



## The enlightened mind

The combination of a brilliant creative eye and a brilliant brain is a powerful one, no better evidenced than at Rebecca Willer's Kensington gallery. Whether it's a Roman artefact or a contemporary sculpture, if it's been selected by Willer, then it's the best / By Morag Bruce

The world of design can be a confusing place, inhabited by thousands of years' worth of influences, layered together, each telling a story. What's needed is a compass to direct us to our destination, which is a room that speaks to us and also says something about us. Step forward Rebecca Willer, design explorer, academic adventurer, Holland Street gallerist.

Willer's eponymous Kensington gallery is frequented by the world's elite designers, collectors and private individuals. There

they find just a taster of the possibilities that working with the Willer team offers up. Lined with statement vases, incredible objets, textiles and tableware, the gallery represents a select group of international artists and makers; it collaborates on exclusive pieces, develops its own ranges and hand-picks antiques. Clients return again and again to have Willer's magic sprinkled on pied-à-terres, palaces, apartments, yachts and chateaus. The reason they come back is because they are > pieces by Paul Philp

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: A Han Dynasty jar; a limited-edition Lynn Chadwick bronze candelabra; a Massimo Micheluzzi vase; a ceramic by Sandra Davolio; and a felted silk and wool throw by Claudy Jongstra for Willer

OPPOSITE: Rebecca Willer in her Kensington home, accompanied by a Massimo Micheluzzi Murano polychrome vase, and ceramic

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confident that what they are offered is the best edit.

Just for starters, there are epic glass vessels by Venetian artist Massimo Micheluzzi, organic glass forms by Japanese artist Masuda Hiromi, glamorous hand-cast bronze furniture and lighting ranges by Paul Mathieu, jagged bronze sculptures by Lynn Chadwick and elegant furniture from Christophe Delcourt. Be sure to ask about the tableware – the team will slide back enormous doors to reveal a Grand Tour of patterns, styles, textures and finishes on plates that will go on to grace the finest tables. Everything can be tweaked and perfected, made unique for each client's purpose.

"If there's anything I set out to achieve, it's that I want the look to be like the objects have grown with the person," says Willer. "Our clients are discerning. They are people who travel, experience different cultures and who are very interested in the arts. We help them reflect their lifestyles in their decor." Charming, perceptive, interested and interesting, Willer has

confidence in what she knows but also confidence to be excited about learning more, all the time. "I am an obsessive researcher," says Willer. "I love being in the library, figuring out the roots, the links, the relationships and the influences."

This approach to design and life is in Willer's DNA. "My father was a diplomat towards the end of his career and when he travelled, what he always wanted to know was 'What are the most special artefacts of the local cultures?' and 'What can we ship back?' I can't imagine not responding to my environment that way; even when I was a student, living on a shoestring, my room didn't look like anyone else's – for pennies, it looked different. I say my approach has always been spare, not forced, certainly accumulated over time."

She is one of those lucky people who are both creative and very analytical. "I was artistic at school, but I was also really good at exams," she says. In the end, academia won out, because of "the terrible middle class thing of 'get yourself a profession, then you can do the other >

OPPOSITE, TOP: Willer 'Keiko' and Italian handmade stoneware, Hermès cutlery and Willer Murano crystal

BOTTOM: An 'Aria' hand-cast bronze and wood buffet by Paul Mathieu





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opposite, top: PaulMathieu's 'Aria' chair, footstool and floor lamp, all in handcast bronze, are a counterpoint to Paul Philp's earthy ceramics

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: A 19thcentury marble and ormolu wine cooler; Limoges porcelain tableware by Willer; ceramic form by Paul Philp; a Biedermeier silver candlestick by Ted Muehling for ER Butler; and a glass sculpture by  $Masuda\ Hiromi$ 

stuff in your spare time.' What spare time, I ask you?" she says, laughing. Willer arrived in London from New York in 1971 and after a number of years staving off various offers to return to academia, she decided to stay put for good. "I went to law school then worked for years in the City. I was the first woman to be allowed through the doors of the Baltic Exchange and have lunch in the dining room." She was even allowed to wear trousers, after special permission was granted. "Times have changed a lot!"

For many years, Willer practiced law while appeasing the other side of her brain with building and design projects as hobbies. Many of her friends were architects, designers, stylists and journalists, and would go to her for sources and for information. "After I had my second child and really only wanted to work part-time - which was unheard of in those days - I knew it was right to make the change in direction. That's when the idea came of becoming the 'sourcer's sourcer'. From the start I focused on the haute couture of design. I went into

business thinking, if I have to compromise, then I'm out of here - I will have failed. And I haven't had to compromise."

Working with beautiful things and talented people is always a thrill for Willer. "There is a wonderful excitement when you find an artist and they really speak to you. It doesn't happen that often. You know it when you see it," she says. "We give people the chance to create something unique. It's very satisfying to be able to facilitate the commissioning process and also to help clients articulate what they want. It doesn't have to be a huge project, it could be an incredible statement tabletop piece."

Whether it's Roman, art deco or brand new, what unites the gallery's contents is their quality. "Good things are always good things, well-crafted things are always wellcrafted things," she says, holding a gilded dinner plate, then placing a smaller bowl, edged in emerald green, on top. "It doesn't get any better than that," she says, admiring the combination. We couldn't agree more. A

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