



# Costume DRAMA

WINNER OF THE BP TRAVEL AWARD, SOPHIE PLOEG CONNECTS HER PAINTINGS TO HISTORY WITH HER FLAMBOYANTLY DRESSED PORTRAITS. SHE TELLS NATALIE MILNER HOW CLOTHES CAN TRANSFORM A PAINTING'S IDENTITY



At first glance, the subjects of Sophie Ploeg's portraits appear to have raided a dressing-up box. But the costumes, including eBay finds, adapted curtains and rare authentic lace, are carefully selected and styled to look at odds with the model's own clothes.

In 2013, Sophie won the BP Travel Award, granting her the chance to research a topic of choice, namely the depiction of lace in 17th-century portraiture in England and the Netherlands. This gave her access to eight cities, three countries and 15 museums, from the grand Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to the Fashion Museum in Bath. The following year, inspired by her travels, she produced 10 captivating oil portraits comprising *The Lace Trail*, shown in the BP Portrait Award 2014 exhibition.

The Dutch artist took an art history degree and PHD at VU University in Amsterdam. Specialising in English baroque architecture and rhetorical theory, she explored how building designs interact with an audience. It's easy to see echoes of this strong visual communication in her portraiture. "It's all connected, it's about mood and atmosphere," Sophie explains. "You form an experience for the viewer. You can do the same thing with a painting – you create a story." It's no coincidence that the term 'façade' can mean both the front of a building and a false appearance.

Theatrical in her approach, Sophie's paintings always start with a scene in mind and her model needs to fit her vision. Instead of conjuring the character of the sitter, as you would in a portrait commission, Sophie scours the faces of friends, neighbours and parents at the school gates, to find an appearance that's fit for purpose. She describes them as "dolls and puppets", enabling her to bring her idea to life.

For instance, when speaking about her series *The Four Ages of Women* from the BP show, Sophie says, "I wanted to create a connection between the ordinary woman and a woman in the 17th century who made and wore that [lace]". With each of the four subjects, spanning from a child through to an 80-year-old woman, Sophie decorated the models' modern-day clothes with authentic lace. In doing so, she merges old and new, allowing the lace to act as a window into the past.

In the same way, Sophie's process combines 21st-century techniques with that of traditional oil painting. She is self-taught, relying on intuition as well as online forums and social media for tips, support and inspiration from contemporary artists. Models are shot in her home studio, in a corner of the room where Sophie has fashioned a drape background hung from a rail. She takes numerous photos from all angles, and if the sitter is comfortable she'll make quick pencil sketches, capturing a range of expressions, even if she won't use them. Next, she'll edit >

**PREVIOUS PAGE**

*The Handkerchief Girl*, oil on linen, 91x76cm

**LEFT** *The Curtain Falls*, oil on linen, 170x70cm

**OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM**

**TOP LEFT** *Kate*, oil on linen, 51x51cm;

*The Matriarch*, oil on linen,

101x81cm;

*Elizabeth Kate*, oil on linen, 51x51cm;

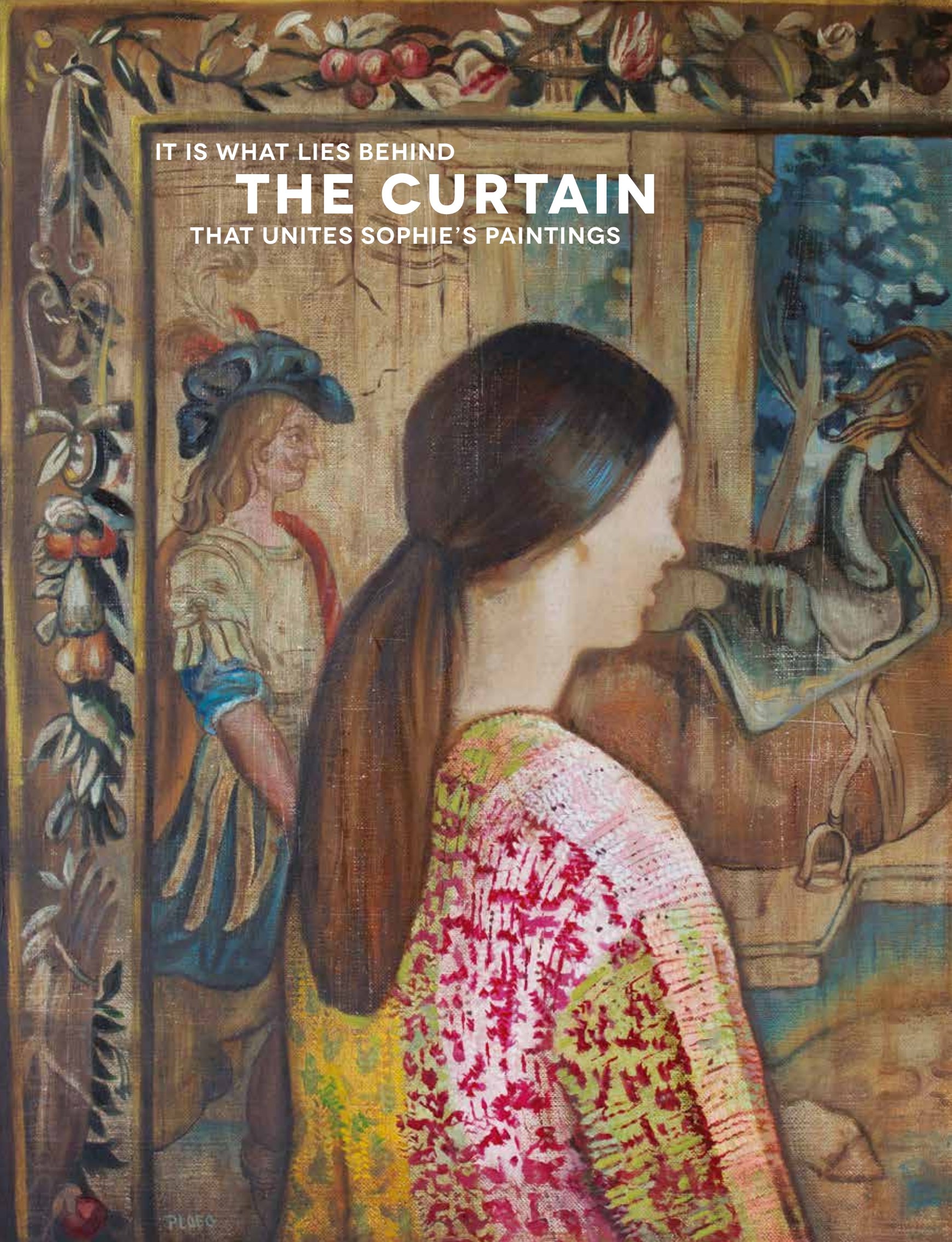
*She Becomes Her*, oil on linen,

101x66cm



“I WANTED TO CREATE A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE  
**ORDINARY WOMAN**  
 AND A WOMAN IN THE 17TH CENTURY”

IT IS WHAT LIES BEHIND  
**THE CURTAIN**  
 THAT UNITES SOPHIE'S PAINTINGS



the best images on Photoshop and work from these on her computer. She paints in private, a practical and tactical approach; her paintings take months to complete, with working hours often dictated by family life, but Sophie also relishes the solitude.

You'd been forgiven for assuming that the artist uses the classical method; in fact it couldn't be further from the truth. She creates an underpainting to balance tone and composition, but from here onwards her method is organic. She chooses colour by eye, rather than name, and mixes on the canvas. She paints so thinly her stocks rarely need replenishing, yet if you venture into Sophie's paint drawers you'll find dozens of colours. She confesses to buying copious amounts of tubes so she can experiment with different brands, but her favourite is Vasari, if a little expensive.

If there's any order to be found in her technique, it's in her choice of brush. She uses large hog hair brushes to block in, but prefers to work with small brushes, even on a large scale. The blue background on her new works *Elizabeth Kate* and *Kate* – two portraits using the same sitter, one modern the other styled like Elizabeth I – was painted in this way to avoid a flat finish.

Favouring watercolour brushes, in particular a Winsor & Newton series 7 size 1 sable, Sophie can apply fine detail and texture to her works.

In her latest show, *Identity & Dress* at The Harley Gallery, in Nottinghamshire, there's a conscious effort to bring the application of paint to the fore. This is seen clearly in her stain effect in *The Girl in the Mirror*, where the paint acts as a bridge between the audience and the character in the painting. The work invites the viewer to peer in, as if drawn to a reflection.

In the same way, Sophie was asked to gaze into the private world, and art collection, of the Cavendish family of Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire, to gain inspiration for her 2016 exhibition. The art historian was absorbed by the Harley's Portland Collection, which features the likes of Michelangelo, Van Dyck and George Stubbs, as well as being intrigued by the personalities behind the scenes. She uncovered a catalogue of semi-royals, politicians and stars of their time, both on and off canvas.

Within this web of characters were a number of strong-willed, independent women, but it was the notable figure of the 16th-century, Bess of Hardwick, that Sophie singled out for her painting, *The Matriarch*. With only a handful of flat-faced Tudor portraits to work from, Bess' clothes became the epitome of her identity; she draped four metres of black velvet and a string of pearls on a dressmaker's model to work from.

This isn't the only time fabric takes centre stage, her new work *The Curtain Falls* is entirely absent of a model, showing a sumptuous red curtain which Sophie explains is reminiscent of early 17th-century painter William Larkin's staging of cloth.

It's what lies behind the curtain that unites Sophie's paintings. In the studio, costumes remain incomplete, roughly tied at the back, velvet pinned to the front of a dressmaker's model – it's an elaborate façade and one she is refusing to hide. Just take one look at *The Handkerchief Girl*; although the model is adorned with a decadent

**SOPHIE'S GUIDE TO  
 SETTING UP A SCENE**

**1 CREATE A MINI STUDIO**

You can make a small space work. Using a corner of a room can be handy; push models into the corner for a dramatic scene or bring them out into the light for a brighter composition. Just make sure your backdrop is a colour that will reflect the atmosphere you're aiming for.

**2 KEEP IT NATURAL**

Working with natural morning light is often best; electric light is great for portrait photography but not portrait painting. Watch out for bright days though, as the light can change dramatically.

**3 TAKE 'BAD' PHOTOS**

When taking photos for reference, use a tripod and set it up so you'll gain clear shots of the whole scene. Don't worry about the crop, you're aiming for 'bad' photos to produce a good painting. If you include objects in the background, remember you can crop it later.

**4 ADJUST THE LIGHTING**

In order to direct light on to the sitter, you can cover a window with cardboard. I wanted to create a 17th-century style light shining on the sitter from above and so I blocked the bottom half of the window to achieve the desired effect.



LEFT  
*The Tapestry*,  
 oil on linen,  
 40x30cm

ABOVE  
*The Long Wait*,  
 oil on canvas,  
 101x61cm

17th-century inspired, lace-edged skirt, her body language and hair suggest a 21st-century woman. Each painting offers a glimpse into another world while being firmly grounded in the present day.

Sophie's playful use of costume places her work in a borderland, one that juxtaposes modern dress and vintage lace, everyday faces and imagined characters of the past, classical appearance and modern technique. You're left with a sense of transition, an impression, a façade. In the absence of a script, the narratives are left to interpretation, with the audience's presence a vital part of the tale. But it's these loose ends that leave you feeling captivated, as Sophie puts it, "what I love about painting is that you can leave the story hanging" – dress it up how you will.

Sophie's solo show *Identity & Dress* runs at The Harley Gallery, Worksop, until 8 January 2017, [www.harleygallery.co.uk](http://www.harleygallery.co.uk). Find out more about Sophie at [www.sophieploeg.com](http://www.sophieploeg.com)