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A HOME OF WORLD CULTURE

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A few years ago, one Fitzrovian opened my eyes a little wider to the neighbourhood... and the world beyond. She encouraged me to look, to listen and to really see this village in the city through her eyes. Her name is Rebecca Hossack. She's beautiful, seemingly ageless, and strikingly tall. She's intellectual and influential, a respected businesswoman, an established art dealer, and a member of the local council. And considering how remarkably down-to-earth she is, it's easy to forget the success of her eponymously named galleries here in Fitzrovia and across the pond in New York City. She's remarkably open when discussing her business, and her abiding love of Fitzrovia, but Rebecca values her privacy too, especially when it comes to her home environment and her own personal art collection, so I was delighted when she invited me into this very special place.



Born in 1955, Rebecca has a Scottish family heritage and was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia. She began studying for the Bar at Lincoln's Inn in the early 1980s when she first came to England, but soon after opted for a career in art. After borrowing £20,000 to open her first gallery on Windmill Street in 1988, Rebecca has gone on to establish two successful Fitzrovia-based galleries, on Charlotte Street and Conway Street, with another in the heart of Lower Manhattan, New York. Today, her presence and her mission are as uncompromising as ever: she wants to create a sanctuary where people can come to find themselves among the artworks, greenery and peace of her galleries.

The same approach to creating a unique space extends to her domestic environment. Just round the corner from Conway Street, in a classic, flat-fronted Fitzrovia terrace, she and her husband Matthew Sturgis have created a beautiful home that's as full of the unexpected as her galleries, and filled with Rebecca's extensive personal collection of non-Western art and artefacts. It begs the question: is her home an extension of her galleries, or her galleries an extension of her home?



As we stand in the kitchen, Rebecca talks to me while making a pot of tea. "This is a house of world culture. Everything in the house isn't just a thing – it has meaning and a personal touch. Everything is made or created by somebody I or my husband knows. In the kitchen alone, all of the cups and saucers are made by the octogenarian potter, Anne Stokes, from Hampstead," she says, handing to me a plate inspired by the Aboriginal artist Jimmy Pike. We step down into the basement of the house, which Rebecca's refers to as her 'earth room'. "Everything in here is homemade. Because it's downstairs, I wanted this to be the earth room. Everything down here is made from the earth. The floor is leather and the curtains are woven leather," she tells me. From a rare wooden medieval chest, to a woven high-back Orkney Scottish chair and a Haitian voodoo flag, the contents of the earth room rival the displays at the British Museum or the V&A, both of whom have taken objects and artefacts from her home on loan through the years. Rebecca walks me to the end of the room, where she introduces me to a series of paintings, and two aboriginal funeral poles. "These are our hollow log coffins. When Matthew and I die, I'll go in this one, and he'll go in that one; your bones gone in there. Traditionally, the aboriginals would hang your dead body on a tree until you'd fully decomposed, then bleach your bones, and stuff them in the log. I'm hoping my log can be planted in Fitzroy Square. I'm not sure how the residents will take to it though!" she laughs.

Her relationship with art and collecting has been a long one, growing throughout her life. It began when she was a child in Melbourne. "Ever since I was tiny, I have been collecting. I've always had this love of human creativity, what people can create, and what nature can create. I've always had an obsession with flowers," she says. "I've had many, many collections during my life; my first one was of glass animals. I have always loved collecting – what humans have made is a source of infinite delight to me. I am not delighted by many modern things: the public realm constantly disappoints me."

Rebecca's lifelong love affair with aboriginal and non-Western art is an unmistakable product of her Australian origins. "I am from a family of three generations of Scottish weavers. My father was a doctor, and all of my family were tradespeople and factory workers. I was the first member of the family to break from the norm. It's funny how suddenly that happens, and why," she observes. "Through the galleries I represent 40 artists, all non-Western. I kind of made it my mission to work with only non-Western artists."

Today, I think we have more pictures and paintings than any other house in Fitzrovia – somewhere in the region of 430 – and an extensive book collection made up of my and my husband's personal collections. I don't know what to do now, because I really have run out of room on the walls. Each one is personal and like a jewel, with so much knowledge and meaning. That's maybe my biggest existential problem in life now!" she laughs. "It's really hard to have a minimalist house filled with this many books and pictures. Everything on the walls is rare enough to be in the British Museum – some of it has been at one time or another!" Rebecca and I walk through the entrance hall of her house. I am examining a series of solid bronze cactuses when she draws my attention to a painting that covers most of the wall space. "The picture you are looking at here is by the Spinifex people. I went to the most remote place on the earth on Christmas Day to meet them some years ago in the Great Victoria Desert. Little was known about these people – so much so that the British used the site for nuclear weapons testing," she says. "The painting tells the story of a nuclear weapons test, in which they evacuated their homeland."





The Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery has been an established presence in Fitzrovia for almost 30 years now, and is renowned for showing exciting, often eye-opening work by international artists. Walking around Rebecca's galleries, as in her home, you are greeted at every turn by figurative drawings, paintings and sculptures that go against existing trends in the art world and are quite unlike anything you'll see elsewhere. The galleries frequently show work on paper by Aboriginal artists from Australia, and are undoubtedly among London's most enviably independent and original gallery spaces. Rebecca Hossack is a Fitzrovia institution. Despite her protestations about lack of space, I suspect her extensive personal art collection will continue to grow, just as her galleries will continue to showcase some of the most exciting and unexpected art to be seen in Fitzrovia. Home and gallery are, in the end, of a piece, and 100 per cent Rebecca. ■
