

Some of the world's most recognisable faces on display at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra

By Rosie King Art

Fri 15 Mar 2024



Ralph Heimans: Portraiture. Power. Influence.' is Heimans's first major solo show on Australian soil. (ABC News: Adam Kennedy)

abc.net.au/news/national-gallery-of-a...



Share article

Sydney-born artist Ralph Heimans is often pinching himself.

In a career spanning three decades, he's captured some of the world's most famous people on canvas.

Among his long list of subjects are royals, Academy Award-winners and Australia's most influential figures.

"It's a beautiful thing when you're painting a public figure or a subject people know and love or have an opinion about to perhaps change their perspective," Heimans said.

"Or for them to see something they may not be expecting."

His first major solo show in his home country, 'Ralph Heimans: Portraiture. Power. Influence.' will open at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra today.



Australia-born Queen Mary of Denmark painted by Ralph Heimans in 2018. (Supplied: National Portrait Gallery of Australia)

It features some of the artist's most famous works, including large-scale portraits of King Charles, King Frederick of Denmark and his wife Queen Mary.

"With Princess Mary, we got a lot of time together, which was wonderful," he said.

"We were able to look through different areas of her personal space, where she likes to work and talk about what she wants to achieve.

"I need to try to find out what drives people – that's ultimately what gives me the inspiration for the concept behind the portrait."

The exhibition also includes portraits of former prime minister Kevin Rudd, former governor-general Dame Quentin Bryce and former High Court justice Michael Kirby.



English actor Dame Judi Dench's 2018 portrait by Ralph Heimans. (Supplied: National Portrait Gallery of Australia)

It's a 2018 portrait of Dame Judi Dench that welcomes visitors into the exhibition.

"With Judi, we went to the theatre that meant most to her – the Royal Haymarket in London," he said.

"As we took a break, all the behind-the-scenes theatre workers came out and listened to her recount stories about her early life as an actor in that theatre.

"It was an incredible journey to hear her recount that and that's why I wanted memory to be the focus of her painting."

Heimans immerses himself in the world of his subject – no matter how high profile – in what he describes as "the exploratory phase" before putting charcoal to paper and then paint to canvas.

His creative process often takes one to two years, though his most recent work 'The Storyteller: Sir Ben Kingsley' is an exception.

It took eight years to complete.



English actor Ben Kingsley's 2023 portrait by Ralph Heimans. (Supplied: National Portrait Gallery of Australia)

"This is the third attempt at this painting – the first two never made it off the easel," Heimans admitted with a laugh.

"With this painting, I got the composition right."

The importance Heimans places on his subject's setting is one characteristic that sets him apart from other portrait artists.

"The setting enables more of a story to be told," he said.

"I think a portrait should be like a symphony, it should say as much as it can about the subject."



Former governor-general Quentin Bryce's 2014 portrait by Ralph Heimans. (Supplied: National Portrait Gallery of Australia)

But it's the eyes he agonises over most.

"There's a lot of effort put into the eyes," he said.

"Exactly where the highlights should be, should the gaze be directly at the viewer or the subject in thought – everything is very, very consciously considered."

It is Heimans's royal portraiture he is arguably most famous for.

Given that, a noticeable absence is 'The Coronation Theatre' – a portrait of Queen Elizabeth painted in 2012 to mark the Diamond Jubilee.

It's on permanent display in Westminster Abbey, and was unable to be removed.

Though a video detailing the project from start to finish, including never-before-seen footage, almost makes up for the absence.



Curator Joanna Gilmour says Ralph Heimans is most famous for his royal portraits. (ABC News: Adam Kennedy)

Curator Joanna Gilmour said securing the exhibition was a major coup for the Portrait Gallery.

"The process of getting these massive paintings from places like England and Denmark all the way to Canberra has been a logistical exercise, to say the least," she said.

"It's wonderful to see them, not just all here together, but finally in Ralph's home country."

And seeing them in real life is the only way to do it, according to Ms Gilmour.

"These are works that you really need to see in the flesh," she said.

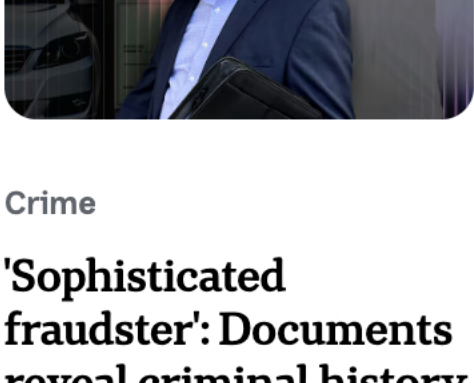
"You literally have to see them in person to appreciate the ambition of them, the scale of them, the amount of work that goes into them."

"The consideration that goes into everything and the detail in these works is really quite extraordinary.

"There is nothing in these paintings that is incidental or erroneous or there by accident, everything has multiple layers of meaning."

The exhibition will run at the National Portrait Gallery of Australia until May 27.

Top Stories



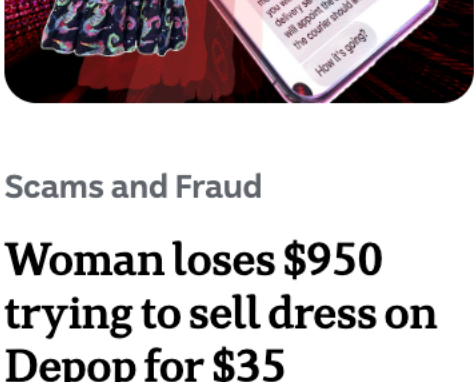
Crime

'Sophisticated fraudster': Documents reveal criminal history of charity CEO



Government and Politics

Nationals leader says nuclear power policy 'sensible' next step



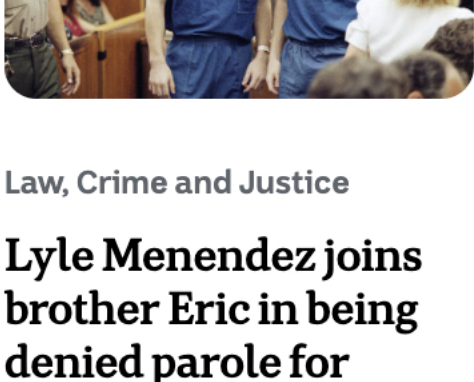
Scams and Fraud

Woman loses \$950 trying to sell dress on Depop for \$35



Analysis by Laura Tingle

Ukraine is not just about a Putin power grab but an eventual European war



Law, Crime and Justice

Lyle Menendez joins brother Eric in being denied parole for killing parents