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Below: the pillows in textile maven Nathalie Farman-Farma's master bedroom are made from Ukrainian folk costumes. The quilt is a vintage American find



House of prints

Nathalie Farman-Farma is the textile designer you need to know. Hayley Maitland steps inside her riotously patterned London home. Photographs by Dylan Thomas



Set on the corner of a quiet green near London's Sloane Square, Nathalie Farman-Farma's Grade II listed townhouse is a study in elegant juxtapositions: ornate Russian dolls sit next to lavish necklaces from central Asia; a dizzying number of 19th-century patterns cover the floors and walls; vibrant French blues complement deep Ottoman reds. In the dining room alone, the eye jumps from a gilt Persian lantern to the velvet Napoleon III chair to a mesmerising Bessarabian rug. A selection of folk embroidery, collected by the Russian noblewoman Natalia de Shabelsky during her travels in the 19th century, hangs in dark wood frames – set against dramatic wallpaper featuring ruby-red

pomegranates. (Many of the rest of De Shabelsky's finds now belong to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.) Also on display are oil paintings of Russian émigrés' homes in Paris by Alexander Serebriakov – an artist known for capturing the houses of everyone from Coco Chanel to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

Farman-Farma and her husband, Amir, bought the house in prime Chelsea just over a decade ago – and purchased the high-ceilinged, light-filled artist's studio next door in 2015. It's from here that the 50-year-old French-American runs her textile-design business, Décors Barbares, for which she sources 19th-century fabrics from a network of dealers stretching >

Above: Farman-Farma in her first-floor sitting room. She wears a dress by La Double J and shoes by Malone Souliers. Hair: Selena Middleton. Make-up: Alice Hovelett. Styling: Gianluca Longo. Sitings editor: Naomi Smart



Lined with books, Farman-Farma's library-cum-studio is where she runs her textile company, *Décors Barbares*



Above: the Farman-Farmas host their celebrated parties in the light-filled dining room off the studio. Right, from top: a bust that once belonged to Madeleine Castaing; potted plants and climbers fill the courtyard garden

from Odessa to Lisbon, and reprints their patterns in a 150-year-old French workshop. "I named the studio after the Ballet Russes, which was considered *barbares* when the company was performing in Paris in the early 20th century," she explains, her tone a mixture of socialite's warmth and academic gravitas. "I share the obsession with tribal culture and folklore from across Asia found in their costumes, design, and music."

Since *Décors Barbares* launched in 2010, a fashionable network of in-the-know clients has come to rely on Farman-Farma's taste – and her encyclopedic historical knowledge. Lauren Santo Domingo, the upscale internet entrepreneur, commissioned her to find a special wall hanging for her library; Violet von Westenholz, who played matchmaker to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, is a huge fan of her fabrics; and Tory Burch uses her *Eté Moscovite* design for her table linens.

This morning, Farman-Farma is arranging lilacs in silver vases at a table in her studio (Mayfair gallery-cum-florist TukTuk Flower Studio delivers seasonal blooms from the Cotswolds to the house weekly). It's here she hosts dinner parties for close friends (Duro Olowu and *Cabana* magazine founder Martina Mondadori are among her inner circle), serving Persian feasts while Sufi musicians perform. "Being Iranian, my husband believes a party should always have live music – usually featuring him on drums," she says with a laugh.

Farman-Farma can trace her love of 19th-century design back to her childhood near Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a Parisian suburb filled with ornate belle époque homes. "As a 16-year-old, I used to make pilgrimages to Madeleine Castaing's shop on the Left Bank for fabrics and antiques," she explains. "Her style was literary, eclectic, and daring. She was the one who taught me the critical importance that each detail holds in >





A Castaing print carpet in the bathroom contrasts with jewellery sourced from Venice to the Caucasus



Above: the curtains were inspired by a family member's Turkmen robes. Below: a Russian icon, bought in a Manhattan antiques shop



a space." The legendary decorator's influence is felt in her house today, from the spring-green carpet in the bathroom – a Castaing print – to the bust on top of a piano that once belonged to the decorator herself.

Originally, Farman-Farma planned to be an academic. Her father's job as head of the American branch of Crédit Lyonnais meant a relocation to Connecticut in her teens, then degrees in classics at Brown and Columbia took her on research trips across the Middle East. "I had always thought that I would be a professor," she says. "I specialised in the late Greeks." It was back in America on a trip to the Hamptons, however, that she met her future husband, a prominent financier, and life changed again. Seven years and a spectacular Persian wedding later, and the couple decided to return to Amir's adopted city of London to raise their children, Alexander, 15, and Rose, 13. "By that point, I had been living in and around Manhattan for more than a decade – and like any good New Yorker, I was determined to have everything within walking distance, which is possible in Chelsea," she explains. "As for the studio, it reminded me of my family's lake house in California, in the sense that it was a complete haven."



The dining room in the main house features a table and chairs covered in Décor's Barbares' Aurel fabric

As soon as she moved in, Farman-Farma transformed the interiors down to the last doorknob – with her husband's background providing a key influence. A descendant of the 19th-century Qajar dynasty, he fled Iran during the revolution. "When I met Amir, he brought this whirl of colour into my life," she says, leading me down into the main house. "I became fascinated by Iranian miniatures – the way that each one features countless different patterns yet none of them seem to clash – and I realised that I was going to apply that same logic to my home."

Every room is a testament to her love affair with Persia and beyond. "That's the problem," she confides. "Once you start finding these sorts of treasures – and looking into their stories – it's difficult to stop hunting for them." As if on cue, the doorbell rings: a 19th-century end table recently purchased from a dealer has arrived. "I just loved the details," she says, stroking the inlaid mother-of-pearl top. "It's carved in a neo-folk way – as if it was designed by the William Morris of the East. It could be from Russia – or maybe the Caucasus. I'm still doing my research. There's a really helpful volume in my studio..." And, just like that, she's away. ■