

Your LIFE



India Mahdavi at home surrounded by a multitude of art and design objects. In back: Alex Prager. Crowd, 2010. Digital C-type print. Left: Gold pomegranates by Italian ceramist Keyvan Fehri



An aerial view of India Mahdavi's living room space featuring her Jelly Pea Sofa, Wilcox Table in limited-edition gold, Gelsomino Chair in lime green and a variety of coffee table books

A NOMADIC WONDERLAND

Vivacious, vibrant and bold, **India Mahdavi** is a designer no one can get enough of. Rebecca Anne Proctor visits her Parisian home, studio and showroom and steps into the designer's enchanting realm

Photography by PIERRE DAL CORSO

An interior view of India Mahdavi's showroom in Paris



India Mahdavi's studio on 3 Rue Las Cases in Paris is full of movement. The designer is in the midst of wrapping up her latest project: the new Ladurée store on the prestigious Quai des Bergues in Geneva. As usual due to her hectic schedule, India's been in and out of Paris. Her team, a bright and passionate group of creatives, endows the ambience with warm energy. Despite the busy atmosphere, India appears refreshed yet determined, commanding the scene with grace and playful charm – just like her design objects. As my photographer sets up in the lobby-cum-library area of her workspace filled with a plethora of magazines as well as architecture and design books, India moves swiftly in the background to set up the scene – an object here, a book there, a vase over here and sketches over there. The space, although a workplace, is immediately contrived according to her design ethos and we behold the designer at work – her quick, thoughtful and passionate hands commanding the objects around her. Drawings on the wall reveal India's talent for achieving harmony through bold, statement-making elements and vibrant colours. Smooth and polished contours, convex and curvilinear ornaments are pronounced through a confident accentuation of their inherent forms – India breathes life into the objects she creates.

It was India's cosmopolitan upbringing as well as Irano-Egyptian heritage – her mother is Egyptian and her father was Iranian – that she believes inspired her love of colour. She was born in Tehran and then raised in the US, Germany and France. Her university studies led her to train at Paris's Ecole des Beaux-Arts as well as New York's School of Visual Arts and Parsons, before she settled in the French capital to work as artistic director for Christian L'Äigre. "I really think of myself like the French word *merisage* (meaning the cultural mix of society)," says India. "I am a pure product of the Middle East product at least by blood – but I actually got to know my homeland much later." To know where I belong very late in life made it more emotional for me. It was like 'what did I miss out on' and 'how can I integrate these elements into my life today.'" After seven years with L'Äigre, India founded her studio in 1999. In 2003, she opened her showroom at its current location on 3 Rue Las Cases, just minutes away from her studio.

Today India is one of the most revered names in design. Notable projects include Manuel Manzoni's The Gallery at London's Sketch complex where the entire restaurant is dressed in a pretty pink colour. India recalls how the initial brief was for her to design the space and incorporate 239 black-and-white drawings by artist David Shrigley. She told the client that her plan was to bathe the walls, her signature curvaceous chairs and banquettes entirely in pink. He was astounded but trusted her in the end. To this day the restaurant is a sensational hit as well as an Instagram phenomenon. Then there's the first REDValentino store in London for which India used bubblegum-pink and mustard-yellow velvet panels. Recent work in Paris includes Café Français on the Place de la Bastille. One of the city's premiere establishments, the café was a once-traditional brasserie now boldly reimagined through an Art Deco-inspired space decked out in the French tricolor, replete with gilded walls, red leather banquettes and ceiling frescoes depicting a dreamy sky. There's also the Café Germain, a theatrical albeit charming Parisian brasserie ▶

Quirky artwork such as these bird sculptures by Iranian artist Bita Fayyazi can be found throughout India's home. The bird sculpture is by French artist Xavier Veilhan



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India Mahdavi

Café Germain, in Paris designed by India Mahdavi. Café Germain. Photography by Derek Hudson





The REDValentino store in London. Courtesy of India Mahdavi

An interior view of the lavish setting of the Café Francès in Matthew Sullivan



run by Thierry Costes who invited India to create the space. She in turn used a black and white tile floor and orange and green anise chairs to complement artist Xavier Veilhan's giant yellow sculpture entitled Sophie that serves as the centerpiece for the venue.

Colour, eclecticism and heritage permeate each of these spaces as they do all of India's work. We're seated in a bustling Japanese restaurant, just minutes from India's studio. "In fact without knowing it, when you design things you are attached to your own memories, to your childhood and to things that you don't even necessarily acknowledge because it is your subconscious," she states.

"So today for me it is really about using all of that as a material – a sort of forced exile or wanted exile because I never lived in those countries." Such references to Egypt and Iran, the nationalities of her parents, are not hard for India to make. "Regardless, it is kind of an exile of not growing up in the country that you belong to, I really think what is interesting is how I have put all of these elements together without really truly knowing these civilisations."

There's a tension in India's work and one that she is not afraid to admit. Maybe, she says, it's this serendipitous emergence of memories intertwined with a present or past culture that endows her work with its addictive exuberance. "I like to put tension in elements," she exclaims. "I like to put tension in my colours and with things so they are a bit off and in the end somehow everything fits together." India's home is a case-in-point. In her living room, the designer combines her own Gelato chair in bright forest green with a charming bishop chair in limited-edition gold and her long Jelly Pea blue modular sofa. "I like putting colours in danger," she says. "But what's difficult is to be able to choose the right element that is going to come in and make [a



Renderings for projects in India Mahdavi's studio in Paris

project or object] work. But that's just sensibility; it is about feeling what is right. If you put all of these elements that fit so well together then you are going to end up with something that is very static and maybe bourgeois and not engaging." A mix of designer pieces, artwork and books fill her living room and dining room. There's no immediate sense of order here but the forms and colours all work together, each can be separated from the whole and then worked back to create again a new design.

Innate to India's work is also a child-like wonder albeit with grace. "I always use very familiar – easy, simple types – that are familiar to everyone and I play with that," she tells me. "They are really childish elements and a lot of the things I use could come out of a cartoon. There is something cartoony about my work; it's not always easy to achieve." India's latest interior design project is the new Ladrère store in Geneva. For this she created a stunning plush lilac and lime-hued temple so striking in hue that the interiors seem themselves to replicate the sweetness of the brand's famous macarons. The venue is a perfect match for India's signature saccharine design. It's sweet to the eye and bold to the experience. India has revolutionised Ladrère from its long-held beige and white interior to a space that exudes child-like wonder, happiness and elegance. "A garden of delights" she called the new venue, which is divided into a restaurant, patisserie, cocktail bar and Tea Room next door to the our Seasons Hôtel des Bergues Geneva.

Like all of India's creations, it enlightens and welcomes into a present-day fantasy.

The childish character of the designer's work lends itself to a Pop Art liveliness. This can be found in her signature lighting and furniture design, among the most notable are her signature Bishop stool, Charlotte chairs and low Bluff tables resembling a chess piece. These and other delectable creations can be found in her Paris showroom, while her philosophy on living and design can be read in her book *Home Chic*, published by Flammarion.

"It's like a vicious circle," she says of her work as we sip on green tea. "It's very difficult today because I do a lot of different things. I have my studio where I do all my creative work ranging from the smallest objects, like this



Above: India Mahdavi in her Parisian showroom

ring (she points to her finger) to a residential building I am currently designing in Tehran. There's also my interior design like I did for REDValentino, Sketch or Ladrère. I also do scenography, my furniture line and also my small objects. There are so many different elements."

Last year, India was awarded France's Officier des Arts et des Lettres. Through her exotic, cheerful and nomadic architecture and design, she has gained fans the world over. "I am interested to do things on a smaller scale," says the designer. "What I am interested in bringing attention to spaces and when you work on a very large scale you become a business person and you have to run it like an operation. I would like to put soul into places and to be able to do that you need a special connection."

In support of such ideals, India's ultimate aim is to transform the world through beauty. "What I am trying to do is to bring joy to people's lives," she says passionately. "My work is about happiness. I am part of the entertainment business. I try and bring joy in the best way I can. I do it through colour or whatever element is given to me. I just take and I transform it into what I think is the best." And just like that, with the same child-like wonder and enthusiasm that she imbues into her pristine design, India honours aesthetic idealism. As she says, "It must be linked to happiness and to sunshine." ■

india-mahdavi.com

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Interior design of the dining room at the Indira Gandhi Centre for Women in New Delhi



Indira Mukherjee in her studio in Paris

"I LIKE PUTTING COLOURS IN DANGER!"
Indira Mukherjee



A table of Indira's Barish, Tabla and Chaudhri Chair at Indira's Park Cinema boutique in Paris

A large circular structure above the stage of Indira's Park Cinema in New Delhi



"MY WORK IS ABOUT HAPPINESS. I AM PART OF THE ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS. I TRY AND BRING JOY IN THE BEST WAY I CAN."

Indira Mukherjee