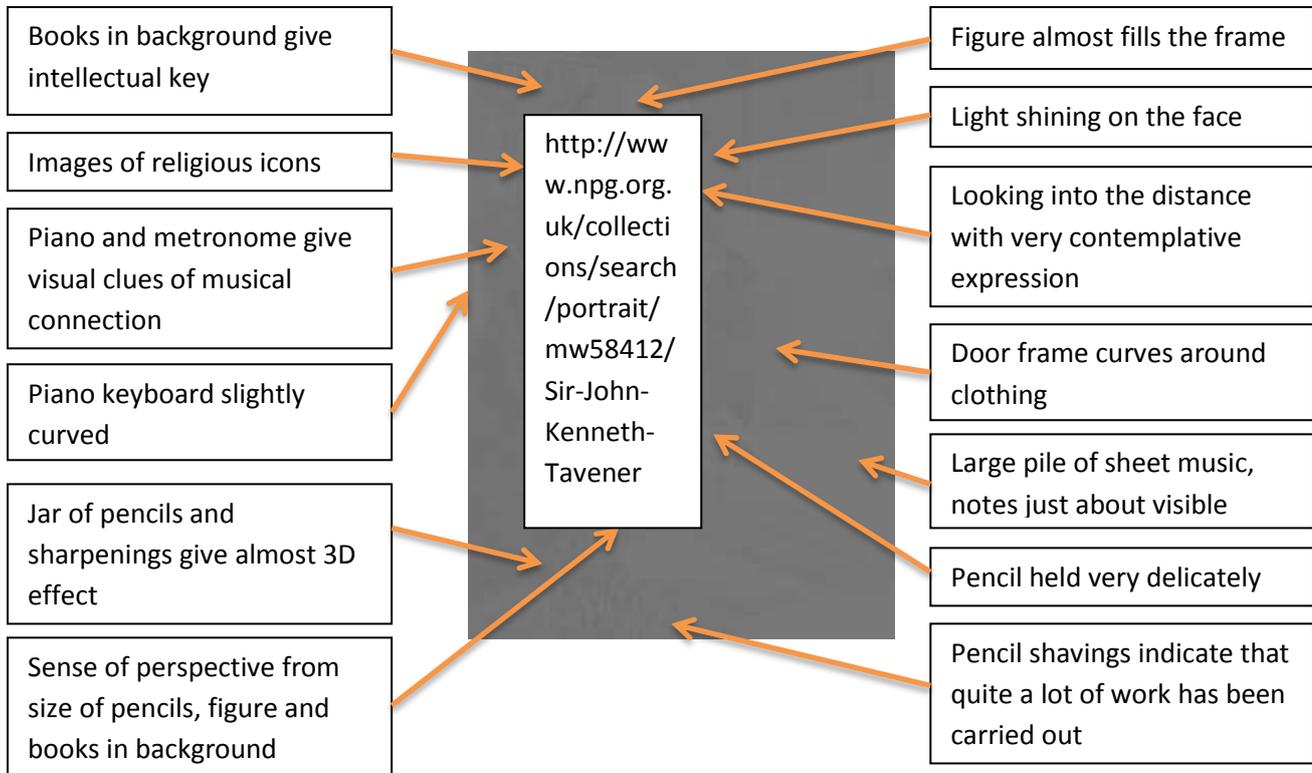


## Analyse a formal portrait – Sir John Tavener by Michael Taylor



*oil on canvas, 2001, 112 cm x 81.5 cm, National portrait Gallery, London*

- Religious connection shown through religious paintings and candle holder in background
- Calm visage of the subject – seeking inspiration?
- Very delicate streaks of red, yellow and grey to the face
- Hair is painted in detail at the front but no detail at the back
- Portrait fills the frame with right elbow leaving the frame and the head near the top of the frame – gives the impression of a big man
- Brush strokes visible in some parts of the face to emphasise natural curves
- Highlights pick out lighter hairs on the eyebrows

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### Description

This is a portrait of the composer Sir John Tavener. It shows him deep in thought, possibly seeking inspiration, as he works on a huge pile of sheet music. The notes are just visible on the top page, but not clear, perhaps a reference to the mystical nature of some of Tavener's music.

He is shown in casual dress as he works and this perhaps gives a greater sense of the person. Despite it being a portrayal of a reflective moment in time it is nevertheless a dynamic picture of a famous composer at work.

The jar of sharpened pencils at the front of the picture gives a very three dimensional effect and a sense of perspective.

## Interpretation

The portrait was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery and was therefore intended as a permanent public record of one of the leading composers of our time. The artist portrays Tavener as reflective, religious, well-read and industrious. From reports on Tavener's life the portrait seems to have successfully captured these aspects of his character.

The artist has included a number of visual clues within the painting that relate to the nature and beliefs of the subject. His work as a composer is clear from his working on the large pile of sheet music.

According to the NPG website "The composer is depicted in his study revising his 7-hour long piece, *The Veil of the Temple*". The length of the piece is portrayed by the volume of sheet music. The pencil shavings on the table show that the subject is well into his work, but the number of pencils in the jar indicates that there is still a lot of work to complete.

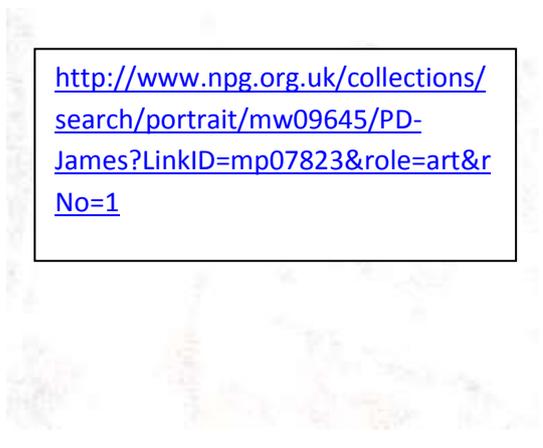
The piano in the background reinforces the musical connection. It is totally out of scale with the figure in the foreground, but this seems to portray it as an instrument of the subject and that Tavener is the important aspect of the painting. The religious icons on the piano and bookshelf behind relate to Tavener's own religious beliefs which so influenced his music.

The viewer is drawn into the painting by the way the artist has framed the scene – the corner of the pile of sheet music, the desk and the base of the jar of pencils are all excluded from the frame making the viewer feel as though they are just the other side of the desk. The size of the subject and the framing also give a sense of immediacy to the painting.

I believe all the visual clues within the portrait would have been understood by most viewers, even those who were not greatly familiar with Tavener's work.

## Evaluation

The artist is Michael R. Taylor and he has two other portraits (of Julian Bream and P. D. James) in the NPG, each painted in a similar style. I was intrigued by his treatment of the door frame on the right hand side of the picture, where the frame meets Tavener's jacket. I was a little confused when I first saw this. When I researched the artist's work further I came across his portrait of PD James. In this instance the same effect has been used, but to a much greater degree. I can only guess that perhaps the artist is suggesting that the subject is having an effect on



<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw09645/PD-James?LinkID=mp07823&role=art&rNo=1>

their surroundings (a bit like the curved piano keyboard on the Tavener portrait) giving a sense of mysticism to the portrait. The Gallery representing the artist says “His chosen way of working inevitably leads to a certain complexity of content that only reveals itself with time and familiarity”.

I think that Taylor has produced a very worthy portrait, which is best summed up by Mary Rose Beaumont on the website of The Royal Society of Portrait Painters “the paintings do not simply record what is seen, but also what might be seen with the inner eye. They represent thoughts and feelings that are not visible .....

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## Web References

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