



HEW LOCKE

Kathy Brewis, My monarch, my muse, The Sunday Times,  
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# *My monarch, my muse*

As a new exhibition brings together six decades of portraits of the Queen, the people who made them reveal why the most famous face of all is the ultimate inspiration. By Kathy Brewis



Off with her head:  
Justin Mortimer's  
controversial 1998  
portrait of the Queen,  
(right). Far right: Pietro  
Annigoni's majestic  
image, unveiled in  
1955, was voted the  
best portrait of Her  
Majesty in a 2006 poll



he looks quite chirpy, considering her head appears somewhat detached from her body. Justin Mortimer, whose portrait of the Queen is one highlight of a new National Portrait Gallery exhibition, was 27 in 1998 when the Royal Society of Arts commissioned an official portrait. "I was young and gauche," he says, "but I'm still proud of it. I think it's a good likeness." I find the lazy eye more disturbing than the possibly severed head, but it was the latter that caused a stir around the world. What mischief! "There was pressure to do a traditional image," says Mortimer, "but I would have felt like a coward."

Now, you might have thought that when Prince Philip, who turns 90 this week, unveiled this portrait of his wife, it would have been with a rude comment about the artist, or even a snigger. But no: the man who famously complained he'd been "turned into an amoeba" when his wife ascended to the throne said nothing. "He was completely professional," says Mortimer drily. As was the Queen herself. "It was always made very clear that an opinion would never be expressed." Was she amused? Who knows?

Others did not hold back. At a private function someone scribbled "F\*\*\* the Queen" on the painting, and "it was up to a poor Courtauld student to find out the exact constituents of Biro ink and clean it off." Mortimer was not offended. "I would have minded if she'd destroyed it, but that was quite funny." Mortimer and his royal sitter found little in common, though she clearly made an effort. "I wouldn't say there was a rapport. She was very chatty, but I don't know anything about horse-riding or dogs." The experience was surreal, he recalls, being in the Yellow Drawing

Room, looking out down the Mall: "People like me are normally looking in, our face squeezed between the railings." The Palace is "a very well-oiled machine, with equerries and butlers in penguin suits, discreet secretaries, hushed carpets. It's a stockade of otherness which you're allowed to enter. It's like the Forbidden City".

In the first of three hour-long sessions, he made three drawings on which, a decade on, the sweat marks are visible. It was a daunting commission. "You're aware of the ghosts of previous artists." He took dozens of Polaroids of the Queen's face. "I was getting closer and closer and I suddenly realised there was a pile of Polaroids on her lap. I had to kind of take them off her lap," he chuckles. Despite his instinctive irreverence, he enjoyed making the painting. "I liked her hair, and her eyes are amazing. She has a really cool gaze."

Look at the rather scary gaze of "Medusa", by Hew Locke, and you might think he, too, is being a bit naughty. But no, he is "neither royalist nor republican". It's a collage that took six weeks to make from layers of jewellery, flowers and plastic toys. The Queen's eyes are made of resin, an enlarged version of teddy-bear eyes. It took Locke four days to get them just right: he wanted it to be a haunting piece and for the eyes to draw you in. They don't draw me in, they scream "Run away!" But anyway, he will wax lyrical about his work given half the chance.

"She has gorillas in her forehead alluding to lost cities, lost worlds, King Solomon's Mines. Her mouth is made of bees and scorpions. It's quite a beautiful thing." Why call her Medusa? Hardly a flattering allusion. "Oh no! It may seem quite dark but it's also colourful. People can claim it as their own. Medusa is a misread character."



ALL PICTURES COURTESY OF NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY. PREVIOUS PAGES: LEFT: JUSTIN MORTIMER. THESE PAGES: CENTRE AND BOTTOM LEFT: GIGI. BEGONIN © 2014. TOP RIGHT: AP. BOTTOM RIGHT: ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION.

Feature



The making of monarchy: clockwise from top left, the young Queen leaves the London Palladium after a Royal Variety Performance, 1954; the 22-year-old Princess Elizabeth by Cecil Beaton, 1948; returning to London from Kenya in February 1952 on the death of her father, George VI; getting the Andy Warhol treatment in a 1985 screenprint; a more informal Beaton portrait, with the infant Prince Andrew, 1960

Prime ministers come and go but the Queen has remained constant. She has confidential meetings every week. She's stoical, she must know so much. She is a keeper of scary secrets."

Locke hasn't met the Queen and thinks that would risk spoiling the magic. He grew up in Guyana, schooled by Anglican nuns from Kent. Her image was on all his school exercise books; he used to add moustaches and spectacles. Now he makes curious representations of her head. "You can't imagine a world without her. She's somebody you can recognise purely by her silhouette. My passport belongs to her, I am her subject. Yet we don't know what she thinks. She's mysterious." Not everyone appreciates his work. "Kids get it straight away. Adults don't always."

How far we have come, for better or worse, since the 1950s, when the Italian painter Pietro Annigoni painted the newly crowned Queen as a romantic, if aloof, figure, gazing beneficently past the viewer. The off-chance paparazzi shots give us a glimpse of the real woman. A news picture from February 7, 1952, published in *The Times*, shows Elizabeth and Philip just off a plane from Kenya. She has just learnt that her father, George VI, has died; it is the first sight of the 25-year-old who has become Queen unexpectedly. Winston Churchill is waiting to meet her. No wonder she looks a little nervous.

Britain needed cheering up after the war. One American commentator called the Coronation "this show put on by the British for a psychological boost to their somewhat shaky Empire". Confident images of the Queen embodied the new outlook Churchill was keen to foster. Paul Moorhouse, the NPG show's ➤➤➤

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curator, has hung the show chronologically, in an unfolding narrative. What must it be like to be a living icon, captured on canvas and on camera over and over again? Moorhouse thinks “she has a great sense of responsibility but is not terribly visual: I don’t know if she’s interested in it, really”.

**H**er image is on every British coin and banknote, her face one of the best-known in the world. She is an über-celebrity, instantly recognisable – yet she lives in a closed, hidden world. This was the paradox that prompted Moorhouse to put the exhibition together. “Here is the most portrayed person of the 20th century, and what do we know about her?” An equally significant question is: what do we want to know? The answer may be, “Not too much”.

In 1969 the Queen took part in a television documentary, *Royal Family*, that backfired so spectacularly it has never been shown since. The NPG is chuffed to have a rare clip in its show. *Private Eye* still has fun with its “characters”, calling the Queen “Brenda”. It was an attempt to curry favour with a public that was increasingly disillusioned with the monarchy, even daring to question the point of it. When 116 children and 28 adults were engulfed in coal-mining waste in Aberfan, on October 21, 1966, nine days passed before the Queen and Philip visited the site. The delay seemed telling. The gap between Queen and country had never seemed wider.

So the experiment in reality TV seemed like a good plan. Oh, how wrong! It was chauffeur-driven car-crash TV. Almost two-thirds of the nation watched a wince-inducing 110 minutes of carefully edited footage. The Queen telling a joke – about Queen Victoria! – in that voice, at the breakfast table, a gawky Prince Charles lapping it up. Philip turning sausages on the barbecue. Eugh, no. Royalists were appalled: it was far too intimate. Republicans were horrified and smug: it confirmed that the royals were an irrelevance.

“I think she was brave to do it,” Moorhouse says. Princess Anne, who also features in the film, later recalled thinking it was “a rotten idea... the attention that had been brought on one since one was a child... you just didn’t want any more. The last thing you wanted was greater access”.

Now, it seems, we have almost come full circle: what many people want from the Queen is, again, mystique. Chris Levine’s eerie larger-than-life 3-D image of the Queen, *Lightness of Being* – originally commissioned by the Jersey Heritage Trust to mark 800 years’ allegiance to the Crown – has fascinated viewers since it first went on display in 2008. A new “lenticular” version of it is the first thing you’ll see in the NPG show.

Levine is an out-and-out admirer of HM. “It was



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: GILBERT AND GEORGE; NPG; HEW LOCKE; PA ARCHIVE; CHRIS LEVINE



Form and function: clockwise from left, Elizabeth and Philip Potent, 1981; state opening of parliament, 1982; Medusa, 2007, Hew Locke's mixed-media twist on the iconic image of the Queen he grew up with in Guyana; Dave Cheskin's photo of HM taking tea on a Glasgow council estate in 1999, with Susan McCarron, her son James (in the corner) and housing manager (standing); Lightness of Being, a 3-D image of the Queen, by the light artist Chris Levine, that appeared on the cover of this magazine in 2009



a privilege to get close to her. I had two sittings and two one-on-one audiences, and by the end of it I felt a real affection for her. She is an extraordinary lady. Her composure over the years is testimony to an exceptional person." Did he connect with her? "It was unnerving when she first entered the room. Initially she gave very little away; she has a highly developed mechanism to observe rather than give out. But once she was engaged in the shoot she was very personable."

Levine wanted the image to "vibrate with her true essence". "I wanted Her Majesty to feel comfortable with my portrayal. The Queen was always in the background as I grew up, and it was

a kind of comfort, like a distant great-aunt always being there. She is a cornerstone to our society, today as much as ever." That's debatable, of course — and that's the fun of it ■

*The Queen: Art and Image is at the National Galleries, Edinburgh, June 25-Sep 18; Ulster Museum, Belfast, Oct 14-Jan 15, 2012; National Museum, Cardiff, Feb 4-Apr 29, 2012; NPG London, May 17-Oct 21, 2012; [www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk)*

The artist Chris Levine on the secrets of capturing such a famous face: [thesundaytimes.co.uk/queenportraits](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/queenportraits)