

## King Charles: First official portrait since coronation is unveiled, painted by Jonathan Yeo,

The vast oil on canvas shows a larger-than-life King Charles in the uniform of the Welsh Guards. The vivid red work, measuring about 8ft 6in by 6ft 6in, is by Jonathan Yeo, who has also painted **Tony Blair**, Sir David Attenborough and Malala Yousafzai. Queen Camilla is said to have looked at the painting and told Yeo: "Yes, you've got him." In the new portrait, the King is depicted, sword in hand, with a butterfly landing on his shoulder.

Unveiling is always a little nerve-wracking, both for the sitter and the artist, but particularly when one of them is a King. Yeo jokes: "If this was seen as treasonous, I could literally pay for it with my head, which would be an appropriate way for a portrait painter to die - to have their head removed!" In reality, Yeo isn't going to lose his head of course - no executions for a badly received portrait of a monarch, in modern times anyway. Fortunately, he has also already had a nod of approval from a key royal figure. The King also got a glimpse of it, says Yeo, in its "half-done state... He was initially mildly surprised by the strong colour but otherwise he seemed to be smiling approvingly".

It is a vibrant painting. The King was made Regimental Colonel in the Welsh Guards in 1975. In the picture, the red of the uniform fades into the red background, bringing the King's face into even more prominence. Yeo says he wanted the painting to be distinctive and a break with the past. He was aiming for something personal.

Yeo decided to use some of the traditions of royal portraiture - the military outfit, the sword - but aimed to achieve something more modern, particularly with the deep colour and the butterfly. He says he's referencing the tradition of official royal portraits but suggesting that's something "from the past and what's interesting about them is something a bit different from that".

"In history of art, the butterfly symbolises metamorphosis and rebirth," he explains, fitting for a portrait being painted of a monarch who has recently ascended to the throne.

The butterfly is also a reference to the King's long held interest in the environment, causes "he has championed most of his life and certainly long before they became a mainstream conversation". Yeo says it was Charles' idea after they talked about the opportunity they had to tell a story with the portrait. Yeo began the portrait when Charles was still Prince of Wales, with the first sitting at Highgrove in June 2021. The King sat four times in all, for about an hour at a time, with the final sitting at Clarence House in November 2023.

Did the artist notice any obvious change in the man after he became King? Yeo says the King "had already been gaining presence and stature by the time I started it, and it went up a level again when he became King, as you'd expect".

King Charles posed in his full Welsh Guards uniform and had to stand leaning on his sword for around 40 minutes each time. "He stood impressively still, and didn't get distracted like some sitters do."

Yeo won't reveal much of what they talked about during sittings, although he says Charles III has "a great sense of humour" and is a "very engaging person".

Royal portraits in the past have had an important role to play in signifying power and projecting an image. They were part of the tools used to ensure the survival of the monarch. But Yeo says our relationship with royalty has shifted since those days.

"On the one hand, we know they're real people with quirks and personality traits. We've seen that much more of them. On the other hand, we still want to buy into the mysticism and the fairy tale that they're different from us, that there's a bit of magic there." In his portrait, he was "trying to figure out how to do both at once".

The artist claims not to have been interested in getting involved in the "rigid formality" of royal portraiture previously. But as he turned 50, he began to think about how "you have to see how you measure up against the works of the past". For him, painting Charles III was different from most previous commissions, where you start from scratch.

"All my life I'd known who he was and what he looked like so it was really just a case of deciding what to show and trying to slightly channel who he seems to be now." He deliberately minimized the visual distractions in his portrait to "allow people to connect with the human being underneath".

There's a great deal of sympathy for the King, Yeo adds. The portrait "reflects exactly who he is, everything he represents and what he's been through".

Katie Razzall, Culture and media editor, *BBC*, 14 May 2024

*Tony Blair is a former Prime Minister*