THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

JUNE 2025



MISE EN SEINE

When it comes to creating a sense of theatre and place, those arch-conjurors Mehmet and Dimonah Iksel have long had it covered – generally with their own company's exquisite panoramic or patterned papers. The couple's latest home, a riverine 17th-century apartment on the Ile Saint-Louis, is no exception, with walls and ceilings variously evoking the Ottoman empire, *ancien* Paris and Edo-era Japan. Props to both settings – that's real as well as imagined – exclaims Natasha A. Fraser. Photography: Ambroise Tézenas

Inspired by a screen from the Muromachi period, the wallpaper in the mezzanine area of the apartment features delicate blades of susuki grass. The 'japonisme' theme is continued with the framed works on paper from Mehmet Iksel's 'Collections Curator', or 'CC', line that hang against the chimney breast and at the top of the 19th-century spiral staircase. Sittings editor: Gianluca Longo



Light-filled apartments on the Ile Saint-Louis are scarce and usually require ties to illustrious French families. Dimonah and Mehmet Iksel, owners of the eponymous company, are the exception to that rule, having found their 17th-century home, with its soaring ceilings and original parquet de Versailles floors, on the internet. *En plus*, the rent is reasonable, they tell me. 'I call that maximum for minimum,' says Dimonah, who is of Iraqi/Hungarian descent. 'What grabbed me was the magic window [in the *grand salon*], because we're level with the Seine.' Her Turkish-born husband points out that Charles Baudelaire wrote *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the neighbouring Hôtel de Lauzun. 'He had the same view as we do,' Mehmet says proudly. 'It inspired him to write the greatest *recueil* in the world.'

Unable to resist the urge to shake a polymath's cage, I ask if Baudelaire is France's answer to Lord Byron. 'No, he's much more important,' says the scholarly Mehmet, aghast. 'Though I love Byron because he was such a romantic character. And Baudelaire led a miserable life.' This latter statement is delivered as Dimonah hands out glasses of chilled pomegranate juice and breaks open a box of almond-paste balls, fresh from Bebek. 'You have to suffer to be a genius,' she says impishly, and follows this with an infectious laugh. The light exchange captures the yin-yang of their partnership, her breezy charm smoothing his occasional cerebral brittleness. 'I couldn't have done anything without Mehmet and he couldn't have done anything without me,' Dimonah says later on. Indeed, their relationship has been at the heart of Iksel Decorative Arts since its launch. In 1988, they started by peddling hand-painted decorative panels and wallcoverings. Then, in 2001, Mehmet dared to go digital, scanning a rich archive of source material for mural and ceiling decoration, allowing customers to paper their pads in everything from 'View of Venice', a sepia-toned bird's-eye view of La Serenissima c1500, to 'Amazonia', a verdant Brazilian landscape imagined with Mayan whimsy and 19th-century sketches.

Dimonah and I first met on a friend's houseboat on the Seine, where she regaled us with mesmerising tales of her childhood in Tehran. That was 20 years ago now, but I can still recall her evocative description of slipping a tiny hand into a burlap sack bursting with baroque pearls, 'hidden by my jeweller father in the kitchen'. Meanwhile, from older British friends, I heard about Mehmet's time at Oxford; how he would sit on the lawn at Magdalen College, surrounded by dons and spouting French poetry. The pair met over breakfast in Jaipur and speak seven languages between them, a worldliness reflected in the raucous parties at their former home on Rue Chabanais, between Opéra and the Louvre, before they left for Istanbul in 2010.

More recently, after opening a showroom on the Rive Gauche in September 2022, the Iksels began hunting for a new Paris home. 'Our shop was the best excuse,' says Dimonah. Besides, they missed their French friends and the city where Mehmet spent most of his adult life (he's inhabited 25 different apartments there). Although he nurses some nostalgia for the Marais and the Left Bank, he's now suitably charmed by the Ile Saint-Louis, which his wife describes as a 'pocket of Paris that exists completely on its own terms'.

Within seconds of entering the *entresol* apartment, the Iksels were sold. 'When something is right, we don't deliberate,' says Dimonah. There was nothing to do except add furniture and decorate – and they have done so liberally. 'The apartment was originally double the size and the owners took great pains to halve and divide it,' she continues. Since the hallway acts as a centre point, the couple have transformed it into a magnificent feature, covering all four walls with a restored version of 'The Governor's Visit', originally an East India Company wallpaper painted in China c1770. 'A friend, the antiquarian Philippe de Zwingelstein, gave us the original wallpaper,' says Mehmet. 'And by collage, I created everything that was missing,' adds Dimonah.

The textiles throughout are Iksel, inspired by the couple's treasure-trove of threadbare ancient Indian and Persian clothes, while the artwork comes from their recently inaugurated 'Collections Curator' range. Created in partnership with their son, Kubilai, it consists of 700 framed artworks that have been selected, cleaned and enlarged by Mehmet, who combed through 'every single visual document' in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France as well as half a million documents online. The result is a sprawling line scoping more than 2,000 years of art history. 'Mehmet optimised them,' says Dimonah, referring to such artworks as *A Hare in the Forest*, Hans Hoffmann's 16th-century masterpiece, and Tiepolo's 'Punchinello' series of drawings capturing the spirit of the Commedia dell'Arte.

To enhance the *grand salon*'s masculine feel, furthered by the faux-Louis XIV boiserie, the Iksels kept the walls plain, combining French Hollywood Regency furniture from the 1960s with stalwart 18th-century pieces from Sweden and France, and Ghiordes prayer rugs from the same period. 'It's fun to mix it all up,' says Dimonah. For the ceiling, they used their 'Directoire' paper, which boasts Neoclassical borders with winged devils and sensual cherubs on a watercoloured sky. It is based on an original, again from Zwingelstein, from one of Paris's fleshpot cafés, which were notorious for their debauchery and popular with beauties of easy virtue. 'At night, people from the street can look up and see it,' says Mehmet. 'I feel I have tricked them because they must think it's the original ceiling.'

In the bedroom and dressing room, the Iksels have plumped for a Japanese theme, inspired by Kubilai's 18 months in Tokyo as a philosophy student. In the mezzanine area, they repeated the wallpaper – which depicts susuki grass gently wafting in the breeze – on the ceiling. 'I did it like a box,' says Dimonah. The result is an all-enveloping sense of cosiness and calm.

The only drawback of the apartment is the microscopic kitchen, a problem Mehmet has addressed by installing a counter space on wheels. 'It's possible to cook in tiny spaces if you know how,' he says. Naturally, they continue to entertain. 'At last year's design week, we did three cocktail parties in four days,' Dimonah recalls. Next stop is decorating all the washrooms and bathrooms at the Four Seasons in Florence, a Renaissance palazzo hotel. Reflecting on such projects, she adds: 'We find our joy in the past' ® *Visit iksel.com*



In typical Iksel fashion, pattern meets pattern in the hall, where a c1770 East India Company document paper meticulously restored by Dimonah using collage covers the walls and jib doors, while 'Japanese Medallions' stretches across the ceiling like a fine carpet



Above: 'I love the Hoffmann hedgehog,' says Dimonah of the work on paper just above a Louis XIV demi-lune table in the 'grand salon'. It is joined by other 'CC' reproductions, including a Rubens, around the double doors, which form an enfilade with those separating the hall and dressing room beyond. Opposite: where the two 'sedir' (upholstered in Iksel's 'Safavid Falconers' linen) add an Ottoman air to the room, the 1970s brass coffee tables and Maison Jansen-style wheatsheaf chandelier evoke, as Mehmet puts it, 'French Hollywood Regency'



Above: Schopenhauer, a rescue cat belonging to the Iksels' son, Kubilai, looks nonplussed by the 'White Blossom' walls in the back corridor. 'He is very cosmopolitan,' Dimonah says of the feline, 'having lived in Montreal, Paris, London and now [with his owner] Rome.' Just behind him is the bathroom, where the theme is more 'à la Turque' thanks to the 'Iznik Leaves' paper. Opposite: surrounding the mezzanine's bed are scenes from two centuries-old Japanese screens that have been digitally printed on canvas and framed