



Michael Noakes

FAMOUS FACES

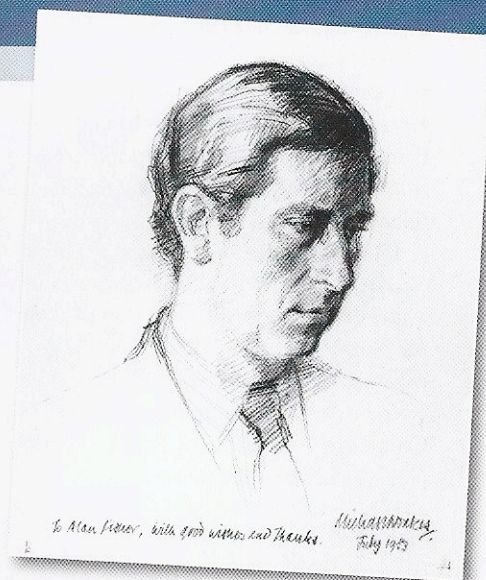
Having painted presidents, prime ministers and even Sinatra, Michael Noakes is better placed than most to discuss the pros and cons of portraiture. Looking back on a distinguished 50-year career, he reveals he is currently on the search for wider horizons. Words: Stuart George

LAST SUMMER, Michael Noakes was preparing to move to Malvern after 33 years in a splendid semi-detached house in North London when he suddenly remarked to me: "Mrs Thatcher is on her side over there."

Despite my initial confusion, Lady Thatcher herself wasn't there – one of Noakes' highly finished studies of her was stowed on the floor. There were footmarks all over the floor of his studio,

too, and he pointed out several of these: Lady Thatcher stood there; the Duke of York was here.

In 1989, Noakes was commissioned by a livery company to paint Lady Thatcher when she was still Prime Minister. The first session was at Chequers in January 1990, only 10 months before she left Downing Street. Noakes cheekily suggested he would like to depict her in front of the door at ▷



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No.10 and, to his surprise, she concurred. The Prime Minister took sitting for her portrait very seriously, and only left a couple of times to take phone calls. She “stands very upright,” notes Noakes.

One of Britain’s most distinguished portraitists, Michael Noakes has painted everyone from politicians and churchmen, to actors and writers, as well as so many Royal Family members that he could lay claim to the title of unofficial court painter.

Noakes has also painted President Clinton, making preparatory studies in the Oval Office – one of very few painters to have been given such access.

“When Clinton is talking to you, he makes you feel as though you are the only person that matters.”

A swinging commission

Noakes was born in Brighton but raised in Reigate. His early education was at Downside, the Catholic public school near Bath, but his art education began at Reigate School of Art, where he spent four years, followed by another four years at the Royal Academy Schools in London. He subsequently taught at Reigate, an invaluable source of income in those days.

“You can’t give up that source of regular income unless your wife agrees.” His wife is Vivien Noakes, a distinguished literary scholar with a particular interest in Edward Lear. “A male painter ought to marry an heiress, and a female writer ought to marry a stockbroker. A painter and writer is a lethal financial combination.”

Though not always a lucrative profession, Noakes’ work has found its way into some impressive collections. He has four works in the National Portrait Gallery’s permanent collection, as well as pieces in the collections of the British Museum, the House of Commons – even that of Frank Sinatra. Noakes designed the sleeve of his 1977 album *Portrait Of Sinatra*, a compilation of his early Columbia recordings, which became the first time a platinum disc was awarded to



a painter and is probably still the only occasion when such an award has been made specifically for work on a record sleeve.

Although there are mostly famous faces on the walls of his studio, Noakes does a great deal of work with less well-known people.

“If I just waited for those commissions from famous people it wouldn’t pay the gas bill. My heart is really in landscapes, but English people like to compartmentalise, so they find it difficult to accept that you paint landscapes if you have promoted yourself as a portraitist.”

By royal appointment

Perhaps his best-known work was done in 1999, when he drew over 360 mixed-media illustrations for the book *The Daily Life of the Queen: An Artist’s Diary*, written by his wife. The book covered every engagement and

working responsibility of the Queen throughout the year, with a commentary on the meaning and significance of each one. The work was highly challenging for Noakes, who had to draw or paint very quickly, and often outdoors, too.

The original seed from which the book grew was sown in 1980 with an invitation to observe and sketch the Prince of Wales. The idea was scuppered after the Prince’s marriage in 1981, but from this grew the proposal to record the Queen’s working life.

It was a typically full and exciting year for the Queen that included Scottish devolution and the opening of the Welsh Assembly; the 50th anniversary of the Commonwealth; a three-country tour of Africa; a state visit to Korea; world cups in both cricket and rugby; a royal wedding; and a contentious state visit by the president of China.

The Noakes were given royal support but no censorship of either illustrations or text – a rare privilege, indeed. Nevertheless, the phrase “no one told us you were coming” became familiar to the Noakes, who on several occasions were unceremoniously asked to leave.

Noakes estimates he has spent 20-30 hours alone with the Queen over the years, a privilege that only family members and senior staff usually enjoy.

“She is very chatty”, he reveals, but his reluctance to say too much about his subjects nonetheless contributes to his popularity as a portraitist.

A former president of the Society of Catholic Artists, Noakes’ most eminent recent subject was Pope Benedict.

“Even in a non-Catholic – perhaps even anti-Catholic – country like the UK, I’m surprised by the weight it carries. Painting the Queen seems to be nothing compared to painting him.” So far, he is the first and only artist to have painted an official portrait of Pope Benedict.

The paradox of such a high-profile project is that the painting will never be exhibited, so hardly anybody will see it. But Noakes telephoned *The Times*, which gave the portrait a full-page story. Despite a long list of eminent subjects, he still actively touts for work, and explains that such self-publicity is a necessity.

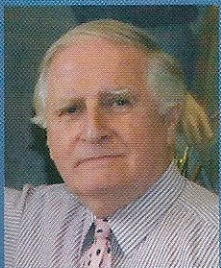
“Nobody will commission you if they haven’t heard of you, especially in this area of figurative painting.”

Despite having painted so many famous people, Noakes concludes: “The private person is often more attractive than the public persona.” **A53**



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Profile
Michael Noakes was born in Reigate in 1933 and studied at Reigate School of Art and the Royal Academy Schools in London. He has



Painted many public figures, including Lady Thatcher, Bill Clinton and members of the Royal Family. He is a former president of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters and a current member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. He has been involved with more than 150 television broadcasts, including a four-year spell as Art Correspondent for the BBC programme *Time & Round* in the late 1960s. See more of his work at www.michael-noakes.co.uk.



ABOVE *His Eminence Cardinal Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster*, oil on canvas, 101x76cm

LEFT *HM Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother*, oil on canvas, 40x50cm

OPPOSITE *HRH The Princess Royal*, oil on canvas, 101x76cm

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Michael Noakes in his cluttered studio;
Pencil study for portrait of HRH The Prince of Wales