Anniversary year portraits

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The traditional unveiling of the Royal Society’s presidential portrait on 30 November 2010 was one of the final acts of the 350th anniversary year. During 2010, several new paintings were donated specifically for the Society’s new premises at Chicheley Hall in Buckinghamshire, but by the second half of the year there were also some unexpected and pleasing portrait acquisitions for Carlton House Terrace, in addition to the commissioned study of Lord Rees. These are described briefly here.

The first, a donated painting, was carried halfway around the world by its subject, Professor Derek Ashworth Denton FRS, to arrive at the Royal Society just before the South Bank convocation of Fellows in June 2010. Professor Denton, the founder of Australia’s Howard Florey Institute, had secured an old friend, the Archibald prize-winning Australian artist Janet Dawson (b. 1935) to compose a portrait based in part on her early recollections of him.

Janet Dawson was born in Sydney and studied at the National Gallery Art School in Melbourne from 1951. A National Gallery of Victoria Travelling Scholarship allowed her to study in Europe, where she enrolled in printmaking courses at the Slade and Central Schools, London, and then later in Paris. On her return to Melbourne and subsequently Sydney during the 1960s, Dawson was associated with Colourfield painting—that is, precision-edged and brightly coloured abstract expressionism. But this was only ever part of her output, and she experimented with three-dimensional works in addition to professional theatre set design. By the 1970s, another change in direction moved her towards a more representational style based on nature and still-life painting around her then-new home at Scribble Rock, Binalong, in New South Wales. Dawson shares with her subject a clear interest in observational excellence, and from 2000 she began to use a small telescope to facilitate paintings of cloud formations and the Moon.¹

The portrait of Derek Denton (figure 1) exhibits several characteristic features of Dawson’s art, most obviously in the mild piece of trompe-l’œil in which the composition, hanging in its preferred condition (without a conventional frame) continues around the stretcher-edges of the canvas. The background is clouded, in keeping with many Dawson paintings, and very appropriate for a work that, although contemporary, aims to capture its subject in an earlier, unspecified time of life.

Martin Rees’s presidential portrait was commissioned from the leading British artist Bryan Organ (b. 1935) and is a very different affair. It places Lord Rees in a particular time, place and role, communicating the Royal Society’s anniversary year. Organ studied

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at Loughborough College and the Royal Academy Schools and is perhaps best known for his pictures of the Royal family, including Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana. These works are in the National Portrait Gallery alongside fine paintings of Harold Macmillan FRS and Sir Roy Strong. Lord Rees is not Organ’s first Royal Society President: he painted Sir Alan Hodgkin FRS (1914–98) in 1983, but not as a Royal Society commission.

The new work (figure 2) plays strongly on the anniversary theme, showing Martin Rees engaging the viewer in the act of speaking, above a branded platform. In addition to being an immediate and very characteristic view of Lord Rees, the work features a mischievously cavalier cropping of the Society’s 350th year logo, a *jeu d’esprit* that would have been suicide by corporate identity for any member of staff during the anniversary. Bryan Organ generously presented the Society with preparatory drawings for the main portrait including his observations of Martin Rees’s hand gestures, which show how much this aspect of his subject caught the artist’s attention and influenced the final, active composition. Organ’s portrait was unveiled on Anniversary Day 2010 and can be seen in the Kohn Centre at 6–9 Carlton House Terrace. The accompanying drawing will be exhibited later in 2011.

The Society’s recent drive to capture art featuring living scientists received a boost from another astronomer-Fellow, Sir Bernard Lovell, who kindly donated a work on paper in April 2011 (figure 3). This 1963 ink sketch with watercolour highlights was originally exhibited at the Royal Academy and shows Lovell at a period when he was the most recognizable scientist of his generation: 1963 was the year of his visit to the Soviet Union, when,
according to recent press reports, Lovell was pressured to defect as part of Cold War machinations surrounding the military use of the Jodrell Bank radio telescope. Sir Bernard, cheerfully drawn by the painter and engraver Hubert Andrew Freeth (1912–86), seems a world away from these professional tribulations. Because the Society has so few works on paper, it is a nice coincidence that the drawing was produced in the same year as the Society’s sketch of Dame Kathleen Lonsdale FRS (1903–73) allowing those interested to compare two famous male and female Fellows at their most influential.

Although it might seem a more melancholy task, the unveiling of a newly commissioned portrait of Dame Anne McLaren FRS (1927–2007) became a celebration of a remarkable scientist. The idea of a portrait was first mooted in August 2009, championed by the Society’s committee on equality and diversity as a means of making the contribution of the Royal Society’s women scientists more visible within Carlton House Terrace. By September 2009 a shortlist of possible artists was drawn up, and Emma Wesley (b. 1979) was selected.

Wesley, twice winner of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters’ De Laszlo Silver Medal, was educated at Cambridge before attending the Courtauld Institute’s easel painting conservation course and establishing herself as a leading portrait-painter. Her catalogue already includes a joint portrait of Professors Uta Frith FRS and Chris Frith FRS (2007).
Faced with the difficult task of creating a posthumous likeness of Anne McLaren, she enlisted the advice of McLaren’s family and gathered photographs and anecdotes to produce a portrait of a mildly amused biologist surrounded by some of her favourite things (figure 4).

The core image of Anne McLaren is after an existing but anonymous Cambridge University photograph. This is embellished by a selection of other pictures suggested by the theme of conception, birth and death and informed by McLaren’s own artistic tastes. A chart of human embryonic development to the 56th day is flanked by two postcards: Adam and Eve (1528) by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)8 and Portrait of a man of the Delves family (1577), which incorporates what may be George Delves’s dead wife, by an unknown, probably Dutch or Flemish painter.9 Apart from the obvious left-to-right symbolic reading of Wesley’s picture, there is wit in the generational cycling of these images, from painting to photograph, from photograph to postcard, and back to painting again.

The foreground is used to show the more practical side of McLaren’s science. Here, the test-tubes and a beautifully painted laboratory mouse are reminiscent of a well-known 1958 photograph taken by John Biggers at the time of his and McLaren’s announcement (in Nature) of the first successful mouse birth by embryos developed in vitro.10 In his speech at the painting’s unveiling on 26 January 2011, Professor Jonathan Michie remarked upon
his mother’s deadpan career description made in response to something like that most famous of apocryphal Royal queries (‘And what do you do?’): ‘I work with mice’. The picture was enjoyed by many at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters’ annual exhibition at the Mall Galleries in London, 5–20 May 2011, before taking its place at Carlton House Terrace.

Notes


2 Studies of the Prince and the late Princess of Wales (NPG 5365 and 5408 respectively) can be seen in room 32 of the gallery. Macmillan (NPG 5366) and Strong (NPG 5289) are in the permanent collections.
3 The Alan Hodgkin portrait is part of the University of Leicester collections (B014) and can be viewed on the pages of the Redfern Gallery alongside other paintings by Bryan Organ; see http://www.redfern-gallery.com/pages/home.html.

4 As reported by, for example, David Brown, ‘Professor Sir Bernard Lovell “was target of Cold War assassins” ’, The Times (22 May 2009).


8 This version is in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

9 From the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.