

Sir William Dargie's Spare 'Wattle Painting'

It was a clear winter afternoon in London on 4 November 1954, and portrait artist William Dargie (1912–2003) waited nervously in a first-floor room at Buckingham Palace. Described somewhat indelicately by a newspaper of the time as 'a chunky Australian in a smart blue suit', Dargie was in fact a prestigious seven-times winner of the Archibald Prize for portraiture and had built on his reputation as an accomplished war artist with the Australian forces during the Second World War. Despite his impressive resume, his nerves were justifiably on edge at the imminent and unannounced arrival of his most significant sitter.

He didn't have long to wait. Quite without warning, the doors opened and the newly-crowned Queen Elizabeth II swept in, looking 'magnificent in her wattle gown and scintillating tiara'. She wore her hair loosely pinned back under the tiara, which had been given to her by her grandmother Queen Mary, complemented by a diamond necklace she had received as a wedding present from the Nizam of Hyderabad. Having already assembled his materials, Dargie pulled himself together, shook hands then waited for the Queen to pose as she wished. Having gauged the composition from several angles, he made a start on what would ultimately be one of his most iconic commissions, beloved by several generations of Australians.

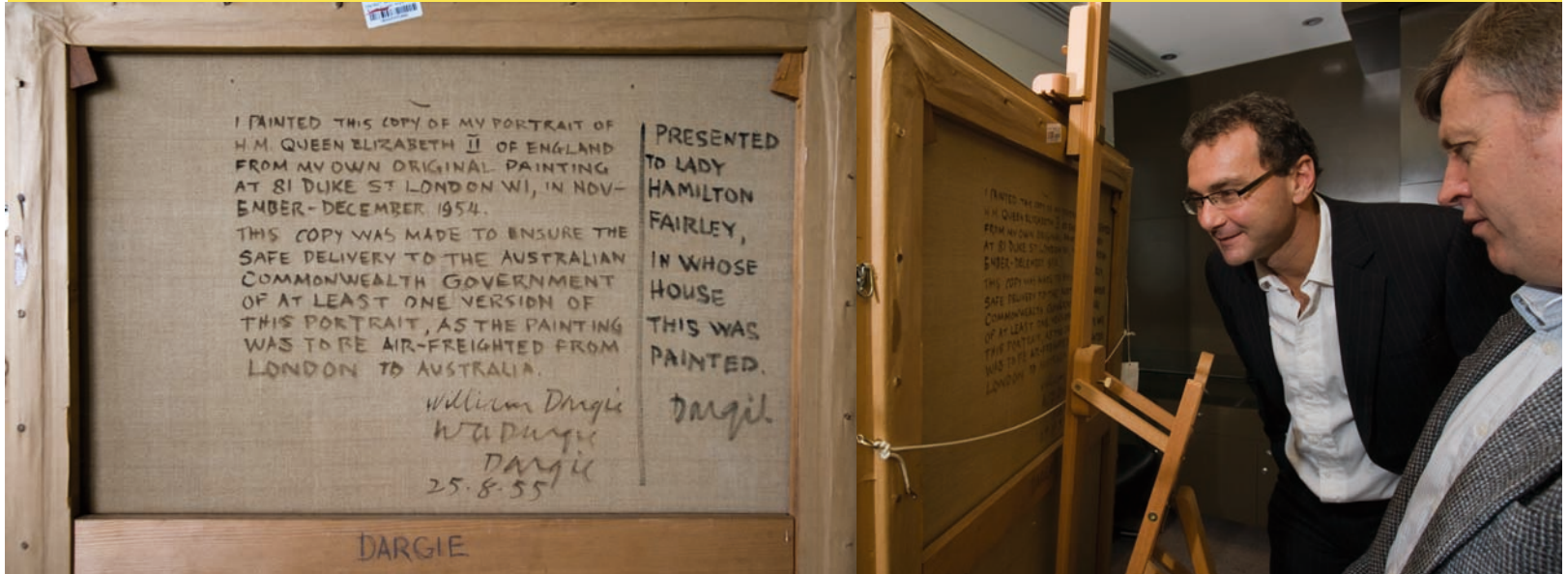
In the wake of the Royal Tour of Australia from February to April 1954, Dargie had been offered the chance of a lifetime by Melbourne industrialist James P Beveridge. With the help of some prime ministerial string-pulling to arrange the necessary sittings, Dargie was commissioned as the first Australian artist to paint his country's official portrait of the Queen, in commemoration of the historic Royal visit. Part of an ambitious and strategic Coronation tour of the Commonwealth from November 1953 to May 1954, this highly publicised venture proved a cultural milestone during a period of immense social change. When Queen Elizabeth II disembarked from SS *Gothic* at Sydney on 3 February 1954, she was the first reigning monarch to set foot on Australian soil. Over an eight-week period, she and Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, visited all state and territory capitals (excepting Darwin) and many rural centres. In an atmosphere of breathless adoration, the Royal couple was presented with the very best of Australian industry and society. The Queen also fulfilled her constitutional role by opening state and federal parliaments. One of the last great pre-television events, almost three-quarters of the population glimpsed her in person at least once in various cities and towns across the country. Described as 'a thunderous progress through thousands of miles lit to incandescence by the affection and enthusiasm of nine million devoted subjects', the tour was to be one of the last displays of mass

public celebration of the monarchy. Whilst Australian attraction towards all things British would wane under the new wave of post-war immigration, during the 1950s the idea of monarchy, and in particular of the attractive young Queen as a role model, was firmly rooted in popular culture.

The Queen's Norman Hartnell gold tulle dress adorned with sparkling wattle motifs also became a celebrated Australian symbol in itself. Not only unambiguously patriotic, it was instantly recognisable as that worn by the Queen on her first evening engagement of the Royal Tour in Sydney, and again to her last evening function in Perth before leaving Australia. Dargie spoke on behalf of a generation when he declared that 'I was never more impressed than when I saw her wearing her wattle gown. It was regal and it was Australian. And that was the gown I wanted to paint her in ... I knew I had to have that wattle gown.'

The Palace raised no objections and he got his wish. Over five sittings, or a little over 12 hours, Dargie portrayed the Queen in oil on canvas using a glowing green-gold colour scheme, enlivened by the white flashes of her jewellery. The skilful conveyance of the freshness and vitality of the youthful Queen is often commented upon. Her expression conveys something of her gracious personality often hidden behind her public persona – indeed she herself referred to it as a 'nice friendly portrait'. To this day, the primary significance of this image is in its representation of the beginnings of the





enduring relationship between the Australian public and the young Queen they fell in love with in 1954.

By mid-December 1954 Dargie became increasingly concerned that this significant portrait might be damaged or, at worst, lost during transit back to Australia. He commenced work on painting a second replica copy from his original. This 'spare' was painted upside down in his room at the home of his hosts, the Hamilton Fairley family, in Duke Street, London. Any artist will recognise this seemingly odd move as an attempt to view the portrait merely as a series of colours and forms. Eliminating the natural desire to improve upon the original, this endeavour prevented embellishment and created a true identical copy.

Both paintings were insured for £1000 and returned safely to Australia on separate flights in January 1955, no doubt to Dargie's relief. The original portrait was officially presented to the Commonwealth by Mrs Beveridge at Parliament House on 21 April 1955 and was received by Prime Minister Robert Menzies through the Governor-General William Slim. Owned by the Historical Memorials Committee, it remains on long-term loan for permanent display at Parliament House. The 'Wattle Painting', as it became known, was well received by the Australian public and became one of the most recognisable and treasured examples of 20th century Australian portraiture. Within a short time of its completion, colour prints were made available and the work took on the status of an official portrait. A royal presence was for many years a common feature in federal, state and local government departments as well as countless courthouses, schools, hospitals, libraries, church halls and RSL clubrooms throughout Australia. For many post-war immigrants this portrait was their first encounter with an artwork by an Australian artist, as it was reproduced on Australian naturalisation papers from the mid 1950s. Under the terms of the 1954 Australian Citizenship Convention, a print of the work was generally present in local town halls where many naturalisation ceremonies took place.

Meanwhile, Dargie returned to London in mid-1955 to paint a portrait of Anne, the young future Princess Royal. The spare replica portrait of the Queen had earlier been returned to Lady Mary Hamilton Fairley, and it was during this visit that Dargie officially presented it to her as a gift on 25 August 1955. This fascinating provenance and the circumstances of the replica's creation are attested by the inscription on the reverse. It was enjoyed for over 50 years and displayed in the private collections of the Hamilton Fairley family until 2009, when it was offered for sale for the first time. The National Museum of Australia was delighted to acquire it at auction for \$146,400.

Official display of the portrait has lessened in recent years as the republican debate gains strength. Regardless of this, the image retains its iconic status and, if the media coverage following the Museum's purchase of this portrait is anything to go by, illustrates the enduring depth of public interest in Queen Elizabeth II. Our spare 'Wattle Painting' remains a charming reminder of the never-to-be repeated fervour of the 1954 Royal Tour of Australia. Nervously awaiting the Queen's first sitting at Buckingham Palace in 1954, Dargie would have been delighted to know that his portrait would be widely appreciated and continue to capture the imagination of the Australian public for many years to come.

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Photos: George Serras

From left: William Dargie Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, 1954 (National Museum of Australia), Copy photo from book 'Royal visit to Australia of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness Duke of Edinburgh' (National Museum of Australia), Back of William Dargie Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, 1954 (National Museum of Australia), General Manager, Mat Trinca with Senior Curator, Guy Hansen at the hand-over of the William Dargie portrait of Queen Elizabeth II (National Museum of Australia).