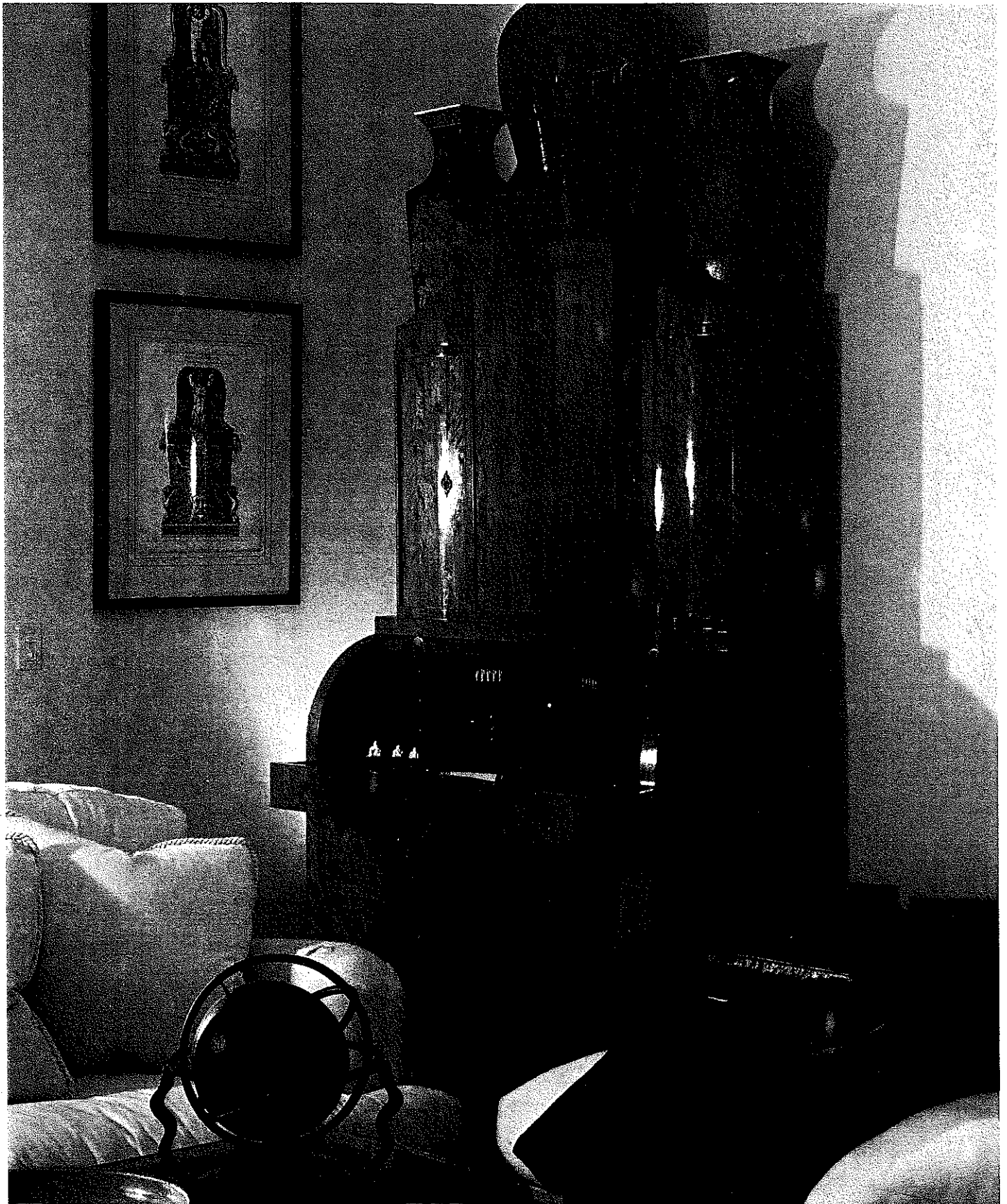


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GARDENS: VILLA TAYLOR

THE COMTESSE DE BRETEUIL'S MARRAKESH OASIS

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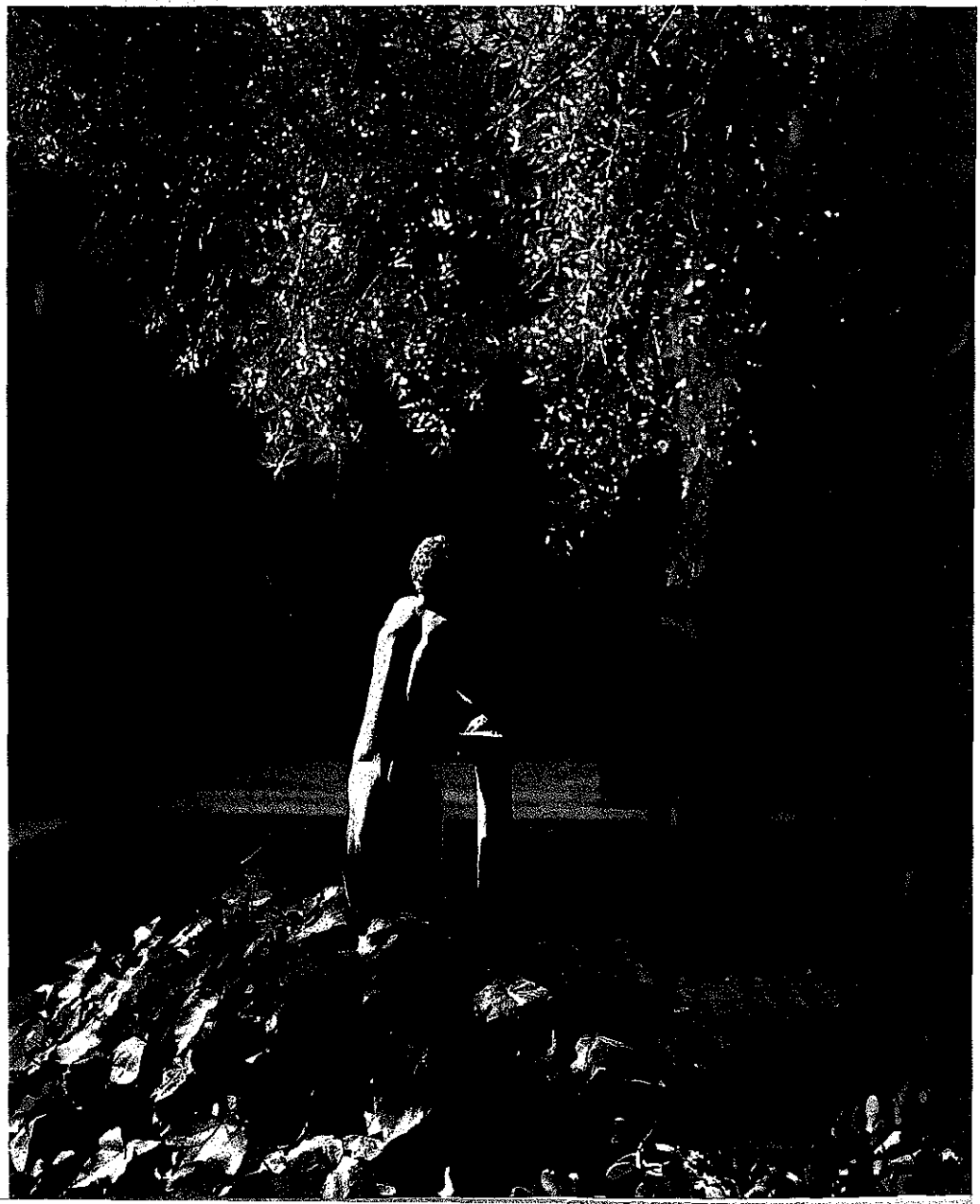
In the heart of Marrakesh's European quarter lie the Villa Taylor and its gardens. Known as the American villa, the house, which was built in the mid-1920s by a granddaughter of Ulysses S. Grant, has been the residence of Comtesse Madeleine de Breteuil since 1947. OPPOSITE: Palms sway beside the tower.



THE VILLA TAYLOR and its sprawling gardens constitute an exercise in how to live in the midst of a vibrant but difficult city. After the crush of people and automobiles in the medina of Marrakesh, the villa's gardens offer an oasis of calm, a semitropical refuge where splashing fountains mute the clamor of one of North Africa's largest cities, and the heady scent of orange blossoms, jasmine and gardenias replaces the exhaust fumes and dust.

Situated about a mile from the twelfth-century ramparts—sand-colored walls that enclose the old town—the villa lies in the European quarter of Marrakesh. It takes its name from its first owner, American millionaire Mrs. Moses Taylor, who built it between 1923 and 1926. Taylor, a granddaughter of Ulysses S. Grant, used the estate as a winter retreat until World War II, when it served for a time as the American headquarters in Morocco. For nearly half a century

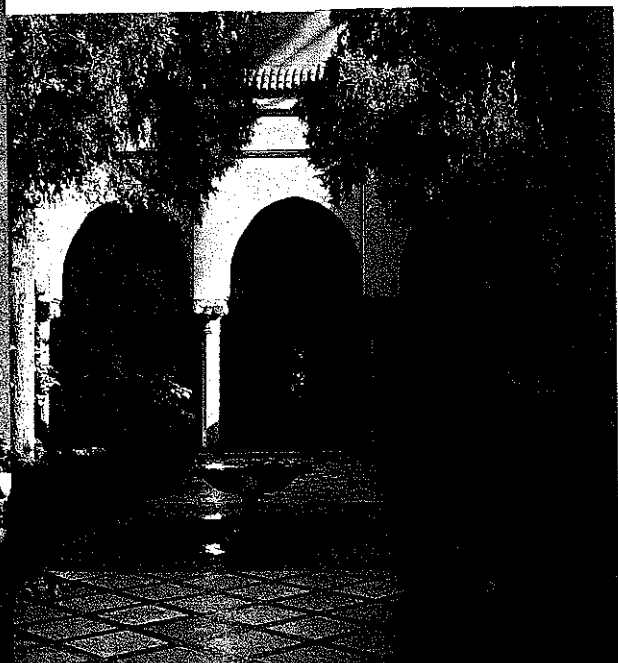
ABOVE RIGHT: The view from the tower, which rises five stories, takes in the villa's lush gardens; beyond are the domes of Marrakesh. In the distance are the Atlas Mountains. RIGHT: A statue of Jean de Breteuil, the comtesse's late son, stands amid olive trees and clumps of ivy before the ornamental pool off the living room.







A French architect designed the Villa Taylor, and local craftsmen contributed to the Islamic decoration. ABOVE: A geometric pattern is cast by the railing on a balcony.

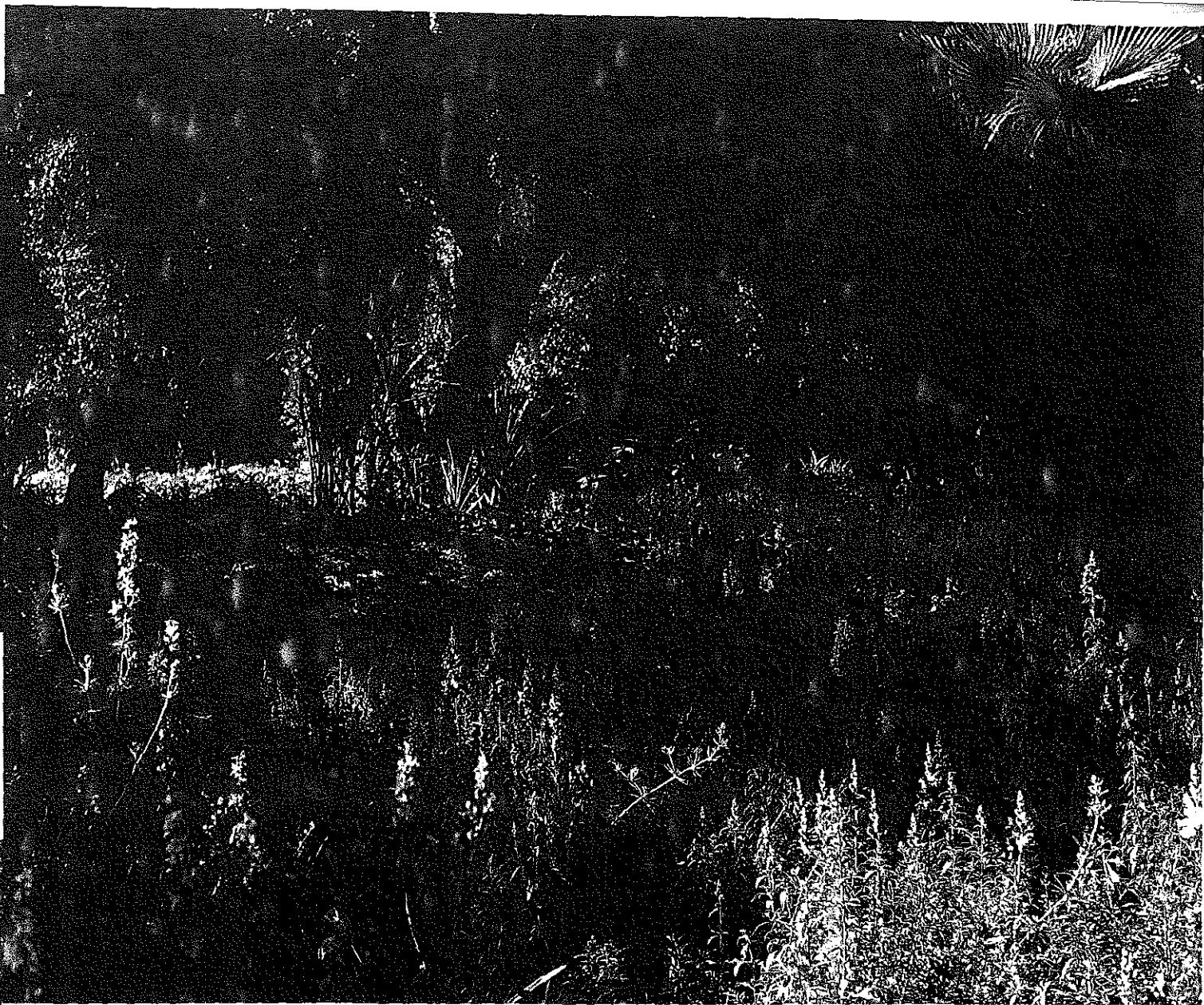


ABOVE: Marble slabs set off by inlays of mosaic pave the cloistered courtyard off the living room. Water—in the form of fountains and pools—has long been a fundamental element in Moorish gardens, which were planned as refuges from the desert heat.

During World War II the Villa Taylor was the American headquarters in Morocco. Later, eminent visitors such as Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt stayed there as guests of the comtesse and her late husband, a French newspaper publisher. Masses of vervain bloom behind the house.

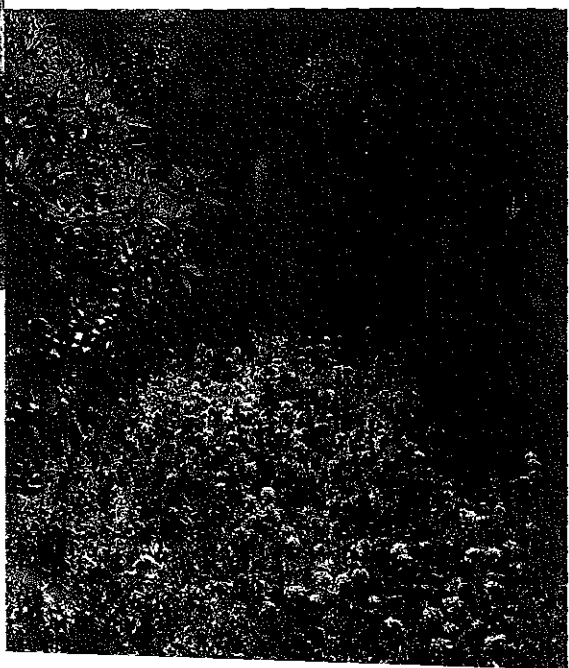






Though she employs five gardeners, the comtesse spends her days tending her varied plants. BELOW: A sunny area in front of the villa.

ABOVE: Multihued snapdragons, amaryllis, larkspur and other imported flowers are arrayed beneath olive, lemon and palm trees.



it has been the home of Comtesse Madeleine de Breteuil. Indeed, the property has been the focal point of the comtesse's life since 1947, when she married Comte Charles de Breteuil, the French-born publisher of newspapers in Marrakesh, Casablanca, Tangier, Dakar, Senegal and Paris. That same year the comte's mother, who was born in Boston, acquired the villa and its grounds as a wedding gift for the couple (see *Architectural Digest*, May/June 1977).

The modest entrance to the property bears no sign. The only opening in the walls is barely wide enough for

the passing of a car or a horse-drawn buggy (a popular mode of transport in Marrakesh); there is no portal, and the guardhouse is concealed behind tall trees. But at all hours of the day an Arab guard, clad in a traditional caftan, is on duty. Once inside, visitors find themselves in a secluded forest. Only the distant traffic noise and the periodic sounds of fervent prayer from a nearby mosque penetrate the cacophony of birdsongs. This is a world of its own: the acres of small trees and spider ferns and flowering shrubs bisected by pathways in front of the villa, the flower gardens near



ABOVE: Amaryllis provides intense color before a row of larkspur. Because of the dry climate, only bougainvillea blooms year-round.

BELOW: Walls in the tones of the desert contrast with the sky. King Hassan II now owns the villa, but the comtesse has lifetime tenancy.

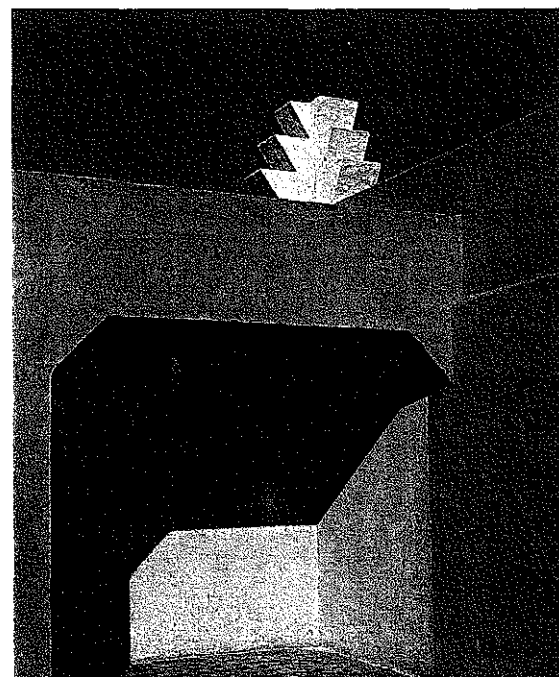
the terrace and around the pool, the courtyards with their hedges and fountains, and the vegetable gardens, neatly pruned shrubs, and cacti and palms behind the house.

The garden is the comtesse's passion, and it's no surprise to find her with a leaf atop her neatly coiffed hair. Her friends call her Boule, a nickname she earned, she says, because she was so round as a child. During the day she usually has on well-worn gardening gloves. She employs five full-time gardeners—more if the season requires it—but she alone determines what gets trimmed and where

a tree should be cut back or more shrubs put in. She likes to have her hand in things. The comtesse began reworking the original scheme of the gardens more than forty years ago; now she has had the pleasure of seeing her ideas take form. "My mother-in-law came to Marrakesh for only two months of the year, but I have had my life here," she says.

The details of the grounds are orderly without being fussy. At the center of a cloistered courtyard bounded by guest bedrooms, the comtesse's sleeping quarters and the main living

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The Comtesse de Breteuil's Marrakesh Oasis
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room is a raised marble pool. Enormous yellow rose blossoms float on the surface, their color echoing the hue of the mosaic tiles below. The green tiles share the subdued tone of the nearby cypress and mimosa trees. Covered walkways that surround the courtyard are laid with old kilims, adding red accents to the scene.

Yet while the comtesse's garden provides calm and refuge, it also honors the world outside. From the sapphire-colored swimming pool and the lily garden, the Muslim chant of "Allah, u Akbar" and the sound of desert horns can be heard at the appointed times of prayer. The poolside bar is adorned with posters given to the comtesse by Yves Saint Laurent, who has his own house and garden nearby (see *Architectural Digest*, October 1987). But the stone coasters come from the Sahara, and the wicker comes from a nearby souk. However European the setting within the garden walls, one never forgets that just outside, Berber sheep farmers still take their wool to market on don-

Only the distant traffic noise and the periodic sounds of fervent prayer from a nearby mosque penetrate the cacophony of birdsongs.

key carts; many women cover their faces in veils; and men wear fezzes or keep up the hoods of their caftans.

The exterior of the villa, which was built by a French architect, is unpretentious and serene, cloaked by foliage and vines, but craftsmen from Marrakesh and Fez have created an interior with elaborately carved ceilings, traditional mosaic tilework and painted plaster walls. The five-story tower has a sitting room per floor, and a terrace on the top floor enjoys views of the gardens, the domes and

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minarets of Marrakesh and beyond to the snowcapped Atlas Mountains in the east. (After the Casablanca Conference of 1942-43, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt stayed at the villa. In one sitting room is a watercolor of the vista painted by Churchill on one of his visits.)

Eight years ago the comtesse sold the Villa Taylor and its gardens to Morocco's King Hassan II, though she retains lifetime use. The comte de

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Breteuil died in 1960, and their only child, a son, died twelve years later. Since the comtesse has no close heirs, she felt it was appropriate that the villa pass to the country of Morocco. But it will always be her home, and though she visits Europe once a year, she sees no need to leave Marrakesh.

"What could I do in Paris? Just change my dress all the time and go to cocktails," she says. "Here, I work a lot in the garden." The comtesse, however, also dedicates much of her time to helping the poor children of Marrakesh, and she has raised money to help polio victims. Though friends from abroad often come to visit, she doesn't care much for social life. But staying at home is no hardship for someone who considers her house and gardens paradise, and who keeps them as such. To the comtesse, a place where she can dine on juicy grapefruit and sweet strawberries from her garden, where the only pests are frogs, is a place to cherish.

When the king of Morocco is in charge of the Villa Taylor, it may become a museum or home to one of his sons, but most likely it will serve as a guesthouse for official visitors. They will see a beautiful place, but to know it with Boule de Breteuil, to watch her tend its roses, is to see it in its glory. □
