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Rumi *Whirlwind* *of Love*

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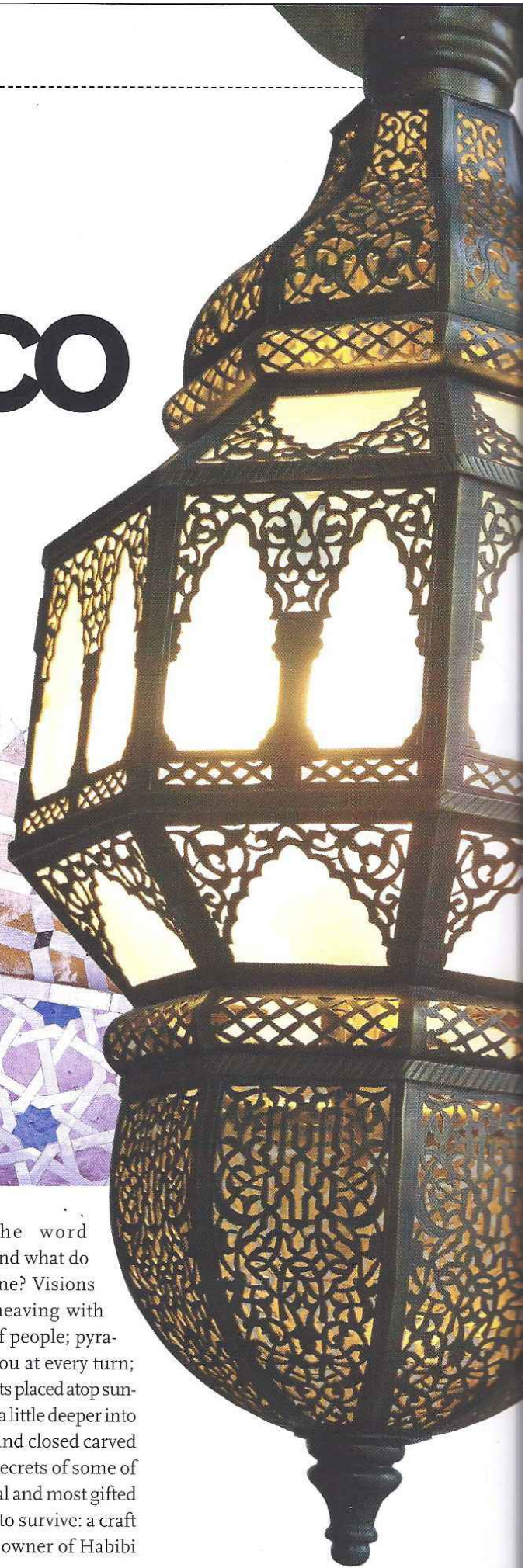
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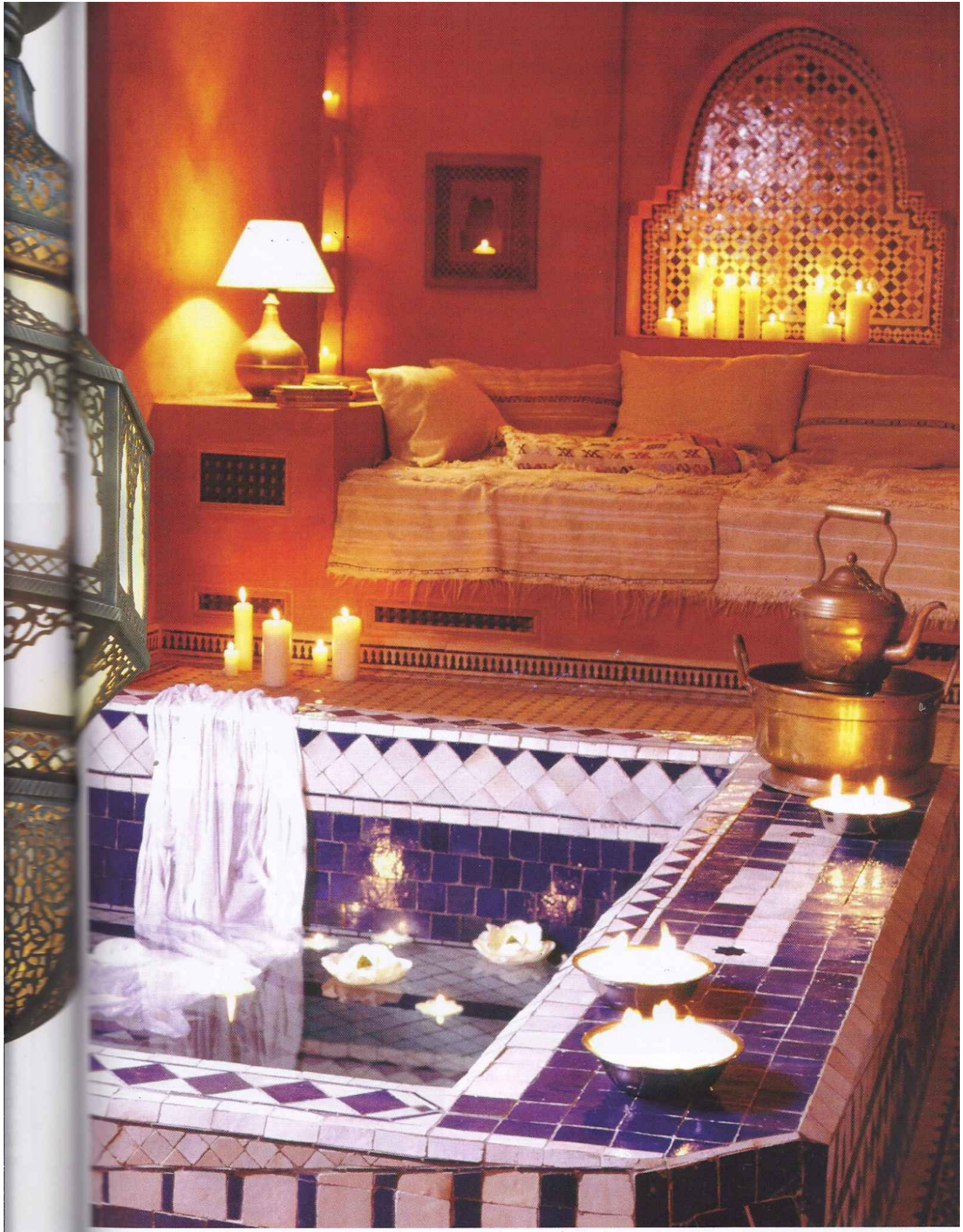
Made in Morocco

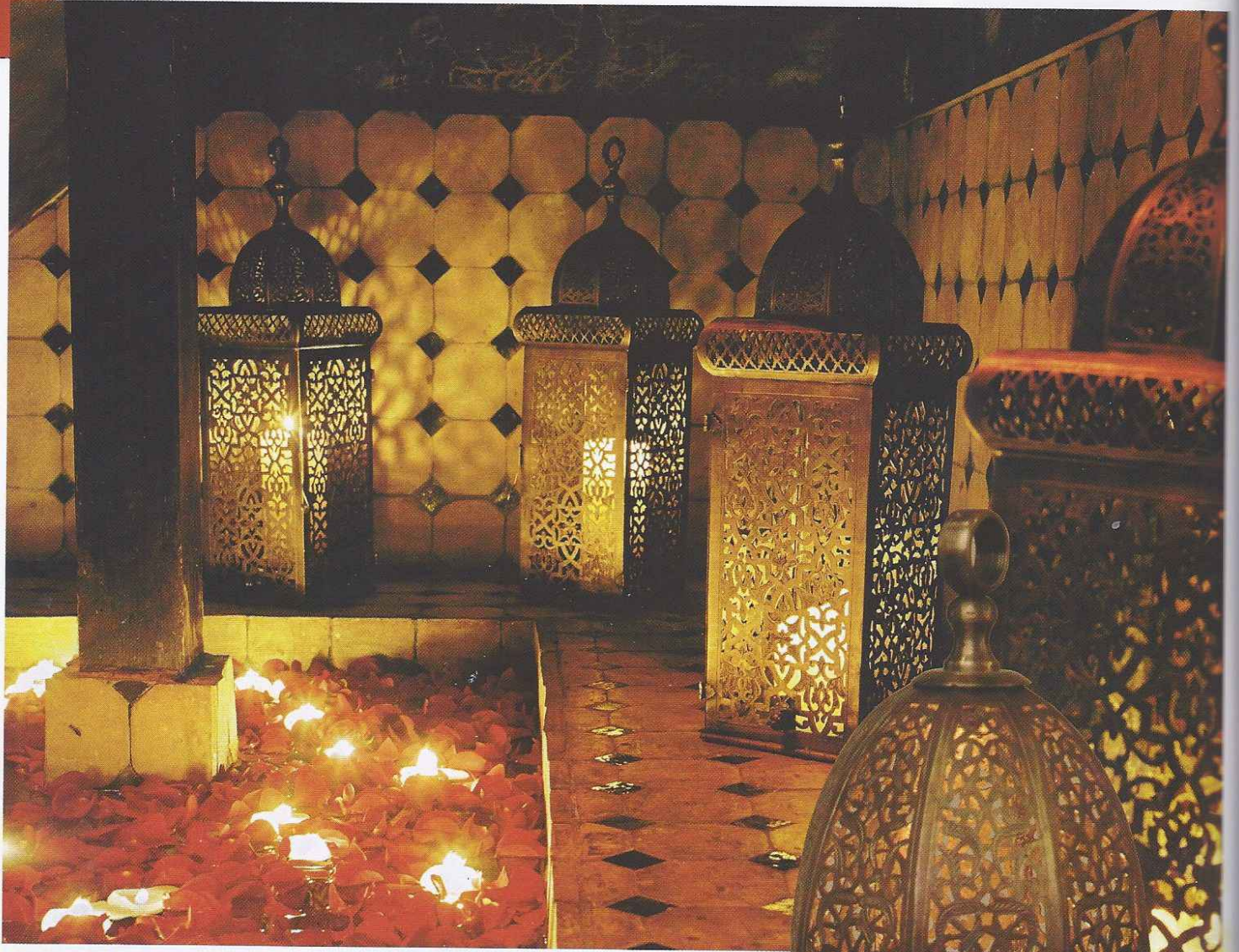
Let the traditional appeal of Moroccan décor spread through your home as **Syeda Onjali Bodrul** speaks to Nouredine Somati about handbaked tiles and keeping true craftsmanship alive. **portrait Nazrul Islam**



Whisper the word Morocco and what do you imagine? Visions of souks heaving with a throng of people; pyramids of spices greeting you at every turn; low tables, and velvet Fez hats placed atop sun-kissed smiles? Yet venture a little deeper into the medina and you will find closed carved doors, behind which the secrets of some of the world's most traditional and most gifted craftsmanship continues to survive: a craft that Nouredine Somati, owner of Habibi Interiors, is eager to share.





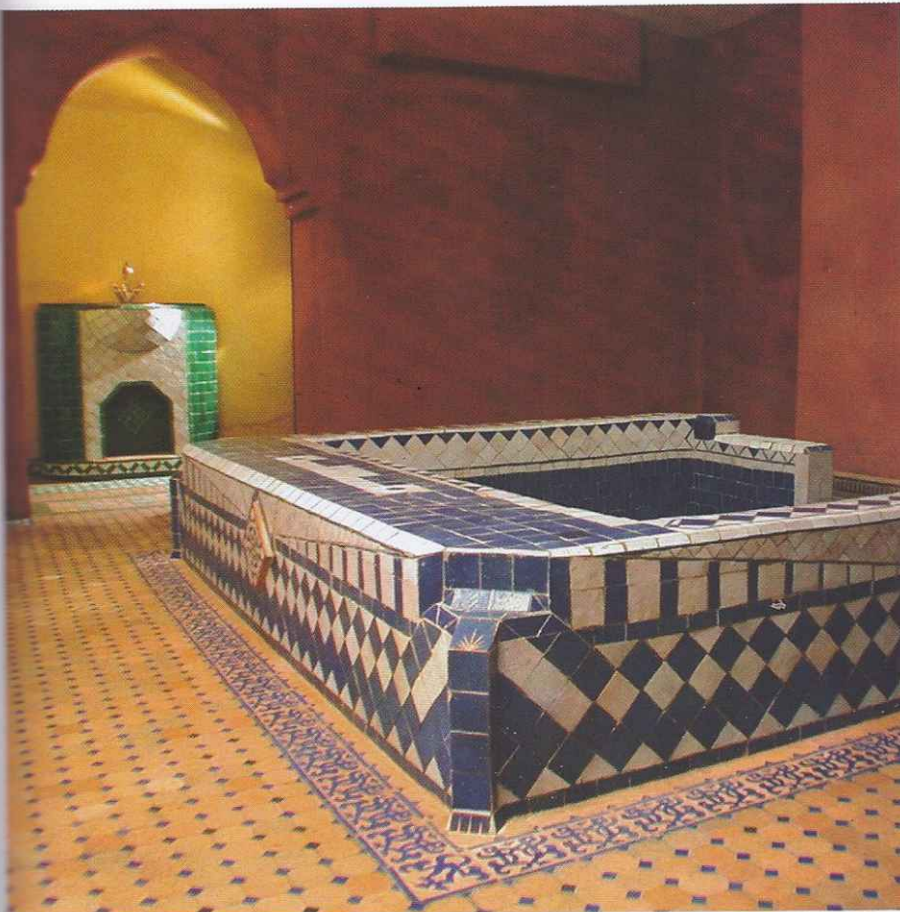


“I grew up in Morocco surrounded by these beautiful handmade tiles, yet only after moving to London 20 years ago and having to live away from them did I realise just how unique they were,” says Nouredine, leaning back in a straw-woven, cushion covered chair at his newest showroom based in south London. Surrounded by relics and emblems of Morocco, from first edition travel books and ancient postcards to silver tea-sets, sculptures and framed black and white pictures of the Moroccan royal family, you sample a taste of an authentic Maghreb – a flavour Nouredine is keen to impart. “I want to bring the essence of the Moroccan home and make it part of people’s everyday lives,” he says, leaning forward. “It is important for me that the centuries of skill that lie behind



each tile is not lost, which is why when people come into my showrooms, I want them to be able to envision how Moroccan tiles can bring life to their homes.”



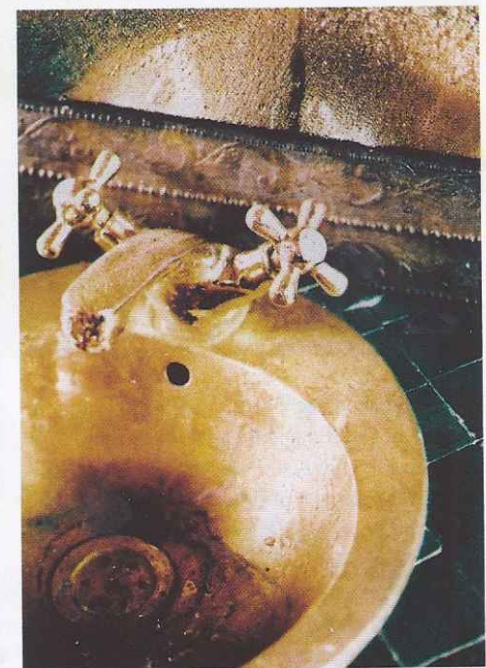
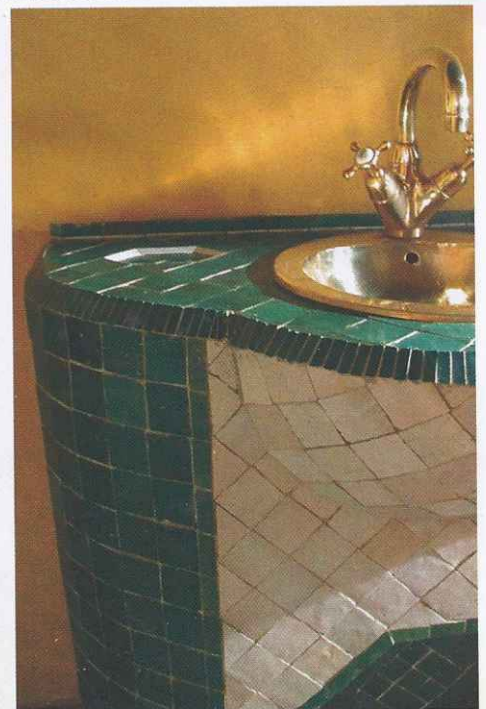


“It is important that the centuries of skill that lie behind each tile is not lost. These tiles are not just at the heart of Morocco, but at the heart of the Islamic world.”

Besides offering a diverse array of rustic hand finished brass lamps and heavy wooden doors, it is clear that the intricate realm of tiles is what lies at the core of Habibi's interior designs. “We have our own workshop in Morocco where 14 of our own artisans bake, cut and assemble each and every tile,” says Nouredine whose glistening collection boasts a multitude of colours, from deep midnight blacks to breezy mint greens. “Every single pattern is then glued together by one of our workers according to what the client wants. For me, these tiles are not just at the heart of Morocco, but at the heart of the Islamic world.”



But why tiles in particular? After all, despite their well documented use in both the Islamic world and hot Mediterranean countries where they offer cool solace from the scorching heat of the sun, a tiled interior



would not seem the most obvious choice for homeowners in less sunnier climes. “Tiles are of course a niche market, a very challenging market,” admits Nouredine. “But I chose it precisely because of that – because it was such a challenge, because it is beautiful and something I have always loved, so it is worth fighting for.”

Giving up his job in advertising to open up Habibi Interiors eight years ago, Nouredine faced a number of strenuous trials, the



biggest obstacle being that of changing the minds of the people he worked with. "You have to change the mentality of the people and especially of the artisans," he explains ardently. "The main problem is that both the artisans and the public in Morocco look upon this industry as something almost unworthy – they don't give it its own value because it is something that has been done for centuries. I know that this industry is important to the Moroccan economy and more importantly to the Moroccan people. So as a company, the goal of Habibi is to raise the standards of the artisans, to give them the benefits of the company and to improve their conditions of work. Because without these people and their skills, Morocco and Habibi would not be what it is." It is this deep-held pride in his country's historical craftsmanship that has seen Nouredine through the worst of times. "There were many low points," he admits. "At

"The goal of Habibi is to raise the standards of the artisans and improve conditions of work. Without these people and their skills, Morocco and Habibi would not be what it is."

one time, 75% of the tiles would arrive here broken and damaged. I wanted to give up, but I knew I simply couldn't."

Walking through perfectly pieced-together kitchens, luxurious bathrooms complete with handmade brass and copper basins, and living rooms lit up by the soft glow of light being reflected from a shimmering surface, the fusing together of traditional and expert workmanship with modern consumer demands is clearly something Habibi has perfected over time. "Most of the patterns we have already exist and can be hundreds

of years old. Others are developed by clients and interior designers or architects. We can do most things, providing that they are based on geometric patterns – we do not do figurative patterns in keeping with Islamic belief and our own traditions." Asked if either he or his artisans would object to modifying ancient designs for modern simplicity, Nouredine smiles and shakes his head. "No, of course not. I like that kind of innovation, of creating something new from something old and it is something our artisans appreciate too. It is why I am here, and why Habibi is here: we need to be challenged in order to grow." And with the news that Habibi Interiors will be working with internationally renowned architect Norman Foster on an expansive project in Abu Dhabi, I have a feeling Nouredine Somati's, and therefore Habibi Interior's biggest undertaking is literally a tiled corner away. ● www.habibi-interiors.com