

MOVING FORWARD

After having to leave her house in Chelsea, Alexandra Tolstoy has established a new base in Battersea for her family and a workspace, which she has filled with furniture, textiles and folk-art pieces that celebrate her Russian heritage and travels in Central Asia

TEXT **FIONA MCKENZIE JOHNSTON**
PHOTOGRAPHS **PAUL MASSEY**



DINING ROOM Walls painted in 'Pimlico Green' by Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler for Fenwick & Tilbrook contrast with **woodwork** in Farrow & Ball's 'Black Blue'. The **dining chairs**, bought from Robert Kime for Alexandra's previous house, are upholstered in 'Joseph' velvet from Lewis & Wood. **SITTING ROOM** The **armchair**, from Love Your Home, is covered in 'Sirin' linen in terracotta from Volga Linen. The **sheep** is an antique sourced by Daniel Slowik of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler. Luke Irwin designed the Persian-inspired 'Blue Popper' rug





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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT **Photographs** of the children taken by Edward Mapplethorpe hang in the sitting room. Alexandra in the dining room. In the kitchen, a **dresser** from John Cornall Antiques stands next to an **Aga** from John Wray Country Stoves. Craig Hanna painted the **portrait** of Alexandra in the dining room; the Swedish **cupboard** is from her new venture, The Tolstoy Edit. **OPPOSITE** A Russian **tablecloth** from Cabana brightens the kitchen. The **pendant light** is from Chris Charles Antiques and the red-painted **cabinet** was built by Apron Design

Behind the neat red-brick façade of a classic Victorian terrace in Battersea are interiors with a fairy-tale charm. As these combine English chintz and romantic-era Russian details with a gallery of wonders, it will not surprise regular readers of *House & Garden* – or her many Instagram followers – to learn that it is the latest home of the writer, explorer and polymath of style Alexandra Tolstoy and her three children, Aliosha, Ivan and Marusya.

What is surprising, given the layers of ornamentation, is that these photographs were taken within weeks of Alexandra and the children moving in. This followed their eviction from their previous home in Chelsea (featured in the July 2018 issue of *House & Garden*), after the Russian government claimed it against alleged debts owed by Alexandra's ex and the father of her children, the oligarch Sergei Pugachev.

'It was awful,' says Alexandra. 'But I quickly realised what mattered, which was the children being able to stay at their French schools and my being able to work on my new project, The Tolstoy Edit. I also lead horseback riding tours in Kyrgyzstan through my business Alexandra Tolstoy Travel, which is based in London. That ruled out a permanent move to Oxfordshire.' (Alexandra's cottage there was featured in the April 2014 issue.) Summoning her renowned pluck, she consigned three quarters of the contents of her Chelsea house to Christie's and set out to find somewhere to rent. She had to move fast: 'I was on Zoopla every night.'

It paid off. Alexandra lit upon a house in the area she wanted, with 'beautiful fireplaces and original tiles'. It also came with an expanse of laminate flooring and all-white walls. Cleverly, Alexandra negotiated a redecoration allowance in return for signing a long-term rental contract. Within days, the landlord's team had found wooden boards underneath the worn synthetic flooring downstairs, laid sisal upstairs, removed a tired Ikea kitchen and revamped three bathrooms – all to Alexandra's specifications. 'I was respectful of cost,' she says. 'The panelling is off-the-shelf sheets and the bathroom floors are Amtico, from John Lewis.'

Regarding the repaint, which was wanted but not needed, she says, 'I mentally spread the cost over how long I plan to live here.' The final expense was the kitchen. 'I had one last piece of real jewellery, which I sold, and I bought a reconditioned Aga – so much better than a necklace.'

Alexandra had kept back from the Christie's sale the contents of her children's rooms. This included the antiques sourced by Daniel Slowik of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, such as the sheep, now in the sitting room. She also kept the dining room table and some of the curtains. Those in teal hanging downstairs are hand-appliquéd with Ivan Bilibin's illustrations for Alexander Pushkin's fairy tales and were made for a house in Moscow, from which Alexandra and Sergei had to flee in 2010. 'They're the only thing I succeeded in retrieving. I'm glad I did – the children have been brought up on those stories.'

Supporting Alexandra was Emma Burns of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler: 'She's brilliant and has decorated all my houses with me – as well as a yacht. Here she helped, as a friend, with advice on paint colours. She also managed the cutting-down of all the curtains, originally designed by her for other windows. She adjusted so gracefully to my rather different budget.'

Unpacking was done in record time, thanks to Susanna Hammond of Sorted Living, who specialises in organisation and is described by Alexandra as 'a godsend to a frazzled



mother moving house'. Meanwhile, the antique dealer and framing specialist Benedict Foley worked with Alexandra on the hanging of paintings, textiles and more. 'The children's bedrooms were each an Aladdin's Cave – it's wonderful to see these old friends in a new light,' she says.

This extraordinary collection, coupled with the abundance of pattern running riot over furniture and furnishings alike, is what gives the sense of being between the illustrated pages of a book of tales by Alexander Afanasyev or the Brothers Grimm. In the dining room, walls painted in 'Pimlico Green', by Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler for Fenwick & Tilbrook, provide a gingerbread backdrop to Orthodox icons and folk art. Chairs covered in Lewis & Wood's 'Joseph' velvet contrast with a Luke Irwin rug and an antique Swedish painted cupboard.

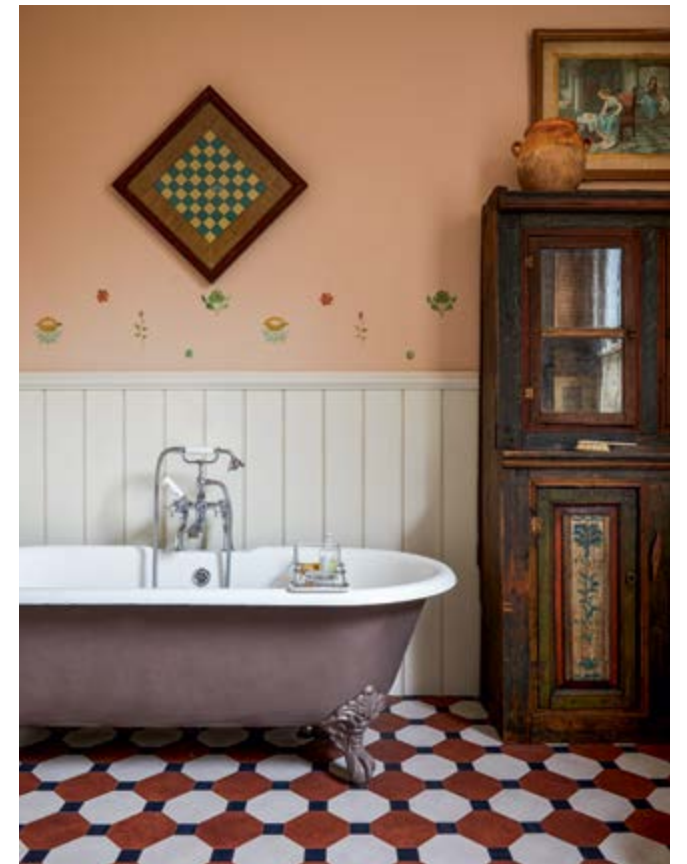
In Alexandra's bathroom, a 19th-century Russian commode inspired the wall stencils by Taruga Creaciones. In her bedroom, the antique bed, dressed in linen and fabric from Volga Linen and Robert Kime, is placed in the window to make space for a 20th-century Irish wardrobe and embroidered Uzbek coats, which recall the allure of the Central Asian steppes.

'At my Chelsea house, those coats were hidden away, along with painted furniture that I've collected since my twenties, which Sergei was not keen on. I feel that I'm able to be truer to myself in this house. We're so happy,' says Alexandra.

She has conjured magic from mettle, giving a masterclass in starting again, downsizing and decorating within the limits of a rental contract, while creating a beguiling home for her children full of treasures valued for reasons that do not relate to their cost. The best houses reflect the lives of those who live there; this is one of them □

The Tolstoy Edit: thetolstoyedit.com

Alexandra Tolstoy Travel: alexandratolstoy.co.uk



MARUSYA'S ROOM (opposite) Scumble Goosie **bunk beds** in Farrow & Ball's 'Rectory Red' pick up on a **rug** from Natalia Violet Antiques. MAIN BEDROOM (this page) Alexandra's bed **valance** is in a Robert Kime fabric. The **curtains** are from Tradchap and the **wardrobe** is from The Tolstoy Edit. MAIN BATHROOM The **walls** are in 'Setting Plaster' by Farrow & Ball, with stencilled motifs inspired by the Russian commode on the right. Alexandra repainted the **bath** in Farrow & Ball's 'London Clay'. The **curtain** fabric is 'Polonaise' by Décors Barbares