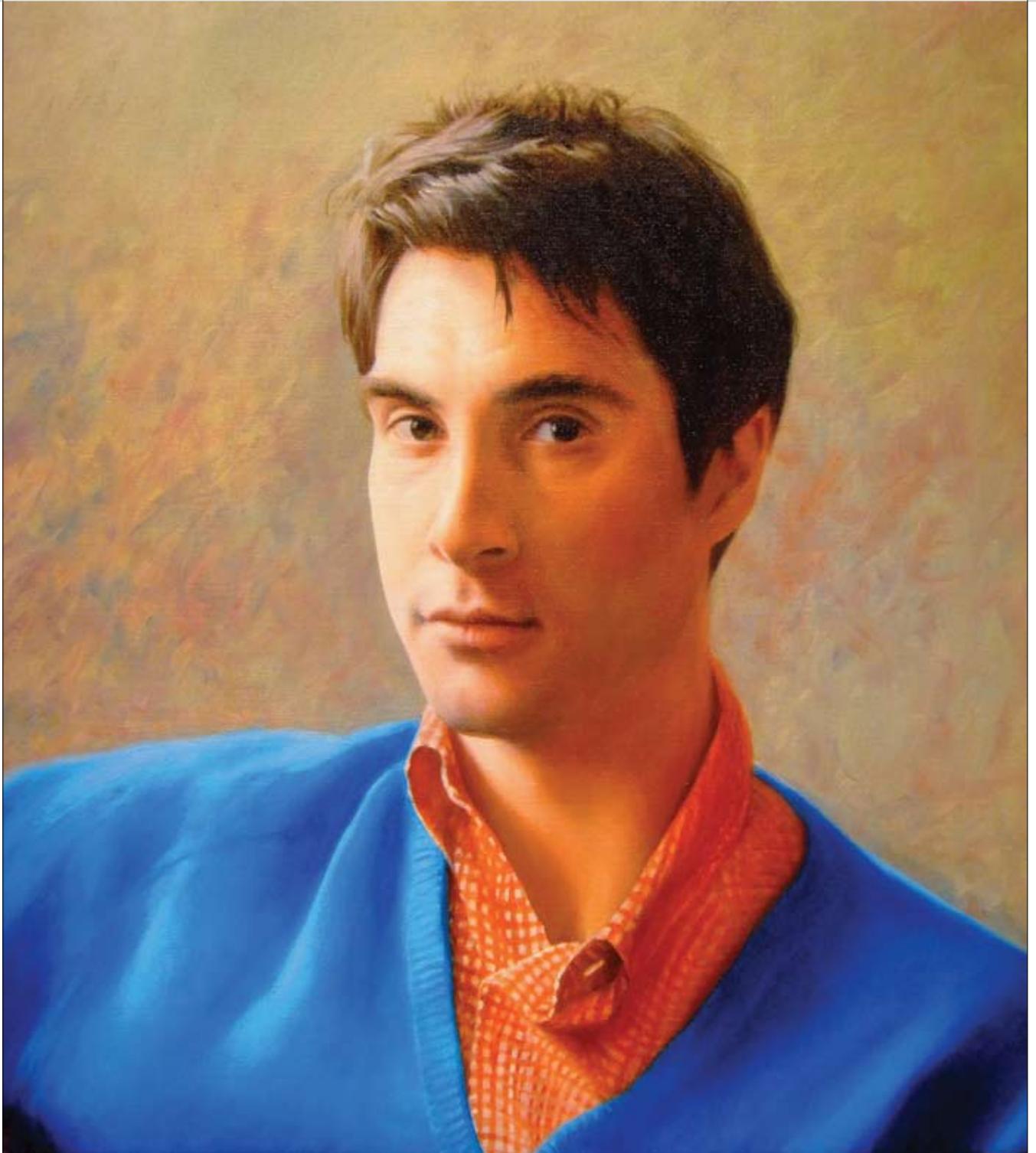


CULTURE



PORTRAIT OF THE ART DEALER AS A YOUNG-ISH MAN

Philip Short of the Colomb Art Gallery, who has spent years selling portraits of other people, talks to Jean-Paul Aubin-Parvu about his personal experience of sitting for a portrait of his own

Philip Short and Henry VIII have something important in common. What could it be? From what I remember, the former king of England had six wives, two of whom were beheaded, as were most of his advisors, especially ones called Thomas. During his long reign the king upset the Catholic church by declaring himself Supreme Head of the Church of England and dissolving Britain's monasteries. In later life he became vastly obese, as well as suffering with suppurating boils, gout and a maddening dose of syphilis.

(The Journal's lawyers wish to point out that Philip Short, managing director of the Colomb Art gallery, has not been married six times. At no point has he been party to any beheadings or meted out summary justice against any persons called Thomas. Mr Short has never massively undermined the Roman Catholic Church and to the best of our knowledge has left every monastery just as he found it. Mr Short does not have

a waist measurement of 54 inches. The Journal is in no way suggesting that the said gentleman has boils about his person – suppurating or otherwise – and his medical records indicate, for now at least, neither gout nor syphilis.)

But just like Henry VIII, Philip Short has had his portrait painted by a master of the period. Henry went under the brush of one Hans Holbein, while in Philip's case it was renowned portrait artist Stanley Kerr.

"It was a 30th birthday present," says Philip, who sits at a small table in the centre of his sun-drenched George Street gallery. "I've always thought Stanley Kerr is amazing. So it just took a subtle whisper in the right ear, and on my birthday my family told me they'd commissioned him to paint my portrait."

The finished work relaxes in one corner of the gallery, illuminated by the sunlight pouring in through the large window. Every time Philip

glances over at the 18 square inch oil painting, his face stares right back. They seem to like each other.

Philip is equally taken with the artist himself, one of three portrait artists represented by the Colomb Art Gallery. "Stanley approached us two years ago," says Philip. "His work – wow! He's had so many exhibitions and has such a distinct style that straight away we took him on. Stanley's a great part of the Colomb Art family."

I ask Philip whether he had any reservations about being immortalised on canvas. "Not really," he grins. "I take the view that as you go through life you should have certain markers – your 18th, 21st, 30th, 40th and so on – and a portrait is kind of like a photograph. It just sets it in stone. I can take the look of myself, so I don't mind really. That sounds a bit egotistical, but I think we should be proud about who we are."

PORTRAIT OF THE ART DEALER



Philip has every right to feel at ease. His face has weathered far better than others I could mention, but this would count for nothing if he had made a fashion disaster on the morning of his first sitting. Wearing the wrong jumper would see him laughed out of the art world. The stakes were high. How difficult was the decision of what to wear?

“I basically raided my cupboard for anything that might look good from the chest upwards,” says Philip. “And then, between them, Stanley and my girlfriend decided on the best look, by considering the colour of my hair, my features, and how it would all flow. And I’m not great at dressing myself anyway. I just sat back – literally.”

The entire portrait process took six weeks, with the first of three sittings taking place at Philip’s north London home in January 2010. “Stanley prefers to work in your own home, because then you are more

comfortable,” says Philip. “You can kick back, relax and put your feet up – and he just takes it from there.” Every portrait starts with the pose. Philip was again led by Stanley. “I believe you’ve got to leave it to the artist’s interpretation,” he says. “The way Stanley works is that part of the first sitting was just me and him chatting. We had a cup of tea, talked about our lives and just got to know each other for a few hours. From that Stanley would discover certain gestures or mannerisms I have, and when he started to sketch he would try to bring these out. Obviously the artist could simply put the subject into a certain position, but if it’s not natural it’s not going to work. They have to draw out something from the subject’s character.”

After using his sketch book, Stanley eventually began to draw simple outlines onto the actual

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canvas in order to start detailing proportions and positioning. Throughout the first sitting the artist took photographs of Philip from many angles, right down to close-ups of the textures of his clothes and hair. Stanley was then able to go away and build up the portrait using the sketches and photographs. At the next sitting Stanley spent two hours honing the textures and working on the colours and the light. He then returned for the third and final sitting to focus on the fine details.

Philip was surprised by the fluidity of the process. “As a fine artist Stanley knows the historical background, the techniques and all the different possibilities. At the start he said: ‘I’m thinking French.’ It was amazing to see the progress, because by the end he was like: ‘I’m going more Italian. It’s going to be more Renaissance.’” Stanley made many changes along the way. “For example, the background was starting to get in the way,” explains Philip, “so he went for a more mottled effect, which actually brings out the face.” Stanley also changed the angle of Philip’s face. “He’s so precise. He went away and actually changed the position. To start with I was looking straight on, but he felt it worked better with my face at an angle.”

In terms of man hours, the three sittings represented the mere tip of the iceberg. “In between Stanley goes away and works on the portrait for hours,” says Philip. “Now that’s actually the most fascinating part – the thought of somebody spending all that time working on me. I can imagine him in his studio.”

It shouldn’t be forgotten that Philip had to do a great deal of keeping still – not easy for a man who freely admits to having ants in his pants. “I did fidget,” he laughs, “and I did scratch my nose – in fact I moved a lot. Luckily Stanley is very patient and just realigns you back into position.”

Despite failing to resemble a statue, it sounds like Philip enjoyed every minute. “I did actually,” he says.

“I enjoyed talking to Stanley and really getting to know him. He’s an excellent man and very worldly – he’s interested and he’s interesting.”

Stanley Kerr is certainly that. Trained in drawing and painting at Maidstone College of Art – where he studied with David Hockney – the Grimsby-born painter gradually moved through the world of fine art, into the conceptual art scene, and then into commercial art, design and illustration. In recent years Kerr has worked as a creative director with a major international advertising agency while continuing his work in painting (now his full time occupation). He has participated in group shows both nationally and internationally and has a number of works in private collections – including MCA Records in New York.

Philip is delighted with Stanley’s portrait of him. “I think it’s excellent, and as a piece I honestly couldn’t ask for anything better. I’m extremely happy with it.” So, too, are Philip’s family, who each contributed towards the cost of the portrait. So happy, in fact, that they plan to repeat the gift when Philip’s dad reaches his next birthday.

The best news is that Philip’s partner likes the portrait too – just as well, for she’ll be sharing her home with it once it’s been exhibited at the gallery. “There’s a debate as to where it should go,” says Philip. “I wouldn’t like it to be sat opposite me, and I wouldn’t want it to be hidden. There’s a perfect spot – and we will find it.”

I delicately enquire whether having his portrait painted has changed young Philip at all? “I guess there are

LINKS

The Colomb Art gallery
52a George Street
020 7487 5118
colombart.co.uk

Stanley Kerr
stanleykerr.co.uk

two of us now,” he quips. “No actually it has. It’s maintained my respect for artists and the way they treat their artwork – both the pleasure they give and the pleasure they take from their work.” Surely he has been filled with delusions of grandeur though? If I’d been painted by an artist, at the very least I’d have hired my own gentleman’s gentleman by now. I demand an answer.

“No, not at all,” laughs Philip, “quite the opposite actually. To be honest I find it quite humbling that somebody would spend time on me – somebody really looking inside me and pulling out elements. And it’s very cathartic actually. It’s a cathartic process between you and the artist.”

Yes, but if Philip’s portrait were to be hung posthumously in the National Portrait Gallery then I bet he’d want to rub shoulders with some famous figures from history, like a king, a pope, a Victorian politician with fluffy sideburns and a stiff collar – David Beckham even. Wouldn’t he?

“I’d balance it out with a portrait of the artist,” says Philip. “Stanley has quite a striking look and it would also be a thank you to him for painting my portrait. We’d be next to each other.”

So not Henry VIII then? “No,” smiles Philip, “I guess the stereotype of the portrait has always been from royalty – and it shouldn’t be like that. I don’t think it should be thought of as something which only people of nobility have done. It shouldn’t be elitist. Everyone should go through the process of having their portrait painted.”

It’s a damn good thing he died when he did, for I doubt Henry VIII would have liked all this revolutionary talk. The King of England didn’t much care for revolution. It tended to make him angry – and we all know what happened when Henry got angry.

10 per cent of sales from gallery portrait commissions will be donated to the Rotary Club to support local causes