

Speech at Prof. Jeffrey Thompson's retirement for the unveiling of his portrait – July 2005

One of the summer tasks I set my students this year was to make a top ten painting list in rank order. Not so much TOP OF THE POPS but rather PICK OF THE PICS. My own list contained seven portraits – including Rembrandt's self-portrait from Kenwood House.

Paintings such as this seem to convey the essence of western humanistic art. I am always moved deeply as they can communicate through time in an almost metaphysical way. Works by masters such as Rembrandt are an inspiration and bench mark for artists working today. However, the golden yellow ochres and deep umbras are from another age. Today's vision is fashioned by technology, printed images and photography. We do not paint like Rembrandt, even if we are able, because we see the world in a different way. But the spirit remains – the image of a human being observed and recreated as a painting or sculpture is a central subject.

You may wonder just where to find such works. Many are in the National Portrait Gallery: works by my friend Peter Edwards who told me recently that painting a portrait is another way to move colours around as it must work as a painting first and by my teacher John Wonnacott, whose magnificent royal family portrait reminds us of the group portraits of Goya and Velasquez.

If today's vision is different – so are the working methods. Photography, once thought to be the end of portrait painting is now a useful tool for painters, providing details and compositional ideas.

For example I combined several photographic studies in Jeff's portrait, to create a sense of movement, particularly to the head.

However, the initial work was made in the old fashion way. I set up easel and stool, paint box and palette in Jeff's office until it was impossible to open the door. This was during the summer of 2003 and it was a great pleasure to discuss art, life, philosophy and football together. From these sittings I was able to complete the portrait back in Germany.

I know that not everybody likes explanations about a painting, but I hope the work expresses some particular characteristics as symbols and analogs.

- The bookshelf shows Jeff's contribution and delight in the world of ideas, scholarship and education. Here you will find publications from Jeff and colleagues together with works from his students .
- If the shelves and books are vertical and horizontal, his shirt is full of movement and playful contour. Here I wanted to convey Jeff's vitality and humour.
- The wall shows part of a painting from a dear friend and the atmosphere is batted in yellow. I hope that these elements express the value Jeff places on personal relations and the warmth of his personality.

IDEAS, VITALITY and HUMAN WARMTH – I hope this painting is a true portrait, Jeff. It has been a great honour to paint you
And... may I ask you to unveil your portrait?