

AN HOUR IN HER PRESENCE

The story behind the only official portrait of the Queen in 2012, by Rachel Campbell-Johnston

How does a portraitist set about capturing a true sense of the Queen's character?

The Australian-born Ralph Heimans was the only artist chosen to paint an official portrait of the Queen in her Diamond Jubilee year. The Australian National Portrait Gallery wanted an image for a display, and he had already done an acclaimed portrait of Princess Mary of Denmark.

"Royal portraiture is often formulaic," says Heimans. "It is often quite static and two-dimensional. It doesn't deal with concepts. Images of power can undermine the truth of the picture, of the sense of the actual person beneath the trappings of office. But it's the story of what they might be feeling that fascinates me."

"I wanted to describe an imagined moment," he says. "The Queen would be alone, at night, in Westminster Abbey, standing at the precise spot where she had been crowned."

"I thought a narrative would offer the public a chance to engage: to try to imagine what

the Queen might be thinking or feeling. I wanted her expression to be quite nuanced and reflective. I hoped the heaviness of the robe would evoke her burden of office. And I wanted her to be alone. No one but a Queen can understand what it feels like to be a Queen. I wanted to capture a sense of her singular existence."

His proposal was submitted to the palace. Ten months later he was told the Queen would sit for him for an hour. At meetings it was discussed what she would wear. "I suggested her coronation robe," he says, "but it was decided that her parliamentary robe would be better. As a portraitist, you have to come in with a vision, but then you have to adapt and be receptive. And her decision felt fortuitous. The parliamentary robe is almost more symbolic."

On March 25, 2012, Heimans arrived at the palace. "An hour is very brief. I came in with a clear image of what I wanted to achieve. But what I had not accounted for was the sense of her presence. It was extraordinary to watch her

approach, her long robe carried by footmen, an entourage flanking her. She was sparkling with diamonds. Then as she got nearer I was confronted by her as a physical person, a woman with soulful eyes. I got a huge sense of her humanity. It was something I hadn't anticipated."

"I bowed. I had never bowed to anyone before. She had just returned from Australia, so we spoke about that, then I asked her to imagine she was alone in the abbey. After that the sitting was conducted mainly in silence. It was better, because what I was seeking was something reflective. I took photographs. She's so used to sitting, she knew what I needed: I couldn't ask her to look down, but that's the pose you naturally adopt when thinking about the past. But the robe was heavy, and after ten minutes she would have to sit and rest. I was told that if I could finish early it would be much appreciated so I ended ten minutes before the official time was up. She was happy. 'Now I've got time to walk the corgis,' she said."

Heimans did dozens of

studies before embarking on the vast 250 x 342cm canvas. "It was the largest painting I had ever undertaken. I had to erect scaffolding. It was also the most challenging from the point of view of the composition, the perspective and perhaps most of all the emotion."

The Queen famously never comments on finished works. But Heimans received another commission from the Royal Collection shortly afterwards so he assumes she was happy. His portrait was a huge success in Australia — the gallery had an unprecedented number of visitors. "People seemed to respond to its emotional message. Because it was so large they felt as if they were entering into its space."

Later, Heimans' portrait was hung in Westminster Abbey where, in 2013, it was defaced by a protester. The artist, appalled, feared the face might have been targeted. "The face is the soul of the painting and is very hard to recreate," he said.

The damage, however, was not lasting and the portrait has since been cleaned and rehung.



▲ Likeness-minded Ralph Heimans with his painting *The Coronation Theatre, Westminster Abbey: Portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2012*