the Villa Trianon at Versailles, where they entertained lavishly. She volunteered as a nurse during World War I and was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor by the French government for her services to the wounded.

At the age of sixty, to the astonishment of all who knew her, de Wolfe married British diplomat Sir Charles Mendl. The marriage was platonic--de Wolfe was said to have married Mendl for his title--and while Marbury at first felt betrayed, the relationship between the two women continued until Marbury's death in 1933.

De Wolfe published her autobiography, *After All*, in 1935. She came back to the United States at the beginning of World War II, but later returned to France, where she died at the Villa Trianon on July 12, 1950.

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