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ROYAL WATCH



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Capturing Images of Kate Middleton: Why the Duchess's Gauzy Portrait Will Be Ignored in the Canon of Kate Iconography

Kate Middleton's Vaseline-lensed portrait was pretty universally panned, mostly because its antecedents in photography and art show much more compelling evocations of the future queen—even in situations that are fictional. We spoke to several people tasked with making Kate-themed iconography—from artist Alison Jackson to Getty photographer Chris Jackson, to a National Portrait Gallery curator—about the most meaningful royal images today.

by **Bridget Arsenault**

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The Queen of England has sat for 129 official portraits in her life, while the Duchess of Cambridge has but one, unveiled last week at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Created by Paul Emsley, an artist with a prior relationship with the gallery after winning the BP Portrait Prize in 2007, the portrait—showing Kate in extreme close-up, with a fuzzy-featured face and somewhat crinkly eyes—was described as “amazing” by the duchess herself. (We'll let you be the judge if her comments were mere placations of a nervous artist.)



BY PAUL GROVER/REX/REX USA.

Kate Middleton's official royal portrait.

But while this marks the first official representation for the duchess, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have already been represented unofficially in a thousand zany ways—as a pair of potatoes in “Prince and Princess Potato Head,” sketched using Sweet Hearts candy, and even Papa John's pizza (among many others). The urge to riff on royal portraits in offbeat ways doesn't stop with the Cambridge couple: Princess Eugenie provided the inspiration and subject for artist Adam Dant's *Apotheosis of Princess Eugenie*, which depicts her serenely bare-bosomed and nymph-like. As for the Queen, the range and diversity of artworks that she has inspired is beyond vast—that controversial Lucian Freud likeness to wool rugs, to, naturally, currency. As Paul Moorhouse, curator of the National Portrait Gallery's “The Queen: Art and Image,” says, “I

was trying to investigate how the Queen's image has been represented over the past 60 years—[and] I realized I was working with the most portrayed and scrutinized individual in history.”

Over his three years researching the exhibition, Moorhouse also realized that the royal icon of the past—a formal oil portrait of a sitting or soon-to-be monarch—was no longer resonating with people. “In 1986 the National Portrait Gallery put on another exhibition about the Queen, and it was very much a formal view,” he says. Today, viewers of royal portraits “want evidence of a real person. It's very challenging—they want an ordinary person and someone special simultaneously.” Duchess Kate is a particularly keen example of this: “She is constantly expected to be both. She's just like you and me, but she's a bit special. But if she's just special, she could find herself ostracized. She's performing this balancing act, but the Queen started it.”

In the absence of good photographic evidence of the royal family's normalcy, some artists will just manufacture it—and none has been so popular in this approach as English artist Alison Jackson. Slim, commanding, and angular in look but not manner, Jackson says that her work feeds into that desire to see the internal life of “the Firm” exposed and has built a robust career with her images of celebrity (and royal) look-alikes. “I think my pictures show the private side or what could be the private side of the public face of the royal family—of course, we don't know, because we've never been allowed in,” she says. “They are absolutely excellent at keeping a public face.” Her last pieces were shortly before Christmas, when she released staged photos of Will and Kate lookalikes celebrating a quiet Christmas at home—watching the Queen's Christmas Day address, unwrapping presents, pulling poppers. “I try very hard to imagine what they are doing and create the pictures that we've never really seen before,” she says—ones that prove extremely popular, especially online.

Getty photographer Chris Jackson, who has traveled with the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on various occasions, feels the same way about the most captivating images being more candid moments: “Everyone wants to see these candid photographs—to capture the royals as real people—so I'm always trying to get the genuine moment,” he says. “So much of what they do is regal and formal. The nature of royalty is something unattainable—the mystic of Kate and Will is that they transcend celebrity.” He adds that when he was in Los Angeles, for the couple's stop there in 2011, “all these celebrities, like Reese Witherspoon, were lining up excited to meet Kate Middleton.”

The royals, particularly the younger generation, are confronted with an unusual dichotomy: they are the ultimate celebrities, partying in comp'ed Las Vegas suites or in Marie Antoinette costumes, but on the other hand, they are public figures with duties to fulfill, protocols to uphold. Samir Hussein, who at 33 is one of the youngest photographers to have traveled with and provided official photographs of the royal family, tells VF Daily, “It is different from shooting movie stars—at an event, royals don't stop and pose; they walk straight past you. William and Kate, they won't stop and give you the picture, so it is more documentary style: You are getting them as they are doing stuff. They are not looking directly at you.” Hussein captured an image during the royal wedding that serves as a visual metaphor for this new generation of the royal family: warm, approachable, but within the context of prim grandeur. Said image, which became the official picture for the Royal Collection following the wedding, shows Kate beaming under her veil, waving gently to the crowd, Pippa, poised and dutiful, holding her sister's train, while a soldier stands to attention, his carnelian uniform catching the light.

“Every so often you get a tantalizing glimpse of what you think is the real person,” says Moorhouse. “But it's not a crossword or a Sudoku—you can't get just one answer.”