

**Tom Phillips**

Audio Guide transcript

The Gallery commissioned this portrait by Tom Phillips in 1984. It took the artist two years to complete, during the course of which he produced a number of studies, including four large-scale pastel heads, some of which you may also find on view in the Gallery. Here, he talks about the experience of painting Dame Iris Murdoch.

‘She came to sit down...sit down in the corner of the room, which is where people usually sit to have their portraits painted, and suddenly that corner was illuminated: she was...I had this kind of image of her, an electric light bulb lighting up that corner. And we talked for sometime about various things that could be in a picture because she’s very interested in pictures and we’d just been looking at the same picture in the Venice Exhibition at the Royal Academy, which was the Flaying of Marsyas, and we’d been looking at a tree together, the ginko tree, which is outside my, um, kitchen here, in my studio building, and I liked the fact that she loved that tree and I love that tree: it’s a kind of primeval tree, it’s darkly rooted in the past of the world. So everything came together, you know, it sounds nice now just to say everything came together, but the business of getting those things together was very problematical and we were always very difficult. If the portrait of Iris Murdoch ends up looking like an icon, it’s exactly meant to look like an icon, only because that’s what she represents to me, you know, certain virtues in English life, certain excellences in English literature, certain depths in English philosophy, certain representations of womanhood and maturity, all these things brought together in one very beautiful person, and therefore she already is an icon. The thing is do you...can you make an icon of an icon? Well I had a go.’