

Portrait of Merseyside - past and present

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A BRILLIANT artist plans to capture the spirit and character of Merseyside in 100 portraits of today's people and an epic canvas of our past.

By David Charters, Daily Post

THE artist himself has a modest manner and his voice is as soft as a cat on a carpet, but within him there swells enough talent to hang the walls of grand galleries with the faces of people who have in some way illuminated his life.

When he is finished, there will be 100 of these faces, all from Merseyside.

And they will be Tony Brown's own hall of fame to be formally unveiled in 2007 when Liverpool celebrates the 800th anniversary of its Royal Charter being granted by King John.

There is an urgency to complete what would be an immense undertaking for any artist. But Tony is blind in the left eye, following complications which arose from a diabetic condition, and there's a cataract on the other one.

Although stable at the moment, it could worsen, adding poignancy to the passionate calling of this gentle man, whose delicacy of touch depends on the observation of minute detail.

Yet Tony is not one to complain, having coming through the depression which cloaked him after he lost half his sight 14 years ago. He never talks in a defeatist way these days. There is an epic task before him and he will finish it and so offer his own gift to the story of Merseyside, its people and its pride.

For his hands can give a kind of immortality to the brave, the talented, the unsung, the kind and the decent, whose smiles would otherwise be glimpsed only fleetingly. Together, his portraits will be known as "100 Heads Thinking As One".

Tony's list will be more personal than those which have resulted from polls conducted for newspapers and radio stations, or the regular gong-giving ceremonies, in which the great and good favour their own, with the occasional token medal diplomatically bestowed on a deserving outsider.

Obviously, familiar names will be included; but, beyond the rich, the powerful and the famous, Tony hopes his portraits will tell us more about the characters who have contributed to the daily life of Merseyside, as Liverpool approaches the 2008 European Capital of Culture.

Tony has chosen some of his subjects, but others are as yet unknown even to him.

This is a work in progress and he is hoping to receive suggestions from readers of the Daily Post to be considered along with his own ideas and those of his family and friends.

And every time he engages people in conversation, Tony learns of more candidates to be filed in his mind.

"Ah, you must have heard of so and so, she did such and such a thing. A fine lady."

There will be 100 living Merseysiders, but these will be supplemented by a massive "Canvas Charter" to be assembled in sections, containing faces from the area's rich past.



That brings us to the contentious question of King John himself, a man who in a later age might well have been branded a "cad and a bounder", if not a "scoundrel".

His real purpose in granting Liverpool its charter was to enable the Crown to use it as a port for dispatching troops to quell rebellions in Ireland, which had come under English control in 1172 during the reign of Henry II.

II. But given the nature of the commemoration, it was impossible to leave him out, though there is no reason why his furtive eyes and weak chin should not be in evidence.

Central to each painting will be the portrait, based wherever possible on a photograph. "I am using a collage style," says the father of four from Birkenhead.

"This will enable me to produce a work which is almost three-dimensional."

In the style he has developed, Tony, a devotee of Pablo Picasso, is able to use newspaper cuttings and images relevant to the person's life as a background to the paintings. These could include a hero or heroine of the subject's or some item of particular interest in his or her life.

Writers might wish to be framed with passages of their best work permeating the portrait. There will be a self-portrait of Brown who is sponsored by Windsor & Newton of Harrow, Middlesex, world-renowned makers of art materials.

"Each one will be a personal diary and a reflection of the person and not simply a reproduction of a flat photograph," says Tony, the son of an insurance salesman, who attended the Blessed Sacrament School, Walton, Liverpool, before his family crossed the river.

Picasso maintained that different textures could enter a composition enabling the reality in the work to compete with the reality in nature in an abstract manner.

However, traditionalists need not fear. Tony's figures will not appear as cubes with their noses and eyes at peculiar angles. But he believes that in the collage form each portrait will carry its own truth and together they will give the viewer an idea of what being a Merseysider means.

One of Tony's subjects is his wife Lorraine, 42, who is not only his "soulmate" but his guide in bringing a dream to fruition.

They have been contacting big galleries and other venues, including the Artists' Club, in Eberle Street, Liverpool, where he has already exhibited his work, and the Athenaeum, Church Alley, Liverpool.

To display all 100 paintings at the same time would require a large area and some venues would have to stage a series of exhibitions to show them all.

The Williamson Art Gallery on Slatey Road, Birkenhead, has already guaranteed Tony space in 2007 for the portraits, some of which will be four feet by six feet.

"This is an ambitious scheme," says Colin Simpson, the gallery's curator, "but as long as the works themselves are well done and recognisable, which from the evidence so far, they are, it will make an interesting exhibition. T

here is a depth in the material. The images tell their own stories and it will make a fascinating record for the year of heritage, showing the range of personalities who have been involved."

But the idea of the portraits being shown at galleries across Merseyside throughout the year also appeals to Tony as a way of drawing the whole region into the celebrations of 2007 and then 2008 when Liverpool will be the European Capital of Culture.

"This is my opportunity to pay tribute to people, not necessarily Liverpudlians, but with an affinity with the city, " says Tony. "It will be a mix of people from all walks of life, but they all intermingle, just as in life. The plumber has conversations with the brain surgeon.

"Accompanying each picture will be a biography, maybe in their own words or maybe drafted by us, detailing their standing in the community, whether a school dinner lady or a university scientist.

We're all equal in one respect. We all have something to offer. There is a driving strength and spirit in all

the people I have chosen so far. There has always been a swagger about Merseysiders which was lost a bit in the bad years, but it is back again.

"A crazy man would think twice about doing this, but I am beyond crazy."

Tony's one seeing eye is working well at the moment. Doctors are reluctant to operate on its cataract because of the risks involved to an eye already damaged by diabetes.

"There is a slight build up of cataract in my good eye," says Tony. "But I am not worried about that, but obviously it could become a worry because this is what I do. I am hoping my good eye will hold out. You work today and then tomorrow you do the same.

"Somewhere down the line it catches up, but I can't let that happen. I am totally positive about it. That goes along with my whole philosophy."

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An international reputation >>

An international reputation

TONY is a largely self-taught artist, starting as a child. He has a studio in Duke Street, Liverpool. In 2000, his paintings were used in an exhibition promoting the Beatles at the legendary Bloomingdale's department store in New York.

But he is perhaps best known for his doodles, or line drawings, most famously of the Liverpool and New York waterfronts.

After 9/11 in 2001, Tony was left with the dilemma of whether to remove the Twin Towers. He kept them in because he thought they would remain in the collective memory, but they are not as sharply outlined as the other buildings, leaving a ghostly impression.

Also, he drew the image of St Anthony's Church, which was used on mugs and t-shirts to mark the 200th anniversary of Scotland Road, Liverpool, in 2003.

Still searching for those famous faces

TONY'S list is not yet complete but the 100 living Merseysiders will include Ken Dodd, Dean Sullivan, the actor; Michael Kelly, retired carpenter, historian and author; Kay Kelly, community campaigner with the spirit of old Liverpool; Colin McKeown, film maker, writer and restaurateur; Jack Sharkey, former trumpeter, soldier and survivor of appalling conditions in Japanese PoW camps; Angela Heslop, Radio Merseyside Arts Editor; Andrew Schofield, the actor; Willy Russell, the playwright; Ron Formby, editor of the Scottie Press and community campaigner; Alan Bleasdale, writer; Tom Williams, Auxiliary Bishop of Liverpool; Tony Brown himself, his wife Lorraine; Dr Wai McWatt, the retired ophthalmologist, who saved the sight in Tony's right eye; Linda McDermott, the Radio Merseyside presenter; Olaf Brommeland, the Norwegian general manager of the Radisson Hotel on Old Hall Street, Liverpool; Bernard and Loretta Hearn, solicitor and businesswoman; Hugh and Cathy Frost, builders of Beetham Towers; Joe Flannery, music promoter and Merseybeat expert.

The Charter Canvas will have King John, John Lennon, Bill Shankly, Dixie Dean, William Gladstone; Kitty Wilkinson, the pioneer of public wash-houses and many, many others.

* READERS with names they would like to suggest should write to David Charters, Features Department, Daily Post, Old Hall Street, Liverpool L69 3EB or davidcharters @dailypost.co.uk

These will be passed on to Tony, who hopes soon to have a website detailing the work in progress.

