

**Tom Wood (born 1955)**

**PORTRAIT OF HRH THE PRINCE OF WALES AND EARL OF CHESTER, 1989**

Oil on birch-faced plywood panel 152.4 x 157.5 cm

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**The Portrait**

Tom Wood's portrait of HRH The Prince of Wales is one of the most successful and progressive royal portraits of the 20th century. Its combination of psychological insight and compositional complexity is unmatched in the formal canon of royal representation in the United Kingdom, and in significance is comparable to Pietro Annigoni's celebrated 1955 portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. Sir Roy Strong, former Director of the National Portrait Gallery, declared it "the best portrait I've

ever seen of him”, and public acclaim for it was pronounced during its years on loan to the National Portrait Gallery. Peter Fuller wrote that it “reconnected the portraiture of the Royal Family with high, imaginative culture”. It is the finest portrait ever painted of Prince Charles.

The portrait’s success can be explained, in part, by the circumstances of its creation. Unlike the vast majority of royal commissions, this work was initiated by the subject himself. Furthermore, at the artist’s request, instead of the normal one-hour sitting allotted to royal portraitists, Wood was given several sittings with the prince at Highgrove, affording him almost unparalleled access to the subject. The resulting portrait is psychologically penetrating, capturing – with insight and empathy – the sensitive, thoughtful and complex man who is destined to become our king.

The prince first met the artist Tom Wood in 1987 during an unscheduled visit to an exhibition of his recent work at Dean Clough Art Gallery in Halifax. The prince’s immediate reaction was to say to Wood “You must do one of me”. Tom Wood produced an initial small oil study as an indication of how the portrait might progress. The prince encouraged the artist to continue, and he produced a second, full-scale portrait, with conventional and accurately painted still life elements. Both portraits remain in the ownership of the prince, while the present work was produced simultaneously with his permission. As the artist says, “by the time I came to work on the third painting I felt I had licence to really ‘let go’ and be adventurous.” This portrait is not only considerably larger but compositionally more ambitious, with a greater emphasis on symbolic content.

The first sitting took place in October 1988 at the prince’s country house, Highgrove in Gloucestershire. Much of the time was spent talking, with some drawing and taking of photographs, so that the artist could get to know something of the sitter’s personality. Wood deliberately did no background research before the first sitting and did not want to make a portrait about the prince which reflected the way he was reported in the media: “I wanted to attempt to wipe the slate clean and to start from scratch.” He knew, however, that he wanted the portrait to be informal rather than regal, and to emphasise the personality of the sitter, which the artist found at their meetings to be sensitive, aware, caring for the needs of others, and very receptive. At Highgrove the prince showed Wood around the Walled Garden, sitting for him beneath a pergola. This sowed a seed in the artist’s mind for the setting and arrangement of this portrait.

The 40-year-old prince, wearing a suit, is shown in his beloved garden, looking directly at the viewer. Wood feels that, with his lips slightly parted, the prince appears to be ready to converse with the spectator, anxious to elicit a point of view. The encounter is intimate rather than formal, and his expression is attentive and empathetic. The shallow picture space brings the viewer close to the picture surface, making the spectator's relationship with the prince unexpectedly intimate.

Large areas of foliage surround the sitter's head, like a halo or laurel wreath, casting dappled light and giving the painting a sense of movement. The silhouette of the urn-capped building behind the prince recalls the secondary garden façade at Highgrove. It also reminds us of his passionate championship of Classical architecture, which reached a pinnacle with his BBC documentary and book *A Vision of Britain* in 1989, the year this portrait was painted.

The stylised branch in front of the prince's right arm is similar to those which appear in a series of monoprints which Wood made in the same year as this portrait, concerning ideas about the ecology of the earth – a concern shared by artist and sitter. The feather on the other side, depicted realistically if coloured un-naturally, may recall the feathers of the Prince of Wales's badge.

On either side of the prince are two brooding shadowy presences looking away, Janus-like, into the past and the future. These enigmatic figures recall Sir Anthony van Dyck's 1635 triple portrait of the prince's namesake, King Charles I, in the Royal Collection. The side of the plinth is decorated with an antique relief of a lion's head which, as with all Wood's symbols, is open to interpretation. It may refer to British royalty (since lions feature in the arms of the kingdoms of England and Scotland and the principality of Wales), or to such attributes as authority and courage.

Wood frequently includes carefully painted small-scale still life objects in his portraits, and those on the plinth may reflect the prince's horticultural interests, expressed so richly in the creation of his garden at Highgrove. The artist is also interested in the paradox set up by a painting; in how three-dimensional objects are fabricated from coloured pigment laid flat on to a flat surface. Signs and silhouettes are honest in the presentation of their flatness according to Wood, and he wishes to bring something of this quality to his work. He sets up the illusion of volume with his exquisitely painted lemon and plant-pot and then subverts this in the flat rendering of the plant above the pot. Similarly, he changes the language

of depiction between the stylised branch and the realistic feather either side of the prince, and between the boldly modelled sitter and the silhouetted building behind. As with many of Wood's portraits, this one is built upon a rectangular grid format, subtly emphasising the structure of the picture and giving the work a sense of stability. In order that this stability does not become too lifeless, Wood works actively with his paints and the picture surface, scratching the paint layers and incising them with razor blades.

In late 1989, Prince Charles returned to Halifax to view a special exhibition, *HRH The Prince of Wales: A Portrait Commission*, which included both of Tom Wood's portraits together with related sketches. The exhibition was then shown at Agnew's in London, where this portrait was purchased by a private collector. The National Portrait Gallery immediately requested its loan, and the portrait was displayed on the Royal Landing alongside Pietro Annigoni's 1969 portrait of The Queen for many years.

## **The Prince**

Chester has enjoyed a special relationship with the Crown for more than seven centuries, the title Earl of Chester having been granted to the heir apparent to the English throne since 1301. Thus Prince Charles was created Earl of Chester and Prince of Wales in 1958, and was invested by The Queen with the insignia of his Principality and the Earldom of Chester at Caernarfon Castle in 1969. Chester's Sword of State was carried at the head of the procession of mayors, led by the Mayor of Chester, at his 1969 Investiture. The Prince of Wales is Patron of the Friends of Chester Cathedral, formerly Patron of the Chester Summer Music Festival and Colonel-in-Chief of the Chester-based Cheshire Regiment, and a regular visitor to Chester. There can be few English cities with such a strong association with The Prince of Wales: he is indeed our prince.

Born in 1948, Prince Charles is the eldest son of Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh and heir apparent to the British throne. He took a degree at the University of Cambridge (1967-70) before serving in the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy (1971-6). Since 1976 he has been a leader in identifying charitable need and setting up and driving forward charities to meet it. The many not-for-profit organisations which form The Prince's Charities represent a broad range of areas including the built environment, the arts, responsible business and enterprise, young people, rural affairs and global sustainability. Collectively, The Prince's

Charities work to transform lives and build sustainable communities in the United Kingdom and overseas. His interests encompass a range of humanitarian and social issues, and he is patron of numerous charitable and arts organisations. Prince Charles has long championed organic farming and has sought to raise world awareness of the dangers facing the natural environment.

## **The Artist**

Tom Wood was born in the African city of Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in 1955, son of a Yorkshire father and a Seychelloise mother, and moved to West Yorkshire in 1959 following his father's death. He studied fine art at Sheffield Polytechnic (BA 1975-8) and at Leeds Metropolitan University (MA 1998-9). His many awards include Artist in Industry Fellowships in 1981 and 1983, Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Awards in 1981 and 1984, a Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Printmakers Award in 1982, a prize in the John Player Portrait Award (National Portrait Gallery, London) in 1985, a prize at the British International Print Biennale (Cartwright Hall, Bradford) in 1986, a residency at the National Portrait Gallery and an Honorary Fellowship of Sheffield Polytechnic in 1989, a Royal Society of Arts Art into Architecture Award in 1991, and in 1993 he became Skopos Professor of Fine Art at Bretton Hall College of Education, West Yorkshire. A highly respected educator, he worked in Hong Kong as Art Adviser for The English Schools Foundation. He is currently working on a series of educational consultancy projects and a number of commissioned artworks using both digital and traditional media. He lives in Halifax and works from his studio in Batley, West Yorkshire.

Since 1980 Wood has held numerous solo exhibitions, including Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield; Piece Hall Art Gallery, Halifax; Northern Arts, Newcastle; Cartwright Hall, Bradford; Dean Clough Art Gallery, Halifax; Agnew's, London; Wakefield Art Gallery; Hart Gallery, Nottingham and London; Gardner Kirby Gallery, Ottawa, Canada; Leeds Art Gallery; Schloss Cappenburg, Germany; Huddersfield Art Gallery; and Mercer Art Gallery, Harrogate. He has also shown in many group exhibitions since 1978, including Arnolfini, Bristol; Hatton Gallery, Newcastle; South London Art Gallery; Barbican Art Gallery, London; Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston; McLellan Galleries, Glasgow; Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, USA; Marlborough Graphics, London; Chicago International Art Exposition, USA; Los Angeles International Art Fair, USA; National Portrait Gallery, London; Norwich Castle Museum; Europ'art, Geneva, Switzerland; Lineart, Ghent,

Belgium; Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; Art Miami, USA; Carlow Arts Festival, Ireland; National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, Australia; and Royal Academy of Arts, London. Wood's work is included in many British public and corporate collections, including Abersytwyth University School of Art Museum & Galleries; Cartwright Hall, Bradford; National Portrait Gallery, London; Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; Norwich Castle Museum; Museums Sheffield; The Hepworth Wakefield; along with Jersey Museum & Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art.

Early in his career, Wood developed a style and visual language in a series of enigmatic works, often featuring a head or a single figure within an implied landscape setting. He often introduced a house form and other objects which act as potent symbols implying a variety of possible meanings and narratives. He acknowledges a wide range of influences, some seemingly disparate: "I go from the ascetic classicism of Ben Nicholson through to the overblown rhetoric of John Martin and the New York angst of Ross Bleckner. I veer from one extreme to another." Portraiture, a natural progression from this work, has become a regular aspect of Wood's practice and he has undertaken many commissions. In addition to his portrait of The Prince of Wales, Tom Wood has been commissioned to paint Alan Bennett and Professor Lord Winston for the National Portrait Gallery, together with portraits of the Earl and Countess of Harewood, the Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding of Yorkshire, and commissions from the National Trust and the Universities of Wales, Birmingham, Warwick, Bradford and Yale. The artist sums up his approach to portraiture as "Bring no truths, tell no lies".

Wood has described how he paints a portrait:

I normally travel to the sitter. It helps me to see people on their own terms where they are most comfortable. I start with some drawings and lots of discussions/chats from which an idea of the form of the painting usually evolves. Wherever possible I listen and incorporate the sitter's views. I like to think we're working together towards a common goal. I have one or two sittings to get the painting started and then with a combination of my drawings, notes and photographs I continue in the studio. Periodically I arrange sittings whenever necessary. I usually take the painting to the sitter. Each sitting is usually for the day, but I try to be flexible and work around the sitter's commitments.

Tom Wood followed his standard practice for the *Portrait of HRH The Prince of Wales and Earl of Chester*, albeit with more sittings than usual, and the end result is his supreme masterpiece.