

# INTERIORS

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The Body  
Issue

# HOLY WIT

Lydia Corbett, once known as ‘the girl with the ponytail’ after modelling for Pablo Picasso in the coastal town of Vallauris in 1954, has long used her family’s Provençal farmhouse as a canvas on which to express her playful vision and deep spirituality. Every flea-market object, picture and piece of ancestral furniture adds another anecdote to the story of the house, which has seen the full tumult of French history, from monks hidden from persecution during the Revolution to German soldiers billeted in World War II. Zing Tsjeng is on the side of the angels. Photography: Steph Wilson

*Lydia Corbett poses in the painting studio wearing a second-hand tunic dress. Above her hang prints of black-and-white portraits of her by Picasso: ‘He never flirted with me. I wouldn’t have had it – I already had a boyfriend.’* *Sittings editor: Calum Knight*

Lydia Corbett  
Sylvette David



exposition du 7 juillet au 30 septembre 2000

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MUNICIPAL







For 400 years, every generation of Lydia Corbett's family has lived, dined, played and slept at Maison Latour, a spacious seven-bedroom Provençal *mas* in the south of France. The French painter and ceramicist – better known as Sylvette David, or 'the girl with the ponytail', who modelled for Picasso in 1954 (*WoI* Nov 2016) – has left her own indelible touch on the house.

'It's full of art – it's a bit messy!' the 92-year-old artist says over a cup of tea and pastries. She has long since swapped the high ponytail that features so prominently in Picasso's portraits for two shoulder-length braids. As ever, the self-effacing Corbett is being too modest – the farmhouse, which retains many of its original features, is a testament to her own free-wheeling creative eye and to the generations of artists in her family. Over the years, she has covered it with luminous murals of angels, saints, flowers, animals and pilgrims. 'I loved Charleston,' she says of a visit to the farmhouse where Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant lived. 'It inspired me to paint on the walls. Actually, I tried

*Corbett painted the cupboards below the bookshelves of the ground-floor library herself with crosses, hearts, vases of flowers and bowls of fruit. The room is dominated by her chicken-wire-and-papier-mâché sculpture of a woman. The bird on the figure's head represents the Holy Spirit, says the owner. Among the leather-bound books on the shelves are legal textbooks that belonged to a lawyer ancestor who was guillotined during the French Revolution. The artist's granddaughter acquired the small rattan chair from a French flea market, while the bust of Beethoven was passed down through the family. The doors allow*





to take the wallpaper off and couldn't – so what I did is paint people on it.'

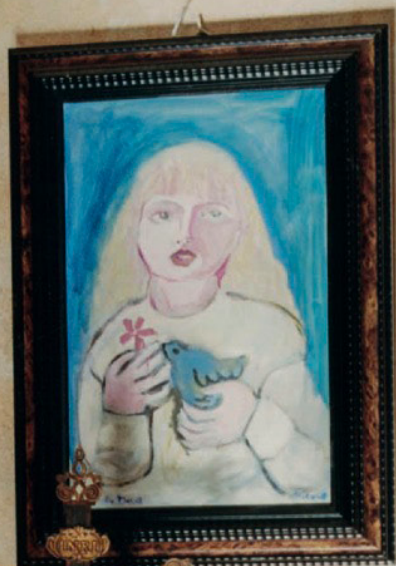
Corbett's French father was a solicitor who became an art dealer, and her English mother was a painter. Their collection, including their own works and several canvases by Dany Lartigue, who lived in Saint-Tropez, adorns the walls alongside Lydia's own pieces. One nude by her mother depicting Corbett's godmother hangs in what was her grandmother's bedroom above an antique metal cot.

The three-storey stone house perched near an old silkworm farm has weathered the upheavals of French history. During the Revolution, the third floor was used to hide monks from religious persecution, and in the neighbouring city of Orange, Corbett's great-grandfather was guillotined. When Hitler invaded France in World War II, the house was seized and used by German soldiers. (Mamiche, Corbett's grandmother, was living there at the time and was forced to take care of them. Apparently they treated her surprisingly well.) Now it plays host to the clan every summer and an ever-expanding cast of

*The ground-floor studio is where the artist gets ready for the day, prays and paints. Her depiction of a mother and child surrounded by white lilies hangs beside the door. Sitting on the marble fireplace is an 18th-century gilt mirror, one of many dotted around the house*

*In the formal sitting room on the ground floor, family paintings in Indian ink and oil hang behind an antique chair upholstered in tapestry. The plaster bust was acquired by Corbett's father, and the crucifix was a flea-market find. On the wall hangs the artist's portrait of her daughter Isabel against a blue background, displayed in an old frame. Before the advent of television, the family used to play the harmonium, now serving as a sideboard, for evening entertainment*







*Opposite: Corbett's bedroom on the first floor has hand-painted red floral wallpaper, which a relative partially painted over with more floral motifs at the beginning of the 20th century. The drawing of a woman beside the door frame was added by the artist. A commode chair that belonged to her father sits next to a marble-topped dresser. Below: in the attic bedroom is an 18th-century chair used by life models during the art retreats that the family hosts. A folding screen painted by Corbett partly hides the boiler behind it*



friends, many of whom work in the creative arts. Both of Corbett's adult daughters are painters, and the family continues the cultural heritage of Maison Latour by hosting artists' retreats at the house.

When her parents divorced, the teenage Lydia followed her mother to Vallauris, a seaside town on the French Riviera that had become a sanctuary for artists. Here she met Picasso, who was 'very amusing', she recalls. 'He tried to make me laugh but I was shy – very serious, I was! He never flirted with me. I wouldn't have had it – I already had a boyfriend.' She started her artistic career in Vallauris, but put it to one side when she started a family and only picked it up again at 45 when her children had flown the nest. 'I

was able to just paint,' she says. 'I like staying at home. I'm not an adventurer!'

The house overlooks a garden shaded by a huge plane tree, planted when the family first moved in. Buttercream-yellow shutters – a style traditional to Provence – are often flung open to let the dappled light in through the windows, still with their original glass. Corbett has channelled her energy into remaking the house in a vision that is inimitably hers – a blend of female-centred spirituality, Christian iconography and nature. It is evident from the moment you push open the heavy teal front doors to reveal a mural of Saint Francis and his follower Saint Clare, each with a cat curled up at their feet. 'I love all religions,' the painter says with a smile.

The *mas* extends from that central corridor on both sides, with a kitchen, formal and informal dining rooms on the right side and a studio, a library and the sitting room on the other. Adorning every shelf and surface are makeshift shrines and objects d'art passed down through the family or collected by the owner and her children from flea markets and *vide-greniers* (the French equivalent of a car-boot sale). In the formal sitting room, a plaster bust bought by the artist's father sits next to a crucifix she found at an antiques market, surrounded by a work by Corbett depicting her daughter and oil landscapes by her mother – three generations of her family represented in a single corner. Some of the vivid geometric tiling in the ground

floor rooms is as old as the house itself, and much of the walnut furniture dates back to the 18th century. Corbett's grandmother was offered a Cézanne painting as a wedding present but turned it down: 'She said: "No, I don't want a Cézanne, I want a bedroom suite!";' she laughs. A winding staircase leads up to the second and third floors, where the bedrooms are located; many of them still have their original hand-decorated wallpaper. A first-floor bedroom known as the Jesus Room features the owner's mural of pilgrims visited by an angel, the child-like figures set against the faded floral walls. The maze of rooms is a child's dream come true, and it is sprinkled throughout with

Corbett's cheerful irreverence, like the trompe-l'oeil window she painted in a dark recess of the Jesus Room.

'I remember being little, lying up here for hours,' says Alice, Corbett's daughter. From a vantage point of the second-floor bedroom, she would watch the family assemble for meals at the long table or play boules in the garden. 'There would be 21 of us here for breakfast – one uncle had seven children.' Humour radiates from even the most everyday of trinkets and souvenirs: a bowl in the sitting room contains pebbles from the nearby river, daubed by Corbett's father with amusing little faces. Even the lights have personality, with a lampshade in the bedroom

collaged by Corbett with reclining nudes amid sunflowers and owls taking flight.

Now in her tenth decade, Corbett calls Devon home and is still showing her art, with a retrospective scheduled for November. 'I want to do lamps in clay,' she says. But she still credits the Bloomsberries of Charleston for inspiring her family home: 'I was moved by their will in decorating the whole house.' Maison Latour, so alive with its bohemian blend of art and family, will surely inspire many more artists in years to come. *My Life, My Dance with Picasso* runs at The Redfern Gallery, 11–12 Pall Mall, London SW1 (020 7734 1732; [redfern-gallery.com](http://redfern-gallery.com), 3–28 Nov. For artists' retreats, visit [isabelcoulton.com](http://isabelcoulton.com)



*Above: the bedroom where Corbett's grandmother formerly slept retains its original toile-de-jouy wallpaper, and a painting of a woman mending a fishing net by the artist Dany Lartigue, son of photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue, hangs above an 18th-century armchair. Opposite: pilgrims and angels adorn the walls of the first-floor bedroom known as the Jesus Room after the murals that Corbett painted here. The artist says she got the idea from a visit to Charleston in East Sussex, once home to Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant: 'It inspired me to paint on the walls. Actually, I tried to take the wallpaper off and couldn't – so what I did is paint people on it'*

