



'Half-wit' Winston Churchill portrait destroyed by wife Clementine to make dramatic return



Maria from Factum Arte reconstructs Graham Sutherland's notorious Churchill portrait (Sky Arts/Factum Arte)

By Adam Sherwin
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A controversial portrait of Sir Winston Churchill, which the war leader loathed when it was unveiled on his 80th birthday, could be exhumed from history and reinstated in Parliament.

Churchill despised the unsparing portrait, painted by the artist Graham Sutherland, which made him look "half-witted".

The birthday gift, commissioned by the House of Commons, was quietly destroyed on the instructions of Churchill's protective wife, Clementine.



Working models for the new version of the portrait burnt by Churchill's secretary (Sky Arts/Factum Arte)



Now, in a nightmare scenario for the Churchill family, the 1954 portrait has been painstakingly reconstructed using cutting-edge digital technology.

Painting 'should be exhibited'

Churchill scholars say the painting, recreated by Factum Arte, a Madrid-based group of artists and technicians, should hang in Parliament's Westminster Hall, where the original was unveiled.

The Churchill portrait will be revealed in a Sky Arts film, *Mystery of the Lost Paintings*, next week.



30th November 1954: The presentation ceremony to celebrate Churchill's 80th birthday (Getty Images)

Working from Sutherland's preparatory sketches and oil studies, merged with a digitally enhanced photography of the finished painting, Factum Arte produced an exact reproduction of the original.

Savile Row samples for reconstruction

The team even visited Churchill's tailor Henry Poole & Co. on Savile Row, which kept samples of the materials used for the striped trousers worn by Churchill in the painting, as well as information on the cut of the jacket.



Adam Lowe, Factum Arte founder, said: "Apart from at its infamous unveiling, Graham Sutherland's portrait of Churchill was never exhibited publicly."

"The National Portrait Gallery has one of the original sketches for the work that was destroyed, so it would feel appropriate to me if you recreation of this lost masterpiece was to go on show there."

He suggested: "There could be a public debate about its eventual fate; should it be hung as intended in the House of Parliament, or should it be destroyed like the original?"

Shown the reproduction, Martin Hammer, Professor of History and Philosophy of Art at the University of Kent, said the work was true to Sutherland's original and should be exhibited.

"This is a terribly powerful painting, a great modern iconic portrait, which a lot of people would enjoy," he said.

'Act of vandalism'

Sutherland called the destruction of his painting an "act of vandalism."

Churchill, who painted himself, felt betrayed by Sutherland, with whom he had formed a bond whilst sitting for the artist.

Churchill mocked the portrait, calling it "a remarkable example of modern art" at its Parliamentary unveiling.

The Netflix series *The Crown* dramatised the affair.

The Sky Arts film includes, for the first time, the voice of Churchill's secretary Grace Hamblin, revealing how she took the painting away from the Chartwell residence in a van, "in the dead of night" and burnt it.

"It was a deadly secret," she said.

Mystery of the Lost Paintings, Sky Arts, Wednesday May 2, 8pm