



arthouse

Words Margie Blok
Photography Dieu Tan
Styling Megan Morton

Imaginative use of paint has turned this Petersham villa into a haven of colour and calm.



"For me, the starting point of interior design is colour," says Rikki Stubbs. "It's all about layering colour, then texture and pattern. I think rooms should be effortlessly stylish, comfortable and calm; a home should be individual and beautiful to live in."

Heeding this mantra, Stubbs has achieved an incredibly serene balance in her own home, a circa 1850s villa where the rooms are painted with enigmatic colours to create a backdrop for her eclectic collection of furniture, textiles and art. This is not surprising, as Stubbs is one of Sydney's most talented interior designers and paint colour advisers – her CV includes hundreds of commercial and residential projects.

A Queenslander who moved to Sydney in her twenties, Stubbs lives in a quiet pocket of Petersham. Now a highly desirable inner-west area – and a magnet for food lovers who regularly descend on the shopping village known as Little Portugal – it was far from fashionable when she moved there in the early 1990s. "This house was very run down then but it had a good feeling, it had soul," says Stubbs.

What, from the street, looks to be a small-scale, two-storey house, turns out to be quite substantial, even though it's only one room wide. On the ground floor are separate living and dining rooms, a kitchen and sunroom, while the first floor has two double bedrooms and a big bathroom.

One of a pair of attached houses, the 150-year-old residence has a simple facade with a wraparound veranda and side front door painted rich jewel-purple. A whimsical dragonfly-shaped door knocker greets visitors before they cross the threshold to an entrance hall where the original staircase retains its worn timber treads. "The stairs show all their scars, but I couldn't bear to remove them; they tell the history of this place," says Stubbs.

"In the hall I wanted to create an illusion that the house went on further. So I asked Sibella Tideman, an artist friend who's worked with me for many years, to paint a trompe l'oeil mural in the stairwell. Her image of steps leading to shuttered French doors works brilliantly."

Tideman also painted the ceiling of the sitting room as well as the entire bathroom, which resembles a glamorous tent. With its faux-fabric draped walls, the bathroom feels incredibly cosy and restful. Stubbs enjoys its sense of illusion and the fact that it allows her to be a little theatrical. "That room felt like a prison cell before Sibella transformed it into such a beautifully romantic bathroom."

An accomplished artist herself, Stubbs studied for years with Sydney artist and teacher Charlie Sheard, learning historical oil-painting techniques. "Art is my passion, and studying painting has been the foundation of my work as a colourist," she explains.

Opposite, top
The original weatherboard sunroom.
Opposite, bottom
In a bedroom featuring plenty of pattern and personal touches, Stubbs painted stripes on the walls "to hold it all together".

Top right
A painting by Aboriginal artist Myra Cook hangs above the dining room fireplace.
Right
The owner, interior designer Rikki Stubbs: "I love the feeling of an artist's hand in the house. It gives things a vibration."

Far right
Creating a sense of theatre and fun, a trompe l'oeil painting depicting draped fabric on the walls of the bathroom evokes the feeling of being inside a glamorous tent.



Artworks are on display in every room. Above the fireplace in the dining room hangs a vivid painting by Aboriginal artist, Myra Cook. "I love that picture, it's so joyous," Stubbs exclaims. On another wall is a large painting from the Warli tribe in India. Propped on a plinth is a sensual and extravagant ceramic sculpture by Pamela Scott, an emerging Sydney artist. "I admire the organic purity of Pamela's work, she's incredibly talented," says Stubbs, who has more than a dozen of Scott's works displayed through the house.

With walls painted a hue Stubbs describes as "dirty gold", the dining room has perfect proportions for family heirlooms: an antique round dining table and four matching chairs. "These belonged to my grandmother who lived in Longreach [Queensland]. My mother grew up with them; it's comforting to have this furniture around me."

Across the hallway is the sitting room where Stubbs relaxes in the evenings. A Walter Knoll chair occupies one corner, a striped rug covers the floorboards and hand-made cushions enhance a long sofa. "Those screen-printed cushions were made by Deborah Leser, who's a significant contemporary textile designer. I love the feeling of an artist's hand in the house. It gives things a vibration."

Above the mantelpiece is a nude by Stubbs, while on a narrow aubergine-

painted wall, next to a doorway leading into the kitchen, are a pair of landscape paintings bought at auction for about \$50 – "they were being sold for the frames."

An Early Kooka gas stove features in the sunny yellow kitchen, which is fitted with rustic open shelves and a large farmhouse-style porcelain sink. "That's my second Early Kooka; when the previous one wore out I replaced it with the same stove because it has the most brilliant oven," Stubbs says.

Off the kitchen is a little weatherboard sunroom – with an original timber shingled roof and casement windows – where a daybed piled with tribal cushions is a favourite place to recline and read.

Upstairs, the light and airy shell-pink boudoir is filled with all manner of personal and decorative items. "There's plenty of pattern in there, but I needed to keep going with it, so recently I painted the walls with subtle grey and soft pink stripes to hold it all together," she explains.

Dusky lavender walls in the second bedroom complement a Khotan floor rug and an Indian cotton bedcover by Sally Campbell. Various artworks include Stubbs' painting of Colin, her beloved cat who died at age 19 – "he was adorable". A hand-painted camel-skin lamp stands on a drop-front desk made by her great-aunt Myrtle in 1940. "She made it for my mother; it still has the original green paint on the pigeonholes inside."

wheresheshops

Covered in Paint
445 King Street,
Newtown.

Phone: 9519 0204.

"A trade secret, this boutique paint store sells beautiful eggshell paint and custom mixed colours using unique ingredients."

Robyn Cosgrove Rugs
168 Queen Street,
Woollahra.

Phone: 9328 7692.

"For the most beautiful traditional and contemporary rugs – these rugs make every home I work on look wonderful."

Agathon Galleries
1D Danks Street, Waterloo.
Phone: 0407 014 683.

"Aboriginal artists from the Western Desert are represented by this gallery – I love the exceptional colour and vitality of their work."

Afghan Interiors
451 King Street,
Newtown.

Phone: 9550 6666.

"I love this shop. It's crammed with gorgeous things from Central Asia and

Afghanistan. I bought the hand-painted camel-skin lamps from here – they're made in Pakistan."

Pamela Scott Ceramics
Bondi.

Phone: 8084 8494.

"For floor vases, garden planters, ceramic stools, exquisite lamp bases – her sensuous work is displayed all through my home."

Living Edge Studio
74 Commonwealth Street,
Surry Hills.

Phone: 9640 5600.

"This store sells classic contemporary furniture designed by Katherine Norman and Caroline Quaine – their pieces subtly reference mid-20th century design."

Planet Furniture
419 Crown Street,
Surry Hills.

Phone: 9698 0680.

"Locally made beds, side tables and drawers of timeless design that look perfect in any modern Australian home."