

BEAUTIFUL AND PRACTICAL KITCHENS FIVE DESIGNERS GIVE THEIR ADVICE

HOUSE & GARDEN

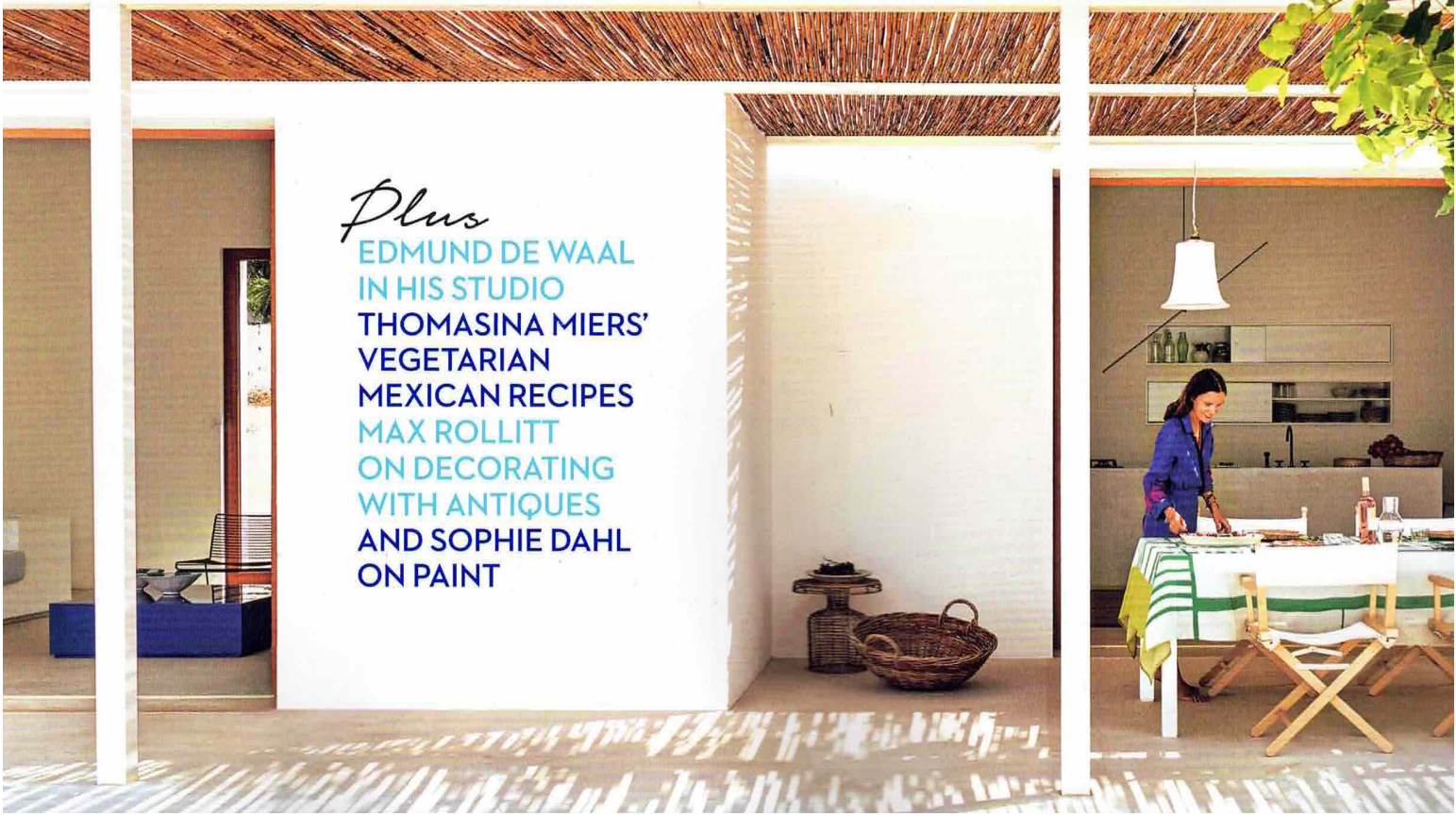
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MEXICAN RECIPES
MAX ROLLITT
ON DECORATING
WITH ANTIQUES
AND SOPHIE DAHL
ON PAINT



Designer and dealer

MAX ROLLITT

on

USING ANTIQUES

ILLUSTRATION ALEXIS BRUCHON

Antiques bring a story with them, whether it is simply the tale of search and discovery, or an appreciation of the life they have led and the past they represent. Whether from a large country house or a tiny cottage, they have travelled through the years to our homes. Their marks, patina and design will tell the story of their origin and their trials and tribulations: visits to the restorers, journeys across continents, and the many hands they have passed through.

It is not only the design element that reflects our history and architecture, but also the materials that were used – be it the ash spindles and legs of a Windsor chair bodedged (turned) in the woods by a farm labourer scratching a living in winter when the earth lay fallow, or china clay dug from the ground in Cornwall and taken to the potteries of Stoke-on-Trent. There is an alchemy that happens when raw materials are moulded by humanity into beauty, from a primitive slipware dish to the finest Chippendale commode or piece of Copeland china. These stories – this romance – seem more valuable now than ever before.

In our parents' and our grandparents' day, there was a more formulaic and formal approach to antiques. They were a status symbol and their use complied with a perception of the correct way of living. We have let this go now and can look at antiques with a different eye – more of an artist's eye. With that freedom comes creativity. Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant exemplified this look many years ago at the Bloomsbury Group's Sussex farmhouse, Charleston. Beautiful pieces like an 18th-century Piedmontese commode seem almost incidental, but their richness adds to the composition and beauty of an apparently informal household.

Care needs to be taken when using any contemporary furniture in a historic house with period architectural features. I recently completed a project with a client who was a great collector of modern art. However, the house was built in 1840. I selected antique furniture in sympathy with the architecture of the house, but created a sense of informality with the choice of textiles, flooring, wall finishes, objects and paintings. The layering of history and texture ran through the whole scheme. We introduced reclaimed flooring, chose antique fabrics for the curtains and upholstery, and used block-printed paper or glazes on the walls and woodwork. In a project like this, the decision about the colour palette is key, a careful balance between freshness and earthiness.

To an interior designer, antiques are an important mechanism. Just as a composer might choose certain instruments to convey a feeling in a piece of music, so the choice of antique pieces can add richness or softness, formality, grandeur or humour to a room. Antiques were made to be used and repaired, to be adapted and



repurposed. These possibilities only add to the thrill of the chase when sourcing. Being able to spot potential and then bring items back to life is a joy. Last week, I bought a Charles II chest, unloved but also untouched and unrecognised. With the replacement of a couple of missing handles and the repair of the drawer runners and some mouldings, it will restore beautifully and make me very happy.

Rather than restoring a piece to make it look new, I prefer to celebrate its story, keeping the patination and character; bringing it to life with wax rather than cleaning away the wear, and repairing the gilt over regilding. The opportunity for repair and restoration that is part and parcel of antique furniture design is missing from modern mass-production processes, which rarely offer any such chance to mend or replace broken parts. Breathing new life into objects that we can use for another lifetime is very satisfying and means future generations can enjoy these beautiful things.

The resurgent interest in antiques has been accompanied by an appreciation of modern crafts, championed by the Crafts Council, companies like The New Craftsmen and shows like the Collect craft and art fair. Craft seems to have made a great leap forward recently and the more it is valued, the more its potential will be revealed. Contemporary craft and antiques mix well together – we can see the value of the handmade and the beauty of the human touch.

My advice is to study the story that runs behind each piece. Learn about the makers, the materials, the process and the design. This knowledge is not essential, but it all adds to the joy and the richness of those partners in your life. Sourcing and using antiques is all about a love of learning, the enjoyment of the unknown, the thrill of the chase – hunting down the right piece for the right place; being open to alternatives and what might fall into your path. I wish you happy hunting □ maxrollitt.com