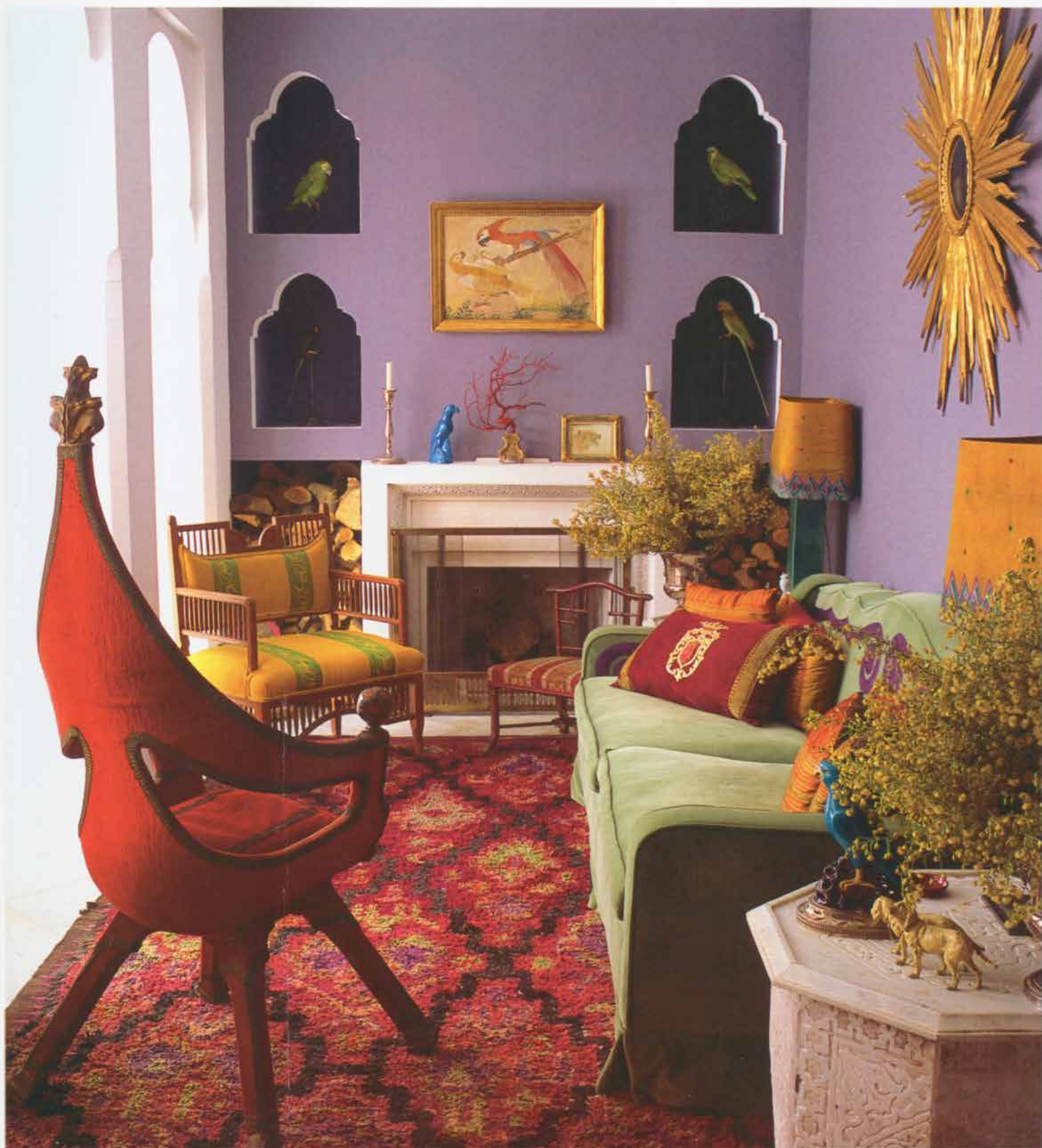


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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

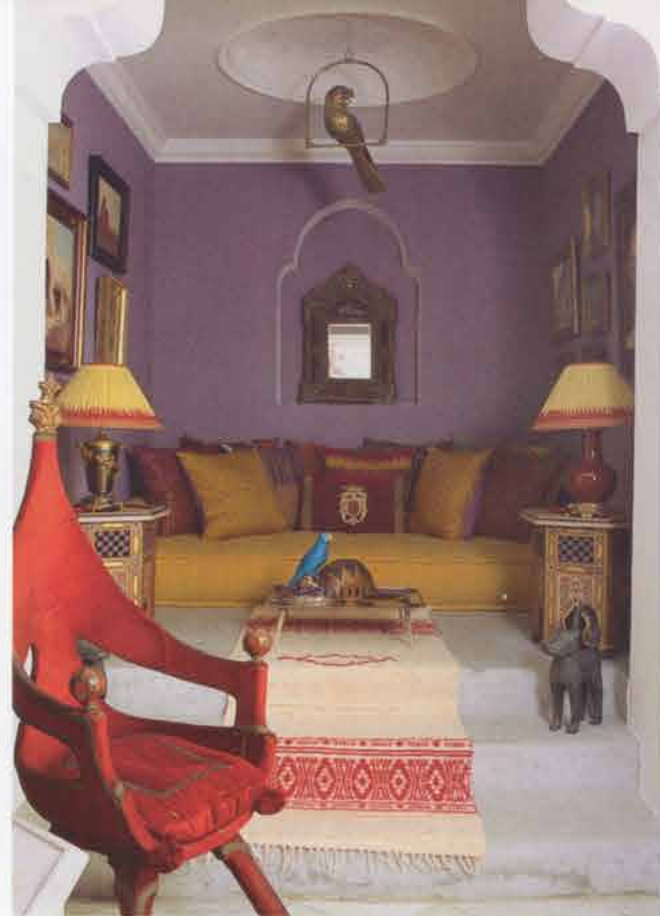


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Whether cheeping in cages in the marble courtyard, glazed onto gilded plates or mounted in Moorish niches, birds are a motif that takes flight in decorator Nicolò Castellini Baldissera's Tangier house. It's all the more apt given his interiors' bold colours - their beautiful plumage - and the eagle's-eye view from his rooftop terrace, as Marie-France Boyer reports. Photography: Roland Beaufre



Simon Hook's sculpted sea urchin sits in the centre of the marble entrance courtyard. On the back wall a copper lantern hangs above an anonymous portrait of an Ottoman and a Moroccan sofa in the Syrian style.



This page, clockwise from top left: Nicolò sits on an 18th-century Italian iron bed covered with a suzani; scattered with Christophe Gollut emblazoned cushions, a large ochre divan occupies one end of a long rectangular lounge off the courtyard. A Chinese porcelain parrot perches between a pair of Moorish Revival octagonal occasional tables; other psittacines, in painted, stuffed and modelled form, bring splashes of tropical colour to a mantelpiece. Opposite: a 19th-century Venetian gondola chair looks towards Carlo Manieri's avian picture.



This page, clockwise from top left: off Nicolò's bedroom is a private balcony with a sculptural table made by NOW (Najim & Othman Workshop - Wof March 2012), planted with figs, plumbago, jasmine, thyme and bougainvillea; the upper terrace overlooks the old port, the Strait of Gibraltar and Spain beyond; the door and windows of the yellow room, which open into the light well above the main courtyard. Opposite: a large Turkish ikat hangs between a pair of Spanish-style gilded-iron beds made in Tétouan. The 19th-century bead chandelier is Anglo-Indian

In the main bedroom, a studded velvet trunk sits at the foot of a bed. To the right a watercolour of Tangier sits beneath a 19th-century pier panel. Nicolò painted the chest of drawers, then glued on braids of Empire paper



**The first** time Nicolò Castellini Baldissera touched the coast of Morocco it was a long time ago; he had come by boat and with his mother. At that point, the decorator did not pay much attention to Tangier, establishing himself over the years in other towns. In 2014, by chance, a customer brought him to this city perched above the Strait of Gibraltar and he 'immediately fell in love'. This account of a coup de foudre is a familiar tune, one heard over and over; for some reason it is always Tangier, never Fez, Marrakesh or Essaouira. One can keep calm in those places, even maintain a certain distance; but Tangier casts its time-honoured spell, and whether it's Bowles, Genet or Matisse being overwhelmed, strangely none can resist. It's all the more bizarre, since the city isn't beautiful, though the fact that Europe is visible across the water on a clear day might have something to do with it.

Now something has changed: since the opening of the Tanger-Med harbour, the city's population has exploded and today numbers more than one million. Captivated by this energy, Nicolò soon bought an old house in the medina, a dilapidated and damp space over four floors that still bore a few traces of what a Tangier house should be. From its roof he has a view of the old port and of far-off Spain, towards which ships can be seen heading, their wakes forming little arrows.

Finding your way to the house is discouraging. For a start, taxis can take you only so far into the medina... Now on foot, you turn right, then left and left again, and pass through an archway, where Medieval streets lined by chipped roughcast walls become ever narrower and deserted but for the bundles of tangled electric wires and skinny cats moping around heaps of rubbish. Then, at last,



glimpsed behind an anonymous studded door, comes the shock of an impeccable staircase and a courtyard white as snow. Such order is unsettling after the labyrinth of the medina. Secret and mysterious, the houses here are all tall, like towers cobbled together. Arranged around a central light well, and windowless to the outside, their rooms are reduced to narrow rectangles. Nicolò's is no exception. Such architecture can be constraining, but he rose to the challenge. He has restored all the woodwork, and preserved the proportions of the doors and internal windows and such traces of the past that were left. With a delicate touch, he has also designed simple wooden *mashrabiya*, or fretwork, cupboards that allow air to circulate, and *tadelakt* bathrooms where none existed.

On the ground floor a mauve living room comprises two distinct seating areas, one by a fireplace that is surrounded by softly lit niches housing stuffed parrots. This avian theme is repeated in a 17th-century canvas by Carlo Manieri and by some porcelain cockatoos. Occupying the entire width of the room and raised on a platform, the other seating area resembles a Turkish divan with its opulent fabrics, many trimmed with gold. Separated by a stately 19th-century gondola armchair, these two sitting areas open on to the courtyard, where a fountain tinkles over a contemporary sea urchin by Simon Hook. Nicolò likes mixing things up.

On the next floor are two guest bedrooms: one blue and, on the opposite side of the patio, one saffron with two spectacular

19th-century Spanish beds from Tétouan covered with embroideries and Oriental-style cashmeres. Nicolò's own private quarters, which occupy an entire floor, are aubergine and dominated by a portrait of one of decorator Bill Willis's lovers, a bed covered with silk velvet, and a pretty corner fireplace he designed himself. It opens on to a balcony with a 'hanging garden' planted with plum-bago, jasmine, orange trees and bougainvillea. He has green fingers and spends all his time here when alone.

Although he decided that the core of the house should be white, to maximise light and to unify the space, with woodwork painted the same grey as the bathrooms' *tadelakt*, there is no mistaking his love of intense colour. It's there in all the above rooms, which each has its own un-Moroccan palette, and in his clothes: fetching violet trousers and a turquoise shirt when I visit.

An unassuming man with a sense of mischief and irony, he is also a believer in 'decoration for decoration's sake' and happily surrounds himself with the kind of objects that once upon a time might have been written off as 'curiosities'. 'I love going around the antique shops. What I'm looking for above all is charm,' he says. In his bedroom, for example, is what looks like an elegant 18th-

century crossbow-fronted chest of drawers. In fact he rescued it from someone who was throwing it out, painted it black and disguised it with 19th-century black-and-white braided paper. On the walls high-quality Orientalist art rubs shoulders with 'anon' and 'school of' paintings, while 18th-century Turkish and Chinese embroideries bed down happily with machine-made ones from Fez. 'Whenever I have crazy enthusiasms for objects, afterwards I have the joy of selling them again,'

he says. And so he has let go collections of silver snuffboxes, cigar boxes and coral with little regret, replacing them with 'fakes'. Similarly the 17th-century Kangxi parrots that he inherited from his grandmother have made way for 1950s interlopers and those of even more recent and dubious provenance. 'I have nothing against copies,' declares Nicolò. 'It's the effect that interests me.'

Birds crop up everywhere here, on gilded plates on the dining-room wall, in paintings, above fireplaces, and alive and twittering in cages near the entrance, where you will also find some tortoises poking their heads under the velvet. Here again Nicolò nonchalantly mixes the ancient and the modern, and the precious with cheap tat, an 18th-century silk velvet next to a South American embroidery. Fabrics are a passion for him – no surprise, maybe, given that his family set up C&C Milano over 100 years ago and his father is the interior designer Piero Castellini Baldissera.

Born into good fortune but never exploiting the fact, these days he leads a happy peripatetic life, dividing his time between Italy, Britain, France and Morocco. Many of the objects travel with him from one place to another. 'Undressing Peter to dress Paul' might be his motto, although certain things are always kept close: an insignificant little owl, a tortoise shell, a few family photographs and a portrait of an ancestor called Puccini. After a little pressing, you find out it's *the Puccini* ■

For more information, visit [nicolocastellinibaldissera.com](http://nicolocastellinibaldissera.com)

This page: a portrait of Tangier resident Bill Willis's lover, by Nicolette Meeres; overlooks an Indian straw sofa. Opposite: all the doors in the narrow grey *tadelakt* bathroom are latticework, to help combat humidity. Beyond the Moorish arch lies a curtained-off dressing room

