

cultural exchange

# United colours of the **WORLD**

Cultural attache Rebecca Hossack's London home is an evolving work of art as **ANNE BARROWCLOUGH** reports

**S**EVERAL years ago, renowned Aboriginal artist Clifford Possum stayed in a London apartment while an exhibition of his work was staged in a downstairs art gallery.

As a surprise thank-you he painted a door in the apartment, thereby giving a Possum original to his host Rebecca Hossack.

Today, Rebecca is cultural attache to the Australia High Commission in London.

And Clifford's work is fetching outstanding prices. At a Sotheby's

the 21st century, which celebrates the culture of both countries. It's being staged in London.

For years, Rebecca had been the unofficial cultural attache for Australia through her Windmill St art gallery below her apartment.

Nine years ago, Rebecca became the first person to sell Aboriginal art in Britain. At the time, the paintings were becoming popular but the artists were losing out to inscrupulous dealers.

Rebecca's arrival on the art scene changed all that. She decided to take only

"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 this country too. The Aboriginal elders call her a "Good Koonga" — "Good Woman".

Friends in England also are 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

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 says.

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."

auction in June, one of his paintings was expected to fetch up to \$30,000. It sold for \$58,000.

What value a painted door? Sotheby's Aboriginal art specialist Tim Klingender estimates up to \$20,000.

"He is one of Australia's most famous — if not the most famous — living indigenous artists," he said.

It's a fair bet that Rebecca is the only person in Britain with a bedroom door worth so much money.

Understandably, it is one of the few features in the flat at Fitzrovia 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 — papaw yellows, mango greens, strawberry crimsons.

There also are artefacts from Rebecca's frequent trips to Australia and Africa.

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.

Since she took the job of cultural attache two years ago, Rebecca has been solely responsible for raising the profile of Australian culture in Britain.

This year there are more than 150 Australian cultural events planned for the UK.

She is working on an exhibition called New Images — Britain and Australia into



a small percentage of the profits she made on the art, giving the bigger proportion back to the artists and to the communities in which they worked. It was a great risk for Rebecca to take and 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 persuaded 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 paintbrushes through his hat band.

"Clifford called it his Number One day," she remembers.

Clifford adores Rebecca, calling her

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 artists, such as Clifton Pugh, one of whose paintings hung above her cot. Rebecca still remembers embroidering gumnuts 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

The consolation of passing 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. 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," she says.

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.

