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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS







# TATAR SOURCE

Inspired by the peoples of the central Asian plain and Russian steppes, Tissus Tartares is a new fabric company that aims to combine the colourful exoticism of the bazaar with a 19th-century European sensibility. In her Chelsea home, co-founder Nathalie Farman-Farma airs these dual strands – from brass samovars to Madeleine Castaing designs – with relish. Text and photography: Tim Beddow





Opposite: Nathalie's fabric 'Jar-Ptitsa', or Firebird – named after a Russian émigré journal published in the 1920s – lies on a swatch book: 'Broderies Russes, Tartares, Arméniennes'. This page: a samovar sits on the kitchen worktop below 19th-century Russian trays made for the Persian market





Either side of the dining room's french windows, Russian mirrors from HM Luther Antiques in New York hang against 'Jundapur', a Brunswick & Fils fabric. The matching curtains are trimmed with Madeleine Castaing's 'Rayure Broderie'. The two-light Argand chandelier dates from about 1810





**NATHALIE FARMAN-FARMA'S** path into the world of fabric was decidedly more pragmatic than vocational. Living in a Greenwich Village 'co-op' in New York six years ago with her Iranian husband, Amir, and their two young children, she was introduced to a neighbour named Olya Thompson, a Russian who had lived in France before settling in the USA. 'There was an instant meeting of the minds, on the cultural, aesthetic, even culinary fronts, though the fabric came a little later,' says Nathalie, a well-read Russophile who fondly remembers being taken care of as a young child by a White Russian lady. 'She used to call me Natascha and made me love her country from an early age.' Olya, meanwhile, grew up in Soviet Russia and loves her cultural roots. 'I dreamed of recuperating the lost texture of *la vieille Russie*,' she says, 'and have always been collecting old [Russian] textiles, embroideries, ribbons, porcelain, books and art.' It was this compatible frame of reference that was the foundation of their friendship.

Decorating their own homes led to discussions about fabric, and to the conclusion, according to Nathalie, that 'there was a dearth of options for the moods in which we were interested – more Tolstoyan for Olya, more French-Persian for me.' Out of this was born Tissus Tartares, a fabric collection in which East meets West, a romantic, delicate, sophisticated *mélange* in which both Nathalie and Olya's heritage, interests and sensibilities mingle with the rich cul-

tural tapestries of the Russian, Iranian, French and Middle Eastern worlds. On their ability to reach agreement, Nathalie says: 'It is sometimes a bit mysterious, but we do communicate very well.'

Nathalie, born in California to a French father and American mother, was brought up in France until the age of 16. Having studied classics in America, then France – from where she travelled to Syria and Egypt – she returned to the USA for a decade, working as an assistant editor on the *New Yorker* followed by a spell in TV alongside respected broadcaster Charlie Rose.

But it was meeting Amir Farman-Farma – an Iranian aristocrat whose family had left the country during the revolution – and their marriage a year later in 2000 that shifted Nathalie's aesthetic focus eastwards. In addition, she says it was riffling through a pile of *The World of Interiors*, no less, in a friend's hall that made her aware of how a sense of place and character arises from family heritage. Setting up home in New York, Nathalie had her first opportunity to fuse elements – French, Persian and American – reflecting the couple's divergent backgrounds.

By 2006 Nathalie and Olya had the concept for Tissus Tartares in place, but sourcing the right factory and the actual production was put on hold while the Farman-Farmas moved to London. Although it was Amir's career in finance that triggered the move, it was also significant that many more Iranian emigrants live in London than in New York, and that the city is geographically





Opposite, top: Swedish cabinets topped by cake stands flank an oil by Stanislav Zhukovsky, who loved to paint dachas. Bottom: this bust was owned by Madeleine Castaing at Lèves, her country house. This page: a glass lamp from Christopher Hodson overlooks a chaise-longue covered in Tissus Tartares' 'Lermontov'







closer to friends and relations in Iran and Europe. 'It is a great asset for Tissus Tartares to have Olya and me in different cities,' says Nathalie. 'We divide the tasks appropriately depending on our different skills and locations.'

Nathalie found a place to live in a street off the King's Road. 'We may have compromised on space, as this little corner house is quite narrow,' Nathalie continues, 'but it is a bit quirky and in a great location.' She discovered years later that the house had been inhabited for a couple of years during World War II by Lesley Blanch – writer, romantic and lover of all things Russian and Oriental. A funny coincidence.

Apart from the minor problem of having to remove all ceiling lights and any lacquered brass – Nathalie's two pet hates – there was no building work to be done. 'I always prefer to concentrate on the décor rather than on knocking down walls,' she says. The precise way in which she has placed objets and furniture means that everything combines harmoniously, despite their varied provenances. It's no surprise that Nathalie is a great admirer of Madeleine Castaing, the Parisian decorator, diva and shop owner whose style, though rooted in the 19th century, always remained fresh and unstuffy (*WoI* Sept 2004).

Although she chose to keep the hall and drawing-room walls a single colour, the dining room and the couple's bedroom are dramatically hung with fabrics by Brun-schwig & Fils and Madeleine Castaing re-

spectively. 'Here I thought it needed to be cosy as the rooms are small,' says Nathalie, for whom a sense of theatre is also important.

With the move complete, Nathalie could once again focus on Tissus Tartares. More than simply pretty patterns she and Olya aim to create an aesthetic in which the exotic, mysterious world of the bazaar mingles with a European fin-de-siècle flavour. For their first designs Nathalie adapted an illustration from *Jar-Ptitsa* (Firebird), a Russian émigré journal published in Paris and Berlin in the 1920s, while Olya created a Russian-themed toile ('Toutes les Russies') that features ethnographic prints from her own collection. For another, a fragment of 19th-century Russian velvet, which incorporates Caucasian rug design, became 'Lermontov', one of their favourite authors.

The fabrics are all hand-printed in Alsace. Nathalie and Olya learned as they went along that the process is a dialogue requiring patience and perseverance. 'There is no magic formula,' says Olya, 'but there is a lot of searching, matching and mixing until finally it feels right to the eye.' Certainly rich and exquisite, Tissus Tartares goes one step – or should that be steppe – further. With an elegant personal twist the fabrics evoke the subtle 'atmospheres' of bygone eras. Just as the Farman-Farmas' house offers a journey to another little world, so it is with their fabrics ■

Fabric prices start from £145 per m. To contact Tissus Tartares, ring 001 207 581 8556, or visit [tissustartares.com](http://tissustartares.com)





Opposite, top: Nathalie is keen on étagères – a book-filled one in the main bedroom hangs against Castaing's 'Branches de Pins' fabric. Bottom: a framed cover of the 1920s journal *Jar-Plüta* (Firebird). This page: in a guest-room Russian ceramics known as Gardnerware overlook an antique bed shipped from New York

