Profile

The one problem 2 years ago

Ralph Heimans: royalty's go-to painter

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Ralph and Lady Hayden Guest, painting Hayden's portrait in London. Louise Kennedy

Q: Who though she says here passed some Kelpie treasures was driven through the gates of Buckingham Palace for the most crucial of appointments? A: Ralph Heimans, a self-ascribed nervous wreck who has painted royalty and celebrities over big questions: what's the Queen like?

Heimans is armed with a good answer when I ask him. The really does have an aura. If such a thing exists in this world, she has it. Although it might have been the Kelpies, which he says she was carrying by the time she arrived, it wasn't quite and walking into that Kensington carrying her. At four feet tall, they I instantly was struck.

Ralph Heimans' work is included in Prince Philip's collection from Westminster Abbey. AP

His more enduring insight into the Queen hangs in Westminster Abbey – a 2.1-metre high by 1.4-metre wide portrait commissioned to celebrate her 60 years on the throne. Heimans was the obvious choice. He had proved himself was the only painter invited to mark the moment and was granted an hour-long sitting with the monarch in the Yellow Drawing Room of Buckingham Palace in 2012. The successive firsts established him as the portraitist of choice for the royal houses of Europe and a genuine Australian success story – albeit not a hugely well known one.

"Just think about it," says Michael Kirby, the former High Court judge who helped Heimans into the job. "The only portrait of the Queen for her diamond jubilee was done by an Australian. And it has been acquired by Westminster Abbey and will live for hundreds of years."

Kirby, who was then a senior Queen, London is enduring another coronavirus lockdown. Heimans has not conducted any in-person sittings of any.

"This pandemic has reminded me how much portraiture depend on human-to-human contact – the sitting, the initial exchange and spark that occurs between the subject and the artists is irreplaceable," he says.

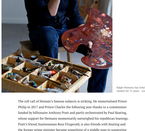
"I think there's a narrative hard and to Australia that the art can take a bit because it is not minimal, which is very distressing. We are one short long to affect during their lives of Heinous."

Ralph Heimans' portrait of Prince of Wales.

He laughs when I ask whether the pandemic might inspire an era of portraits featuring masks. "The eyes are the window to the soul and thankfully we can at least still see those. What's amazing is how easily we can still recognise people with a mask on – how little information we require, and how millisecondy, to identify somebody. The brain is incredible."

Heimans will often start a major work by tackling the eyes. "I'm off in the eyes. When I have a blank canvas, as soon as you paint the eyes, it starts to breathe and it starts to tell you that the painting needs. "His distress when Sydney' Lights arrived. This Sydney opera painted "HELP" over the Queen's portrait in 2013 was slightly offset by relief the vandal had missed her eyes.

"A portrait painter is a little bit like a sculptor – creating a form out of stone. You try to breathe life into a figure. It's not just a superficial thing of how they look. It's really how they move, how they feel, how they think. It's almost like being an actor – you have to inhabit that persona."



Ralph Heimans has had his work under his 15 years. Instagram

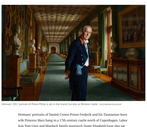
The cult cult of Heinous's famous subjects is striking. He immortalised Prince Philip in 2011, and Prince Charles the following year thanks to a commission from the Australian Prime Minister's Department. Heimans's work has drawn other support for Heimans numerically outstripped his equalitiar hunting. Fiona's friend, businessman Ross Fitzgerald, is also friends with Keating and the former prime minister mentioned something of a middle-man is suggesting Heimans might be the right choice to paint the Queen King.

Ralph Heimans' portrait of Prince Charles is also under pressure of Michael Stoller. Instagram/@ralphheimans

"So, yes, a portrait of Prince Charles came about through Paul Keating, which is ... unexpected," Heimans laughs. "But when you think about it, those two were contact really well, with their passion for the environment, art and architecture."

Keating thinks the startling beards 50-year-old artist is only just getting started. "He's on going to see a lot more of Ralph ... there's going to be an even bigger Ralph coming," Keating tells me.

"Ralph is interested in beauty, a matter which has gone out of fashion. And of course I've been interested in beauty per se all my life. And I'm sure you too somewhat of a kindred spirit you do find something of a common cause."



Ralph Heimans' portrait of author Michael Stoller. Instagram/@ralphheimans

Heimans' portraits of Danish Crown Prince Frederik and his Tasmanian born wife Princess Mary hang in a 17th-century castle north of Copenhagen. Labor leader Bill Shorten and his wife Chloe Bridgman-Shorten have also sat for the Sydney born artist, from billionaire business directors Dr Frederick Barclay and Darla Moore.

Heimans's work celebrates its heroes. Indeed it is sculptural at Sensuan, and extends to them that European are by nature more gifted. We've had many people in Australia who have had to go overseas to get discovered. But I do think Ralph was discovered before he went to London."

Heimans only came to paint Radical Movement in 1996 after a chance conversation between Kirby and the painter's documentary maker Father Frank.

"He really did, Kirby," Heimans says. "He admired my work, which was wonderful, and I admired what he stood for, his bravery and his judicial philosophy. We became friends."

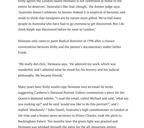
Many years later Kirby would copy Heimans into an email he wrote suggesting Canberra's National Portrait Gallery commissions a piece for the Queen's diamond jubilee. "I wrote and called Michael and said, 'what are you cooking up?' and he said 'would you like to do the portrait?' and I replied 'absolutely'," John Stuart, Australia's high commissioner to London at the time and a former prime secretary to Prince Charles, took the job to Buckingham Palace. Ten months later the green light was granted and Heimans was whisked through the gates for the all-important sitting.

Ralph Heimans' portrait of Lady Hayden.

You try to breathe life into a figure. It's not just a superficial thing of how they look. It's how they move, how they feel, how they think.

Portrait painter Ralph Heimans

There's an element of destiny to Heimans' extraordinary success. Some of his first memories feature dressing and painting. "From a very early age I remember my identity was an artist. "It was from the south London home he shares with wife Tami and their daughters Ella Rose and Hannah. I had a very clear sense of what I wanted to be and I could not alone for hours on end and was then a little bit of a nerd. I loved museum to my childhood because I could just pick up a pencil."



Ralph Heimans' portrait of Lady Hayden. Louise Kennedy

While Frank made documentary, Heimans' mother Jeanette taught French. His brother Jeremy would co-found activist group GetUp! in 2005. It was at the family home in Cremorne on Sydney's lower north shore where a 15-year-old Heimans fell in love with oils. "The experience of oils was indescribable. I set up a corner in the dining room of the family house and that was it. I basically never left that space for the rest of school."

Ralph Heimans' portrait of Lady Hayden. Louise Kennedy

Heimans would go on to win the new defunct National Art Award (part-1) and and the $2000 prize money to spend three months travelling Europe in search of an art school. But this was the 1980s and Heimas's interest in traditional European styles was thoroughly unfashionable, even discouraged. He scraped out prestigious academies in Florence, Milan, London and Vienna but was disappointed they all focused on theory over technique.

He returned to Australia deterred but determined. At one point Frank and Jeanette took their son to see a psychologist. When the doctor asked what was wrong, his exasperated parents blurted out in near-unison, "He wants to be an artist".

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"It was like a scene out of a Woody Allen movie," Heimans laughs. "The look on the psychologist's face was sort of like 'who am I supposed to be evaluating here?' It didn't take long before they did a complete about face and were very supportive and it has been so important to have that."

Conscious of his parents' concerns, Heimans enrolled in study architecture at Sydney University. "It was a bit odd because I was trying to design buildings and I was painting, but I felt it was a good thing to do for future." He eventually graduated with a degree in fine arts and post-mathematics – the latter of which he calls on to paint the intricate structural surrounds of portrait subjects.

Ralph Heimans' portrait of Prince Philip. Louise Kennedy

"When you study pure maths and you take it to a higher level, it is all about dealing with spatial issues and problems which keep returning to punctuation. When you paint realistically it's quite empirical, it's quite scientific and there's a lot of left brain that goes into it."

Ralph Heimans, featuring former High Court judge Michael Kirby is one of the most popular artists at Canberra's National Portrait Gallery. Louise Kennedy

Heimans' first commission was from his architecture lecturer, Trevor Howells. Another proud moment was when a British artist Heimans names only as Iggy – an emigrant from Krakow "who had virtually stopped art of the 19th century" – was impressed by Heimans's young talent and handed on his Sydney University offering from.

"It was the most unusual context in which to receive a rigorous European artistic education but I did, somehow, find this guy," Heimans says. The two became friends and Iggy mentored Heimans for the next three years before his untimely death at the age of 50. Ralph has understood a legacy about oil painting technique that I have developed since then but the whole thing does feel very distant since it's was foundational. It was very rigid and I had to break away from it to find my own path."

Heimans' work is unique in that he holds a narrative around the subject, often borrowing inspiration moments from their past. The Queen can be her diamond jubilee portrait at Buckingham Palace but the painting is set in Westminster Abbey where she was crowned in 1953.

"It's not about giving the likeness," Heimans says of his approach. "They'd first live. It's about trying to capture someone's essence. "He has sometimes spent more than a year working out a concept and composition before applying the first brush of oil to canvas.

"The whole process of art leaning is so well out the puzzle suggests he crosses the line between artist and scientist. Heimans's approach to his craft is something you look at as you walk past. You have to be able to stand in front of that painting for a whole hour."

Ralph Heiman's portrait of Princess Mary helped introduce the Tasmanian-born royal to Denmark. MUSEUM OF NATIONAL HISTORY

National Portrait Gallery of Australia director Karen Quinlan praises Heimans' storytelling, citing the subtle inclusion of Hobart's Constitution Dock in the portrait of Princess Mary even though it is set in Denmark's Fredensborg Palace.

"It's easy to be dazzled by the astonishing accuracy and detail of Ralph's paintings and his great ability in creating a 'likeness'," she says. "But beneath the surface there is consummate draughtsmanship as well as a concept that often has multiple layers and has been very carefully planned, considered and researched."

Mette Skougaard, the director of Denmark's Museum of National History, says crowds flock to the painting of Princess Mary and Prince Frederik. "These commissions can be tough because you have to live up to standards and traditions but at the same time also give it your personal touch and personal interpretation."

Not everyone is a fan, though. When Heimans unveiled his 2014 portrait of Quentin Bryce, art critic Andrew Frost lampooned it as a "shambles of hokey symbolism and compositional trickiness". Heimans portrayed Australia's first female governor-general in a suffragette purple jacket and included other subtle nods to her favourite causes.

Ralph Heiman's portrait of Dame Quentin Bryce hangs in the Members Hall of Parliament House.

Frost's scathing verdict summed up the views of a small band of detractors who believe Heimans' depictions are almost too real and not contemporary enough. In any event, Bryce loved her artistic depiction. "As a mathematician and a student of architecture, Ralph's composition is exquisite," the former governor-general says. "The individual is not just seen in physical form but is revealed to be a composite of influences as a person with depth. I was astounded at the level of research and observation that he applied as part of the creative process for my portrait."

Art dealer Philip Bacon met Heimans while the Bryce piece was being constructed and the two had a long conversation about the career challenges the young painter would face.

"Expat artists can often fade away unless they come home often for exhibitions, which is why people like Jeffrey Smart, Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan would come back every couple of years as the prodigal son and say, 'oh by the way I've got 30 new pictures to sell'," Bacon says.

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"Of course that isn't open to Ralph because he paints maybe one major portrait a year. There's nobody who paints like him. He really has developed so much his own handwriting, which is so important but so difficult when you are working in an established area like portrait painting – a lot of masters have gone before. And you just can't keep doing the huge blow-up heads painted from photographs, which is what the Archibald Prize has become over the past couple of decades. There's no future in that."

Ralph Heiman's portrait of legendary Sydney Symphony Orchestra conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Heimans says the criticism doesn't really affect him. "Some people think I've elbowed my way to the top as some kind of establishment figure who goes to all the right parties. Nothing could be further from the truth. I feel lucky to have had the commissions I've had but they haven't been through any degree of self-promotion at all."

In a sign he might be on the right track, Heimans was sorting through some old files recently when he stumbled on a decades-old handwritten 'wish list' of identities he one day hoped to paint. The Queen's name was at the very top.

"I thought, 'well I can tick that one off.' I really do love what I do. We've got one life and this is my voice. But there's still room to grow. I don't even feel I've come out my shell yet, artistically. There's so much more I can do."

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