

Michael Taylor

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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How did the portrait of P.D. James evolve?

I first met P.D. James some weeks before the painting began, I went to her house just in order to see really what sort of environment she lived in, I like to go into the environment of the sitter if I'm going to paint a portrait because I think that's part of them, it reflects how they've chosen to live. We talked, I did some little diagrammatic drawings to remind myself what was there, then I went away and let it all percolate for a while. And then when I felt that I'd extracted what was useful I contacted her again and we arranged a sitting.

What aspects of her were you aiming to portray?

I hope to show as much as possible of her personality that you can extract through her face and her environment. I wish to reflect a certain amount of what she does, what she thinks of herself as, and in using my craft, my perceptions as an artist I obviously wasn't going to want to put too much of myself into it because that would be pointless. The idea is to extract as much as you can from the sitter. When you first meet a sitter they move around, they put themselves in different poses but you watch what their doing and some poses seem to click, they just become ... your intuition tells you that that is telling you something about it. In her case she put one hand almost stilling the other one, she almost helped it and it was the way it was reflected in this kind of dark, stagnant pool of the table, it seemed to have some of the darkness of her writing. You felt that in the depths of this mahogany reflection there were loathsome things lurking.

Do you find the setting sinister?

What she's doing as a crime writer is up to a point I suppose you could say is a certain matter of clichéd content isn't there. When I was first asked, my obvious thought was 'I'll paint her in the dining room with the candlestick and Professor Plum' because that's how you think of crime fiction and in fact when I did get there and sat down, blow me, there was in fact a candlestick and a dining table and a veiled figure, perhaps Professor Plum.

What can you say about the objects in the portrait?

I think it was important to read something before I attempted it, yes. Her imagination was obviously quite dark and the importance seemed to be placed on the veiled bride. It obviously had some significance to her, I noticed it was actually mentioned in a book and there it was on the mantelpiece, it has a sort of sinister connotation as well, it's almost like a shrouded figure, a mute witness, 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil', it's very introspective, so I wanted that in, that I knew immediately. I think it very quickly occurred to me that it had the element of being a double portrait, the two reflecting one off the other, the introspective, the outside and the inside.

Why did you distort various objects?

In the case of P.D. James and often crime writers in general, there is a sort of dark quality to the work and in the case of the painting I thought nothing should be straightforward and there was a sort of intuitive feel that things distort as you look at them, there's a psychological distortion going on, there's a dark wind blowing through the picture, it billows the architraves and doors like curtains blowing at an open window, French doors, nothing is as it seems, everything is distorted by the way it's looked at and by the psychology of the sitter almost bends it as well and the mute witness of the veiled figure, the statuette.

Do you paint from life?

It is very important to me to paint from life. I think the interaction between two people and the way that oil paint has the unique ability to respond to those inflections as you're painting, the slightest nervous response can be registered by the hand and then the oil paint sets and it sets those little inflections in, it doesn't change, it remains exactly the same. So working from life you're dealing with a very direct nervous response to the sitter and indeed that response is being set like a fly in amber in the paint and it can be extracted hundreds of years later just by standing in front of the portrait, it's a wonderful mystery really.

Did she like the portrait?

Well, it's very difficult to tell but she outwardly looked as if she liked it, she said 'Well done', I think I said at the time, 'You don't look weak and you don't look stupid so at least we got that bit right', she said 'No, I don't'.