

Stories → London's Global Galleries

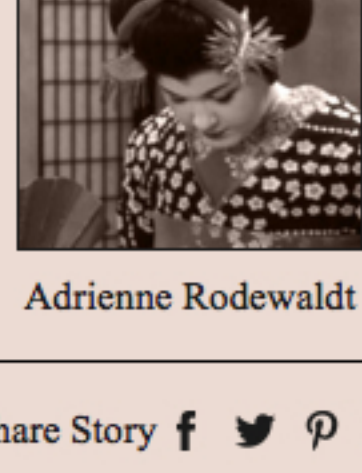


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Marion Friedmann explains the process behind these stunning pieces  
Photo © Adrienne Rodewaldt for L'ArcoBaleno

All the world's a stage for these four trailblazing UK galleries.

Text by



Anna Carnick

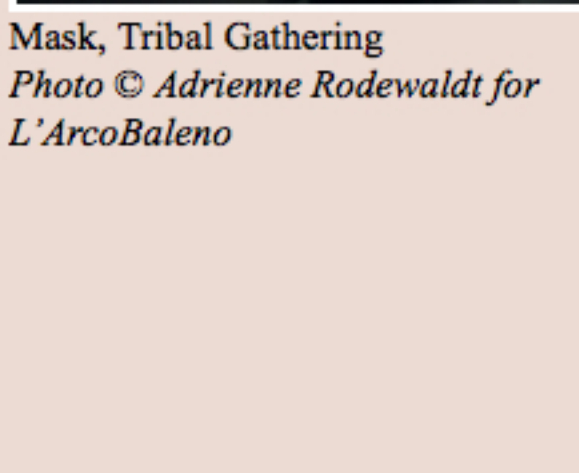
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Mask, Tribal Gathering  
Photo © Adrienne Rodewaldt for L'ArcoBaleno

Rightfully recognized as the design capital of the world, London is home to numerous museums, universities, and studios that bring together some of the brightest talents of our day. Amid the city's many heralded institutions, though, a standout set of small, bold galleries is cultivating a truly international perspective by shining a light on designs and makers from across the globe. We sat down with four galleries—Tribal Gathering, Themes & Variations, Sigmar, and Marion Friedmann—to better acquaint ourselves (and you) with the people and places that, day in and day out, continue to bring the world to London.

**Tribal Gathering London**

Set on a quiet side street in Notting Hill, **Tribal Gathering** specializes in African tribal arts and adornment. Founder Bryan Reeves began dealing his exceptional wares in the 1980s, first from a market stall and then a shop on Portobello Road before opening the doors to his present location in 1998. Speaking about London's creative appetite, he notes, "London is very much a crossroads city with a tremendous energy. The art scene here is huge, so to become recognized and simply survive takes a lot of doing."

Reeves' gallery certainly seems to be doing all the right things. On any given day, upon entering the space, one can find everything from a rare, **ceremonial skirt** (worn for a young girl's coming-of-age ceremony in Tanzania's Mangati tribe) to exquisite examples of midcentury, **woven grass baskets** by Rwanda's Tutsi craftsmen, or even a **prized stool** previously used by the chief of Ghana's Ashanti tribe—stunningly carved from a single piece of wood. Decorations, masks, figures, tools, and garments grace the walls and shelves, lit by subtle, layered spotlights against dark, blue-green walls.

"I was drawn to African art after first being drawn to Africa itself; its people, its culture, its beauty."

Describing his approach, Reeves says, "I think what sets this small gallery apart from others in this field is that for many, many years, I have traveled and sourced all the pieces myself." He is quite patient as well, happy to wait for the sort of extraordinary pieces that stand out from the pack. "I am looking first for authenticity and thereafter for qualities that create that special presence—shape, movement, and patina. I might look through hundreds of pieces before I find a [single one] that makes the cut. When you have a gallery full of such extraordinary pieces, I think it becomes a very special place."

Reeves—a quiet and thoughtful man who's been traveling to the continent for thirty years—says, "I was drawn to African art after first being drawn to Africa itself; its people, its culture, its beauty. I became fascinated with all things African—the music, the food, and then the art."

He continues: "African tribal art was never made for commercial sale. Rather, it's solely for traditional use. It all had a purpose. What we can learn in the west is how a functional item can be made with so much beauty—[particularly] in a time and place where it has had no influence from the outside world. This is, in fact, when functional design all started, I believe."

Reeves will show off his latest finds at next month's Tribal Art Fair at the historic De Duif church in the center of Amsterdam. In the meantime, he's off to Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania to hunt for even more treasures for his one-of-a-kind gallery.

**Themes & Variations**

Not far from Tribal Gathering stands **Themes & Variations**, one of London's most respected—and pioneering—design galleries. This year marks its thirtieth anniversary; during the eighties, the Notting Hill institution introduced the world to some of today's contemporary design legends, such as **Tom Dixon**, while also presenting world-class collectible pieces from the '50s, '60s, and '70s. These days, Themes & Variations continues to combine contemporary and historic works from across the globe. As owner Liliane Fawcett puts it, the gallery "ignores the traditional demarcation between vintage and contemporary. Our taste is not for minimalism, but for out-of-the-ordinary designs and strong colors with a touch of eccentricity."

"It is admirable to see how African designers' enthusiasm seems unaltered by unsettled political situations, shortage of electricity, and poor communications."

Fawcett founded the game-changing gallery with Giuliana Medda (our very own Ambra Medda's mother) in 1984, but has run the gallery solo since 1990. She dedicates the bulk of her time to researching, traveling, and scouting, often focusing on previously unheralded or overlooked design regions. Themes & Variations produces about one major show a year. In 2012, for example, it presented *Chinese Design Today*, the first major selling exhibition of contemporary Chinese design in London. The exhibition included original works by 16 established and emerging designers, including Chen Qing Qing, Zhang Zhoujie, and Li Lihong. Fawcett recalls, "It took about three years to organize and quite a few visits to Beijing and Shanghai. It was absolutely fascinating to meet the designers and to realize the huge gap that existed between the older and younger generations. Those who suffered during the hard years of the Cultural Revolution have, not surprisingly, a very different approach to life and design from the young generation born under a much freer regime."

For 2015, Themes and Variations is planning a solo exhibition of [Boston-native] Toots Zinsky. "She is the most amazing contemporary glass artist," explains Fawcett. And plans are already in the works for a 2016 presentation of contemporary African design. According to Fawcett, "It is slowly taking shape and promises to be spectacular. Of course in Africa, one is confronted with new challenges due to unsettled political situations, shortages of electricity, and poor communications. It is admirable to see how African designers' enthusiasm seems unaltered by these."

As Fawcett continues to look forward, she remains mindful of how dramatically the design world—and its audience—has changed over the years. "Design used to be considered futile; it was almost unthinkable to spend any time discussing it, or money to buy it. But around the mid '90s, thanks to the Internet boom, new, younger collectors started to emerge and with them, design was in demand!"

**Sigmar**

Further south, on Kings Road in Chelsea, stands Sigmar, a relatively new kid on the block specializing in contemporary and historic Scandinavian designs. Interior designer Ebba Thott and design dealer Nina Hertig launched the gallery in 2004, and named it for the German painter and photographer Sigmar Polke. As Hertig explains, "His art is strong, varying, and—despite the sometimes hard subjects—it is always beautiful. If we could do anything even remotely in that direction, we would be very, very happy."

The modesty of its founders notwithstanding, Sigmar is already doing remarkably well, attracting clients with both a diverse collection of one-off pieces as well as interior design services. Hertig tells us, "We wanted to bring back the idea of poetry in interiors, focusing on the beauty of quality as well as the design. To us, really great interiors only work because there is as much skill and intent in the execution as there is in the conception behind them."

"Once you know what quality feels like, it is hard to do anything else."

Thott and Hertig look for superbly crafted objects that will stand the test of time. "Sigmar is about the classic, not the fast-moving or the new. Everything we offer will still look good, and in some cases even better, in 50 years." Quality and simplicity anchor the gallery's collection. "Where and when [an object] is made is not paramount," Hertig notes. "To us, the story starts in the 19th century with the onset of Thonet, carries through Scandinavia in the 20th century, and still exists with people like **Michael Anastassiades**, **Carl Auböck**, and **KH Wurtz**."

Tracing the roots of Sigmar's aesthetic, Hertig says, "Growing up in Scandinavia, you tend to spend a lot of time indoors, and so you are surrounded by people who care about houses and what goes inside them. Once you know what quality feels like, it is hard to do anything else, and modern mass production does not allow the quality found in many 20<sup>th</sup>-century Scandinavian pieces."

Henningsen, "I remember, growing up, a small, Frits Henningsen, red leather rocking chair. It was not regarded as anything special at the time, but it had more life in the color of the leather [alone] than most of the pieces you could see in the design museums at the time. Scandinavian pieces were, on the whole, very well made, and have made it through to today in a better condition than many other pieces from the 20th century. They were intended to last a long time."

**Marion Friedmann Gallery**

Marion Friedmann opened her eponymous gallery in 2011, but she's been a design advocate for years, working previously as a curator, collector, and consultant. Based in south London, she operates through a system of bold pop-up exhibitions that spotlight emerging designers from Latin American and Mexico as well as Europe. As opposed to a permanent gallery space, the pop-up system offers great flexibility. "Our work can evolve naturally," Friedmann says. "Good things need time, and this format allows me to react freely, spontaneously."

The gallery's goal is two-fold: Friedmann wishes to champion the wealth of untapped talent that exists off the beaten path of Eurocentric design and, at the same time, to broaden the global design conversation by presenting these designers on par with their European counterparts. "I want to create platforms for cultural exchange; when I go to Mexico, I want to show designs from the UK and Europe, and vice versa," she explains. "I always want to show very original, poetic works—work that has a meaning, a story to tell, work that uses special materials and techniques; something people have not seen before."

Friedmann's passion for Mexico and Latin American design began a decade ago on a five-month solo trip through Mexico—which she refers to as "the greatest adventure of my life so far." She continues to make annual visits back, spending at least a few months at a time to research and cement further relationships. "It takes a lot of time to build up trust and find talent, to engage and develop something really exceptional."

Describing her fascination with Latin America and Mexico, Friedmann notes, "I think it is a very special moment to be following this part of the world. The perception of design within these countries is markedly evolving. Previously, there was more interest in design from Europe [in Mexico and Latin America], but now people are starting to look more and more inside their own countries and appreciate their own talents. Designers in these parts of the world are very proud of their heritage, history, and craft skills, and they make ample use of this in their work."

She goes on: "The craft movement here is perfectly aligned with the ongoing, global craft and making trends. Small-scale production, individuality, this is where these countries shine. Prototypes can be developed quickly, in great quality, and rather cheaply still. I think this is already, and will continue to become, an important competitive advantage for designers here. The myriad of talent and skills within the workshops makes for enormous opportunities."

"I always say London is not London, but the world."

The gallery's pop-ups to date have combined works by the likes of Mexico-based designers Thierry Jeannot, Ariel Rojo, and Martacarmela Sotel with works by Austrian artist Gisela Steigler and designer Dejana Kabiljo. During this month's LDF, Friedmann presented *Out of the Cage*, a show featuring delightful glass pieces—birdcages bursting with colorful, mouth-blown glass vessels reminiscent of caricatured birds—designed by Spanish-born, Mexico City-based Gala Fernandez and realized in collaboration with Mexico City's NOUVEL Studio.

Up next for Friedmann? The gallery is participating in the **MAD Museum's** highly anticipated winter exhibition, *New Territories - Design in Latin America*. And the passion project will presumably have an even greater opportunity to shine next year; the Mexican and UK governments have designated 2015 as a dual cultural celebration called The Year of the UK in Mexico and The Year of Mexico in the UK.

While the future looks increasingly bright for Friedmann's love of cross-cultural exploration and travel, London is still the only place in the world she calls home. As Friedmann puts it, "I appreciate the global outlook the city provides, the truly multicultural feel it has. I always say London is not London, but the world."

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*Anna is L'AB's Managing Editor. Her writing has appeared in several arts and culture publications, and she's edited over 20 books. Anna loves celebrating great artists, and seriously enjoys a good picnic.*

Adrienne Rodewaldt  
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Antique Bench Revisited by Gu Yeli, Themes & Variations  
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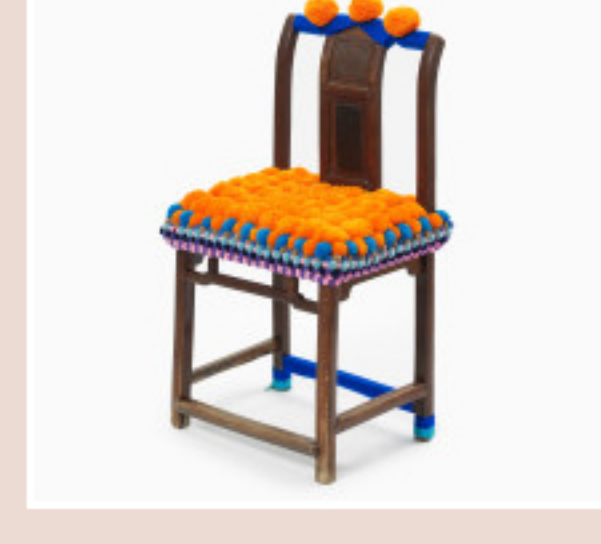
Inside Sigmar Gallery  
Photo © Adrienne Rodewaldt for L'ArcoBaleno



Glassworks, Gala Fernandez  
Photo © Adrienne Rodewaldt for L'ArcoBaleno

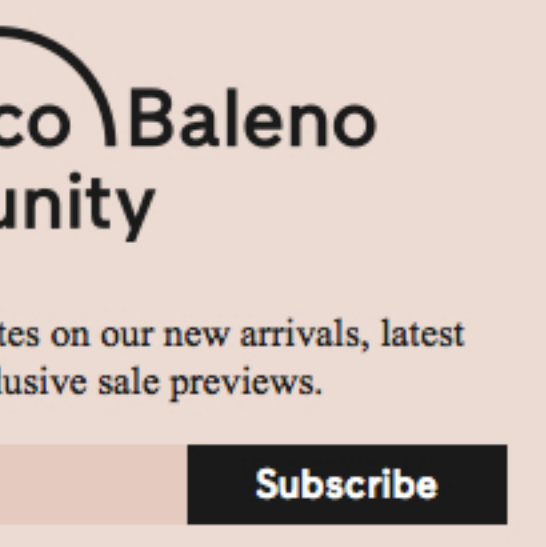
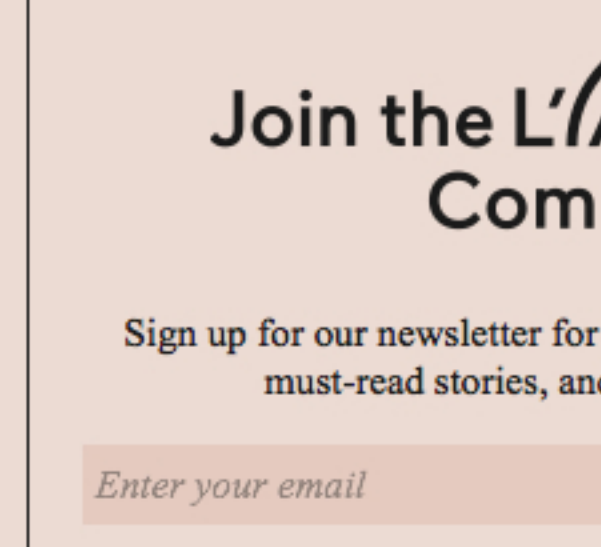


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