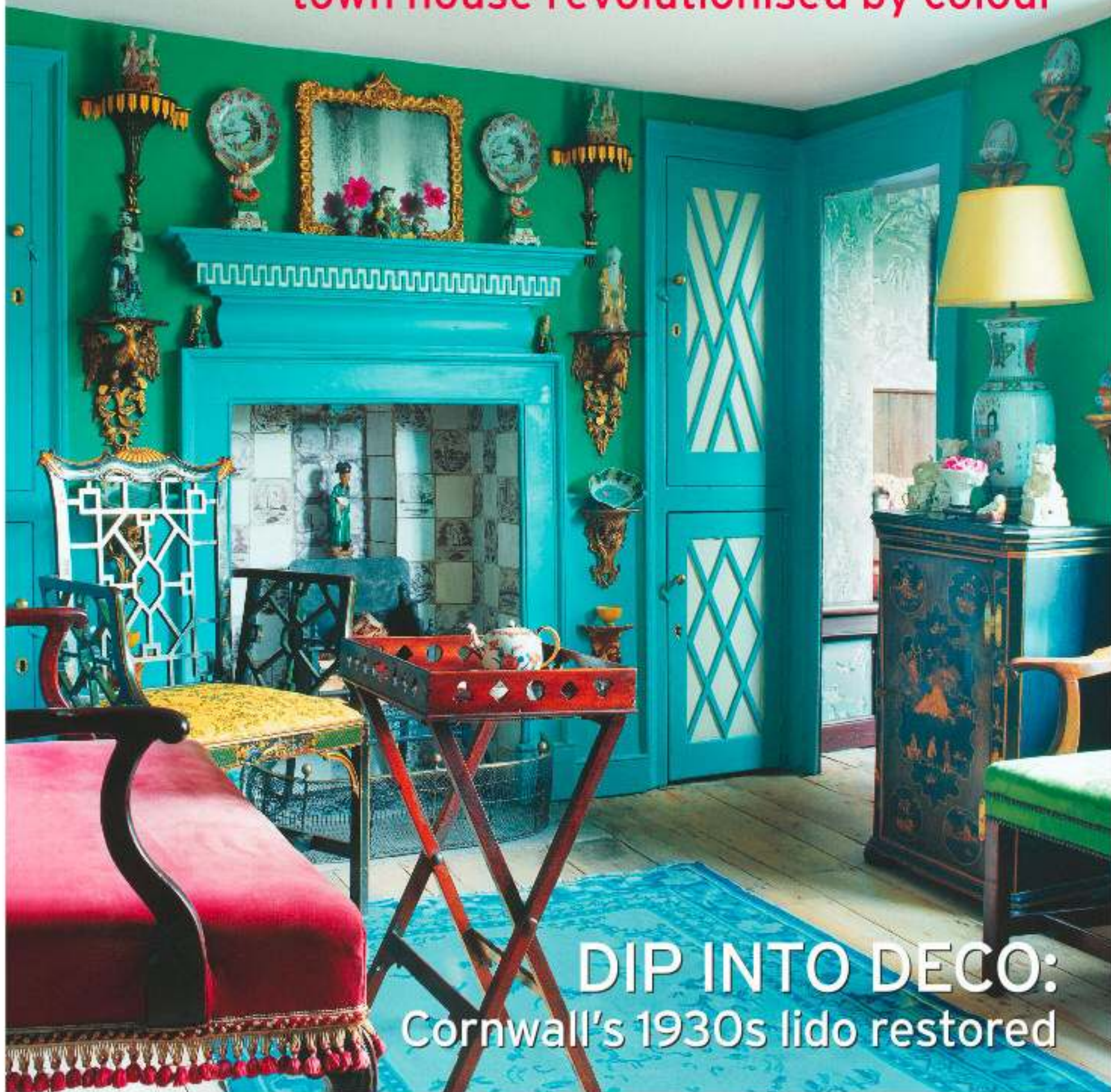


APRIL 2017

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

GLOSSED AND FOUND: Neglected Georgian town house revolutionised by colour



DIP INTO DECO:
Cornwall's 1930s lido restored



Above: all the studio's furniture is reclaimed or, in the case of the table on the right, made by Francesca and Camillo with paint tubs. They use this worktop to make the company's swatches. Opposite: mixing is done in a separate room - 'my west wing,' Francesca jokes. Colour formulae are written on index cards with a sample splodge. Once a recipe has been developed by hand, the machine is programmed to mix larger amounts



MATCHED AND MIXED

In her London studio, Francesca Wezel, of Francesca's Paints, draws on memory to make up her colours, distilling a walk by the Ganges or a favourite painting into lime wash or gloss. Each of her evocative collections, rooted in experience, tells a tale of the Italian's 21 years spent honing her eye, as Grace McCloud discovers. Studio photography: Antony Crolla ▶



NEVER TRUST a thin cook, goes the saying. But what about a clean paint-maker? For Francesca Wezel – who calls herself a ‘chef of paint’ – is suspiciously spotless. Her nails are scrubbed, her jersey pristine. Luckily, it seems I’ve just caught her at a good moment. ‘No, no! We get dirty. . . . If you go to a paint shop and everybody’s clean, then they’re not making paint,’ she says, pointing to an apron behind her, reassuringly smeared and spattered. As if on cue, Camillo Boschetti, her second-in-command at Francesca’s Paints, appears from the mixing room of their Battersea studio, flecked from head to foot.

The pair are both Italian (Francesca from Milan, Camillo from Udine, near Venice), but they met in London. They’ve been working together for all but two of the company’s 21 years, ‘so we must like each other’. Before that, Francesca was in Sydney. She was working in marketing, which she loathed, when she heard of a job going at a firm called Porter’s Paints. ‘I didn’t really know anything,’ she admits. ‘But the boss [founder Peter Lewis] liked my accent. . . . and he said: “Why don’t you come and sell my paint?”’ Before long, she was mixing it too, after the colour man got the sack. She acknowledges that she has improved over the years – but only a little bit. She had a knack for it from the start.

One gets the sense the young Francesca was something of a rebel. She had grown up dreaming of becoming a pianist, but her family (‘who are very business-minded’) believed music was a hobby, not a career. Art was out of the question. Yet here she was, mixing limewash by hand in Lewis’s garage. There came a point, however, when she felt she’d outgrown the business, but she didn’t want to become a competitor to the man who had taught her everything she knew, either. She left for England. Did she ever feel the desire to go back to her native country? No, she says emphatically. ‘Italy was very colourful a few centuries ago. . . . but [now] you can only paint the exterior of a house with the pigments of the region. So Genoa is pink, Milan is yellow ochre, Siena is brownish.’ Not surprisingly, she abhors the Italian fashion for white interiors. ‘But England, because it has a very grey light, needs colour.’ >

From top: Francesca liked the colours of this bench she saw in Ukhimath, a Hindu pilgrimage site in the Himalayas; the paint-maker in her element, at work in the mixing room. ‘I come to work in the morning and I feel lucky, because I love it,’ she says; the mixing-room window is dotted with sample pots and photographs taken in India, a country she visits every year





Arriving in London, she asked a well-known paint company for a job and was offered a role as a shop assistant. 'So I just looked at them and said: "You know what, I'm actually going to open my own business."' And that she did. To begin with, she was just producing limewashes, mixed by hand, but in 2005 she expanded the range (and consequently her client base). Now she makes flat oil, eggshell, old-fashioned oil gloss – the whole gamut. She is blessed with a brilliant eye. 'If you want the colour of your skirt, I'll just make it up,' she says confidently, with no hint of a boast. Born with the chromatic equivalent of perfect pitch, she can see a colour, remember it and mix it. As a child she used hues to memorise things, and today such mnemonics help her with clients' names. But matching is her real talent. Take her a scrap of fabric or show her a painting, and she'll whip up its counterpart in paint in just 'a few tries'. That's how her 'Houghton Hall' collection came about in 1999. Interior designer Miv Watts, who had a shop inside the Palladian mansion near King's Lynn, gave her a bag of faded damasks, silks and velvets – offcuts from the house's exquisite textile collection. Not long after, an eight-strong range appeared, named for the house, its grounds and those who made it what it was: Horace Walpole immortalised in warm taupe; Sybil Sassoon in muddy teal, like the Norfolk sea.

Such skill is handy, say, when you're on a yoga retreat in northern India with a self-imposed screen ban: no telephone, no mod cons. A trip like this, taken last year, was the inspiration behind her latest collection, 'Himalayas', comprising eight new hues, including black-blue Starless Night and Monkey Tail, brown-pink like wet gypsum. There's a raspberry red, exactly the colour of the Rudranath Temple (and accordingly named). Turmeric, Box Myrtle, Rishikesh: these are the colours of experience – sights and smells and tastes anchored in place.

The most intriguingly named, Path to Ganga, has the most poetic story behind it too. One day towards the end of her trip, once her yoga course was over, Francesca walked down to the Ganges in the silence of the morning. Beneath her feet she noticed the fresh paw prints of a▷

From top: the studio doors are covered with the queen's head painted in Francesca's colours. Camillo made 98 of them for a trade fair that coincided with Elizabeth II's jubilee; a leopard's paw prints inspired Path to Ganga, one of the colours in the 'Himalayas' collection; Francesca stopped at this giant statue of Shiva while on her way to an ashram in Uttarakhand





leopard. Luckily, they were going away from her, so she was fairly sure she wouldn't be disturbing the creature (and could avoid becoming breakfast). Relaxing her embargo, she took a picture, 'because if I said I saw a footprint of a leopard, [everyone would] tell me they'd seen one of an elephant; they'd just go: "Yeah, yeah."' The almost-grey she has mixed is exactly that of the sullied sand she saw in the early light.

Returning to London, the collection took just three days to put together. 'I had been wanting to make it for a long time and then, just seeing those colours...' She tails off, dreamily. A similar thing happened with the 'John W. Waterhouse' collection in 2015. Going to look at *The Lady of Shalott* in Tate Britain, her favourite painting, 'I could see the collection in my head. I could just break up the colours... And then I just made it.' Francesca the rebel reappears at this point in the story. The year before, Tate Britain had staged a dazzling exhibition of Turner's work, and Mike Leigh's biopic of the curmudgeonly artist had been released. 'I wanted to be a little bit different,' she says. 'I could have done a Turner collection and it would have been beautiful. But I already had a lot of sandy colours,' she continues, dissolving into laughter. She doesn't pander to trend – and all the better.

The paint-maker is eager to stress, however, that while she comes up with the colours – and yes, it's her name – it is Camillo who makes things tick. 'He has golden hands,' she says. 'He told me the other day I don't know how to mix paint, because I'm too messy.' Packing boxes, Camillo – modest, reserved – looks over and nods. 'Look how beautifully he prepares parcels!' she continues. 'Everything has style. He is so neat and tidy and perfect.' But Camillo is 67, and Francesca is keenly aware that one day, he'll want to stop. 'That will be a tragedy,' she says, not least because finding a replacement will be hard. 'Young kids now... want to be behind a computer. Nobody wants to get dirty.' Luckily for us, however, Francesca still does. Here's a chef you can trust, splatters and all ■
Prices from £43.30 per 2.5 litres of limewash. Francesca's Paints. Ring 020 7228 7694; francescaspaint.com

From top: a market stall displays the colour and goods India has to offer; a view of the Ganges with its rushing currents; Francesca is proud that, unlike bigger companies, she is able to produce a whole collection each year, rather than just a few new colours. The colours within ranges are all designed to work together. Shown on top is 'Houghton Hall', her favourite