

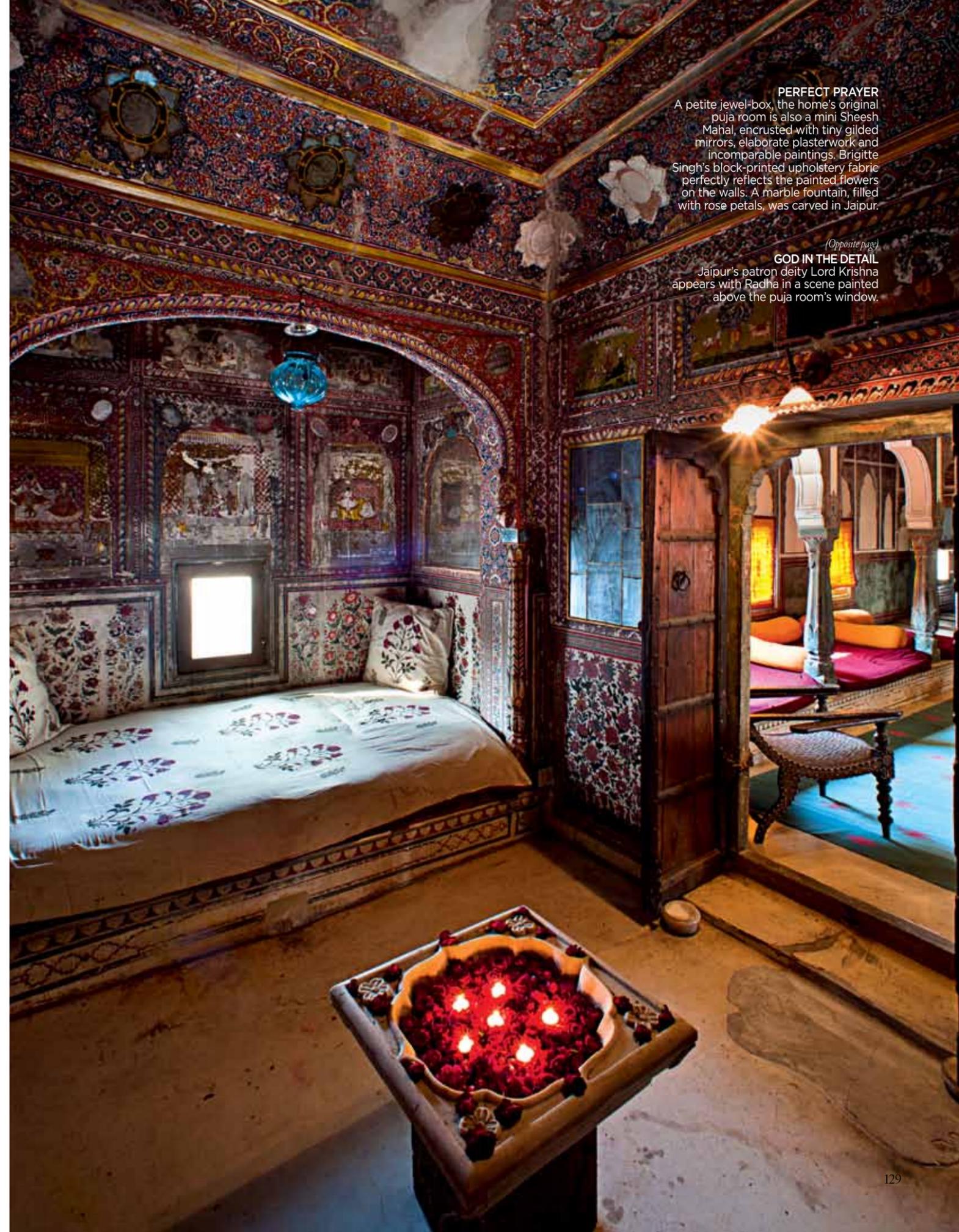
# The Descendants

*Bagru haveli was in ruins within the Pink City, until a new tenant saw its former glory flourish through time-ridden grimy walls and brought it back to the present*

WRITER VICTORIA LAUTMAN · PHOTOGRAPHER ANTONIO MARTINELLI



**I**n 18th-century Jaipur, a home nestled inside the city walls near the Maharaja's court was an enviable luxury—even more so for the Thakur of Bagru, a nobleman who lived 30 arduous kilometres away from the Pink City. Luckily for him, when the design-besotted Sawai Jai Singh II laid out his new capital, he granted a parcel of land to the family and, right around 1740, the Thakur erected a show place where his entourage could linger when royal duty called. This wasn't just any town home. The grand courtyard mansion sprawled over an entire city block, with stables for horses and elephants, numerous servants' quarters, and a constellation of rooms designed for living in splendid Rajput style. In subsequent decades during the reign of Maharaja Pratap Singh (1778–1803), the finest craftsmen were employed to emblazon walls with murals, mirrors and the dust of ground pearls, and invitations to candlelit soirées at Bagru haveli would have been to the A-list only. >



**PERFECT PRAYER**  
A petite jewel-box, the home's original puja room is also a mini Sheesh Mahal, encrusted with tiny gilded mirrors, elaborate plasterwork and incomparable paintings. Brigitte Singh's block-printed upholstery fabric perfectly reflects the painted flowers on the walls. A marble fountain, filled with rose petals, was carved in Jaipur.

*(Opposite page)*  
**GOD IN THE DETAIL**  
Jaipur's patron deity Lord Krishna appears with Radha in a scene painted above the puja room's window.



**COLOURFUL LEANINGS**

In the Rang Mahal, murals are only lightly restored, while unfussy fabrics, modest bamboo blinds and plenty of pillows create a welcoming ambience. The furniture is kept to a minimum to augment the room's airy expansiveness; Mitchell Crites had a formerly plain planter's chair entirely inlaid with bone.



**RAW EDGES**

Three stylized Cyprus trees embellish a cast-bronze console by Nilou, with an eclectic collection of objects artfully arranged on top. The calligraphic work in Arabic script is contemporary, as are the tribal figures from central India and the wooden artefact. A prickly, nail-studded antique sandal, once worn by a sadhu, is one of a pair, from Mysore.

< But two centuries of heat, dust and neglect will take its toll. Slowly, like the sinking of a vast ship, the haveli fell into decline, its property divided, sold or bequeathed to retainers, while its grounds filled with small shops and parked cars. By 1987, when art historian Mitchell Crites was searching for a residence in Jaipur, Thakur Janak Singh—a direct descendant of the original owner—was ensconced with his family in a top-floor apartment. One flight down, the ornamental antique living area was available to lease, which lured Mitchell and his Persian wife Nilou to a bustling street near the Gate of the Moon in Jaipur's old city.

Then and now, a narrow, steep stairway offered no clue to what awaited above. "We were greeted by a wreck, a complete mess," laughs Mitchell, recalling his first impressions. "Missing windows, broken doors, no fans, water, or working toilets, and just a single light bulb dangling from the cracked ceiling. Oh, and there were bats." But rather than focusing on the decrepitude, Mitchell saw only former glory in the paintings and mirror-work peeking through layers of grime. He was smitten.

### INDIA CALLING

Nilou, a jewellery designer, saw things differently. She pronounced her husband "out of his mind", vowing never to live or even visit the haveli. Most people would have done the same, but the American-born scholar had a unique perspective: Steeped in ancient Indian history and languages as a graduate student in Chicago, he moved to Delhi when his studies ended. "I loved India from the minute I first visited in 1966. It always felt like home," he admits, far from the small Midwestern American town where he was born. Putting his knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian and Hindi to use, Mitchell embarked on a variety of projects in India, Iran and England before opening a gallery in London devoted to Indian and Islamic art. Ricocheting between the UK and the subcontinent, he started producing sophisticated Mughal-inspired architectural pieces, manufactured in Rajasthan. But working with artisans meant extended hotel stays, and a permanent home in Jaipur made sense. That's when the haveli turned up, like a musty, half-dead time-traveller, and Mitchell wasn't about to pass it by. "I just didn't notice the problems, but saw only the potential. So much was still there and reasonably intact that I felt it could be brought back to life. I asked Nilou to give me one year, and went to work."

A swarm of a hundred artisans and workmen descended, replacing windows and doors, adding bathrooms, and installing a modest kitchen that bisects the home in two. On one side, the Rang Mahal—or 'painted palace'—is the household's heart, a room for dining and entertainment. Ringed with carved columns, sculpted niches, and low banquettes, there were elaborately detailed paintings on every surface. "These aren't typical murals of gods and goddesses, but are related to feasting, with dishes of fruit and sweetmeats, with lots of peacocks."

But how to proceed with the areas requiring repair? On this, Mitchell and Nilou agreed: preserving the haveli's old character was vital. "We insisted on 'disciplined restoration', a concept unknown to Jaipur's craftsmen who wanted to paint over everything. I allowed only light touching-up of the damaged areas, even altering the colours slightly to make it obvious. They thought we were crazy! But today this is the standard for restoration." In fact Mitchell's company, Saray Design, expanded to include so

many renovation and design projects that he was obliged to jettison his London gallery to concentrate full-time on an international roster including palatial residences, historic mosques, and Jaipur's own Jal Mahal.

### ROYAL RESERVE

Meanwhile, Nilou focused on furnishing the haveli. Anything detracting from the abode's historic character was sidestepped, so there's no glitzy embroidery or gold-threaded fabric in sight. Instead, bamboo blinds and an artful arrangement of several brightly coloured pillows lend a cozy and unfussy ambience to the Rang Mahal. Here, the room's lush greens, reds and golden tones are complemented by vintage teak dining chairs that once graced a Parsi restaurant in Mumbai, while a dhurrie designed by Nilou anchors the floor.

Guests exploring this room discover a surprise treasure in one corner behind carved doors concealing the tiny Sheesh Mahal, where pujas were traditionally performed. Like an ornate jewel-box, the room sparkles with gilded plaster and wafer-thin mirrors that proved nearly impossible to replace. "Modern mirrors just don't compare," laments Mitchell, who eventually located a capable craftsman for the job. Scenes of Radha and Krishna, Shiva, Ganesh and Durga line a snug upholstered alcove, but it's a frieze of painted poppies, much admired by the opium-addled Mughals, that captivated Mitchell's inner art historian. "These are the finest floral paintings in Jaipur and among the best in Rajasthan," he lovingly declares. "Instead of the standard stylized flowers, they're wild and almost impressionistic. I've never seen anything like them from this period." Nilou and Mitchell use Sheesh Mahal specifically for meditation, out of respect for the room's original purpose.

The unbridled exuberance of these 'public' areas recedes in the haveli's more private areas, where a soothing open courtyard filled with potted plants and a fountain provide an al fresco oasis for the couple, at least now that the local monkeys have been banished. Here in the former mardana, or men's quarters, sedate plasterwork and geometric black motifs extend into the adjacent master bedroom, known as the Moti Mahal, which opens onto the terrace. Seeming nearly austere after the colour-saturated Rang Mahal, the bedroom has a stunning arrangement of arches, columns and niches, the sculptural effect magnified by creamy, bare araash walls. This time-honoured plastering technique, said to incorporate pearl dust for its cooling effect in the searing Rajasthan summer, creates a subtle glow, while punctuation is added to the monochromatic space by a vigorously patterned rug and simple black bands of paint. Indeed, the only nod to colour is three small glass windows, original to the room. "The bedroom needed little restoration, and the Thakur who built this must have had an unusual character," says Mitchell. "It's beautiful but restrained, bold in conception and quite masculine. I find it to be very elegant, and architects love to come and sketch it."

Thankfully, Nilou and Mitchell found their home, the Thakur found willing neighbours, and the haveli is resurrected. "It's an unusual arrangement, but it's worked out well for everyone," Mitchell concedes. "One day we won't be here anymore. But I have an agreement, written in Hindi, stating that I can stay, forever." Bagru haveli will live on. ♦

### REFLECT ACTION

A local bazaar yielded several treasures, like this carved and gilded 19th-century mirror and an old wooden chowki table. The leaf motif bronze candelabras are by Nilou.





**SANCTUM**

Serenity dominates the master bedroom, with its sculpted arches, restrained plasterwork and muted tones. Soot-based pigment was used to refresh the delicate painted friezes, whose intricacy is mimicked in a custom-made dhurrie designed by Nilou. Mitchell, who turned a vintage wooden jali screen into a unique table, also commissioned a local silversmith to create the rose water containers, which are based on 18th-century designs. A pair of antique Rajput beds complete the room.



*(Clockwise from top left)*  
**INNER CIRCLE**

Mitchell and Nilou Crites in the courtyard. A house-warming gift from one of the woodcarvers, the ornate jali screen echoes Rang Mahal's splendour. Nearby, a stone table designed by Mitchell supports a collection of antique glass vases, flanked by a pair of old chairs updated with bone inlay—Nilou's initials are visible on the rug of her design. The secluded room was where, historically, the Thakur's wife was sequestered during childbirth.

