

# Who's Who: The Problem With Great Portraits

## 3. British Monarchs

By Simon Abrahams  
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Oliver Cromwell, attributed to Lely



Lely by Lely

Later discovery, not included below. A contemporary, Francis Mortoft, saw the portrait in the gallery of the Grand Duke of Tuscany on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1658 and thought it “nothing like him.”

Crino and Millar, “Sir Peter Lely and the Grand Duke of Tuscany”, Burlington 100, April 1958, p.127

**The portraits that follow of Britain’s kings and queens** are the visual icons of British history, the mnemonic markers of the island’s story.

Although they are neither the most important portraits in the history of art nor even the best examples of the poetry in question, they are nonetheless both widely known and of wide interest.

Like the portraits in the preceding papers, these royal images were never intended by the artist as historical records of an actual sitter but as depictions of the artist's *alter ego*. No doubt they pretended otherwise to their patrons but they and their peers knew better; the evidence is overwhelming. Of the many methods used to practice this deception, *face fusion*, for want of a better term, is the easiest to demonstrate. One or more of the artist's features are fused with the sitter's in such a way that the end-result can resemble *both* the sitter and the artist. Some are so like the artist, though, that the sitter's own likeness is questionable. Pose, lighting and hairstyle are also used.

Another of their tricks, linked to pose, is simple. By inverting or slightly rotating a face they were able to help disguise what they had done. Today, with computers, it is easy to reverse those changes as I have done in the comparisons below. A common hairstyle is another method, whether or not either person had such hair in reality.

Facial resemblance is not even needed in the practice of self-representation because a single feature will do, as has been shown previously (Issue 2). However, to convince those new to this form of visual perception, I have limited the portraits to those that are obvious with the sole exception of Holbein's. Some readers may want to improve their sight by checking their own observations of similarities against mine in the Appendix. With practice they will recognize these methods more easily.

Holbein, one of the first artists to paint a British king with true illusion, was particularly subtle. His patron, after all, had few scruples and if Holbein had failed to capture the royal head as expected, his own might have been at stake. Whatever the reason, note how the following features in Henry VIII's face match those in Holbein's self-portrait: the line of the eyebrows, the curve of the nostril, a sharp contour running across the forehead, the turn of the head and the rectangular shape to their faces and beards. Most subtle is the similarity between their mouths, with Henry's identical to the *central* portion of Holbein's. At first sight, no-one would say they were the same; it requires close looking.

In Holbein's portrait of the Prince of Wales, later Edward VI, the short eyebrows again match Holbein's, just as the vertical stripes of Edward's hair and headwear echo the artist's hair. The rectangular face, a Holbein characteristic, is caught again in the bulging cheeks while the lips, like Henry's, match the central portion of Holbein's mouth, only much fuller. Finally, the edge of the nostril, shaped like a rectangular parenthesis, mimics Holbein's too, only smaller.

The other portraits illustrated here, fourteen more monarchs and a consort, need little explanation though, as mentioned, a list of similarities can be found in the appendix.



Henry VIII by Holbein



Holbein by Holbein





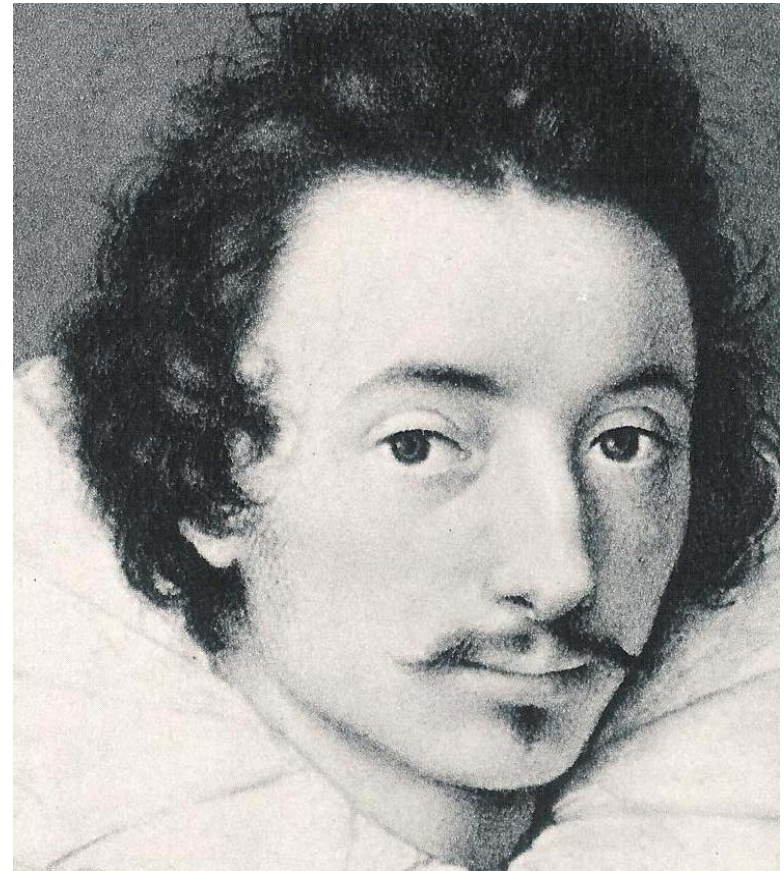
Edward VI by Holbein



Holbein by Holbein



Elizabeth I by Oliver



Oliver by Oliver

This miniature of Queen Elizabeth I was described by a leading scholar as “without doubt..painted from life” and “arguably our greatest likeness.” Yet the Queen, perhaps unhappy with the resemblance even so, is said to have disliked it.<sup>1</sup>





Elizabeth I by Hilliard

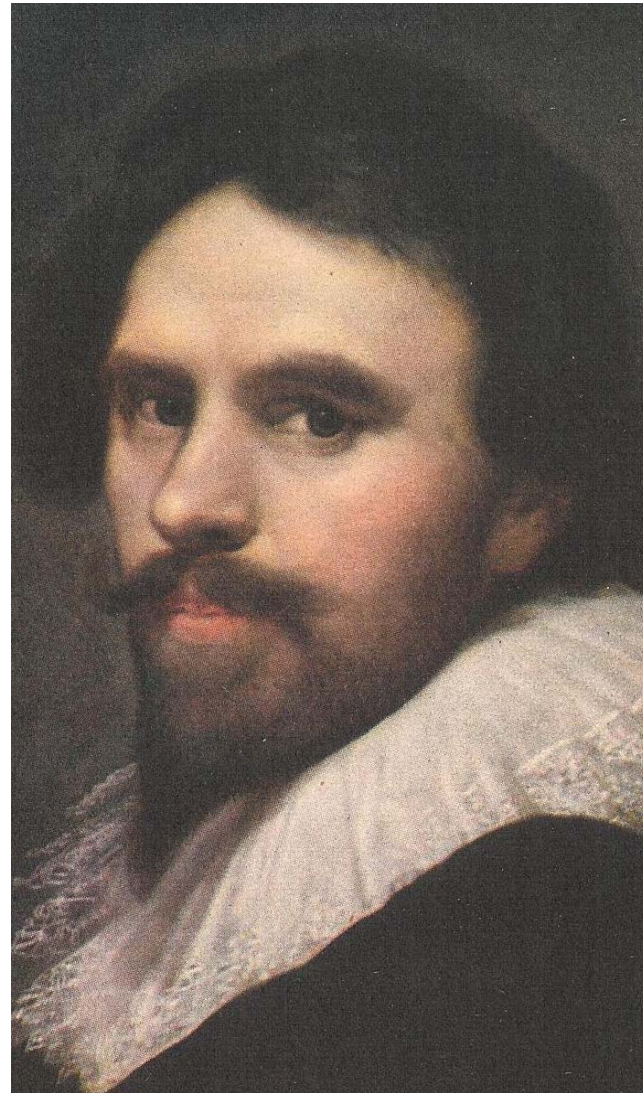


Hilliard by Hilliard





Charles I by Mijtens



Mijtens by Mijtens





Charles I by Van Dyck



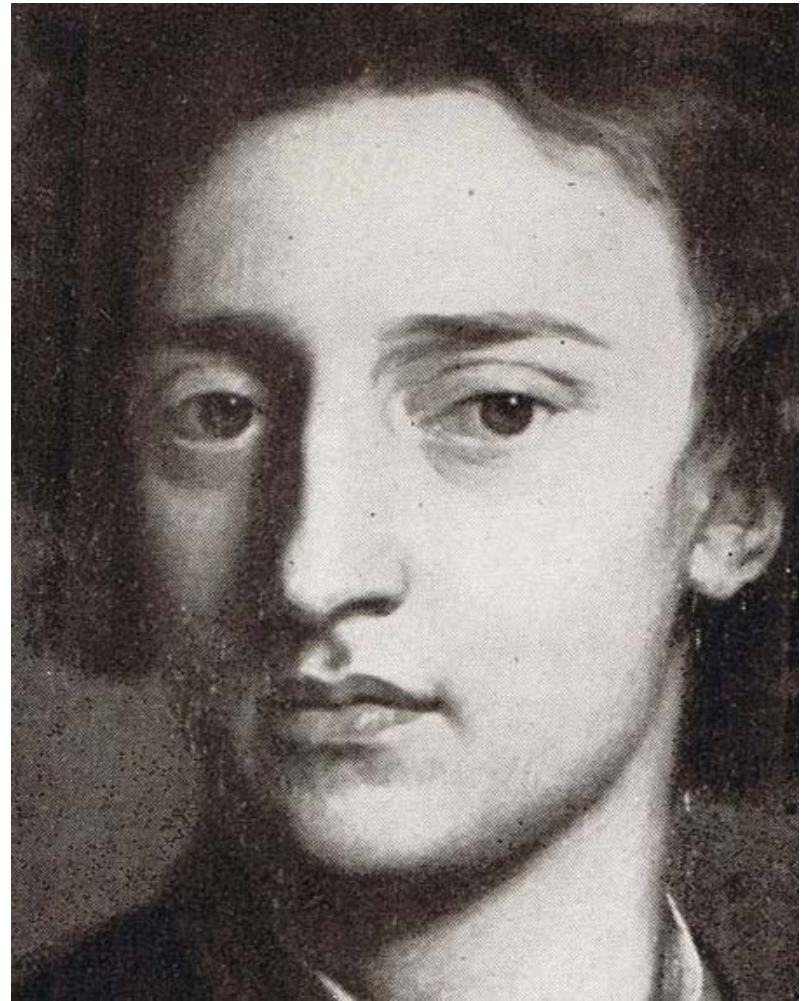
Van Dyck by Van Dyck

Note how the color of the king's hair changes to match the artist's: dark brown in Mijtens' portrait (opposite), red in Van Dyck's (above).





Charles II by Kneller



Kneller by Kneller





James II when Duke of York by Lely



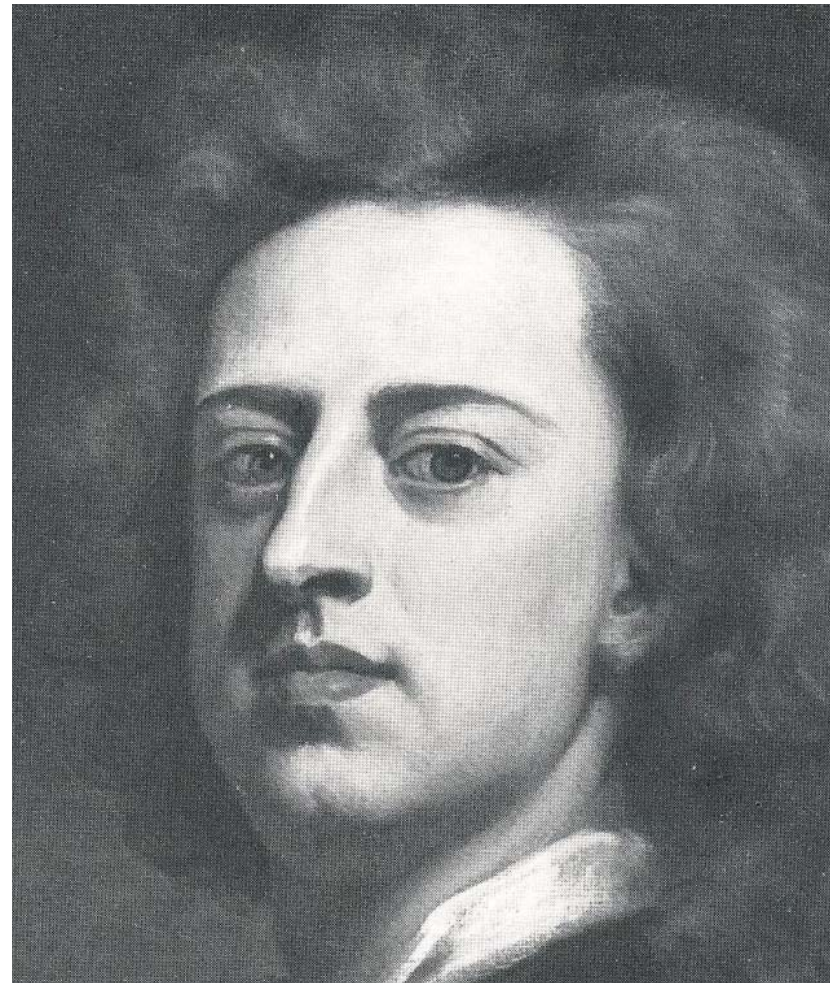
Lely by Lely<sup>2</sup>

At least two contemporaries of Peter Lely complained that the faces in his portraits resembled each other, one even suggesting that he was too fond of studying his own features.<sup>3</sup>





James II by Kneller



Kneller by Kneller\*

\*While the nose and eyes here of James II as Duke of York resemble those in the above self-portrait, the mouth and chin are a better match with those in Kneller's earliest extant self-portrait of around 1685.



Anne by Kneller



Kneller by Kneller





William III by Kneller (Engraving)



Kneller by Kneller





Mary II by Kneller (engraving)



Kneller by Kneller





George I by Kneller



Kneller by Kneller



George II by Kneller



Kneller by Kneller

A contemporary reported how a couple visiting Kneller's studio had to ask which portrait was of their son. When they were gone, Kneller protested that the portrait was a good resemblance though "by God, man, I did put a little sense in his face, and now his friends do not know their fool again."<sup>4</sup>



George III by Reynolds

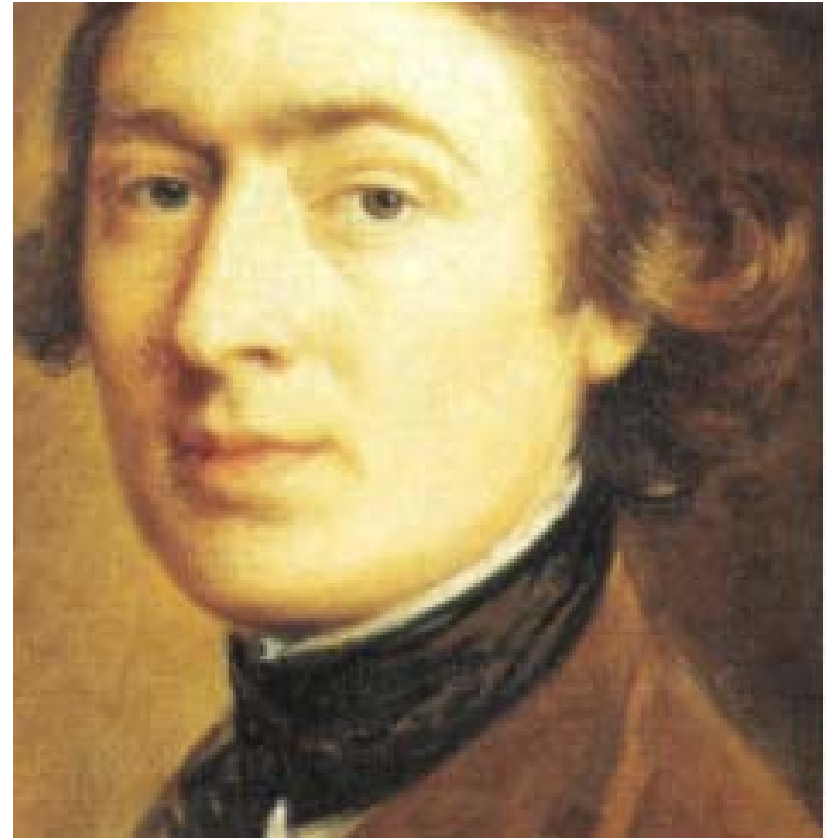


Reynolds by Reynolds





Queen Charlotte by Gainsborough



Gainsborough by Gainsborough

\*The quality of this reproduction will be improved as soon as possible.





George IV by Reynolds

Reynolds by Reynolds



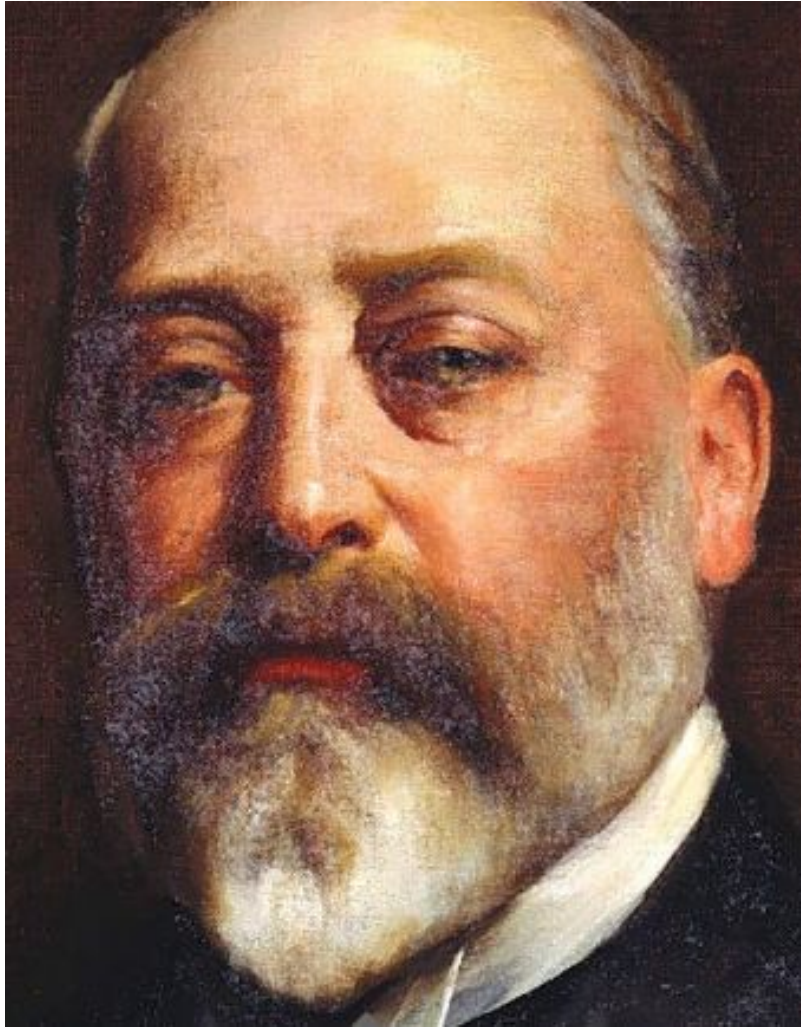


Queen Victoria, Engraving after by Hayter\*

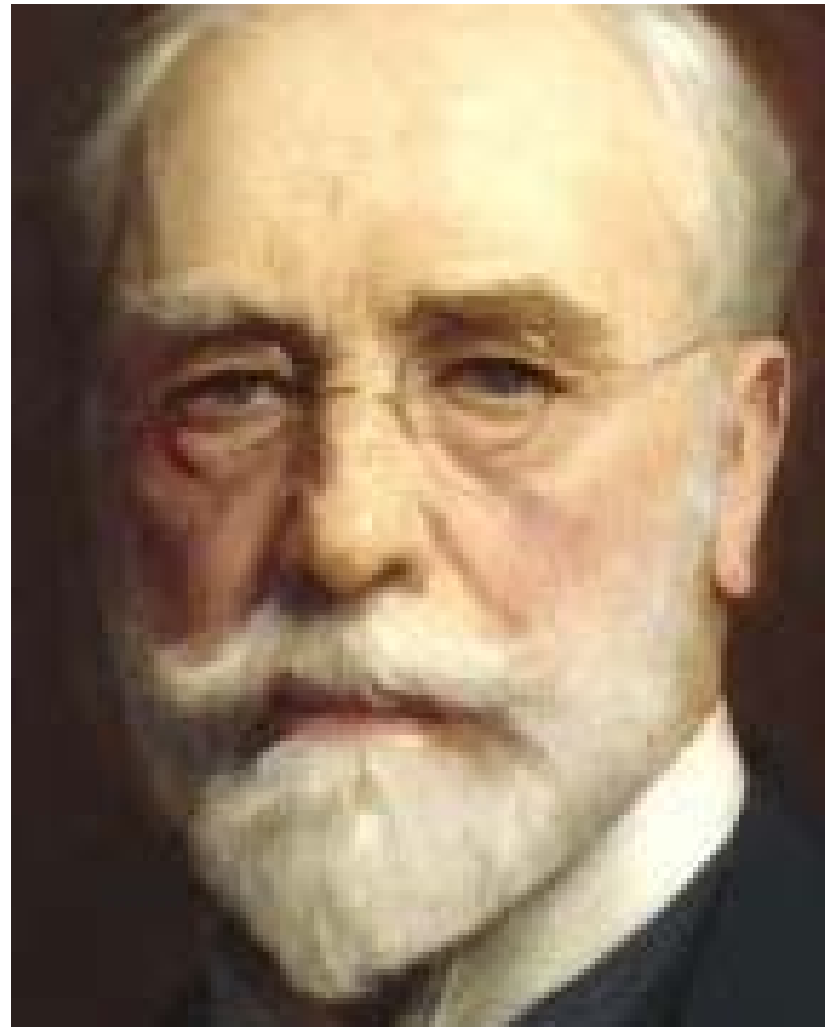


Hayter by Hayter

\*The quality of this reproduction will be improved as soon as possible.



Edward VII by Luke Fildes



Luke Fildes by Luke Fildes





Elizabeth II by Annigoni



Annigoni by Annigoni





Elizabeth II by Freud



Freud by Freud



Lucian Freud, the only artist illustrated here still alive, has practiced self-representation throughout his career. Note how in his self-portrait his *hair* resembles the shape of the diamond-encrusted cross in the Queen's Crown and is colored silvery-grey too.

In the next issue the focus turns to Italy and the Italian Renaissance. The examples, some of which can already be seen in the website's Gallery, will make clear that artists in Britain were not working in a vacuum but had used their powers of visual perception to unveil the poetic content of earlier art elsewhere. Indeed behind their poetry lies a philosophy that many artists (painters and sculptors) must have learnt almost entirely through vision. What it is and how they did it remains to be explained but, first, viewers need to accept that the traditional understanding of art is deeply flawed. Only then will new ways of looking be welcomed.

## **APPENDIX** (page number in parentheses)

### **Holbein / Henry VIII (6)**

Eyebrows; line of nose is the same until Holbein's extends outwards; nostril is the same shape, just smaller; central part of Holbein's mouth equals the whole of the King's; rectangular beard; sharp line curves across forehead

### **Holbein / Edward VI (7)**

Striped hair/hat; curved contour across forehead; inner eyebrows;  
rectangular  
shape to face/beard

### **Oliver/ Elizabeth I (8)**

Nose; eye openings; mouth; chin; facial shape

### **Hilliard / Elizabeth I (9)**

Left contour and facial shape..same position of head; eyebrows lines similar, just thicker; curly hair; line of nose continuing up to eyebrow; narrow eyelid on right



**Oliver's and Hilliard's versions of Elizabeth I** have a different length to the chin, different shape to the eyes, different lips....

**Mytens / Charles I (10)**

The line of Charles' nose is longer and less straight than the artist's but ends in a similar bump with a similar nostril; lips; eye openings; a few loose strands above the left temple; similar parting; beard and moustache

**Van Dyck / Charles I (11)**

Unkempt hair; lines of both noses (excluding end); nostrils; lower lips; broad plane from center of near eyebrow to cheekbone; chin seems to be similar; diagonal line of collar.

**Van Dyck's and Mytens' portraits of Charles I** have different color beards and moustaches though, in each case, they match the artist's.

**Kneller / Charles II (12)**

Eyes; broad eyelids; long nose; lower lip

**Lely / James II when Duke of York (13)**

Hairstyle with two curls on forehead; heavy eyebrows; eye openings; straight nose though of different length

**Kneller / James II (14)**

Hairstyle; eyebrows; shape of nose if not the length; lower lip and shape of upper lip

**Kneller / Anne (15)**

High, messy hair; loose curl above left eye; mouth that also curls up at the edges; chin

**Kneller / William III (16)**

Curly hair if not as curly; long nose though not as hooked; straight eyebrows; similarity to eyes though not identical; mouth; chin

**Kneller / Mary II (17)**

Eyebrows; shape of eyes with narrower eyelids; nose; mouth; facial shape

**Kneller / George I (18)**

Shape of hair; eyes; angle of nose; mouth though upper lip narrower; chin; facial shape

**Kneller / George II (19)**

Hair; eyebrows; eyes; angle of nose; shape of mouth though upper lip less full; chin



**Reynolds / George III (20)**

Facial shape; contour of hair; eyebrows; eye openings; nose similar (except nostril); upper lip same; cleft in chin; tubular neck

**Gainsborough / Queen Charlotte (21)**

Eyebrows; eyes; mouth; chin; facial shape

**Reynolds / King George IV (22)**

Flying hair including a loose lock by the cheekbone; eyebrows; eye openings; line of nose with similar nostril; slightly open mouth; cleft chin

**Hayter / Queen Victoria (23)**

Eyebrows; far eye; line of nose; full lower lip; chin

**Luke Fildes / King Edward VII (24)**

Similar baldness; line of eyebrows; eye openings; nostril; beard and moustache

**Annigoni / Queen Elizabeth II (25)**

Shape of artist's beret matches shape of Queen's hair; raised eyebrows; angle of nose; mouth with full lower lip; shape of chin

## Freud / Queen Elizabeth II (26)

Hair color; eyebrows with frown; shape of eye opening on left with drooping eyelid on right; the dip in upper lip almost splits it in two; chin

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Strong, *Artists of the Tudor Court: The Portrait Miniatures Rediscovered 1520-1620* (London: V&A Museum) 1983, pp. 97, 124-5

<sup>2</sup> The faces are even more alike when Lely's self-portrait here is compared to an unfinished head of James II by Lely in The National Portrait Gallery.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Millar, *Sir Peter Lely, 1618-1680* (London: National Portrait Gallery) 1978, p. 25

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Richardson, cited in J.D. Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller* (London: National Portrait Gallery) 1971, p. 8.