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In uproar over portrait of Duchess of Cambridge, its artist speaks out

By [Anthony Faiola](#),

IN BRADFORD ON AVON, England — On Paul Emsley’s studio wall hangs an alternative version of the most famous portrait of one of the most famous women in the world. In it, the Duchess of Cambridge, the royal formerly known as Kate Middleton, appears bright-eyed and young, refreshed, even playful.

It is, perhaps, the antithesis of its larger fraternal twin, the [first official portrait](#) of the 31-year-old duchess that, when unveiled two weeks ago, touched off nearly universal indignation. Netizens, royalty junkies and art critics — armchair and otherwise — savaged the portrait. Where Emsley saw mystery, his attackers saw a woman aged beyond her years. Where he saw natural beauty, they saw bags under her eyes. Where he saw regal bearing, they saw the duchess’s Picture of Dorian Gray.

“Ghastly . . . an out and out disaster,” stung the British Art Journal.

“The cheeks incline towards the hamsterish,” declared [the Independent](#).

Like “something unpleasant from the ‘Twilight’ franchise,” piled on [the Guardian](#).

As Emsley attempts to process the full power of one work to alter an artist’s life in the age of instant media, a question swirled in his head. Should he have done the portrait differently? To answer it, he picked up a piece of black chalk a few days ago and began cathartically sketching another work. This time, it was the way the duchess’s devoted followers so often see her in glossy magazines and airbrushed photos. Flawless. Glamorous. The fairy-tale beauty who bagged a prince.

But a funny thing happened as he did the sketch. The self-doubt of a man who is his own worst critic began to fade, replaced with a growing certainty that the canvas hanging in London’s National Portrait Gallery is not only the better version, but maybe even the masterwork of his career.

Emsley showed the smaller, black-and-white alternative version to a visitor, but he would not allow it to be photographed. He said he intends to keep it for private purposes at his studio.

“There’s a quotation an American friend of mine, the wife of an American artist, sent me in support,” Emsley said in a four-hour interview, his most extensive since going into seclusion after the portrait’s rough reception. “When Picasso was told his portrait of Gertrude Stein did not look like her, his response was, ‘It will.’ People will become acclimatized over time to something which is not something that they were expecting.”

‘Natural, not official, self’

On a chilly February day in this picturesque hamlet 83 miles west of London, Emsley received a fateful e-mail at his cottagelike home nestled on a hillside. It was from Britain’s venerable National Portrait Gallery, which had honored Emsley’s work with one of this nation’s highest art awards in 2007. Would he, the gallery asked, like to be shortlisted for a top-secret project — the first official portrait of the duchess?

Would he, indeed. Emsley, 65, who was born in Glasgow and grew up in South Africa, had worked with famous subjects before, and he jumped at a chance to paint the duchess. He had studied advertising in his youth, moving from illustrations into professional painting, mostly of animals, nature and, of course, people. Portraying faces as “moving landscapes,” he rose in renown after moving back to Britain in the late 1990s. He returned briefly to South Africa to paint a haunting portrait of Nelson Mandela and won wide praise for his painting of the author V.S. Naipaul.

In March, when he first met the duchess at the National Portrait Gallery off Trafalgar Square as one of four finalists for the commission, his pitch was a contemporary portrayal using traditional techniques. “I wanted to do something which had some sort of a sense of mystery, of presence, of stillness about it.”

The pitch worked. Three days later, he had the job. The duchess arrived at his home for her first sitting in May. For more than six hours, he photographed her in various grades of natural light, a process complicated by the day’s torrential rain. Another sitting several weeks later at London’s Kensington Palace finally yielded the shot Emsley would use in his studio to paint her portrait. In it, the duchess, who had told Emsley she wanted to be seen as her “natural, not official, self,” looked precisely that: light makeup, wind-blown hair, slightly mischievous smile.

In his small studio, he labored over the portrait for four months, substantially longer than normal. The gallery’s director, Sandy Nairne, encouraged him to give the duchess a grin, a challenge that on canvas can leave subjects appearing locked in a perpetual grimace. A moment of truth came a month later, when the finished work was presented to the duchess at a private viewing in the National Portrait Gallery. Emsley, who was not present for the viewing, said he beamed when he heard the duchess was delighted.

She would later state her pleasure publicly. “It’s just amazing. I thought it was brilliant,” she said at the portrait’s official unveiling Jan. 11.

Emsley was overjoyed by her response. “I had the sense that she did get my work, that she understood what I was trying to do.”

Abundance of criticism

But if the duchess understood, the world seemed not to.

Within hours of the unveiling, the global media space was alight with an increasingly vicious barrage of tweets, Facebook posts, blog items and angry missives. The attacks seemed to fall into two camps: the elites, who thought Emsley had shied away from a thoroughly modern representation, and the duchess’s faithful, who gasped at his unvetted interpretation of their icon. Although a handful of positive reviews surfaced, Emsley’s critics appeared to agree that he had done his subject’s beauty a disservice.



“I did not deliberately age her or anything like that,” Emsley said. “I wanted it to be an authentic record, but it’s very easy to put in more shadows and things than are perfectly necessary, and I haven’t done that. I’ve tried to record, in a polite way, what I regard as her natural beauty.”

A major problem, Emsley and others contend, is that the portrait, awash in a half-light and seeming to capture a subtle expression of self-possession in the duchess when viewed in person, does not photograph well.

“I think we knew because of her standing in public life that this was going to draw a great deal of attention,” Nairne said, adding that museum attendance has surged since the unveiling and that postcards of the portrait are in their second printing after less than three weeks. “But people were commenting on this work after only having seen it online. This is a bold, mature painting that needs to be considered in person.”

After responding to criticisms on the day of the unveiling, Emsley withdrew to his home studio, largely keeping the television off and avoiding newspapers and the Internet. The comments have “deeply upset” his family and have reached the point where he fears for the safety of the painting itself. He has received scores of e-mails from across the globe. Although most were sympathetic, he said, others were not. One woman from Italy demanded to know whether he was blind.

But he takes comfort from the story of another artist, Pietro Annigoni, who painted a panned portrait of Queen Elizabeth II in 1969. That same work was later reconsidered more favorably by critics and recently won a prestigious place in a National Portrait Gallery retrospective.

“Those particularly vicious and personal comments at one stage made me feel, ‘Gosh, was it wise to have gone through all this?’” Emsley said. But he has gotten over those feelings, and after making the additional sketch of the duchess, he said, he remains even prouder of the original work.

“I have to accept the fact that there are many people that don’t like the portrait, and that’s fine,” he said. “As an artist, you do understand you’re never going to please everybody.”

Eliza Mackintosh contributed to this report.

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