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Bill Willis, a tribute to a maestro

He left an indelible mark on Moroccan craftsmanship while Marrakech still radiates with the aura of this extravagant character, who fascinated some and upset others, who made the Red City his personal paradise and space his life’s theatre, reforming the Islamic arts into a new language where tadelakt, zelliges, fountains, marble and bejmats are transformed into something new under his refined aesthete’s eye.

Bill Willis, a dandy with a rebellious streak, arrived in Marrakech in the late 1960s accompanying his friends Talitha and Paul Getty Jr. on their honeymoon. He fell instantly in love with the city, which would mark a decisive turning point in his destiny; he would remain there until his death, in 2009.

With experience as an antique dealer in Rome, Willis was fascinated by the Islamic artistic tradition. In Marrakech, he recreated the palaces and residences of Arabic Nights for Paul and Thalita Getty (Polois Getty) and for a host of other wealthy friends—exciting and sophisticated clients: Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé (Dor es Saada, Villa Oasis, Jardin Majorelle), Marie-Hélène de Rothschild (Dar Zeylen in the Palmeraie), Christopher Gibbs and Marcella Agnelli (Ain Kassimou à Marrakech)… and des lieux commerçais, tels l’hôtel Tichka et le restaurants La Trattoria au Guéliz, qui portent sa touche unique : un mix audacieux de vintage avant l’heure les années 20 et 30, l’esprit colonial), un goût certain pour la simplicité et le meilleur du travail artisanal ancestral marocain.

To conclude this homage to the unforgettable Bill, some of whose creations (brass architectural lamps, tables with zellige mosaic tops) are now back on sale at the famous Maison Gérard in New York, we will leave the last word to Pierre Bergé: “The perfect accuracy of every detail, the constant invention, his way of solving problems, all prove that Bill Willis was one of the greatest decorators of our time. In fact, it can be said that there is a before Bill Willis and an after Bill Willis.”