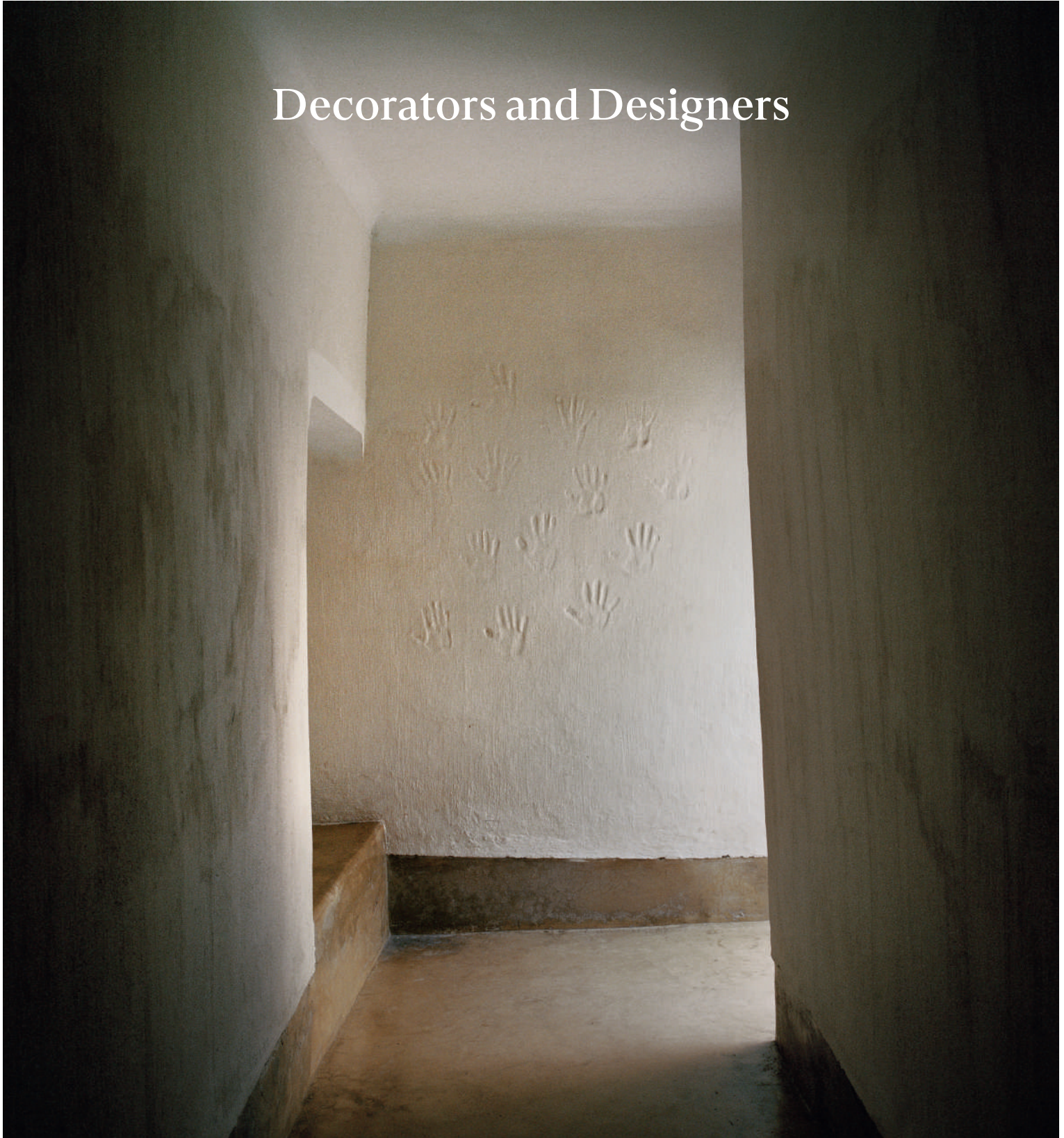


# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

APRIL 2023

Decorators and Designers





*Opposite: in the living room at the rear, a Ghanaian Ewe cloth from Retrouvius drapes over one of a pair of sofas originally from Penrhyn Castle and bought from Matthew Cox Antiques (Chris's brother). The little table to its side was made out of spark plugs by a young metalworker in Salt Lake City. This page: inspired by a trip to the Maison de Verre, Paris, this 'bibliothèque', custom-made in the studio, features 5cm-thick glass panels (back-lit in the evenings) and a patchwork of steel-mesh and repoussé-brass doors. The structure incorporates practical functions – a sound system, TV, printer and leather-clad drop-leaf desk – and objets, from a 1950s Venetian-glass lamp base to brain coral, a gift from Chris's mother*



On a summer's day in 2011 Chris and Nicola Cox moved into their house in north London. Unbeknownst to them in advance, the street was celebrating its centenary. Not only did this feel auspicious, it proved particularly helpful when Chris realised that the boiler had blown and the water was bust. All he needed to do was collar a neighbour from amid the bunting so they might point him towards the communal stop-cock. What could be more sensible? Yet, as mains water flowed into his newly acquired Edwardian house, out sprang five leaks – at least one for every floor. Another neighbour informed Chris that the previous year a pipe had burst up-stairs, causing a mini-Niagara to cascade

down the stairs and out the front door. 'It's amazing what doesn't come up in a survey,' deadpans Nicola. And yet, insists Chris: 'The bones of the house were good; the ceilings were high and the garden was huge.' In comparison to their previous two-up, two-down, 'it felt like heaven'.

This story has its genesis at Wimbledon School of Art, where the pair first met in 1993. Nicola, who grew up in suburban Auckland, was, says Chris, 'a child of nature'. Her family garden was jewelled with grapefruit and orange trees, and she carefully saved her pocket money to spend at the local pet shop. 'Bantam chicks would nest in my hair, and I had a pet cockerel who took against everyone but me,' she says. 'I caught tadpoles in the

nearby creek and kept them in a jar on my bedside table. It's a miracle my parents let me get away with it.' Nicola may have left New Zealand 34 years ago, but her homeland, her 'native roots' and her connection to 'mother nature, Papatūānuku', remain grounding forces within her life and work. At 17 she travelled to Europe, managing and touring with various rock-and-roll bands, before landing at Camberwell College of Arts and thence to Wimbledon.

Meanwhile Chris, one in a long line of antique dealers and restorers, knew very early on that he wanted to be an artist. He was raised in a home where a love of aesthetics went without question. Entire meals were spent ruminating on patination or quarrelling over the precise date an

*Below: an unusually large 1940s tribal 'tapa' from Fiji purchased from the couple's friend George (of Brownrigg) offers a backdrop to a sofa that's by the threshold between living room and kitchen. Its rear cushions are covered in a 1960s Barbara Brown fabric that languished in the couple's cupboard for nigh on 20 years. The large hand-blown mercury lamp is a Cox one-off*

*Right: concrete walls from Daniel Dixon-Spain of the Plaster Collective contrast with an antique terracotta floor reclaimed from a Dutch salvage yard. Far right: the oak units sit in iron appliques, forged in the studio, and cold-worked with a ball-peen hammer. A bust of Homer looks down on a 19th-century anchovy jar from Puglia and a Medieval stone ram's head*







object was made. As a teenager he would experiment with ‘faking things’, sculpting something in plaster and then trying to ‘make it old’. When Chris and Nicola arrived at art school they brought a shared love of the sculptural and of the physical act of making. ‘Our material processes were so complementary right from the start,’ says Chris. ‘My fabrication helped Nicky’s practice and her casting enhanced mine.’ Today their work is entwined. ‘I think we rely on one another more than we can understand. We’re like two trees who have grown together as one.’

Over a decade has passed since the pair bought their house near Grovelands Park. After two stages of intensive building work, it is not only home to Chris, Nicola

and their 12-year-old daughter Olivia, it is also something of a test bed for the pieces they create at Cox London, their eponymous design studio/shop on Pimlico Road. Among the antiques and curiosities that fill the house – a large lump of brain coral; a bust of Homer; an early piece of Venetian ironwork given to Chris by his grandfather; an unusually large 1940s Fijian *tapa* cloth – are plentiful examples of the sculptural designs so synonymous with the Cox name. Anything they need, they make. Their atelier has a department for practically everything: fabrication, design, mould-making, glasswork, bronze and so on. ‘Traditional skills are at the core of our business. For many years, we restored antiques and parts of our rebuild

were similarly satisfying to undertake,’ says Nicola. ‘Rotten cross-members in the front pediment of the house were barely supporting the brickwork above, and we loved seeing replacement sections spliced back in to be covered up again for another 100 years.’ Decorating was an exercise in ‘drawing on old and new friends and keeping just the objects that still speak to us’. Once the builders had left, the pair took the opportunity to edit. ‘Things still travel back and forth from the workshops – it’s just inevitable, but then that’s how we keep ideas flowing,’ says Nicola. ‘The objects we observe and remember become the creative compost of our minds.’

Each baluster, knob, handle and bracket was handmade at Cox London.

# BESPOKE FROM THE HEART

An immersion in aesthetics and the natural world came early in life for the husband-and-wife powerhouse behind Cox London. Finding rich expression in their custom-crafted north London home, the couple's talents for sculptural design, whether in fashioning furniture, fixing antiques or forging picture rails, have proven truly complementary. 'We're like two trees who have grown together as one,' discovers Emily Tobin. Photography: Tim Beddow

*Right: in the dining room, a hand-blown glass vessel by Stewart Hearn and a humble 20th-century ceramic vase from Caroline de Kerangal perch on a giant burr-walnut console with a polished and patinated bronze top by Cox. Opposite: naive early 20th-century chinoiserie bird paintings on rice paper hang above rare pagoda-topped c1830s tole tea canisters, bought from Chris's father, the antique dealer Robin Cox. Serge Roche-inspired scallop sconces flank a burr mirror, which faces the 'Reed' dining table – all made by Cox*















Above: in Olivia's room, which was completely rebuilt, her special bed 'grew' from a collection of drawings made over many months. The photographs are by a friend, Carolyn Quartermaine, and the bedspread is a beloved Kente cloth dating from c1900. The lamps, abstract gilt-iron constructs by Chris, are topped with antique marbled shades from Colefax & Fowler. Right: a very heavy one-off wrought-iron Edwardian-style daybed, made in the studio, meant the guest-room floor needed reinforcing. The naive animalia paintings are by Chris's mother, Pearl (Cox) Bugg





*Right: the loft, where the main bedroom is located, covers the building's entire footprint and is at the maximum ceiling height so as to fit in these four japanned panels from a 19th-century screen. Storage space has been created behind the two end ones. The Cox-made opaque glass shades hang from bronze renderings of hand gestures in Caravaggio paintings. Below: the De Le Cuona sheers at the window and Crittall-style partition filter light and can change the space dramatically. An antique woven Zulu basket sits across from a yew table, another gift from Chris's dealer father*





The kitchen splashback is another fine example of invention. For a year the family collected flowers, grasses and seaweed from the Tottenham marshes, Grovelands Park and Dorset's beaches, which Mary Anning once combed for fossils. A large wooden press was made at the studio, and each week ferns, seedheads and fronds of seaweed were dried, flattened and eventually framed in two long compositions. Off the kitchen is a conservatory filled with plants. 'We have been amateur cultivators for years,' says Chris. 'It's habitual... We rarely let a plant die, which is why we have one particularly large nine-foot-tall cactus that has lived with us for 20 years.'

Their biggest intervention was the loft conversion, which offered free rein to

create a space more or less from scratch. Elsewhere, original details and footprints set natural parameters, but here, the bedroom and adjoining bathroom were a blank canvas. The Coxes opened up the south-facing back wall and installed vast Crittall windows, beyond which the London skyline hazily emerges each morning. Above the bed hangs a ceiling light formed of over 5,000 Venetian glass leaves woven into a hand-forged frame. Like so many of the couple's designs it takes its form from nature, in this case bracket fungus, a shelf-like polypore which fruits in interconnecting wedges. For Chris, a particular point of delight is the early 19th-century Italian basin shaped like a scallop shell, for which he built a base inspired by the ironwork

of Gilbert Poillerat with deliciously decadent twists of gilt-iron rope hung between each leg. 'It feels like brushing your teeth at a baptismal font,' he says with glee. From the ceiling hang pots of happy ferns, relishing the steamy room in which they reside. Here, as with every other inch of the house, nature, antiques and contemporary sculptural design come together. Chris and Nicola approach their materials with awe and a deep respect for the past, and yet they continue to push their skills and work as far as they possibly can. Theirs is a house fully equipped for such experimentation and one that will no doubt continue to evolve with each new discovery ® Cox London, 46 Pimlico Rd, London SW1 (020 3328 9506; [coxlondon.com](http://coxlondon.com))



*Left: the open-plan dressing area behind the bed head. Opposite: in the loft bathroom, an early 19th-century Italian marble basin in the style of a scallop shell is grounded by a reclaimed Edwardian factory floor. The cabinet above has two doors that open and a central one etched with a star. Ferns hanging from the ceiling thrive in the humid atmosphere*







## INSPIRATION



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1 When is a 'Magnolia Branch' not a magnolia branch? When it's a hand-forged white-ferric light fitting with gold highlights in the guise of one. Genius! Or genius perhaps. Said lamp hangs above the dining table in the home of Chris and Nicola Cox (page 243), its twiggy form an apt symbol of their entwined talents, and in their Belgravia showroom. Pick one up there, ready to plant on a ceiling, for £18,000. Visit [coxlondon.com](http://coxlondon.com). The couple's

love of nature knows no bounds, it seems, and even extends to their kitchen splashback (page 247), a quasi herbarium featuring ferns and fronds that they've dried and pressed. Ellie Jauncey, of Ede flower studio in Somerset, would understand. The set of three cards she's created with Toast suggests a shared passion and aesthetic – and costs £21.50. Visit [toa.st](http://toa.st). Voile is the ideal light-filtering foil to the muted tones in the north London house,

alongside acres of off-white linen – as per the living-room sofa (page 246). For a suitably slubby substitute, you could sew De Le Cuona's 'Seed' in poppy (£162 per m). Visit [delecuona.com](http://delecuona.com). Among the copious things to covet *chez* Cox is the antique basket in their loft space (page 249), which had us weaving our way to Kigwele, where this 'Chausiku' costs £40.99. Visit [kigwele.com](http://kigwele.com).  
2 We can't help you find a flat in Montevideo as atmospheric as

Fernando Santangelo's, sorry. But we can point you to Philip Hunt Antiques for a burr-walnut breakfront armoire (£3,250; visit [philiphuntantiques.co.uk](http://philiphuntantiques.co.uk)) that's as monumental as his (page 189), to Watts for some damask in Cretan bronze (£236 per m; visit [watts1874.co.uk](http://watts1874.co.uk)) similar to the upholstery his 1960s three-piece suite sports (page 181) and thence to Houles for some fancy 'Scarlett' moss fringe (£50 approx per m). Visit [houles.com](http://houles.com) ☺