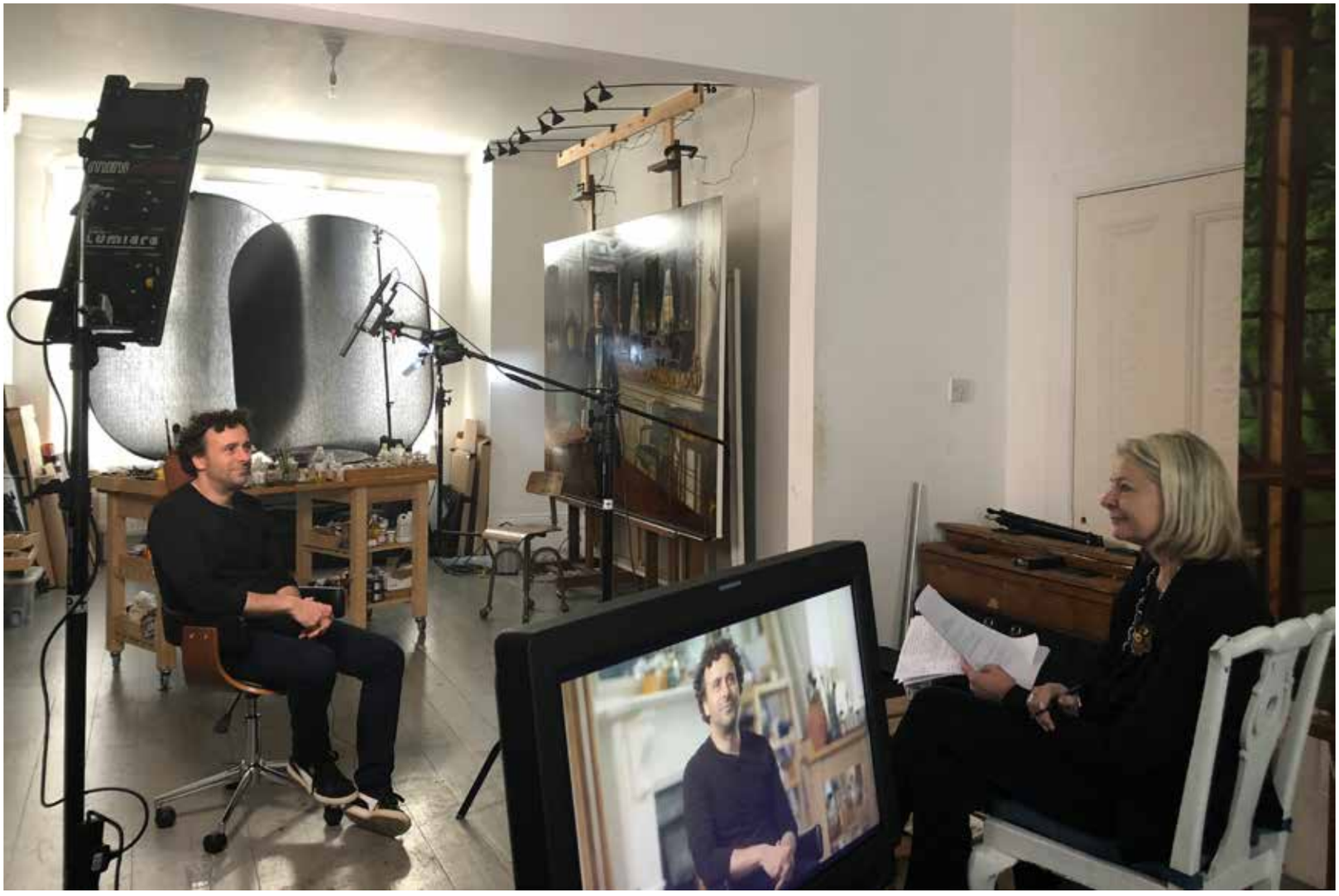


Q&A WITH THE ARTIST

Ralph Heimans and Mette Skougaard

M: Tell me about how you became an artist. What were your early years like?

R: Well there was never really any doubt in my mind that I wanted to be an artist. It felt like a real calling for me. My first memories from childhood are of drawing constantly. I used to love drawing cartoons, making up stories and drawing caricatures of my teachers and family.

Around the age of 14, I tried oil paints for the first time and that was it for me. I loved everything about it. I set myself up in a corner of the room that eventually became a studio – I was fascinated by the texture, the sensual quality of oil paint and its properties. I kind of instantly fell in love with the medium itself.

When I first discovered the tradition of Old Master paintings through art history books it was like a world had opened up for me, that in some way felt so fresh, and so hard to access. There were very few of these works in Australia, and it became something extra special, very exciting and quite radical compared to what other suburban kids were into.

I remember being pretty out of step with the Australian cultural scene at the time. Australia was very different in the 70's and 80's and I was just on my own path. I fell in love with classical music, opera, and the Renaissance and just threw myself into it. And you really had to seek it out because it just wasn't all around you.

M: So that was your path into portraiture?

R: Yes exactly, I just fell in love with the genre. I was just mesmerized by these faces, these characters from history. I felt so cut off from the European tradition of art in Sydney, but that was what I really identified with personally. My father is Dutch and so the Old Masters became a big part of my personal identity.

M: How did you train yourself as an artist?

R: When I finished school I really wanted to study art. I had won a competition when I was about 17 called the National Art Award and with the prize money I went off to Europe in search of a school. I checked out the Florence Academy, the Brera in Milan, the Royal Academy, the Slade and the Vienna Academy, but they weren't actually teaching painting techniques anymore – the sort of training I was looking for just wasn't in vogue.

When I came back to Sydney, my parents were in a bit of a panic about what I was going to do with my life. I remember at one point they took me to see a shrink

In Ralph Heimans' studio during the Q&A

who said, "What seems to be the problem?" and they both sort of blurted out in unison, "He wants to be an artist!" It was pretty hilarious. Anyway, to keep the peace, I enrolled in architecture at Sydney University, because I love architecture and I somehow thought it might be a bit of a fallback career. Needless to say, it didn't work out – I was you know putting Doric columns all over the place and designing Renaissance edifices for suburban Sydney … But one of my lecturers did do me a big favour as I was being booted off the course, and that was to commission me to paint a portrait.

So that's really how it started out. And then one commission rolled onto the next. And I feel like I've been learning on the job ever since.

In terms of my formal education, I stayed at uni and studied art history and pure mathematics, which I really got into. I have to say the maths has really stood me in good stead. I have quite a fearless attitude to geometry and perspective and reflection, which has enabled me to take on these complex spatial ideas and translate them to the canvas.

But still, I needed some proper training in technique. And one day this elderly Polish man who'd heard about me through a family friend, turned up at my home, clicked his heels and declared that he would teach me. So there it was – I found my self being mentored by this eccentric Polish master who had studied just after the war in Krakow when it was a very serious matter to study art. He had this real foundation in traditional European techniques and his approach to art education was that it was all secret knowledge. He would make his own mediums from scratch and mix up the pigments and he taught me about layering and glazes.

M: How did you develop from being a student to mastering your own way?

R: Well, at some point I had to break free from that education, because it was overpowering – very black and white. His approach was that there was a right way to paint and a wrong way, which was quite restricting. So after a very intense time, I had to really cut those ties and develop my own work. I was very conscious of that.

Ultimately what I learnt was the kernel of a technique, a way of thinking about constructing the painted surface to create the illusion of volume, depth and light that I have built upon and personalized over the years.

M: How would you compare your early works with the works you do now? What's been the development in your approach?

R: Well, when I was starting out, trying to teach myself the methodology, I would paint portraits based on historical works, so I did a portrait of my sister for example in a Venetian Gothic setting, and a portrait of my mother which was inspired by Velasquez's Pope Innocent X.

But my work has really developed through the process of being commissioned – you have to turn your head to how to represent real people in their con-

temporary lives. Sometimes it can be frustrating – you know contemporary dress can be a bit bland and I'm not hugely fond of jeans in paintings. That's definitely something that the Old Masters had in their favour – all of these lush fabrics and costumes, so I often look for interest elsewhere – in the architecture, for example and in the composition, and of course, in the people themselves. People are absolutely fascinating to me.

One of the big areas of development is that the works have become more complex spatially. I'm trying to explore narrative in challenging ways and use devices to do that such as perspective and reflection.

I'd say though that I have had a single voice throughout my career. Many artists change styles dramatically, but I feel that with my art, there is a continuous thread that you can follow.

M: How would you define that thread?

R: I think one of the defining features of my work is narrative – it's story telling. It's the start of every project for me. It's not just about capturing someone's likeness on the canvas, it's about choosing what story you are going to tell about them; what are you trying to say about them as an individual and then all the choices about how you are going to communicate that flow from there.

M: You're very fond of the horizontal format. Does this have a specific purpose?

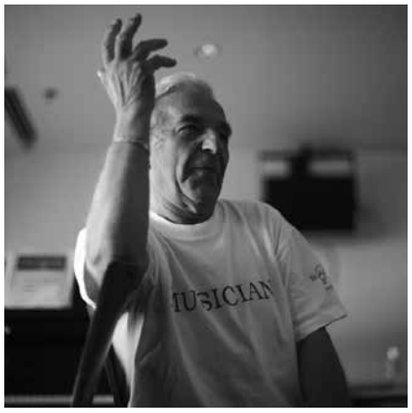
R: Yes, absolutely. The horizontal format for me is very cinematic and it gives me much more scope for narrative. I like to paint my figures at life size and you can just fit so much more context into a horizontal format. By broadening the picture frame, it turns the work in to something more than a portrait – it transforms it into a painting.

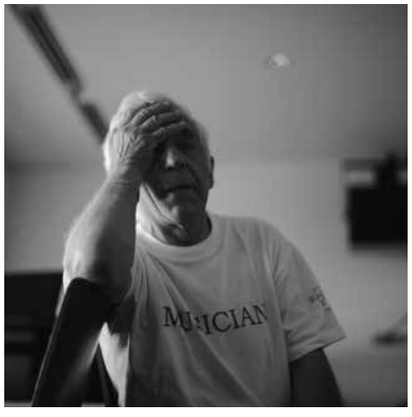
M: Tell me more about your process ... ?

R: Well, the first step for me is to try to come up with a concept. I always find it odd that people assume that portraits aren't conceptual. I think that really underestimates the genre.

But whether it's public or private portraits, coming up with the concept involves a myriad of decisions about the things like the context and purpose. Is the portrait for an occasion like the Diamond Jubilee, a retirement, or a landmark event of some sort? Is the portrait celebrating some aspect of a person's professional life? Is it private, formal, informal, etc. … so many questions that I will put my attention towards in order to define the concept.

And then a number of decisions stem from there. The biggest one for me is the setting. Where will the portrait be set? Because the context really informs and defines the narrative.





Photos from Vladimir Ashkenazy's sitting

For the Queen's Diamond Jubilee portrait for example, I loved the idea of The Queen going back metaphorically to Westminster Abbey and revisiting the spot where she had been crowned 60 years previously.

For Prince Philip, the Grand Corridor of Windsor Castle is steeped in history and says so much about his ancestry as well as being evocative of the passage of time.

For Vladimir Ashkenazy, it made every sense to paint him at the Sydney Opera House because the purpose of the portrait was to celebrate his tenure with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and his contribution to the cultural life of Australia.

But as fitting as these settings seem in retrospect, I will often spend many weeks trying to find them, researching my subjects and trekking out to different places and seeing different settings that might resonate with the story I am trying to tell.

M: So you are immersing yourself in the world of your subject? There is a tendency to the opposite approach in contemporary portraiture.

R: Yes I guess that's true. I'm not that interested in bringing each individual into my studio, sitting them in an armchair and inserting them into a standard template. If you do that, the painting risks being uninspired or potentially being more about the artist than the subject. So my approach is to reverse that and immerse myself in the world of the subject and draw inspiration from it to create the work through my own artistic lense.

M: You explore spatial elements such as perspective, reflection, geometry and light to create an immersive experience.

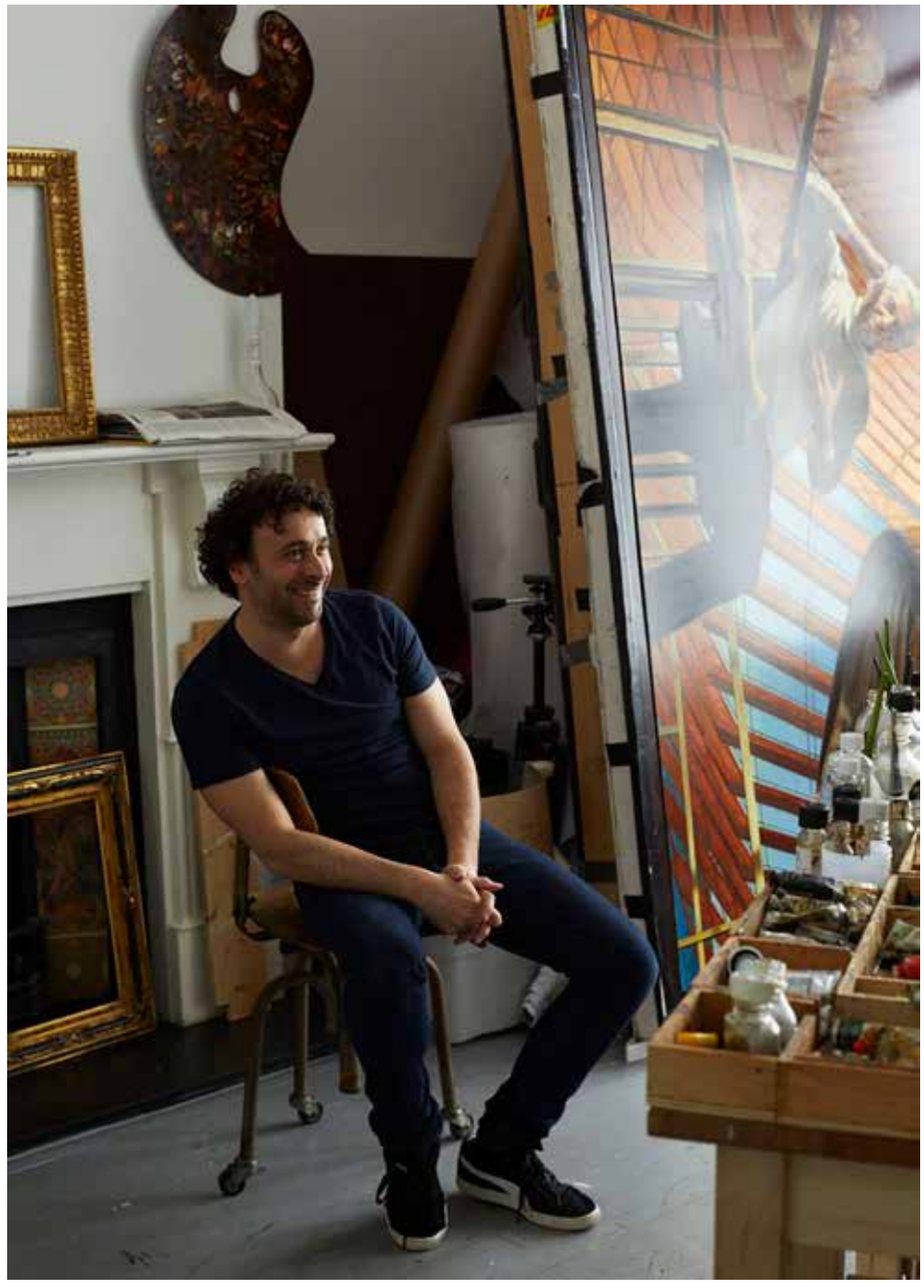
R: I guess you could say that these are distinguishing themes and part of the narrative language that I've been developing over time. I have quite a holistic approach in that I believe every element of the painting should enhance our understanding of the subject.

And my aim with every portrait is that it should hold the attention of the room. I generally unveil one work at a time, so if people are going to come out and see it, the painting needs to be engaging.

M: Once you've chosen the setting what happens next?

R: Well once I've decided on the setting, finding the right view or perspective for the composition can be very difficult because often these places can be quite overpowering. Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle, The Opera House, they are all iconic buildings in their own right, so the challenge then is to adapt the existing architectural structure and make it work for a different purpose, which is to draw our attention to the subject of the portrait, the individual at the centre of it. Getting that balance right so that the setting doesn't overwhelm the sitter is the key.

I really believe that the setting is an extension of the subject. With Ashkenazy's portrait, for example, it wasn't until I actually lay down on the floor of the Opera House and looked up, that I had found a perspective that would work. It looked like the insides of a musical instrument, a grand piano, with all these parabolic cables stretching around the structure in a vortex of movement. There



was an architectural rhythm, which is itself so musical and it spoke to me of Ashkenazy's dynamism and energy as a musician. It felt like a visual manifestation of his musicality.

M: How do you go about working out the actual composition of the portrait?

R: For my practice, that means actually getting out pencils and paper and drawing up the entire work. Initially, underlying any composition is a set of simple geometrical lines, and basically, however complex, you can break a composition down to three of four principle lines that essentially describe the movement of the eye through the painting. So when you design a composition, you are essentially directing a pathway of movement for the viewer through the painting and ensuring that the energy of the portrait extends to all four corners of the canvas and brings the eye back to the subject. It's quite musical for me.

And then when I'm drawing up the composition more precisely, I find that I will have to entirely reconstruct the space on paper so that it works. Columns and walls or windows need to be moved, archways altered, ceilings, floors – everything have to be manipulated – nothing is actually as it seems. So invariably I'll be re-drawing perspective lines either on paper or more often even at life-size scale, you know with strings of cotton thread that will stretch across the canvas to line up the vanishing points and perspective lines.

It can be frustrating that often people don't realize the extent to which I've re-constructed the space. But I guess that's the measure of a painting's success. If it's not believable spatially, then it's a block – it reads as a mistake and the viewer spends their time in front of the work thinking about what's wrong with it. I don't want that. I want to hold the viewers attention on the soul of the portrait. That means that there is a flow and energy to the composition that keeps you in that moment.

M: And what about your group portraits – how do you compose them?

R: Well, yes with group portraits there's the further complicating factor of working out how the figures will interact with one another as well as the space they are in. And that is very challenging because when you have a group where the subjects are directly addressing one another, I find that you lose a sense of individuality of each person and they become subsumed by the notion of the group. I'm more interested in how the individual interacts with the group, whilst retaining a sense of themselves.

It's sort of like the Renaissance paintings of the Sacra Conversazione, where you have groups of saints that are in this quiet meditation. Even though they're within the same room, they're all in their own psychological space. I like to convey something about the inner world of each subject, so they might be looking in different directions but their bodies might be addressing each other in various

compositional configurations. There's that sense of unity through the geometry of their poses and their positions, and yet each figure is an individual in their own right.

M: Your canvases are often very large. What's your technique for getting the composition up onto the canvas?

R: Once I've developed a detailed drawing I will then blow that up to size using large scale printers so that I can see physically what it looks like at that size and very often that's a point at which I make many changes. Moving objects around, redrafting, re-printing – sticking overlays up at different sizes – things get very crafty in the studio. And I won't order the canvas until I'm absolutely happy with the proportions.

But once that's done and I've primed and sanded the canvas, I put down a dark imprimatur over the whole area, which is the basis of the old master layer technique. The dark base allows you to build up the surface in a series of transparent and semi-transparent layers and that's what gives the portrait its luminosity.

And then when I've transferred the blown up sketch to the canvas using charcoal, I have a very faint line drawing on the canvas as a guide to start the painting.

But whether it's a group or a single figure, for me the composition is everything and it can be very difficult. – That is what I wrestle with. Once I've cracked it, then the painting is fun and it's a joy bringing it to life.

M: You talked about light as one of the defining features of your work. What is your approach to achieving these effects?

R: Throughout my career, light has been one of my obsessions, one of my preoccupations. I mean, sometimes it's the subject in itself of a portrait. Light can elevate a very mundane scene into something quite magical. The way the painting is illuminated can provide a sense of movement, and depth as the light and the shadows fall across the painting. For me the shadows also impart a sense of mystery and meaning to the subject, so the painting becomes more truthful – people are not completely open, you know, they are complex.

When I'm right into the painting of a work, I use light and shadow to gradually build up the forms and the volumes, and through this process, accentuate a sense of spatial depth. Light surrounded by darkness is far more enigmatic and exciting – contrast brings a figure forward, creates separation from the background. And then there's the colours themselves – warm colours project, cold colours recede – so I'm constantly playing with these levers when I work to create a tangible sense of versimilitude.

M: It seems like you have a very structured approach.

R: Well yes and no, because it's a symbiotic process between the artist and the subject and that can never be too predetermined. I try to prepare as much as I can, but the creative process is a mysterious thing and even when you think you've got it all worked out, something will happen; the subject will give you something better than you imagined at the sitting or something unexpected and you have to be flexible. And the portrait is constantly changing and evolving as you work it up and so you have to be patient and open to seeing where the portrait takes you.

M: Does this extend also to the expressions of your subjects? Do you strive to get more than one expression? How do you create a timeless image?

R: Oh absolutely. That's a wonderful thing that develops as you paint. I'm often working on a portrait for 5 or 6 months and in that time the layers of personality seem to get built into the work. As well as that, events happen in their lives; births, deaths, seismic changes, and so the expression develops on the canvas long after the sittings. When you're creating a portrait you're trying to put all of your empathy, all of your understanding of that person into that one image. It's not like it's one of thousands of photos which each capture a different mood. It's not disposable and there has to be a degree of finality about it. The image you create has to say much more than the fleeting moment of a snapshot because everything is very intentional. – It's one single image and you try to encapsulate as much of the depth of that person as you can. You are trying to communicate something of the soul of that person to the viewer.

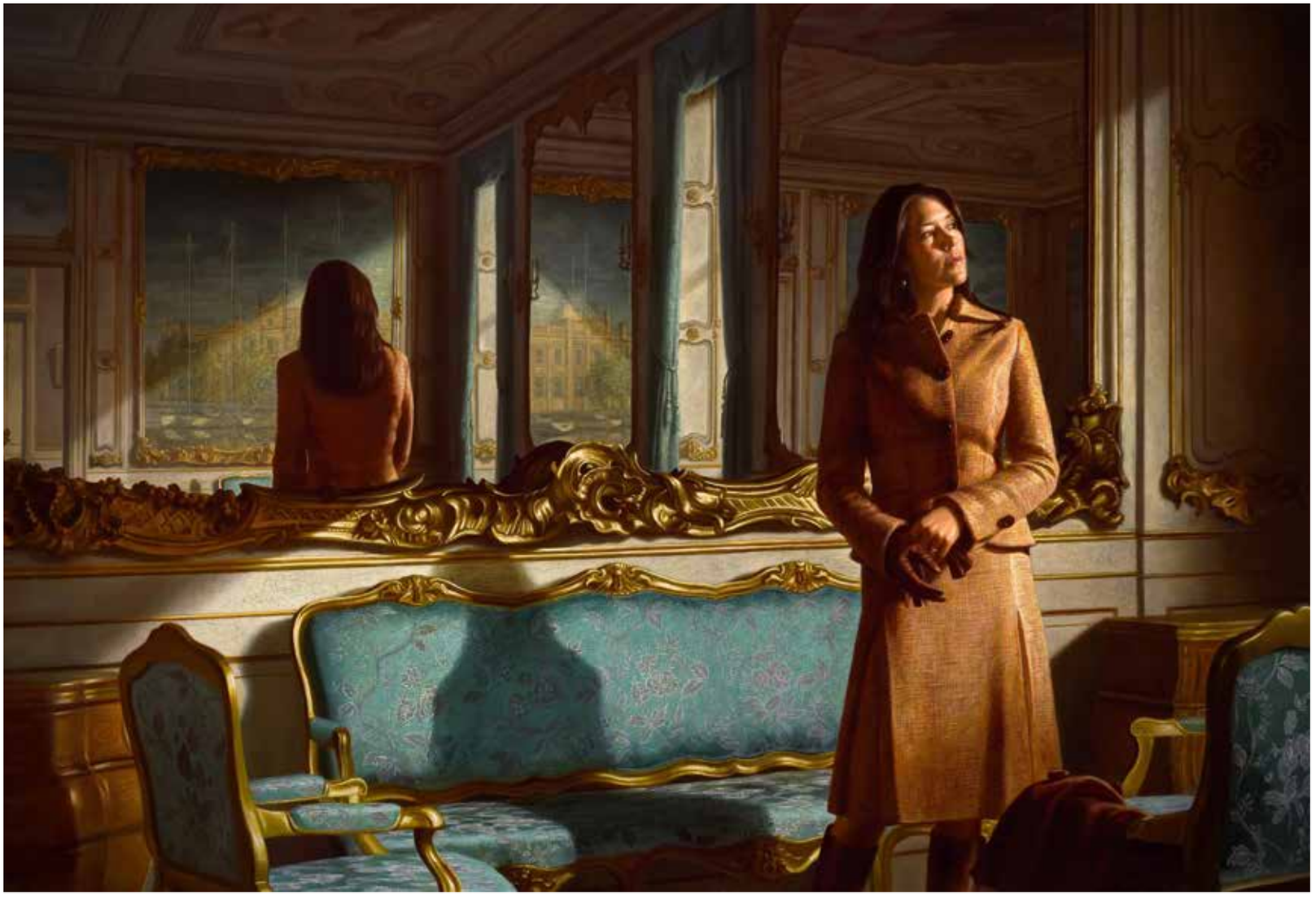
The artist filtering their impression of the subject is the underlying mystery of portraiture. I think that's what viewers find fascinating.

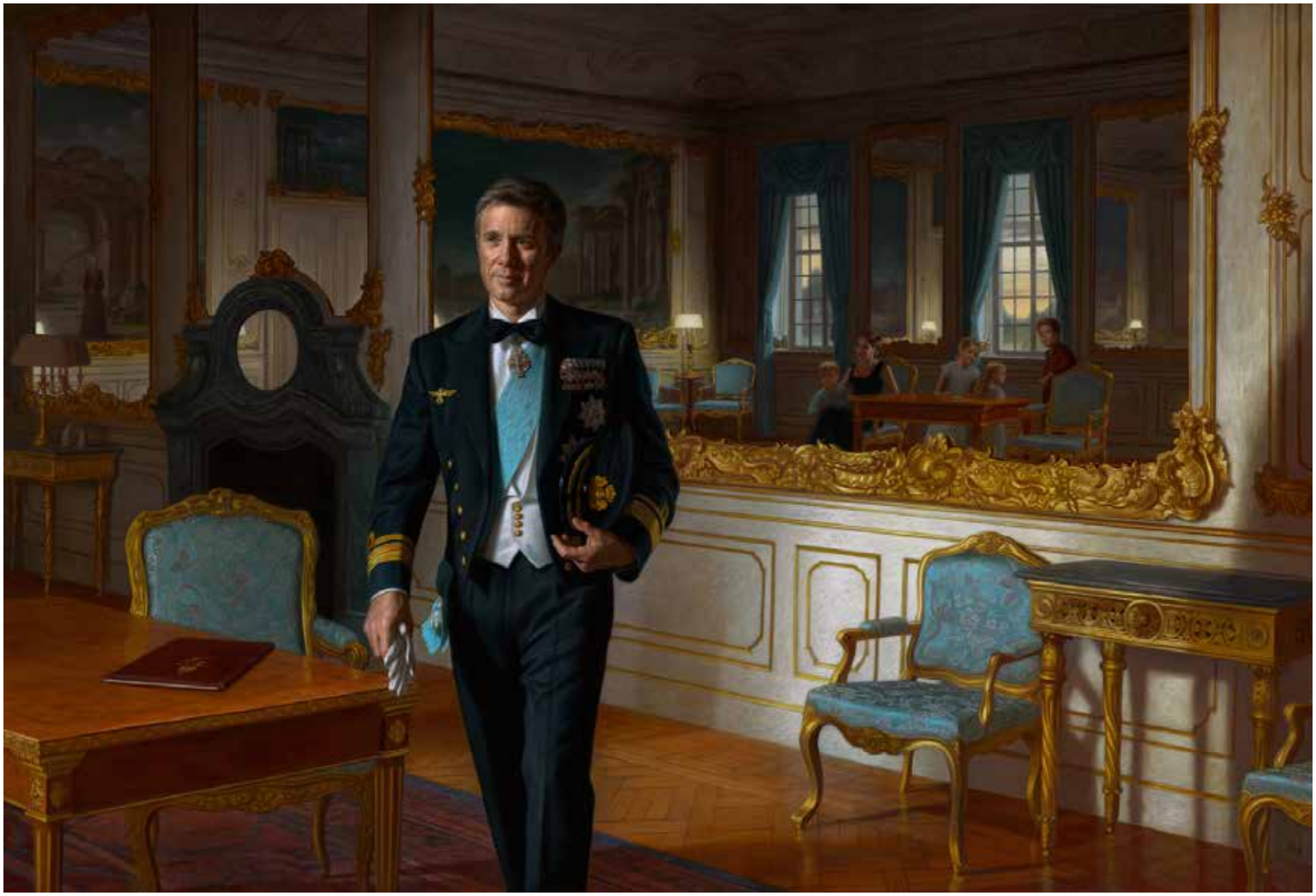
M: How do you choose the expression, whether the subject is looking at the viewer or elsewhere for example?

R: It's fascinating because both are very powerful but often you get a feeling immediately which one it should be. Very often it depends on your impression of a person, how reflective they are as a person, how extroverted they are, how direct, how protected they are or how open – all of these factors can influence how you represent them.

When the subject is looking directly at the viewer, it can be quite challenging or confronting for the viewer. They are wondering whether they are being looked at or judged rather than the other way round, which is an interesting dynamic. There is an internal monolgue or imaginary conversation that takes place in the viewers mind.

Often when the subject is looking directly at the viewer, the portrait has a degree of formality, because there's a consciousness about the process of portraiture, 'I am posing, I am looking at you'. However, if you represent the subject in such a way that they've turned to you spontaneously in a moment or they're busy doing something and then they've looked at the viewer, that can also be intrigu-





ing, because you're creating a sense of that they are living their life, but taking a moment's pause.

But actually, it's quite rare for me to have my subjects looking straight at the viewer. I find that when they look away, you are able to access a more internal moment – as though the subject were lost in their own thoughts – which often they are. I'm not very chatty during the actual sittings. I'm quite happy for the silence. I'm observing and allowing the subject to let their thoughts settle and that can be so revealing.

M: That was certainly the case with your portrait of The Queen.

R: Yes absolutely, I wanted to convey a reflective moment and I believe her expression is enigmatic. Which is very much like the Queen herself. She famously rarely offers an opinion in public and is certainly not an open book. Prince Philip on the other hand, has been able to be much more open in his public life and the expression that I chose for his portrait reflects that – it is nuanced, but quintessentially him.

M: Do you sometimes feel like your work is in dialogue with itself?

R: Yes often the dialogue I am having is with my own works. Trying to constantly develop and extend your own language is something that most artists struggle with. So for example, in producing the portrait of Prince Philip five years after my portrait of The Queen, I wanted the works to relate to each other, both compositionally and in terms of their emotional resonance.

M: I see parallels in your depictions of the Danish Royals.

R: Yes absolutely, there are some parallels. The portrait of Crown Princess Mary was my first royal commission, and it was wonderful to work with the Museum on that. It was a very successful collaboration because I was developing this narrative approach to portraiture and you wanted me to extend that in to the genre of royal portraiture, which was a really exciting challenge.

I guess my background in art history and that pictorial tradition with it's rules and iconography made it quite a natural transition, but I really felt that I wanted to push the boundaries within that tradition.

When I painted Princess Mary, she was really starting out in her role. She was actually pregnant at the time and was quite tentative. Now of course, she is a style icon and so assured, but back in 2006, she was really just finding her feet and I wanted to convey that. So we made decisions about her wearing informal dress – no tiara or sash. But by setting the portrait in this very significant room to the Danish Monarchy, the Garden Room, the viewer understands the passage from her old life to the new.

And then I also played with the elements in the room, changing paintings to mirrors and then reflecting images of Constitution Dock in Hobart rather than

the famous paintings that actually exist in the room. Everything about the portrait was tied to her narrative at the time.

M: The Museum thought that it would be a good idea for the portraits to form a pair. Tell me about the challenges with that brief.

R: Well, this was a fascinating commission from that point of view because the setting was predetermined, and the challenge was to see if I could produce something original and complimentary using the same space. And that was actually quite tough, because I had already done so much in terms of the spatial complexity with Princess Mary's portrait. But it was great to be given those boundaries and I think the finished works fit together. They interlock compositionally. I mean this is really a story about both of them as a unit. And returning to the Garden Room at Fredensborg Palace 11-12 years later, now that they have a family, was a chance to say something about that.

So, to acknowledge the passing of time, I've recreated the space again and shown in a mirror behind Prince Frederik, a reflection of Princess Mary with their children, sitting by the windows, where I had depicted her alone ten years earlier when she was pregnant with her first child. He is walking towards them and they are both in evening attire. I like the idea of the narrative beyond the edges of the picture frame. What was he doing before and where are they going next?

M: There's something quite natural about the scene.

R: Yes, even though he's in formal dress, he seems comfortable in his skin and in his role. I wanted to portray him as I saw him – very open, dynamic, quite youthful. He is very sharp, charismatic. I had met him before, so there was a sense of familiarity. And you know he's only a couple of years older than me, so sometimes you have to remind yourself that he will be the King of Denmark.

But also while I was producing this portrait he lost his father, and I think the responsibility weighs even more heavily on your shoulders when an event like that happens. It becomes embedded in the narrative and in the layers of paint.

M: It's an interesting contrast in terms of the movement and the mood with the portrait of Prince Philip, who as we know is also a Prince of Denmark.

R: Yes, with the portrait of Prince Philip, I wanted to invoke a sense of his history, his ancestry, and the passing of time. I loved the rhythm of the light and shadows stretching back down the lengthy corridor. It was wonderful to paint someone with so much history behind them. I mean it's like he steps out of another time, and another age. He fought in the Second World War – he's had 70 years of public life. It's quite hard to fathom really.

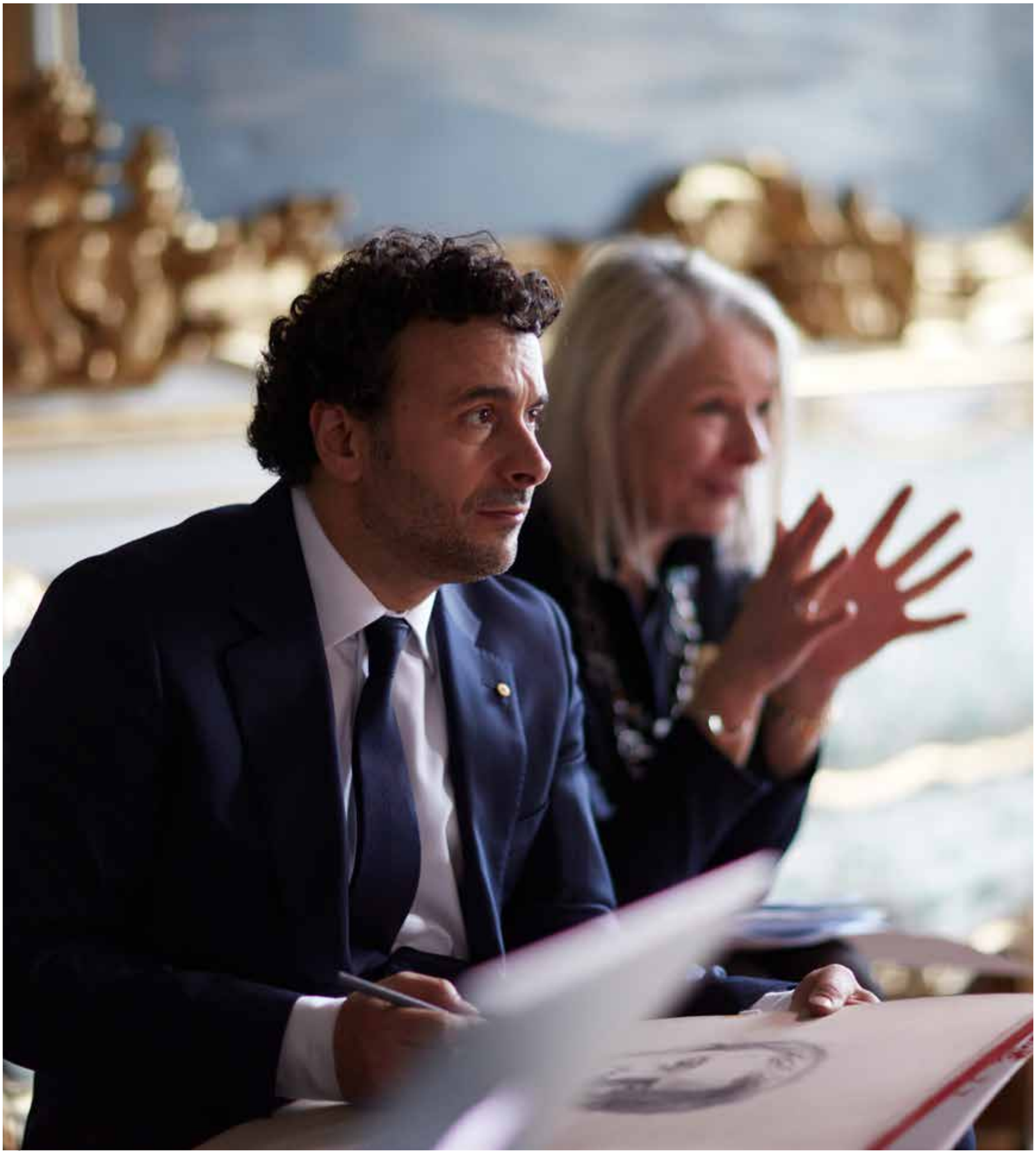


Photo from Crown Prince Frederik's sitting

Sketch for the portrait of Crown Prince Frederik, 2017.
Private Collection

And so there you have a man at the end of his career, public life, and the sense of farewell about that portrait was ever present. He's turning towards the viewer, before one imagines him turning back and walking away, which I thought was a very powerful moment to portray.

M: Has looking at the person behind the role underpinned your approach to royal portraiture in general?

R: Well I think it's fascinating to explore the relationship between the individual and the role that in some cases they were born to do. It's interesting because we are born with this notion or expectation of free agency – that we can make our choices in our lives and to some extent determine the course of our own fate. But when you are born into a royal family, you're born into this notion of duty and a life of service effectively. I think it's interesting to examine this and shine a light onto how these individuals have interpreted their roles and effectively conducted themselves under these rather unusual circumstances. And really I think that is what a contemporary approach requires. For me pushing at the boundaries of royal portraiture means accepting and acknowledging the canon and the iconography of royal portraiture but moving beyond that to reveal something deeper about the subject.

M: Tell me about iconography in a modern context.

R: Well, portraits in the past used to follow what they would call a symbolic program. Obviously in royal portraits you had the main symbols of power such as the staff and the orb, but a whole complex language developed around other elements such as putting gloves on (which I used in Princess Mary's portrait) and understanding portraiture was like decoding a language.

I think that's the challenge for every artist working within the genre of royal portraiture; it's not to make the subject just a symbol of power, or a symbol of their role, but to peel back and try to reveal the person underneath that.

M: How important is likeness in portraiture?

R: Well likeness is so mercurial and it's usually the people closest to my subjects who can see whether I've got them or not. It's in the body language, the exhalation, and the changeable quality in the expression.

It's not important for everybody, but for my practice, I'd say likeness is very important. Like with the spatial aspects, if it's not right, the viewer reads it as a mistake and it's a barrier to connecting with the work. Likeness should be a given and then they can move beyond that to the deeper questions of identity and intent.

M: Tell me then about the process of collaboration – you've worked with some very powerful people. Any difficult people?

R: Well, I don't know if I'd characterize it like that. It's a creative process and my particular approach is to encourage collaboration. It's so important in the early stages to listen to the subject and be receptive to their ideas. These are fascinating individuals by and large and there is so much to learn from them. But then you have to be true to your vision.

M: Do you let people see the works in progress?

R: Well not if I can help it. Once compositional drawing has been agreed on, I don't really want people to see it until it's finished.

M: Why is that?

R: Well because, it's very hard for people to understand what's happening until it's done. They see that the surface is covered and it looks finished to them, but it's not. So much happens in those last coats – fine-tuning the expression, balancing the colours and the light – after months of painting, often something transformative happens in those last days and if people start interfering, it can jeopardize the work. And really it's my reputation on the line when a work is released publically. So I'll finish it to my highest standard and then if there is a comment I'll look into it.

M: When you're working on a public portrait how aware are you of the zeitgeist?

R: It's a really interesting thing and the artist has to walk a fine line because you are absorbing everything from the cultural moment around you and still you have to hold firm to your vision. This was especially true with my portrait of The Queen, because the Jubilee was happening all around me as I was producing the work – you know there were street parties and bunting and cupcakes and Pimm's – all fantastically British and everywhere there were images of this beaming Monarch which was wonderful and celebratory, but that was definitely not the mood of the piece I was producing. And I really had to steel my nerve to carry out my vision for a what I thought would be a lasting piece for her legacy and for what I hoped would engage the public in a more reflective conversation. And I think to that extent, it was successful, because it did elicit this groundswell of emotion from people for whom this Queen has been a constant throughout their lives. The emotional response was overwhelming and for me that makes a successful portrait. As an artist, the creative instinct is that you try to move people. The worst thing you can get is no reaction.

M: Is that why you enjoy painting high profile people. What is your take on celebrity?

R: Well I do like to paint well known people because despite the pressure involved, it's fun to be part of the cultural conversation – how does your portrayal of a

person resonate with the public's view of them, what can you add to their narrative, perhaps you can reveal something more that people might not have seen or considered, a different perspective. Portraiture should be revelatory to an extent.

But the term "celebrity", that doesn't really resonate with what I do. My portraits take time to finish, so I have to choose my subjects wisely. I choose people who interest me and whom I feel have made a lasting cultural contribution, so that they're still relevant by the time I finish the piece.

M: In this age of smartphones etc. … everyone's taking their own portraits constantly – what's the importance of having big commissions from institutions?

R: When you think about the genre of portraiture, I think it's fair to say that it has experienced something of a revival. I don't think we're at the point anymore where we have to argue for the validity of its existence as a genre. You know, just looking at the queues to line up to portrait prize exhibitions and the public interest when public portraits are unveiled affirms that. It's a very accessible genre – everybody loves to look at others and to interpret images of other people. But popularity doesn't necessarily equate with quality and a lot of what we see especially with the rise of social media, is very transient – there's a public obsession with the disposable self-image.

And so I think it's very important beyond the portrait prizes for institutions to continue the tradition of commissioning art. These provide the opportunity for artists to make lasting statements about the prominent cultural figures of our time – to create a cultural legacy. And it's a tradition which presents unique challenges for the artist that are often not understood, because you get given a brief of sorts and you have to navigate all these different dynamics; between the institution, the sitter and the audience and somehow still stay true to your own personal vision for the portrait in order for it to be a success.

M: Do you think that people who visit a portrait gallery and look at them are learning something about humanity?

R: I mean, you know, the maxim that art teaches people how to see the world I think is quite true. Through looking at portraiture and understanding how the artist has interpreted the subject I guess you can learn something collectively about the human condition.

When looking at Old Masters' portraits there's something about the feeling in them – you get a view into the continuum of humanity and yet they don't feel old to me – they still feel very immediate and relevant.

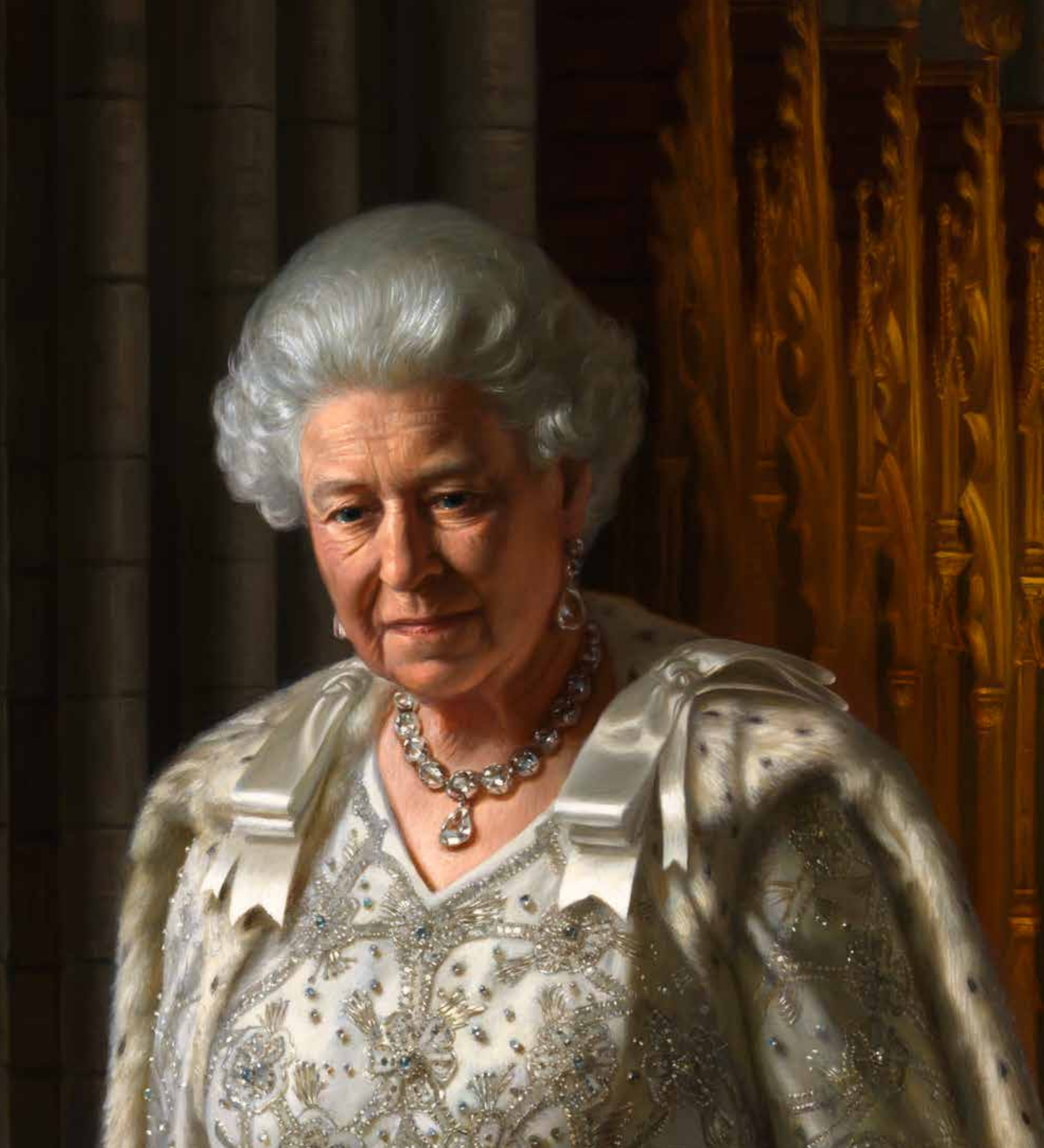
M: What do you think is the future of portraiture?

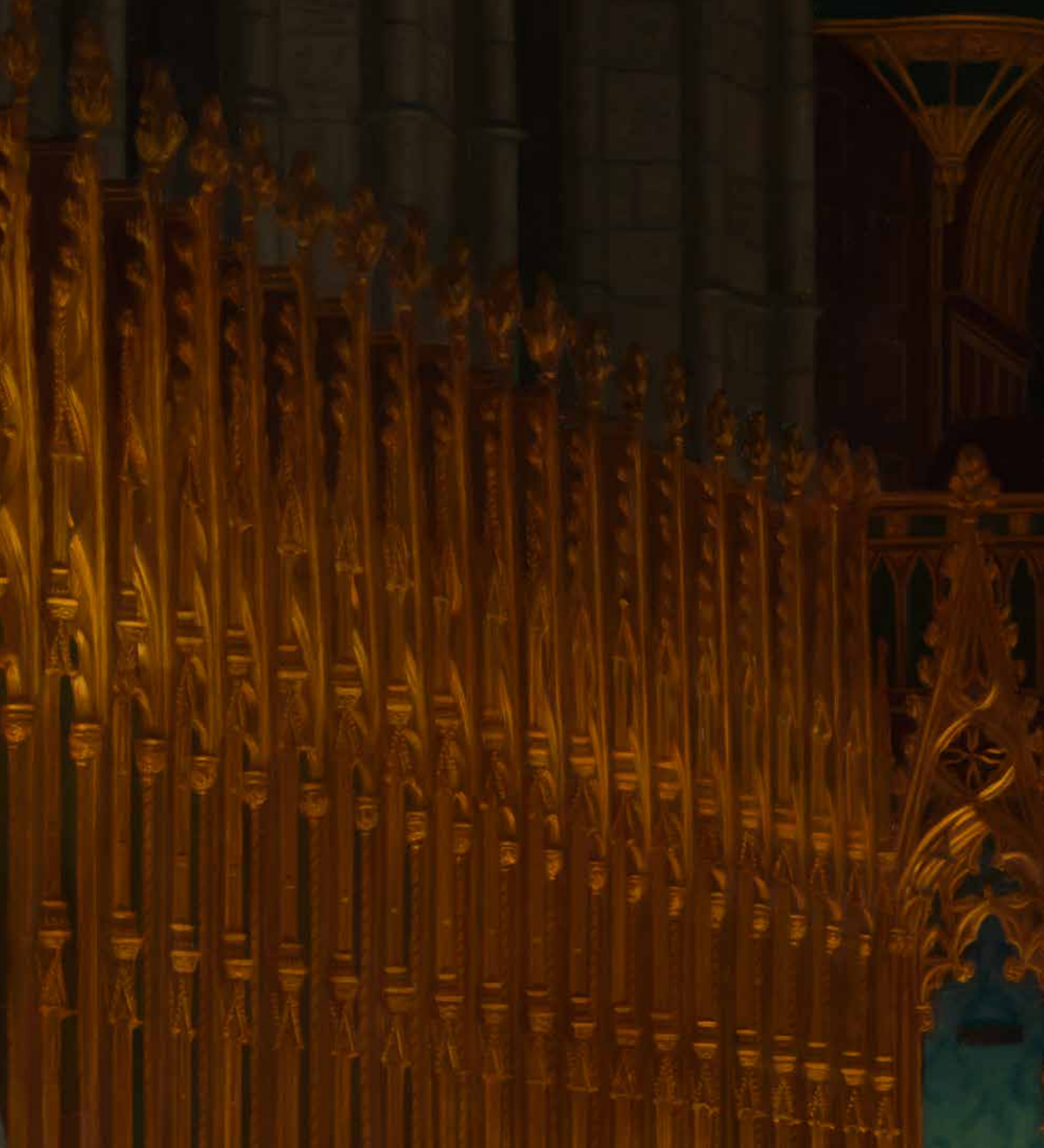
R: It's good to try to be ambitious, and produce a work that moves somebody emotionally, or that creates its own universe that in hundreds of years time people can still you know, feel that they know something about the person that is on the canvas.

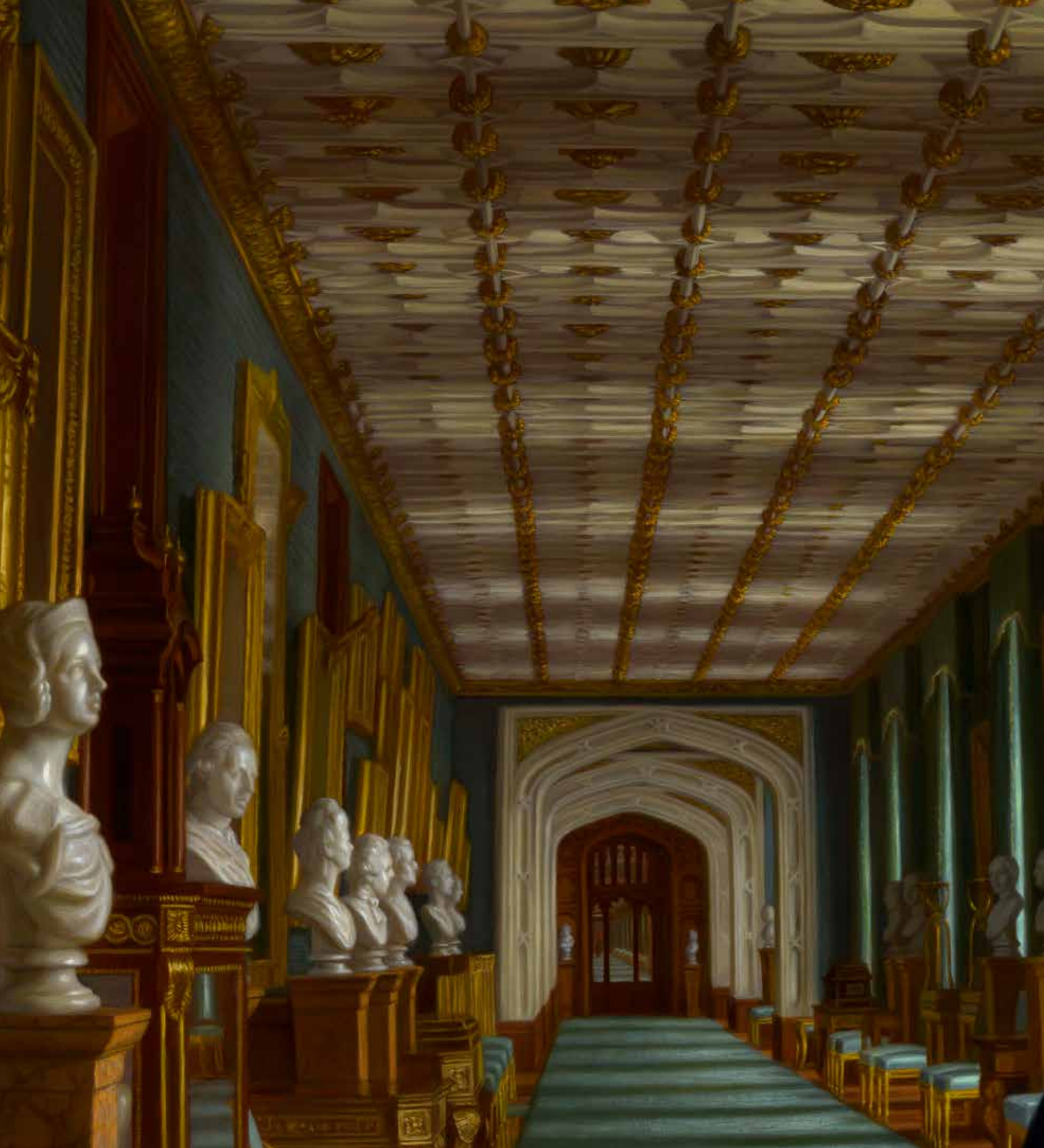
I think you want to create a feeling that somebody through the ages, in another time, in another place, can understand who that subject is and get an impression of their character, without a written description. That's what makes a portrait succeed; it has to be for posterity, it has to be able to communicate in its own right. I think art has to speak for itself.

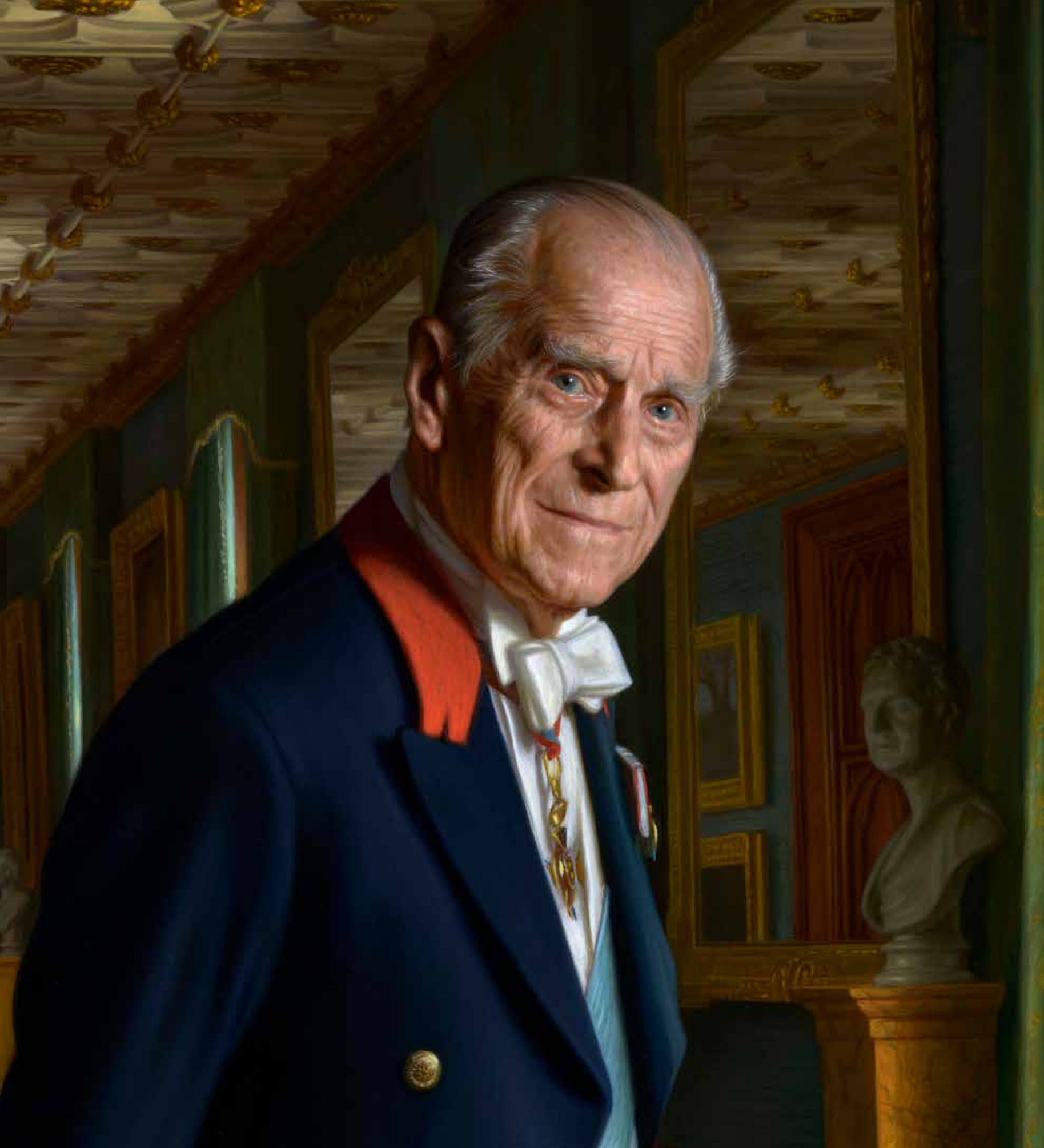
P. 46-47: The Coronation Theatre (detail)

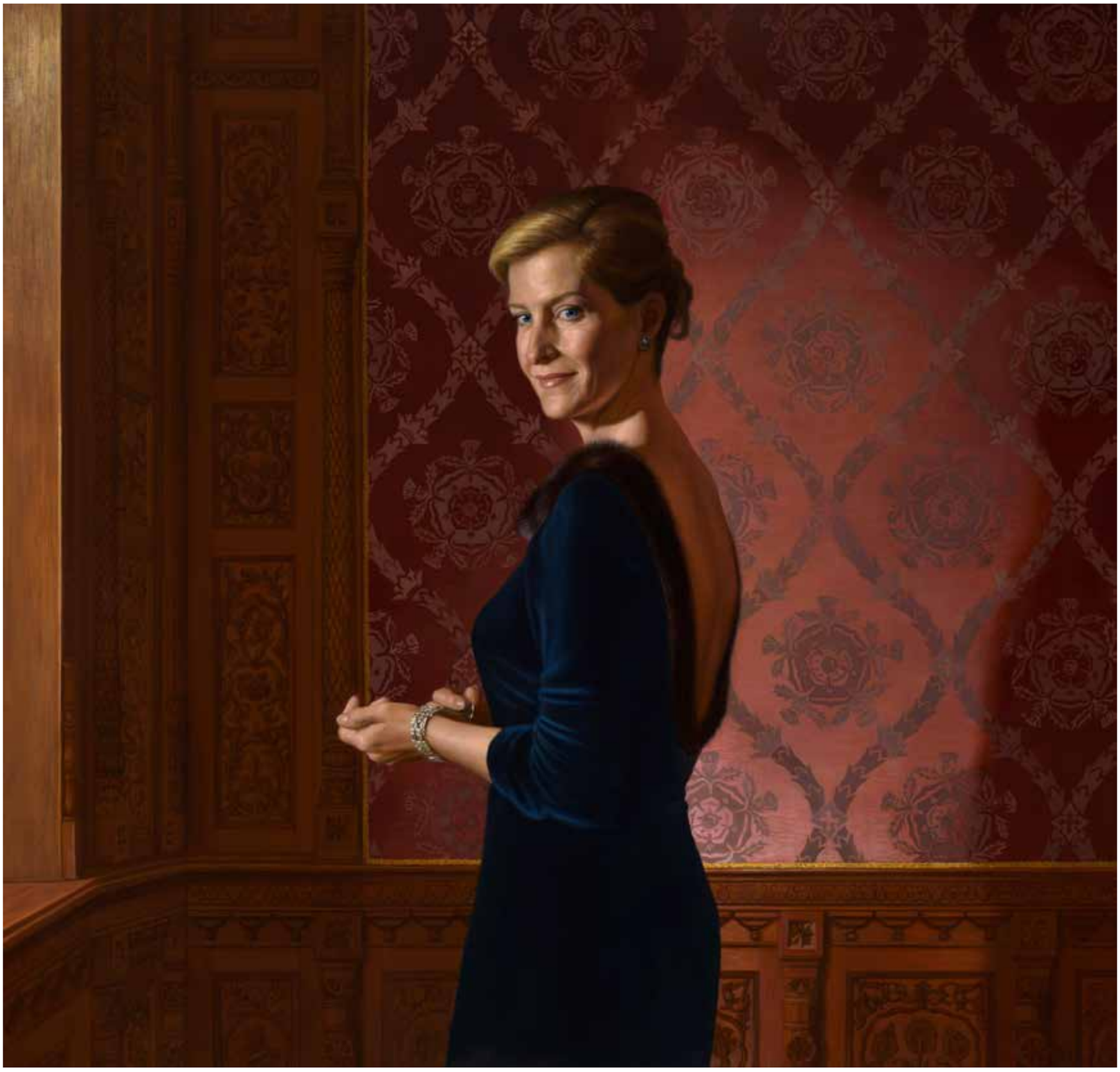
P. 48-49: Portrait of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh (detail)



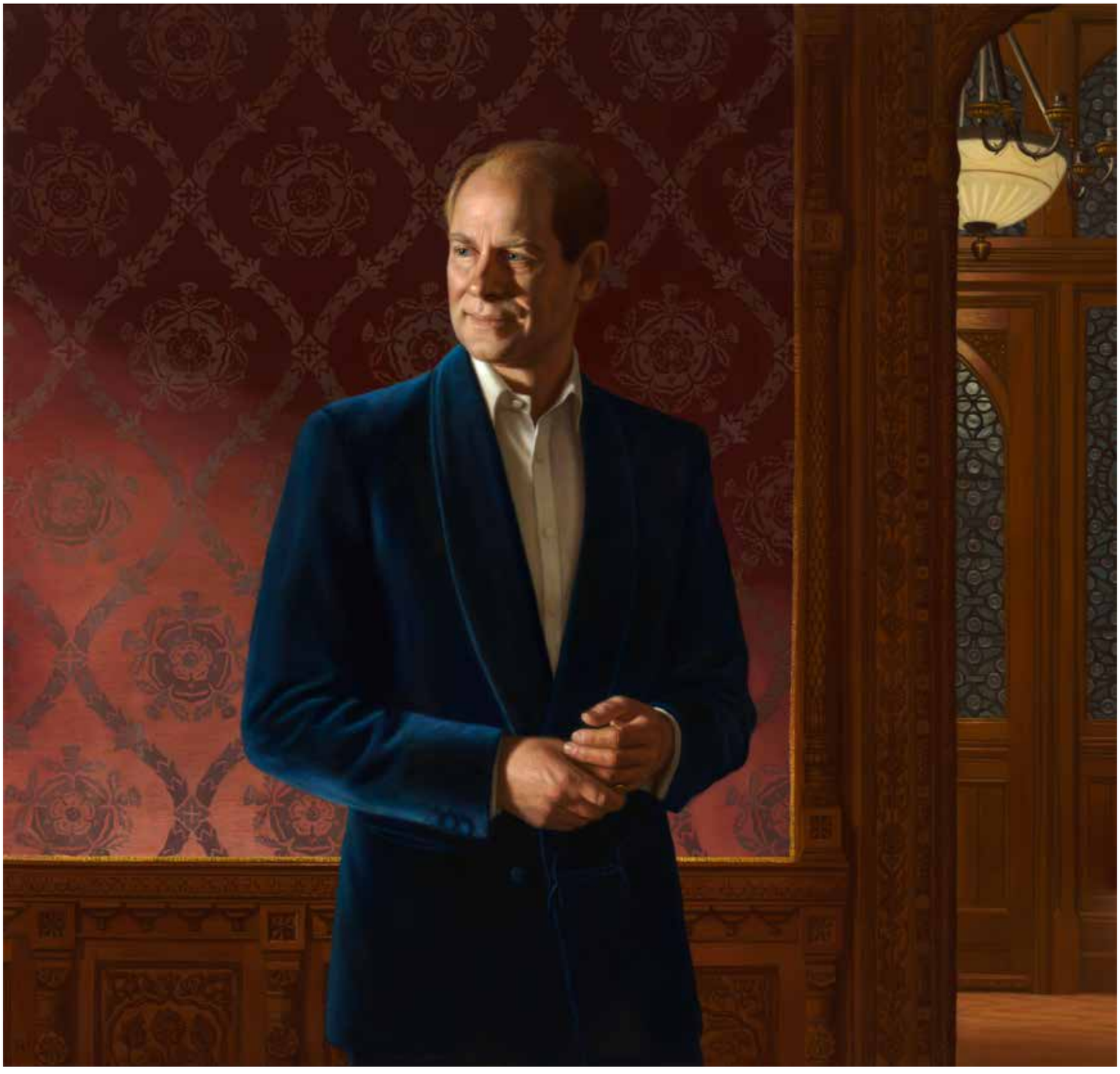








HRH The Countess of Wessex, 2016.
TRH The Earl and Countess of Wessex



HRH The Earl of Wessex, 2016.
TRH The Earl and Countess of Wessex