



## THE QUEEN OF SERENE

IF YOU WANT COOL, CALM AND COLLECTED LUXE, YOU NEED THE INTERIOR DESIGNER ROSE UNIACKE. NO WONDER THE BECKHAMS HAVE CHOSEN HER TO DO THEIR NEW LONDON PAD, SAYS SHANE WATSON

**S**tepping through the front door of the interior designer Rose Uniacke's Pimlico house takes your breath away. Immediately to the right is a jungle of a room — a high-walled, glass-ceilinged oasis of orchids and tinkling water, palms and lush greenery, with a marble table at its centre. This was the exhibition space of the Victorian artist who built the house in the mid-19th century. The room beyond it was his studio. It is now a comfortable, sofa-strewn screening room, lined in canvas, built for her husband, the film producer David Heyman. "The other day someone said, 'Who did that?'" Uniacke says, nodding towards the wall-mounted white screen. "Well, I did, as it happens." She bursts out laughing.

This is the building that has been dubbed the house that Harry Potter built — a reference to the phenomenally

successful Harry Potter film franchise that made Heyman's name (he is said to have earned at least £70m from the series) — and it's a modern palace fit for a golden media-centric couple and their family. It's not hard to see why Victoria and David Beckham took one look and signed on the dotted line for the full Uniacke refurbishment of their Holland Park villa (at a rumoured cost of £5m). The Beckhams are fashion-conscious, family-orientated taste-makers balancing busy modern lives: there is only one woman who can deliver the house that works for them and purrs success and confidence in just the right way.

In the space of a couple of years, Uniacke has become the preferred designer of sophisticated, comfortable, liveable houses for people who can afford not to ask how much. It's hard to define up-to-the-minute good taste, but in a Uniacke interior, you know you are in its presence. And how. Listening



The dramatic staircase in the entrance hall of the Pimlico house of Rose Uniacke, top left, is based on a Victorian design and made of Portland stone. It replaced the mock Tudor stairs that were in the house when she bought it in 2007. The painting on the landing is by the Californian artist John Baldessari



The walls of the old exhibition space were once thick with coats of plaster. A glass ceiling floods it with light. The space also features a secret door into the screening room

back to my tape, recording us as she takes me from vast room to vast room — up the cantilevered Portland stone staircase, rebuilt from scratch as it would have been in the original house, into the ballroom that is now a luminous office with goldfinch-yellow silk curtains, Borge Mogensen leather chairs, a 17th-century Mogul rug the size of an Olympic swimming pool — I am embarrassed to discover I am panting like a greedy child in a sweet shop. Throughout the building, the floors are reclaimed French boards (a Uniacke signature), and the walls and ceilings are painted in layers of white with the faintest trace of colour (she describes the house as “pink, like an Italian palazzo”, though most of us would see merely chalk).

Uniacke, 51, is the perfect advertisement for her interiors. Barefoot in navy Céline trousers and a Valentino blouse, she is beautiful, elegant and completely natural, with an infectious laugh and an old-school resistance to showing off. Ask her why she is currently the hottest designer on the block and she squirms. Under duress she talks haltingly about respecting the “history of buildings” and “simplifying, to make it feel comfortable for modern life”. What she does is — she agrees — very pared down. Walls are left bare and mantelpieces empty, floors are often plain boards, she doesn’t much go in for family snaps in frames, and her kitchen is a visible-



I HOPE MY STYLE IS WARM. I DON'T THINK IT'S MINIMAL, I HOPE IT'S MORE WELCOMING THAN THAT

food-free zone, but her rooms are never cold. “I don’t overfurnish,” she says with characteristic dryness. “I hope my style is warm. I don’t think it’s minimal, I hope it’s more welcoming than that.” She uses antique fabrics — a favourite is 1920s Fortuny — draped over ottomans and tables, or made up into cushions to add richness. Flowers are arranged informally, as if picked straight from the garden (though she buys them herself, from New Covent Garden Market). In her bedroom, the chalky linen curtains are overlaid in another fine curtain of cashmere (sold by the metre as part of her bespoke range) to “give softness — when it’s night, they look so pretty”. Bringing softness to an almost monastically simple aesthetic is her forte, and it gives her interiors a timeless, easy chic.

For Victoria Beckham, hiring her means getting a designer who knows how to make a house modern and luxurious without filling it with beige and steel and breaking out the grandeur. Uniacke will easily find a place for the kissing photograph, the swimming pool (her own is black lava stone), the playroom (she has a six-year-old son, Harper, whose Lego lies just out of sight behind her marble bath). It helps that she is a fashion-conscious perfectionist (in every room we walk through, she adjusts a chair or tweaks a lampshade, “part of the sadness of being me”), and not merely a working woman,



Uniacke loves chandeliers, which feature throughout the house, though she rarely lights them, preferring to use lamps. In the dining room, 17th-century Italian embroidered panels hang on either side of the fireplace, while the window above has an in-built panel that can be drawn across to create a mirror



The old ballroom has been transformed into an office space, with sofas and an ottoman from Uniacke's bespoke range. The rug is early-17th-century Mogul, while cushion covers are made from Fortuny fabrics. The cashmere throw is also from her own collection — she sells it by the yard

but one juggling deadlines with children (five ranging in age from 6 to 29) with her husband's commitments, including red-carpet appearances and A-list entertaining. Is her life quite stressful? "Yup," she says absent-mindedly, but living the life is what makes her so ideally suited to this particular job. "Oh, I can't say anything," she says, hooting good-naturedly at my attempts to get her to dish on details of the Beckham residence, which is, of course, another reason everyone wants her. She's discreet to a fault and she has nothing to prove. All she's prepared to reveal is (her) David's favourite room. "This is it," she says triumphantly, flinging open the door of a temperature-controlled wine cellar, with Harry Potter gargoyles perched on the floor. She grins: "We don't know where to put them."

Uniacke started out as a gilder and restorer, before joining her mother, Hilary Batstone, in her interiors business, and then setting up shop under her own name further down Pimlico Road in 2009. She can't, she says, identify the moment when it really took off, "but we've expanded the shop and the studio, and in the past year the business has doubled in size". Now it's a question of which projects she can fit in. "Sometimes I do have to say no. But when we say yes, everyone gets me."

Her story is inspiring for anyone who thinks it's all downhill after 45 or a painful midlife divorce. Success has happened for her in her forties, after the breakdown of her first marriage to the financier Robie Uniacke — with whom she has three children, plus a stepson she brought up as her own — and who has since settled down with the actress Rosamund Pike. Uniacke married Heyman seven years ago (the bride wore Lanvin), had Harper at 46 — "That was hard work," she says, her eyes widening — and gradually, with his support, has dived into making a success of her business. Last year she won the respected Andrew Martin International Interior Design award, and now, with a little help from Skype, she's all over the world.

Presumably, these days she has carte blanche to do as she sees fit. "Oh no, not at all. Sometimes you'll be working around someone's art collection, for example, and that is the job." Similarly, she says, a commission does not have to involve six-metre ceilings and endless space. "It would never be, 'Omgod, it's not big enough' — never, because small jewels are really exciting to create. It would be more, you know, 'Do we understand each other, do we get on?'" There is only rule, she says: "The fit has to be right. And then it is a real pleasure. And we have really great clients who are interested in the whole process and understand the way we work, the detail involved and why things take time."

The house that Harry Potter built took three and a half years to complete. But then Uniacke is definitely worth waiting for. As a matter of fact, I'll bet there are clients dragging out the process in the hope of keeping her on site, laughing, tweaking and spreading beautiful order. ❖

roseuniacke.com



Velvet sofas in the screening room are from Uniacke's own collection. The projection equipment is concealed behind the curtain



Wide, reclaimed French floorboards run throughout the house, including the master bedroom's ensuite bathroom