

ON THE CHEAP

Vicente Wolf Creates an Indian Sanctuary in Kips Bay



Matthew Williams for The New York Times

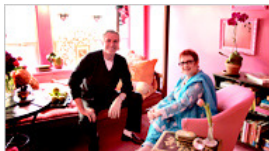
The designer Vicente Wolf created a vibrant setting for Harrice Miller in the second bedroom of her Manhattan apartment.

By JULIE SCELFO

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FOUR years ago, after selling her weekend home in Amagansett, Harrice Miller, a dealer in and historian of costume jewelry, began reexamining her life.

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Before and After: Turning a Spare Room Into an Indian Sanctuary

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Ruby Washington/The New York Times
Before, the apartment's second bedroom was used as storage space.

She had owned the Long Island house since 1973, she said, and maintaining it had become an emotional and financial burden. "Once I sold it, it was a like a weight lifted from me," she said.

Ms. Miller, whose main residence is a rent-stabilized apartment in the Kips Bay section of Manhattan, soon realized that she longed to devote more of her new-found time to producing concerts of Indian classical music, which she has loved ever since attending a wedding in Gujarat in 1999. "Indian music for me is like doing meditation or *yoga*," she said. "It brings you down to a place where you can hear your insides." Her company, Harrice Miller Entertainment, has produced 20 shows and planned a variety of smaller events.

But even though Ms. Miller, who declined to give her age, regularly invites musicians into her home for dinner parties and jam sessions, she had never been able to provide a place for them to stay. That was a problem. "There's a guru-disciple tradition" in Indian music, she said, "and musicians are typically hosted by family or students."

The apartment's second bedroom was being used as a storage space for Ms. Miller's

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costume jewelry business and, more recently, for the leftovers from her Amagansett house, like a pair of nautical rope chairs and several paintings by her parents.

She began to imagine converting the room into a space like those she had seen in temples and palaces in India, with low furniture, floor cushions and scalloped arches over doorways and windows.

So she decided to respond to a notice (since removed) on the Web site of The New York Times offering to help people with small budgets redecorate. She had \$5,000 to spend, and the newspaper asked Vicente Wolf, an interior designer known for his sophisticated, pale interiors, to take on Ms. Miller's project. He agreed to do it free.

In February, visiting his client for the first time, he seemed surprised.

"Harrice is not a man — and she's not Indian," said Mr. Wolf, 65, who has radiant good looks and speaks in a monotone, making it hard to read his meaning.

Ms. Miller showed Mr. Wolf the second bedroom and began describing her vision, using several books on Indian design to illustrate her ideas. But the designer bluntly dismissed them.

"To try to get this to look like a palace in India, it's going to look fake," he said. "You're not Indian. And we're in Manhattan."

Ms. Miller, who wears rhinestone glasses and had accessorized her outfit with a fake hot-pink diamond ring, forged on. "If I was doing it myself," she said, "I would have a tent made here and do it between Ali Baba and the wildest tent you can imagine."

"I don't do themes," Mr. Wolf countered. "The sense of India should be something you don't see but maybe perceive." The distance between the two grew.

Mr. Wolf then asked Ms. Miller if she was willing to meet again, this time at his Midtown office. She agreed, although she admitted to doubts after he left. "This is minimalist versus maximalist," she said. "How are we going to find common ground?"

The next day, Mr. Wolf welcomed her into his white meeting room. He introduced a student intern and a designer on his staff, Tina Ramchandani. "Tina is Indian and had an Indian wedding, so she's here to vouch for the authenticity of our designs," Mr. Wolf quipped.

Then he questioned Ms. Miller about what colors she liked, how she felt about textures, how she planned to use the room.

Ms. Miller said that she wanted to continue storing jewelry there, and that she might want to use the room for reading or meditating, and for extra space when entertaining.

Soon, the conversation grew more informal. Mr. Wolf mentioned that he had followed his parents to the United States from Cuba when he was 15; that he had worked as a model and as a ladies' shoe buyer; and that he has a poor memory and it led to his failure as a thespian: "What sort of actor are you if you can't remember your lines?"

Ms. Miller spoke of her divorce and her close relationship with her ex-husband's new family. And when she told him she once owned the costume jewelry collection of the dancer Ann Miller, Mr. Wolf became excited. "I love musicals," he said, and rattled off the names of movies the dancer had made, like "Kiss Me, Kate."

Although the two had at last seemed to connect, Ms. Miller was still apprehensive. "I looked at his book and at his Web site and everything there was white," she said. "White floors, white walls, white ceiling. I was like, 'Oh, this is so not me.'"

A week later, she returned to his office and Mr. Wolf presented his vision.

To start, the walls would be painted hot pink and the windows covered with matching cotton shades. Next, Ms. Miller would get a new metal four-poster bed with a custom-upholstered mattress in crimson fabric, which would work as a daybed and a place for overnight guests.

The closet doors would be replaced with the same shades as those on the windows, the



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floor would be covered in wall-to-wall raspberry carpeting, and the frame chairs from her house in Amagansett would get a new life with more hot pink paint and magenta upholstery.

To reflect Ms. Miller's love of the architecture of Indian palaces, Mr. Wolf planned to repurpose some of her unused picture frames, painting a scalloped archway on the wall behind them. To add a sense of mystery, he would suspend three Moroccan lanterns from the top post of the bed. For function, he would add a small cafe table that could serve as a place to write or as a nightstand. And for a touch of "glimmer," he would wrap a gold-flecked sari over the top of the bed.

As he described each element, Mr. Wolf (or Ms. Ramchandani) put a swatch on the table, eventually covering the sleek white surface in a riot of color.

Ms. Miller was delighted, having been presented with the same kind of sensory experience that had captivated her during the trip to Gujarat.

"When you are working with few elements, each element in that space has an important part to play," the designer said. "The strongest element in this room is the color of the walls.

"When you walk in the room, I want it to feel soft, comfortable," Mr. Wolf added. "I want you to have a sense of comfort, engulfment. When I think of India, it's an all-encompassing sort of experience. I wanted the room to have that as a subliminal message."

Feeling relieved and excited, Ms. Miller signed off on his plan. With shipping and installation, the total cost exceeded the \$5,200 budget that Mr. Wolf had proposed, even with the \$1,450 expense of paint and painting excluded from the budget. But the final pre-tax cost, \$5,862, was in the ballpark, a result reached by obtaining several furnishings from discount stores online and by using some of Ms. Miller's possessions, like the frames.

Over the next few weeks, Mr. Wolf and his staff helped Ms. Miller find a painter, order furnishings and deal with logistics like wiring the lanterns. (Mr. Wolf had envisioned them lighted by candles, but Ms. Miller had safety concerns.)

By late April, the project was nearly finished, and Mr. Wolf, wanting to create suspense, asked Ms. Miller not to enter the room until it was done.

On the appointed day, Ms. Miller, dressed in a salwar kameez and a necklace that had belonged to Ann Miller, saw the room for the first time and was rendered speechless.

"This is mine?" she finally asked. "It really is gorgeous. I'm moving in here."

Mr. Wolf had finished off the room with a chartreuse chair, side table and orchid, all from the living room, and two paintings, one each by Ms. Miller's mother and father.

Several minutes later, Ms. Miller was still astonished. "I'm never leaving this room," she said.

Mr. Wolf said he, too, was happy, believing that he had provided the drama Ms. Miller sought "without compromising our design integrity."

For him, the project was fun. "Most people hire me because they want me to do white, so I don't get that much of a chance to utilize colors like this," he said. He also liked how Ms. Miller had provided him with something more creative than a furniture request. "She gave us an emotion," he said.

Several months later, Ms. Miller said she was frustrated by several things, including the way the blinds didn't close completely. Still, she said, she finds herself relaxing in the room nearly every day. And last weekend, she had her first overnight guest, Sumitra Guha, a vocalist from New Delhi.

What It Cost

Ms. Miller's budget was \$5,000, not including the \$1,450 for the painting and the

paint: Benjamin Moore Hot Lips for the walls, Twilight Blue for the ceiling, Spring Azalea for the chairs and window frames, and Magenta for the frame interiors.

Here is a breakdown of the budgeted costs, with pre-tax prices rounded off. Vicente Wolf, the interior designer, donated his services. (Normally, he charges 35 percent of the job total, with projects typically starting around \$100,000.)

Klondike nylon carpet in Rosarian color from Fox Floors Carpet One, purchase and installation, **\$800**

Cotton Roman shades in pink (two at 60 by 72 inches and four at 48 by 72 inches) from orientalfurniture.com, **\$240**

Mateo cotton fabric in magenta (eight yards for chairs) and Titan cotton fabric in Berrywine (seven yards for mattress) from Norbar Fabrics, **\$185**

Custom upholstery of two armchairs by Home Interiors By Anthony Giaramita, **\$600**

Full-size Bristol firm innerspring mattress with custom upholstery from Charles H. Beckley Inc., **\$600**

Totally Tangerine full deluxe quilt set (quilt, two shams, bolster and accent pillow) from roomstogokids.com, **\$168**

Two standard pillow inserts from Costco, **\$7**

Full-size handmade canopy steel bed frame with rust finish from boltz.com, **\$1,200**

Extra slats to support mattress, **\$125**

Bed assembly and installation by Boltz Furniture, **\$150**

Console table with shelves in coffee from Brocade Home, **\$300**

Round side table with black metal powder-coated frame and slate top, from restaurant-bar-furniture.com, **\$63**

Three pierced tin and frosted glass Moroccan lanterns (no longer available) from tazidesigns.com, **\$225**

Wiring for lanterns, **\$135**

Tolomeo clip spotlight in aluminum finish by Artemide, from M. S. K. Illuminations, **\$140**

Elise table lamp with aluminum base and dimmer (three-inch diameter), from roomandboard.com, **\$128**

Rose-colored antique sari with circular pattern from VW Home, **\$300**

Picture hooks, extension cords and other assorted installation materials, **\$60**

Shipping, **\$229**

Transportation and postage, for Vicente Wolf Associates, **\$207**

TOTAL: \$5,862

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