

the COLLECTOR

At his Tangier retreat, the horticulturalist Umberto Pasti devotes his time to finding antique treasures and tending a garden filled with rare native plants

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THE MAIN SITTING ROOM IN THE NEWEST PAVILION OF UMBERTO PASTI'S TANGIER HOME, BUILT IN THE 1980S BY STUDIO PEREGALLI TO COMPLEMENT TWO OLDER PAVILIONS. ON THE WALLS HANG 18TH-CENTURY TUNISIAN TILES AND FRAGMENTS OF ANTIQUE CARPETS; THE ONE OVER THE FIREPLACE IS A 16TH-CENTURY STAR USHAK CARPET FROM TURKEY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: UMBERTO PASTI; THE SIMPLE SWIMMING POOL, TILED IN A TYPICALLY MOROCCAN TURQUOISE SHADE; MANY OF THE WALLS IN THE HOUSE ARE COVERED IN 18TH-CENTURY MOROCCAN TILES, WHICH PASTI HAS BEEN COLLECTING FOR YEARS; A QUIET SPOT FOR LOUNGING IN THE GARDEN



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mberto Pasti's novel *The Age of Flowers* is about a man who, overwhelmed by the vagaries of life, sequesters himself in his beautiful North African garden. At Pasti's home in the hills overlooking Tangier, life, to a degree, imitates art, for nature is the soul of the place. "I love being here because I am happy outside in my garden," he says. "Here I can rest."

Pasti – who was born in Milan, where he still spends part of the year – is a horticulturalist as well as a writer. For him, the two vocations are intimately linked. "In most of my books, I talk about the destruction of nature by men," he explains. It's no surprise, then, to find that his gardens are sanctuaries for native botanical species threatened by modern development. Romantic and untamed, they're inspired by the old gardens that once flourished in Tangier, and are filled with a profusion of roses, begonias, jasmine, fruit trees, ferns and tropical palms. For small wildlife – birds, lizards and, Pasti's favourite, frogs – they're paradise. He's designed several such oases in northern Morocco. One of them, in the countryside south of Tangier, will be the subject of a

book he's currently working on with the photographer Ngoc Minh Ngo, to be published by Rizzoli in October. Pasti first came to Tangier thirty years ago, and put down roots because he fell in love with "its beauty, its wild flowers, and the kindness of its people."

The house he bought with his partner, the French-born fashion designer Stephan Janson, sits at the heart of his lush garden, filled with plants that thrive in the region. It consists of three pavilions: one dating from the 1920s, another from the 1950s, and a third added in the 1980s with the help of two friends, Roberto Peregalli and Laura Sartori Rimini – aka Milan design duo Studio Peregalli, who are renowned for their reinvention of classical styles.

"They are the only architects we trust for creating buildings that look quiet and old," says Pasti. Indeed, the new pavilion is entirely in keeping with traditional Moroccan architecture, with its white exterior, shady loggia and Moorish arches, all of which are gradually being veiled by greenery.

Inside, the rooms have something of the spirit of their owner's gardening style, with collections of antique textiles, found objects and local crafts allowed to evolve organically, colonising walls, floors and furniture. Many of these treasures are Middle Eastern in origin, while others hail from Spain, England and even Ancient Rome. It serves to give his home a >



RIGHT: A FOUNTAIN MADE OF ANTIQUE STONE AND TILES **BELOW:** THE FIREPLACE IN THE DINING ROOM IS AN 18TH-CENTURY WOODEN ANTIQUE FROM PIEDMONT, SURROUNDED BY 17TH- AND 18TH-CENTURY TILES FROM FEZ. **OPPOSITE:** ANTIQUE ENGLISH REGENCY FURNITURE IS CONTRASTED WITH A STRAW AND LEATHER RUG FROM MAURITANIA

“I love being here because I am *happy* in my *garden*. I can rest”



timeless feel – or rather, as if time has paused for a life-affirming moment or two.

“I never ‘decorate’,” says Pasti. “I just put things that I love in my house, because I find them beautiful. Antiquities, shells, pebbles... I also collect old fabrics, tiles and painted wood objects from this part of Morocco. Most of them are displayed in this house.”

The main sitting room of the newest pavilion intriguingly demonstrates Pasti’s richly layered, incremental decorating style, whether or not he would refer to it as decorating. On the walls hang 18th-century Tunisian tiles, which Pasti has had framed by a craftsman from Fez, and fragments of antique carpets from Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus. A 16th-century Star Ushak carpet from Turkey hangs above the fireplace.

Everywhere you look, nature has made its presence felt in some way. In the main sitting room of the new pavilion, the walls are a delicate putty green and an antique chair is covered in fabric the colour of celery. Scented flowers from the garden and tropical plants alight on every surface. Here and there you’ll spot whalebones and animal skulls, some salvaged from a nearby beach. And in another sitting room, aged wooden planks have been used to clad the walls and ceiling, their faded hue a subtle backdrop to the garden beyond.

Pasti is fascinated by objects that are worn, broken or decayed, and treats them almost reverentially. Fragments of weather-beaten pottery and carved stone are amassed in rows on shelves, or stacked on top of one another, like rambling plants or sedimentary accretions. “For me it’s important that everything in a home has a certain harmony, a quiet rhythm,” says Pasti. “This is what I call beauty. The world outside is ugly enough.” □



A CORNER OF ONE OF THE SITTING ROOMS IS HOME TO AN ECLECTIC DISPLAY OF ANTIQUE MOROCCAN AND TUNISIAN TILES, AN ISLAMIC MARBLE COLUMN WITH A ROMAN STONE HEAD ON TOP, AND A GROUP OF WHALEBONES, FOUND ON A NEARBY BEACH **OPPOSITE:** A SITTING ROOM IN THE 1950S PAVILION. THE CHANDELIER WAS MADE BY A LOCAL CRAFTSMAN USING DOZENS OF FRAGMENTS OF ROMAN GLASS, AND AN OLD WOODEN STAR, THAT HAD BEEN USED TO HANG LANTERNS IN A MOSQUE

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