



Beaut!

but what would Sir Les think?

The Oz spittle king may well scoff but the real-life Australian cultural attaché, Rebecca Hossack (above) certainly has chic on her side

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Photographs **Simon Brown**

REBECCA HOSSACK must be the only woman in Britain with a bedroom door worth more than £10,000 – and decorated by the greatest Aboriginal artist ever.

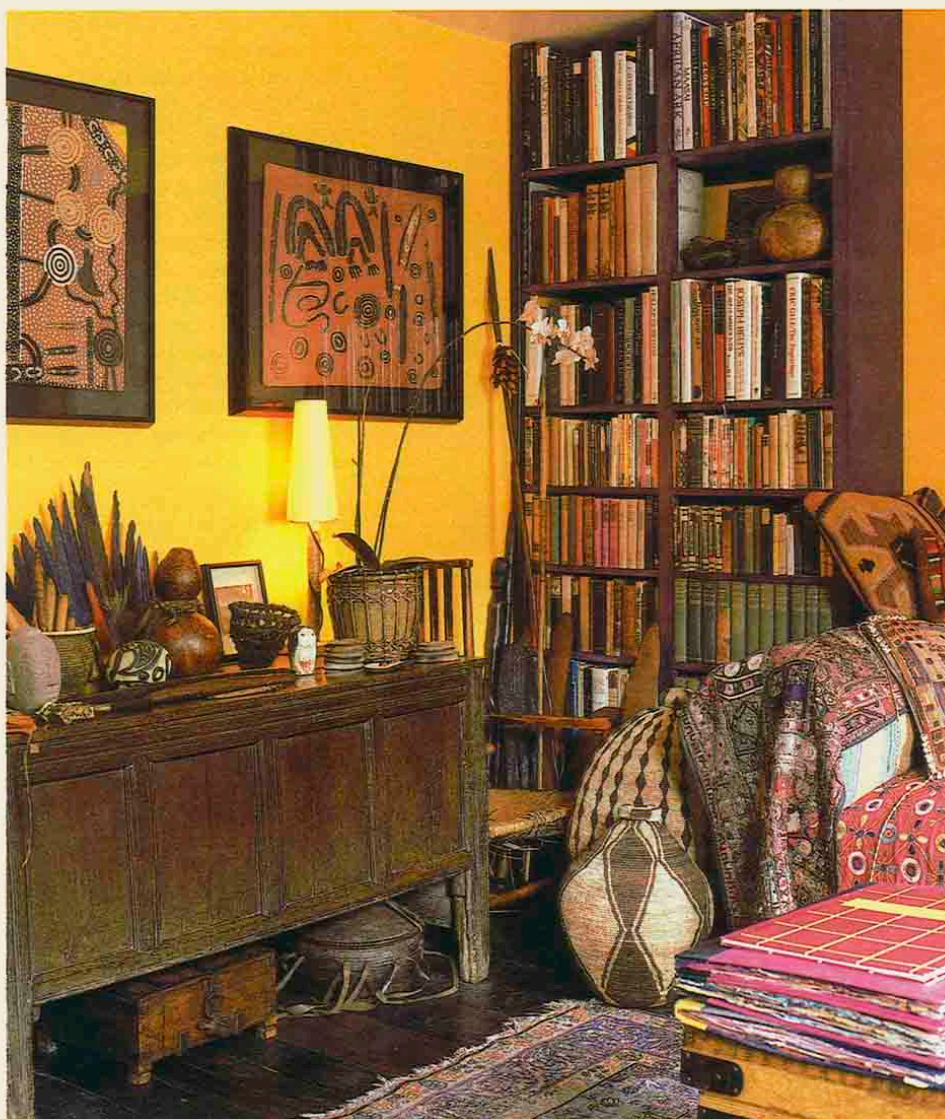
It was painted by Clifford Possum when he visited London seven years ago to exhibit his work at Rebecca's gallery in London's Fitzrovia. He stayed at her tiny flat above the gallery and, as a surprise thank-you, painted her door, making it a Possum original – none of which now sells for less than £10,000.

Understandably, the door is one of the few features in the flat not to have undergone a makeover. Rebecca changes the decoration regularly, pointing out, "Nothing in life is permanent. The design of your house should be ephemeral. It is constantly changing because that's how life is."

But the constant here is the Aboriginal influence that drifts through the flat. Paintings from artists all over the world are displayed on the walls, which themselves are painted in a constantly changing palette of colour – pawpaw yellows, mango greens, strawberry crimsons. There are also artefacts from Rebecca's frequent trips back to Australia, and to Africa, dotted about.

Aboriginal pictures and bark paintings hang above statues from Ethiopia and other parts of Africa. Persian and Tibetan rugs cover the floor and there is a fascinating mix of favourite objects, such as Ethiopian lip-stretching plates, tobacco pouches from African bushmen – whose art she also promotes enthusiastically – and an Aboriginal death stick.

As cultural attaché to the Australian High Commission in London, Rebecca is a real-life Sir Les Patterson – but



Colour purple: the "poetry door", left, is inscribed with Tennyson's poem *Ulysses*. Above, the "dreamtime" living room



I am a rock: stones from Africa



Dish the dirt: figures made of pebbles



Mix of Australian and African pieces



A yellow painted cupboard offers another bold contrast



Panels of Indian fabric welcome you to the kitchen



Bright lights: pelargoniums and cacti decorate the sill

with lots more class and less spittle. Since she took the job two years ago, she has been solely responsible for raising the profile of Australian culture in Britain. This year alone there are more than 150 Australian cultural events planned for the UK, and she is now working on *New Images – Britain And Australia Into The 21st Century* – an exhibition to be staged at the High Commission celebrating both cultures. For years, Rebecca has been the unofficial cultural attaché for Australia through her art gallery, a major centre for Aboriginal art.

Nine years ago, it was Rebecca who, at her Windmill Street gallery, became the first person to sell Aboriginal art in Britain. At the time, these extraordinary paintings, depicting the dreamtime of the Aboriginal people, were becoming popular. But Aborigines were losing out to unscrupulous art dealers.

Rebecca's arrival on the art scene changed all that. She decided to take only a small percentage of the profits she made on the art, giving the greatest proportion back to the artists and to the communities in which they worked. It was a great risk for Rebecca to take, and

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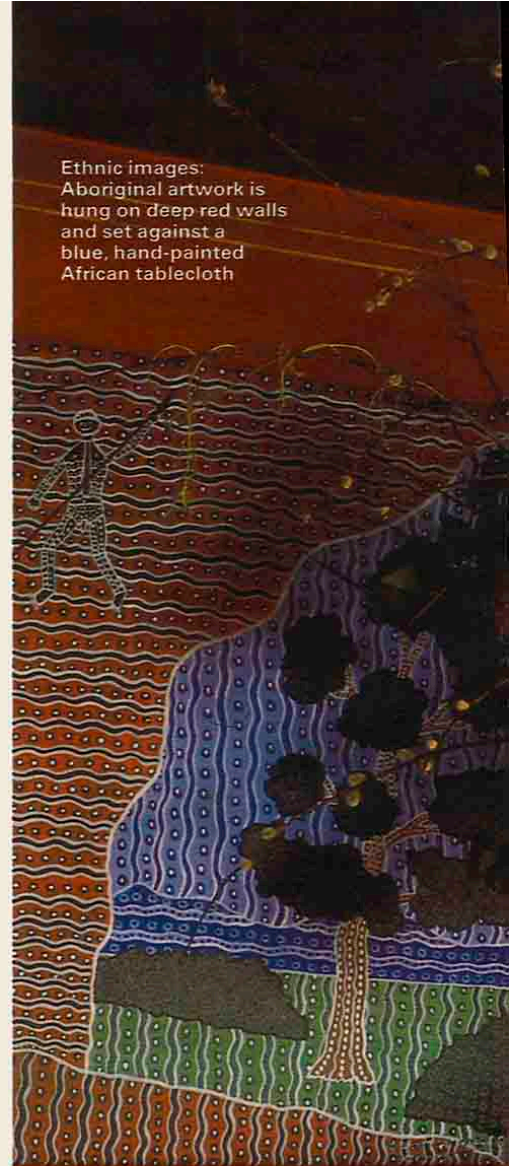
it meant that the only place she could afford to live was this one-bedroom flat above her gallery.

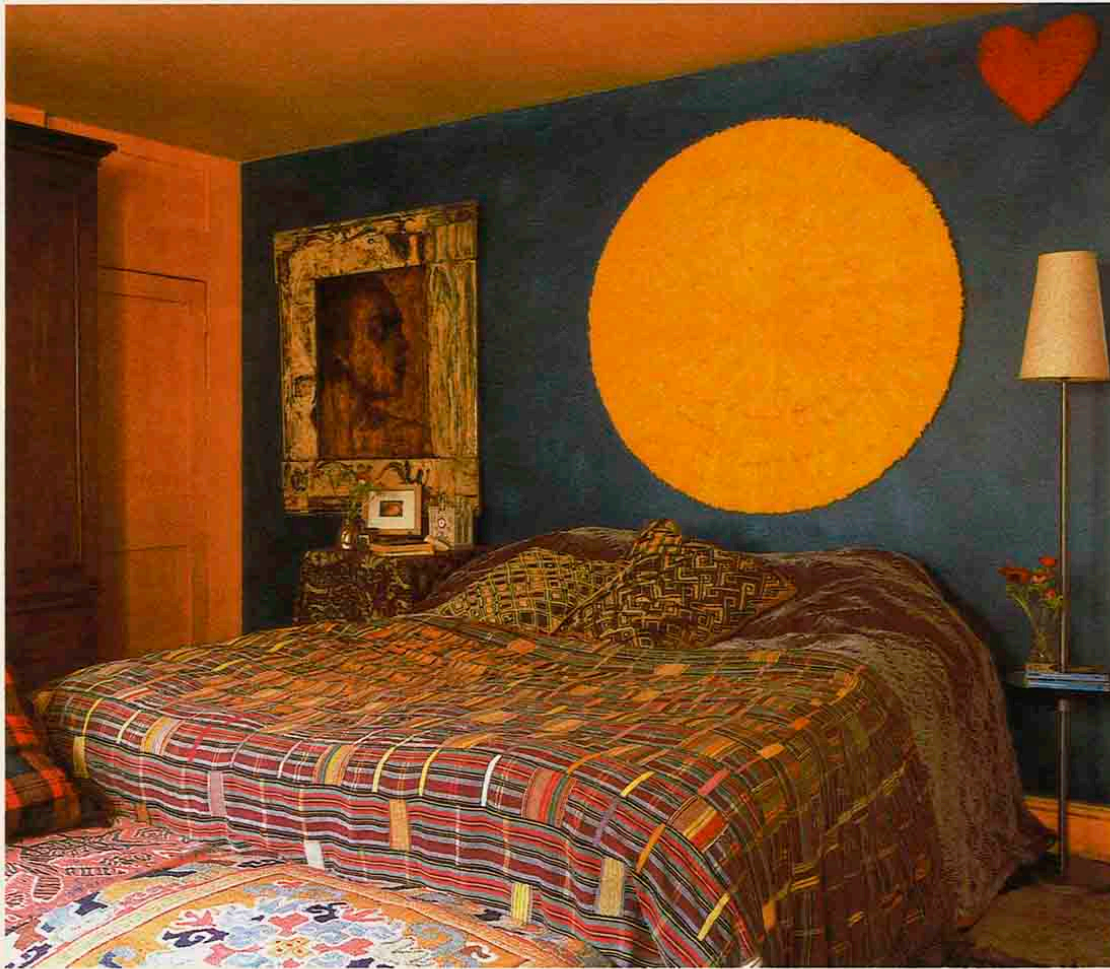
She has a close relationship with all the artists she exhibits. In 1990 she managed to persuade Clifford Possum to come to England to meet the Queen. They were invited to a garden party at Buckingham Palace, and Rebecca hired a top hat and tails for Clifford, putting paint brushes through his hat band.

"Clifford called it his Number One day," she remembers. Clifford adores Rebecca, calling her "Rebecca Nagamarra Possum" which means she is his sister of the skin. She has spent the past two years negotiating a deal between him and British Airways for the artist to work on the airline's new look.

Her work for the Aboriginal communities has made her revered in Australia, too. The Aboriginal elders call her a "Good Koonga" – "Good Woman" – the highest compliment they can pay to anyone. Friends in England are also

Ethnic images: Aboriginal artwork is hung on deep red walls and set against a blue, hand-painted African tablecloth





Dream on: Clifford Possum's painted door, below, opens into the bedroom, above

affected by Rebecca's enthusiasm for Aboriginal art. She has a habit of letting friends pay for art as they can afford it – a kind of hire purchase – believing that she should do everything she can to facilitate people's love of beautiful painting and sculpture.

Her interest in Australian art goes back to her childhood in Melbourne. Her father was chairman of the Victorian Ministry of Arts, and she grew up among renowned Australian artists, such as Clifton Pugh, one of whose paintings hung above her cot. Rebecca still remembers embroidering gumnuts (eucalyptus seed-pods) on her clothes and scouring her local antiques shops for old Australian ceramics.

Now, with her husband, freelance writer Matthew Sturgis, she scours the world searching for art for herself and the gallery. She also scours London. Southall Market, where she buys yards of Indian cotton to make up blinds and wall hangings, is a favourite haunt. "On a grey, wintry English day, it is so wonderful to arrive in Southall and be surrounded by the warm scent of Indian spices," she enthuses.

Although her home is now England, Rebecca still misses much about Australia. "I especially miss the insects, the natural world and the buzzing of nature," she says. "I also miss the green grass outside my house, the space, the fresh air and the eucalyptus. The world is older and



'This is a warm, loving community. It is like living in a village, and I adore it'

wearier here and the natural world is dying."

The consolation of putting up with all the noise and pollution in England, however, is living in Fitzrovia, in the centre of London's West End.

"You'd think living in the centre of London would be awful and cold," she says. "But this is the most warm, loving community of people, mainly because of all the Greeks and Italians who live here. It's like living in a village and I adore it."

And she'd never move, of course, because it would mean she'd have to find another flat where the great Possum door would fit. ■

Details

● Rebecca Hossack can count a certain Terry Major-Ball among her admirers. Rebecca and the ex-Prime Minister's brother got on so well that she helped him



arrange a visit to her homeland.

● The gallery owner formed a less friendly relationship with street cleaners in north London. She was threatened with a fine for cleaning her gallery doorstep – a task the sweepers claimed was theirs.

"We were arguing over two leaves and a

bit of dust. It was comical," she says.

● So passionate is she about Aboriginal art that Rebecca travels Britain to spread the word. Crofters in the Orkney Islands are among those to benefit from Hossack's enthusiasm.

