THE INIMITABLE INDIA

India Mahdavi's mastery of colour and playful aesthetic make her the go-to designer for joy-seeking style insiders, says **Charlotte Abrahams**

The interior of Ladurée Beverly Hills is the perfect evocation of everything a fine French pâtisserie should be. The pistachio-green walls, crisscrossed with white trellis work (pictured overleaf), appear as though spun from sugar. Plump cushions, the shade of strawberry bonbons, pad peacock-style chairs and light sparkles from a series of giant mirrored daises sprinkled around the space. It is as sweet and joyful as the macarons it serves. The designer behind this confection is Paris-based architect and interior designer India Mahdavi and although the decor expresses the essence of the brand, it could not have been designed by anyone else. The playful aesthetic, the curvaceous furniture and the unexpected but pitch-perfect colour palette are pure Mahdavi.

This strong signature style is informed by Mahdavi's heritage. She was born in Tehran to an Iranian father and Egyptian mother and had a peripatetic childhood, travelling between Cambridge, Massachusetts, New York, Heidelberg and Paris. She later studied architecture in Paris and trained in industrial, graphic and furniture design in New York, subsequently spending seven years at luxury French design house Liaigre, before setting up her eponymous studio in 1999.

The business now comprises a design studio, a furniture showroom and a boutique of *petits objets* (including her ceramic Bishop stools, from €550, pictured right, lamps, vases, embroidered cushions and tableware), all conveniently located on Rue Las Cases in Paris's seventh arrondissement.

Her portfolio is impressive, ranging from flagship stores for Red Valentino, in both London and Rome, and internationally acclaimed restaurants such as The Gallery at Sketch to the homes of leading international tastemakers. Fashion designer and former Lanvin creative director Alber Elbaz lives in an India Mahdavi apartment, as does Maison Dior's artistic director Maria Grazia Chiuri. Isabel Ettedgui, owner of Connolly and wife of the late Joseph Ettedgui (founder of the Joseph fashion empire), is on her third such property. "India has strong design bones and a sensibility that is modern but also very human," she says. "Comfort is always there, beauty is always there, joy is always there."

Joy is a word used frequently in relation to Mahdavi's work. As I pause at the window of the Rue Las Cases showroom to admire two pink velvet Charlotte chairs sporting shiny brass bases and plump-panelled backs, I find myself smiling. Perhaps Mahdavi is on a mission to make us happier? "There is no mission," she says, "but it's true that people say my spaces make them feel happy." She pauses. "My aesthetic is related to the time I spent in Cambridge, which was the happiest of my childhood. It was the mid-1960s, boom time in America, and my world was filled with pop culture, cartoons and colour – Bugs Bunny and *Tom and Jerry* on the television, strawberry milkshakes and technicolour lunchboxes. I have integrated all those things into my

India Mahdavi with several of her designs: a Bishop stool, from €550, the velvet Jelly Pea sofa, from €18,500, and a Gelato armchair, €1,950



for whom it was originally designed) separates into two different-sized, round-ended sections: one for eating, one for working. It is both functional and jewel-like.

I can see the childhood influences as I survey the space – Jelly Pea's cushions are as round as giant chocolate buttons and that floor lamp brings lollipops to mind – but this is also considered, elegant and sophisticated furniture, expertly crafted from the finest materials. It may prompt nostalgic recognition but kitsch it is not. "One of the hardest things is to be playful without falling into something more vulgar," Mahdavi says. "Quality is a really important part of achieving that balance."

The designer puts her ability to create high-calibre work down to three things: her experience of different cultures ("Living in France has given me an elegance whether I want it or not, while my time in Germany gave me some kind of structure," she says), her architectural training and those seven years at Liaigre. "I learnt a lot there," she says. "Christian [Liaigre] taught me about materials and textures and how to work on a furniture scale. It was an interesting contrast after my architectural studies – where you work on layouts of rooms but never get to a detail."

It was during her time at Liaigre that Mahdavi also discovered she had "a way with colour". That is something of an understatement. Scan the many column inches she has generated in the press and you'll instantly find phrases like "colour guru". Ralph Pucci describes her as "a master of colour – probably the best colourist in the design world right now". This is not hyperbole. What India Mahdavi can do with colour is quite extraordinary. She turned The Gallery at Sketch a shade of pink she describes as the "essence of pink" – in other words, the pink you imagine when you hear the word but rarely encounter. The Gallery has famously become the most-Instagrammed restaurant in London but, more importantly, it is also an extraordinarily lovely place to spend time in – comfortable, fun and somehow both traditional brasserie and unlike any brasserie you've ever dined in before. Small wonder, then, that owner Mourad Mazouz has resisted changing it. "It was originally planned as a two-year project," he says, "but restaurants are like daisies: the yellow in the centre is the food, while the decor, the front of house and the table settings are the petals. If you take one of those petals away, the daisy is ruined. Hence, I keep asking myself, why change something that works so well?"

Mahdavi says her sense of colour is instinctive, a result of growing up with the technicolour palette of American pop culture. But it's also a craft. That Sketch pink works because she knows how light and materials affect shade. "It seems super-easy to create a space that's all one colour," she says, "but it doesn't happen overnight. I have 20 years of experience. I knew that the pink I chose in Paris, for example, would appear more yellow at Sketch because there's no natural light. I also know velvet to be one material that gives me the shades I want."

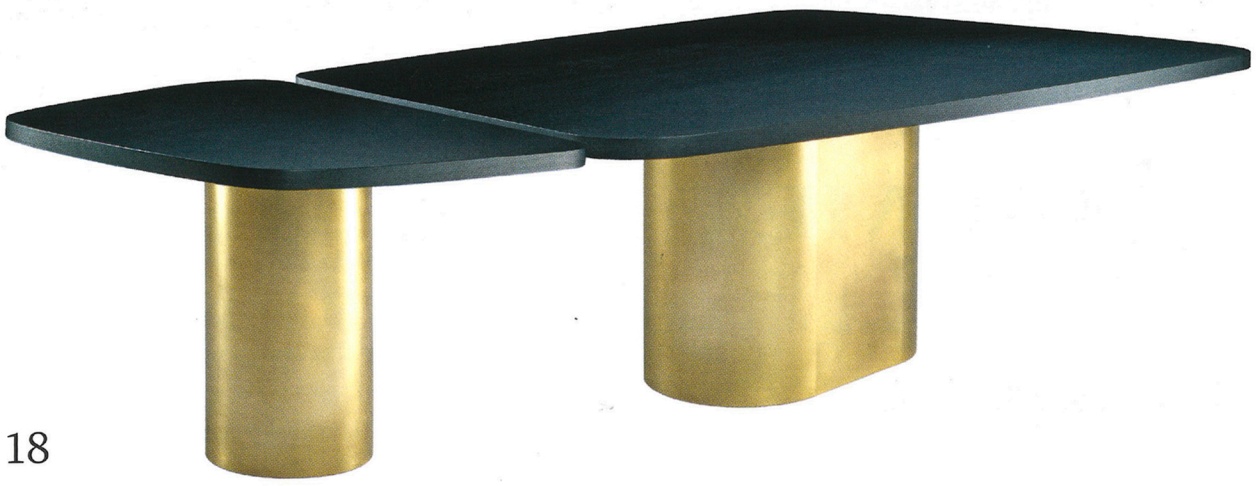
Few creatives were working with colour – or velvet – 20 years ago. Today both are ubiquitous. Is this something Mahdavi welcomes? "Of course! Colour makes the world a more joyful place and we need plenty of joy at this time," she says, before admitting to a certain frustration at the idea that you can achieve the Mahdavi aesthetic simply by sticking some pulse-raising shades on the walls. "I have been working with colour for so long it's become part of my language. Now there's a whole new generation in the business following my path – that's fine, but it does bother me when it's badly done." Mathias Augustyniak, one half of art and design agency M/M Paris who worked with Mahdavi on the hotel Maison Thoumieux and Café Français, has seen less skilful interior designers attempt the Mahdavi look. "They are pale imitations," he says. "India has invented something quite unusual – her interiors are visually present but also allow for the people who inhabit them to express their own personality."

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Mahdavi's understanding of space is part of her brilliance. "I spent six years studying architecture. I create fantastic plans and I know how to make space flow," she says. But it's more than that. Nilufar Gallery's founder Nina Yashar describes her work as "poetic" in that the people who live in the homes she creates talk first about how the space makes them feel rather than the spectacular furnishings. "India has made me a home where I feel at home," says Maria Grazia Chiuri, who commissioned Mahdavi when she moved to Paris from her family residence in Rome a year ago. "India has an incredible sense of how people live," Isabel Ettedgui adds. "She makes places that you want to live in, entertain in, bring your children up in. She is a homemaker."

Ettedgui raises an interesting point given Mahdavi's assertion that she is "still very nomadic at heart". Does she create homes for other people as a substitute for making one of her own? "Well, perhaps I will stop when I have a home of my own," she laughs, "but I have enjoyed creating other worlds since I was a child and that's really what I'm doing now. In commercial projects, I imagine who will go there and invent different characters as part of the narrative, while in private homes, I listen to the people and the space and try to create a three-dimensional portrait from that." Like all the best portraits, the end result speaks to us on a deep level. "India's spaces have a universality," says Augustyniak. "They make a strong impact on your soul." ✦

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From top: the elegantly playful living room of a Connecticut home designed by Mahdavi. Walnut and brass Alber table, €32,700 for both modules

MAIN PORTRAIT: MATTHIEU SALVAING





Clockwise from left: the playful aesthetic and curvaceous furniture of Ladurée Beverly Hills are pure Mahdavi. The bohemian blown glass, brass and marble Don Giovanni floor lamp, €3,300. Velvet and brass Charlotte swivel chair, from €3,200

designs and I think people respond to them so positively because they are reminiscent of their own childhoods. It makes my work seem somehow familiar and that is comforting." Mahdavi strikes a chord, and I suddenly realise why those Charlotte chairs (from €3,200, pictured below right) bring a smile to the lips – it's because the shape of the backs is reminiscent of sponge fingers. "Exactly!" she laughs, delighted by my delight.

Few designers can execute such playfulness, particularly when their designs command serious prices, but Mahdavi not only has an enviable portfolio – 2018's commissions already include a decadent club-like installation space at the prestigious Nilufar Gallery in Milan; Homo Faber, the Johann Rupert-backed exhibition at Venice's Architecture Biennale; the interior of Tod's Sloane Street store; and a collection of coffee cups for Nespresso – she has also featured in the AD100 list of top architects and designers for the past two years. And her 2004 ceramic Bishop stool is now part of the permanent collection at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

"India is not quite what you see is what you get," says Ralph Pucci, president of Ralph Pucci furniture gallery, which has represented Mahdavi in the US for 12 years. "She's so hot here right now because she has brought much-needed fun to the design world. Strip that away, however, and you see that her furniture is absolutely beautiful – her Flower and Double Diagonale tables, for example, are incredibly sculptural and modern."

So, too, is the furniture that dresses the showroom. Beyond those pink velvet chairs in the window are designs representing the past 20 years of Mahdavi's oeuvre, from the low-backed Jetlag sofa (from €12,000), its angular form offset by swooping armrests, to the cocooning Jelly Pea sofa (from €18,500, pictured on previous pages) and the elegant Don Giovanni floor lamp (€3,300, pictured far right) made from glass, brass and marble. The eye is also drawn to a pair of striking modular dining tables: Bluff (from €7,000) is a puzzle of straight-edged blocks in walnut lacquer, while the walnut-and-brass Alber (€32,700, pictured overleaf, named after Elbaz,

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