

Secret of my Success

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**LONDON JOBS**

# I lived in a grim hostel and worked all hours to pay for my art studies

Gallery owner **Rebecca Hossack** tells how she suffered for her love of art — but triumphed in the end

I WAS the eldest of four sisters and it's true that I enjoyed being the first-born. Growing up in Melbourne in the Fifties and Sixties was paradise. We spent a lot of time outside. I went to three different schools in a row as a teenager and didn't do particularly well at any of them. I was very romantic and idealistic, I liked long, wafly dresses, boys with long hair and poetry.

But at 17, I suddenly started being studious and won a scholarship to university. My father was the son of a Glaswegian factory worker, and he'd gone to university, then become a doctor, so it was probably that aspirational outlook that took hold. I went on to do a law degree, and then a degree in history of art. My parents wanted me to be a lawyer, and I agreed.

That is how I ended up in London in 1981. I came to study to be a barrister at the Middle Temple. But I never started. A place on a new history-of-art course at Christie's came up and I jumped at the chance to follow my dreams.

In fact, recently I

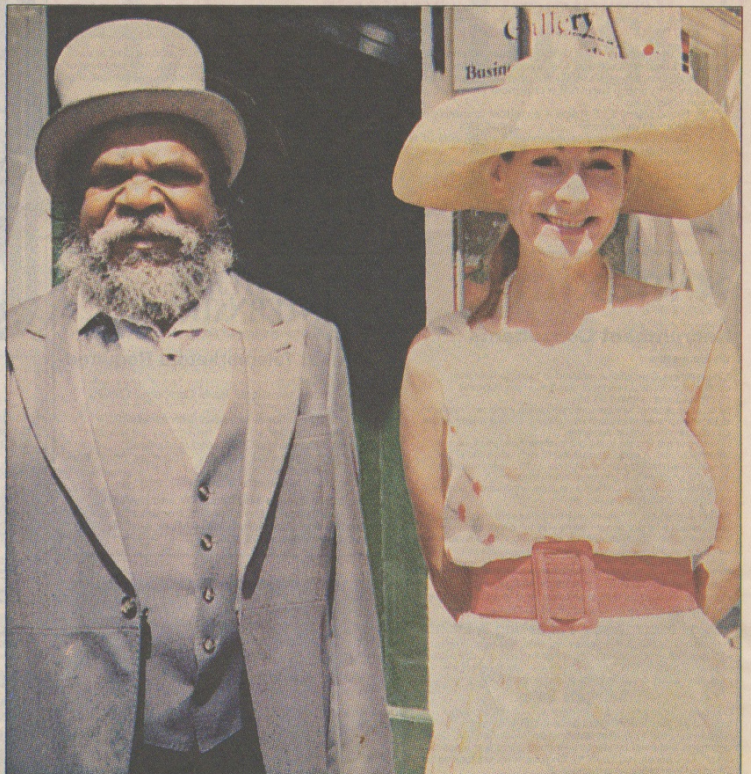
went back to give a lecture on being a gallery owner there, and a Filipino girl put up her hand to say she was the reason I'd been able to get on the art course at the last minute. Her mother had dropped out because she was pregnant.

I never had any money. I worked for a year every day in a pub and a shop before I came here, and that was to fund one year's study. I lived in a very grim hostel in King's Cross, but at the end of the Christie's course I won a studentship to work at the Guggenheim Gallery in Venice.

After that, I spent time sleeping on people's sofas and working as an art gallery assistant. I started representing one of the artists as an agent, and from that I organised a huge show of artists in Wapping, for which I won a Business Sponsorship of the Arts award.

Then one day in 1988, I was cycling down Windmill Street in the West End. It was a beautiful day. Fitzrovia reminded me of Australia, with everyone sitting outside. I saw a "shop for rent" sign with the encouraging phrase "no premium required".

I had been idly wondering about



Original: Clifford Possum, Hossack's first Aboriginal artist, off to meet the Queen. Below left, a young Rebecca

did. So I was able to open my first gallery. If he hadn't been there, I'd probably never have done it.

Fortunately, the bank lent me £20,000. At that point, I could only think of the first show and having a brilliant champagne opening party. We took £3,000 on the first show and I knew I had enough to pay the rent for the month.

There were many times over the next five years, however, when I had sleepless nights wondering how I was going to pay the rent. I used to get down on my knees and scrub the gallery every day. It was a way of trying to make something happen.

One day a man ambled in and sat down on the stairs. He looked like someone who lived on the streets but he asked if I showed Aboriginal art, which I did. He turned out to be one of the richest men in America and I ended up helping him to put together a collection.

The key to running a successful gallery is hard work, loving what you're doing and loving the art. Now I have four women who work with me and our strength is how well we pull together.

Not long ago, we were having a hard time, so I persuaded my manager to go to the gym every evening to build up her stamina. We worked flat out for 21 days, and we solved our problems.

I have got to know more and more about Aboriginal art over the years as it has developed. Now it's expensive and fashionable, but in the Eighties it was almost unknown in Europe.

My first Aboriginal artist was Clifford Possum, whom I'd met in Alice Springs. I asked him whether he would like to show in

London. He said: "Yes, and can I meet the Queen?" Without thinking, I told him he could but I didn't take his request seriously.

In 1990, he and his work arrived and the first thing he asked was: "When do we go to meet the Queen?" I was appalled. I felt that I — like generations before me — was betraying the trust of the Aboriginal people. He was an elder in his community and he expected to meet our elder.

By complete chance, George Harewood turned up to the opening and I told him my problem, without knowing who he was. In fact, he was, and is, the Queen's

homeless could take bread.

Then, in 1994, the Australian government decided it wanted to raise the country's cultural profile over here. I was made cultural attaché, a role that, of course, many people thought was already filled. In fact, Barry Humphries sent me a signed photo inscribed: "All the best, Becky, from your unworthy predecessor, Sir Les Patterson".

For three years, I worked very hard promoting Australian arts. I opened my second gallery in 1997 in Charlotte Street. The idea was to show just non-Western art but it hasn't worked out that way because some of the pieces are so big.

We show a huge variety of work in the galleries: young figurative painters from Scotland, Australia, America and England, neglected Op artists from the Seventies, octogenarian potters, radical collagists, tinsmiths and jewellers. I hate the notion that there is a division between art and craft.

**'Clifford was an elder in his community and he expected to meet our elder — the Queen'**

ONE of the secrets behind running galleries well is looking after everyone — including the collectors. We've got a nurse who is passionate about the colourful paintings by Ken Done, so she pops in for a cup of tea, and she met him at the opening, which was very moving.

Then there are the artists to take care of. I'll visit them regularly and make sure they feel supported. You have to remember to do that when they're not selling, as well as when they are.

I like to operate with the spirit of generosity. I'm very friendly and welcoming but if you look behind the scenes at our offices, it is rigorously well organised. We are extremely efficient, we get back to everyone in 24 hours, we have very orderly files.

But we're very much a people's gallery. We don't have a bell on the door.

Interview by Rose Rouse

**CV** **Rebecca Hossack**

**BORN:** 1955 Melbourne

**PARENTS:** Mother, devoted mother; Father, doctor.

**MARITAL STATUS:** Married to writer Mathew Sturges, no children.

**EDUCATION:** Geelong Grammar School; Australian National University (History of Art), Melbourne University (Law).

**EXHIBITIONS AND ARTISTS:** More than 50 exhibitions of Aboriginal Art in UK and Europe including Jimmy Pike and Butcher Cherel plus 20 other artists, from the prolific David Bromley whose paintings hark back to 1950s illustrations and Warhol-influenced naked girls, to Glaswegian artists Abigail McLellan and Ken Done, who are both exhibiting at the moment. [www.r-h-g.co.uk](http://www.r-h-g.co.uk)

**FAMOUS FOR:** Being Queen Bee of Antipodean art in London and taking Clifford Possum to meet the Queen, the first Aboriginal person to do so.



starting up a gallery of my own. There was a man hosing down the pavement and I asked him if he knew who owned the building. Amazingly, he