

The Telegraph

Lucian Freud: Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, review: A show that proves Freud's greatness

The National Portrait Gallery has gathered by far the best large selection of Lucian Freud's work, says Richard Dorment, including plenty of surprises

★★★★★



Lucian Freud Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, Feb 9 - May 27

By [Richard Dorment \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/richarddorment/\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/richarddorment/)



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Before beginning my review of the National Portrait Gallery's first-class survey of Lucian Freud's portraits, I want to tell a story that could not have been printed while the artist was still alive. About 20 years ago, I found myself face to face with a madman. It happened after a West End gallery opening, when my wife and I stepped into a taxi provided to ferry guests to dinner at the River Café in Hammersmith. As we trundled along in the company of three complete strangers, I tried to break the ice with some utterly banal

conversation. Without warning, one of them took offence at something I'd said (I had no idea then and have no idea now what it was) and started to scream at me, his face contorted with rage, his fists clenched as though he was about to use them.

Everyone in the taxi froze. We listened in silence until he was through. At last the cab stopped, he jumped out, and without a glance behind him disappeared inside the restaurant.

Then one of the other passengers spoke. "Don't take his invective personally," she explained. The man had been one of Lucian Freud's regular models until a few months earlier, when without warning the artist had dropped him, refusing to see him or take his calls. Devastated, his life spiralled into chaos, with the result we'd all just witnessed.

Whether there were good reasons why Freud no longer used this particular model, I can't say. But over the years I've heard a number of accounts by those who knew, sat or worked for Freud, and they all describe the same arc of experience: the intoxication of being swept away by his charm and wit, followed by deflation when their services were no longer required.

Freud's death at the age of 88 in July of last year will change what we know and think about the man and his art. Monographs and memoirs by close friends and admirers eloquently attest to Freud's personal charisma and visual intelligence – but all were published with his approval. Still to come are the accounts of those who were scalded by their encounters with him. When enough time has passed and some future biographer is able to write openly about the dark side of Freud's genius, we will see that his was one of the most interesting lives of the 20th century – in fact, the only artist's life that will give Picasso's a run for its money.

[Freud: a life in pictures \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8653726/Lucian-Freud-a-towering-and-uncompromising-figure-in-the-art-world.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8653726/Lucian-Freud-a-towering-and-uncompromising-figure-in-the-art-world.html)

[Lucian Freud: 'He just had one idea in life - to paint' \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/9060469/Lucian-Freud-He-just-had-one-idea-in-life-to-paint.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/9060469/Lucian-Freud-He-just-had-one-idea-in-life-to-paint.html)

[Lucian Freud: 10 things you didn't know \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8654311/Lucian-Freud-10-things-you-didnt-know-about-his-paintings.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8654311/Lucian-Freud-10-things-you-didnt-know-about-his-paintings.html)

[Unseen masterpieces by Lucian Freud unveiled for the first time \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/9046274/Unseen-masterpieces-by-Lucian-Freud-unveiled-for-the-first-time.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/9046274/Unseen-masterpieces-by-Lucian-Freud-unveiled-for-the-first-time.html)

[My life as Lucian Freud's love child \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8579839/My-life-as-Lucian-Freuds-love-child.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8579839/My-life-as-Lucian-Freuds-love-child.html)

Formalist critics dislike this biographical approach to looking at art, but with artists like Picasso and Freud it is inevitable because the success of their portraits usually depended on the emotional, psychological or erotic connection they made with their sitters.

In the case of Freud, this diaristic reading of his portraits had begun to happen long before his death. Despite deadpan titles like *Girl in Bed* and *Girl in a Green Dress*, it is generally known that a series of crystalline early portraits show his radiantly beautiful second wife Caroline Blackwood, while the disintegration of their marriage is chronicled in a double portrait of the painter and his wife in a Paris hotel room at the very moment when each in their own way understands that whatever has just been said between them is irreparable. Freud perfectly captures the abject misery of lovers who recognise the emotional chasm between them.

In his later work, Freud would often try to suppress his own feelings to focus on those of his sitters. In his staggeringly beautiful *Man in Chair*, he succeeds in doing what very few artists have ever done – to somehow suggest the many layers of contradictory experiences and impulses that go into the make-up of a flawed, human, and highly complex man.

The label tells you the sitter was Baron Heinrich von Thyssen, and you instantly sense that this man is racked with anxiety. Gradually you grasp that the source of his confusion is nothing more worrying than the experience of sitting for his portrait. All of the picture's visual tension is located in the prominent veins of the hands and the long, tapering fingers he is pressing so hard into his thighs. The gilded armchair, upholstered in red velvet, that he clearly brought with him to the studio speaks of the insecurity of a rich man who is ill at ease outside his accustomed milieu. And only the most uptight of sitters would feel the need to wear a buttoned-up business suit with a white shirt and tie when sitting to Freud.

And by the way, the artist responds to the Baron's obvious distaste for his grubby surroundings by adding an entirely unnecessary (but deliciously painted) pile of paint-stained rags behind the chair. He wants no one to mistake the setting for one of Thyssen's many homes – or to make the error of imagining that he, Freud, came to the Baron's place to paint his portrait, and not the other way around.

It's when Freud allows us to see human frailties like this that he is at his best. A gangster whose face has been hideously slashed by razor blades looks out of the picture at us – but hesitantly, as though used to the reaction of people who avert their eyes when they see his scars. The look of pain in his eyes is replicated in the face of the daughter he draws close, and to whom he has passed down not only his build and facial features, but also a burden of sadness that is heart-breaking to see in one so young.

As a general rule, the simpler Freud kept his compositions, the more successful the outcome. Nothing detracts from the intensity of his studies of the head of the tormented artist John Minton or the small 1972

study of his still-fierce mother. In the nearly monochromatic portrait of the Duke of Devonshire, simply by scumbling purple into the light-grey background Freud envelopes the sitter in air and light.

Until I read Martin Gayford's riveting account of sitting for his portrait, I had not understood how Freud uses accents of strong colour like the electric-blue scarf as tonal devices to make the varied colours in the face register as monochromatic. In some cases, Freud will build a sitter's character on a detail of clothing – the long red stripe on the trousers of Andrew Parker-Bowles's uniform is one example; another is the pink nail polish and butterfly-patterned jersey worn by an elderly woman whose strong face and red-rimmed eyes suggest anything but a frivolous interest in feminine or coquettish things.

But all painters have to set themselves new challenges, and that's what Freud did in later large-scale figure compositions such as *Large Interior W11 (After Watteau)*, or the pictures in which the naked models assume grossly contorted poses or are placed in irrational juxtapositions with other figures. These – a red-haired man crouching on a chair or a naked youth clutching a rat – are far less compelling for me than the straightforward character studies. And in the last galleries, the acres of flesh on view sometimes felt more like still lifes than portraits, though they certainly show how Freud carefully distinguishes between the flesh colour of a young woman, the blotchy pallor of an Irishman's torso and the unhealthy grey skin of a dying man.

I don't mean to carp. This is by far the best large selection of Freud's work I've seen, and in addition to some of the paintings we all know like the backs of our hands, there were plenty of pictures I hadn't seen before.

After a celebrated artist's death, his reputation often dips. On the basis of this one exhibition I predict that the opposite may happen with Freud. No longer in need of the great man's approbation, curators will explore aspects of his life and art that were off limits before.

From Thurs until May 27

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