

Interview
David Cobley

The leading portrait artist discusses his long and winding road to fame, and how he creates his award-winning work

Words: Tom May



To anyone who dreams of making a living from art, David Cobley may seem like he's had a charmed life.

Recognised as one of the UK's leading portraitists, he regularly gets to paint some of the nation's most interesting people, including actors, writers, business figures, politicians, sports people and even royals.

But it hasn't been an altogether smooth ride for the Devizes-based artist.

It all began conventionally enough. Born in Northampton in 1954, Cobley enjoyed drawing as a child and was encouraged to do so by his Uncle Don. "He used to draw with me and seeing what I could do, told me I could be rich and famous one day. On my 11th birthday I received just one present from my family, but what a present – a big red box full of brushes, oil paints, turpentine and linseed oil," he recalls. "I fell in love with it, and felt very lucky."

Buoyed by encouragement from such a young age, he went on to study at

“Cobley enjoyed drawing as a child and was encouraged by his Uncle Don”

● **Clutter**

Oil on linen, 24x24in

For this self-portrait, I positioned a mirror so I could look down on myself from a bird's eye view.



The artist

David Cobley is one of the UK's leading portrait and figure painters. A member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters and New English Art Club, he has been a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and held solo exhibitions. His portraits of Ken Dodd and Sir Martin Evans hang in the National Portrait Gallery. He has won many awards, most recently The Smallwood Architects Prize for Contextual Portraiture, and is also the founder of the Bath Artists' Studios charity.

Northampton School of Art. Then in 1972, aged 18, he started at the Liverpool College of Art. But suddenly, everything changed.

The young artist became involved in the Unification Church, a religious movement commonly known as the Moonies, which has been accused of employing brainwashing techniques. Cobley consequently dropped out of college and stopped painting completely.

The Church didn't specifically tell him to stop painting, he says. But it did take over his life to such an extent that he no longer had room for art. "I threw myself into religion, so there was no time to do anything else," he explains.

Cobley was sent with a number of other members to Japan, but in 1977 began a course in Comparative Culture at Tokyo's Sophia University, paid for by teaching English. His religious fervour began to waver. "I'd had questions anyway, but the course opened up a whole new world to me," he recalls. Ultimately, it led to him dropping out of the Church.

Interview

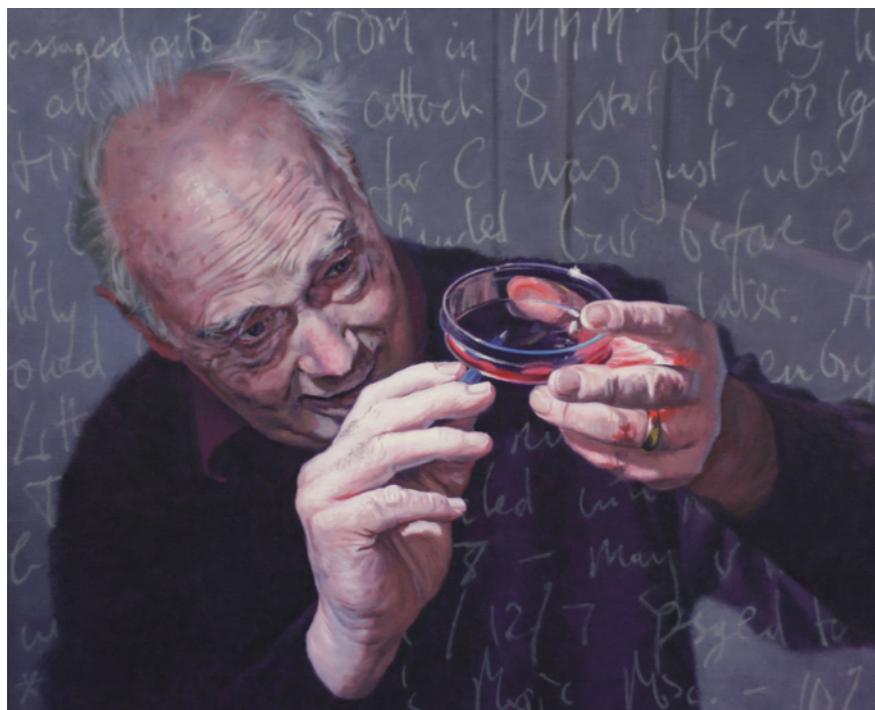
Brush up on people skills

"To make it as a portrait painter, you have got to like people. Sometimes you don't gel immediately with the sitter. But if you want to do a good job, you [need to] find a way of understanding where it is they're coming from."

Cobley was now desperate to get back to art, but unsure of the way forward. Then one day, he took action. "I bought a pen and sketchbook, jumped on a train, and just drew and drew and drew," he recalls.

He wouldn't necessarily have been so confident openly sketching people in London or New York, he adds. "But in Japan people keep themselves to themselves, and you can virtually do what you want. A lot of the time they were asleep, or looking out of the window, or reading a book."

Cobley feared his talents might have atrophied after such a long period of neglect. "But slowly, it started to return," he



◆ Sir Martin Evans
Oil on linen, 28x23in

Here I want to capture that moment where the biologist made his great discovery, which launched the stem cell revolution.

recalls. "I was very wobbly to start with. But it's like everything: you practise it enough and it starts to come back."

After almost 10 years in Japan, he returned to the UK in 1984 and moved with his then-wife and two young children to Pembrokeshire, where his mother and brother were running a B&B. "I tried to find work as an illustrator, but struggled to find any work at all," he says. "So we sold up, moved back to England, rented, and I just touted my portfolio to absolutely everybody I could think of. Publishing companies, advertising agencies, design agencies... you name it, I just blitzed them."

Cobley eventually managed to find enough work to make a living. But



◆ Bandwagon for Oblivion

Oil on linen, 84x46in

This painting is about how we're all unsure of where we're going, and cling on to things we think are important.



◆ Made to Measure

Oil on linen, 25x35in

This portrait of third-generation London tailor, Philip Child, was painted in a way that reflects the craft of tailoring.



“I bought a pen and sketchbook, jumped on a train, and drew and drew and drew”

illustration wasn't his objective. That was to paint portraits; and so now Cobley flung all his energies into pursuing this new goal.

“In my spare time while I was illustrating, I did as many portraits of friends, family, self-portraits as I possibly could,” he explains. His efforts quickly paid off. Soon he was getting his work exhibited, and in 1989 was shortlisted in the John Player Award (now the BP Portrait Award).

“Getting stuff like that is really encouraging when you're younger,” he

● **The Blue Dress**

Oil on linen, 48x48in

This woman wasn't terribly well. Her husband ended up giving her one of his kidneys; I find that very touching.



Interview

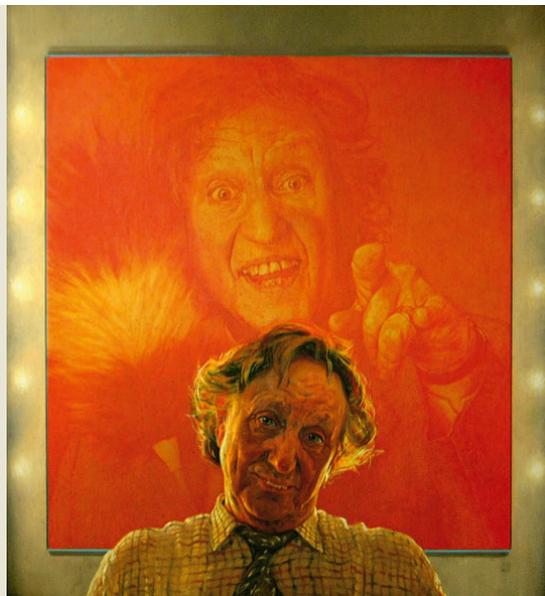
smiles. "I thought, 'Well, if I'm being accepted there, there's hope.' And bit by bit, I started to get commissions. Eventually, after six or seven years, I was able to drop illustration altogether and just concentrate on portraiture."

Soon there was no stopping him. Elected to the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in 1997, Cobley went on to paint subjects as diverse as the Princess Royal, Sir Norman Williams, Festus Mogae, the former president of Botswana, Steven Berkoff and Richard Briers. Working mainly in oils, he's won several awards, and his portraits of Ken Dodd and the Nobel-winning scientist Sir Martin Evans now hang in London's National Portrait Gallery.

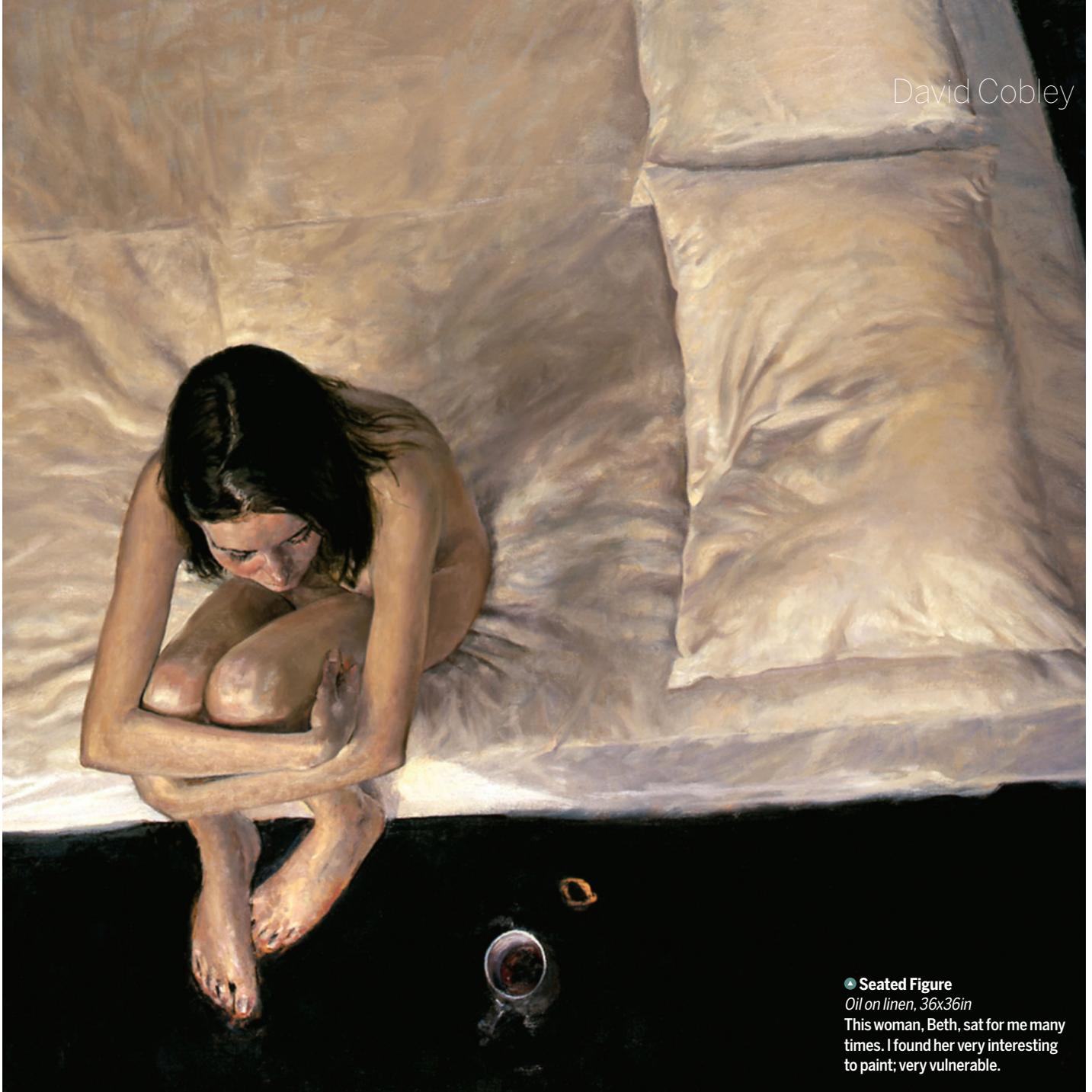
When he first meets his portrait subjects, Cobley likes to begin the process by taking

Sometimes it's about the timing

"I was a fan of Ken Dodd so I wrote to him and we met up several times. I did a painting that was framed and ready to exhibit (right). Then I thought: it's just not good enough, so I left it for a while. Three years later I painted another (below), which is now in the National Portrait Gallery."



◆ **Ken Dodd OBE**
Oil on linen, 42x46in
I'd been a fan for years, so I wrote and asked to paint him. We met up several times.



● **Seated Figure**

Oil on linen, 36x36in

This woman, Beth, sat for me many times. I found her very interesting to paint; very vulnerable.

photos. "I use the camera like a sketchbook," he explains. "People generally have limited availability, so time is of the essence. You get an hour, a couple of hours, and you want to get as much information as possible. I try and catch them slightly unawares, or at least not totally self-conscious, so that takes a little while. You learn ways of getting them to relax."

Fulfilling the brief

His next step is to discuss the portrait with whomever is paying for it. "It's generally an organisation that commissions portraits," he explains. "So you've got past portraits to look at, and they're generally a certain size, and so on; you can get an idea of what they want. Then I have to figure out how I produce something that's going to meet the

"I try and catch them unawares, or at least not totally self-conscious"

brief. I'll do lots of drawings and, increasingly, play around with Photoshop."

Once he has the organisation's agreement on the way forward, he asks for a one-third deposit and then the balance on completion. "Then I try to have as many sittings with my subject as I can. Not too many, because I know they're busy. But there's no substitute for being there with the sitter. You talk to them, you

Remember the key moments

"As a child, I remember opening the box of paints my uncle bought me and feeling absolutely thrilled. I took the top off the linseed oil and turpentine bottles, and I just loved the smell. Turpentine's not good for you, though, so these days I use Oil of Spike Lavender."

Interview



understand them better. You're able to observe, which is critical, make colour notes and all the rest of it."

In general, his subjects are very helpful, he adds. "They have great trust in you as a painter, they trust your experience. They'll have seen work by you before. It's probably the first and last time they'll ever be painted, so they find the whole process quite interesting and want to be part of it."

Cobley normally uses Old Holland paints, a centuries-old Dutch company whose products are used all around the world, particularly for restoration work. "I like the tactile buttery quality of Old Holland paints," he says. "The company's been around since 1664, so they know what they're doing. Plus there's this connection with one of my heroes, Rembrandt."

● Professor Philip Jones

Oil on linen, 54x44in

The vice-chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University was a smiley, optimistic, lively character, so I felt this expression represented him well.

● Festus Mogae

Oil on linen, 40x50in

The former president of Botswana. I painted [this picture] for University College Oxford, where he is an Honorary Fellow.





“You want to know that in 500 years... it'll look as good as when you finished it”

For his canvas, he'll use oil-primed linen. “I get my canvas from Bird & Davis,” he says. “It comes on a 10-metre roll and I stretch it myself. It's the finest linen you can get.” And that's very important to Cobley. “When people ask me to paint a portrait, you want to be sure that you can create not just the best image, but one that's produced in a way that's tried and tested,” he reasons. “You want to know that in 500 years' time it'll look virtually as good as when you finished it.

“I think that's my duty, my responsibility to the client,” he concludes. “The Old Masters all knew what they were doing when it came to the application of paint, and their work has stood the test of time. If something has been properly painted and properly looked after, there's no reason why it can't look as good as the day it was completed.”

● **Spilt Milk**

Oil on linen, 36x36in

Objects are interesting; they suggest things. I painted this while going through a difficult period, thinking about things I regretted.

Practise drawing

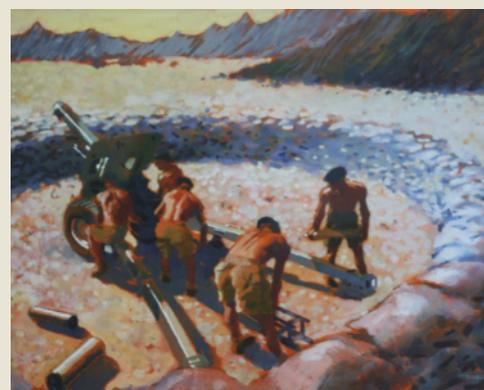
“If you want to paint portraits, you've got to do a lot of drawing from life. Practise is key. I see portraits that look competent on the surface, but when you really look, they just don't show a grasp of observational drawing.”

Commission process

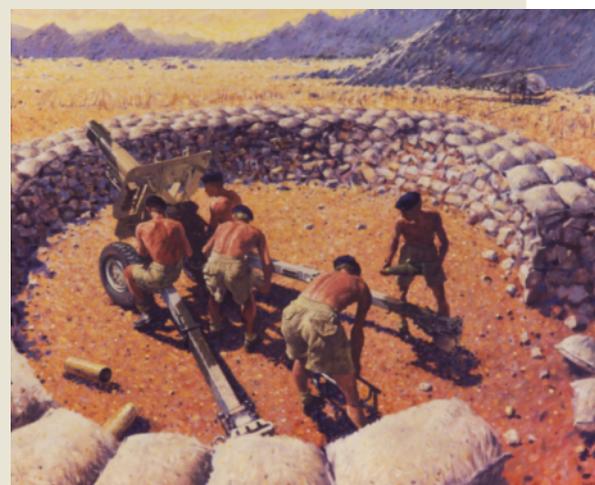
David talks us through how he worked with the client in the creation of this commission



1 THIS ARTWORK, *Gunners*, was commissioned by someone who'd been on service in the Middle East. The challenge was to take the photo reference and recreate the perspective, to give you a feeling you're in the heart of the action.



2 I DID THIS PAINTING on paper in gouache, and showed it to him. He asked me to add a gap for the gun to get into amongst the sandbags, as well as adding a helicopter in the top-right corner.



3 THE FINAL PAINTING was done in oil (24x30in) and included his changes, so he was very happy with it. It works, but looking back, I think the gouache is more lively and has a lot more action to it.