

# Home!

## WINTER WONDERLAND

High in the French Alps, one couple have created a stunning family home where their art and design is on display – and for sale

REPORT Ian Phillips PHOTOGRAPHS Stephan Julliard



**Clockwise from top left:**  
an exterior view of the  
19th-century farmhouse  
near Megève; the sitting room,  
with rock crystal and brass  
chandelier by Christopher Boots;  
Igloo sofa by Mathias Kiss and  
a Carrara marble coffee table,  
also in the sitting room



Left to right: view of the kitchen, with skis on the wall that were custom-painted by French artist Xavier Veilhan; the dining room, with Julian Mayor table and chairs and tapestry by Gilles Pernet; Christian Astugueville's sculpture *Divinité* in the hall

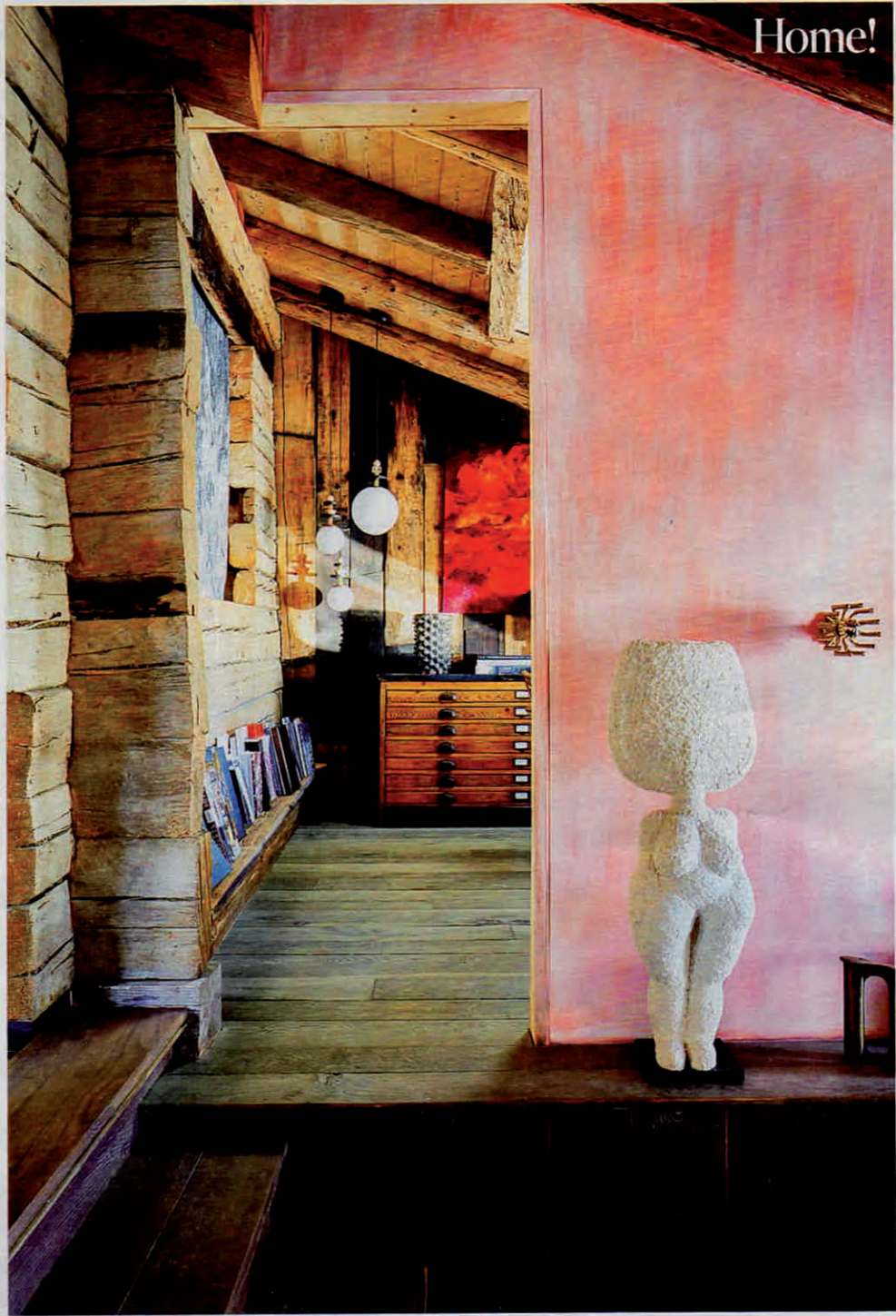


Last summer, French furniture dealer Armel Soyer had five huge blocks of Burgundy oak delivered to her home in the Alps, the largest of them 12ft long and nearly 3ft wide, and invited a Russian designer to come for a three-week artist's residence. He arrived with two chainsaws, a red pencil and a burly Georgian, whose job it was to lug the wood into position, and set about crafting a table, two benches and a chair, which sat for

several months on the terrace. When a nearby client bought the table, it was so heavy it had to be delivered by helicopter.

It's an unusual way for any dealer to source her stock, but Soyer likes to get under the skin of all her commissions, to fully understand their place in the market. "When a piece is proposed to me, I always ask myself what's novel about it and whether it will still be relevant in 50 years," she declares. "My goal is to create something that will really stand the test of time."

Nothing about Soyer becoming a leading figure in the design world was predestined. She was actually born into a horse-racing family in Chantilly, north of Paris. Her father was a trainer; her mother worked for one of Europe's leading owner-breeders, the Aga Khan. Soyer herself moved to Paris to attend boarding school at the age of 15 and quickly developed an ambition to work in a creative field. For ten years, she oversaw marketing at Lalique, before opening her own Parisian gallery



She never expected to find herself living in the Alps, either. She and her husband, Gilles Pernet, a photographer and image consultant, previously divided their time between a loft in Paris and a weekend house in Normandy. His work, however, took him regularly to the ski resort of Megève, where Soyer would join him. "We started to fall in love with the valley here", he says. "It's extremely wide and sunny."

When they decided to buy a property, it didn't take long to find one. "I was so excited

that I immediately started searching and found our farmhouse in just 48 hours," Pernet recalls. It came with two hectares of land, so Soyer's two horses could be stabled. It was also not too remote, which meant that it was easy to get their two sons, Ernest, 9, and Ange, 7, to school. Then there were the spectacular views, especially those of Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc. "It's like a protective figure, a point of reference," says Pernet. "Just like the Eiffel Tower in Paris."

The chalet itself dates from the first half of the 19th century and was a working farmhouse until the Sixties. When Soyer and Pernet first saw it, there was still a metre of hay on the upper level and no central heating. Converting it into a home took three years. Although they made few changes to the external structure, they completely gutted the interior, making particular efforts to salvage the original materials. As Pernet says, "It would have been sacrilege not to

Clockwise from this image: Armel Soyer and Gilles Pernet; the exterior, with the Megève Valley beyond; guest bedroom view, with ceiling painting by Charles Belle; vintage Jens Risom chairs in the kitchen



## Materials were reclaimed: 'It would have been sacrilege not to repurpose the old wood'

repurpose the old wood." Former floorboards were used for walls, as was burnt wood from the old chimneybreast. And when new planks had to be added, he stained them different colours to give them an aged effect. He scratched the pink-painted walls to give them a patina, too. The staircase that links the two floors, meanwhile, was topped with an angular structure reminiscent of a hut.

Quite early in the construction process, Soyer decided that the space would not only become their home, but also a second gallery, and much of the ever changing

furniture is for sale. Many of pieces are in perfect synch with the Alpine setting. An angular sofa by Mathias Kiss is named Igloo, while Julian Mayor's General Dynamic chair resembles a faceted block of ice. Then there is a rock crystal chandelier by Australian designer Christopher Boots and a bedside table made from pyrite, which both reference natural materials found in the region. A pair of tapestries created by Pernet was inspired by the environment, too. The one in the dining room is based on a digitally distorted photo of the slopes opposite, where he and

Soyer often ski during extended lunch breaks in winter.

"Being here gives me a feeling of great freedom," she says. "I've been able to demonstrate that a contemporary design gallery can exist outside a big city." Pernet seems equally content with their new life. "With our children, we often listen to a song called *Il est où le bonheur?* [*Where is happiness?*] by a singer called Christophe Maé," he says. "And for the first time in my life, I really am able to relish the joy of every moment." ■

