

# high life



PHOTOGRAPHY: REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY/CAROLYN MAE LASSITER

far as Aboriginal art was concerned and Hossack's artists' work, priced at \$A200 – \$A300 had few takers.

Since then Rebecca Hossack has become Australia's Cultural Attaché in the UK, her gallery in Windmill Street has grown in strength and reputation and those pictures are now priced at anything from \$2,000 – \$10,000.

Australian Aboriginal art has grown up and has become not merely accepted, but an admired and recognised art form with its own nuances in the different schools and styles.

"Six years ago", says Hossack, "if you sent news to a magazine of a gallery showing of a particular tribe or artist the editor would come back saying, 'Oh but we've just done Aboriginal art'. They just couldn't see that it is more complex than that. I found the whole thing terribly patronising. After all you don't say 'Oh we've just done European art' if

you've featured an exhibition by a Belgian painter."

Today the best of the painters in the Aboriginal schools, artists sometimes called the desert painters, like Kathleen Petyarre, Clifford Possum (see page 150) Tjapaltjarri and Turkey Tolson Tjupurula have their best work hanging in top Australian galleries and private collections alongside that of Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, Fred Williams, John Olsen and Tim Storrier.

The late Sir Sidney Nolan, probably Australia's most famous artist, was one of the first to recognise the power of these paintings and wrote, many years ago, that "the Aboriginal is probably the best artist in the world – they have a wonderful dreaming philosophy which all Australian artists should have".

Such fame and celebrity is heartening, particularly for people like Rebecca Hossack who have worked tirelessly to bring this extraordinary imagery to the

**Overleaf: Mathias Kauage; Clockwise from top left: Mathias Kauage's Helicopters; Carolyn Mae Lassiter's Adam and Eve; Gertie Huddleston's Bush Foods; Clifford Possum's Milky Way Dreaming.**

world's attention; but what of the artists?

The new fashionable success of contemporary Aboriginal art has made a huge difference within Aboriginal communities.

"Not so much financially," explains Rebecca Hossack, "Aboriginal communities these days are quite well endowed by the government anyway, so the extra money coming in just affects the artists and what they do with it is their own business. Much more important is that art has brought a resurgence of pride into the Aboriginal culture. For so long the Aboriginals had been at best ignored, at worst destroyed, by the white settlers that there was no self-esteem within the people. These paintings, with their distinctive style, have thrown another, totally fascinating, light on Aboriginal life. They are not just images, they are proof not just of a history, but a living culture."

It is a similar thread of history that is woven into the prized rugs





and wall hangings of the Navajo people of North America. These are the ethnic currency of the Navajo women (and all the contemporary weavers are women) who live on land comprised of four meeting corners of the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. This is where the spiritual and, for the most part, the traditional life of the Navajo tribe still exists (for a fuller picture, see page 134). Part of that tradition is tapestry weaving; it is a cultural legacy.

Collectors who are attracted by such textiles, and they have been collectible and fashionable since the 19th century, may throw up their hands in horror at the prices that contemporary rugs command. Andrew Nagen, an authority on Navajo textiles, can't understand why.

"Your average Navajo Indian earns something like \$1 an hour for what she does," he tells me. "What you're talking about, you see, is creation of a work of art

**Clockwise from top left: Clifford Possum's Tjapaltjarn Worm Dreaming and Water Dreaming used on British Airways tailplanes; Carolyn Mae Lassiter's Peaceful Kingdom; Camilo Ayala Marcial's The Corn Harvest; Carolyn Mae Lassiter's Woman with Horse.**

from start to finish. That weaver will raise the animals, totally process and dye the wool, build a loom and make the textiles. That's what you are paying for, a complete process. You can buy a 4ft x 6ft rug of average quality for less than \$1,000, of which maybe half goes to the dealer. That weaver worked probably 500 hours to make the rug. She makes maybe \$500. She is underpaid, not overpaid."

If money were the motivator, in Andrew Nagen's opinion, many of the women might live off a government subsidy which would give them just about as much as the price of a rug. But they don't and it has to be because they weave out of conviction and out of pride. "It comes," says Andrew Nagen, "from a place in the heart."

There are a select few who command big money. Their names may seem western, but their art is as intrinsically tribal as it ever was. Elsie Wilson, Sadie

Curtis, Tina Conn, Marilyn John and Virginia Nakai are big, Andrew Nagen tells me, and can ask for and get anything from \$100 – \$500 per square foot, making a 6 x 4 rug, an investment of up to \$12,000. But, he also believes there are others, equally talented but with less sophisticated marketing skills, whose work is of the same quality but costs considerably less. He cites Andrea Bedah, Sarah Tisi, Irene Hollie, Angela Yazzie and Irene Chase.

It took much longer for the art of native Mexico to be discovered by the art world.

When Eddie and Carol Rabkin moved to Mexico from the States in 1972 they knew nothing about Mexican art. But they did know, as the saying goes, what they liked. So when Eddie went into the square one day in the town of Cuernavaca and came across the bark paintings of Camilo Ayala Marcial he was intrigued. "There was something special about

PHOTOGRAPHY: REBECCA HOSSACK/CAROLYN LASSITER/BRITISH AIRWAYS



plan to build a dam in his area which would have swamped 26 villages, all of which had been there since pre-Columbian times. Marcial got people from all those villages to paint pictures of what their village and their life meant to them. "He made sure," says Carol, "that the right people saw those pictures. I'm not saying he

he was a true Stone Age man. Bone through the nose, feathers in the hair, the whole thing. When Kauage was a teenager he climbed on a rock with a bow and arrow to shoot what he thought was a big bird which turned out to be a helicopter discovering his valley. In his 60-year-old life this man has lived

he wanted to go shopping in Oxford Street, go to Harrods to buy T-shirts and a CD player. He longed to sample the fruits of 20th-century society and who's to say no? Is it ruining the balance? Of course not. No-one can afford to be judgmental in these things. You should simply pay what a specific artist is worth, no matter

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personally stopped the dam, Marcial taking on City Hall, that sort of thing. But the bottom line is, they didn't build the dam and those pictures ended up being shown at the Chicago Museum."

Carol and Eddie have moved back to the arts hub that is Santa

Fé, New Mexico. But images of their Cuernavacan idyll fill their house. In their own art gallery are pictures by Marcial and many of his relatives who drifted in and out of their lives and their home during that time of artistic discovery. Carol, a black American from the rural backwaters of North Carolina, having felt a rapport with the Mexican Indians she met through Marcial, was inspired to find her own artistic voice and is now a painter and sculptor herself. It is a story that really does have a happy ending.

Some Western buyers, doubtless from the purest of motives, are anxious about paying fees to artists which, however normal by western standards, are equivalent to a lottery jackpot in some parts of the world. Rebecca Hossack takes a robust line:

"Who am I to say, for instance, to an Aboriginal artist, 'you can't buy four trucks with your money and a crate of beer'? It's not for me to say what he should do with his money.

"We've just done an exhibition with an artist from Papua New Guinea, who really did fit all the stereotypes of the noble savage. His name is Mathias Kauage, and

everything from Fred Flintstone to modern-day man.

"But Kauage is a painter of genius and from this exhibition and the many that will follow he will receive more money than he ever knew existed. People may tut tut and say 'oh no, how dreadful,' but what's it to do with them? When he came to London

if he wears a grass skirt and rings in his ears or an Armani jacket and trousers. It's progress."

Gertie Huddleston made a different choice. Her pictures sold out when they were featured in London; but it was to be her last exhibition. "She decided that she preferred fishing" says Hossack, "and has not painted since."



British Airways is extremely proud to be able to add Clifford Possum to the roster of artists who are contributing to their global celebration of highly individual world images being displayed on its tailplanes.

Possum, a member of the Anmatyerre people, is one of the most important living Aboriginal painters and a highly respected custodian of his people's culture. The image

which will soon be seen painted on British Airways aircraft is a typical example of his distinctive work. Called Water Dreaming, the circles represent waterholes and soakages, while the wavy and straight lines illustrate walking paths.

Rebecca Hossack, said "Clifford Possum is one of the greatest painters working in the world today. He has changed the way we look at the Australian landscape, imbuing it with myth and magic. His work has developed over 25 years, achieving an extraordinary richness and power."