

# Telegraph

## The Queen: Art and Image, review

As a new show demonstrates, few artists have captured her real qualities, says Richard Dorment

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This touring exhibition is much more interesting than it sounds. The exhibition, which celebrates the Queen's forthcoming Diamond Jubilee, looks at how the sovereign has been portrayed in photographs, documentary films and paintings over the 60 years of her reign, from newsreel footage of her coronation to Lucian Freud's 2001 portrait. Most of us have seen the individual pictures in it (at least in reproduction), but that is a completely different experience from the biographical narrative created here by hanging them in chronological order. The organisers have played it fairly straight by choosing iconic images and alternating between the public and private person and between formal portraiture and photo-journalism. At one extreme, Dorothy Wilding's 1952 hand-coloured photo of the new monarch is the size and shape of a religious icon, the first step in the time-honoured process of turning a human being into a symbol of the state whose face could be endlessly reproduced on banknotes and stamps. At the other end of the spectrum, in a snapshot of the Queen watching the fire at Windsor Castle in November 1992, the emotional discipline of a lifetime is seen to give way to a look of pure anguish. Artists and photographers succeed or fail with the

Queen depending on their ability to set aside their own egos and allow her to be herself. If there is an antihero in the story it is Cecil Beaton, whose "fairy tale" images of the young Queen were utterly unsuited to her straightforward personality. These photos were far from harmless. By surrounding her with artifice, Beaton unintentionally implied that the monarch lived in an unreal world. He, of all people, should have known how dangerous it could be to remind her subjects that stage sets can be struck, productions cancelled, and leading ladies thrown out of work. And if Beaton missed the point, so did the Italian painter Pietro Annigoni (and later, the American painter Annie Leibovitz), whose overdramatic portrait showing the Queen in Garter robes silhouetted against the sky feels ludicrously untrue to her actual role, which is not as a five-star general, but as a benign head of state. By the late Sixties a new generation of royal photographers appeared who stood less in awe of the Queen and in consequence were better at presenting her to the world as a real person. Yousuf Karsh's glamorous photographs are all the more effective for dispensing with dramatic lighting, and Patrick Lichfield's snaps of his cousin on the Royal Yacht Bri-

tannia are the first we've seen in this show in which she looks like she's actually having a good time. In recent years some of the most enchanting images of the Queen have been fortuitous shots by photo-journalists. The famous one of the Queen on her own under an umbrella at the opening of the British Lawn Tennis Association's new headquarters is that rare thing, a photo of the most famous person in the world when no one is looking at her. And by far the funniest picture is Dave Cheskin's of the Queen having tea with Susan McCarron and her son James at their home on a Glasgow council estate in 1995. For all that the Queen sits ramrod straight and seems to have no intention of removing her coat, her smile is so warm and she looks so genuinely delighted to meet her hostess that at first you don't notice the little drama going on in the background, where a lady-in-waiting is clearly trying to persuade young James to stop picking his nose and join the party. Hew Locke, Kim Dong-Yoo, and Justin Mortimer: too many contemporary artists strain for originality and end up with nothing special. What they don't understand is that you can love the Queen or hate her, but you can't be ironic about her. She is so grand that attempts at levity serve only to make the artist look desperate. Leaving aside Lucian Freud's insulting daub, I particularly dislike Chris Levine's dirty trick of photographing the Queen while she was resting between shots. What does the image tell us? That the Queen sometimes closes her eyes? The most recent official portrait of the Queen and Prince Philip, by the German photographer Thomas Struth, stands out precisely because it tells us so much. Commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery in the spring of this year to commemorate the 90th birthday of the Prince, it is a masterpiece in the iconography of royal portraiture that in terms of its huge scale alone feels as significant as anything by Lawrence or Reynolds. The enormous size of the print is intrinsic to the artist's intention, because he wants us to be as mesmerised as he is by every detail of the splendid setting of the Green Drawing Room at Windsor Castle, from the grandeur of the candelabra and carpets to the depth and richness of the dark green silk that covers the settee on which the royal couple sit. He also wants us to be aware of what they are – and are not – wearing. Both

are dressed formally but not for an occasion of state. The Queen is not wearing a crown or a tiara, but does wear a triple row of pearls, a pearl and diamond brooch and – very visibly – her wedding and engagement ring. The Prince wears a suit and tie, but no medals or decorations. In terms of the conventions of royal portraiture, it must be significant that Struth shows the couple seated side by side on a piece of gilded furniture that could almost be construed as a double throne. Though they are of course unequal in rank, in the photo their status is differentiated only by the way Struth ensures that more light falls on the Queen than on the Prince. Prince Philip looks straight out at us, his face a blank, his thoughts unreadable. Not so the Queen. Struth catches an expression on her face I've never seen before, an almost imperceptible smile of private satisfaction. She could of course be thinking about a racehorse, but I'd like to think it's because she's sitting right where she is.