

HOUSE STYLE

Bright colours and works of art from around the world bring an inspired warmth to the home of Australian cultural attaché and gallery owner Rebecca Hossack, Katherine Sorrell writes. Photographs by Ray Main



BRAVE NEW WORLD



REBECCA HOSSACK is Sir Les Patterson. This sounds like the title of a dodgy West End revue but is, in fact, a rather good joke. Because Hossack, in real life, does the job

which Sir Les, the fictional creation of comedian Barry Humphries, so palpably — and hilariously — fails at: she is the Australian cultural attaché.

The elegant and vivacious gallery owner could hardly be more different from the drunken, lewd and crass Sir Les but, nevertheless, she finds it highly amusing that she is his genuine counterpart. Does she not, though, object to the fact that the success of Humphries's creation lies in the irony of the idea that Australia has any sort of culture to offer? "Not at all," she says. "Barry's satire is part of Australian culture.

Besides, I think Australia now has the self-belief and cultural diversity to take such jibes in its stride. At the moment, for instance, we have *New Images*, a year-long programme of events to celebrate the links between Australia and Britain, including the Bangarra Aboriginal dance company, Australian opera and an exciting exchange of young British and Australian writers."

Hossack has lived in Britain since 1981. Her enthusiasm for her work — both at the High Commission and as an art dealer — is infectious. Her small flat near her gallery in the heart of London's Fitzrovia contains not just a few examples of Australian art and craft, but a multitude of them. Together with pictures and artefacts from all around the world, antique and modern, they fill every available inch of wall space, cram on to ledges and shelves, and overflow on to tables and window sills. The effect, perhaps surprisingly, is not at all



The lounge (left) and bedroom (far left) of Australian cultural attaché Rebecca Hossack's Fitzrovia flat is crammed with an international collection of art and craft

cluttered, but cosy and welcoming, and though the pieces are disparate in origin and nature they often feature colours, shapes and decorative details that are reminiscent of one another, giving them a sense of unity and coherence.

"I have never bought anything because it 'went' with something else — the flat just came together organically," Hossack says. "I like making connections rather than finding differences and categorising things."

It would, indeed, be extremely difficult to attempt to categorise this flat, which contains objects from 30 different regions of the world. Britain and Europe are well represented, with — to mention only a few — a set of 18th-century Wedgwood shell dishes, lead crystal glasses from Waterford, lamps from the hip London lighting shop SKK, a set of metallic robins by the Scottish sculptor George Wyllie, a bright yellow feather mandala by British artist Simon Costin,

bronze sculptures from Spain and a battered Orkney chair. Continuing around the globe, there are lingams (sacred stones) from the River Ganges, a magic scroll from Ethiopia, armbands made from telephone wire in Papua New Guinea, beaded skirts from central Africa, a bedcover from Istanbul with Mexican fringing, a Turkish wall-hanging, an Amazonian headdress, a Haitian voodoo sculpture made from the top of an oil drum, a Tasmanian aboriginal club, Indian saris adapted as bedroom blinds, a Chinese *sang de boeuf* bowl, a Persian throne, a Kuba chieftain's hat, carved and gilded wooden insects from Thailand, a Moroccan lamp and Tibetan yak headcovers.

This collection is confidently teamed with a selection of 17th-century English country furniture. Simple and solid, the dark oak works remarkably well in this multi-ethnic environment, and also as a foil to the strong colours of the paintwork.

Like many Antipodeans living in Britain, Hossack has chosen brilliant hues — a wonderful, Buddhist-inspired saffron, deep purple, acid green, orange and blue — as a form of escape from our dull, grey light. Gold stars have been printed up and down the central hallway ("I couldn't afford the wallpaper") and even the bright purple front door has been given the Hossack treatment with the addition of gilded seashells and a Tennyson poem hand-painted around its frame.

When Hossack moved into the flat ten years ago the environment was anything but inspired: bland magnolia walls and beige carpets, with white radiators very noticeably dotted all around. Undaunted, she and a friend took up the carpets with a kitchen knife and were thrilled to discover the beautiful wooden floorboards underneath. Once the radiators had been boxed in with far-Eastern inspired trellis and the

walls lined with bookshelves, the flat was ready for a total transformation.

In pride of place among Hossack's wealth of nations are her many Australian Aboriginal paintings, which must surely form the best private collection in the country. Some originate from Papunya Tula, the outback settlement where Aboriginal artists were first encouraged to commit their traditional "Dreamtime" stories to canvas; another was painted directly on to her bedroom door by Clifford Possum, one of Australia's most important living artists. The paintings use a complex dotting technique and are richly symbolic of the ancient Aboriginal culture.

"They are incredibly powerful and beautiful," says Hossack, "and they really strike a chord with me. The paintings are always linked with the Australian landscape so it's like having a little bit of Australia over here."

From Australia to Orkney, Turkey to Tibet, Istanbul to India, the objects in Hossack's flat are united by the same thing — a love of the individual, of imagination and of personal vision. This is what guides her in choosing artists for her gallery, and it is what makes her home so unique. "Everything in here is special. They are all objects that I love and they all mean something. I am always fascinated by everywhere I go and everyone I see. What I am is all these things." ●

The Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 35 Windmill Street, W1, specialises in Aboriginal and other non-Western art. For appointments to view the collection, call 0171-436 4899