

Charlotte's Web

BY AIMEE LEE BALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA LIMER



INTERIOR DESIGNER CHARLOTTE SCOTT'S
ANDALUSIAN FARMHOUSE IS A
WHIMSICAL WEAVE OF DECORATIVE TRADITIONS

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hen Charlotte Scott and family go on vacation they sometimes engage in the fantasy decoration of their hotel rooms, draping fabrics from a local bazaar over the mirrors and writing their names in rose petals on the floor.

Imagine where they live.

The chimera Scott has conjured up is Trasierra, a 16th-century Spanish *finca* (or country house) behind stone walls high in the Sierra Morena, north of Seville. Perhaps only an Englishwoman with a decorator's eye and a vagabond's soul could create such a home, which has further evolved into a small hotel and refuge from the world. "It's been a challenge and a puzzle," says Scott. "The whole thing was dictated by the structure and available materials—Spanish earth colors and rough white-washed walls. Things are useful, childproof, practical, and pretty. I mix the old with the new, the fake with the real, the cheap with the fancy."

As a proper London decorator, Scott took pride in helping clients find their own style—asking a few questions and sizing one up as a Jay Gatsby, another as a Juliet Capulet. Scott was also gifted at fitting the one hideous thing a client was sure to love (a red lacquer table with dancing horses, for example) into a palatable scheme. On a recent visit to England, she was pleased to hear that one satisfied customer had dubbed his home the *Musée Charlotte*: Nothing had changed in 20 years, so well had she expressed his sensibilities.

This tribute is all the more impressive when you learn Scott has absolutely no formal training as an interior designer. From childhood, she always kept notebooks about places she visited, recording good taste and clever ideas: "pale-blue ceilings give a cool feeling," or "sailcloth sandbags hold down picnic tablecloth." Her traveling has always constituted a busman's holiday: watchful wanderings punctuated by vigorous discussions with fork-tongued shopkeepers and unimaginative customs officials. (In India she once admired an antique bedspread hanging on a clothesline and bought it.) And she always read about the pros. "Billy Baldwin was a big influence," she says reverentially. "He believed in comfort and layout, in suitability rather than unnecessary decorative effects."

It was surely Scott's karma to live in Spain: She was born in



Charlotte Scott (above) with her 10-year-old daughter, Amber, who wears a "tennis ball" dress by the young Spanish designer Angel Ramos. His clothes will be available in Scott's store, as will many of the decorative elements at Trasierra, including those in her private living room (opposite): The kilims, tartan throws, Indian block-print fabrics, and Moroccan ceramics at either end of the sofa.





Scott's freely admitted avidity for the color blue is evident in the guest dining room (above), which was once a stable. Bottles of Trasierra olive oil sit in the window; the blue-and-white pottery bowls on the sideboard are Moroccan. Flowers and herbs hang up to dry in the storeroom (top right). The roof terrace of the guesthouse looks over the main

courtyard toward the Scott residence (center right). The floral cottons in the yellow guest room (lower right) are by Colefax and Fowler. Using simple elements arranged with perfect symmetry—baskets made in nearby El Pedroso, Indian silver ashtrays on the console, and lidded pottery jars—Scott creates a poetic tableau in her private quarters (opposite).



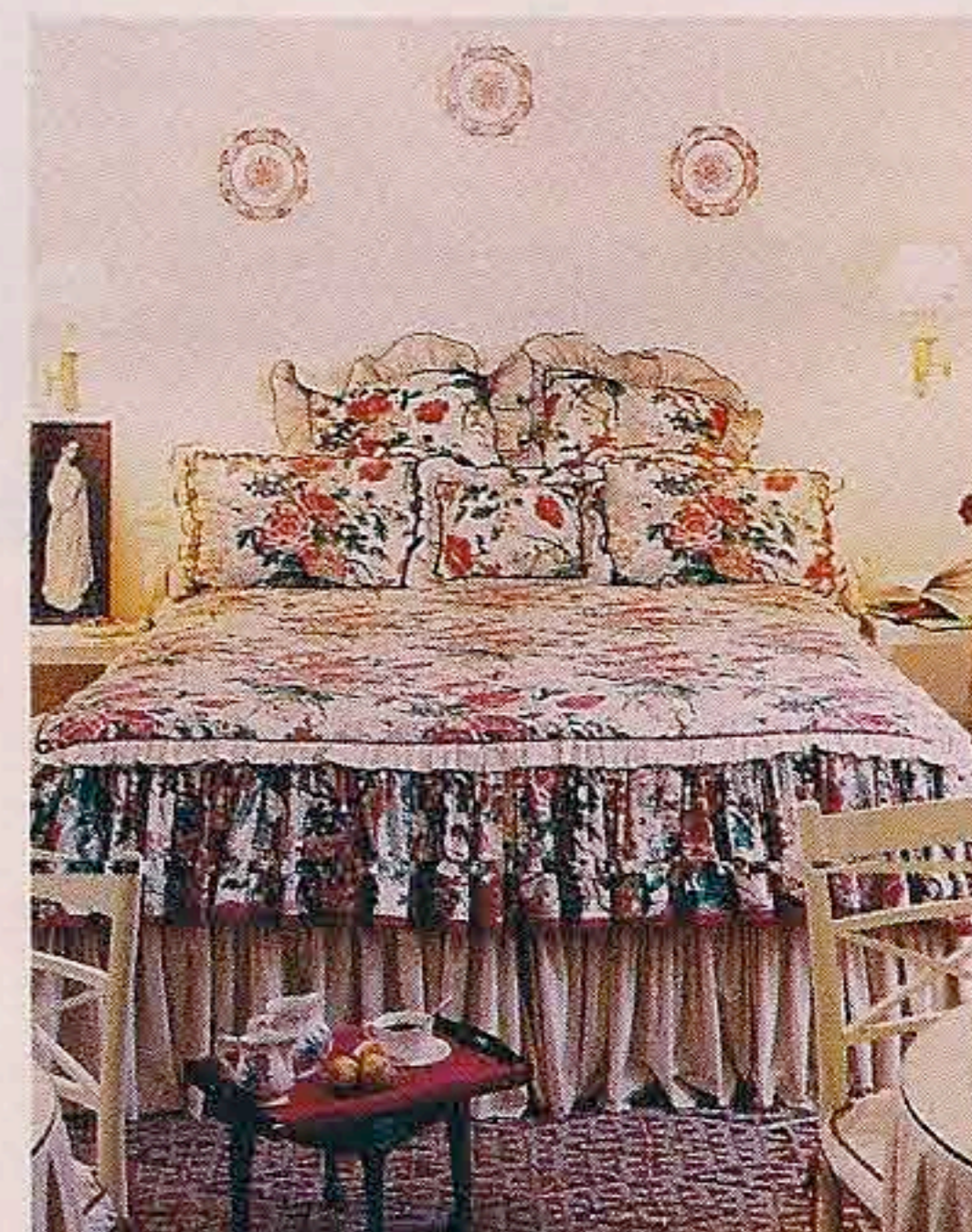
Madrid, then whisked away to London for life as the child of a diplomat, then as a teenager dumped rather unceremoniously in a Spanish school for a "broadening" experience. She cried for three weeks, since no one spoke English, but emerged from the vale of tears devoted to Spain and fluent in the language. She knew she'd return as an adult to the most *simpático* place of her youth—she's quite sure that the Spanish countryside speaks to her because it's what she gazed on from her crib.

When it came time to educate her own brood, she didn't just reject the traditional British system of boarding schools and nannies, she left the country. In 1979 Scott gave up her decorating business—and her husband the advertising world—to buy Trasierra, eliminating the detritus of a chic London life with a tag sale. The chaff was separated from the stuff she could not bear to part with—a valuable bronze sculpture was priced at \$10, a beloved old chipped plate at \$200. However, she neglected to read her Emily Post first: A few horrified ladies found their own wedding gifts to the Scotts on sale. She also sold off most of her stylish wardrobe, thinking that she would now wear black, with her hair in a bun covered by a shawl—a romantic idea she'd gleaned from Spanish paintings. She was surprised when the Spaniards kept asking, "Who died?"



The ex-fashionable Scotts arrived at Trasierra, near the small town of Cazalla de la Sierra, with a party of incredulous friends to survey their folly: The buildings were crumbling, there was no electricity, and they had to bathe in a lake, the men treading water while shaving.

Gradually, the 1,000-acre Trasierra estate was transformed into Elysian fields. The Scott family now lives in what used to be a chapel, with a pantry in the old grain bin and bedrooms for Gioconda (16), Jackson (14), George (12), and Amber (10) carved out of what was the olive press. Former barns and stables now function as a separate wing for paying guests, some of whom come







to take painting courses with a tutor imported from England.

You smell and hear Trasierra almost before you see it. The insistent perfumes of pine and cedar, jasmine and eucalyptus, constitute the welcoming committee, along with the coos and squawks of sparrows, chickens, canaries, turkeys, and white fan-tailed doves. (It is bad form to run over a baby chick in the driveway.) The gargantuan hacienda-style front gate was made by a local carpenter, the pine seasoned and stained black with diesel and linseed oil. Unfortunately the carpenter failed to realize that his own front door was smaller than the gate and had to knock down a wall to get it out of his workshop.

The feeling inside the sanctuary of Trasierra is indescribable, but let's try. It is as if your very good friend, the *Condesa*, has taken you in. Scott claims to hate luxury and to love charm, but the charm of staying in a former pigsty could wear thin without a vanity table worthy of Ida Lupino and curtains with the same kind of button-out linings that make a Burberrys raincoat toasty. "Do you think I need to get matching towels?" Scott asks with some concern. No, not when there are linen cloths with ancient embroidered initials—Lillie Langtry's, perhaps?—on the towel rack. You could get used to this.

The mistress of Trasierra is the woman trying to arrange plum-bago flowers in vases while chasing a renegade turkey across the cobblestones. Scott is part aristocrat, part tomboy, and part Auntie

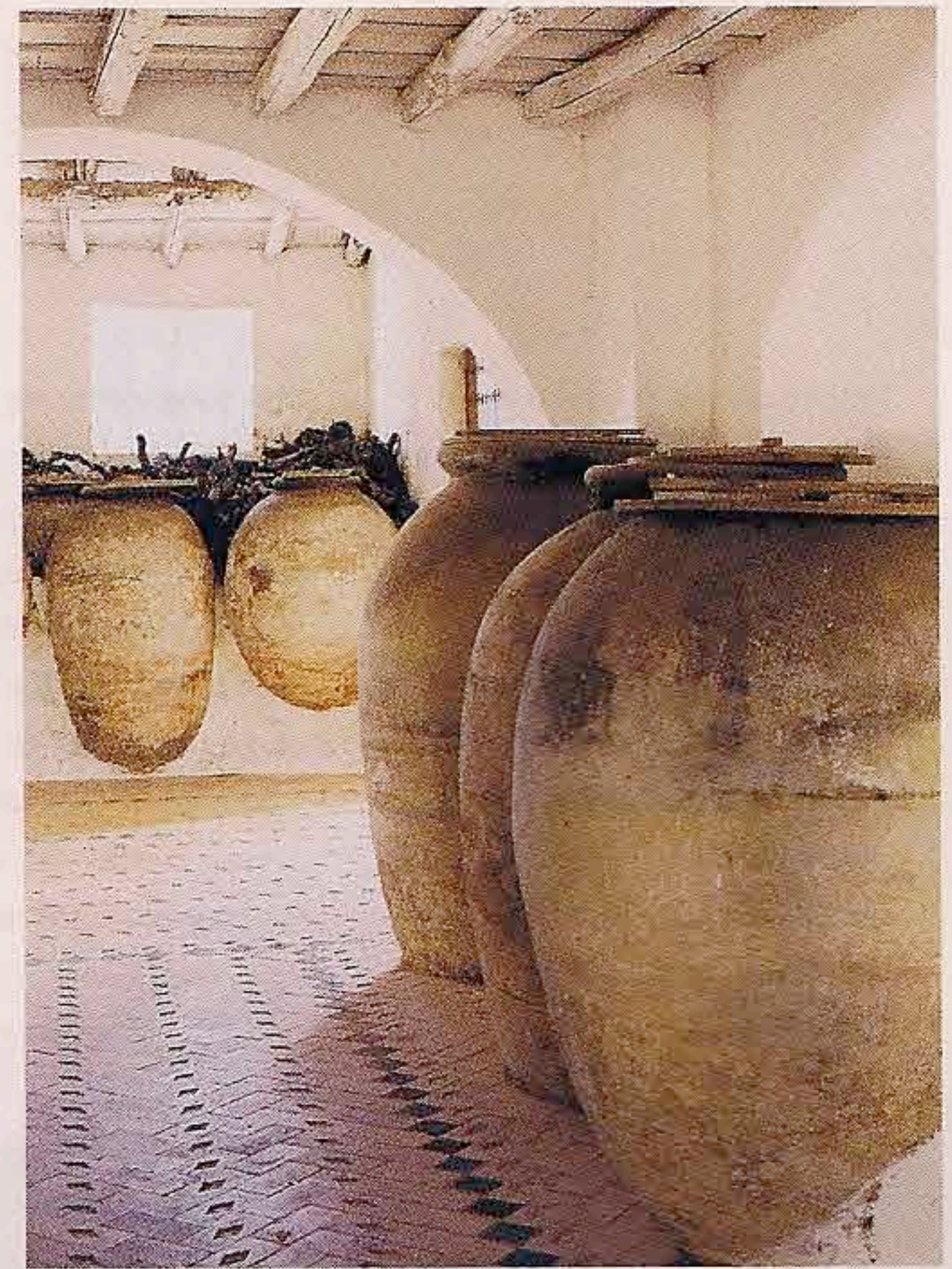
Mame—a woman who named one of her children for a ski resort and another for the *Mona Lisa*. She's a hotelier who so hates being a visitor herself that the first things she selects for a guest room are a writing table and a reading chair to evoke the comforts of home. She may relax before dinner in a bathroom lifted detail for detail from *Brideshead Revisited* and emerge wearing a man's chambray shirt.

She doesn't look like a madwoman, but of course she had to be slightly deranged to leave the "glam" life of London for a partially roofed, win-

dowless house, and years of dealing with workmen endeared to the concept of *mañana*.

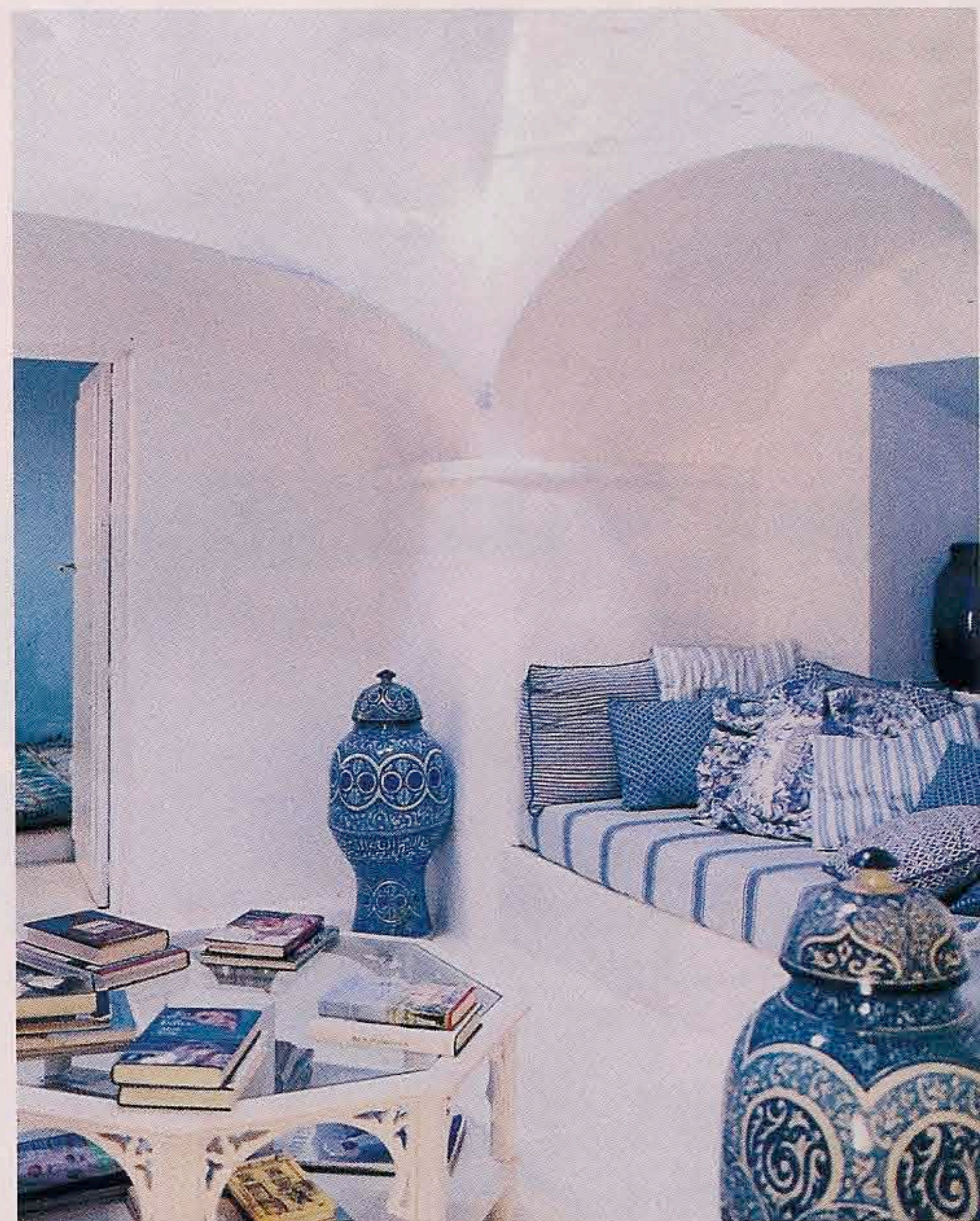
Scott crisscrossed Spain to find her building blocks, taking a child on every buying expedition to establish common ground with strangers and avoid the overcharging suffered by tourists. She had bricks made in the bleak plains of Extremadura, known for their rich clay, then interspersed them with ceramic tiles from Seville to create a diamond pattern resembling a carpet runner. Brobdingnagian terra-cotta pots called *tinajas*—originally used to store olive oil on the property and buried underground—were called into service as planters. (Trasierra is still a working olive farm, the oil now pressed at a co-op in the village.) "But the workmen refused to dig up the pots until they got orders from my husband, who was away," recalls Scott. "They considered it a waste of time and turned their backs on me until *el hombre* approved." So—heavily pregnant—she started the job herself, chipping away with a chisel until her husband returned.

Scott collected old doors long before she had any walls for them—massive and formidable slabs with iron studs and peep-



The giant clay urns (above) were used to store oil when Trasierra's donkey-powered olive press was still active. The sitting room in the Moroccan suite (below) is in the oldest part of the *finca*. Estate workers once slept in the alcoves,

which surrounded an open fire. Left: The bulletin board in Scott's office. The main outdoor dining terrace (opposite), with its white wicker furniture, is shaded by a grape arbor, and the air is scented with the fragrance of lavender.



Afternoon tea is served on a smaller terrace (below); a tentlike calico awning is suspended overhead—it's attached to the pergola with large bows—to deflect the hot Spanish sun. Tomatoes are spread out on wire nets to dry (top right) in the large vegetable garden. The comfortable sofas and chairs in

the guest's drawing room (opposite) are from George Smith in London. Scott appliqués the cushions herself (they'll be available in her store) and is also responsible for the decorative plasterwork around the fireplace. Bunches of lavender and herbs hang to dry—an enchantingly constant motif at Trasierra.

holes, marks of their origins in monasteries and churches. She spent countless Saturday mornings at the gypsy market in the bullring at Puerto Baniús, near Marbella, negotiating for brass urns and wind directionals. She climbed over mountains of old railings and window grilles at Antonio Rico—a Seville scrapyard selling architectural artifacts from dismantled houses. And when she had a few spare seconds Scott herself pressed rope into the wet plaster of the new fireplace mantels to create ornamental coils.

If she has any decorating philosophy at all, it is that all classics go well together. Consequently, various corners of the British Empire are represented at Trasierra. Indian sari prints live amiably alongside Scottish tartans and English florals from Colefax and Fowler. "India changes your concept of color," says Scott. "I used to think in traditional two-color schemes, like blue and white. It is an effort for me to do anything other than blue. But I've become braver about mixing colors: shocking pink, saffron, black. And everything changes seasonally. I like the idea that you can empty a room in a day, paint it, and move back in with new colors—a bit like a stage set."

Scott uses fabric to mask the unsightly, covering the utilitarian chain of a chandelier with a shirred sleeve of calico. Many of the fabrics at Trasierra come from the flea market in the village, where Scott is known as the mountain woman and rarely has any competition for the things that catch her eye. "I buy the stuff they use to tie up other bolts of fabric," she jokes. She's used the burlap found on seed bags for banquette cushions, and she becomes thoughtful over a roll of bubble wrap, thinking aloud, "This would make a great skirt."

There are two options for guests at Trasierra: Take a breakfast tray in private (with orange marmalade that is made from trees on the property) and retreat to the pool with a stack of mysteries, or embrace the appealing Scott family: Amber performing flamenco dance by candlelight and George tending bar in a waistcoat. (The children come by a dramatic streak honorably—Scott's uncle is the horror-movie star Christopher Lee.) Dinner, *en famille* under a grape arbor, is served on rough-glaze pottery found in Moroccan souks or made to Scott's order in Talavera de la Reina, a town near Toledo where the air is thick with the dust of ceramics factories. She had to fight for simple patterns and plain strong colors. "Most of what they make is overdecorated and quite hideous," she says. "They couldn't understand why I didn't want my coat of arms and birds of prey, which they thought much more *bonita*."

Good furniture falls to bits in this climate, from dryness or humidity. So when Scott left England she sold off almost everything, but kept one of every chair and table that she liked and had Spanish craftspeople copy them. A local carpenter, Antonio Ortega, made pine bedstands (taking on Scott's son Jackson as his apprentice along the way), and a black- (continued on page 218)





smith, José Maria Luca de Tena, duplicated Portuguese iron beds and chandeliers. Most of the sofas come from George Smith in London. And there is the occasional curved Spanish chesterfield, designed to be placed around a circular table with a charcoal-burning brass brazier: In wintertime a thick wool tablecloth is placed over it, and people wrap a corner of the cloth around their waists to keep warm. "But this is all more comfortable than Spanish style," says Scott. "Spanish families do all their entertaining in restaurants, not at home. They can't understand tarding up a house. Trying to get upholstery in Spain is like trying to get a plumber on Sunday in the States."

Despite Trasierra's being an artist's colony several months a year, there is little art on display. Scott's exhibits might be her grandmother's Tyrolean jacket hung on the wall or bunches of bay leaves tied with red ribbon. "Still lifes are set up for the students all around the property," she says. "Sometimes they see the blue glass in the dining room and end up sitting at the breakfast table all day. Trasierra is such a beautiful place I don't need paintings on the walls. The jewels out the window are enough."

Scott declines association with chic decorators. "A decorator used to be a little old lady in a hat who helped you with your first house," she says. "I wish I knew what I was doing, like what proportion a pillow should be. But I can't stand the idea of putting a stamp on something. I would hate someone walking into two places and knowing I did them both."

Though she eschews a "Scott style," some of the trappings that define Trasierra will be available at a shop Scott is opening in the village soon. It will be called La Reina Carlotta—a joke, not an attempt to join the Spanish aristocracy. She is stockpiling Panama hats and china teacups from England, bangle bracelets and saris from Delhi and Jodhpur, summer fire screens that she paints with her art tutor, and pillows that she appliqués with cabbage roses. Straw baskets from nearby El Pedroso hold wheels of *manchego* cheese or rolls of toilet paper. *Anís*, the licorice-flavored liqueur that has been the pride of Cazalla for centuries, is put in bottles the shape of a crenelated tower or steeped with locally grown cherries. Trasierra olive oil is packaged in chunky green glass from Valencia, with corks from

Spanish Lessons

DESIGN RESOURCES Suppliers that Scott uses in Spain include:

Architectural artifacts: Antonio Rico, Alcala de Guadiara, Seville.

Tiles: Cerámica Santa Ana, Calle San Jorge 31, Seville; 34-5-433-3990.

Ceramics: Artesanía Talaverana, Ave. de Portugal 32, Talavera de la Reina; 34-25-802-909; fax: 34-25-812-512.

Reproduction Spanish furniture: Arteferro, Carretera Sevilla Cazalla, km. 1, Seville; 34-5-437-1149.

ACCOMMODATIONS Trasierra's guest-house comprises four suites, two double rooms, and a cottage with two double rooms. Facilities at the *finca* include a hard tennis court, a barbecue, and a large swimming pool. The hotel, which is about one hour north of Seville, is closed from Christmas through New Year's, except for private parties. No children under 16, unless by prior arrangement. Bed and breakfast: \$100 a night per person sharing. Full board (by prior arrangement): \$180 per person sharing. Painting classes—held March through June and September through October—include tuition in a wide variety of media, from watercolor to oil. Rates include all meals, seven nights' accommodation, tuition, and limited wine with lunch and dinner. Painters sharing double room/suite: \$1,600 per week per person. Nonpainting partners: \$1,265 per week.

INFORMATION AND RESERVATIONS

Western & Oriental, 56 Ledbury Road, London W11 2AJ; 44-171-221-8677; fax 44-171-221-7808; or contact Charlotte Scott, Trasierra, Cazalla de la Sierra, 41370 Seville; 34-5-488-4324; fax 34-5-488-3305.

GETTING THERE There are no non-stop or direct flights to Seville from North America. Iberia has a daily flight from New York with a connection in Madrid; TWA, American, United, and Continental also fly to that city, where connections can be made via Iberia. Or take the new high-speed train from Madrid to Seville (trip time three hours).

local trees. (Cork is somewhat scarce, harvested every nine years and snapped up by Champagne bottlers in France.) Scott will offer simple black cloaks she discovered in a Madrid shop that outfits Catholic clerics. And she'll be presenting the efforts of a local Isaac Mizrahi: Angel Ramos, the son of friends, asked if she'd look at his clothing designs, and she agreed with a heavy heart, expecting something amateurish and outmoded. She was dazzled to find wired dresses that spiral and curve in exuberant flights of fancy. She bought the whole lot.

Such a style is born of fearlessness, daring to mix the sacred and the profane, like putting candlesticks from a Spanish Holy Week float on English pub tables. Scott is a demanding client herself, and shopping in places that are less than efficient brings out the British memsahib in her. But when the world is your marketplace there's a cer-



tain element of adventure: Last year Scott ordered handblocked, vegetable-dyed fabric from a merchant in Jodhpur who promised, "We will make your dreams come true," but who didn't quite grasp the concept of a mailing address. The fabric sat in the Madrid airport for a year; Scott ended up buying back her own bolts at an auction of unclaimed merchandise. "My heart is bleeding," said the merchant when Scott returned to his shop. "Would you not like some camel-headed back-scrubbers? Also we have ducks. And my wife has made a feast fit for a queen." ■

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