



## **Sitting for Derek Hill**

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## Sitting for Derek Hill

Introduction to *Derek Hill: Portraits* (London, 1978: Marlborough Fine Art), 3



*Derek Hill's 1975 portrait of IB hangs in the library at  
Wolfson College, Oxford*

MR DEREK HILL has asked me to write an introduction to the exhibition of his portraits, and although it would be absurd of me to pretend to any expertise in this field, I have so far been unable to bring myself to refuse any request from him. This is due not only to personal friendship – that alone would scarcely entitle me to pronounce on a topic on which this country teems with persons far better qualified than I to assess the merits of an artist – but because this request gives me the opportunity of expressing my personal gratitude to the artist. For I may as well declare an interest: invited by my former colleagues at Wolfson College, Oxford, to nominate a painter of the college portrait to which they were entitled, I invited

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Derek Hill to paint me. The result, achieved after comparatively few sittings (this is an element in his astonishing virtuosity), was agreed by those who commissioned it to be a masterpiece. As for myself, I can only say that it seems to me to enhance reality in the manner commended by French philosophers of art in the eighteenth century; it has added greatly to my constantly failing self-confidence, perhaps too greatly.

What gives me almost as much pleasure as the portrait itself was the sheer enjoyment of the sittings. They took place in the elegant drawing room of the Warden of All Souls, and although I began by feeling nervous, self-conscious and stiff – as anyone must who is not a Narcissus by nature – the gaiety and charm of the artist's conversation, designed, no doubt, to overcome the somewhat artificial relationship which sitting for portraits creates, were beyond compare. We talked about music (of which Derek knows as much as about the visual arts), singers past and present, Byzantium, Persia, travel, common friends and acquaintances, books, scenes, the worlds we had known, novelists, poets, historians and their lives and works – I can truthfully say that I have never spent such exhilarating and pleasure-filled hours: a contrast with the terrible tales of the innumerable sittings apparently endured by my colleagues when their portraits were required by their colleges, and of the deep depression which the inescapable prospect of more of these induced in them. I can say only that even if the portrait had turned out to seem to me a hideous travesty of what I believe myself to be and to look like (some sitters have, I believe, gone through such experience), I still could not have regretted those delightful days in John Sparrow's drawing-room. If the artist's far more eminent sitters – presidents and archbishops, statesmen and other public figures (to take but one example: President Radhakrishnan is immortalised in one of the most remarkable and unforgettable portraits of our time) – did not enjoy themselves as much as I (and, I hope, the artist) did, they must be gravely deficient in a sense of pleasure – not, perhaps, a sufficient, but certainly a necessary condition of a fulfilled human life.