

A royal subject

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GEORGINA Barclay, who has recently painted the Prince of Wales, was an art school rebel. She nearly failed her first-year examinations – not because she submitted a pickled cow in a glass case but because she dared to hand in figurative drawings in a classical style. Bovine installation art would probably have delighted her tutors; the drawings were an affront to the cultural establishment.

Threatened with eviction from her university art course for this outrage, Barclay (pictured below) was forced to rustle up a selection of “proper” modern art overnight. She hurriedly fashioned fragments of torn canvas and spattered paint for a series of pieces she describes as “total tat”. Her teachers loved them and she scraped through. A fellow student passed first time with a collection of potato prints.

Most young people would have been crushed by this but Barclay remained convinced that an artist should master drawing and be able to paint from life. She left England to train in classical portraiture at the private Charles H Cecil College in Florence.

Following her instincts has paid off. Barclay, 28, is prospering as a portrait painter in London and has just completed a canvas of Charles (pictured left) as the last colonel-in-chief of the Black Watch regiment.

We meet in the garden of the members-only Chelsea Arts Club in west London. The roses haven't stopped flowering over winter and a bower of white graces this city oasis.

Barclay says her painting of the prince is tinged with sadness. It was commissioned to mark the end of generations of royal association with the Black Watch. The regiment is now incorporated as a battalion within the Royal Regiment of Scotland.

Barclay was awarded the commission after a worldwide competition. Hers was one of two names submitted to Clarence House, the prince's London home, for the final decision.

Once she was selected, the schedule was tight. “I only had four one-hour sittings and had to do my research in advance. Fortunately, I was able to speak to fellow artists who'd painted Charles for advice and I visited the room at Highgrove that would act as my studio the day before.”

Barclay says many of her subjects find being painted therapeutic: it's unusual to take three hours out of your day to sit and chat to someone. An artist must find common ground with their subject; for Charles it was architecture and the environment.

Barclay says such matters exercise him so much that she prayed for his mood to brighten because it was affecting his expression. “There are some things he's passionate about and has had ideas about. There's this black cloud that comes over him when nobody's listened and no one's understood. I was thinking, please lighten up and try to change the subject.”

Was she overawed? “Charles immediately put me at ease because he could tell I might be nervous. He's used to this sort of situation and was terribly kind. I instantly recognised this approach: it's one I use myself in relaxing my subjects.”

Her affinity for classical techniques must have endeared her to Charles. “I don't dislike all modern art. Some of it is fascinating, thoughtful and attractive but it's embarrassing to be around at this period in art history.”

Barclay has depicted other men in uniform. She has painted Lord Guthrie, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, in dress uniform; a retiring Irish Guard who sold his motorbike to pay for the portrait; and a soldier returned after a tour of duty in Afghanistan in battle camouflage.

Her subjects are usually posed in relaxed mood and casually dressed. In one, a man holds a whisky tumbler, another a cigarette. Sporting outfits are also popular, especially cricket or fishing. Women might pose with their favourite jewellery. In one portrait, an ornate crucifix is set off by a geometric patterned blouse in a composition with Renaissance overtones.

People will ask to have their looks improved. Women might want fuller lips, thinner faces and larger eyes. How does she deal with that? "You can flatter to a certain degree but I will not change too much. My portraiture is meant to be accurate. I might take off one chin but not all three."

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