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WHO IS LUCY DICKENS?

Through her paintings, the artist immortalises the beauty in everyday city life. She shares more about her work and that famous last name.

BY SARA YAP ON MARCH 10, 2016 [INTERVIEWS \(/SG/ART-CULTURE/INTERVIEWS\)](#)



A man smoking in front of a news stand. A lady applying red lipstick. Diners engaged in conversation over dinner. Such moments border on the ordinary and humdrum, but for artist Lucy Dickens, these are what get her creative juices flowing.

Based in London, the 57-year-old specialises in oil-on-canvas depictions of everyday life in her beloved city. Describing herself as an “avid people-watcher”, she relishes in finding the beauty in unabashedly ordinary scenes: People mingling over afternoon tea, ladies primping in the powder room and facades of iconic hotels, such as the Mandarin Oriental and Claridge’s. “London is a hugely cosmopolitan city with a rich history to it. From pomp and circumstance to shady characters lurking in low-life bars, it’s all there. I see it all around me every day,” says Dickens, adding that her style of art comprises “atmospheric reportage with a touch of humour”.

She is currently working on new art pieces for her upcoming solo show in April. To be held at the Osborne Studio Gallery in London, the exhibition will showcase “familiar London scenes, as well as vignettes from New York”, which she recently visited. “This collection is more colourful and looser than any show I have done before. I am really excited about it,” she says.

If Dickens’ last name rings a bell, it’s because she is the great-great granddaughter of literary legend Charles Dickens — known for his novels set in early Victorian London. Some of her art pieces are even inspired by the renowned author’s work and life. In one painting, female croupiers clad in crimson dresses take a smoke break on a gritty street corner of Soho — mentioned in *A Tale of Two Cities* as the home of Lucie and Doctor Manette. Another artwork depicts a boat sailing down the canal at northwest London’s Regent’s Park, which is opposite Charles Dickens’ former home at 1 Devonshire Terrace, where he lived in 1839. “As a fellow chronicler of London life — albeit with the brush rather than the pen — I am conscious of my heritage and am instinctively drawn to paint ‘Dickensian’ scenes, which can still be found in London today,” says Dickens.

While she is proud of her famous lineage, Dickens doesn’t harp on it and prefers to let her art speak for itself. Many of her works are based on observations and memories, with some carrying personal significance. For instance, The Ritz London is a recurring motif in her oeuvre, not just because of its striking facade and opulent interiors, but also because of its crucial role in her parents’ courtship. “I am told that my father, then a young and penniless journalist for The Telegraph newspaper, took my mother to the champagne bar at The Ritz for a date before they were married. This seemed to me a wonderfully romantic gesture,” recalls Dickens. “Many years later, I still find The Ritz has a magical quality.”

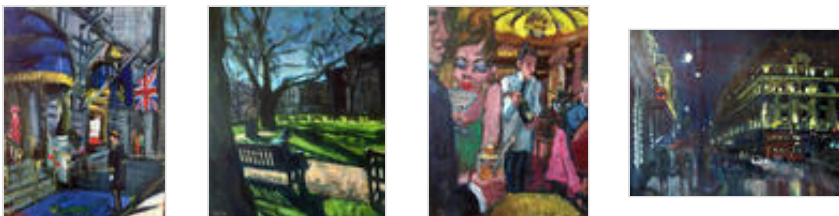
Her paintings of the luxury hotel convey this sense of nostalgia: In one, well-dressed patrons unwind over aperitifs at The Rivoli Bar (a watering hole within the residence’s premises), while another artwork features dapper doormen awaiting guests at the entrance. There is also a striking painting of the hotel at night, its exterior glowing golden against the dark sky.

Born and bred in Surrey, Dickens knew from a young age that she was destined for an art-related career, as she enjoyed drawing and painting. “Art was always my best subject,” she says. Desiring to learn more about the nuances of design, she pursued a Diploma in Fashion Writing at the London College of Fashion at the University of the Arts London. After graduation, she joined publishing firm Condé Nast UK as a fashion stylist for *Vogue* magazine. Over the next nine years, she gained experience in conceptualising and coordinating fashion shoots for various titles. “I had a wonderful time concocting romantic editorial pages and organising wedding fashion shoots, often in very exotic locations. It taught me a lot about composition,” she says. By age 26, she was appointed the fashion and beauty editor of *Brides* magazine.

It was in the late 1980s that she decided to freelance and try her hand at illustration art. She took on commissions from *Vogue*, *Brides*, *Tatler* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, as well as assignments for newspapers such as *Financial Times*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*. She also illustrated and wrote a series of children’s books, which were published in London and New York. After freelancing for three years, she decided to concentrate on her art full-time. “This was a great way to hone my drawing skills, and becoming an artist seemed like a natural progression to me,” she explains.

Since then, she has exhibited around the UK and in New York, and completed commissions for clients such as the University of Oxford. Her most recent solo show was in 2011 at Fosse Gallery Fine Art in Gloucestershire and it featured rural scenes inspired by the rustic surroundings of her country cottage in Norfolk.


Outside of work, the mother-of-two enjoys cultivating vegetables in her garden, meditation and going for walks. Artistic talent runs in her family too: Her youngest sister is a sculptor and her mother is a gifted water-colourist. Despite the uncertainty that comes with life as a full-time artist, Dickens remains dedicated to her craft. “The joy and satisfaction of bringing a new work to life generally outweighs the solitude and self-doubt that all artists have to live with,” she says. “I hope to still be wielding a paintbrush in my 90s.”




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