

# Colour for Christmas

*Gallery owner Rebecca Hossack takes a colourful and ecumenical approach to the festive season, says Lisa Freedman*

Photographs by David Cleveland

Rebecca Hossack is dashing round her small kitchen setting out candles in the run up to Christmas and, though she's tall and slim and blonde, she has the qualities of Father Christmas. Generous spirited, energetic and ebullient, she seems to bring an inexhaustible abundance to her seasonal preparations.

Hossack and her husband, biographer Matthew Sturgis, live in an elegant, flat-fronted Georgian terrace in Fitzrovia. Its austere classical exterior is entirely in keeping with a neighbourhood originally laid out in the 18th century, but, behind its demure charcoal façade, lies a world rich in colour and warmth.

Here, a few hundred yards from the Euston Road, Hossack fights a one-woman campaign against London's midwinter >



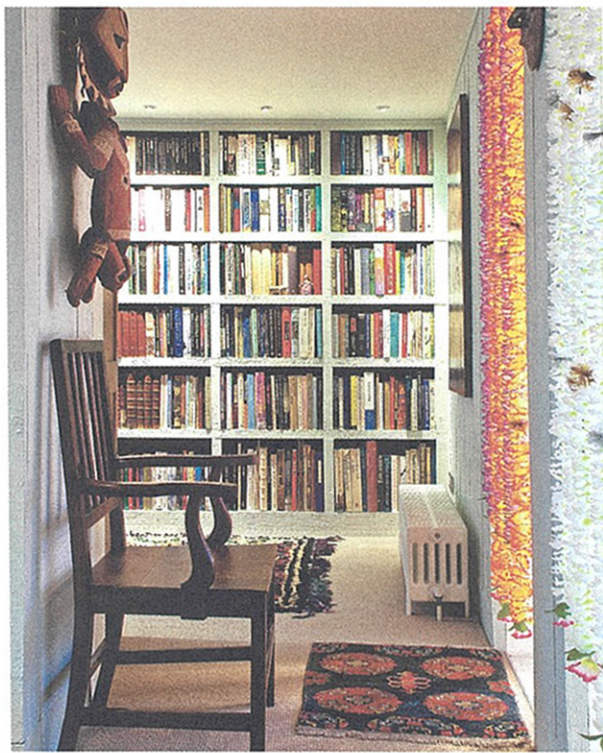
**This page:** The top-floor sitting room. The LED Buddha is by the artist Rebecca Butcher, one of the artists Hossack shows in her gallery.

**Opposite:** The lower-ground floor dining room. The table and chairs are by Ilkka Saarela. A 1920s Billie Blair rug sits on a leather floor. Curtains are also in leather.





*“The last time we counted, my husband found we had 183 pictures”*



monochromes. "I can't bear the greyness," she says. "The darker it gets, the more light I need."

Her antipathy is to be expected. A native of Australia, where turkey is served with sunshine, she arrived in London in 1980 to study for the Bar, but she realised that creativity interested her more than contracts. In 1988, she rashly borrowed £25,000 and launched her first gallery in Soho, where she also lived in a flat decorated "like a Tibetan temple". But a small flat and a permanent passion for acquiring beautiful things are not compatible. "I'd love to live somewhere minimal," she says, "but the last time we counted, my husband found we had 183 pictures."

It was Matthew who found a solution to the ever-shrinking wall space, when he stumbled across a derelict flat around the corner from Rebecca's galleries also in Fitzrovia. The eventual acquisition of the three floors above have resolved the hanging issues.

Nowadays, the Hossack-Sturgis Christmas feast takes place in the lower-ground floor dining-room, a leather-lined cave furnished with a mix of Aboriginal art, antique English furniture and mid-century classics. This month, the white Saarinen 'Tulip' table is brought to vivid life with jewel-coloured glass, bespoke crockery and bold arrangements of freshly-cut flowers.

The cooking is left to her husband. "I don't cook, I don't drive, my only skill is embroidery," says Rebecca, but she's clearly in her element when it comes to decoration, and, in the run-up to Christmas, every doorway is hung with brilliant garlands, every vacant surface laden with lights. But this is a house layered with exotic display year round. From the glass-fronted armoire in the bathroom, with its rainbow sandwich of textiles, to the dressing-room festooned with myriad ethnic jewellery, from the army of bronze animals regimented on a windowsill, to the skylight sitting-room, covered with drawings by unsung artists.

Rebecca is a colour addict and, the higher up the house you go, the brighter and more expansive the mood. In the master bathroom, aqua rubber flooring complements a tap-side composition of sky-blue glass. In the converted attic, which now forms a large sitting room, an Eames chair, a Scandinavian sofa and a Georgian armchair, are upholstered, respectively, in burnt orange, brilliant turquoise and daffodil yellow. In the master bedroom and bathroom she took her inspiration from a 'woodland cabin', a look she simulated by panelling the walls in the type of builders' planks normally reserved for scaffolding.

"Rebecca approaches a house intuitively – like creating a piece of sculpture," says Matthew, a calm and measured counterpoint to her whirlwind presence. "If she doesn't like the way something looks, she just changes it."

Unsurprisingly, Rebecca has a profound commitment to the artists she shows in her galleries. She became established as London's most prominent dealer in non-Western art and her gallery was the first in Europe to exhibit Aboriginal painting. Since then, she's held important exhibitions of work by African Bushmen, as well as by artists from Papua New Guinea and tribal India, and the house is liberally sprinkled with a cosmopolitan collection of ethnic work.

But she is as quick to appreciate the wit and skill of western contemporaries and this year her Christmas has been co-produced by Ian Butcher, an artist who creates delightful portable shrines in which paper and collage are combined with LEDs to represent a colourful and ecumenical approach to world religion. With Butcher's help, Hossack's home has temporarily become a shrine to both art and the Christmas spirit. "He creates a jolly and beautiful world," she says. Rather like the house's owner herself. *Ian Butcher at Rebecca Hossack, 28 Charlotte Street, W1, r-h-g.co.uk*