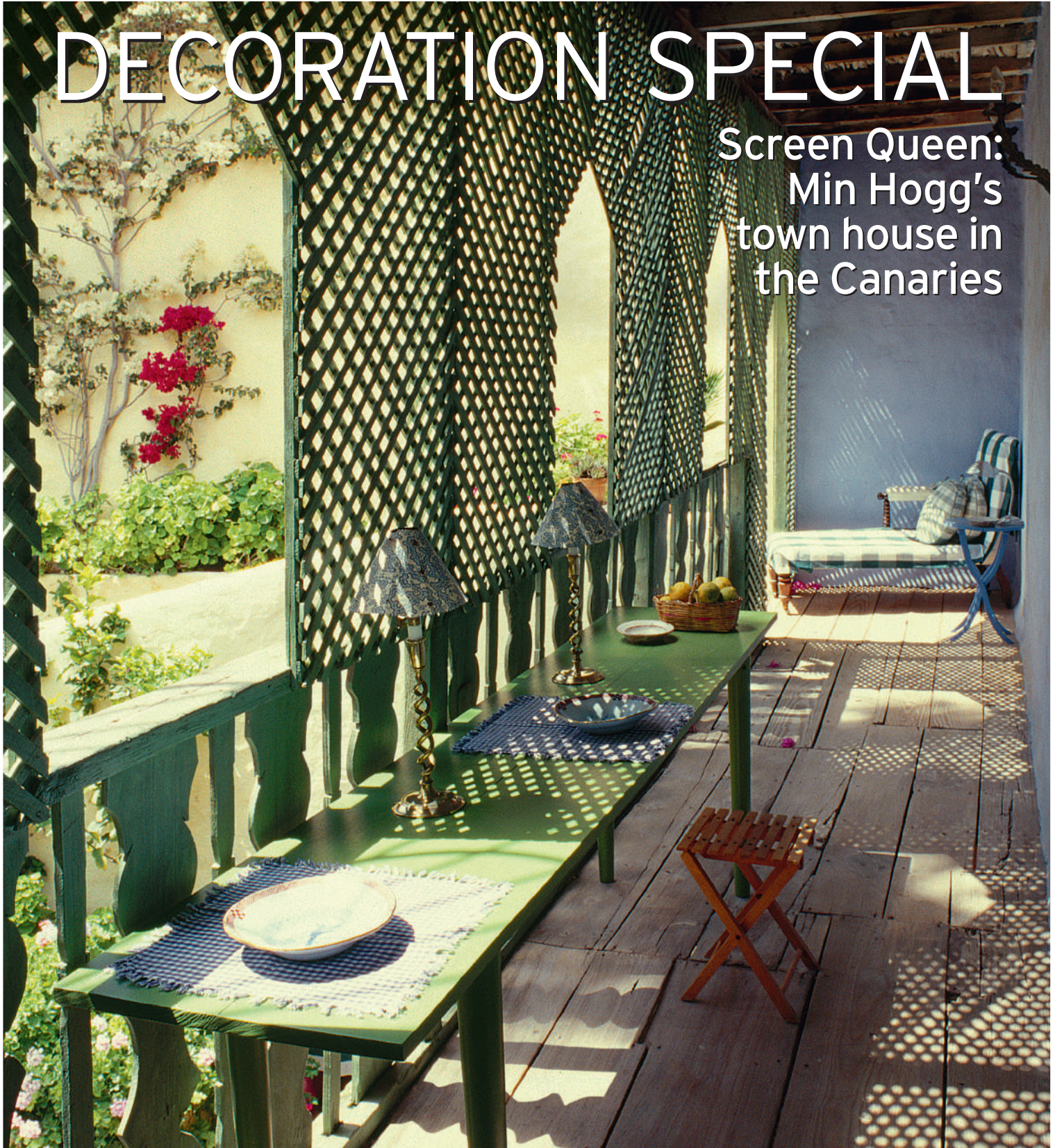


OCTOBER 2019

# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

## DECORATION SPECIAL

Screen Queen:  
Min Hogg's  
town house in  
the Canaries





Viola Lanari's floral plaster lamps were roundly applauded when they appeared at a Pentreath & Hall pop-up sale. around the globe and the circle ('the simplest form'). Her disc-oriented artistic direction cheerfully snubs smooth





# PROJECT SPHERE

But she's ringing the changes with her latest, joyously geometrical collection for Porta Romana, which revolves finishes in favour of textural intrigue. Amy Sherlock is captivated by the results. Photography: Antony Crolla >



Viola's studio is filled with lamps and prototypes in various stages of production. The 'Viola' lantern on the table in the foreground was inspired by Diego Giacometti's chandeliers for Paris's Musée National Picasso. The neon-bright lights above the work area (left) are party decorations bought on a recent trip to Jaipur.





**‘I HAVE** to confess, I cried,’ Viola Lanari tells me. We are sitting in her cottage-like studio, tucked behind the unlovely Wandsworth Road in south London in a garden whose trumpet vines blaze late-July orange, talking about Diego Giacometti. Specifically, a recent exhibition about the extraordinary chandeliers created by the Swiss designer for the opening of the Musée National Picasso in ▷

Viola has worked at 401½ Studios for three years – initially in a basement, then taking over the whole space when the former tenant left. Her clothes were made while travelling in Kenya with designer Kirsten Hecktermann, whose fabric off-cuts she uses to structure her lamp designs





Paris's Hôtel Salé, his final commission before he died in 1985. 'It was so beautiful, how he used the material. Not many people use plaster. It's usually a material of process – the mould or the maquette, which is thrown away. It was very moving to see.' Giacometti's fine, elongated frames, sparsely hung with decorative details (a flower, a leaf in bud, a resting bird), are a clear inspiration for the young Italian designer: the studio is filled with table lamps and wall lights, in various stages of completion, that share their delicate, semi-organic forms and powder-white hue.

'It all started with a pair of lamps that I had in my flat,' explains Viola, a contributor to *Wol* and former stylist at *House & Garden*. 'They were wired through the furniture so I couldn't remove them, and I really didn't like them. So I began mucking around with plaster.' Made by wrapping plaster-soaked gauze over a wire structure and pre-existing lamp base, her first designs featured flowers with their petals spread wide, like roses breathing their last gasp, and were an instant hit when she took them to a pop-up sale at Pentreath & Hall in 2016. Topped with a simple blackout shade, the lamps, when lit, are a drama of shadow, functional yet sculptural. Amassed on a bed of moss in an installation at the Vanderhurd showroom in winter 2017, the lamps created a ghost forest, a mixture of fantastical and eerie, as in the best fairy tales. Each flower is made freehand – Viola does not work from patterns. She uses scraps of stiff cushion-backing fabric (salvaged from her textile-designer friend Kirsten Hecktermann) and dips them in a very hard-drying plaster to create each form, before finishing with a softer-drying one that can be sanded back. The surface is left deliberately imperfect, gestural, bearing the traces of her movement. 'Smoothness and perfection are too predictable,' she explains. 'A very smooth finish gives a sharp, hard shadow, which is less interesting to me.'

Viola has moved away from recognisably floral forms in her new collection for Porta Romana, which launches in September. This is the first time that she has collaborated with the brand, whose founders, Andrew and Sarah Hills, started out in the same studio complex that Viola now occupies. The four lamps in the 'Viola' ▷

Top left: in the foreground is Viola's 'Othello' lamp, which was inspired by smoke rings. Top right: her latest creations have moved away from lighting. A console (pictured) and side table, influenced by the form of old chimney pots, will be launched at Porta Romana later this year



collection (with a console and side table to come) are made from bone-white resin cast from Viola's plaster designs, making them sturdier and more durable. (Likewise, the chandeliers that complement Picasso's canvases across the 17th-century Hôtel Salé were designed in plaster but produced in harder-wearing resin.) 'I have tried to go more abstract,' Viola explains. 'The flower lamps are very girly, which I like, but I'm happy to go in a way that's not feminine.' The 'Viola' pieces, which will be released later in the year, are softly geometric: stacked discs, floating orbs, a table perched on a fluted column. 'It's the simplest form, the circle. There is no up or down. It's also the shape of the sun and the moon, which give light.' Her inclination towards abstraction may be due, in part, to the influence of the Italian artist Lucia Sterlocchi. A friend and former teacher of Viola's mother, Sterlocchi used natural elements such as sand and water to create the sculptural images that brought her critical recognition in Italy in the 1970s and 80s. 'I learned a lot from her,' Viola says.

But there is also a playful, narrative strand in Viola's work. She shows me early experiments with a series of caryatid-like lamp bases – figures with their arms outstretched, flattened almost to the form of a stingray – as well as a newer prototype for a wall light adorned with the forms of a serpent, a sphere and two leaves. The biblical references recall the intricately patterned and often gloriously coloured tree-of-life candelabras that Viola shows me in a book of Mexican folk art from the 1970s ('The best book in my possession'). The tome shares the studio shelves with flea-market and charity-shop treasures – clay figures, jelly moulds, a front line of miniature terracotta-army figurines – as well as sticks, shells and drying fronds of seaweed. The organic and the man-made, in her life as in her art, jostle alongside one another, suggesting, always, the possibility of magical transformation ■

*Viola Lanari's new collection will be launched at Porta Romana as part of Focus/19. For more information, ring 07774 084103, or visit [violanari.com](http://violanari.com). Porta Romana, Design Centre Chelsea Harbour, London SW10 (01420 23005; [portaromana.com](http://portaromana.com))*

Top left: the 'Maudie' light from the 'Viola' collection draws most directly from Viola's earlier flower lamps, seen in the background. Top right: The 'Torso' (left) and 'Cake' lamps were created for the design dealer Jermaine Gallacher, who runs a gallery/shop in Bermondsey