



A Jessup Inc. watercolor of the Yellow Guest Room in the Edsel & Eleanor Ford house, Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan. Photo: Courtesy of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House

the report

The Decorator Time Almost Forgot

An exhibition at the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach aims to rescue Polly Jessup from
obscurity

By Maggie Lidz

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If you've never heard of Polly Jessup, it's because she and her blue-chip clients didn't want you to. Known as the Grande Dame of Palm Beach decorators, Jessup enjoyed a fruitful career spanning six decades. She didn't advertise or publish photographs of her rooms, a counterintuitive business strategy that attracted publicity-shy blue-chippers like Fords,

Mellons, and du Ponts. When Jessup died in 1988, age 89, she commanded a staff of 52 but managed to stay under the public radar to the end.



Polly Jessup working at home. Photo: Courtesy of the Daniel family

The [Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach](#) wants to change that. The Foundation has recently launched a new Polly Jessup Design Series, underwritten by her nephew Ron

Daniel and his family, which begins with an exhibit on her life and the first of five annual lectures in her name.

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“Polly Jessup’s taste is simply beautiful,” wrote Billy Baldwin in his 1985 autobiography. “Her extravagant insistence upon quality, and quality only, has not been equaled, and her success has been without limit and every bit of it is deserved.”

Jessup, a New Englander, began designing casually in the 1920s after moving to Florida and commissioning furniture for her own home. “Friends came and saw it, and I had furniture made for them, too,” she recalled. By 1929, she and her husband, John, lived and worked in West Palm Beach, running Jessup Inc. together. Hobe Sound, the low-key, high-WASP winter resort 27 miles north, was their stronghold. Joseph Verner Reed and his formidable wife, Permelia—who didn’t own quite everything on the island, but it seemed that way—hired the Jessups for their beach house, as well their Jupiter Island Club.



A sitting area in the master bedroom of the Ford house. Photo: Courtesy of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House

Many of Jessup's clients were serious collectors. A prime example is Robert Hudson Tannahill, for whom she began to work in the late 1940s. His was among the first entire houses she completed after John died in 1945. Tannahill, a noted connoisseur and the quiet heir to the Hudson department store fortune, lived alone in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, near his cousin Eleanor Ford. When he died in 1969, his \$13 million art collection went in its entirety to the Detroit Institute of Art, stimulating international interest and articles in the highbrow art journals like *The Burlington Magazine* and *Apollo*. Fortunately, before his collection was removed, the rooms were photographed.

The 1970 *New York Times* description of the comfortable bachelor residence must have delighted Jessup, who prided herself on creating homes—spaces meant to be lived in—not trophy galleries: "Mr. Tannahill's house gave no impression of being a collector's quarters, or even of being a rich man's domain, even though on the walls you found major paintings by (a partial list) Corot, Renoir, Degas, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Cezanne, Modigliani, Rouault, Klee, Matisse, and Picasso."



Matisse's *Poppies*, ca. 1919, in the Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, home of Robert Tannahill. Photo: Courtesy of Detroit Institute of Arts Research Library & Archives

Jessup's exclusive stable of craftspeople, from cabinetmakers to painters, upholsterers, and lampshade-makers allowed her to create unmistakably domestic settings worthy of great art. She didn't mind a little shabbiness (in fact, "shabby" was one of her favorite words) because a little wear and tear made high-quality construction more apparent—not unlike the Mainbocher suits worn by Jessup and many of her female clients.



The Yellow Guest Room in the Ford House. Photo: Courtesy of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House

Jessup took over as the Fords' primary designer, working on everything from Grosse Pointe to the 125-foot yacht the Fords kept docked during the winter months at Hobe Sound to their summer place in Seal Harbor, Maine (now owned by [Martha Stewart](#)). She did the houses of all four of Edsel and Eleanor's children, supervised the decoration for the Ford granddaughters' debuts, and by the 1960s was even in charge of Eleanor's Christmas display. Jessup became so integral to the family way of life that after Eleanor's death in 1976, she advised the museum staff on how to keep the place authentic. Besides plenty of well-arranged fresh flowers ("do the things Mrs. Ford loved"), she insisted on

light-colored mud rugs (“the dirt won’t make that much difference”) and emphasized the warm glow of natural patina. “Keep it shabby, the way it was!”



Eleanor Ford, left, and Polly Jessup, center, in similar Mainbocher suits. Eleanor’s daughter, Josephine, to the right. They stand in front of Pophleys, a 16th-century English farmhouse near Radnage in Buckinghamshire. **Photo: Courtesy of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House**

In this glossy context—paintings by Renoir, downy upholstery, and silk-lined, brocaded window curtains—shabby refers to a look money alone can’t buy: age-softened carpets, worn leather edges on well-loved books, and the sheen of much-ironed monogrammed linens.

For the current exhibit, the Preservation Foundation scoured up rare photos and artifacts from private lenders and the Four Arts Society. On November 16, the lecture series was inaugurated to a standing room-only crowd by prominent interior designer Leta Austin Foster. “Polly Jessup loved wallpaper, antiques, and lampshades,” Foster later told me in a phone conversation. “She truly loved lampshades. I’m like her. I can spot a bad lampshade at 50 paces.”

The Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach exhibit runs through December 22.

Maggie Lidz is a historian with the [Edsel and Eleanor Ford House](#).



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