

# A Life Less Ordinary

WORLD-RENOWNED CLASSICAL INDIAN DANCER, RATHI KARTHIGESU, OPENS THE DOORS OF HER HOME TO ALEXANDRA KOHUT-COLE



PHOTOGRAPHY CHIAN, MILK PHOTOGRAPHIE

**S**URROUNDINGS ARE ALL IMPORTANT TO RATHI KARTHIGESU. Apparent from the way she has designed the interior of her home, she understands where each object should be placed. If she feels something is out of sync, she will move it, then move it again, arguing that it's imperative each piece find harmony in relation to others.

"My husband used to say, 'How many times are you going to shift that thing around?' And I would reply, 'Until I feel comfortable that it feels quite at home.'"

Married at the age of 16 to the late M Karthigesu, judge of appeal, Rathi has overcome the recent loss of two children in tragic circumstances. Thus each object in her home tells a tale about her life. Tranquillity prevails, with Rathi confirming that "It doesn't happen by chance; it's a feeling you create."

She designed her apartment as a concept. "When I open the front door I like it to have an impact. I am not the type to visit a museum or the park for half an hour to imbibe beauty and come back home. I need that sense of calm 24 hours a day. When you come here you find it peaceful."

At the entrance, the goddess Saraswathi faces the goddess Lakshmi and your gaze is pulled past an old window from a Rajasthani house through a corridor gallery featuring stunning portraits from Rathi's dancing days, directly into the study.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Dancer, Rathi Karthigesu's hall of fame; Wooden carved door panels; The dining room





*The entrance to the area is guarded by Ganesha, the first god prayed to upon entering a temple*

A style fusion in a smaller sitting room is bathed in light from windows overlooking a bank of trees where her late son's desk enjoys a view. A Dutch colonial sofa rests protectively beneath an old Chinese embroidered carpet of silk on a background of gold. "It's so old that if you take it out it would fall apart, but I managed to reframe it before I came here." Works of art by Thai and Australian painters share space with an imposing black, carved wooden cabinet which would have previously sat over a fireplace. The entrance to the area is guarded by Ganesha, the first god prayed to upon entering a temple. Walking directly into the large sitting room, much parianware is evident.

Rathi's strong instinct for creating an interior is evident, especially when she talks about her beloved town house in Hillgate Place, Kensington. *A Touch of Class*, starring Glenda Jackson, was filmed nearby and Princess Diana's brother lived opposite. London is the place where she feels she grew up, saying, "I came into



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Suresh's bedroom: black wood Chinese screen inlaid with ivory figures; Rathi Karthigesu and her niece in the kitchen; Custom-made dining table with chandelier **OPPOSITE** The study





my own in London. I realised my personality and, surprisingly, I learnt more about my religion and philosophy in the UK than I did in Singapore. In the 1970s an eminent group started a school of Indian culture in London at Queen's club. The patron was Lord Louis Mountbatten and when he died, Prince Charles took over the patronage. They would attend my performances and we had wonderful dialogues – I call it the 'golden age' in my life."

Rathi lived in London during her 30s while her children attended school and she pursued her dancing career. "My dance came first and the collections came later," she explains. "I just put them around me. Wherever you turned there was a thing of beauty." The majority of her rare Indian sculptures in dance poses were recently donated to the National Heritage Board, following which she received a Patron of Heritage award. "I was born and bred in Singapore. When I did this giving, I felt I belonged."

In the sitting room on an ornate wooden reproduction table is a lamp so tall that it adds a certain height to the room by forcing the eye upwards. Behind one of the slightly ornate yet comfortable sofas is a dark timber table from Vietnam.



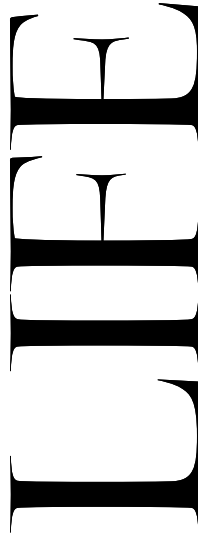
*The majority of her rare Indian sculptures in dance poses were recently donated to the National Heritage Board*

**TOP** The bathroom  
**RIGHT** A smaller sitting room



**HOMES**

Private  
Lives



Draped over one of the chairs from the London house is an old yet luxurious Japanese shawl, heavy and embroidered. And behind these two chairs is a portrait of Rathi by a street artist in Montmartre.

Her dining table was custom-made and a UK dealer friend found the perfect set. However, two of the chairs and one carver were missing so he copied them. Suresh covered them by embroidering them with the exact wool obtained from the Guild of Design. It's impossible to tell the difference.

Utterly graceful, Rathi's poise shines through and is ingrained in her spirit. For one who has overcome so much in her life, her home reflects her sense of style and her indomitable character. **T**

*Tranquillity prevails, with Rathi confirming that, "It doesn't happen by chance; it's a feeling you create"*

**TOP FROM LEFT**

Sharmini's bedroom; Embossed calager from Burma on the study wall

**BELOW**  
Sitting room

