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Princes, potentates and politicians shine in Ralph Heimans' glorious portraits

20 March 2024 | By Genevieve Jacobs

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A portrait of Princess Mary of Denmark is included in the exhibition. Photo: National Portrait Gallery.

It's a minor but important detail to know that as a university student, portrait artist Ralph Heimans studied pure maths and fine arts at the same time.

His paintings – now on show at the National Portrait Gallery in a major exhibition – are precise, detailed, finely balanced and very, very beautiful.

Moodily lit like the Renaissance portraits they echo, the images of princes, politicians and potentates of all kinds glow against dark walls, and each one has a hidden story.

Dame Quentin Bryce emerges from a shimmering wall of glass – an accurate representation of her offices at Government House but also a metaphor for the barriers she broke as Australia's first female Governor-General.



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The Princess Mary of Denmark pulls on her gloves in slanting afternoon light at the Frederiksborg castle. But the watery scene outside is not Copenhagen – it's the historic docks on Hobart's waterfront, her hometown.

There's a matching portrait of her husband on the opposite wall and detailed sketches accompanying the huge portraits show the meticulous, lengthy process of developing a painting that does more than recall a face – in the case of Dame Judi Dench, posed against the stage curtain where she's spent her life, it explicitly enters the world of memory.

Amid the cultural icons, prime ministers and High Court judges are portraits of the Pratt family and legendary bookmaker Bill Waterhouse, whose family was among the first to commission an Australian portrait of their beloved (and controversial father), his daughter Louise said at the exhibition launch.

"We knew we didn't want something ordinary, and we like to credit ourselves with discovering Ralph," she told *Region*.



It's rare these days to commission portraits and rare to focus your career as an artist solely on the form. Heimans left Australia in 1997 to pursue his career in Europe, where the paintings of Princess Mary and Prince Frederik were game-changers for his career.

The exhibition includes icons like Sir Ben Kingsley, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Margaret Atwood, alongside Prince Charles who appears in Dumfries House, the treasure trove of eighteenth century furniture and art he rescued from destruction and dispersal.

A highly polished grand piano top reflects the towering oak tree outside, a symbol of his commitment to enduring British craft and artisanship. Heimans also painted the late Queen, whose portrait now hangs permanently in Westminster Abbey.



Curator Joanna Gilmour says the exhibition brings together much of Heimans' work in the same place for the first time.

"The National Portrait Gallery holds four portraits by Ralph Heimans in its collection," she says.

"This exhibition will offer audiences an insight not only into Heimans' skill as an artist but consider his position in the centuries old tradition of Western portraiture."

Ralph Heimans: Portraiture. Power. Influence is at the National Portrait Gallery until 27 May.