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Art & Culture

'That unguarded moment': Tips from the Aussie portrait artist adored by royals

What secrets can a formal oil painting reveal about power, age-old rivals and the trappings of political office? Ask Australian Ralph Heimans, renowned painter of monarchs, Hollywood royalty and eminent – if occasionally reluctant – locals.

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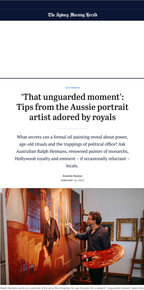

Ralph Heimans with his portrait of Prince Charles, which was commissioned by the Australian Institute of Architects to celebrate Charles' 60th birthday. | Courtesy of Ralph Heimans

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Here's a small thought experiment. If time travel were possible, how many of us could be transported back 300 years – to the time of Henry VIII, say – and make a living? How many of us have a modern day job most capable of leads to anything anyone might have done, circa 1526, to keep good on the wage packet? Not many, I'd wager. Not even those who have come from the short 7 can think of only one person: Ralph Heimans.

Heimans is a portrait painter. In 2012, he painted the then British monarch, Elizabeth II, Hall's enthusiasm gap, exactly this job – high personnel, on a formal commission, with a deadline, in a specialised field. Heimans is one of the genuine portrait artists in history, from Holbein to Rembrandt, to have painted Henry VIII in Sydney's The Whitehead Mural (destroyed by fire in 1858). Both men got the job via patronage, Heimans's commission from close to the divine (Heimans for the former Justice of the High Court of Australia, Michael Kirby, Holbein for the then chancellor of the exchequer, Thomas Cromwell). Both got well-heeled time with their royal sitters (Heimans's sessions with Elizabeth II were reportedly limited to 30 minutes; Holbein made preliminary sketches before Henry's wedding to Anne Boleyn). Both (it's 500 years, remember) had to do it on commissions largely using detailed materials. Instead of a canvas, Holbein, painter, have had to make his studio and source precious stones into the like Demand and realise. Heimans had to make his studio and source precious stones into the like Demand and realise. Heimans had to make his studio and source precious stones into the like Demand and realise. Heimans

There are, of course, different tasks between the two men. Heimans generally works on linen, Holbein on wood panel. Heimans uses a camera as an aide memoire, then makes chalk and charcoal drawings on the canvas before he sets to work. Holbein worked up a sitter's expression from his chalk drawings on the panel, then painted the rest of the image from memory. In addition, he also wrote letters to Cromwell, Henry's vicar-in-chief, to have known outside the lofty world of those who can afford to commission his work, which, each one can be up to 500,000 pay. (Next month's Archibald Portrait Gallery in Canberra will open a retrospective of his work, entitled Holbein: Art and Life at the Court of Henry, each one can be up to 500,000 pay.)

But without doubt, both men could enter a time machine, and emerge – shock forward or pass backwards through the centuries – with their method, almost otherworldly counter-skills intact. Ralph Heimans is a Henry VIII's ambassador Lifes Barton just as if Holbein, both are sure "very excellent in taking of photographs."

"No mummy is more passionate about portraiture than Australia," was an critic John McDonald. "I think we get more portrait prizes than any other country in the world." Quite so, but not it is less clear to me why this is so.

"Perhaps because portraits tend to be understandable, approachable," he suggests. "Our main museum is the art museum, and portraits are the dominant museums today. And with someone like Ralph – he's not exactly the toast of the avant garde – he's a very, very good portrait painter, and the level of technical skill is always appealing. The man on the street likes to see something he cannot do."

Michael Cathcart of Dynagraphy, a pet shop photographer, in Sean Gain, Sydney Morning Herald, and Sydney Morning Herald

"This exhibition has been in development for one-four years," explains National Portrait Gallery director Brian Parkinson, who chose Heimans' work-roughly after and "highly representational." But to point people for a living, Heimans's work is not. Not at all. Heimans's work is, in fact, the exact opposite. Have some artists, for the sake of a crude, predictable joke, tried to be more zero before, a stick-man's head, a queen's limelitmus. On the other hand, you have your sitter, who may want to have their image – their image – their power, their prerogatives, their humanity – but rarely their truth. If the portrait artist is commissioned, especially, the most satisfy the former desire, if he wants to be employable, the latter.

"I have to inhabit the ambiguity between the two," says Heimans regularly, striving to this enabler. It's simple, a bright, full-cringed trace at the end of a power-based profession. Ask Prof Kirby and ask Justice Michael Kirby, the Sydney magnum from sitting to his canvases. Heimans seems like a very nice man, and he's very good at his job, and he's very good at his job because he's a very nice man. Heimans's commission for the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, Kingdom, who looks neither unidimensional nor sympathetic.

"As a portrait painter, I have to be attentive to that self-image, that facade, and then come up with my own vision. But the facade is important. Who does a person have to? Is that a performance?"

"I want people to get lost in their thoughts."

Ralph Heimans

He turns towards the canvas of Knights, who was knighted in 2001. "So I'm here in an area, and an area – and I'm not quite sure what I want to be that icon for the world." He pauses and so both look at Sir Ben, who looks back at us, and he's very, very, very,

Heimans' portrait of then-Justice Michael Kirby (centre) in 1998 was bought by the National Portrait Gallery three years later.

Radical Restraint (1998) is the only Heimans work that has ever met the criteria for entry to the Archibald. It was not even hung, though it made the final of the Doug Moran National Portraiture Prize in the same year. Heimans smiles. "I think [not being selected] had an effect on me at the time – a slightly chilling effect," he says, "which is a bit silly. But I'm a huge supporter of portrait prizes as a concept, and the Archibald. I think it's an incredible way for the public to engage in portraiture, and it keeps the tradition alive."

With a fine disregard for judging-panel opinion, Kirby loved the painting. "[Heimans] is the Diego Velázquez of the current age," he says. *Radical Restraint* was purchased by National Portrait Gallery in 2001, and the pair became friends. Years later, it was Kirby who started the artistic and diplomatic balls rolling that eventually resulted in the only portrait of the Queen done during her Diamond Jubilee year, painted by Heimans.

"When she finally got to me, there was this surprising sense of a real person underneath the robe. Not an imperious person at all – something gentle, but shy, honest."

Ralph Heimans on the late Queen

It's a striking work – not least because of its setting: the extraordinary Cosmati pavement in the high sanctuary of Westminster Abbey, where English monarchs have been crowned for more than 1000 years. Heimans spent two nights lying on the floor of the Abbey, recording its intricate details. "I wanted to reflect the singularity of her experience," he says. "None of us knows what it's like to be Queen, do we? Only she knows."

Just three weeks after its hanging in Westminster Abbey, the painting was defaced by a men's rights activist with lilac spray paint, who wrote "Help" across the Queen's body. "When they rang, the first thing I asked was, 'Did he get the face?' " recalls Heimans. "And he had." But thanks to the durability and resilience of Heimans' old-world materials, the damage wasn't permanent. "Some of the paints I used on that portrait I made myself when I was 20," he recalls. "And the oil in them dried incredibly fast and hard, so the spray paint didn't absorb. The old stuff works!"

The late Queen, whose painting by Heimans in 2012 set in London's Westminster Abbey was her only Diamond Jubilee portrait.

Five hundred years ago, portraits travelled the world – they were the influencer posts of their day. Part of an artist like Hans Holbein's job, therefore – like Kim Kardashian's – was to tell his audience stories via visual symbols: stories about wealth, power, preference.

In portraiture, these symbols have barely changed in half a millennium – and Heimans, predictably, loves them. "It's about being able to contribute to a canon, to a pictorial language that has lasted for centuries," he says. He uses gloves, for example, exactly as Holbein did, to denote wealth, luxury, and personal agency (see his portrait of Mary of Denmark, secretly pregnant and embracing her new royal role, compared with Holbein's portrait of another Danish princess, Christina of Denmark, secretly preparing to refuse marriage to Henry VIII). If Holbein were to totter out of the TARDIS today, he would read a Heimans work, with its weight of symbolic language, as easily as a street sign.

Not everyone is keen on this kind of decoding, of course. In 2014, art critic Andrew Frost called Heimans' portrait of outgoing governor-general Quentin Bryce "a shambles of hokey symbolism and compositional trickiness".

"I think I still hold that opinion," says Frost today. "There's just so much going on in that painting it sort of detracts from the subject. It's supposed to be a portrait, after all."

Then princess, now Queen Mary of Denmark in 2006 – both Heimans' and her first royal portrait.

Bryce herself, however, certainly doesn't feel shortchanged. "Ralph is a genius," she says firmly. "It is a privilege, seriously, to be painted by such an artist." And Kevin Rudd loves the care with which Heimans surrounded him with meaningful objects: his Chinese vases, books, chess set (denoting politics, strategic thinking, worldly power) – even his beloved cat Louey. "That's Ralph's signature song," he explains: "in the tradition of the 16th-century portraitists. Imagine if I'd put a skull in there, too, for mortality's sake!"

Heimans himself, meanwhile, still remembers Frost's review. "Yes!" he says, half-laughing, half-wincing. "It was brutal! Look, I think the symbolism in my paintings is there if you're interested, but there's nothing prescriptive about it. Portraits should be like novels: you should be able to read them on lots of different levels. Whether you want to peel the onion is totally up to you."

Heimans studied art history and pure maths before pursuing a career as a painter. JAMES BRICKWOOD

Despite such criticism, he still loves public work. "I spend most of my time working alone, on paintings that disappear into the homes of whoever's commissioned them, never to be seen again," he points out. "And I do that because that's how portraiture works, and portraiture is what I absolutely love. But at the end of the day, you're like every artist: you're trying to communicate with other people. Sharing your vision is integral to the whole process. So I love it when my paintings enter a wider public forum – because you're entering into a dialogue with an audience."

What he wants his paintings to say, he concludes, "is something truthful. And because I paint people, I'm trying to express something true to their own sense of themselves, true to my impressions of them, and true to the people looking at the painting. Often you wonder if you've succeeded. Are you able to capture the public imagination with your vision? Have they understood what you're trying to achieve?" He laughs. "Very often you walk away thinking. 'Oh, maybe not.' But that's the goal."

Maybe, in the end, that's why we love portraits. Because if an artist does express that truth, it lasts 500 years.

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