

# At the Scottish National Portrait Gallery – Victoria Crowe : Beyond Likeness

As part of the Edinburgh Art Festival 2018 which begins properly at the end of July there is an exhibition of work by Victoria Crowe at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. A renowned artist this exhibition is restricted to her portraits of figures from the worlds of art and science.



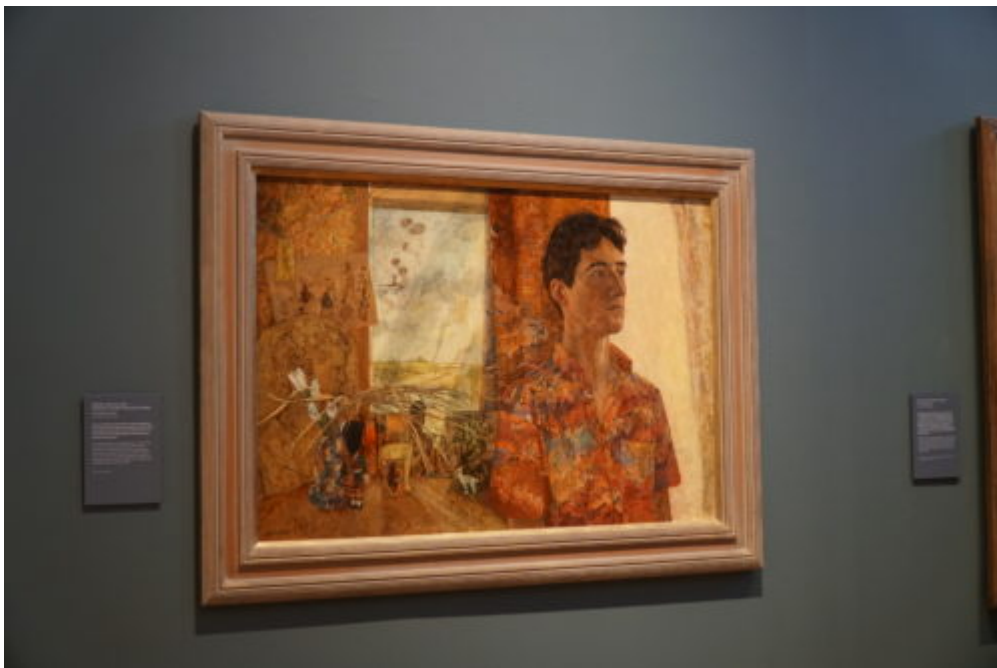
This is the first time that an exhibition has focused solely on her portraits and there are 54 of them including Professor Sir Peter Higgs, psychiatrist RD Laing, and composer Thea Musgrave.

Victoria Crowe has often spoken about the ‘privilege’ of painting a portrait and the relationship that develops between artist and sitter and cites her experience of painting the physicist Sir Peter Higgs as particularly rewarding. In the course the sittings the artist was captivated by the way the Noble laureate, in spite of his worldwide fame and the fact that his research has changed the way we perceive the world,

remains resolutely modest and shy. Crowe painted him resting in an iconic Wassily chair designed by the modernist architect Marcel Breuer, with the famous Higgs equation jotted on a wall nearby; a depiction of the explosion that confirmed the existence of the Higgs Boson, the subatomic particle that bears his name, hangs above Higgs like a lampshade.

A long time lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art, Crowe said : "It is good to have the opportunity of putting all of these paintings back together. Some of them I have not seen for about thirty years. They are all different strands of my life which add up to a meaningful whole so it is great to see them all again.

"I never think of myself as a portrait painter at all. Of all the paintings in this exhibition the time line is about 40 - odd years. I maybe do one or two a year but I paint a lot of landscape and the intensity of light on the landscape, natural form, natural world, art history, all of these things. Some of the portraits contain elements of all of the things I am interested in."



But it was the painting of Crowe's son that we spoke to her about most. Sadly just a few years after painting him, Ben

Walton died of cancer. It is called Heroes and Villains : Ben Walton and shows the 19 year old with some other details around him.

Victoria told us : "Heroes and Villains is a quote from a Beach Boys song. My son was obsessed with the Beach Boys. He was very, very musical and studied psychology at Aberdeen University. This painting is about him when he was 19 and standing on the threshold of life, moving away from home. It was his last summer at home with us. What's happening through the window is an event that happened the previous year when the first Gulf War was starting and they were practising parachute dropping n the Borders. So it was quite a strange and scary event, juxtaposed with Ben because one of his schoolfriends was out in the Gulf and I was thinking about the fragility of young guys of that age. I am very glad I painted it because three years later Ben had died from cancer when he was at university. So it is very much about holding onto that image of him as this youth stepping forward."

*Christopher Baker, Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, added: "Victoria Crowe is a painter of great accomplishment who allows us an intimate view of her fascinating sitters, the relationship she builds with them and their complex interior lives. She is also a wonderfully subtle colourist who creates layered works of remarkable beauty. It has been a privilege for the National Galleries of Scotland to work with her on selecting this exhibition, which will we are confident will prove immensely popular during Edinburgh's Festival season."*

We met one of her subjects standing next to his portrait.

Duncan Macmillan already knows a lot about the artist as he wrote a book about her in 2012. He is Emeritus Professor of History of Art at the University of Edinburgh, an art critic and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Royal

Society of Arts as well as an honorary Scottish Academician. He pointed out first that this exhibition is of course only her portraits, and that while she paints on commission Crowe prefers to paint portraits of people who interest her.

He told us how it came about that she painted him. He said : "I wrote the catalogue for this show and Vicky had been talking for a long time about painting my portrait mainly as a result of writing a book about her some years ago.

"So she thought this would be the occasion to fulfil that promise and paint my portrait. This painting was finished in February I think so it is quite recent."

I asked how it was to sit for his portrait and Professor Macmillan replied : "It was very pleasant! I suppose it is a slightly odd experience as you have somebody sitting there examining your detail, but Vicky of course is very charming and put me completely at my ease.

"You talk about things, so I suppose it is a bit like sitting on a psychiatrist's couch I think. The focus is so much on you you tend to talk not about yourself necessarily but ideas that you share and we talked about painting and portraiture too.

"I have done this once or twice, and I think the outcome reflects the ease of the situation.

And the all-important question : Does he like the portrait? Professor Macmillan said : "Oh yes, very much. My granddaughter thinks it is quite cool!"

Some of the portraits reflect her wider art which is about states of mind and memory and the way in which our memory of things overlays in our head. He explained : "When she is painting portraits Victoria brings in other things to enlarge the subject, rather than having the subject just described by a face. There are all sorts of peripheral stuff which builds up a sense of the person, who they are or what they are doing.

My portrait is quite simple but on one side there is a page of a book, an early copy of a book the first History of Art which is on my bookshelves. This associative kind of thing makes her paintings so interesting.”

Victoria Crowe explained to me that the details in the painting are meant to link you the viewer with the sitter in a more meaningful way, so that you know something about what they work at or are interested in.

**VICTORIA CROWE:**

**BEYOND LIKENESS**

12 May – 18 November 2018

Scottish National Portrait Gallery

1 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JD

0131 624 6200 | Admission FREE

#VictoriaCrowe

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