



DESIGNProfile

A LIFE IN DESIGN

# INDIA MAHDAVI

The international interior and furniture designer on creating her Hollywood-glam schemes and some crucial decorating dos and don'ts

Interview - Charlotte Luxford



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Betop a Lula bamboo trays, from approx £130 each, India Mahdavi; a portrait of the Paris-based designer; intricate detailing in the banquet seating created by India for the Café Germain in Paris; India gave the Monte-Carlo Beach hotel a Doro look; and Kiriko porcelain table lamp, approx £80, India Mahdavi

Photography: (India Mahdavi portrait) Paolo Bonolis / Monte Carlo Beach Hotel; © Arnyg

For someone who started out as an architecture student, but wanted to make films, India Mahdavi has found her calling in a roundabout way. Fifteen years after setting up her interior design studio, she has no regrets. With her playful use of colour and witty feminine style, it's no wonder the likes of Claridge's and The Connaught knock on her door when they want to inject a bit of fun into their hotels.

**What influences your designs?**

I work a lot with my memory. My use of colour harks back to my childhood, especially the late Sixties, early Seventies when I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There were lots of these powerful, poppy colours that always struck me as very joyful and that's reflected in my work. My interiors and pieces often have something whimsical and playful about them.

**So how do you use colour in your interiors?**

I think of colour as an identifier of a space. It's like when

you take a photo and you remember that place because of a strong association - for me, that's colour. For example, pink will come to mind for many when they think of my interior for The Gallery Restaurant at Sketch in Mayfair, or turquoise if they have visited the Condesa DF hotel in Mexico. As for introducing colour in the home, I think you have to use at least three or four shades. If you choose just two, it's like 'yes, no, yes, no' and that's kind of boring.

**What's the key to a successful interior?**

I always say a home is like a wardrobe - it should never stay static. Look at the fashion industry, for example. You renew your wardrobe every season, adding new things to wear with existing staples and I think a home should be like that. Move things around, swap your artwork and add accessories, so you're always surprised - in a good way. It keeps things dynamic. When I do private commissions, I think of them as 3-D portraits because the interior should reflect a homeowner.

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**Is that something you do in your own home?**  
 Not! I'm always changing things around and rearranging, but there are always pieces that stay. I've got a lot of my own possessions at home, such as the Lullaby floor lamp and Jilly the table. It's all about building layers. I'm the worst architect. But I suppose my apartment is a bit of a mix and very relaxed. When you step outside, you can sense that it's been put together as an ensemble, but it doesn't look over-designed. I love my collection of books, for example.

**Are you in trouble for using patterns?**  
 I'm always getting the biggest samples possible, so that you can see them all together to see how they look. One great trick when you're in a bit of a bind is to take a photo of your space. It helps to take a step back and you'll start to see what you couldn't see before. The study into pattern came late in the moment. I'm working on a collection of items right now for Blooming. They're inspired by the Pop and Swanton eras, with surprising cultural connections and graphic motifs.

**Your interior for Sketch has a very strong identity. What inspired that look?**

Sketch was a very specific project because I needed to address the surrounding space - it was already very masculine, high and demanding. I wanted to counterbalance the wifely wall graphics by using David Cheng's well-worn, simple and comfortable. So I introduced a Hollywood glamour feel, with the girls and expose jewelry adding warmth and sensuality. On the opening night, it seemed like all the guests had a three-day tan - everyone looked beautiful and glowing.

**How do you balance masculine properties with femininity. Is that key to your work?**  
 I mention this a lot in my books (more Chic, Chicening with Style, actually). My home's round, soft and sensual. I'd describe an feminine and anything graphic and make sure that femininity is more masculine. For instance, my O'Shea sofa has a structured, square shape, which is very masculine, so I've covered it in light velvet for a softer feel.

**What made you produce your own furniture when inspired by companies nearly 50 years ago?**  
 The market wasn't what I'd like. Now, it's booming and there are so many exciting designers. I love the work of Roman and Grace Bourgeois, Pella, Rosco, Pella's (cousins - not back then, there were very few to branch apart from the desk when companies that were around in the 1940s). So it seemed easier to design pieces that would give your rooms identity and spirit.

**Which pieces best represent your style?**  
 I think there are two signature pieces. There's the Baking chair, which is a handy piece - it can be used as a side table, indoors or outdoors. It comes in a range of colours and has its own accessories. It's genuinely my favourite. Then there's the Bull, a round and square coffee table that's very sensual and playful. It has a modular top that can be switched around.

**How do you design any new pieces recently?**  
 Well, the first sketch for Pella India, which is a French company I really admire. I call them 'chubby', due to their, because of their cultural design and sense of character. I've also designed a new collection of table lamps called The Seducers. Of course, you're got Colette and Eva Goussier. They really suit the job because in the south of France, a yacht and a restaurant for French Michelin-starred chef Le Morvan.

For more information, visit [india-mahdavi.com](http://india-mahdavi.com)

**'A home is like a wardrobe - it should never stay static. Move things around so you're always surprised'**



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