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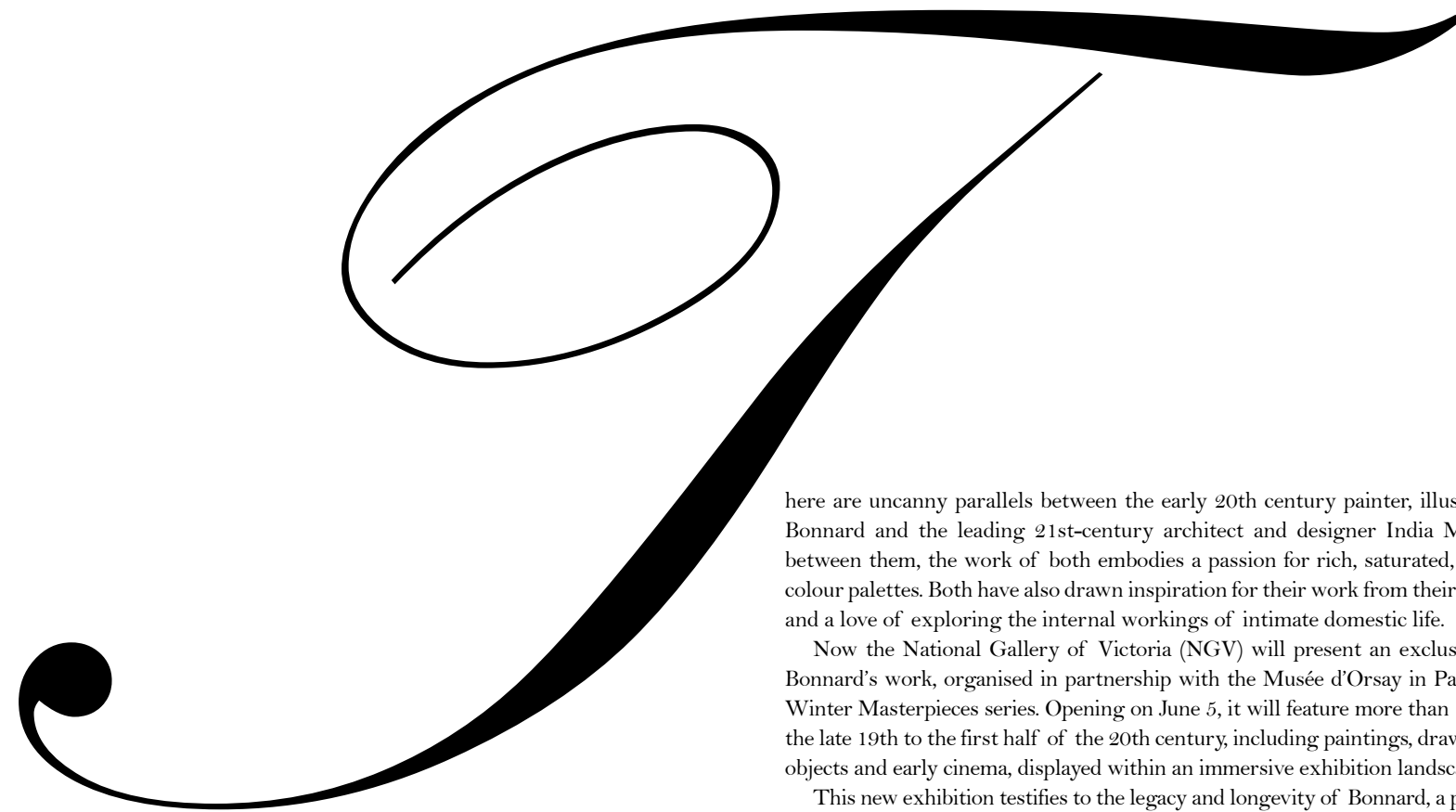
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Shared vision

'Queen of colour' India Mahdavi is bringing her affinity with the work of Pierre Bonnard to a new exhibition at the NGV



There are uncanny parallels between the early 20th-century painter, illustrator and printmaker Pierre Bonnard and the leading 21st-century architect and designer India Mahdavi. Despite the decades between them, the work of both embodies a passion for rich, saturated, sometimes almost iridescent, colour palettes. Both have also drawn inspiration for their work from their own lively, vivid imaginations and a love of exploring the internal workings of intimate domestic life.

Now the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) will present an exclusive world premiere of Pierre Bonnard's work, organised in partnership with the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, as part of the Melbourne Winter Masterpieces series. Opening on June 5, it will feature more than 150 of Bonnard's works, from the late 19th to the first half of the 20th century, including paintings, drawings, photographs, decorative objects and early cinema, displayed within an immersive exhibition landscape designed by Mahdavi.

This new exhibition testifies to the legacy and longevity of Bonnard, a prolific artist once described by his friend Henri Matisse as "a great painter, for today and definitely also for the future". Many of the pieces will come not only from the Musée d'Orsay's own comprehensive Bonnard collection, but also from the Washington National Gallery of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and even *La Sieste, 1900*, once owned by the novelist and art collector Gertrude Stein and acquired by the NGV in 1949, will be in the mix.

Mahdavi is also an accomplished scenographer who collaborates regularly on exhibitions with curators at the Centre Pompidou and the Parisian art dealer Patrick Seguin (past shows have included works by Jean Prouvé, Pierre Jeanneret and Jean Royère). She was drawn to working with the NGV, she says, because of Bonnard's ability to find beauty in the minutiae of domestic life.

"I like the way he painted so much of his house and how he took the *quotidien*, the everyday, as we say in French, and made it into something else," she enthuses. "He painted just a piece of what he could see – like his wife Marthe taking a bath – but all his colourings were with the light of the south [of France], where a white becomes pink or violet. I like how he pushed that all the way."

When WISH met Mahdavi at her Left Bank showroom on Rue Las Cases in Paris last December, the cold, grey day outside was made considerably more bearable by our surroundings. The richness of burnt orange, sunshine yellow and pale silver drenched everything from the geometric pattern on the walls and rugs to the leather and velvet cushions on Mahdavi's Cap Martin rattan sofa.

The Bonnard exhibition will wind through the artist's early days, from his involvement with Les Nabis, a group of aesthetic avant-garde artists in the late 1800s inspired by the synthesised style of Paul Gauguin's work, through to his final years in the small town of Le Cannet on the French Riviera, where he finished his final work, *L'Amandier en fleurs, 1947*.

As a dramatic backdrop, Mahdavi plans to use the colourful, patterned details of Bonnard's light-soaked paintings to produce a series of wallpapers with which she will line the many rooms of the NGV's exhibition space. For example, she has taken the bouquets of flowers painted on the wallpaper in *Nu dans un intérieur, 1914-1921* and lent them a more abstract form, recoloured in ice cream shades of buttermilk, raspberry, strawberry, caramel and mint; the poppies and tall green grasses seen in the background of Bonnard's *Femmes au jardin: femme à la robe quadrillée, 1891* will now be big red swirls amid long green brushstrokes. A wallpaper in *La toilette, 1908* is reimagined as a camouflage of pale

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Clockwise from above: Details from Mahdavi's studio, including a model of her work with the NGV. Below right: Bonnard's *Le Corsage à Carreaux 1892*

pink, blue and green; a red gingham check imitates the fabric of the model's blouse in *Le Corsage à Carreaux 1892*.

Against these contemporary patterns, "the paintings will have a lot more intensity than being on a white wall", Mahdavi says. "It will provide a different perspective, making you look beyond the composition and notice the details." There will also be some of her pieces of furniture – "just for scale" – and an occasional false window to continue the idea of domesticity. "I wanted to put Bonnard's paintings back into context," she says.

Being able to see things in different ways lies at the heart of Mahdavi's design ethos, a skill that perhaps owes something to her nomadic upbringing. She was born in Tehran to a Persian academic father and Egyptian-English mother. The family moved often, taking in Germany and the south of France before Mahdavi relocated to Paris at the age of 18 to study architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts. After graduation, she spent a year in New York studying graphic, industrial and furniture design, before returning to Paris to work as artistic director with the French interior designer Christian Liaigre.

"My work has been nourished by these layers of my culture – it has given me a super-quick adaptability, like a chameleon," she says. "I can put completely opposite things together and they look fine." Her ability to play with often eccentrically disparate colour combinations is a case in point. "I like to mix colours and let them insult each other, to have an argument," she once told *The New Yorker*.

For Mahdavi – regularly dubbed "the queen of colour", and frequently voted one of the most influential architects and designers in the world by *Architectural Digest* – it is a talent that comes naturally. One of her biggest hits, and an Instagram sensation, is the Gallery restaurant at Sketch, London, which she washed in a heady shade of rose quartz pink in 2014 to offset the 200-plus black and white drawings by artist David Shrigley commissioned for the space.

"People assume pink is my favourite colour, but I think pink owes me more than I owe it," she laughs. (It also features heavily in her design for Red Valentino's London store, which opened in 2016.) "I'm happy pink has its own life and that it's not such a girly colour. Pink can be radical."



As a teen, Mahdavi considered studying film and set design and there is a cinematographic quality to her work – a little bit quirky like Wes Anderson, a little bit sci-fi like Stanley Kubrick

As a teen, the now 58-year-old Mahdavi considered studying film and set design, but while she opted for architecture instead, there is certainly a cinematographic quality to her work – a little bit quirky like Wes Anderson, a little bit sci-fi like Stanley Kubrick. The latter is one of the filmmakers, along with Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti (di Modrone), she most admires for "the very strong settings they create for telling a story".

"I like to be transported," she says. "I like to feel I'm elsewhere. That's a strength of movies, and I like to think that's what I do with my work too." Her use of colour and curves also echoes the work of design heroes such as Gio Ponti, Carlo Mollino and Ettore Sottsass. "When you look back at Ponti's Parco dei Principi hotel in Sorrento, where he designed not only the building but the furniture and interiors in the early sixties, he did so with a lightness of touch and a little bit of humour," she says admiringly.

Mahdavi established her own studio in 1999 and her big break came in 2001 with the Townhouse hotel in Miami, where she opted for a scheme of ravishing red, baby blue and beige as an ode to the city's vibe of "sea, sex and sun",





she says. For the past two decades, she has designed rooms, bars and restaurants for hotels such as Claridge's and The Connaught in London; L'Apogée in Courchevel; the Condesa DF in Mexico; and brasseries such as Le Germain and Le Café Français for the Costes brothers in Paris.

The art collector and Swiss pharmaceutical heiress Maja Hoffman asked Mahdavi to bring her elegantly flamboyant, slightly bohemian touch to the design of Hôtel Le Cloître in Arles, opened in 2012 as part of Hoffman's expansive cultural complex in the city. Last year, Mahdavi launched Flowers, a paint range of 56 colours, with French manufacturer Meriguet-Carrère. Humorously named shades included Je Rougis (I'm Blushing), Chaud/Froid (Hot/Cold) and Beaucoup Trop (Way Too Much). She also presented a limited-edition cast glass table and a hand-blown Murano glass light with WonderGlass for Nomad, the collectable design and contemporary art show in Venice.

Mahdavi's remit has included designing a sensuous, sophisticated boutique for Tod's in London, and a marquetry-topped table patterned with 112 pieces of smooth leather for Louis Vuitton's Objets Nomades project. She has designed carpets for Le Manufacture Cogolin; glossy bathroom furniture in shades of strawberry, pistachio and blueberry for Bisazza; and a geometric velvet collection for Pierre Frey. In Paris, during the trade decoration event Déco Off in January, she referenced Persian miniature paintings, specifically those of 16th century artist Reza Abbāsi, to create a scenic wallpaper, handpainted on baby-blue silk, that wrapped around the walls of bespoke wallpaper manufacturer De Gournay's private apartment in St Germain.

The shades of olive, brown, teal, ochre and grape Mahdavi used for velvet banquettes and bespoke wallpaper for Chez Nina, a pop-up space designed with Nilafur gallerist Nina Yashar during Salone del Mobile in 2018, will appear again in her forthcoming homewares and clothing collection for Monoprix, launching in May.



This will be her second collection for the French retailer; for the first, in 2017, which included neon-bright, African-patterned textiles, plates and stools, as well as a bright gold shopping trolley, there were queues down the block. "I didn't realise it was going to have so much success," she says. "It is nice to do something that everybody can have."

There is a dreamlike, almost cartoonish, quality to Mahdavi's work – in large part influenced by four formative years spent growing up in Massachusetts in the mid-sixties. "It was a joyful, colourful place," she says. Her first memories are linked to the Technicolour vivacity of sixties pop culture in America, as is evident in the flower shape of a light, the playful pattern of a tiled floor, the chess piece curves of the best-selling Bishop ceramic stool-cum-table (now part of the permanent collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs), or the soft, rounded lady finger sponge-like backs of the chairs and sofas she regularly designs. "There is a sensuality in something comfortable and round," she says.

Clockwise from left: Abbāsi in the Sky handpainted silk wallpaper; Red Valentino store in London; Hôtel Le Cloître, Arles; the Gallery restaurant at Sketch; Hôtel Le Cloître; velvet banquettes and acid candy stained glass tables, and geometric-patterned wallpaper, at Chez Nina, Milan

However, "I don't try to do things in a nostalgic way," she adds. "Instead, I like to speak about familiarity, about the things everybody carries in their memory."

This is particularly relevant to the way she designs someone's home – Alber Elbaz, Isabel Ettegui (wife of the late fashion retailer Joseph Ettegui) and Dior's artistic director Maria Grazia Chiuri all reside in Mahdavi-designed abodes. (Ettegui also asked Mahdavi to redesign the inside of Life Aquatic, her 22m Silvers motor yacht, originally built in 1952. "She makes places that you want to live in, entertain in, bring your children up in. She is a homemaker," Ettegui once told the *Financial Times*.)

"Homes are a very special thing, because it is like doing a portrait of somebody," Mahdavi says. "It's really not speaking so much about myself, except for the language of how I translate my understanding of who they are and bringing something of them into the space. It's like when a photographer takes a picture of somebody – the photo looks like them, but it's through the lens of how that photographer sees them. I really see my work like that."

While there may be many similarities between Bonnard and Mahdavi, she quickly points out that she doesn't work like an artist. "Maybe my work is done with a sensibility, an emotion and a meaning I consider artistic, but it's not art," she says. Instead, she happily peddles the art of *joie de vivre*: "Environments can have a huge impact on one's mood, on everyday life. What I try to do is reveal it in a way that appeals to all the senses – that means colours for your eyes, textures for your touch, music for your ears, everything that really makes you feel alive. We're here at this moment, in this present, and we have to enjoy life." ☺

REBECCA REID; COURTESY OF RED VALENTINO; THOMAS HUMERY; MATTIA LOTTI