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Vicente Wolf.

Travels With Vicente

Wolf discovers the unexpected in foreign cultures, which translates into exotic, global-inspired possibilities for his interiors.

BY NANCY A. RUHLING

WHETHER YOU'RE TREKKING THROUGH THE RAINFORESTS OF Brazil or walking down a street on Manhattan's Upper East Side, good design, declares Vicente Wolf, is the ability to see things in a different way. To prove his point, he searches through some of the items he purchased during his latest world travels. There's an Ethiopian necklace he bought from around the neck of the woman who made it. At first glance, it looks like handcrafted beads, but it's really made of discards, including caps from Bic pens.

Next, he holds up a foot-high headpiece of glorious emerald-green parrot feathers he picked up during a recent visit to the Amazon. Its luminous colors fly in the light. With the flick of his wrist, Wolf flips it over and those green feathers turn to show their envious secret: Their undersides are the color of ancient Mayan gold. But if you didn't train your eye to really look beyond what's readily visible, you never would have had the thrill of seeing this surprising spectacle.

"Travel, for me, is an adventure," Wolf says. "I like very primitive places, I love the sense of exploring cultures that are very different from ours. It's a way that I have expanded my vision of design, by experiencing and understanding how other people live and communicating with

them. If you don't know or you haven't experienced something, it's difficult to work with materials and items that have come from those places. It's very foreign because you don't feel the dirt, you don't feel its origin. You have to be immersed in the culture so you can add to your personality, your range of vision."

Now, Wolf is sharing his experiences through *Crossing Boundaries: A Global Vision of Design* (Monacelli Press, \$50), a travelogue/design diary in which he explores, through prose and photos, the cultures of five countries – Ethiopia, Madagascar, Borneo, Burma and Syria – that have caught his eye and captured his imagination. "When you are traveling on a river in Borneo and you're looking at the color of the sky and the textures of the woods around you, all of a sudden you see things that maybe you never had focused on before," he says, adding that his two new collections – fabrics for Kravet and bed linens for Homestead – reinforce the thesis of the book by bringing the global theme to the home front.

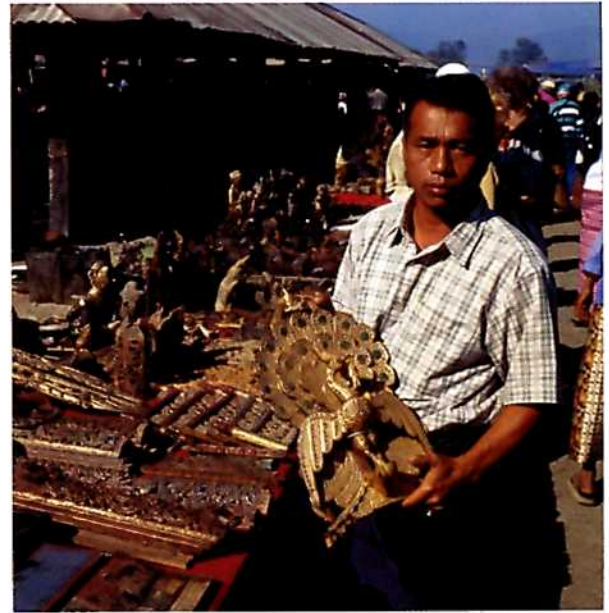
Traveling to Wolf means sleeping on the ground under the sparkling stars in Borneo; cooking food over an open fire with the natives in Papua New Guinea and eating it with your bare hands; hanging precariously over Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls so that the spray tickles your nose; fishing for piranhas on the Amazon River; and rafting down rapids in Borneo on a bone-shaking bamboo raft.

It is those daring experiences – and many others like them – that have led him to create global-inspired design schemes for celebrities like Twyla Tharp, Clive Davis, Carl Bernstein and the Prince and Princess von Furstenberg, and that have led to a host of public commissions, including the SW Steakhouse for Steve Wynn's new Wynn Las Vegas Hotel and the Luxe Hotel Rodeo Drive and Café Rodeo in Beverly Hills.

"My design is a blending, it's not just arranging furniture in a room," Wolf says. "It's like a sentence that has a lot of different words, and each word – like chair and table – is individual until you put them all together and you end up with a thought. It's not about the furniture, it's about the thinking process that goes into creating these rooms. It's about understanding everything from Buddhism to Ikebana to seeing how nature blends colors together; it's understanding the sense of smooth and rough, yin and yang, all the things that are not necessarily decorative associations."

It is, he continues, about pairing a 19th-century Chinese chest with a pair of sleek, avant-garde 1950s metal chairs upholstered in cane. It's about bringing a bit of the world home by using the unforgettable image of a turbaned shepherd in Ethiopia leaning against a tree to inspire the color scheme of a Long Island living room. And it's taking everyday objects like the gourds he bought from village children and turning them into objects of beauty, in this case vases that form a sculptural vignette at his Montauk home.

"You can put an inlaid table from Syria next to a 19th-century French table, and they're both saying luxury and wealth, but they're saying it in different ways," he says. "To put a French chair next to a French table is what most people do, but to put that French chair next to an African stool is bringing both of those elements to life because each one is



For Wolf, traveling and discovering the unexpected is an adventure. Left: Ladies in Borneo perform a welcoming dance to their village. Top right: handicrafts – some old, some new – from Burma. Center: Inle Lake Market, with a profusion of gold objects, remnants of temples and buildings. Among them, a gold peacock, which, when mounted in a very tailored bedroom (bottom), adds a touch of whimsy and glamour.

standing on its own. It's the sense of balance that is enlightening."

If design is all about balance, travel, the Wolf way, is, by design, all about keeping yourself off-kilter. Wolf, who was born in Cuba and grew up in Miami and New York, has been fascinated by visiting foreign countries ever since he watched his mother walk up the steps to a Europe-bound plane in the 1950s. "My education didn't come from school, but from my experiences," he says. "I'm dyslexic, and I never even finished high school. So the world has become my classroom. I took my first trip – to the Bahamas – when I was 17, and even when I came to New York after I left Miami and didn't have any money, I took the bus to Washington, DC."

At the end of every year, Wolf charts his six-to-eight-week course, going it alone, except for a native guide or interpreter, through unknown territories. In between watching witch doctors do their magic and observing rituals that involve masked men eating snakes and performing days of dancing, he shops the markets and buys from the natives so he literally can bring his renewed and redirected vision home.

"I don't see myself as somebody who just places furniture," he says. "I see what I do as creating points of views and blending different thoughts and cultures and expressing them in a lifestyle. It is these travel experiences that give me that capability. The color of the sky over

a field in Madagascar where they're digging for precious stones and the color of the people digging covered in mud – all those things are really vivid visions that I keep."

Now, the best part, he says, is sharing his adventures with the world. "Travel is all about looking back at what you're leaving behind, and venturing forward. I hope that my book opens the door for people and helps them look at things in a different way," he says. "I want to tell them to look at what is unexpected and absorb that and don't see it just for what it is, but for how its possibilities can enter your life."

Nancy A. Ruhling, a freelance writer based in New York City, writes frequently about interior design, art and antiques.