



THIS PICTURE Brigitte Singh's house was built to her own specifications, round a central courtyard; she lives on the upper floor, above her studio. OPPOSITE The floor of the airy, open-plan living space is covered with locally made tiles in a Moghul chevron design traditionally used for water features

*Inspired by Moghul art, the owner of this modern 'haveli', left her native France to develop her own hand-block-printed fabrics business in India, where she now lives and works*

# FRANCO-INDIAN FLAIR

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS HENRY WILSON









Brigitte Singh follows a particularly European tradition. She is one of that handful of people who have successfully upped sticks and left the comfort and assurance of their native surroundings – in her case, France – to set up a business in challenging circumstances. She now lives in India, running her successful hand-block-printing business from a newly built stone *haveli* (mansion).

As a young girl in Cholet, near Nantes, Brigitte dreamt of such exotic places as Herat and the Great Bazaar in Afghanistan. At 19, she went to study Islamic arts in Cairo; in 1979, she travelled to Jaipur, capital of Rajasthan, India's desert state. She studied Moghul and Rajput miniature painting, but soon discovered the area's famous hand-block-printed fabrics. For centuries these were one of India's most refined and sought-after exports to Europe, the floral fabrics first becoming known as *indiennes*, later evolving into *chintz*.

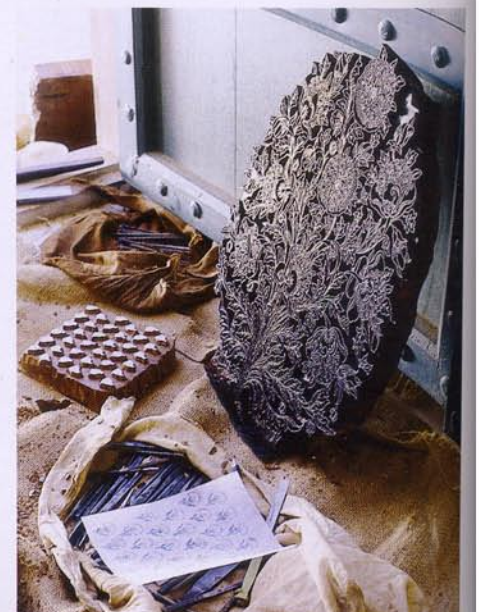
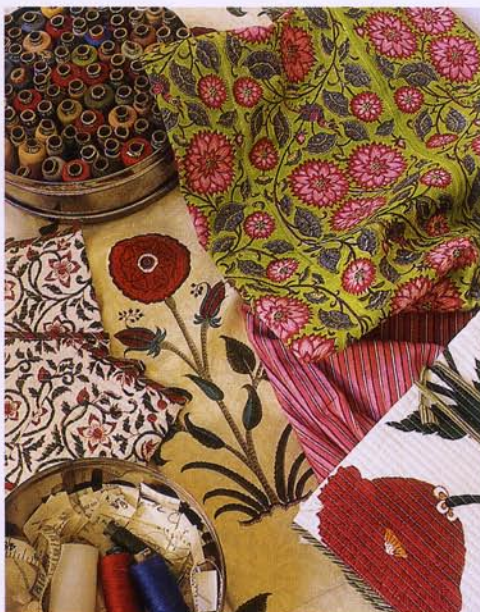
So impressed was Brigitte with the bright, sophisticated finish of one new pattern, based on an eighteenth-century example, that she went in search of the artist who had created it. Soon she was producing her first hand-block-printing commission for Colefax and Fowler.

Brigitte's house, built to her specification in 1995, is on the outskirts of the village of Amer, which is dominated by a spectacular hill fort. 'I adore the old stone-built *havelis* of Rajasthan, and I designed the house along their ancient principles – or rather, it designed itself,' she laughs. 'I love working with the local builders who work with such basic tools, still use the traditional methods and materials, and still work to perfection.'

The heart of the building is a large airy *chowk* (courtyard). Its design creates natural ventilation, essential to combat the high summer temperatures. The ground floor is entirely given over to her atelier, as for Brigitte it is essential to be close to her work – 'to live with it,' she explains.

A stone staircase leads to Brigitte's quarters, at the centre of which is an airy open-plan living area with views of the garden. Here she combines her own French style with Indian tradition, tempering decoration with practicality. The floor is finished with locally made tiles in the distinctive chevron design that traditionally decorates Moghul water features. 'I am constantly reminded of animated water,' says Brigitte. Not only are stone or tile floors crucial here for their cooling effect, they are also a practical choice due to the fine sand that is constantly blown in from the desert.

Brigitte combines French and Indian styles - the chair in the living area (above left) was formerly in the Rajasthan Legislative Authority building in Jaipur. The fabric covering the kitchen table (above right) was inspired by an eighteenth-century French design. The garden (above centre) is filled with over 200 varieties of flowers, shrubs and trees. Brigitte's fabrics (below left) are all hand-block-printed in her studio (below centre), using a variety of tools (below right)







The furnishing of the house is constantly evolving. 'I'm not a great shopper for myself, but often when I go hunting with friends to help them I end up buying things,' says Brigitte. Her style is informal and understated, often arrived at by happenstance: 'I found the art-deco sofa in an antiques shop in Delhi, and the trunk while holidaying in Sri Lanka.' Many of the accessories in Brigitte's home are made by local craftsmen to her own specifications. There are also plenty of her own botanical fabrics – 'just adding a few flowers adds so much beauty to an interior.' Her main decorative inspirations are Moghul botanical motifs – the cushion covers on the art-deco sofa feature the 'Black Tara' poppy – and, to a lesser extent, traditional French floral toile, such as the tablecloth in the kitchen, which was inspired by an eighteenth-century French design.

Instead of curtains, which become dust traps, she has chosen the traditional rolled chicks (split bamboo blinds) paired, in the main sitting room, with one of her own favourites, a lotus design. The chicks are lowered every afternoon, particularly in summer, to keep out the hot sun, producing a soft, filtered light.

There are many unexpected green vistas. 'My Chinese sign is the wild

goat,' says Brigitte. 'I need to chew green and I need a garden; I would not survive without one around me.' She quotes an old adage: 'If you want to be happy for a day, have a drink; if you want to be happy for a year, get married; if you want to be happy for a lifetime, work in your garden.' Crumbling Rajput ruins form a focal point in the garden that Brigitte planned around a traditional Moghul layout, filling it with over 200 different flowering perennials, shrubs and trees. The vibrant colours of the borders – which overflow with Moghul roses, poppies, marigolds, cornflowers and many more – 'serve as templates for the combination of flowers which I reproduce in my fabric designs'.

Brigitte admits, 'I am not a city person and my isolation is by choice.' She needs the peace and space to work. Her creations are the result of conscientious research and a meticulous approach but, by her own admission, she is an incurable romantic: 'Great stories start with dreams,' she states. What is certain is her precise vision of delicious, bespoke fabrics and the beautiful setting in which she dreams them up □

To order Brigitte Singh's fabrics in the UK, contact Aleta Bartel (020-7228 9676; e-mail: [aleta@aletaonline.com](mailto:aleta@aletaonline.com))

The main bedroom (above left), with its simple four-poster bed, is typical of Brigitte's understated style. Throughout the house, Brigitte has dressed the windows with split-bamboo blinds (above right) paired with thin curtains. The vibrant colours of Brigitte's garden (above centre and below left) inspire the floral patterns that she reproduces in her fabric designs (below centre). Brigitte is pictured in the garden with her daughter, Lilah (below right)

