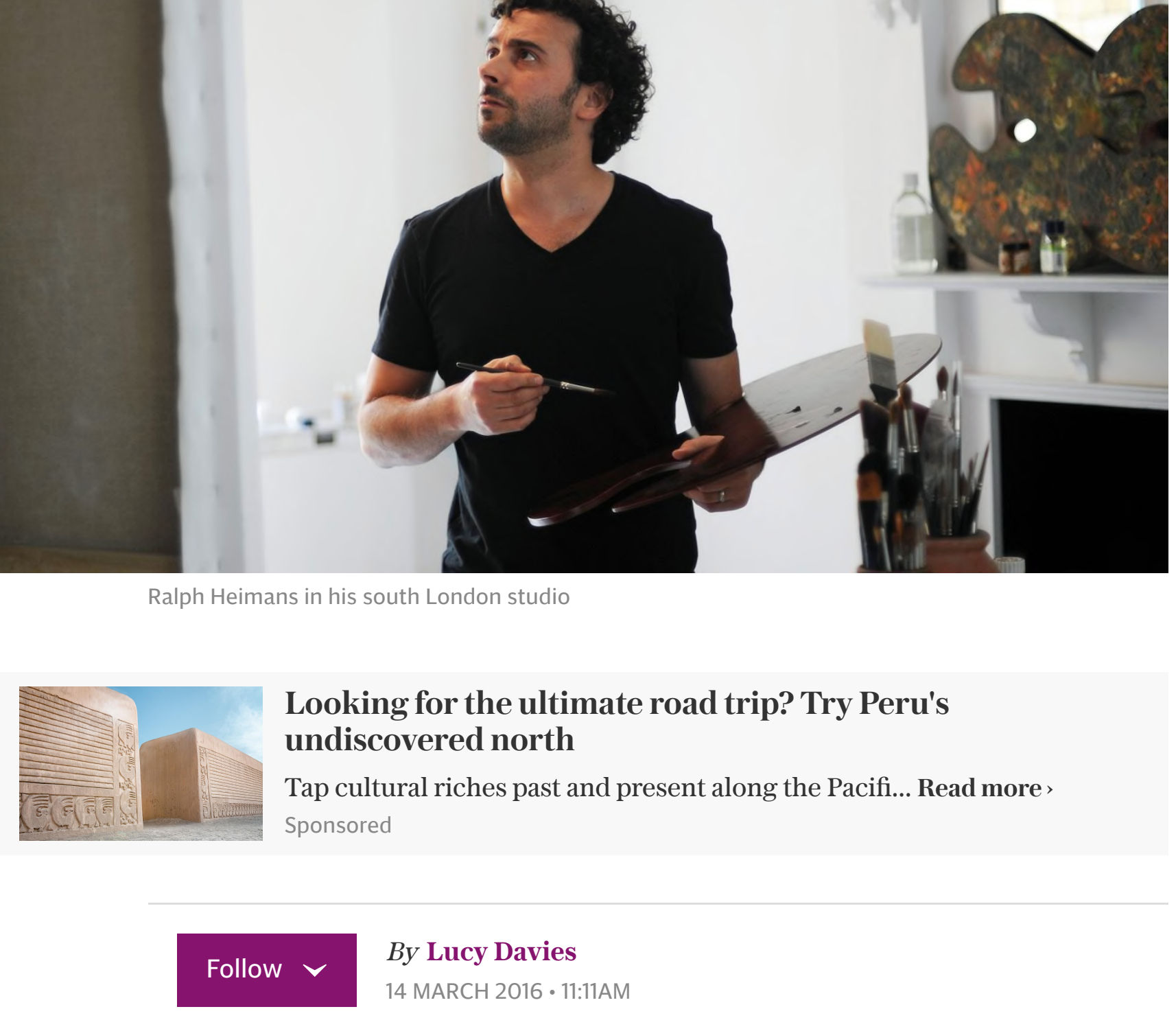
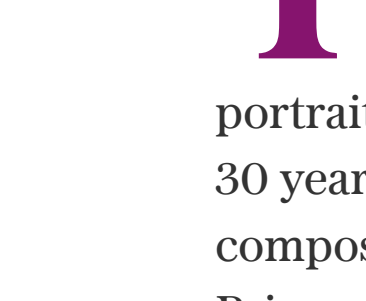


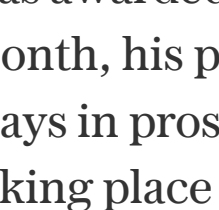
Ralph Heimans: in the studio



Ralph Heimans in his south London studio



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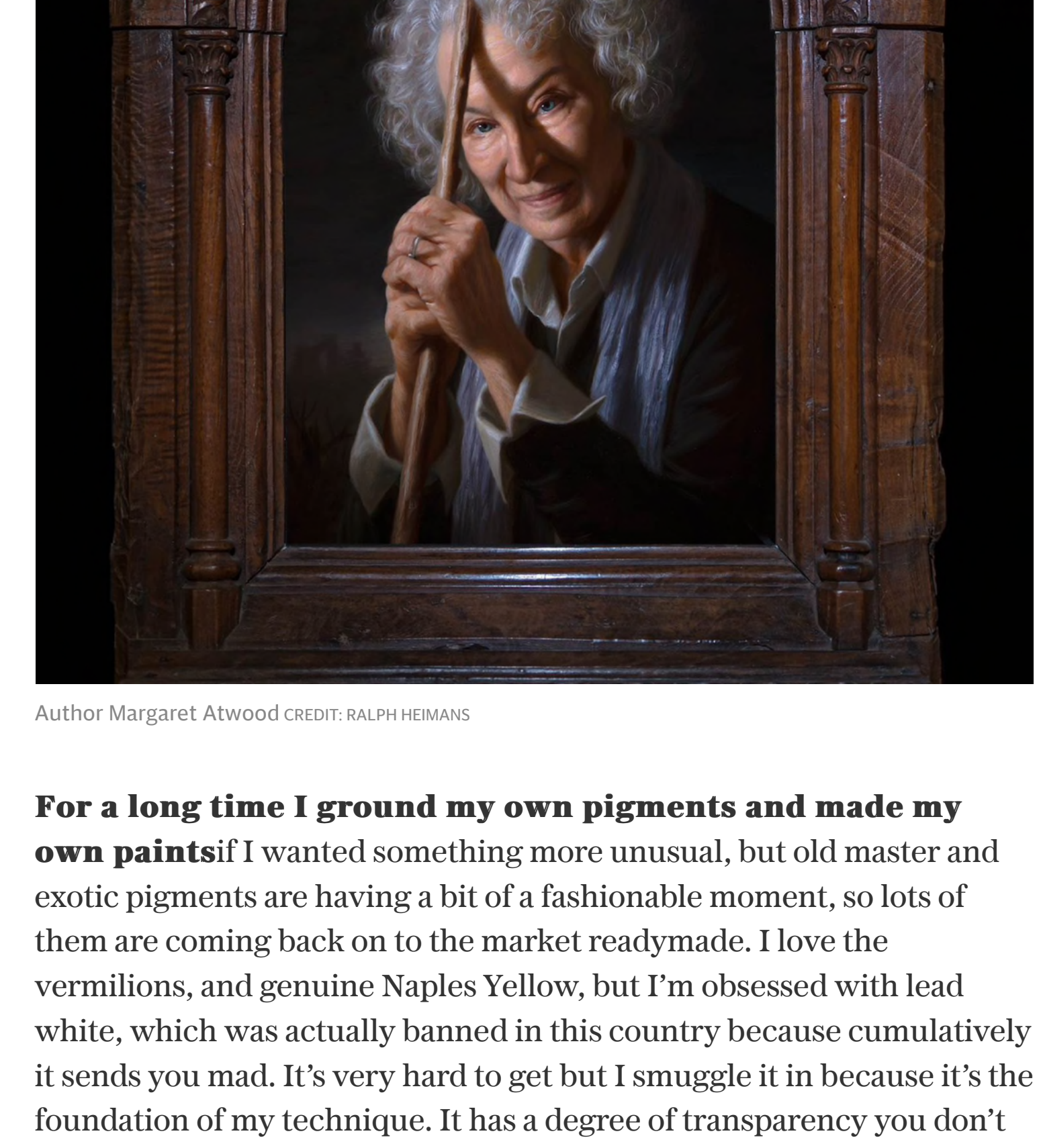
By Lucy Davies
14 MARCH 2016 • 10:11AM

The Australian artist Ralph Heimans, 46, is best known for his Diamond Jubilee portrait of the Queen in Westminster Abbey. He specialises in paintings which integrate the subject of the portrait with their life story, and has a portfolio reaching back nearly 30 years, including Princess Mary of Denmark and the pianist and composer Victor Ashkenazy. Portraits of HRH Prince Edward and HRH Princess Sophie, and the actor Ben Kingsley are in progress. In 2014 he was awarded an Order of Australia for services to portraiture. This month, his portraits of the authors who are revisiting Shakespeare's plays in prose, go on show at The Globe, as part of the celebrations taking place across the country for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in April.

I wake up at 6.30am, if I'm lucky. My four and five year old daughters jumping on me is my alarm clock. I can't start work straightaway, so part of my ritual is to do the school run, and then my wife and I go to a café nearby and run through the order of the day. I always start work at 9am. Even though nothing else in my life ever follows a routine, I'm religious about my start time.

I live and work in a double-fronted Victorian terrace in Herne Hill, south London. My studio occupies half of the house. It has high ceilings and lovely fireplaces. We moved over here from Australia in 2010, when I was commissioned to paint the Queen's portrait.

When it comes to being organised, I'm really quite **shambolic.** I've become a collector of antique frames since I started work on the author series, so there are lots of those strewn about, plus a couple of easels, about 50 brushes, and hundreds of paint tubes. I use a very large palette, in terms of the spectrum of colours, and I love collecting paints wherever I go in the world.

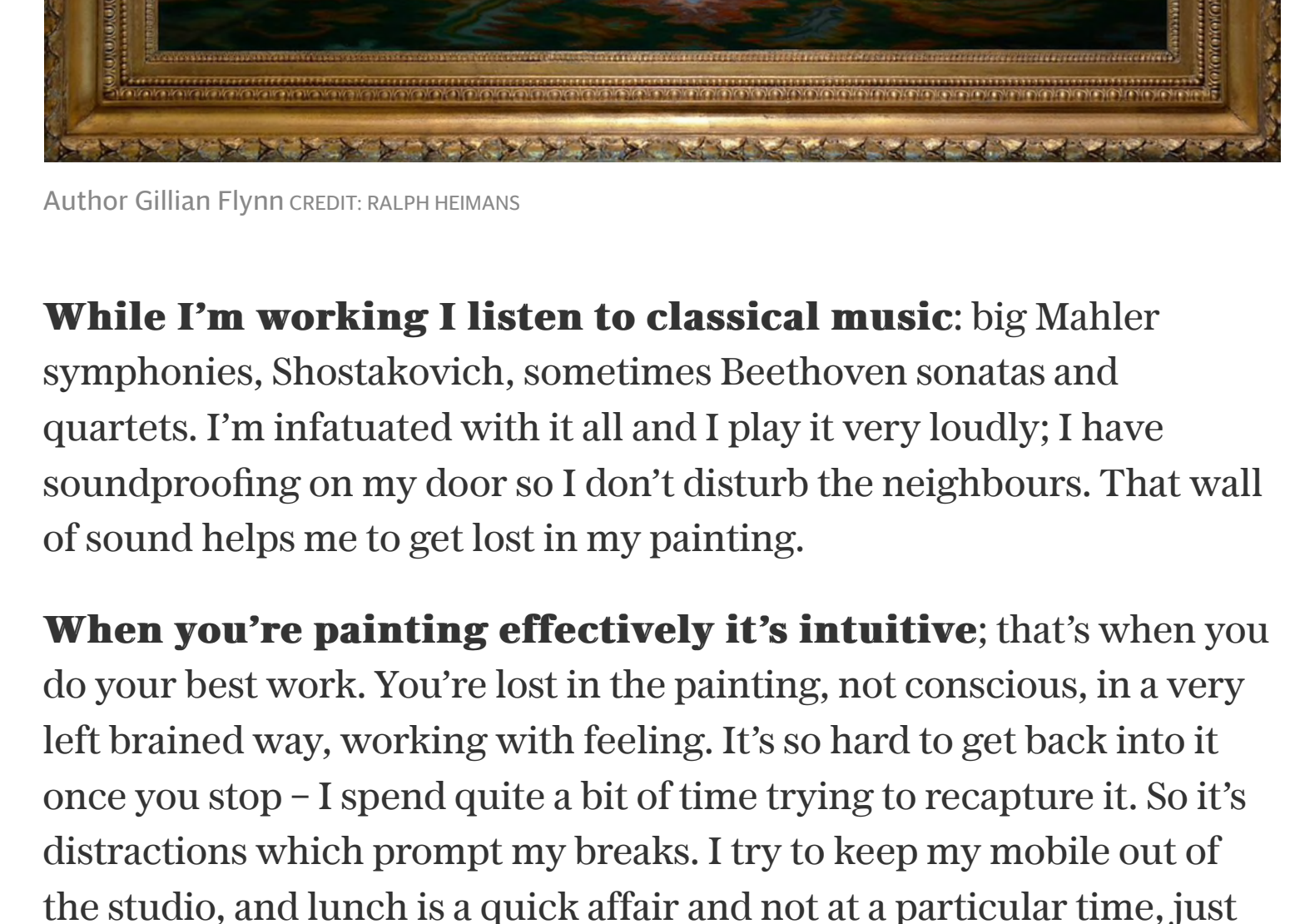


Author Margaret Atwood credit: RALPH HEIMANS

For a long time I ground my own pigments and made my own paintsif I wanted something more unusual, but old master and exotic pigments are having a bit of a fashionable moment, so lots of them are coming back on to the market readymade. I love the vermilion, and genuine Naples Yellow, but I'm obsessed with lead white, which was actually banned in this country because cumulatively it sends you mad. It's very hard to get but I smuggle it in because it's the foundation of my technique. It has a degree of transparency you don't get with the more common Titanium white, plus a lovely sort of buttery quality. Because I paint in glazes, I need that translucency – it's a very luscious and opalescent hue, which suits the ultimate focus of my work – light. For me, the subject of the portrait is almost a pretext to display the effects of light.

I'm very much the absent-minded artist – I can never find anything in my studio – but I'm fanatic about keeping the surface of the canvas pristine. I paint with heavy mediums that take a while to dry, and they can be quite sticky. If a fly enters the studio I drop the brush and pick up the fly swatter and run around chasing it.

I'm paranoid about dust for the same reason. I guard the door, and if anyone comes I make sure it's shut immediately. It's not an uncommon obsession. If you look at old master paintings its surprising how clean they are. When I go to museums I often go up close and check out the surfaces – there are never even any brush hairs. They clearly shared my obsession. The 17th Century Dutch painter Gerrit Dou had a trapdoor to enter his studio, and he developed this way of entering where he'd wait for the dust to settle and then make a swift movement close to the door, and wait again, so I'm not alone! I'm actually part Dutch, so maybe it comes from my ancestors.



Author Gillian Flynn credit: RALPH HEIMANS

While I'm working I listen to classical music: big Mahler symphonies, Shostakovich, sometimes Beethoven sonatas and quartets. I'm infatuated with it all and I play it very loudly; I have soundproofing on my door so I don't disturb the neighbours. That wall of sound helps me to get lost in my painting.

When you're painting effectively it's intuitive; that's when you do your best work. You're lost in the painting, not conscious, in a very left brained way, working with feeling. It's so hard to get back into it once you stop – I spend quite a bit of time trying to recapture it. So it's distractions which prompt my breaks. I try to keep my mobile out of the studio, and lunch is a quick affair and not at a particular time, just when I can't carry on any more – being hungry can make it hard to concentrate. I wouldn't survive without coffee, though.

Allen Jones: in the studio

I can't have any images on my walls – neither my own, which I would just want to tinker with, nor anything by anyone else. I find it too distracting. It's a rule I impose all over the house, although these days, somehow there are paintings by my kids everywhere.

I only work on one painting each day – time is really important in the creative process and really you need a solid chunk on each work, at least a few weeks. But usually I have two large canvases on the go and another small one. Even if I keep two of them in a separate room, my mind is working on all three at once.



Author Howard Jacobson credit: RALPH HEIMANS

I feed my inspiration by immersing myself in the achievements of my subject. When I painted Vladimir Ashkenazy, for example, I listened to his entire musical legacy, and when I was painting the Queen I listened to the history of the British monarchy. For the authors, I went through their entire oeuvre; it's a wonderful way of getting into the world of the subject and it fits my particular philosophy of painting, which is very immersive. Rather than artists who bring the subject into their studio, my objective is to lose myself in their world. It brings new inspiration into every work, because you're drawing on things you may not normally encounter. It enables the work to thrive.

Most artists suffer from a block at one time or another and I deal with it pretty poorly. If you have the luxury of time, then turning a painting against the wall for a while is the best solution, because when you look at it again you can usually see what's wrong straight away. To be honest, portrait painters hardly ever have time to do that – there's always a deadline looming. In that case you just have to pull yourself out of it. It's hard for me because I'm such a perfectionist and things can spiral out of control, but somehow I always manage to pull it off, even if it means have a few all-nighters.

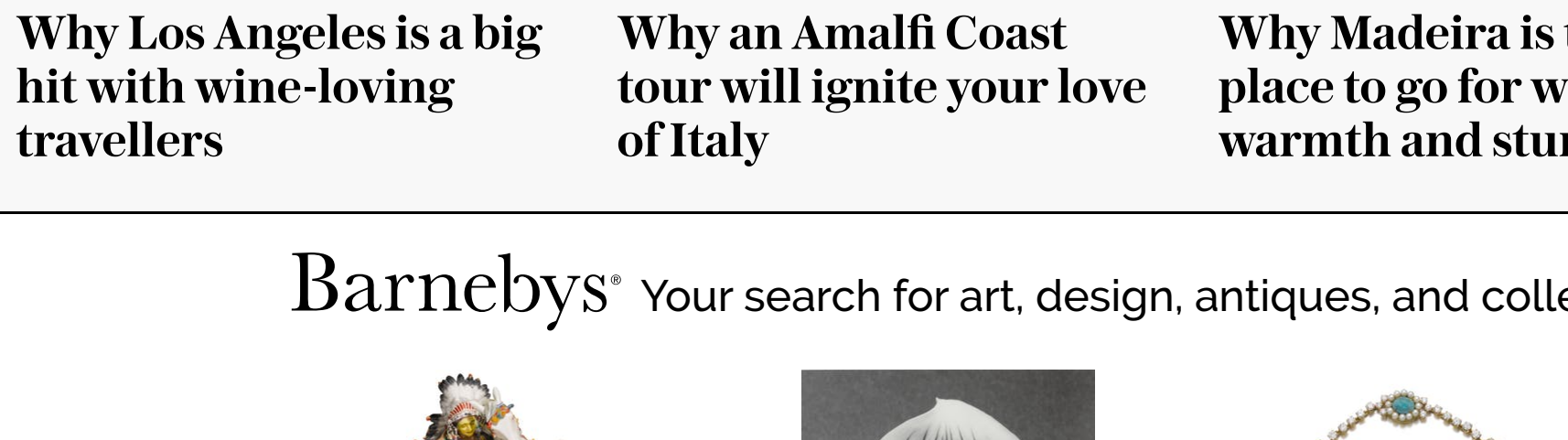
I work until the early hours, sometimes 2am. Often those are the best times: it's dark outside; silent. There's a sort of intimacy I get from being connected to the painting, which I really like. I probably shouldn't be doing it though; it's hard on you physically.



Author Jo Nesbø credit: RALPH HEIMANS

I relax by interacting with other people, going out into the world and seeing friends and family. I don't take much time off though – a morning here, an afternoon there. In between commissions I might take a whole weekend off.

If I can sleep for five hours I'm pretty happy. Actually I think I need eight. It's best not to think about it too much, just press on and drink another coffee.



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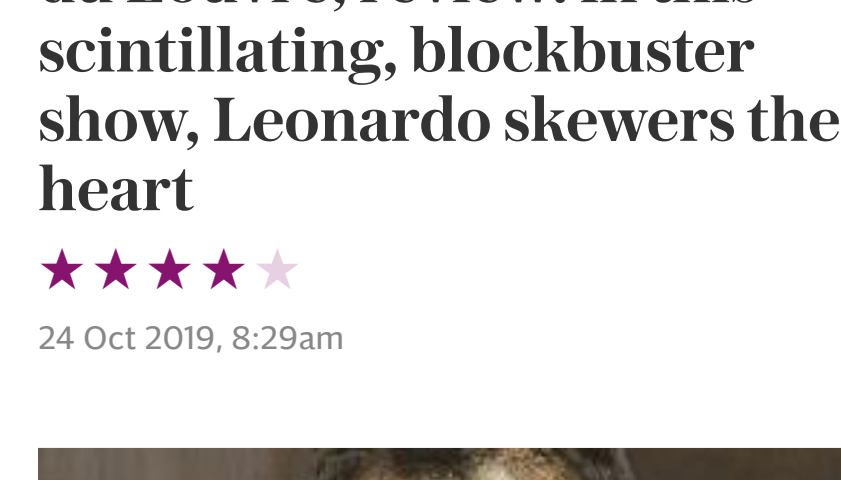
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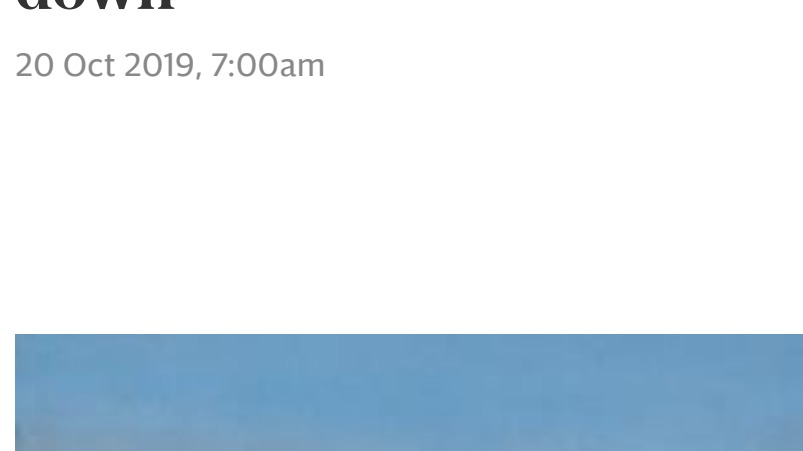
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