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The Mystery of the Eisenhower Toile

Cindy Cook

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The Eisenhower toile is a twentieth-century textile with a story to tell—through its motifs and its creators. The motifs in this toile represent the story of Dwight D. Eisenhower's life. The creation of the Eisenhower toile is a story of mystery and intrigue involving a famous American couple, Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower; a prominent interior designer, Elisabeth Draper; a prestigious textile company, F. Schumacher & Co.; and a mystery designer.

The Eisenhower toile is a printed cotton produced by F. Schumacher & Co. of New York from 1956 to 1960. Schumacher produced the 36" wide fabric with a 36" repeat in ten colorways:

Mistletoe Green
Pheasant Gold
Ruby
Charcoal & White
Jouy Blue

Carnation Pink
Toile Red & White
Apricot
Oak Brown
Cinnamon

The design features buildings and emblems important in Dwight Eisenhower's life and career, surrounded by floral symbols. (Fig. 1) The buildings and what they represent are:

Columbia University, of which Eisenhower was President in 1948–49
Gettysburg Farm, which was the Eisenhower's vacation and retirement home
White House North Portico entrance, residence when he was President
Denver, Colorado home of Mrs. Eisenhower, where the couple were married
Abilene, Kansas home, where President Eisenhower was born
West Point, where the President completed his military training.

The emblems reflect important aspects of Eisenhower's career or personal life and include:

Great Seal of the United States
Emblem of SHAEF—Supreme Headquarters, Allied European Forces
Five-star General insignia
Elephant—eighteenth-century motif reminiscent of the Republican party symbol
Weapons and flags—military trophy panel in the Directoire manner
Easel, paint brushes, and golf balls—representative of the President's hobbies
Emblem of NATO—North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

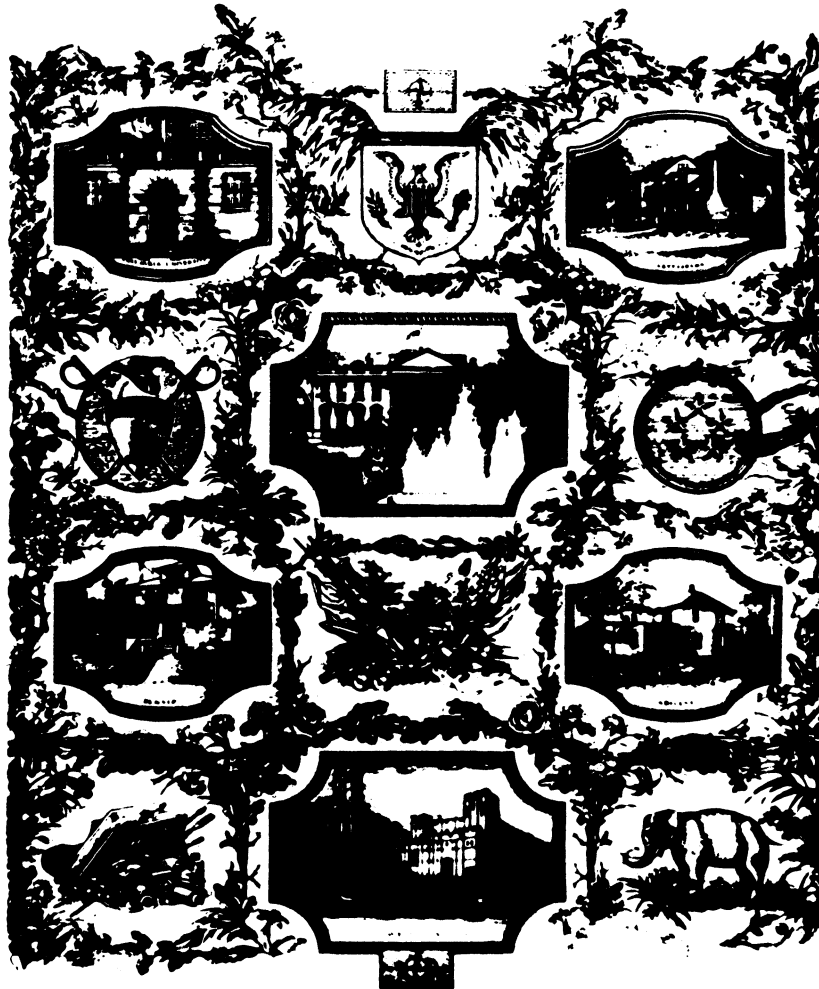


Fig. 1 SCHUMACHER Eisenhower Toile fabric, which is copyrighted by F. Schumacher & Co. Photo printed with permission from the Eisenhower National Historic Site.

The floral motifs symbolize states that were influential in Eisenhower's life and values that were important to him are:

Sunflower—Kansas
Columbine—Colorado
Bluebonnet—Texas
Rose—New York
Laurel—Pennsylvania
Oak—Strength
Acorn—Fruitfulness
Palm—Victory.ⁱ

The Eisenhower toile was produced in the 1950s for use in apparel and interiors. (Fig. 2, 3) Several examples of the toile in garment form still exist, including a raincoat at the Eisenhower National Historic Site in Gettysburg, PA and dresses in several museum collections. Toile draperies are currently displayed in a sitting room in the Eisenhower house at the National Historic Site. After initial production stopped, F. Schumacher & Co. completed a special production run for the Eisenhower toile in the 1970s for use in Blair House, the Presidential Guest Quarters in Washington, DC. The interior designer, Elisabeth Draper, specified the toile in a plum or aubergine color for use on the bed cover and a wing chair in the bedroom that also exhibits other Eisenhower memorabilia.ⁱⁱ The toile was in the news again in 1989 during Schumacher's centenary celebration when it was featured in "The Prestige Clientele" chapter of the publication *Opulent Textiles* by Richard Slavin.ⁱⁱⁱ The Eisenhower toile was representative of special fabrics produced by F. Schumacher & Co. for important clients.

It was appropriate that toile, a recognizable textile form, was selected to commemorate Eisenhower. Toile-de-jouy describes a printed fabric featuring designs primarily in a single color on a neutral background. The history of toile originated in the eighteenth century in Ireland and England and became popular with Christophe-Phillipe Oberkampf's production in Jouy, France. A famous Oberkampf factory designer, Jean Baptist Huet specialized in toiles with cameo-like medallions that separated a scene from other decorative motifs, similar to the design of the Eisenhower toile. The motifs were often scenic pictures of people and landscapes suitable for depicting events.^{iv} There was a precedent set by another toile, "Apotheosis of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington," produced in England in 1785 for the American market. The colors in this textile were blue, purple, or red on a neutral ground, similar to colors used in the Eisenhower toile.^v Research notes in the Elisabeth Draper archives indicate that Mrs. Draper was aware of the history of toile-de-jouy and the suitability of toile for commemorating famous figures.^{vi}

The Eisenhower toile can be called a "living toile" because it commemorated Eisenhower before his death. Dwight D. Eisenhower remains a prominent American hero. As Supreme Allied Commander in World War II and President of the United States from 1952–60, he was a pivotal figure in mid-twentieth-century America. In 1955 when the toile was designed, the Eisenhowers were debating whether to run for a second term.



Fig. 2 (Above) Eisenhower toile in upholstery and drapery. Photo courtesy of F. Schumacher & Co. Fig. 3 (Below) Toile in dress for Mrs. Eisenhower. Photo courtesy of Eisenhower National Historic Site.



Perhaps Mrs. Eisenhower was conscious of her own health or had a premonition about President Eisenhower's health when she collaborated with Elisabeth Draper on the Eisenhower toile. *U.S. News and World Report* questioned the status of Mrs. Eisenhower's health in March, 1955.^{vii} In September, 1955, President Eisenhower was stricken with his first heart attack. Concern about the President's health was a major topic of discussion by the end of 1955, making the introduction of the Eisenhower toile in 1956 very timely. (Fig. 4)

The Eisenhower toile was conceived while Mrs. Eisenhower and Elisabeth Draper worked on the interior design of the house at the farm in Gettysburg, PA. The purchase of the farm at Gettysburg in 1950 was the fulfillment of a dream for the Eisenhowers. During Eisenhower's military career, the couple moved twenty-seven times. Although Mamie was adept at making a home anywhere in the world, she longed for a home of her own. Ike wrote, in a letter to his brother Milton, that he was concerned about the farm as an investment, but he was willing to buy it because "Mamie's heart seems to be settled on this...and that settles it, so far as I am concerned."^{viii} They began work on the house after Eisenhower was elected President, and Mamie was finally able to create the home she had always wanted. They spent weekends on the farm whenever possible during the Presidential years, and moved to the farm after leaving the White House. Elisabeth Draper helped create the home where Mamie could unpack her own belongings and enjoy the privacy she desired.^{ix} Elisabeth Draper who had decorated the Eisenhower home at Columbia University in 1948, was hired as the "decorating counselor in the designing and furnishing of their (Eisenhowers') home in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania." Mrs. Eisenhower was to be billed for the retail price of merchandise and labor for the designs. Mr. William Robinson of Robinson Hannagan Associates of New York was to be billed for Mrs. Draper's services at \$75.00 per day plus expenses.^x

Elisabeth Draper (1900–1993) was an interior designer known for her classic good taste and her ability to attract prominent clients. She was the daughter of a prominent New York banker and a descendant of Louis Comfort Tiffany. Although not formally trained in interior design, Draper entered the interior design business in 1929 during the golden age of interior design. She was a contemporary of Elsie de Wolfe, Syrie Maugham, and Sister Parrish, designers who dominated the field in the twenties and thirties.^{xi} Draper preferred a refined, quiet quality to her life and work that was in direct contrast to the more famous interior designer, Dorothy Draper, who practiced at the same time. To quote Elisabeth Draper, "She (Dorothy) was the famous, I'm the infamous."^{xii} Elisabeth Draper never became a household name, although she was a favorite with powerful clients such as the Eisenhowers; Henry Kissinger; and Jacqueline Onassis and her mother, Janet Auchincloss.^{xiii}

The name, Elisabeth Draper, and the Eisenhower toile went hand-in-hand throughout the second half of the twentieth century. On the selvage of the fabric is the inscription "Elisabeth Draper's 'Eisenhower Toile' An Exclusive *Schumacher* Hand Print." In advertisements and articles of the time, Elisabeth Draper was usually credited with "styling" or "designing" the toile. In a letter contract dated April 12, 1955 and signed by the Schumacher representative, Elisabeth Draper's name was to be on the selvage and she would receive royalties of \$.05 per yard for each yard sold.^{xiv} Further negotiations produced a final letter contract dated April 20th, 1955 signed by both parties,



Fig. 4 President and Mrs. Eisenhower on the campaign trail. Dress made with SCHUMACHER Eisenhower Toile fabric, which is copyrighted by F. Schumacher & Co.

where Schumacher agreed to reimburse Elisabeth Draper \$350.00 for the design charge of the artist; to use the name "Elisabeth Draper...as often as feasible in all publicity; and to print "styled by Elisabeth Draper" in the selvage.^{xv} Elisabeth Draper was very interested in being credited with the Eisenhower toile.

It is plausible that Elisabeth Draper was responsible for the conception and final form of the Eisenhower toile: however, the mystery of the Eisenhower toile is the story of the actual textile designer. A memo dated February 14, 1955 in the Draper archives at the Eisenhower National Historic Site indicated that Mrs. Clayton Knight of West Redding, Connecticut was to be paid \$300.00 for all art work, research etc. for the Eisenhower toile, if not sold; and \$350.00 if the toile was marketed. The following statement, "It is agreed that the artist remains anonymous," explained why Katherine Sturges Knight did not get credit for the design.^{xvi} There was a letter signed by Katherine S. Knight communicating that she sent the toile drawing and some pictures from research books back to Elisabeth Draper, Inc. for review. The letter was not dated, but the design was supposed to be completed by the end of February, 1955.^{xvii} By October, 1955, Katherine Knight received cuttings of the ten different color combinations of the Eisenhower toile and her reaction to the colors was complimentary to Mrs. Draper who, evidently, selected the colors.^{xviii}

The artist who actually designed the toile, Katherine Sturges Knight (1890–1979), was primarily known as an illustrator of books and fashion. Her textile design experience included designs for the Stehli Silk Americana series in the mid-1920s, two of which were *Moon and Sixpence* and *Beauty and the Bird*. The book, *The Illustrator in America 1880-1980* published by The Society of Illustrators in 1984 did mention her as the designer of a commemorative toile depicting Eisenhower's career and, also of fabrics for Macy's based on Peruvian designs.^{xix} However, *The New York Times* obituary for Katherine Sturges Knight in 1979 did not mention her textile designs. It appeared that Sturges Knight was primarily known for her illustrations rather than her textile designs, although she obviously used her experience as a textile designer and illustrator to design the artwork for the Eisenhower toile.

Elisabeth Draper remembered an interesting story about the Eisenhower toile that indicated Katherine Sturges Knight earned her \$350.00 fee. After the initial design was completed, Mrs. Draper was at the farm at Gettysburg, when she stopped the President outdoors and asked him if he would like to see the design. She spread a large sheet of paper out on the lawn, and he put his hands behind his back and examined the design. He said to her, "I wonder, Mrs. Draper, without spoiling your design, could you put Mamie's house in?...After all, we were married there."^{xx} The design, which originally included Culzean Castle, a castle in Scotland where Eisenhower was given an apartment in recognition of his contributions in World War II, was changed to reflect the President's wishes. The curator's office at Gettysburg Battlefield has an example of a previous design showing that several of the emblems were moved, in addition to replacing the castle with Mamie's Denver home. Katherine Sturges Knight earned her \$350.00 fee when she had to go back to the drawing boards after completing the complex design.

The mystery of who designed the Eisenhower toile is solved—it was Katherine Sturges Knight rather than Elisabeth Draper. But the mystery and intrigue does not end there. Another mystery involves F. Schumacher & Co. How were they selected to

produce the Eisenhower toile? Schumacher was a good choice for the company to produce the toile. The firm had a prestigious reputation for a wide selection of fabrics, particularly in traditional or classical designs. In the 1940s, Schumacher introduced the Williamsburg Collection of authentic historic designs as a part of their commitment to innovation and tradition.^{xxi} By 1955, the firm was very knowledgeable about historic fabrics and patterns, including toiles, and was familiar with the production and marketing requirements for fabrics similar to the Eisenhower toile. Richard Slavin, Archivist/Historian of the Schumacher Collection, did not know how Schumacher was selected to produce the Eisenhower toile. To his knowledge, Elisabeth Draper did not design any other fabrics for Schumacher. In fact, Schumacher had a contract with Dorothy Draper, the more famous Draper, for textile designs.

Politics might have had an influence on the decision. Schumacher's West Fortieth Street showrooms were next door to the Republican Club at the time. Also, F. Schumacher & Co. had a visitor's suite in the Republican Club and was very pro-Republican. There is a photograph in the Gettysburg archives of Eisenhower waving to the crowd from a motorcade in front of the Schumacher building. An additional factor was that Schumacher fabrics were used often in the White House. Perhaps the Schumacher company's proximity to the Republican Club and relationship with former Presidents may explain Schumacher's production of the Eisenhower toile.

As late as 1989, there was more intrigue about the Eisenhower toile. A newspaper article in *The New York Times* discussed three "style setters" of the time, Donald Deskey, industrial designer; Dorothy Draper, interior designer; and F. Schumacher & Co., textile company. There was a photograph of Dorothy Draper adjacent to a photograph of the Eisenhowers with Mamie in a dress made of the Eisenhower toile.^{xxii} Although not specifically stated, it appeared that Dorothy Draper designed the Eisenhower toile. According to Richard Slavin, that was when he realized that Elisabeth Draper was still alive. She called about the mistaken identity of the designer and *The New York Times* printed a correction the next day stating that "because of an editing error, an article...omitted the name of the designer of F. Schumacher & Company's 'Eisenhower Toile' fabric...She is Elisabeth Draper."^{xxiii} Elisabeth Draper was eighty-nine years old at the time and still very interested in being credited with the Eisenhower toile. The correction did not mention Katherine Sturges Knight.

The story of the Eisenhower toile involves mystery and intrigue in the twentieth century. The toile is also a prime example of American material culture—a textile that represents a specific time in history, the life of Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States and those people involved in its conception and production. The Eisenhower toile is also an intriguing example of how textiles are created. The toile illustrated how a specific textile was conceived—in this case, a proud, perhaps, concerned wife, Mamie Eisenhower, of a famous man, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, collaborated with an accomplished interior designer with whom she had often worked, Elisabeth Draper. An illustrious textile company, F. Schumacher & Co. agreed to produce a textile attributed to Elisabeth Draper even though they had a textile design contract with her rival interior designer, Dorothy Draper. There was a "ghost" designer, Katherine Sturges Knight who agreed to relinquish credit for the toile even though she was a textile designer. In a competitive marketplace, it was important to Elisabeth Draper, even at the age of

eighty-nine, to receive credit for the design over her rival, Dorothy Draper. The Eisenhower toile provides mystery, intrigue and an interesting story about the makers, methods, and markets for an important twentieth-century textile.

ⁱ Research notes, EISE 8045, Elisabeth Draper Archives, Eisenhower National Historic Site, Gettysburg, PA.

ⁱⁱ "Blair House," *Interior Design* (January, 1972): 64–67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard E. Slavin III, *Opulent Textiles, The Schumacher Collection* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992), 90.

^{iv} Meda Parker Johnston and Glen Kaufman, *Design on Fabrics* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1967), 16–18.

^v Florence M. Montgomery, *Printed Textiles: English and American Cottons and Linens 1700–1850* (London: Thames Publishing Co., 1970), 279–282.

^{vi} Research notes, EISE 8060, Elisabeth Draper Archives, Eisenhower National Historic Site, Gettysburg, PA.

^{vii} "The Story of Mrs. Eisenhower's Health," *U. S. News and World Report* (March 25, 1955): 40

^{viii} Dwight Eisenhower to Milton Eisenhower, Box 14, Milton Eisenhower Papers, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

^{ix} "The Eisenhowers: After 38 Years, A Dream House," *Newsweek* (June 28, 1954): 28–30.

^x Elisabeth Draper to Mr. Robinson, March 31, 1954, Box 6, Wm. Robinson Papers, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

^{xi} Dodie Kazanjian, "The Indomitable Elisabeth Draper," *House and Garden* (November, 1986): 271.

^{xii} Kazanjian, 271.

^{xiii} Jura Koncius, "The Quiet Decorator," *The Washington Post - Home Section* (July 22, 1993): 11.

^{xiv} Letter contract, April 12, 1955, EISE 7964, Elisabeth Draper Archives, Eisenhower National Historic Site, Gettysburg, PA.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, April, 20, 1955, EISE 7963.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, February 14, 1955.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, EISE 7956.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, EISE 7454.

^{xix} Walt and Roger Reed, *The Illustrator in America 1880–1980* (New York: Madison Square Press, Inc.), 1984.

^{xx} Elisabeth Draper, oral history interview by James Roach and Laurie Coughlan (February 21, 1991), Elisabeth Draper Archives, Eisenhower National Historic Site, Gettysburg, PA.

^{xxi} Slavin, 190.

^{xxii} Suzanne Slesin, "Not-So-Old Designs: The Latest Thing in Nostalgia," *The New York Times* (March 16, 1989), III: 1.

^{xxiii} "Corrections," *The New York Times* (March 17, 1989), I:3.

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