

Horses, Heroes, and Her Royal Highness: Arnold Friberg's Remarkable Journey to Royal Portraiture

BY ALEXANDER STARR

Few artists in history have been given the honor to memorialize royalty in portraiture, and even fewer American artists have been commissioned to paint the British Monarchy. Arnold Friberg, however, achieved this lofty goal not once but twice, memorializing both King Charles III, then the Prince of Wales, and the late Queen Elizabeth II in equestrian scenes commensurate in skill and affect to the great royal portraits of history. Friberg's path to capturing these two monumental figures of the twentieth century began early in his career when, at the age of twenty-four, he was commissioned by the Northwest Paper Company to create a depiction of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The paper company had launched a new advertising campaign featuring the Mounties, hoping to associate their brand with the public image of dependability and honesty attributed to the RCMP at that time. It was also an ideal imagery for a paper producing company, as the eye-catching scarlet uniforms would be instantly recognizable and a perfect way to communicate the richness of color that could be produced using their product. Friberg's first Mountie painting was well received, leading to an ongoing commission that would support him through the early years of his artistic career and spur a lifelong fascination of depicting the Mounted Police as they performed their duties across the majestic, yet unforgiving, terrain of the Northwest Territories.

Friberg approached this subject in his typical manner, using photographs and other illustrations to study every minute detail of the uniforms, landscapes, and all-important equine companions to bring out the signature depth of richness in his compositions. In *Springtime in the North*, the artist's mastery of the equine form is on full display. Each powerful muscle and tendon is accounted for in the horse's legs. Its lustrous coat, slightly damp from a long morning ride, shines in the radiant sunlight, newly returned to the land. For the RCMP, horses were a vital ally while conducting their duties, providing transportation across jagged mountains and deep snow drifts as well as companionship in the isolating solitude of the wild. Friberg takes special care to capture the strength and vitality of both horse and Mountie, which he mirrors with the crisp, surging spring, freshly melted from its frozen slumber. These conscientious renderings of life in the far North drew a dedicated following among the RCMP members, who often saved clippings of the Northwest Paper Company advertisements due to their admiration of Friberg's careful recreations of their livelihood. Several decades after producing the first Mountie image, Friberg traveled to Canada for the



Springtime in the North

first time in the 1960s and learned of his acclaim. During that time, he developed friendships with many members of the force and would eventually be asked to present the original oil paintings at an exhibition, coinciding with the centennial celebration of the RCMP. His work was so well received that the RCMP Friends of the Force leadership arranged for Friberg to paint a commissioned portrait of Charles, then the Prince of Wales, to commemorate a new museum in the Northwestern Territories dedicated in the Prince's honor.

The portrait of the prince would also include the royal mount, a horse named Centenial, which the RCMP presented to Queen Elizabeth II during the aforementioned centennial celebration. This offered Friberg a chance to present his mastery of human and equine anatomy in a vivid display of realism, while maintaining the spiritual and authentic undercurrent found throughout his oeuvre. The painting was unveiled at the opening of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre to great fanfare, and Charles and the Queen were said to be greatly enamored with the manner in which Friberg captured the future king. Owing to the success of Friberg's first foray into royal portraiture, the RCMP Friends of the Force set their sights on commissioning a second one, this time featuring the monarch herself. Ultimately Queen Elizabeth II was so taken with Friberg's exceptional skill in capturing the likeness of her son in the first portrait, that she agreed to sit for the second commission. Friberg had so successfully conveyed the spirit and royal position of the prince, he would now be given the opportunity to paint one of the most famous and popular figures of the twentieth century.



Portrait of HRH Queen Elizabeth II

The Portrait of HRH Queen Elizabeth II is an exemplary iteration of Friberg's exceptional technique and individual style. Distinct from the portrait of the prince, who is depicted standing before Centenial, the Queen is seated atop the royal mount, drawing inspiration from the historical tradition of royal equestrian portraiture. However, Friberg quickly departs from this tradition in a myriad of ways that epitomize his extraordinary command of anatomical motion and his ability to evoke the delicate nuance of his subject's spiritual affect. Consider two of the most famous royal equestrian

portraits, Diego Velazquez's portrait of Philip IV and Francisco De Goya's portrait of Carlos IV. In both compositions, the artists have rendered the monarchs in a gargantuan scale compared to their mounts. This tradition of enlarging the human subject in equestrian imagery dates back in Europe to Marcus Aurelius and beyond. The increased scale was intended to convey the larger-than-life persona of the King and display his supreme dominance.



Philip IV by Diego Velazquez



Carlos IV by Francisco DeGoya

Friberg chooses to depart from this tradition and depicts Queen Elizabeth II in a life-like scale. If the intent of the larger-than-life depictions of monarchs throughout history was to display their raw power and immense figurative stature, Friberg's painting perfectly captures the steady-handed guidance and cool-under-pressure affect quintessential to Queen Elizabeth's storied rule. Friberg further departs from tradition in his depiction of Centennial.

Throughout history, even master painters have struggled with the equine form, especially when reproduced at an angle. In the Velazquez portrait mentioned above, Philip IV's mount is shown in almost complete profile, with a slight hint of angularity to create depth within the scene. In Goya's portrait, Carlos IV's mount is shown at the three-quarter angle, a depiction known for its difficulty. Friberg presents Centennial at a rare angle between the three-quarter and profile views, showing off his remarkable command of anatomical composition and extreme attention to detail. Going a step further, he also shows the royal mount moving at a leisurely trot, with the horse's tail lightly bouncing through the air while the Queen masterfully controls the speed and direction of the pair.

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Friberg's exceptional work with the Mountie paintings throughout his long career perfectly prepared him to produce the royal portraits that marked one of many high points in his career. His careful study of anatomy, horsemanship, and the human condition allowed him to hone his skills, giving him the ability to convey the regal nature and singular spirit of such transformative world figures.