

The Queen's portrait ^[1]



Queen Elizabeth II imagined in the Coronation Theatre of Westminster Abbey where she herself was crowned in 1953. The painting is life-size: 9 x11 feet. The artist was given two nights in Westminster Abbey to light the space and take photographs from which he worked.

*"The Queen still has best poker face in the business" and other such comments are the sort of things Brits—and the British press—like to say about royal portraits. London-based Australian artist **Ralph Heimans**, whose other subjects include Princess Mary of Denmark and conductor/pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy, knew that when he became the only artist to be granted a sitting for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee year that the task of negotiating the tension between the public and the private persona of an elusive subject was going to be his challenge—not least because he only had a single hour of her time. He has produced a strangely lonely yet extravagantly scaled and intensely textured portrait of a solitary Queen standing in Westminster Abbey in the spot named the Coronation Theatre. Trained as both a mathematician and an artist, he says that the combination has helped him not to be afraid of problem solving or an empirical approach although in the end the narrative possibilities transcend anything else: "I think people reflecting on their lives is possibly the strongest thing in my work."*

You live in London and so you must have known that you were stepping into the viper's nest by painting a portrait of the Queen—it's kind of a British sport to dislike royal portraits.

It hasn't had a good track record lately, no.

If ever—why is that?

Because people have a very emotional connection with the monarchy. And it's a controversial and political notion for some, the notion of monarchy. For an artist it's like stepping into a canon, an artistic tradition that stretches back to the Old Masters.

I read some of the things the British press said about your portrait and some of them said that they thought the Queen looked "sad" or even, I think "forlorn" and "the last royal standing". I don't know if these were meant as criticisms but for me, they recommended the painting.

Right. Of course I anticipated various reactions and I wanted to make the expression as nuanced as possible. And I guess for an artist, it is a compliment for people to have different readings of the one expression because I think that is one of the main aims of portraiture.

Do you think she looks sad?

Personally, no. I think there might be a tinge of nostalgia or melancholy.

She looks very alone. Was that unintentional? Was she meant to look alone?

Solitary. No, it was entirely intentional. She leads a singular life—I mean who can compare? Representing her on her own made perfect sense and I think that is probably enhanced by the sense of space around her in the Abbey. That is meant to give her a human dimension—she's not wearing a crown for example, so it allows people to empathize with her more directly.

I have to say I think she's the most elusive subject for a portrait painter. I don't know if anyone has ever quite "got" her.

Well, I think she remains elusive. That's part of her role in a way because she's a queen. She's done an extraordinary job of keeping that distance so she can be seen for others to respect and to look up to her.

We don't really ...

Well I think people do.

I think people would like more of the intimate side.

I was interested in that intersection of public and private. She is dressed in full regalia and wearing the robes of state and Queen Victoria's diamonds but at the same time she is alone in the Abbey and you're reminded of her humilitv. Perhaps she's standing before a higher power. Her expression is



The artist, Ralph Heimans, in his London studio.



one of reflection, so you're reminded of her past. I wanted some setting with particular relevance in order to say something about her personality but also about her reign.

But she hasn't got much of a personality that she lets on. Did you get a glimpse of it?

I think that's what I was trying to express: dignity perhaps, persistence, determination, vision.



Detail of Queen Elizabeth II imagined in the Coronation Theatre of Westminster Abbey.

You said in another interview that you found her "amazingly vulnerable".

I never said that. A journalist said that. It's extraordinary because it became the catchphrase.

But that's interesting the way that caught the public's imagination, as if that's what they want to hear. I saw your style described as "hyper-real" – I'm not sure you would agree with that definition would you?

I would never accept that as a description of my work. I think that is what you get when you look at it on the computer screen and not 'in the flesh'. It's very traditionally painted.

So tell us about when you were actually with her. I know you only had 60 minutes [at Buckingham Palace]. Was it 60 minutes on the dot?

Actually we were told we would be very popular if we finished early so I managed to finish in 45 minutes. It was a very tightly-choreographed sitting. I had rehearsed and I had a [lighting] crew organized. I think the actual encounter wasn't something that I was really prepared for. I really was struck by her presence. You can't get that in any other way other than by meeting her.





Princess Mary of Denmark. The painting reflected in the mirror behind her, is not the original painting in the palace but is an imagined view of Constitution Dock in Hobart, Australia, the hometown of the Princess.

You weren't intimidated, daunted, nervous?

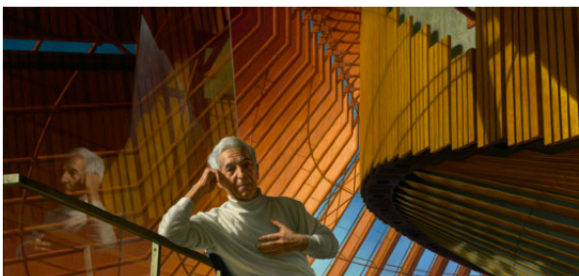
All of the above. The actual entrance of the Queen was very dramatic and very theatrical. She entered fully dressed as she is represented in the painting in the robes of state with footmen carrying the robe and she walked down the long corridor of the palace. I was waiting with my little crew at the door to the Yellow Drawing Room where she sits. It's a very long corridor and it actually took her a very long time to approach and the sun was shining beautifully through the windows—she would sparkle as she passed through the sunbeams. All of us had our jaws to the floor.

And did you stick to the protocol?

I did. I was coached. You address [her] for the first time as "Your Majesty" and from then on it's "Ma'am". I was literally given instructions on which way to turn and lead her into the drawing room and which way to introduce her to the other crew members. And then ... [as] to how to address her to begin the sitting, I was given instructions that I would say *[begins to laugh]* "May I take control now Ma'am?" And I could *not* find the courage to say that! I fumbled my through something else.

It sounds like a line from a James Bond movie!

Yes, "I am now going to control the country for three-quarters of an hour." It was a very intense sitting. People have this impression that you're going to have chit-chat with Queen but basically I was working very intensely. And she's obviously sat for a lot of portraits so she knows this is precious time.



A portrait of conductor and pianist **Vladimir Ashkenazy** in the Sydney Opera House—"He looks as though he is trapped inside a grand piano" says the artist. "It's almost a visual representation of music."

And what were you doing?

I was taking photographs—with that time limit, I was having to resort to photographs. And also being the [year of] the Diamond Jubilee, I think we were lucky even to have that time. No other artist was given that time with the Queen.

Why do you think she picked you?

My guess would be the Australian connection. She's clearly very fond of Australia. I can only hope she had a particular affinity with my work.

How long did the whole thing take you?

It was eight months of solid work but four months to do the physical painting—working twenty hours a day.



Detail of Vladimir Ashkenazy.

I know she never comments directly on the portraits but what has been the feedback?

We've had very positive feedback from the palace and been given all indications that she's pleased with the painting.

And what about ordinary British people?

As far as the public is concerned, I think it was extremely well received. There were some mixed reviews but the public reactions were overwhelmingly positive.