

The Daily Telegraph

'Let them drink vodka': how the Queen Mother rewarded a Russian portrait artist

It was the most extraordinary royal portrait session. The Russian artist insisted on wearing a 19th Century French dress suit and Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother invited everyone to drink vodka shortly after noon.



Queen Mother, 1990s Photo: ALEXEI MAXIMOV

By Adam Lusher

7:30AM BST 01 Apr 2012

Alexei Maximov, who had been commissioned by the Moscow Kremlin Museum, also drew the Queen and the Princess Royal in March 1992. His sitting with the Queen in the Buckingham Palace yellow drawing room is believed to have been the first time a reigning British monarch sat for a

Russian artist.

Now the resulting pencil drawings, and the photographs taken during the sittings, are to be displayed to the British public for the first time, at Mr Maximov's Royal Portraits exhibition at the Ritz Hotel, London.

To mark her Diamond Jubilee the Queen will be presented with one of Mr Maximov's drawings of her. The rest of the Royal Portraits collection will go on sale for offers in the region of £10 million.

Mr Maximov, 60, from St Petersburg, revealed how honoured he felt drawing the Queen Mother, and how rare the sitting was.

He said: "When I was a schoolboy studying English, I knew that in England there lived the matriarch of modern European monarchy, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. The sitting was in her living room in Clarence House, which her secretary said had never happened before. Of all my portraits, I appreciate most that of the Queen Mother."

He was determined to dress appropriately, even if it meant discomfort and delving into his collection of antique curiosities.

"I usually worked in a sweater and leather jeans. They weren't suitable for this occasion. I had an antique silver watch and a dress suit sewed in Paris in 1890. It was in good condition and suited me perfectly."

The late Queen Mother was 92 at the time of the sitting, but Mr Maximov said: "She looked brilliant for any age. Elegant and very feminine, with a bright gleam in her eyes, she acted very openly."

Mr Maximov said that at the end of the sitting in the Clarence House living room, "I showed the picture to her. She didn't simply sign it; she traced out painstakingly 'Clarence House. March 31st 1992.'

Then, at about 12.30pm, she decided to celebrate.

"She turned to her secretary: 'I suggest we drink some vodka with these Russian painters.' She loved the portrait that much. The offering of vodka to a Russian artist was a provocative gesture and a good way to start the party."

By 1pm the Queen Mother had changed into a new dress and the vodka was ready.

Mr Maximov, however, was alarmed to notice that the Queen Mother's courtiers had served him such a generous measure that he feared the consequences of meeting expectations and downing his vodka, Russian style, in one gulp.

"'Drink some vodka' is easy to say, but the Queen Mother got a [small] cup, whereas each of us got a big glass. I couldn't drink a glass of vodka, but how could I refuse?"

"I hoped that no one would execute me, and finished the glass only after the reception."

The Royal Portraits project had begun in late 1991 in a discussion between Mr Maximov, 60, and his fellow painter Leonid Efros.

Mr Maximov said: "My idea was to depict reigning 'Old World' monarchs in enamel miniature using techniques known since the 17th Century to give

the portrait a striking historical dimension.”

Initially told they must wait five years, the Russian artists were amazed to be allowed to join the Spanish painter Theodore Ramos at his previously arranged sitting.

Mr Maximov said: “This was the first time in history that the ruling British monarch had agreed to sit for Russian painters.”

Then, during the sitting, the Queen volunteered to help arrange the meeting with her mother.

Mr Maximov said: “I didn’t hear or understand all the conversations. I was absorbed in my work. It wasn’t until I was heading back to the hotel that I was told the Queen had said: ‘It would be lovely to make portraits of the Queen Mother and Princess Anne. I shall talk to them.’”

Back in Russia, to fulfil his commission from the Kremlin Museum, Mr Maximov worked from his drawings to create 2.5in by 3.5in miniature enamel portraits of the Queen, Queen Mother and Princess Royal.

These miniatures remain in Moscow, but for his London exhibition Mr Maximov has specially created three new ones. Encased in silver with inlaid diamonds and sapphires, they each took between three and ten months to make.

The exhibition will also feature more than 50 photographs, enamel miniatures of Prince Michael of Kent, King Harald V of Norway and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, plus the artist’s memoirs of the story behind the work.

Mr Maximov said: “I am fascinated by the idea of monarchy. My dream is to continue by depicting other members of the Royal Family, including new ones like Kate Middleton.”