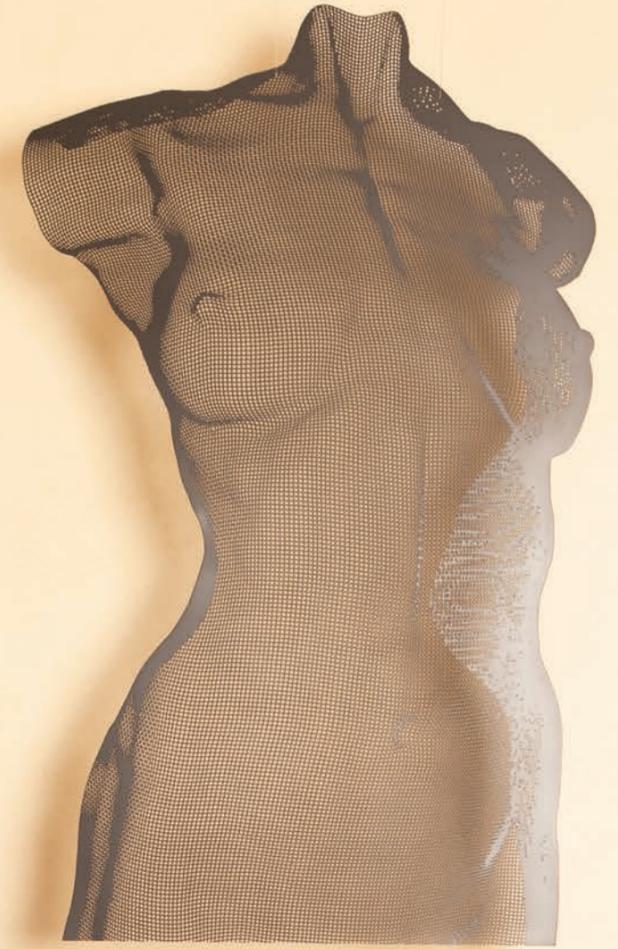




Left: Laura Hamilton, *Markings*, 1991; facing page: Theresa Roberts, in her London home, 2022, with David Begbie, *NUUD 1*, 2005

Meet the collectors: Theresa Roberts

Championing the rich history and strength of Jamaican contemporary art is the driving force behind the Theresa Roberts Art Collection. On a visit to its founder's London home *Helen Sumpter* finds out what inspired her passion. Portrait by *Jillian Edelstein*



Roberts' recognition of herself in an image she saw in Jamaica sparked the desire to seek out art by Jamaican artists

Theresa Roberts' passion for and pride in Jamaica, the country of her birth, is clear. It drives her interest as a philanthropist and collector, it fuels her business success as founder of the Jamaica Patty Co restaurants, and it is evident in her elegant London home, where she is surrounded by art from her collection, much of it made in the 60 years since Jamaica's independence in 1962, which serves as an important reference point for the development of Jamaican art. Marking that anniversary, a new selection of more than 30 works from Roberts' collection is currently on show in the University of Liverpool's Victoria Gallery & Museum. The collection, with work by established and emerging Jamaican artists such as Mabusha Dennis, Marlon James, Christopher Lawrence, Laura Facey Cooper, Judy Ann Macmillan, Edna Manley and Alvin Marriott, includes work in a variety of media, including painting, sculpture and photography, and on a diverse range of subject matter. The exhibition in Liverpool is the most extensive show of Jamaican art to take place in the region.

Born in Black River, St Elizabeth, in 1956, Roberts spent her early years largely in the care of her grandparents. When she was six months old, her parents left her and her sister to come to the UK as part of the Windrush generation, where they settled in London, in Battersea. Roberts is grateful that they did. 'The way I look at it,' she says, 'is that if my mother gave me up at six months to come to England to make a better life for us, I have to take that seriously, and make sure that I do something that they would be proud of. That gave me ambition, it gave me foundation and it showed me that you have to work for what you get. If people travel to give you a better life, you've got to grasp it.'

Roberts and her sister joined her parents, and new siblings, in London when she was eight, and her ambition translated into a desire to join the world of work as quickly as possible. Leaving school at 16 she undertook various jobs, including in a bookshop, and modelling work for Black magazines. She married and had two sons. By the age of 19 she had also bought her own house, in Edmonton, north London, for £5,000. 'I'd earned a bit of money, and was thinking of buying a car,' she recalls, when a friend advised her to invest it in property instead. 'I could only buy the house because it was cheap and had a sitting tenant, so I lived upstairs and the elderly tenant downstairs.' When the tenant passed away, Roberts sold the property for a profit, which then gave her the confidence to invest more seriously in real estate. 'It gave me self-belief,' she says. 'It wasn't always

easy for a Black person to be comfortable with that at the time, but the more I did it the more I succeeded. People may think what they need is therapy, but if you can go and do something good, and positive, and succeed, then that too can change how you feel.'

One of the first things Roberts did with that success was to take her parents back to Jamaica for a holiday. 'They couldn't have afforded to go back to the country they had left,' she says. It was on her travels back to Jamaica that her connection with the island's artistic legacy took hold. Whilst in a hotel in Montego Bay she saw a print of a Black girl selling mangoes by the side of the road, and recognised herself at the age of five or six. 'I thought: "Oh my God, I used to do that!" When the nice mangoes fell off the tree, you'd put them on the roadside, go back to your little house, and then the drivers on their way back to Kingston would beep their horn to let you know you've got a sale. You'd run up the dirt track and try and barter with them, but they'd always end up trying to give you more, because they respected you trying to sell something at the roadside.'

Roberts' first work of art was a gift in the 1990s from her good friend, the Scottish-born sculptor David Begbie, followed by the purchase of more works by Begbie, by figurative and still-life painter Craig Wylie, and James Gillick, among other artists. But it was her recognition of herself in that image of Jamaica that sparked the desire to pursue that reawakened connection and seek out works of art by Jamaican artists, in Jamaica.

Encouraged by her husband Andrew to undertake some proper research, Roberts spent



time in Kingston at the National Gallery of Jamaica, and the School of Visual Arts in Edna Manley College, where many of Jamaica's artists study. Roberts also credits Andrew for seeking out and introducing her to Jamaican collector and art dealer Guy McIntosh (who died in 2011). 'That's where my collection really started,' she says. 'Guy knew all the artists and he knew my passion, but he also educated me about Jamaica's art history, and not only the quality of the art, but the care that was taken with it. Not everyone expects that from Jamaica.'

Artist and educator Edna Manley (after whom the School of Visual Arts is named) is just one part of Jamaica's strong artistic legacy. Edna (married to Norman Manley, who became Jamaica's Premier in 1959) worked and exhibited in London and Jamaica, and the impact of her powerful modernist figurative sculptures, many of which made reference to Jamaica's social and political unrest in the early- to mid-20th century, led her to be known as the 'Mother of Jamaican Art'.

The next stage for Roberts' growing collection (she admits to not knowing exactly how many works are in it, but several hundred) was to build a home in Jamaica, near Montego Bay, in which more of it could be seen. Called Hanover Grange, the building's suites are all named after Jamaican artists, with the exception of one named after respected Jamaican-born writer, critic and curator Edward Lucie-Smith, another important friend of and influence on Roberts. 'We hit it off immediately,' she says. 'We travelled a lot together, and he also taught me a lot.'

Hanover Grange is also the venue for a paid



Left: Phillip Thomas, *Exodus: The Golden Calf Has Matured*, 2017; above: Edna Manley, *Orpheus*, 1983; facing page: Kristina Rowe, *Untitled*, 2009



Right: Barrington Watson, *After the Storm, Hector River, Portland, undated*; below: Basil Watson, *Shadow*, 2008



artist residency and programme of cultural exchange, which is supported by the Robertses, and run in conjunction with the East London-based Royal Drawing School. Drawing alumni can apply for two-week residencies based at the property, where they can draw inspiration, make work, meet with local artists and visit Edna Manley College. The next artists will be taking up their residencies in October.

'The relationship developed after I approached the Royal Drawing School, in 2014, to take some of the artists I collect to the school's residency at Dumfries House, in Ayrshire, Scotland,' Roberts says. 'The artists Phillip Thomas and Christopher Lawrence came and they loved it. They felt proud to have that on their CV and, again, it was another example of success giving you confidence.'

Hanover Grange was also the genesis for the Jamaican Patty Co (JPC). When the Robertses were building the house in 2007, Jamaican patties (related to Cornish pasties) and coconut water were their staple diet. Although Roberts admits to not being impressed with a pasty from Andrew's native Cornwall – 'too full of salt', she says, 'I had to throw it away' – it was a discussion about pasties and patties that led to the decision to start making and selling Jamaican patties in London. The first JPC outlet opened in



Covent Garden in 2013, with a second in Liverpool Street in 2021. With the same energy that Roberts promotes Jamaican art, through JPC she also promotes Jamaican cuisine. Along with the patties – ranging from Ackee and Saltfish to Vegan – among other items on the menu are Curried Goat, Jerk Chicken, Tortuga Rum Cake and Black River Chocolate. And Roberts is involved in all aspects. 'I make sure I know how to cook all the recipes,' she says, 'If I don't like it, I don't sell it.'

The reputation of Roberts' collection and her relationships with and support for the artists she collects mean that many artists now approach her, rather than the other way around. 'It's important when established artists such as Basil Watson [born in 1958, the son of influential artist and educator Barrington Watson (1931-2016), one of the first Black artists to receive an MA from London's Royal College of Art] are passionate about what I do, because then the younger, up-and-coming artists see that. There's a lot of support and respect out there.'

Roberts has work by Barrington Watson, Basil Watson, Basil's brother Raymond, and Basil's son Kai Watson, in her collection. It's Basil Watson's sculpture, commissioned by the Government, that is scheduled to be unveiled in Waterloo Station on Windrush Day on 22 June this year. 'Jamaicans have always led the way,'

says Roberts proudly, 'and it's important for people to know that history because the facts are not always there.'

While Roberts does get involved in other philanthropic activities – for example, she supports Jamaican Rugby and the Jamaican Women's Football Team (The Reggae Girlz), 'I'm an unofficial Jamaican ambassador really,' she says – she knows that in promoting Jamaican art and its history through her collection, she's promoting the best.

There have been several previous selected shows from Roberts' collection, all different – including an exhibition of work by just women artists in 2010, at the New Hall Art Collection, Cambridge – but, as a legacy, Roberts would ultimately like the works to be part of an institution, where they could be toured globally and seen by more people.

'The whole point of art is to be able to show it to and share it with the world,' she says. 'I don't want to have it all to myself, I want to show the world how strong Jamaican art is.'

- 'Jamaica Making: The Theresa Roberts Art Collection', to 9 July, Victoria Gallery & Museum, Liverpool. vgm.liverpool.ac.uk, free to all
- For more information on the works of art held in the Theresa Roberts Art Collection, visit art-jamaica.org

Roberts knows that in promoting Jamaican art and its history through her collection she's promoting the best of the country



Left: Christopher Lawrence, *Ethan the Faun*, 2014; below: Marlon James, *Request*, from *Lonely Wanderer* series, 2017

