



THE WELL

The Nature of Things

A noted London design couple look often to what lies outdoors—the shapes, forms, flora, colors of the natural world—for inspiration about how to live inside their home



INTERIOR DESIGN BY *Nicola and Chris Cox*
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The London home of Nicola and Chris Cox is filled with many of their own creations and finds. The living room (opening pages) features a burlwood console (far left) by Cox London and large bronze andirons custom designed by Cox. A Larusi wooden bowl is set on the coffee table. This page: An abstract sculpture by Chris Cox is set with flowers arranged by the noted London floral designer Harald Altmaier. Opposite: The dining room chandelier replicates a leafy magnolia branch; other natural motifs in the room include scallop-shell wall lights, both Cox London.





A copper lantern in the kitchen was restored by Cox London; the Brighton Station Lamp in Verdigris from Cox London hangs in the center of the room. An antique sofa allows guests to watch their hosts cook. The adjacent breakfast room is furnished with a lion-paw table. A collection of antique wooden bread boards is arranged in a windowed alcove.



A large 19th-century chinoiserie tea tin is set on a counter in the kitchen, with a backsplash composed of pressed seaweed and flora set behind a glass and framed in brass. An antique plaster bust of Homer peers from a shelf.



The custom bed in the primary suite is fitted with a bedspread composed of vintage linen offcuts that were configured by Nicola Cox and Paul Macneil. The linen pillowcases are Larusi. Panels of a 19th-century chinoiserie leather screen conceal a series of cupboards.



The bath in the primary suite features an antique carved marble basin in the form of a scallop shell that is set on a forged bronzed and gilt-iron base designed by Cox. Custom wall lights establish a soft mood. A sheer can be drawn for extra privacy.



Cox London's Tree of Life dressing table is set within the steep pitch of the roof; upon it rests an antique leather and studwork jewelry box. A custom green plaster finish created by Daniel Dixon-Spain of The Plaster Collective establishes color and texture.

WALK INTO THE Cox London showroom in the Pimlico Road design district, and Nature is everywhere: here a metal wall light looking like a pair of oak twigs with every curve of leaf

and turn of stem completely realistic, there a table whose top is supported by branching waterlily pads. As Cicero observed, "Art is born of the observation and investigation of Nature," and for the namesake owners, Nicola and Chris Cox, the observation of Nature is the beginning of everything they do. Nearly everything at Cox London is hand-made in its own foundry and workshop. Ironwork predominates, so it is no surprise to learn that the pair who designed these pieces, and many more, met while studying sculpture at Wimbledon School of Art (now Wimbledon College of Arts).

The couple are avid nature lovers. You might expect such a couple to live in a tree house, but home for them is a comfortable house built in 1911 in a North London suburb. With its original millwork, windows, and cornices still intact, the dwelling provides a sedate counterpoint to the couple's extraordinary mix of antique and modern pieces. "We've pared the house back without destroying its character," says Nicola. The gray walls in the ground-floor rooms have a soft, almost velvety, texture. It is a finish invented by Chris's best friend from art school, Daniel Dixon-Spain. As Chris characterizes his friend and his technique, "He's a plaster obsessive, and he calls this his 'Modern Concrete'. It's all in the trowelling."

In the back half of the long, narrow living room, a comfortable pair of 1960s chairs and matching sofa—all covered in ecru linen—sit opposite an 18th-century marble fireplace; to the left of the hearth is a giant piece of burr oak, cut from the trunk of an infected tree, which they have topped with a slim bronze layer to make a side table. They have taken a mold from this fascinating phenomenon and cast it in jesmonite (a sturdy sculptor's plaster which provides very accurate molds); they sell the resulting side tables in their showroom. A marble-topped metal table of their design stands nearby, flanked by a delicate pair of 18th-century ebony and gilded side chairs bought from Chris's antiques-dealer father. Indeed, 12 members of his family work in the sale of antiques. His grandfather, a legend in the trade and someone with a deep affection for early Italian ironwork (as well as a man whose motto was "the earlier the better"), gave Chris, while a teenager, his first job and inspired his grandson's future career.

On the other side of the fireplace is the couple's metal *bibliothèque*, inspired by a visit to the 1930s modernist *Maison de Verre* in Paris. This intricate piece houses books, a television, and a small pull-out desk. On the walls nearby are pressed sea weeds, which Chris has mounted on the backs of old pictures. "I love the foxed paper," he says.

Hanging above the dining table in the front part of the room is a metal chandelier made in the shape of a magnolia branch. Three magnificent *magnolia grandiflora* trees once grew in a neighbor's garden, overhanging the Coxes' back garden fence. Their glossy dark green leaves and the scented creamy white blossoms were a delight in summer. One year the neighbor decided to lower the level of his garden, and the trees died. So, Chris cut a branch and made this chandelier in their memory. A giant magnolia bough chandelier was made to greet visitors in the Salon Art + Design, held in New York last November, where the Coxes were entrusted to design the opening space.

In their kitchen are pressed wildflowers glued to cartridge paper, forming a brass-bound glass backsplash behind the kitchen counter. Chris loves the slight wave in paper, "which makes them look more casual, more real," he says; however, typically, he saves his greatest enthusiasm for describing the ingenious design of the flower press he and a colleague made, to do the pressing.

Just as varieties of nature mix in the rooms, so, too, do cultures, notably in their daughter's room, which is defined by such elements as an antique Kuba cloth bed-hanging and a Ghanaian Kente cloth that are used as bedspreads. In keeping, too, with the couple's penchant for establishing the sense of lineage, works by Chris's mother, Pearl Bugg, appear throughout, including a "primitive" portly pig that the 13-year-old daughter, Olivia, cherishes.

In the couple's inner sanctum on the top floor, four panels of an antique gilded screen hang on the green wall behind the bed, with its aged and much-patched cream linen bedcover. The ceiling light is made from several thousand white glass leaves, commissioned from Venetian glass artists. In the bathroom, an antique Italian marble washbasin with a curving edge is set in a metal frame, which Chris describes as his tribute to the 20th-century designer Gilbert Poillerat. But its tassels, which the French designer would have allowed to hang neatly down, are swirling here. "We wanted to make our tassels more like the movement the ends of a rope make, as they float in the water," says Chris. Nature and observation, are, as ever, to the fore at Cox London. ■