

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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One of the most coveted invitations for inquisitive visitors to 19th-century Cairo was to the *maison arabe* of Baron Gaston de Saint-Maurice. A compelling figure, the bewhiskered baron was equerry and horse trainer to Khedive Isma'il Pasha, the ruling governor of the country.

Granted land in 1875 in what was then a sparsely populated part of the city, Saint-Maurice spent the next seven years creating a mansion that was remarkable in its repurposing of historic salvage, such as a pair of antique bronze doors that the epigraphist Max van Berchem noted had come from the recently demolished madrasa established by Baybars I, formerly the sultan. The Mamluk-style house quickly became a living *Schatzkammer*, or treasury, for Arabic artefacts, iconography and textiles collected by the highly cultured Frenchman-turned-Cairene. A hall, some seven metres high, was inscribed with Coptic psalm calligraphy, while his bed, in rosewood inlaid with glass and ivory, came from the Hijaz. When the property was dismantled in 1937, a few of the interiors were remarkably saved by Gaston Wiet, the head of Cairo's Musée Arabe (now the Museum of

Islamic Art), and can still be seen at the French embassy in Giza.

The Saint-Maurice mansion had stood on the corner of Qasr El Nil and Sherif Basha streets in what was once a swamp-ridden quarter of eastern Cairo until it was completely redesigned by the ambitious Francophile Khedive Isma'il. He created an arrondissement lined with elegant boulevards where his intimates and senior aides could reside in Haussmann-in-the-desert style. Downtown, as it became known, soon blossomed into the most desirable address. And so the mansion's demolition in 1937 provided a chance to design something spectacular on the plot, much to the excitement of the charterati. An architectural competition was launched, and it was won by the Frenchman Max Edrie, known for Alexandria's Goethe-Institut, and Italian maestro Gaston Rossi, who had designed the Qasr El Nil Cinema and the Kom Ombo Mosque. Their project produced Cairo's first high-rise, known as the Immobilia Building.

Funded by industrialist Ahmed Abouboud Pasha, the wealthiest man in Egypt, it comprised twin towers of 13 and 11 floors and was the last word in sophistication,

with the cream of Cairo clamouring to move in to the flats, where they settled like fireflies in trees. Residents included the screen idol Anwar Wagdi, comedian Naguib El Rehani and singer Mohamed Fawzi, and during the heady postwar years it wasn't uncommon to see King Farouk's motorcade pull up to deliver the monarch himself for soirées there.

The party lights may have dimmed in the decades since, but Immobilia, whose silhouette is immediately recognisable to Egyptians, has enjoyed something of a renaissance in more recent years. One visionary leading its revival is the German-born, Cairo-based lawyer and hotelier Florian Amereller, who describes the building as 'a true Cairo icon – with a European twist' and has transformed several of the apartments, which have captivating views across the skyline to the Nile beyond. Two years ago, he introduced a friend, photographic agent George Lang, to one on the 12th floor. 'I first visited Cairo as a teenager from Australia,' George recounts, sitting barefoot next to an Ottoman tombstone perched on his terrace. 'The connection was electric. I remember just sitting, in the middle of the

ADDRESS TO IMPRESS

In an area that's long attracted the cream of Cairo, photographic agent George Lang is sitting pretty in the Immobilia Building, the capital's first high-rise and a landmark familiar to all citizens. Filling his lofty flat with antiques bought locally has been a culturally enriching adventure for the Australian émigré. The urbane result is not about good taste, he tells Cosmo Brockway, 'but a mirror-glance into my experience here, my love of the place'.

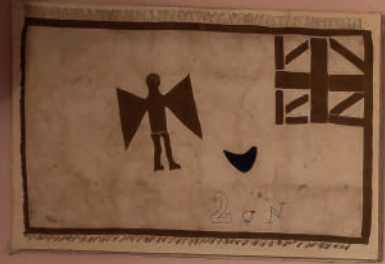
Photography: Georges and Samuel Mohsen

'The hall is my homage to shock value and playing with taste,' says George. The vestibule next to the entrance is a very deep and narrow space with ceilings almost five metres high, so placing furniture here presented quite the aesthetic challenge. The Kente cloths are antique and sourced from Duncan Clarke in London, whereas the marigold-coloured fabric is hand-loomed Egyptian silk. According to the owner, 'the collection of walking sticks belonged to an elderly Egyptian gentleman', and one of them is 1930s Gucci





Above: in the smaller salon a mid-20th-century acrylic coffee table in the style of David Lange allows the striking parquet floor to sing. 'I found the arabesque love seat in a downtown antique store,' says George, 'and had it re-covered in velvet I brought from Italy.' The extra-deep and -long sofa was custom-made in Cairo and covered in hand-loomed linen and silk. Opposite: in the main sitting room, a cluster of Asafo Fante flags from Ghana hangs above a 1920s Art Deco drinks cabinet found in the Dokki neighbourhood. A flea-market painting, discovered in New York for \$150, makes another colourful contribution alongside the partition's pocket doors







Opposite: at the front of the kitchen, a poster collection includes vintage advertising for coffee shops in Alexandria, photos from King Farouk's farm and a charming needlepoint of feluccas on the Nile. The jaunty tablecloth is from Beit, George's new homewares company with friend Margarita Andrade. Above: George's dining room is filled with his collection of Mid-century Modern furniture and a treasured Japanese screen found, surprisingly, in Cairo. 'The dramatic star-burst lantern is always a great icebreaker,' he says, while a voluptuous trio of Nubian date-palm baskets dance above a painting by the Russian artist George Khomich



night, with my face glued to my hotel window, watching all the life below.’

For a decade George toyed with committing to the place, but then, with a nervous shudder, made the leap and signed the lease on a home whose high-ceilinged rooms were intimidatingly empty. ‘I suddenly realised I had no idea where to buy anything,’ he says with a laugh. ‘But then I had the luck to meet one of the city’s great house-consignment people. Several strong Turkish coffees later – nothing is done here without that first – I found myself in possession of a clutch of antiques.’ Thus began this Australian/New Yorker’s foraging quest through the dusty warrens of Cairene dealers. Angular and lithe with a shock of white-blond hair, George is a master of the Arabic nuances needed for bartering (as well as having an unerring eye for form, scale and patina). According to one acquaintance, he is ‘the sort of person who always seems to land in Cairo

– that is to say, the least likely, and they usually thrive’. Of course, the enigmatic subject of our tale has done just that.

Spend any time in his company and it quickly becomes clear that the nest-feathering urge evolved into a more contemplative journey through his adopted metropolis. ‘The sheer diversity of the people who have passed through here [is] reflected in the forgotten dusty piles of porcelain, gilded mirrors and dented monogrammed boxes,’ he says. ‘Ottomans, Armenians, Greeks, British, French – just some of the communities.’ As his voice trails away, I look over to a vast map of Cairo hanging on the wall, nibbled, faded and vellum-coloured, its tiny street names in Arabic. Of course, this apartment is a modern equivalent; a subtle homage to those who have gone before.

‘Living in Egypt is an exercise in letting go,’ George reflects. ‘You have to surrender to something bigger than yourself.

The electricity goes off, light a candle. It works best when you go with the energy and flow of the place. This was very much my intention when decorating the flat, which is just as well because every time I got ahead of myself, Egypt intervened.’ Anyone who has ever lived in a far-off country will understand the sheddings and inner changes that can entail. While the interior is undeniably tailored and pristine, here, without doubt, is a place formed by a Westerner undone and made into a crucible of sorts, all Occidental primness axed. ‘The flat is not about good taste or valuable objects but a mirror-glance into my experience here, my love of the place.’ He finishes as I head into the elevator, like a marksman landing his shot. ‘This is a country of generosity of spirit, humour, eccentricity and beauty. I have been folded up in the warmth. This is the feeling I have tried to reciprocate here.’ Another firefly has landed in the tree ©

Top: in the sitting room, this vintage Khayamiya textile made into a floor cushion is a mysterious one-off, in that it was made in the 1940s using European fabrics. Opposite: the locally bought early 20th-century avian prints ‘are stamped [says George] with the royal Egyptian seal and are birds native to Egypt’. The rug on this guest-room floor is Guatemalan. Following pages: in another spare room, this monumental 1910 map is of Cairo and in Arabic (they are usually in French or English). Displaying a flair for layers, George has placed a Chinese screen in front of a Moroccan tent textile behind the guest beds. The chair’s cushion is vintage Russian roller fabric





