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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





THE TREASURE HUNTER

The harrowing experience of becoming stranded in the wilderness of Sudan led English army major RG 'John' Gayer-Anderson to devote his energies towards a new, sedate passion – antique collecting. Having convinced the authorities in Cairo to let him reside in a fine pair of 16th-century merchants' houses, he restored their original features and created a dazzling museum of Oriental and Middle Eastern treasures, even importing an entire room from Syria. Text: Olivia Temple. Photography: Tim Beddow



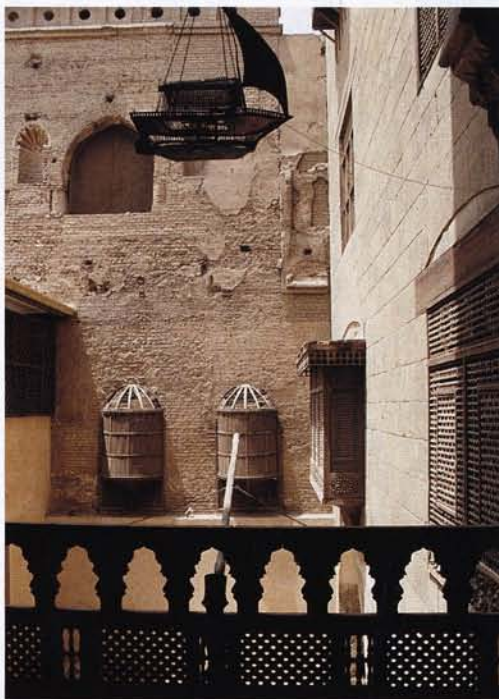
Previous pages:
Gayer-Anderson
designed a roof
walkway and garden
to display his
collection of
moucharabieh
screens. This page,
top: the Celebration
Hall (also opposite),
seen from the
Minstrels' Gallery.

This was used
as a place for men
to socialise while
women spied on them
from the harem.

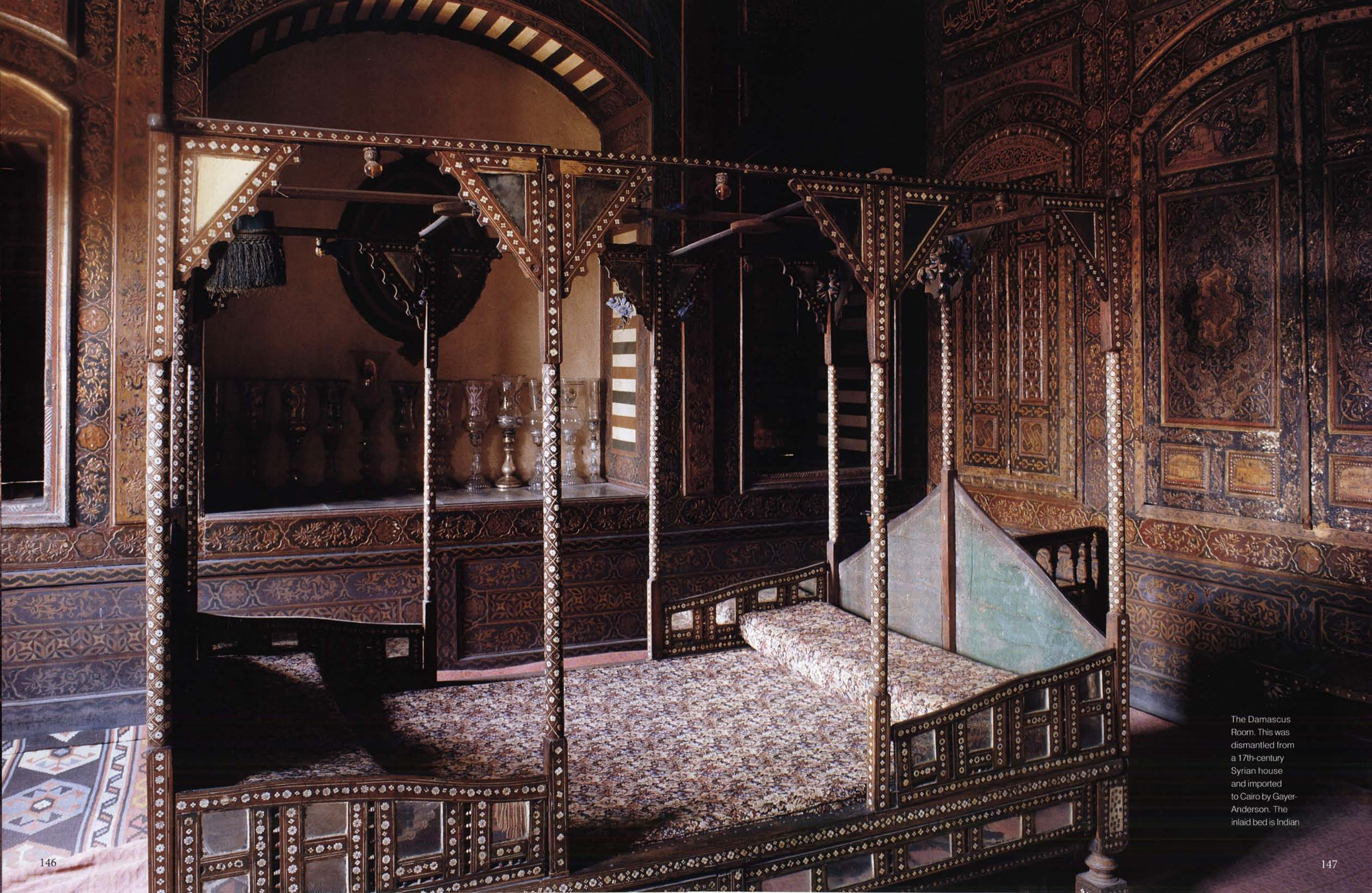
The marble-mosaic
fountain was a gift
to Gayer-Anderson
from his mother,
and was last used
when *The Spy Who*

Loved Me was filmed
in the house in the
1970s. Middle left:
a birdcage in the
shape of a ship hangs
outside. Middle
right: the lid of an
ancient Egyptian
coffin stands guard
beside a latticed
moucharabieh
window.

Bottom:
the Persian Room.
A fringed and
tasselled canopy
ensures a cool sleep
on this elegant
four-poster. Stained
glass creates an
ecclesiastical feel







FINDING A HIDDEN TREASURE is everyone's fantasy, but it usually remains just that. Travel often brings surprises, and there is both treasure and surprise tucked away in the back streets of Cairo. In this ancient Fatimid city mosques abound, and the call to prayer is as familiar as police sirens are in other capital cities. The most ancient of these is the Ibn Tulun mosque, built in the 9th century. The 20th century brought restoration of the old religious buildings, but also the destruction of many of the ancient palaces and merchants' houses that at one time stood cheek by jowl against the holy walls (the purpose being to give the mosques back their physical isolation).

However, two great houses have been left standing, with-in touching distance of the Ibn Tulun. Separated only by a narrow alley spanned by a fragile footbridge, the houses are now known as the Gayer-Anderson Museum, but were formerly called the House of the Cretan Women. The whole surrounding area was developed in the early 16th century by one Sultan Selim, 'The Grim', who was known for having finally beaten into submission the Mamelukes, a military elite who had ruled Egypt for 250 years.

RG 'John' Gayer-Anderson came across the two houses when he was taken to see the Ibn Tulun mosque by a dragoman. Gayer-Anderson was a young English physician and army major, fluent in Arabic, who had arrived in Cairo in 1906. He was also a dealer in antiquities, an interest that developed after he had a life-changing experience when he got lost in the Sudanese wilderness for five days. When he was finally rescued he was found naked, incoherent and hollow-eyed. He became more contemplative, directing his energy away from the army into the more sedate and rewarding pastime of collecting antiques.

Gayer-Anderson instigated the idea of the Egyptian authorities allowing someone to reside in historic houses, similar to what the National Trust still do in Britain. During the 1920s, the two houses were overrun by squatters, but they were all ejected when the authorities began restoration work on the mosque and the two adjoining houses. Upon completion the House of the Cretan Women became an 'Arab Monument'.

Gayer-Anderson moved there in 1935, and was able to accommodate and to continue building his collection of Oriental antiquities, which can still be seen today. He lived there happily until 1942, when he was forced to move back to Britain due to ill health and bequeathed the museum to the Egyptian government. During that time he restored all the fountains, pavements, ceilings and other original features that had been removed or destroyed.

Gayer-Anderson was astute, passionate and dedicated in his pursuit of Oriental and Middle Eastern prizes for his collection. He even shipped a whole interior from Syria, as can be seen in the Damascus Room. During the 1920s and 1930s many people visited him at the house: well-known travellers, aristocrats, military gentlemen and their wives, artists and writers, most of them adding their own touches

to his collection. The whole place is full of personal mementoes: photos, books, everyday objects common to the 1930s and 1940s, as well as a collection of family portraits. Although he was married with a child, Gayer-Anderson lived a fairly reclusive life in Cairo while his wife and son remained in London.

There are twists and turns and secret passages, sudden courtyards and surprising fountains, and a fine layer of dust covers everything, as it does Cairo itself. Bright tiles and sombre marble mix like a kaleidoscope in the filtered light. There are Pharaonic relief fragments and mummy cases, Coptic textiles and tombstones, and modern European paintings sharing space with Sufi begging bowls and engraved ostrich eggs.

The façade, made of dressed limestone, is plain and unembellished except for some carved stone banding and faceted geometric patterns confined to structural components or entrances. The inner courtyards are approached by screened-off corridors which deny access to the interiors and have niches for doorkeepers to stand guard. There is a sacred well in one courtyard which is credited with magical powers and a most unusual public drinking fountain, or *sabil*, with brass mugs

attached to chains for the public to quench their thirst. Gayer-Anderson also created a roof garden with turned-wood screens.

The ground-floor rooms were formerly used for storage or occupied by servants. The loggias on the first floor are known as *maq'ad*, or 'place for sitting'. The original owner, probably a rich spice or coffee merchant, would have sat here to entertain and oversee activities in the courtyard. In Cairo these loggias are invariably oriented to the northwest in order to take advantage of the prevailing wind that brings relief from the desert heat. The reception rooms are tall and long and are traditionally divided into three sections, the central portion being lower than the areas either side, which are used for sitting.

Their wooden ceilings are painted with intricate floral motifs bordered with inscriptions, and there are fountains made of inlaid marble in the centre of the rooms.

The Ottoman arabesque nature of the place is strong throughout, with ornately carved doorways, screens and secret balconies from which the women of the house could watch the men go about their business. The *moucharabieh*, a projecting bay window, was fabricated from turned-wood which formed an intricate screen. This was originally 'a place for drinking' where water would be placed in small porous earthenware jars and kept cool by the breeze. The soft light created by the *moucharabieh* creates an ever-changing dappled effect within. There are mosaic floors, intricately carved inlaid cupboards and screens, benches of faded crumbling wood, turquoise glass and fiery flashes of red cloth. Such accents of colour in the earthy, dusky, golden and ivory hues of the whole leave one quite bedazzled. This place is like being pressed against a stained-glass window at Chartres cathedral, or plunged into a casket of amber necklaces – a journey through jewels ■

Gayer-Anderson Museum, 4 Maydan Ahmed Ibn Tulun, Cairo. Ring 00 20 2 364 7822 for opening times





Opposite: RG 'John' Gayer-Anderson. This page, top: the Celebration Room contains an Orientalist throne. The rugs are Egyptian, as are the folding chairs and table. Middle left: a fine oak sideboard houses a collection of blue-and-white ceramics. Middle right: a traditional drinking fountain, or *sabil*, with brass mugs on chains. Bottom: the Persian Gallery. In the window is a bust of Queen Nefertiti, facing a black statue of the ancient Egyptian cat goddess Bast

