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SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2015 / ISSUE 21 / VOL 4

## LIVING



# *Curated spaces*

**OUR PICK OF FABULOUS FAMILY HOMES**

# CONTENTS

**INSPIRED**  
LIVING

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2015 / ISSUE 21 / VOL 4

Antique chic: 35  
Classic European decor in a Dubai home



## WELCOME

10 Shalaka Paradkar's letter to you.

## DECOR

18 **LUXE SERENITY**  
Soft neutrals and metallic accents spell laidback luxury for the home.

20 **THE SPICE ROUTE**  
Warm hues teamed with Eastern motifs make for a gorgeous seasonal palette.

6 **INSPIRED LIVING**  
SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2015

## DESIGN PEOPLE

24 In conversation with Piergiorgio Cazzaniga.

## HOME TOURS

28 **GLAM SLAM**  
A fabulous family home in Downtown Dubai, filled with creative DIY projects.

35 **PAST MEETS PRESENT**  
Step inside this stylish yet cosy villa that speaks of old Europe.





# Past meets present

Gwen Steketee creates a family home brimming with history and colour.

BY SHILPA CHANDRAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KISHORE KUMAR AND MAUDE VERLIAC



“I would describe my style as European, timeless and quite minimalist. While I value history and have an eye for antiques, I’m also open to modern design.”

**Gwen Steketee**





Torro, the bull's head from Spain commands attention in the living room

M

odern yet classical, minimalist but like a manor, Europe in the midst of Arabia – you need a list of paradoxes to describe Dutch expat Gwen Steketee's Dubai home. Tucked away in leafy Umm Suqueim, the house has marvellous views of both the towering Burj Khalifa and the Burj Al Arab from its terrace.

The easy harmony of cultures and eras is visible from the minute you step into the entrance hallway, where an 18th-century mirror overlooks a wooden bench, both brimming with history and experience. The bench, one of Gwen's favourite pieces, she says "is very convenient, especially to drop all our bags and relax once we enter the house."

The study is the first room that captures our attention, quite like entering a museum and being captivated by the first big exhibit. An English cabinet, packed with books, commands the space which also functions as an office. Dotted with historic objects such as a grandfather clock, a handmade wooden ship and a wall of framed maps, it showcases Gwen's husband, Roderik Flikweert's passion for antiques. Facing the study is Gwen's five-year-old son's play den.

The pièce de résistance of the home, the living room, is blessed with an abundance of space and light. Full-length windows let in the sun and the view of a lush green lawn and a pool beyond.





In fact, this view is what won Gwen's heart. One and a half years ago, new to Dubai, the family encountered this property; it was sixth in their house hunt. "We entered the house, tired from looking at other places, and just followed the agent. We came to these steps [leading to the living room] and just froze. Our son was running around the huge room with his football and we immediately decided that this was it! It clicked right away and we took it," she remembers.

Not surprisingly, the living room is the heart of the house. Wanting to make the space cosier, Gwen designed a striking and intriguing innovation. She split the room into two with a subtle white curtain to separate the drawing and dining areas.

Gwen placed two tall wooden cabinets on either side of the curtain; part of a vintage collection by Belgian brand Flamant. Her connection with Flamant dates to the time she worked with them in Holland as an interior designer and design manager.

A startling touch is the bull's head high on the wall, overlooking the oversized, comfortable sofa. Meet Torro the bull: Gwen and her husband acquired him in Holland using cash gifted during their wedding. (While admiring Torro's big horns, chances are a black furball will brush against your feet. That's Bibi the cat, the friendlier one of the resident pets; her brother Baloo prefers hiding behind the curtains.)

The dining area, Gwen's favourite spot in the house, is packed with treasures – the setting invites you to linger with family and friends. At the centre is a long, rustic dining table, set with wrought iron candlesticks and teamed with chairs upholstered in a burst of candy pastels that add life to the largely neutral background. Conversation points here include a majestic Baroque gilt-framed antique mirror and a wall cabinet that contains priceless family heirlooms,



Furniture from Flamant appeals to Gwen's love of classics





Antiques, a wigwam and wall murals make this a fun room for Gwen's son.

“ The dining area, Gwen's favourite spot in the house, is packed with treasures – the setting invites you to linger with family and friends.



The bed is a family heirloom, passed on from father to son



The 150-year-old bed in the guest bedroom, sourced from a family friend in Germany.





Juxtaposed with the European artifacts are a few pieces from the Middle East.



The master bedroom with its contemporary four-poster bed.

including a rattle given to Gwen by her mother when she was a baby.

Juxtaposed with the European artifacts are a few pieces from the Middle East: a Bedouin necklace the couple bought in Kuwait, a black lamp from Morocco and a side table sourced in Dubai.

On the first floor, the tastefully done up master bedroom also is the only room in the house with photographs on the wall. These are of the couple's memorable wedding day, nearly six years ago. The room also features one of the most modern items of the house, a four-poster bed acquired during their stay in Kuwait, prior to moving to Dubai.

Gwen's most adventurous decor experiment happened in her son's room. The fun touches include a white wigwam teamed with an animal skin rug, Gwen's previous drawing table which is now his desk, and walls featuring large painted animals.

Antiques can be easily integrated into modern lifestyles and Gwen shows us how with her son's bed. It's not









just another kiddie bed but a 100-year-old cast iron heirloom which has been painted white, with the pronounced detailing of history circling its edges. It once belonged to Roderik and is now used by their young son.

"An interior needs to live. I like to consider it as a constant process of designing. I am always looking at new things to try and integrate into the decor. We have been very intrigued by Dubai and its culture and are looking for more pieces to add to our home. Roderik likes to collect maps of the places in our lives that have a special meaning: where we were born and where we have lived. We are currently looking for a vintage map of Dubai," she explains, pointing to the framed maps which cover the white walls of the stairways. History lives on in the guest room as well, in the form of a 150-year-old bed from France, which was acquired from a family friend living in Germany.

Our home tour ends on a perfect note, with scrumptious Dutch pastries. Over freshly brewed coffee, Gwen tells us her love of design is hereditary. Although she took a degree in political science, she pursued her passion, following in the footsteps of her mother, an established interior designer.

Working with Flamant in Holland, she learned more about the business and set up her own design practice ([www.gweninterior.com](http://www.gweninterior.com)) ten years ago.

Post a sabbatical after her son was born, she was asked by friends to design their clinic in Abu Dhabi. "Being good friends and well-known doctors, I feel proud to have been able to help them." Encouraged by the favourable response to its opening, Gwen is now planning to resurrect her practice again. "I would describe my own style as country, European, timeless and quite minimalist. While I value history and have a good eye for antiques, I am also open to new developments and modern designs." ◀



The only room in the house with photographs, the master bedroom has wedding pictures on the walls.



A side table bought in Dubai