

Peter Edwards

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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What do you remember about your first meeting with Bobby Charlton?

The first meeting with Bobby Charlton I remember very well because I'd been waiting in the afternoon for him to come to Ellesmere where my studio was. The studio was two floors up in a sort of garret and the knock came down in the entry and I went down and opened the door and there he was, the great Bobby Charlton. On the very first sitting Bobby came in a suit with a shirt and tie, he obviously doesn't go around in sports gear all the time now, but that just didn't seem quite right for this particular portrait and so again I used to discuss things with Robin Gibson back at the National Portrait Gallery and with his backing, I felt that, and if Bobby agreed, it would be much more appropriate to have something more sporting. Both Bobby and I, I think felt it would not be appropriate to be in shorts, I think he felt that he was beyond sort of being depicted in shorts age but I think with the tracksuit and the sports top and the trainers in particular I think we got it right. The trainers in particular, they were shoes that he'd worn many times so in the way clothes do they sort of moulded themselves a bit, in the same way that the chair that he sat on had moulded itself to him.

How did the portrait develop?

The first painting I did of Bobby was a head and shoulders, by which I mean a life-sized head and body down to about the waist, which was the original brief given to me. That's a very comfortable size to work one-to-one and that was worked up to the finished painting really and I could have submitted that as the final painting but I had a very strong feeling by then that this painting done entirely from life, entirely one-to-one did not say everything that I wanted to say about Bobby Charlton and I realised you're not going to get a chance to paint such an iconic figure as Bobby Charlton everyday - I might not get a chance to paint someone as well known in the same way ever again and so there was a lot more that I wanted to do so it was very important for me to then move on to this full figure to get the full body language. Then I went up to Knutsford to see Bobby in his home setting. I took quite a few snaps in the home, these I took back to the studio. Then I saw I had the study of Bobby Charlton, quite a finished head and shoulders study and I had the snaps of the armchair with him in it and the two of them were then composed into this much larger painting, which continued on for another six months or so.

Where is the portrait set?

The painting is set inside, nominally in Bobby Charlton's living room or at least the chair is from Bobby Charlton's living room but almost everything else is sort of altered and played around with. I didn't want a particular space with the wallpaper described and the curtains, all the floral patterns ... The only object that was focused on was the armchair and by doing that the armchair took on, I felt, a sort of symbolic role, perhaps as a throne almost, or a champion's seat.

Is that a halo above Bobby's head?

The whole halo thing came about because I'd done this very gestural mark on the canvas early on because I always start big canvases very frenetically making lots of marks and sort of thinking loosely about the painting. I'd sent a Polaroid down to Robin Gibson in London, the curator at the National Portrait Gallery, and with the usual Robin Gibson wit he wrote back straight away and said 'I like the halo' and I thought 'well, alright you've made your witty remark so I'll get my own back and keep it in until the end of the painting and see if I can get away with it'. Realising of course, that even if it's only half a halo this will spark of again certain thoughts and ideas in the painting which might not be inappropriate to Bobby Charlton. Of course when it was unveiled that was very much what

most of the press picked up on, this halo effect which I of course stoutly denied having consciously tried to do.

What did you learn about Bobby Charlton during the commission?

I think in the course of doing the painting what I learnt about Bobby I think was an understanding that as well as being a very professional communicator, which he's become, underneath that is quite a private and reserved person, possibly even a shy person whose learnt how to overcome that. But I also felt in some deep sense that there's a tinge of almost wishfulness, maybe it's too far to go to say sadness, so I think it was important that the painting reflected the person that I met and I wasn't meeting Bobby in a public setting, it was an intimate setting and like oil painting often is, it is an intimate process.