

IN HER 17TH-CENTURY SURREY HOME, ARTIST SHERREE VALENTINE-DAINES ON PAINTING THE QUEEN AND HER STROKE OF LUCK WITH A FRIENDLY BANK MANAGER

'There was no way we could have afforded the house. But we had this bank manager who knew our work' Sherree



Sherree in her home studio (above) and (right) with husband and fellow artist Mark Rowbottom outside their 17th-century home, a former rectory, near Dorking in Surrey. The pair met while studying at the Epsom School of Art, now part of the University for the Creative Arts.



With its walls lined with oil paintings and bright rooms filled with an eclectic mix of objets d'art, Sherree Valentine-Daines's 17th-century home is as welcoming and charming as the artist herself.

"I'm quite conscious of the aesthetics of my surroundings," she says, writing down into one of the many notes in her mirrored drawing room. "I don't like sterile houses - I like them to be warm and cosy."

Sherree has been described as "the face of modern British Impressionism" and her figurative works capturing people and scenes in a moment of time can sell for tens of thousands of pounds. She is both prolific and in demand. She has painted the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh, and her many celebrity portraits include Justin

Lindsay, Michael Parkinson, Dame Vera Lynn and Sir John Major. Her current work in progress is a portrait of explorer Sir Ranulph Fiesher, who has climbed Mount Everest and trekked to the North and South Poles.

As a leading society painter, Sherree annually attends the Hestley Royal Regatta, the Royal Windsor Horse Show, Wimbledon and Royal Ascot, where she is the only artist ever invited to paint in the Royal Enclosure.

This week, as thousands descend on Gloucestershire for the Cheltenham Festival - a highlight of the National Hunt jump-horseracing season - she will be there with her sketchpad.

A special exhibition of her work from past festivals - as well as sketches from ▶



'In theory I paint from 10am to 10pm. But I also spend a lot of time in the fridge'

STYLING: EMILYAN; HAIR: SARA; MAKEUP: EMILYAN; LOCATION: GLOUCESTER

Sherrae's commissions have included one from the royal household to depict the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh at the Royal Windsor Horse Show (below), as a 90th-birthday present for Her Majesty, and a 100th-birthday portrait of Dame Vera Lynn (below right)



this year – will be on display the day after the Cheltenham Gold Cup.

Sherrae, 56, and her husband, fellow artist Mark Rowbottom, have lived at this beautiful Surrey home, a former rectory, for 23 years. They raised their four children here, all as creative as their parents. Charlie, 32, is an artist and Lauren, 28, is a violinist and former *Britain's Got Talent* finalist who now lives in Barbados.

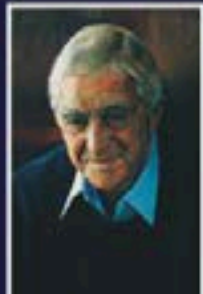
Joining Sherrae for *WRELD*'s exclusive shoot are her daughters: Ruby, 23, a sculptor and fashion designer (with a new line, Baboo, for breastfeeding mums) who's also mother to Opheëlia, two, and five-month-old Corinna, and Felicity, 21, who is studying sculpture at Oxford Brookes University. The partners of both women play rugby union for the Worcester Warriors.

Sociable, chatty and quick to laugh, the matriarch of the house is at her happiest when surrounded by the buzz of family life and says that being a grandmother is "the best thing." "I never wanted to have a career," she says at one point. "I only ever wanted to be a mum."

Her sanctuary is her delightfully messy studio, filled with palettes, pots of brushes and "positive energy," where she creates up to 30 oil paintings a year. "In theory I paint from 10am to 10pm," she says. "But I also spend a lot of time in the fridge." Fabrics, the notes, a hungry work.

She's convinced her home is haunted by a female ghost and, deciding to embrace her, asked her vicar to come round to bless the

"I could go shopping all day, or walk 20 miles, and never have the same exhaustion as with painting," Sherrae says. "Because you have to concentrate, hold, and the minute I don't it doesn't work"



Sherrae says she prefers painting male sitters, including the "great, crazy face" of Sir Michael Parkinson (left), but she has carved out a niche depicting sporting scenes (right and far right), including Royal Ascot and the Cheltenham Festival





'Sometimes I don't leave the house for days because I've got everything I want'

house. "We don't want her to feel she is not welcome," she says. When the partying, which has six bedrooms, a drawing room, dining room, kitchen and "manana" coffee bar came on the market, Sherree and Mark were in a two-up, two-down, trying to make a living as artists. "There was no way we could ever afford it. But we had this bank manager who knew our work and he said, 'I believe in you. I think you'll make a go of your paintings; I'll lend you the money.' Which was unheard of. But it paid off."

RACKING THE GREAT HORSE

One of her most prestigious works of art to date was a commission for the Queen's 80th birthday almost three years ago, when she was approached by "someone close to the royal family" (she won't say who) to paint the Queen's favorite black Highland pony as a secret, special birthday present. It didn't quite go according to plan at first.

"I went to the Windsor Horse Show, did some sketches of the pony, took some photographs, and sent them in.

"They rang me and said, 'You've got the wrong pony!' she laughs. "I thought, 'How can I be so stupid?' Next time I went to the stable, I got the right one."

The brief was later changed to

include the Queen and Prince Philip, walking with the pony in the grounds of Windsor during the show, for which Sherree was able to get up close and take photographs of the couple during the event.

"She obviously knew something was going on as I was the only photographer there, and only a couple of feet away," says Sherree, who wanted to capture the Queen's "warmth and motherliness." "She was delighted," she adds, "and I was really impressed with her dignity."

When it came to painting brush to canvas, however, Sherree was very nervous. "I can't tell you the amount of layers of paint used. I kept on and on painting; it took one month as I felt so much under pressure. I never felt it would be good enough. Ever. And I still wish I could have another chance to do it now."

Her hard work paid off and she was rewarded with a special invitation to a private reception at Windsor Castle, where the painting was presented to the Queen.

"It was magical – and she was sparkling," remembers Sherree. "I was a bit dumbstruck, which was unusual for me. I started, she said the painting was lovely and asked me some questions. All I could say was yes and no. I felt quite weird, really." The ▶

Arworks by Sherree and Mark (together left with dog Celery) fill their home, but pride of place as a dining table centrepiece (above and below) is a wire and gold-leaf sculpture by their daughter Bunty Rowbotham (also known professionally as Bunty Valentine-Dames) who grew up modelling for her parents' paintings



'I never wanted to have a career - I only ever wanted to be a mum'



Sherrée with granddaughters Opheka and Tremonia - her family gives her as much joy as her art



painting now hangs in one of the stair rooms at Windsor Castle.

The artist was equally lost for words when she recently met Sir Ranulph as he began work on the new portrait, which will be sold for charity.

"I only had half a day with him, but again I was dumbstruck as he's such a hero, a real man's man."

She prefers to paint men to women because she likes "muscles and rugged, strong faces". That's why she loved working with both England Rugby World Cup winner Jonny Wilkinson - "the most modest man

you've ever met" - and Sir Michael Parkinson, who has "a great, craggy face".

When she painted Dame Vera Lynn to mark her 100th birthday in 2017, she took along her parents, Ralph, 96, and Rose, 90, who were big fans.

"It was quite moving for me to meet her. My mum has a beautiful voice and she said: 'Do you mind if I sing?' She started singing and Vera joined in. That was a moment when I felt proud for my parents, as they met an idol."

Despite milking in the higher echelons of society, Sherrée does not, she says, come from a "posh" background. Her dad was a

builder and stone-mason but his five children all had a talent for art.

Sherrée left school at 15 and became a legal secretary, but never stopped drawing. By the time she was 19, she'd decided she wanted to learn more and talked her way into Epsom School of Art - using her siblings' drawings in her portfolio and lying about her exam results.

"I was the worst and had to work harder than anyone else," she says of her experience of college, where she also met her husband of 34 years.

WATER COLOUR

She was first introduced to the Henley Royal Regatta by an art-school friend.

"Everyone was dressed up and I heard someone say: 'Are you here for the week?' and I remember thinking: 'You have five days of this, wearing boaters!'" I thought it was amazing."

"Then someone told me about Ascot, so I got a public ticket and went along. I thought: 'How do I get into this life? If I paint it, I'll get in...'" Her love of painting sports events was born.

Tenacity and a series of chance meetings are behind her success. After knocking on lots of doors, she secured her first London exhibition at the Barbican arts centre in 1985, which happened to coincide with the opening night of the smash-hit BBC show *Let's Make a Deal*, resulting in plenty of press coverage.

Spurred painting at a local cricket match by a member of the MCC in 1986, she became a regular at the Oval and a fixture on the

'Everyone I know wants to travel, but all I want to do is spend more time with my family and paint'



Family traits: Sherrée (flanked by daughters Felicity and Berty, who are both sculptors)



Mark and Sherrée with daughters (from left) Felicity, Lettice and Berty at the 2014 Victoria and Albert Museum awards ceremony. Felicity (right) went on to reach the final (right above left)



Three generations gather for Sherree and Mark's six-bedroom home of 25 years, which is the perfect period setting for their impressionist artworks and sculptures (below and right) and, says Sherree, home to a "welcome" female ghost - who didn't join in our shoot

BBC's sports coverage as "the girl who paints cricket". About a year later she was donating sketches at a polo match at South's Lawn, home to the Guards Polo Club in Windsor Great Park, when she was approached by "a lovely man who asked if I'd like to paint there regularly and give me a private pass for the whole season".

That man was Major Ronald Ferguson, the father of the Duchess of York, and Sherree was given access to the private polo days of the royal family, including the Prince and Princess of Wales and Princes William and Harry. "I felt privileged, but I kept my distance," she says. "It was very private so

there wasn't any interaction with any of them. They just knew I was an artist painting in the distance." By 1990 she had approached Royal Ascot and the Horley Regatta, asking permission to paint on site, and her career as a society artist was secured.

There are people she'd still love to capture on canvas - breeders Anthony Joshua and Mike Tyson, Dame Judi Dench "for her beautiful bone structure" and Jeremy Irons "for his strong face" are all on the wish list. And there's talk of her possibly painting the Queen again for the British Horse Society.

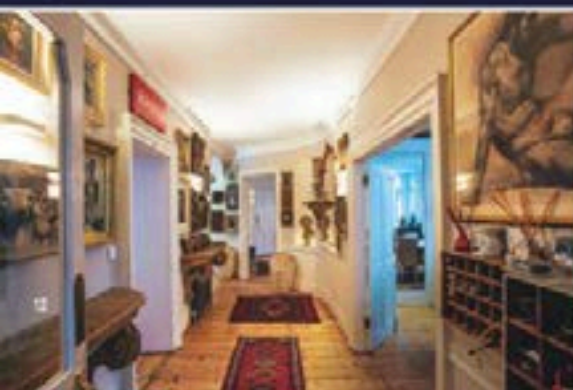
But for now she's content with her life. "Nearly everyone I know wants to travel, but all I want to do

is spend more time with my family and paint," she says. "Sometimes I don't leave the house for days and days because I've got everything I want. I'm really happy!"

INTERVIEW ROSA JO POWELL
PHOTOS: SIMON LEIGHTON

STYLING: SARAH-SARAH AT GARDY, HAIR: MARGARETTA, MAKEUP: JILLI HARRISON AT GARDY, NAILS: MARGARETTA

Sherree's exhibition of original oil paintings celebrating the Cheltenham Gold Cup can be seen at Whitwell Galleries, Cheltenham on Saturday 14 March, 3pm-6pm; visit whitwellgalleries.com



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