



Last portrait of mother

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Bereavement Care

Daphne Todd's portrait of her dead mother, Annie Mary Todd, prompted accolades and shock when it won the 2010 BP Portrait Award, hosted by the National Portrait Gallery in London, UK. Here Todd tells Catherine Jackson why she painted the portrait, and Jonathan Jones provides a brief review of the genre of deathbed portraiture.

Todd is a professional portraitist who had successfully entered her work for the BP Award several times until she reached the (then) maximum age for entrants. When the award was opened to people aged over 40, she decided she would enter again.

But, she stresses, entering the BP Award was not her motivation for painting the portrait. She chose this portrait for tactical reasons:

'I think juries go for something out of the ordinary. They get over 2000 entries for the award, so I thought I'd enter something that stood out.

'I made the choice [of which portrait to enter] almost a year after her death. When I did the portrait I wasn't at all sure I would exhibit it. It was in my studio for about a year. A client came to see another painting and he shuddered and said: "That is a very powerful work," and I realised I had stopped seeing it – it had become just a painting. I have painted dead animals just because they looked interesting to paint. This was no different.'

Todd's mother lived with her for the last 14 years of her long life. She died aged 100, in hospital, after many years of ill health. Todd had painted her before, some years previously. They discussed the possibility of her painting her again, in death, after reading an article about an artist who had painted flowers on his mother's hands after she died.



Last portrait of my mother, Daphne Todd (2009).

Photo © National Portrait Gallery

'My mother and I talked about this and she said: "You can do something like that if you want." I said I might want to paint her and she said: "I don't care what you do." I can't say it was a deep conversation – it was more that she didn't care what happened and wasn't interested in talking about funerals. But I did ask her – I wasn't stealing the image.

'I was aware that she wouldn't have liked the painting. She didn't like any of my portraits. She didn't like my style of painting. She was a very sentimental woman and I am not. I paint facts. I try to paint things as they come to my eye.'

Grieving process

While Todd is very clear that she regarded the work as an interesting challenge to her skills as a portraitist, she also feels it was an important part of her grieving process.

'It was I think my way of grieving, my way of digesting the facts of her death. My father died of a burst aorta when he was 61, when I was in my 20s and I was abroad. I came straight back but only saw him at the undertakers. He was in a coffin, his eyes closed. He was a pasty colour and his face was peeping through this frill around his face. He had this little silk hanky over his face. I took the hanky off and it just didn't look like him. I spent almost no time in there. I touched his face, which was cold. It took me a long time to get over it. I did try to paint him from memory when I got back to Spain but I couldn't – I think it was because I didn't have time to digest it.

'I wouldn't have sat with my mother's body as long as I did if I hadn't been doing the painting. It was a kind of wake. And she was fantastic to paint. There is a magnificence about her as a still life.'

Diptych format

The portrait's format – a diptych of two square panels joined together, commonly associated with devotional paintings – was in fact dictated by technical expediency.

'With commissioned portraits you often have to work from the outside in. You have to work it out – if the head is there, will I be able to fit in the toes? I think that stops you going for the likeness. A portrait should be like looking at someone normally; your eye should focus on the face – some part that is particular to the person. So I prefer to work from the face outwards, but if you do that you are likely to end up going off the edge of the panel.

'I didn't know how long I had to do the painting. I knew I would not have very long, so I wanted to start with the face. By the time I got to the edge I had to use another panel. At one stage I was thinking I might make it full length but I didn't have time.'

The portrait was painted at the premises of a local funeral directors, Tester and Jones, based in Crowborough, East Sussex.

'She had been in hospital for four or five weeks before she died. I was in the middle of a double portrait commission, so I was away from home. I came as soon as they told me she was dying, but I was half an hour too late. She was lying pretty much propped up as she is in the portrait. I told the hospital what I wanted to do and they gave me a list of undertakers and said they knew Tester and Jones had done something unusual for someone else before. I contacted them and they were very sympathetic. I was surprised how they threw themselves into it. They hadn't ever had anything like this before.

'I told them not to change how she was lying. She was on a trolley, in a cool room. It took three long days – no breaks.

She would have lasted another day but I was beginning to feel uncomfortable about it by then. She was slightly turning colour. It was an interesting experience working there, with everyone going about their business – people laughing and talking as they do in any place of work.'

Mixed reactions

Public and professional reactions have been mixed. Other portraitists have said they too have wanted to do this kind of painting. Members of the public have complained about being presented with such a graphic image of death in their daily newspaper. Others have found the image redolent with symbolism, and a moving depiction of mortality.

'People have seen a lot of symbolism in the portrait. I try not to disillusion people. Paintings have their own life and people bring their own stuff to them.

'Sandy Nairn, the director of the National Portrait Gallery, noticed the wedding ring in the picture. It isn't on her finger – it's just there, in space. He saw it as symbolic of the relationship between my mother and me, or the ending of it.

'In fact I put it in because, just before she went into hospital, she'd lost so much weight, she had been wrapping thread around the ring to keep it on. She asked me to wrap some more thread on it because it had become loose but I was very busy – I was in the middle of the double portrait commission at the time. So I said: "Just leave it for the time being". I never thought about it until after she died and one of the nurses remarked she had no wedding ring on. Then I remembered a previous conversation when my mother had said people should know she was a married woman and I had forgotten this and been harassed and rushed and dismissed it as unimportant. I thought, I have got to have this ring in the painting; she died without it on but the ring ought to be there. So I just painted the ring onto the painting with its bit of thread. It's just there.'

The portrait is now back in her studio.

'People asked what I was going to do with it and I said I didn't think I would want it on my wall in the living room. Some people have objected to having this image of death thrust in their face – this terrible, emaciated shape that my mother had become. People didn't want to see it when they opened their daily newspaper. It is a horrific image in one sense but it doesn't look horrific to me because that is what old age looks like. There are 3000 people a year getting telegrams from the Queen, all living in bodies like that – what is frightening isn't dying in that body, it's living in that body. I think we don't see enough of death today. We are all going there, some of us sooner than my mother. But if we are to live to that age, we are going to have to live in that body.

'I don't feel remotely frightened of death itself. You experience dying, but you can't experience being dead because you're not there to be it. I think a lot of people imagine death as being shut away from life and being conscious of it. I don't. To me, death is like a flame going out. The flame doesn't go anywhere. It just stops. That isn't frightening. I am much more frightened at the thought of having to live through my mother's last ten years.

'The portrait ought to go into a public collection – in a public gallery where people can choose to look at it or not. It's a reminder, a contemporary reminder, of where we are all going. It's very easy not to believe in your own death. You can see it in others but not in you. When it does dawn that it could be you, and it could be sooner rather than later, then we live accordingly.' ■

The deathbed portrait's unique tribute

In this article, first published in the *Guardian*, Jonathan Jones reviews the centuries-old tradition of the deathbed portrait

Mouth hanging open, eyes peeping from frigid lids, arms thin and dry: Annie Mary Todd resembles a medieval cadaver, torn from a tomb. The artist has said she found beauty in her mother's corpse, but it is still shocking stuff: emaciated, stiff and monstrously dead.

Here is a portrait that has got people talking, because it confronts us with death. Yet it does so in a way that is specific to painting and drawing – to what we would call the traditional portrait, which is a world away from photography and film. To photograph a dead body, you push a button – click. But what is it to portray the dead, with pencil on paper, and to lovingly colour the face of your mother in its new hues of mortality? What is it like to spend that time with a corpse?

Artists have felt compelled, again and again, to perform this eerie task. Leonardo da Vinci did it and recorded his motivations. In about 1508, the artist and scientist visited a hospital in Florence. There, he wrote, 'an old man a few hours before his death told me that he had passed a hundred years, and that he did not feel any bodily deficiency, other than weakness. And thus he passed away from this life. And I made an anatomy of him in order to see the cause of so sweet a death.'

Daphne Todd's mother was also 100 when she died. She has become, in this work, a symbol of the same instinct that made da Vinci open up a corpse: the need to perceive the difference between life and death. Is such knowledge not terrifying? Perhaps, but it may also be therapeutic. Artists down the centuries have sometimes acted as grief therapists, helping the bereaved to bear their loss. This is surely the function of Anthony van Dyck's 1633 painting of Venetia Stanley on her deathbed, which hangs today in the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London. Her widower, Sir Kenelm Digby, wrote of how 'we found her cold and stiff' and yet, with a little rubbing, they managed to bring colour to her cheeks. So he called on Van Dyck to portray her like that – as if asleep, and for ever about to waken.

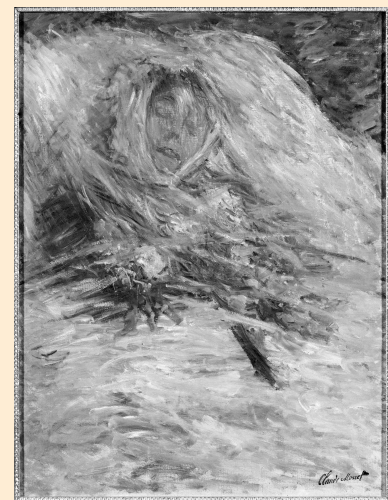


Venetia Stanley, Lady Digby on her death-bed, Anthony Van Dyck (1633).
By permission of the Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery

Claude Monet allowed himself no such consolation. When his wife Camille lay dead, he portrayed her, tears blurring his vision, in a painting that seeks no reassurance. It is a terrifying masterpiece: her yellowed features, closed eyes and parted lips are seen through a mist of white brushstrokes, as if she is fading away. You are stunned by the artist's determination to record what must have been the worst moments of his life. When Lucian Freud's mother died, he performed exactly the same clear-eyed homage.

The deathbed portrait, in other words, can be either an attempt at consolation or a fierce acceptance of reality. Perhaps it is always both. Yet it is a singular form of art, a final intimacy.

Portraiture is always a relationship: the artist who captures a person is getting to know them deeply, experiencing the contours of their being. To do this for the dead is a last rite only artists can perform: a unique act of love and memory. No wonder so many painters, from Freud to Daphne Todd, have felt compelled to use their gifts in this way. It makes you wish that, at such moments, you, too, could paint.



Camille sur son lit de mort,
Claude Monet (1879)
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