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RUMI

BEHIND CLOSED CURTAINS
Interior Design in Iran

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Photos

Hamed Farhangi

Texts

Lena Späth

Art Direction & Layout

Eva Gonçalves

Illustration

Laura Fernández Arquisola

Proofreading

Kim Burger

Author picture

Paula Jordan Ramirez

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LENA SPÄTH

Photos by
HAMED FARHANGI

ONE BLINK
BEHIND CLOSED CURTAINS
Interior Design in Iran



Preface

At some point in my life, I started thinking every nine months something dramatic would happen. First, my mom was diagnosed with cancer; nine months later my boyfriend dumped me, and then nine months after that I was laid off from work. My flatmate and I joked it was hinting at one of us becoming pregnant. But what all this was really leading to was quite different: the decision to write this book.

The last event happened in June 2016. After a year without a holiday, it was a good moment to rest and think about what I really wanted. Life had been a bit like a washing machine for more than three years. After traveling through South and Central America and moving to Barcelona, I was the person I wanted to be; but I was not doing what I wanted to do.

It took me two weeks before waking up one Monday knowing what I would do. My list of ideas and projects had been long, but what I really wanted to do was produce a coffee table book on interior design in Iran — with my own savings and being responsible for every step. No one had done this before, but I knew about the hidden treasures of old Persia. I sometimes wake up and have these epiphanies — it's as if my brain and heart talk during the night and come up with the perfect solution the next day.

When I say Iran, I talk as it were France or Argentina; for me, Iran is like any other country in the world, because I look at the people. I don't write this book for the country but for the Iranian

people. My relationship with Iran started off pretty naively. When I was 19, I wanted to study the Middle East and become a war journalist. The dust and stories in Afghanistan called to me. I didn't have the courage though and turned to more solid fields, first law and then journalism, only to return to Middle Eastern studies and politics in the end. The upheavals, the adventures, the otherness of the region was too tempting.

My family feared I would end up a taxi driver like humanities graduates before me in Germany. But I was stubborn and fell in love with my studies. For the first time in my life I was learning about things I was really interested in. I read Iran's history from its kings to its modern day politics and learned Farsi and the Arabic alphabet, but this was all theory. To really taste the country, feel the atmosphere on my skin, and listen to the sounds of Iran's streets, I had to go to the country.

Germany's biggest newspaper wrote of the UN general assembly meeting: "The most powerful humans meet in New York to rescue the world — and to insult each other." It was the height of tensions between the magic triangle, Ahmadinejad-Bush-Netanyahu, and rumours of possible war circulated. I saw all this as part of a big adventure, so in the fall of 2008 I signed up with the German Embassy as a temporary resident in Iran and imagined the worse case scenario would be being rescued by helicopter; a great story to tell my grandkids.

Happy to say, everything went quite differently. I came back without war fanfares, but with loads of books, hand-crafts, and a heart lost to an Iranian man. Through him, his friends, music, favourite poems and books, family, coffee shops, slang and stories, I met the real Iran; the Iran in which the great poet Hafez tells you your future, the expression “The New City” revives Tehran’s old red light district, and eating hot beetroot from the city’s viewpoint seems like it can’t get better. What followed again was a life in a washing machine, but without a happy ending. What outlived everything was my love for Iran and its people.

Since then I have been to Iran multiple times to inhale Tehran’s emissions, but also the smell of barbecued meat, to talk to the taxi drivers about politics and life here and there, to meet my friends, to travel through this outdoor museum of millenniums, to experience the contrasts between the liberal Iranians and the conservative ones, and to understand the national psyche each time one centimeter more.

Every time I was in Tehran, I went to its flea market on Fridays. In 2008, my friends told me it was not a good place to go; they said it was dirty and questioned why I would want to buy something Iranian when I have IKEA and H&M and co. in Europe. Most people didn’t understand my love for traditional design and handicrafts. But today, almost a decade later, things have changed. Young people have started to buy Persian products and are more and more creative themselves. Now one can buy ceramics, jewelry, or even hammocks made in Iran via Instagram. And the Friday

Market is so crowded, moving the location should be considered.

This is why it is the right time to write a book like this one: look what great architecture the country has, you can be proud of it. Look at these beautiful exterior AND home interiors using Iranian design. This is Persian tradition and knowledge, gathered over centuries, which, if lost also takes a part of every country’s identity. And if it’s lost, it is sometimes just simply lost forever.

My heart hurts when I see a traditional house being destroyed and the beauty of Persia vanishing in favor of Roman, Greek or neo-classical copycats. As Noushin, one of the house owners in this book said, “The beauty of our everyday surroundings makes a difference to our lives.” I am optimistic that, as Iran is in general in constant transition, people’s way of thinking about cultural heritage will adapt. During my work, I meet so many enthusiastic fans of traditional design and architecture who want to change things, who want to combine history and modernity, who don’t think there exists only black or white or a dusty-dirty traditional style or a Western modern one. They are the ones who will prove it is a trend, small at the moment, but gaining traction.

Even if young Iranians think the West is the land of opportunities, often the opposite is true. Interior design, furniture manufacturing, renovation, and authentic and sustainable tourism, are all chances in Iran waiting to be seized. It is a common belief that good interior design needs money, yet I don’t agree. Some of the houses in this book are examples of this.

The DIY (Do-It-Yourself) approach Amir applies doesn't need a huge financial budget. The traditional pot he used as a kitchen sink costs just a few euros in any traditional bazaar (p. 48). At the same time, I don't claim the houses shown in this book are representative of Iranian homes among all classes. Remembering Maslow, home design is a topic more present in middle and upper class families. Also, this is not a documentary photo book; our goal was to show examples of great interior design in Iran.

This is also the story for foreigners: look what great design one can find in Iran. Take a look at these houses, listen to their owner's stories, read a little bit about this country, and I am sure you will understand why I fell in love with it. If we succeeded in adding a different nuance to the image you had of Iran before, consider actually living the experience yourself. Some of the following houses might even host you and prepare the famous Iranian kebab I told you about before.

This book has become a really personal project. It showed me again, every day over

and over the power of humans and their passion because of the support I received within Iran and from all over the world. But more surprisingly because I experienced directly after looking at all these people and my own project that the myth is true, you can achieve almost everything if you want it enough, have patience, and act.

The latest nine months are ending while I am writing this. Let's see what happens; so far the waters are calm. It seems as if this book has broken the curse and, if not, as one of my friends said in the imaginary way Farsi is famous for: "Poostam kande shod. Vali bazi vaghtha khoobe choon puste jadid narm mishe." This means, "My skin got stripped off. But sometimes this is good, because new skin is soft."

Note: The Persian words in this book are written like Iranians do type them in daily life when using the Latin alphabet. This is academically not correct, but makes reading easier. The names of Iranian people are written using the spelling that they themselves would use.

Lena Späth



Amir Hossein Rahimi Yegane

TEHRAN



“It Was Worth the Pain”

“The difference between artistic and non-artistic people is their love for life at a fast pace. They sit behind the wheel and go fast, full of adrenaline. I was living by this fast pace and with my whole heart.” When jewelry and furniture designer Amir Hossein Rahimi Yegane felt a sudden pain, he was sitting in his living room and chatting. He didn’t know his life would never be the same after that day. A severe illness struck him down, causing three months of chronic pain that made him “bite into the wall” and “lose half his weight.”

“Just when it was over, I understood it was worth the pain. Sometimes a little sting is not so bad; it lets you understand what happened.” Amir had enjoyed life in the fast lane. He worked in advertising before turning to design. He started out of his small apartment and worked on an IKEA chair creating jewelry pieces. All his tools, the chair, and a pan fit into a wooden trunk. He wanted to travel like this through Iran, working and searching for inspiration, but success got in the way. This was in 2009 when Facebook was not yet fully blocked in Iran. Amir started to sell his designs online and sales went through the roof. Suddenly, he found himself employing six people with no way to leave things. Offline stores and his own website in the USA were added for distribution.

Today, 15 people work in the house in Tehran’s old neighborhood of Abshar, close to the bazaar, this is where the revolution of 1979 originated. In his underground workshop, (p. 49) they build handrails out of water pipes (p. 42) or continue with the jewelry pieces for Amir’s brand, Liqe. They moved to this space in the late summer of 2016 when the house found Amir, rather than the other way around. The couple who the house was already promised to, withdrew because of a bad sign: the day of the contract the husband had fallen down the stairs and broken his lower leg. When Amir moved in he made some renovations — the replacement of the windows alone cost him 50,000 Euro — and created an interior design barely seen in Iran. The historical walls of the house are the background for his DIY ideas and own work where he plays with Persian tradition: the glass bottle lamps above the pool table (p. 43), the kitchen sink made of pots (p. 48), or the fairy tale canopy bed (p. 40). When you open the many doors during spring and summer the house appears like a free space, the feeling of indoor and outdoor vanishes.

Amir, a big fan of Steve Jobs, has today, at the age of 40, hit the brakes on his life. He plays billiards alone to force himself into calmness. He walks every day after his prayer at 6pm over to his mother’s house (before he hadn’t visited her for six months). “People think life will always be like this. You go to sleep and you wake up. Now after my downfall, I say: “Who said life has to be short and for nothing? How often do I want to be born, 100 times? I just have one life.”











CHAIR

Sandali

When Amir was a kid, he used to sit on the traditional Persian drum, Tombak. To bring back these childhood memories, he designed a chair consisting of the drum and a slide rule for the back. Both parts are comfortable, but also possess a nostalgic element.



STOVE

Bokhori

Amir sees himself more as a discoverer than an artist. This stove he created by putting two pans together, which are usually used to cook soup.



SPOON AND FORK

Ghashogh va changal

Amir's brand Liqe is famous for using calligraphy-style Persian letters for earrings, bracelets, or pendants. For him, letters are the best way to connect design with language. Here, as spoon and fork will end up in a human's mouth, it becomes a funny metaphor.



Sufi Shahidzadeh Falsafi

ESFAHAN



When Spanish Colors Enter Iran

An Iranian proverb calls the city of Esfahan Nesfe Jahan, meaning half of the world, which dates back to the 17th century when the city became a center of commerce under the Safavid Dynasty. Traders from all over the world passed by on their way between Asia and Europe and the city was named at the same time as Florence. One of Persia's most important kings, Shah Abbas I, made Esfahan his capital and envisioned the first master plan for an Islamic city. With its gardens, buildings, and streets, it resembled a Persian carpet and led to a revival and perfection of art and handcrafts.

The Dibai House is situated in a narrow street of traditional clay and straw houses near the old bazaar. Built in the 1670s, it features the typical central courtyard and two Ayvans, large vaulted halls open to the garden (p. 99). In between them sits the typical splendid room to welcome guests, the Shahneshin, nowadays known as a guest room (pp. 108–109). Here a traditional fireplace with holes for glass bottles catches the eye. These bottles can be seen at the house of Yekta Mortazavi in Rafsanjan (p. 254).

From the courtyard, one can pass by a bench made from an old wooden door (p. 102) to get into the kitchen. The room is not only stretching some meters to its further end, but also up in the air (p. 103). Here, centuries of smoke has gathered and blackened the ceiling, an actual sign of the history of the house. Another unique piece of the Dibai House is its fountain house, the Howzkhane (pp. 104–107). It impresses through an exuberant mix of drawings, mirror work, and wooden window frames, but also a balcony and wooden columns that are more than 300 years old. Light reaches the room through a skylight; during hot summer days when temperatures can climb up to 40°C, the Howzkhane guarantees a fresh breeze.

Originally, the house was doomed to be destroyed to create a parking lot for the nearby mosque. But its owner, Sufi Shahidzadeh Falsafi, renovated it between 2006 and 2009 to transform it into a guesthouse. Having lived in Spain for many years, she brought the multicolor approach with her when she moved back to Iran. With the traditional earthy beige as a background, the rooms now shine in a strong blue, orange, turquoise, and yellow — an example of how different traditions can merge into something new and beautiful.



















TISSUE BOX

Jabbe dastmal

After being introduced by Americans just before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, paper tissues are now omnipresent in Iran. Often, their packaging is hidden by a special box. Some are decorated with Khatam, an inlaying technique that has its center in Esfahan. Geometric patterns, mostly star-shaped, are created by gluing thin sticks of wood, brass, camel bones, and sometimes even ivory, gold, or silver together. Cut into small slices, these layers are then applied to a wooden surface. Khatam work is found on mirrors, picture frames, and any kind of box.



WALL HANGING

Esfand

This wall hanging serves as protection against the evil eye, a common superstition in the Middle East. These inexpensive models are made of thread and seeds of a plant called Esfand, thus the name. A step-by-step tutorial is available on page 114.

SADDLE BAG

Khorjin

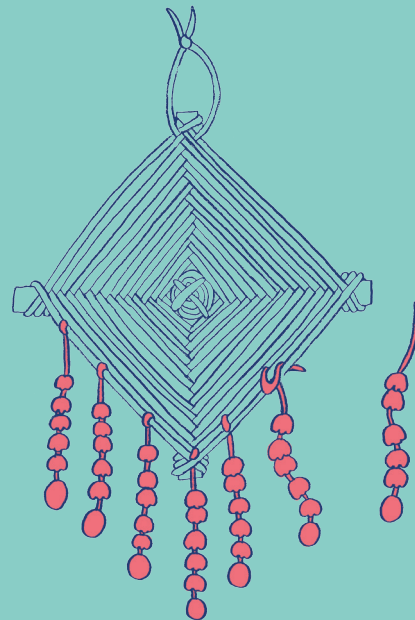
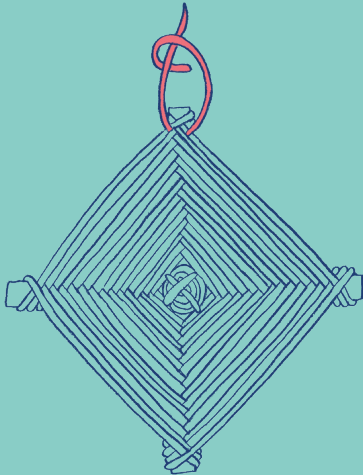
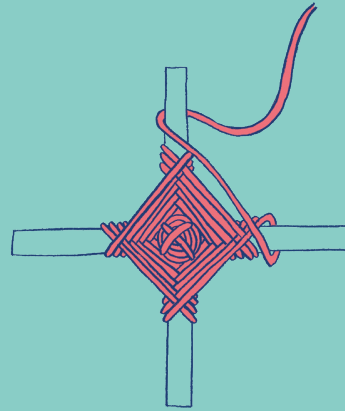
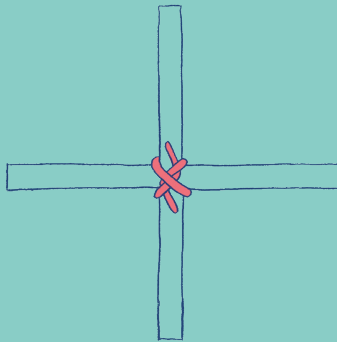
In Iran's countryside, animals are still used as a means of transportation and carriage; because of that and because it's made its way onto bicycles and motorcycles, the saddlebag is still widely used. Depending on the region, it is made from simple cotton, gelim, or carpet material. Khorjins come in every price range and quality and are now even found in living rooms keeping magazines or remote controls in place.

DIY: WALL HANGING

Good looks, good fortune, and good health particularly attract the evil eye according to Islamic traditional beliefs. The person possessing the evil eye just needs to look at others to cause harm for them. To protect a house and family from this misfortune, Iranians count on burning incense, wearing amulets, and hanging Esfand.

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Two branches, chopsticks, or any other kind of wooden sticks
- Three different colors of ribbon
- Thread
- Needle
- Beads



1. Cross the two sticks and bind them together with the first ribbon via a transom knot.
2. Wrap the ribbon around the center until the area is well covered.
3. Start making the first diamond, passing the sticks from below and making a turn at each of the four parts. Make sure to push the ribbon close to the center after each turn.
4. Make several turns until you are happy and fix the ribbon where you started.
5. Do steps 3 and 4 for the next two colors.
6. Attach the hanging loop to the strings.
7. Attach the beads with needle and thread to the horizontal bar.

The Makers



LENA SPÄTH (31) was born in Munich, Germany, but lives now in sunny Barcelona. She studied Middle Eastern Studies, lived in Turkey and Iran, and worked for consulting, recruiting, and Internet companies. She analyzed the presidential elections in Iran, Google's advance into the television sector or the latest trends in bohemian interior design. Lena cannot imagine a life without traveling the world; still, Iran is her greatest love. www.allmyhippies.com
lena@allmyhippies.com / [@allmyhippies](https://www.instagram.com/allmyhippies)



HAMED FARHANGI (36) is a self-taught photographer from Tehran. Since 2005, he has been working on fine art, architectural, and construction photography. His specialties are construction sites, constellated around the suburban landscapes shifting the boundaries between cities and countryside. The results are cold, fictional, and fanciful images that cross the line between reality and illusion.
hamfarhangi@gmail.com
[@tehrantracker](https://www.instagram.com/tehrantracker)



EVA GONÇALVES (34) is an Art Director and Graphic Designer from Portugal. Since 2010, Berlin has become her base. She likes to work with people rather than for people and works for clients in the cultural, political, and artistic fields. Eva is also co-editor of *mono.kultur* magazine, writes about art and design, and participates in a couple of side projects — experiments that tend to explore the line that separates art and design.
www.unfinishedinventory.com
mail@unfinishedinventory.com
[@yayeva](https://www.instagram.com/yayeva)



HAMID AKBARI (37) was born and grew up in Iran's capital city, Tehran. He studied theater and worked with the internationally known film director Abolfazl Jalili. He attended film festivals worldwide and won, among others, the prize for Best Documentary at Kalamata International Documentary Film Festival. During the making of this book, he had a hard time helping with shooting the book and recording the documentary simultaneously.
www.akbarihamid.com
mail@akbarihamid.com
[@hamidakbari58](https://www.instagram.com/hamidakbari58)



LAURA FERNANDEZ ARQUISOLA (30) is a freelance illustrator from Valladolid based in Barcelona. After a Fine Arts degree in Salamanca, she received her Postgraduate Diploma in Creative Illustration and Visual Communication Techniques from EINA in Barcelona in 2015. She is a specialist for illustrations for children and teens, but also sells mugs and other accessories with her designs in shops and markets in Spain.
www.lauferilustracion.com
lauferilustracion@gmail.com
[@laufer](https://www.instagram.com/laufer)