

Interior designer India Mahdavi
in her Paris atelier.



COLOR QUEEN

**EVEN AFTER 20 YEARS
OF GLOBAL SUCCESS, THE SUPERSTAR
AESTHETIC-DEFINING INTERIOR DESIGNER
INDIA MAHDAVI STILL DEALS WITH
GENDER DISPARITY IN DESIGN.**

By Michelle Ogundehin

AFTER SEVEN YEARS OF WORKING IN PARIS WITH CHRISTIAN LIAIGRE—THE KING OF DISCRETE FRENCH MINIMALISM—INTERIOR DESIGNER INDIA MAHDAVI MOVED TO THE BRIGHT SIDE OF THE DESIGN SPECTRUM AND LAUNCHED HER EPONYMOUS CREATIVE STUDIO IN 1999.

Shelving the simple lines and toned-down neutrals favored by her former employer, Mahdavi spent the next 20 years honing a distinctive, trailblazing (and color-embracing) aesthetic that strongly influenced the international design scene. In those two decades, she's created exquisite wallpaper for de Gournay and sumptuous bath suites for Bisazza, designed striking bars, hotels, and restaurants from Miami to Mexico, and outfitted unique private homes for the likes of fashion supremo Alber Elbaz and Swiss philanthropist and art collector Maja Hoffmann. In 2015, she was awarded the insignia of France's Officier Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Even with such auspicious beginnings, it was arguably her 2014 renovation of the Gallery at Sketch, the hyper-trendy central-London tearoom, that jet-propelled her to international stardom. Unapologetically colored, as Mahdavi calls it, "the perfect essence of pink," from its walls and intricately detailed ceiling to every stick of furniture inside (including Mahdavi's now-signature chubby Charlotte armchairs, with a configuration similar to six sponge fingers arranged in an embrace), it became the must-have background for the selfie generation. Today it remains the most-Instagrammed restaurant in the world.

But for the Tehran-born Mahdavi, the middle daughter (with four siblings) of an Iranian academic father and an Egyptian-English mother, it was just another reinvention on a creative journey that started at birth. »





**"NOW WE WILL PAY MORE ATTENTION
TO WHAT'S NOT SEEN; WHAT'S BEHIND THE
PRODUCT, THE VALUES, HOW AND WHERE
THINGS ARE PRODUCED. WE WANT TO
SUPPORT WHAT'S REAL AND AUTHENTIC."**

—INDIA MAHDAVI, INTERIOR DESIGNER





The Gallery at Sketch London undoubtedly launched Mahdavi to design superstardom. With only three months to reinvent the space, she transformed it into the most Instagrammed restaurant in the world and officially clinched the popularity of the color pink. Mahdavi's Charlotte chair, as seen tucked into each table, is now her signature piece.



Named after Nina Yashar, founder of Milan's Nilufar Gallery, Chez Nina was designed as an exclusive, invite-only club during Salone del Mobile 2018. Outfitted with custom-designed glass tables, a geometric silk wall mural by de Gournay, Gio Ponti chairs, and more, the color-saturated space is a dark and sexy iteration of Mahdavi's work.



**"COLOR IS
IMPORTANT
BECAUSE WE
NEED THE JOY
AND THE
ENERGY TO
CONTINUE."**

—INDIA MAHDAVI,
INTERIOR DESIGNER

"You either have it within you or you don't," she says of her artistic prowess. A peripatetic, globe-traversing childhood that took Mahdavi and her family to Cambridge, Massachusetts, Germany, and the South of France undoubtedly fed any nascent visual curiosity. During this time, Mahdavi dabbled in a little bit of everything, from painting and drawing to sewing—her progressive school in the South of France, École Freinet, dedicated every afternoon to artistic activities. Today, she calls herself "a polychrome polyglot, because I'm a mixture of so many different things."

Ever influenced by her surroundings, Mahdavi describes the trajectory of her youth in a typically sensorial fashion: "My first memories are [of] the crazy American cartoons of the mid-1960s," she recalls. "I remember them as being very pop, very joyful, and with color all around." Whereas in Heidelberg, "my life went from color to black and white. It's not to say that I was unhappy; it's just how I remember it." At age seven, Mahdavi and her family landed in the artistic enclave of Saint-Paul de Vence on the French Riviera, where, according to the designer, "the light came back again. I wanted to be a filmmaker at first, or a photographer." Instead she chose architecture, training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris before studying for a trimester each at the School of Visual Arts, the Cooper Union, and Parsons School of Design in New York City. When she wasn't in class, Mahdavi still fueled for passion for film. "I spent one year going to movies twice a day instead of studying!" she admits.

In a sense, this helps to explain the immense depth and resonance of her work, which sits in marked contrast to the two-dimensional, cookie-cutter interiors so prevalent today. Whereas such copycat spaces are seemingly designed only to chase social media approval—no doubt attempting to ape the success of Sketch—Mahdavi's aesthetic virtuosity has always been the result of a narrative process that's firmly focused on the user. She tells stories with her designs. Consider Guy Martin's 100-seat I Love Paris brasserie at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport,

where diners step into what Mahdavi describes as "a love song dedicated to travelers." Replete with tall arches, brass details, and cobalt blue and mossy green upholstery, it's a world away from the bland ubiquity of the usual airport diners. Starting in 2016, Mahdavi designed a trio of Ladurée tea rooms, one apiece in Geneva, Los Angeles, and Tokyo. Each shop immerses visitors in "a sensorial and ultra-contemporary voyage" that leads directly to the pastel-hued heart of the almond-paste macarons. In Geneva, a play on curves and angles is swathed in rich purple and green hues; the Beverly Hills outpost embraces a "Garden of Delights" aesthetic with latticework walls and garden-party-inspired furniture. The Tokyo tea salon returns to purple and green tones and Mahdavi's signature scalloped velvet furniture. As with everything she does, Mahdavi's cartoony furniture designs serve a purpose, in this case to "exaggerate space."

Despite their appearances, not all of Mahdavi's projects are focused on luxury. A recent fashion and home décor collaboration with the French department store Monoprix developed because the designer was excited to work with Creative Handicrafts, a social enterprise that provides women from the slums of Mumbai with training for fair-trade manufacturing jobs—and a path toward economic self-sufficiency. "The association allows them not only to live, but to reinvent their lives," Mahdavi says. The textile offerings include 1970s-inspired caftans, button-down dresses, and two-piece matching pant-and-top sets—all in wavy and striped patterns in blues, pinks, and greens.

Although her studio is based in Paris, Mahdavi credits her personal heritage—and specifically her birthplace, Iran—with influencing her work, although she admits that it wasn't until much later in life that she fully embraced the country. "When I started visiting regularly in 2012, there was this amazing recognition of things I was doing in my work, this twisting of pop culture that was right there," she says. She cites her early adoption of rattan, when it was not considered even remotely cool, or her continuing

love of Formica. "I'm not scared of going into these forgotten materials and using them in a very different way. And this irreverent mix and match is everywhere in Iran." It chimes with her approach to color—think ripe greens contrasted with prune purple, and *that* pink: "I like putting colors in danger."

In contrast to her obvious creative bravado, Mahdavi is often referred to as a very feminine designer, implying a softness or delicacy that she refutes. "I think my work is sensual," she posits. "Is sensuality feminine or masculine?" While she concedes that there's great comfort and joy in her designs, she also suggests a divide between the approaches of male and female designers. "I don't think men always think about comfort. They think more about ego." In contrast, Mahdavi likes to consciously extract herself from her work, asking instead, "How can I define an identity for this space? How can it belong to itself?"

Even with her undisputed global success, Mahdavi believes her gender has prevented her from receiving larger-scale commissions. "Most of the clients are male: the insurance people, the bankers, all male. As [a woman], as soon as you come to bigger projects, you're out. There's an assumption that you're just a decorator. I'm not. I'm trained as an architect. I know what I'm doing." She speaks without frustration, although she may have felt it in the past. For now, she says, the best projects are about "having a conversation with the right people. Projects don't have to be big to be precise. You can say a lot with small places, and for me that's enough." ❄

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ladurée Tokyo, the third in a trio of international tea rooms designed by Mahdavi for the brand, is a Marie Antoinette-meets-*kawaii* chic mashup. Mahdavi's collaboration with French retailer Monoprix features striped tunics and beachy, '70s-inspired prints. A second collaboration with Italian glass mosaic company Bisazza eschewed sterile whites in favor of ice-cream hues and bold mosaic walls.

