

Colourful EVOLUTION

Colour consultant Fiona de Lys' thoughtful approach to updating her 18th-century cottage sees her combining rich, immersive hues with antiques from England and Italy, reflecting her dual heritage

FEATURE KATE JACOBS PHOTOGRAPHY RACHAEL SMITH

In the sitting room, the walls are painted in Tige Brune, with the ceiling in Terre de Sienne and woodwork in Terre Brûlée, all by Argile, adding to the sense of cosiness here. The French Louis XV-style bergère sofa, picked up at Southgate Auctions, brings a decadent touch, along with the smaller sofa from Little Paris Store, Crouch End.



With an ultra-simple dining table and bench, both from St Martins Antiques, Stamford, Fiona has created a monastic feel in the dining room. The pendant light was made with an upturned basket.



When colour consultant Fiona de Lys first viewed this cottage, her now bedroom was crowded with tendrils of wisteria, which had found their way in during the seven years that the stucco-fronted, timber-framed house had lain unoccupied. 'It was so romantic and mysterious,' she recalls. Her work centres around telling stories through colour so it is apt that her story here began in such a fairy-tale manner.

The cottage, which dates to around 1750, is perfectly positioned at the point where London finally gives way to the countryside, close to High Barnet, where Fiona was already living, in a Victorian cottage. 'It was the first time I'd had the opportunity to buy such an old property. I loved the authenticity and the bare bones of it. It had last been updated in the 1970s and was extremely dilapidated, but it was a chance to start from scratch and make my mark,' she says.

Because the cottage is Grade II listed, Fiona's options to improve the 'insane' layout were limited. She moved the kitchen from the now dining room into what was then a bathroom and a couple of awkward corridors, hoping to open up the two rooms and improve the sense of flow, but she was only allowed to create a large hatch to merge the spaces. ▶

ABOVE Grand, large-scale pieces in the sitting room create a contrast with the scale and rustic nature of the cottage. The painted French chest of drawers is an heirloom piece from Fiona's grandfather. The mid-century pomegranate lamps by Casa Pupo, still with their original orange shades, were a vintage find.

RIGHT Fiona on the claret velvet bergère sofa in her sitting room, a space that pulls together the many influences that shape her interiors style.





The Italian influence comes into play in the kitchen, where Fiona wanted a simple, rustic feel that reminded her of her grandparents' Lago Maggiore home. Occupying almost the entirety of one wall, is a vast and heavily ornamented walnut credenza, once her Italian grandfather's.



Stucco-fronted with an upper timber frame, the cottage dates to around 1750.

'It's not just interior design for design's sake. This project was very much about personal growth'

Upstairs, again, was about making a more logical use of the wasted space, to create two bedrooms, a bathroom and a dressing room. More recently, she has reworked the dining room, pushing the ceiling up to the pitched pantile roof. 'The ceilings are low in this house and I wanted to feel "lifted" in this room. For that reason, I used a more neutral colour that reflects that sense of calmness and space, with a monastic feel.'

Elsewhere in the house though, colour is altogether more expressive, from the autumnal palette of the sitting room, the pale coppery hue in the kitchen, inspired by some of Fiona's copper pots, to the green dressing room, inspired by the idea of forest bathing and sunlight filtered through green leaves. In the bathroom, the tiles were chosen for their exact shade of seaweed green. 'There's a beach in Sardinia where you can swim out to a shipwreck through beautiful vibrant seaweed. When I'm in the bathroom here, I'm submerged in that experience,' she explains. Fiona's bedroom meanwhile, layers nuanced shades of earthy pink, purple and orange: 'I wanted the feeling here to be sensual and feminine. Colour is my language and I find that different colours and combinations evoke feelings and sensations for me on a physiological level.'

Unsurprisingly, given Fiona's profession, the house has had multiple colour iterations during her time here and it is now decorated entirely in colours by luxury French paint brand Argile, with whom she collaborates. 'They have a very sophisticated and seductive palette,' she enthuses. Fiona's process when it comes to colour is deep and thoughtful, philosophical even. 'It's not just interior design for design's sake. This project was very much about personal growth. Everything else prior to this was experimental in trying to understand what my style was, in terms of connecting with my roots, my English and Italian heritage. It has been about thinking, understanding and exploring, and allowing for the emotion which comes with that,' she explains.

Fiona uses multiple colours within each room scheme, taking her inspiration from the way that shadows are created in *trompe l'oeil* painting, using variations on a particular colour. 'Often people choose a lighter or darker shade of the same flat colour. I've developed my own signature system where I like to 'bend' colour and use a darker or a lighter colour that is not the same, so there's actually a shift in the hue. ▶



Nests and nesting are important to Fiona, who asked Queenie Ingrams to include a wren's nest in the dining room mural, which is inspired by the local landscape, with a fantasy element. The large antique Belgian cabinet functions as Fiona's boot room, storing shoes and bags.



To create an atmosphere of warmth and intimacy in the principal bedroom, the walls are painted in Ombre Brûlée, with Tige Brune on the ceiling, and panelling in Terre du Vaucluse, all by Argile.



‘Colour is my language – I find that different colours and combinations evoke feelings and sensations for me on a physiological level’

ABOVE RIGHT In the bathroom, 1960s botanical print curtains tie in with the vintage Capiz shell artichoke pendant light, while the walls painted in Argile des Marais, by Argile, and Catania green tiles from Topps Tiles evoke a memory of swimming amongst seaweed in Sardinia. The basin, by Victoria Plumb has been mounted onto an antique cabinet for a period look.

It makes colour feel more rounded, more complete. So the woodwork in the sitting room is a warm “shadow colour” of the wall.’

Since her unique ideas are writ large in this cottage, she now runs colour workshops from home, including her Delysian Colour System, as well as collaborating with interiors brands and experts, such as Kate Watson-Smyth. Fiona felt it was fitting to include some *trompe l’oeil* in her updated dining room, working with top mural artist Queenie Ingrams on a vista of clouds and trees, framed by a stone arch, inspired by her rustic garden and the woods close to her home.

Her influences blend English and Italian antiques, with Arts and Crafts elements – traced to her childhood in Hampstead Garden Suburb – along with mid-century modern designs. The Italian strand includes pieces linked to her mother’s roots in the Lago Maggiore region. ‘Lots of raw, rustic pieces with an almost primitive aesthetic,’ she explains. Pots are a motif that run throughout Fiona’s house, with

big-bellied Mediterranean vessels clustered in every room. ‘For me, they’re about the idea of containment, holding onto what is precious to us.’

For Fiona, the sitting room is the heart of this house. ‘It encompasses the vibe and the aesthetic of every single room, merged into one. It’s the melting pot of everything, the sum of me. I have mid-century alongside antique, my English aspect and my Italian roots.’ The chimneybreast in here is covered with a green and gold Seventies velvet textile. Having grown-up with a mother who was always buying lovely pieces of fabric, Fiona likes to layer up textiles, with a particular passion for botanical prints, old rugs and vintage throws, generally in very muted colours, with an aged aesthetic. ‘For me it’s about balancing patina, story, function and the experience that we can have by engaging with a piece in a reimagined way. When I’m in my kitchen with my old Italian credenza, I’m not in High Barnet, I’m transported to another place.’ ■



The staircase leads to an open landing which serves as Fiona’s dressing room and a neutral space to enjoy relaxing in. The rich immersive greens – Matcha on the walls and ceiling and Nori on the woodwork, both by Argile – have been chosen to evoke the experience of forest bathing.