

The painting that went and did its work

A portrait of a woman after her mastectomy has gained international prominence for both artist and sitter.

By Elizabeth Grice

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On first glancing at this portrait of a nude woman seated, you will probably fail to register that she has no right breast. Your eye is drawn to her open, half-smiling face and expressive eyes. Momentarily, you see her as a whole woman because she looks so triumphant and self-possessed. Even when you have noted the diagonal scar across her chest, any suggestion of disfigurement is curiously absent.



A portrait of a woman after her mastectomy has gained international prominence for both artist and sitter. Photo: MARTIN POPE

The portrait of Evelyn Satterlee after her

mastectomy was painted by her friend and neighbour, Heath Rosselli, 11 years ago and has developed a strange and wonderful life of its own. It has travelled far, putting across the message that there is meaningful life after breast cancer. It won the National Portrait Gallery's BP award in 1997 and hung there for a while, attracting such a mixed response that the organisers decided to display it behind glass in case objectors threw a pot of paint at it.

Professor Mike Baum, one of Britain's leading oncologists, first saw the picture in a Suffolk barn and was so impressed by the sitter's aura of calm, and by her asymmetric beauty, that he made it the frontispiece of his book, *Fast Facts: Breast Cancer*, and regularly uses the image in lectures.

Now, after years of being alternately fêted and forgotten, Rosselli's *Evelyn* is to be shown at the Louvre in Paris, alongside Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*, Raphael's *La Fornaria* and Rubens's *The Three Graces*. It is one of five works being used at "The Art of Oncology", an international conference for doctors and scientists this weekend. The two women, sitter and artist, will meet for the first time in 11 years on the steps of the Louvre.

Prof Baum, who chose the paintings to illustrate each workshop, says: "When I first saw this arresting image, I was captivated by the light of intelligence in the eyes, the beauty and self-confidence in the expression and sense of calm. It told me something about this woman and about women in general. They are far more than the sum of the parts of their sexual identity. They have courage of a different sort to men."

Satterlee, 59, an American now living in Seoul, sees the message of the picture as "about taking good care of our bodies and loving ourselves for who and what we are". For Rosselli, it demonstrates the importance of spirit and essence over physical perfection. "I wanted my portrait to remove the stigma attached to mastectomies and to show they are not ugly. I was saying that here is a woman who has come through this trouble, still with a beautiful body and a smile on her face, to show her courage and optimism."

Rosselli, 48, who uses the Renaissance technique of building up layers of oil and glaze, retained ownership of the picture so it could "go out and do its work". But as a single mother trying to make a living from figurative painting, she had little time to promote it, and for years it lay on her studio floor in Worlington, Suffolk, gathering dust.

Yet *Evelyn* was "doing its work" in other ways. It started Rosselli on a series of portraits that helped to combat the stigma associated with other medical conditions – conspicuous birthmarks, disfigurement from cancer or accidents, self-harming, even widowhood.

She painted a companion portrait to *Evelyn*, a nude of a woman showing her reconstructed breast after mastectomy. And she won the Painter-Stainers Prize for *Juliet's Reflection*, a study of a young woman who, at the final sitting, removes her eye patch to reveal an empty left socket, the result of cancer.

In 1999, she painted a 38-year-old woman who had been cutting her arms for 25 years, after the trauma of rape. Currently, she's working on a wedding-day portrait of a young Cambridge lecturer whose personality shines out despite the severe port-wine birthmark distorting one side of her face. "It is good to be using my talent in different ways," says Rosselli. "Doing things for healing charities gives more point to the other work I do."

Neither Satterlee nor Rosselli had lofty ideas about the portrait. "Heath needed a subject," says Satterlee, "and I was thinking about how to celebrate five years in remission from cancer. Over a glass of wine one night, we decided to do it. I'm shy, but I knew her well. I wasn't afraid of what she might do." Wearing nothing but her grandmother's wedding ring, Satterlee began a sequence of sittings.

"I did find it embarrassing at first," she admits. "But soon Heath and I were laughing and gossiping as if we were having tea. There were odd moments when I regretted it. At a party we attended, someone pointed to me and said: 'You're the model.' I wanted to melt away.

"I consider my missing breast just a blemish, in the same way I think my thighs are big or I have more wrinkles than I used to. Posing was a way of saying: I am done with cancer now and that part of my life is in the past.

"The picture came to symbolise a lot of important messages for women, such as being happy with the body they have and not putting off diagnosis because they are afraid of the verdict. People say it has helped them, but that was not the original intention. It was just a nice painting."

During the year that Satterlee underwent surgery and treatment, she continued to pilot the family through other troubles. One teenage son was injured by a falling tree branch and the other had a bad motorcycle accident. This is the sort of female fortitude Prof Baum applauds in an appreciation of *Evelyn* in the Louvre symposium brochure. "Men may win medals on the battlefield," he says, "but there are no medals struck for women bringing up the family. The majority of my patients face up to the diagnosis of breast cancer and its treatment with formidable bravery and often express sympathy with me for having to break the bad news. They often show more concern for their husbands and children than for themselves."

Rosselli says: "Evelyn is one of the happiest people I know. To have her sitting there looking positive and wonderful got across everything I wanted to get across. It says that mastectomies are not grotesquely disfiguring. It shows that Evelyn remains a beautiful and whole woman, enjoying a full life, a happy marriage and good health. It taught me a lesson: if ever I have to have a mastectomy, I will not have a reconstruction."

Satterlee, who teaches special needs children in Seoul, has not ruled out reconstructive surgery when she retires. "It would be a complicated operation for me, and would take three months' recovery, because the cancer had invaded the muscle beneath my breast." Her mother – who had breast cancer in her early twenties and will be 80 this year – is paying for her to fly to Paris from South Korea to meet Rosselli at the Louvre.

Of the four pictures being shown with *Evelyn*, Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* (1665) has become an icon of the breast-cancer movement. Bathsheba, pictured having her feet bathed, has a dimple in what doctors identify as the upper outer quadrant of her left breast, the classical stigma of breast cancer. Rembrandt's model was his mistress and housekeeper, Hendrickje Stoffels. She died eight years later. "For me," says Prof Baum, "this is probably the best-attested chance illustration of breast cancer in the history of fine art."

"It will be exciting to see *Evelyn* in such exalted company," says Rosselli. "This picture really has a life of its own."

- To see Rosselli's other work, visit www.heathrosselli.co.uk (<http://www.heathrosselli.co.uk>)

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