

SAUSAGE FINGERS, HOLY HAND GRENADES AND POLITICAL ICONOGRAPHY — A REDDIT CRASH COURSE

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After I had been made aware of it, there was no way to unsee it: Charles's, now King Charles III's (Who were the other two Charleses btw?) right hand looks unfavourable, to say the least. In his official coronation portrait photograph, he holds the Sovereign's Scepter with Cross, "a gold rod symbolizing the monarch's temporal power" that was given to him the moment before the actual crowning.[1] Charles's swollen, reddish fingers uncomfortably grabbing onto it, however, further accentuate the temporality that the Scepter is supposed to symbolize, but in a rather memento mori-fashion: "King Sausage Fingers the First" commented a Reddit user; "Highest blood pressure in the land" added another. These comments, and others like them, led Redditors to speculate on the freshly baked King's health: "It[']s actually severe edema, homie must have congestive heart failure."[2]

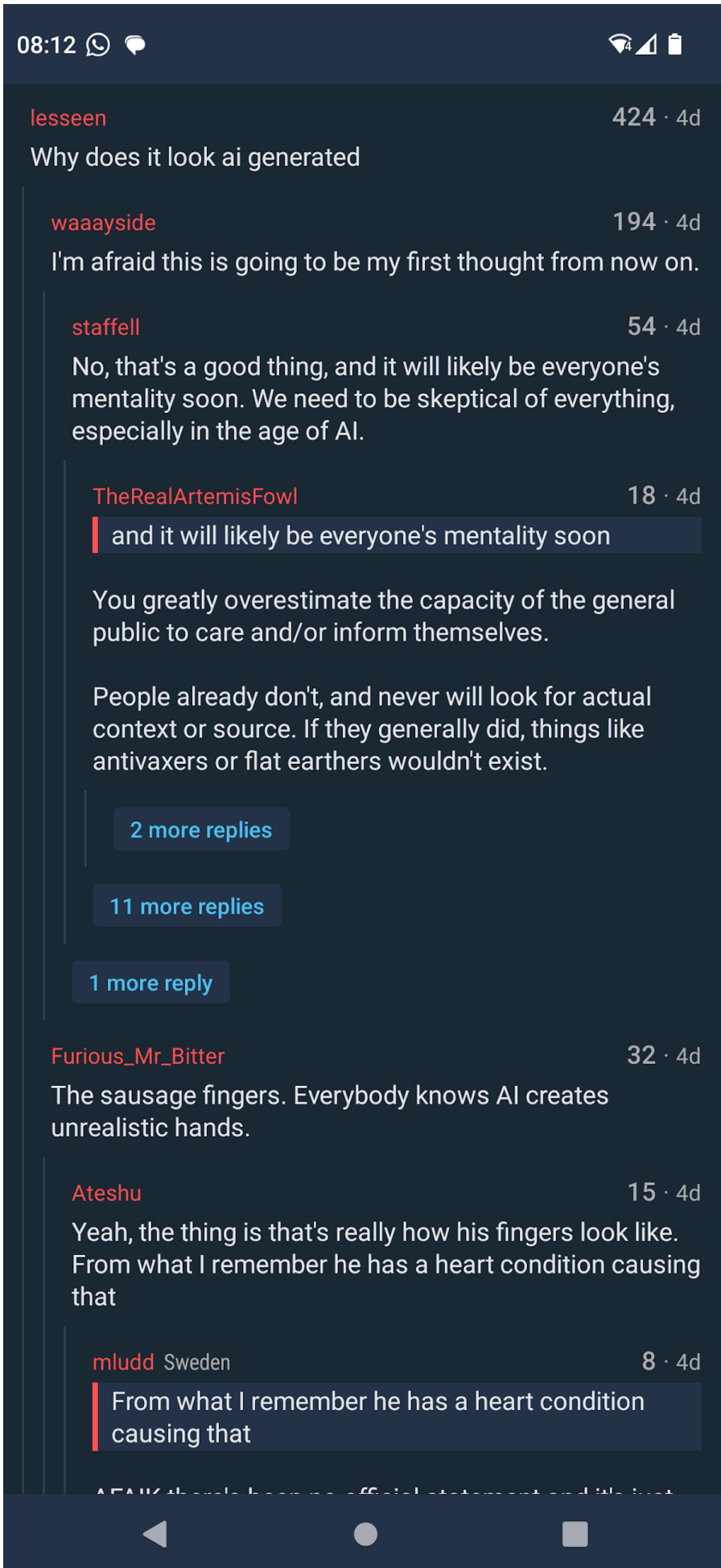


Screenshot Of Burnard, Hugo, Portrait Of King Charles III, May 2023,
From Rebecca English, Elly Blake, Oliver Price: Official Coronation

Portraits Show Charles Is A King Who Knows His Own Mind: Who Has Surrounded Himself With A Slimmed Down Monarchy Of People He Can Depend On – And Sister Anne Being At His Right Hand Is No Accident – Royal Expert Reveals. In: Mailonline (8.5.2023): [Daily Mail Co.Uk/News/Article-12059773/Its-Official-Charles-Slimmed-Monarchy-Unveiled-Official-Coronation-Portraits.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/News/Article-12059773/Its-Official-Charles-Slimmed-Monarchy-Unveiled-Official-Coronation-Portraits.html), Accessed On May 11th, 2023.

The remote diagnostic online conversation, which, as one may suspect, at times turned spiteful really quickly, immediately fascinated me with the individual users' attention to detail: "He has some blood flow issue for sure. If you look close you can see the tips of his fingers are white while holding the holy hand grenade," referring to the jewel studded Sovereign's Orb held in Charles's left hand, which symbolizes the medieval idea of the Christian world,[3] and that, between the reflections of two bright window openings in the back, shows a blur that might represent the shot's photographer Hugo Burnand. Or maybe it's just a random blur. As a side note: Centuries or decades before Charles, King Arthur already asked about the Holy Hand Grenade "How does it... ehm... How does it work?" in Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975).[4] It took YouTube users mere moments to turn the Sovereign's Orb into the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch.[5] The meme trended on Twitter and was an instant staple of Reddit's conversations about the coronation and Charles's portrait. It is thus no surprise that John Cleese felt the urge to comment: "I couldn't stop laughing... All these people in these silly costumes, all taking things so seriously. I thought it was a Python sketch." [6] The hyperreality weighs as heavily on the event and its images, as the crown weighs on Charles' head.

Lacking both medical knowledge and general interest in today's royalty (all the little knowledge I have in this regard comes from watching Netflix's *The Crown* (2016—) and I've already forgotten half of it again), Charles's health status was not the first thing that sprung to my mind when seeing the photograph. Rather, his awkwardly fleshy right hand reminded me of the apparent difficulties AI image synthesizers have with imaging anatomically correct human hands due to the lack of proper training data and the inherent complexities of hands as subjects.[7] As Kyle Chayka pointed out in the *New Yorker* in March, when AI hands were the talk of the digital town for a few weeks, tools such as Midjourney, Stable Diffusion and DALL-E face the same troubles as art students do when learning to draw hands — whereby the abilities of these tools to produce effects of apparent photorealism more often than not tend to produce "a range of nightmarish appendages: hands with a dozen fingers, hands with two thumbs, hands with more hands sprouting from them like some botanical mutant. The fingers have either too many joints or none at all. They look like diagrams in a medical textbook from an alien world." [8] It's the uncanny qualities thus pointed out that haunt me when I look at the regal portrait, and thousands of Redditors, too: "Why does it look ai generated[?]"



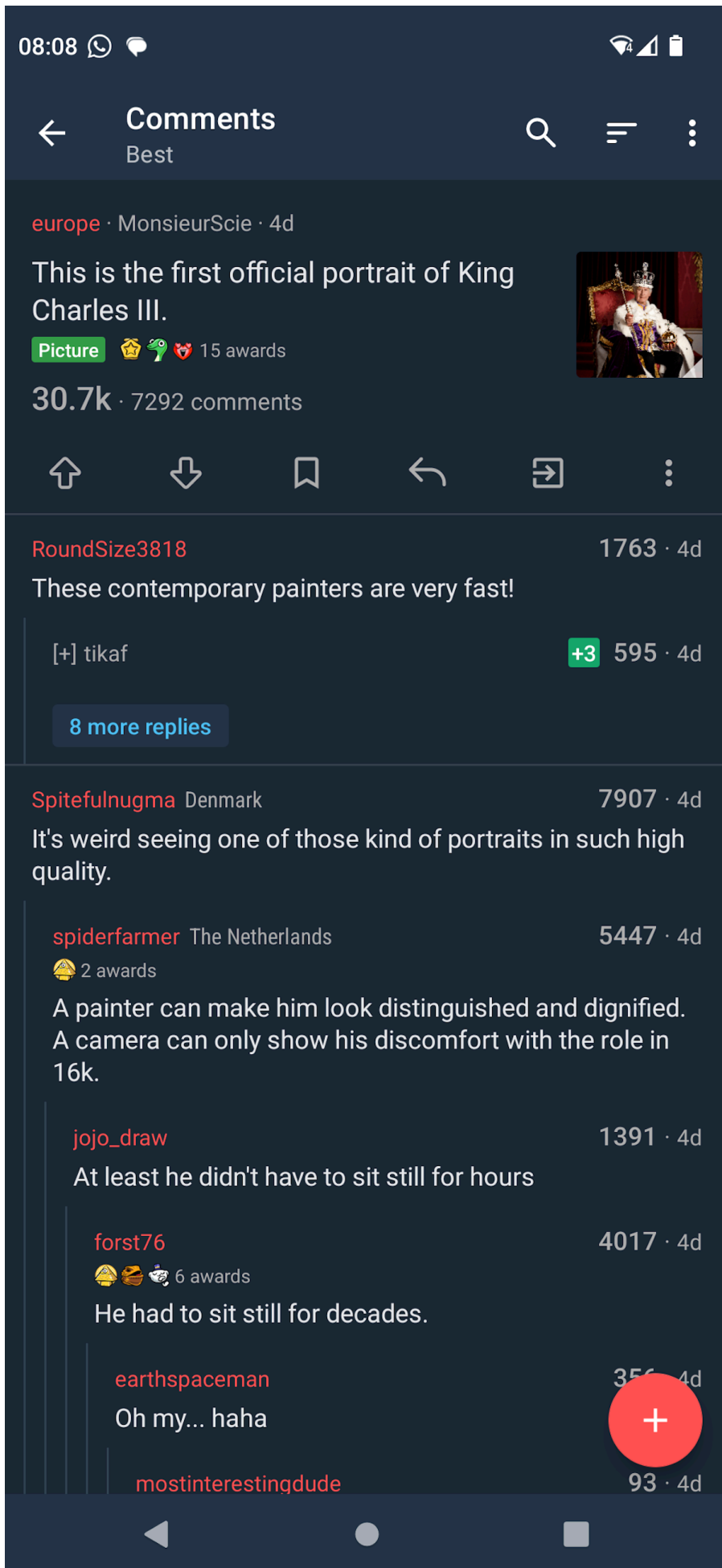
Excerpts From Comments On Reddit, Accessed On May 11th, 2023.

Now, I know that Charles's hand here is not AI generated, and I do not want to imply at all that it is a nightmarish appendage. Rather, I think that experiencing the evolution of AI generated hands with all its

failures and mutants unfit for survival and its rapid progression towards synthesized hands that are virtually undistinguishable from photographed ones has permanently altered the way I look at hands in images altogether. I certainly scrutinize them differently to how I would have done a while ago. Just like the newly invented photographs in the 19th century invited observers to scrutinize the pictorial reality with magnifying glasses, as well as the advent of Photoshop that later forced us to readjust our perception of (not just) photography anew, I feel that AI tools already introduced a third irreversible change of our image perception. Funnily enough, the word digital stems from the latin digitus, finger, and its adjective digitalis, describing all things finger-y. So, I guess we're living in the Era of the Uncanny Digital, Zombie Digitality or whatever label you please. Or maybe I'm just being weird. I'm sorry, King Charles, that your hand became the object of this uncanny fixation of mine. Have you had a closer look at John Heartfields famous 5 Finger hat die Hand [5 Fingers has the hand] (1928) montage recently? Or all the other iconic hands in modernist photography?[9] Have they changed?

Charles's portrait was published by Britain's Royal Family in a small portfolio of only four images of Official Coronation Portraits on 8 May, just two days after the big event, which had been awaited critically by many sides.[10] His Highness's likeness is followed by Her Majesty the Queen's (aka Queen Camilla, aka Camilla Parker Bowles), a portrait of Their Majesties together, and a group portrait of the Working Members of The Royal Family (whereby I suspect that there isn't too much identificatory potential given here for working women and men and vice versa). Burnand's choice as the coronation spectacle's official photographer came as no surprise. The release states: "Hugo is a renowned British photographer based in London. [...] In 2005 he took the Wedding photographs of the then Prince of Wales and Camilla Parker Bowles at Windsor Castle and in 2011 he took the official Wedding photographs of Prince William and Catherine Middleton at Buckingham Palace. Hugo has been taking photographs of Their Majesties both privately and officially for over 20 years."11 Hence, Burnand obviously checked all the boxes. He was a safe bet for these eminently important representational images — "to create images", as the New York Times put it, "that every newspaper in the world clamor to publish, and that art historians rush to analyze."12]

Large (online) newspapers generally seem to have held back critical opinions on the images, or, like UK's boulevard press, praised them for showing "a King who knows his own mind".[13] In Reddit's sphere of pseudonymity, however, they (and not just Charles's health) were heavily criticized, mainly in the subreddits r/europe and r/pics. Different Redditors tried to point out what exactly it was that irked them with the photos taken in Buckingham Palace's Throne Room.[14] The strangely relatable comment, "It's weird seeing one of those kind of portraits in such high quality," for example, prompted another user to state: "A painter can make him look distinguished and dignified. A camera can only show his discomfort with the role in 16k." While the notion of painting as the foremost representational tool seems pretty reactionary (and has so for a long time), it is still interesting to read the rhetorical shift from the painter-individual to the camera-apparatus, which unwillingly reminds of Talbot's musings about the Pencil of Nature and the wider (critical) discourse about photography as a mechanical art. Even though it's supposed to only serve as a punchline, it is also tempting to think about political representation in terms of image resolution and quality. "[T]he better photo quality really show[s] off how fucking silly his fancy little ball and staff look," wrote user I_SOMETIMES_EAT_HAM.



Excerpts From Comments On Reddit, Accessed On May 11th, 2023.

Obviously more isn't always better when it comes to resolution, as philosopher Markus Rautzenberg has shown in his text on Exzessive Bildlichkeit. Das digitale Bild als Vomitiv [engl.: Excessive Pictoriality].

The Digital Image as Vomitive] (2011): "In the promiscuity of detail and in the kitsch of overfilled pictorial spaces, visual 'obscenity' is pushed to a limit that turns into disgust. Here, the excess of digital overwriting frenzy becomes visible on the pictorial level and, in the mode of disgust, turns into a presence effect." [15] The overly vibrant hues of the crown jewels' RGB-colored gemstones and the, as users pointed out, crumpled purple satin tunic, the contrastive lighting with the dark background, the amount of detail that lets you check the King's fingertips for blood pressure issues — the longer and the more closely you look, the more promiscuous the image becomes on its surface, thereby further enhancing its discrepancy to Charles's indecisive pose, his narrowly opened mouth and his gaze that's aiming at the camera as much as it's trying to flee the situation. Sure, the Redditors in their short remarks make use of a scornful tone that, in their anonymity, is both playful and in some way seductive, but their individual observations about the representational value of the image are oftentimes pinpoint — in the end, the punctum is supposed to sting. "At least he didn't have to sit still for hours" notes one pragmatic user in order to save photography's honour, while another replies: "He had to sit still for decades." Ouch!

Some took offense by the shot's overall (un)theatrical feel: "This looks like a random old man went to one of those tourist photo shops and grabbed all the worst royalty props," one person wrote; "Even at his age he looks like a kid playing dress up," mocked another. In an interview before the coronation, photographer Burnand stated that "he knew that the portraits were aimed at a global audience, but that he wanted them to feel intimate, as if viewers were 'having maybe a one-to-one conversation' with the king. With the portraits, he said, he wanted to create a 'little piece of theater.'" [16] The indecisiveness inherent in this intimate but global and regal but also theatrical approach surely plays into these perceptions. It is evident, however, that Burnand is not speaking of his individual stylistic choices alone, but about their wider context of political iconography, in which Charles's public image will be shaped by his photographic representations. "Britain's head of state is said to want a more accessible, forward-looking and inclusive monarchy," titled the Times three days before the coronation, and followed it with: "It's not an easy message to convey through golden relics and ancient rituals." [17] The fact that the photographer had "just minutes" for "the most important moment of his career" and just two days for the editing and processing might not exactly have helped, either. [18]

While the online commenters generally did not really take into account Burnand's motivations and situation, they, like New York Times author Alex Marshall, looked for historical predecessors when typing their critiques of the global polit-iconographical theater they were witnessing. Not seldom they made use of standard art historical methods of ekphrasis and the good old double slide projection image comparison (without the projector and the slides, of course). Several dialog threads rather unfavourably compared Burnand's Charles III to Cecil Beaton's iconic coronation portraits of Queen Elizabeth II. [19] Comparisons, of course, are inevitable here: "He looks like his mother." — "Well[,] he's wearing his mother's work clothes." In the threads it is pointed out how Beaton's black and white produced a more "classic look" and how it helped to even out the crown jewels' stark color contrasts. Some commenters quite thoroughly compared Charles's and his mother's poses in the images:

"It's also the composition of the shots.

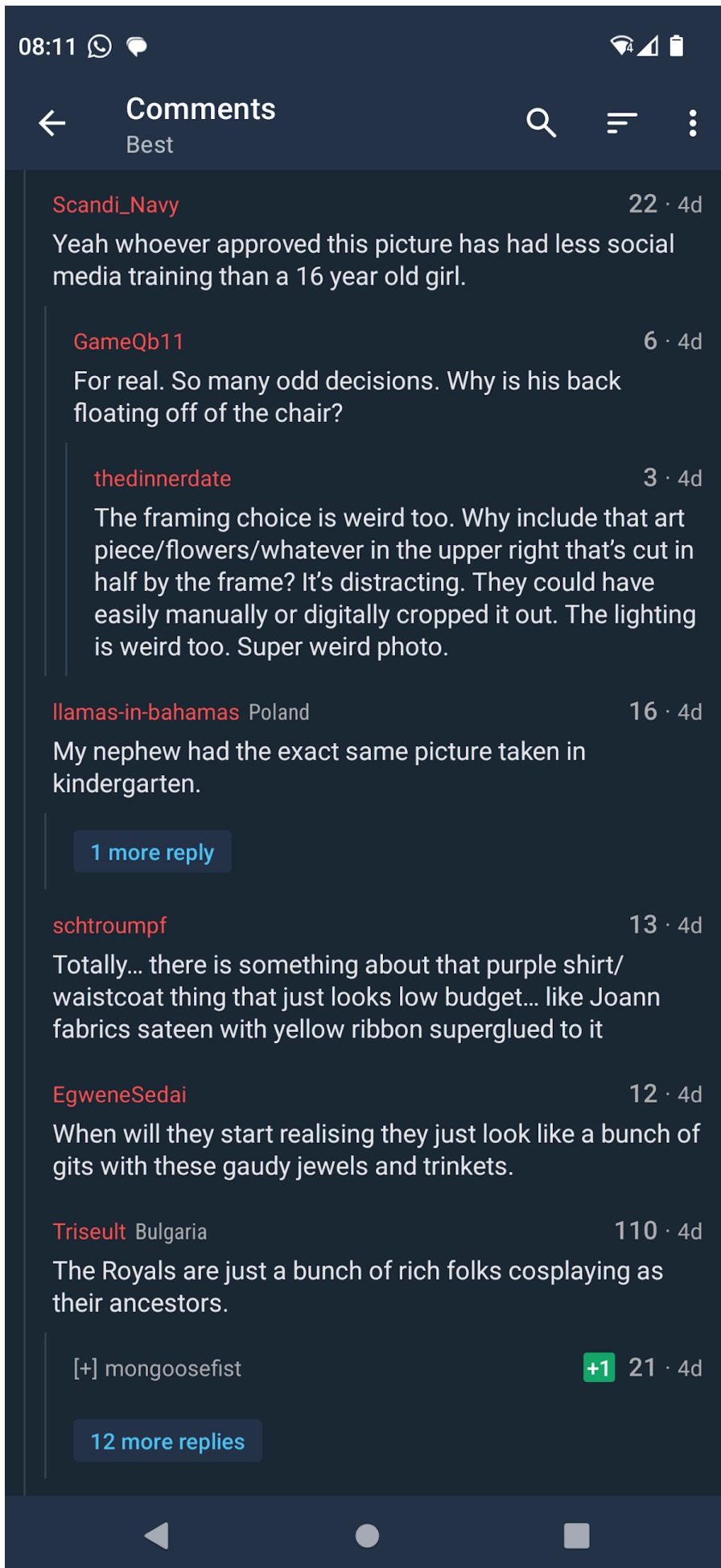
She (seemingly) pays no attention to the presence of the camera and sits with careful and deliberate posture; frame by the light from large windows and a display of intricate vaulting arches supporting the high ceiling above her. It's a shot the brain could trick you into thinking is candid, but that seems intentionally to do much to imply the wealth and prestige of the crown.

He sits with an apparent knowledge of the camera upon him that makes the shoot feel more staged, in a position where it's hard to tell if his back is straight or slumped, with a boring backdrop that one could easily imagine in any old photo studio."



Screenshot Of Beaton, Cecil, Coronation Portrait Of Her Majesty The Queen, June 2nd, 1953, From Website Royal Collection Trust, [Rct.Uk/Collection/2999885/Coronation-Portrait-Of-Her-Majesty-The-Queen-1953](https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/Collection/2999885/Coronation-Portrait-Of-Her-Majesty-The-Queen-1953), Accessed On May 11th, 2023.

The comment goes on but the user already seems to have systematically made clear which of both images earns our favour. Interestingly, Beaton's Westminster Abbey background is a painterly illusion as one can see in other (colour) photos from the shooting that also took place in Buckingham Palace.^[20] Beaton worked under similar time constraints, "banging away and getting pictures at a great rate," The New York Times quotes from his diary. "I had only the foggiest notion of whether I was taking black and white, or color, or giving the right exposures."^[21] Charles's coronation portrait and its online critique offer a fascinating opportunity to learn more about how contemporary political representation does and does not work, how it is affected by media technology and social media, even though or maybe precisely because one might find this last comment true: "Yeah[,] whoever approved this picture has had less social media training than a 16 year old girl."



Excerpts From Comments On Reddit, Accessed On May 11th, 2023.

- [1] See Duarte Dias, Tucker Reals: King Charles' coronation crowns and regalia: Details on the Crown Jewels set to feature in the ceremony. In: CBS News (6.5.2023): [cbsnews.com/news/king-charles-coronation-crown-regalia-details-crown-jewels/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/king-charles-coronation-crown-regalia-details-crown-jewels/). Compare the regalia in the Royal Collection Trust's online collection: [rct.uk/collection/31712/the-sovereigns-sceptre-with-cross](https://www.rct.uk/collection/31712/the-sovereigns-sceptre-with-cross).
- [2] All Reddit quotes in this article are taken from the threads This is the first official portrait of King Charles
- III. (2023): old.reddit.com/r/europe/comments/13bz1xb/this_is_the_first_official_portrait_of_king/ and This is the first official portrait of Charles
- III (2023): old.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/13c0td6/this_is_the_first_official_portrait_of_charles_iii/ with circa 10.000 comments (as of May 13).
- [3] See Dias, Reals: King Charles' coronation crowns and regalia.
- [4] Clip of Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975): [youtube.com/watch?v=4B71nvZ_TC0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4B71nvZ_TC0).
- [5] Holy hand grenade but its at king charles' coronation (2023): [youtube.com/watch?v=DI_KfA-61A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI_KfA-61A); King Charles III is issued the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch (2023): [youtube.com/watch?v=gwc0EwbU7g0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwc0EwbU7g0); King Charles III Recieves the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch (2023): [youtube.com/watch?v=XFLF-dhHGkw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFLF-dhHGkw).
- [6] John Cleese in hysterics over King Charles's Coronation — ,It was a Monty Python sketch!' (2023): [youtube.com/watch?v=t8-Rqv5Rcag](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8-Rqv5Rcag)
- [7] See for example Vox's short video on the topic: Why AI art struggles with hands (2023): [youtube.com/watch?v=24yjRbBah3w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24yjRbBah3w).
- [8] Kyle Chayka: The Uncanny Failures of A.I.-Generated Hands. In: The New Yorker (10.3.2023): [newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/the-uncanny-failures-of-ai-generated-hands](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/the-uncanny-failures-of-ai-generated-hands).
- [9] See for example Sabine T. Kriebel: Germain Krull's Shadowplay. In: Photoresercher No. 27 (2017): Playing the Photograph, guest edited by Matthias Gründig and Steffen Siegel, p. 30–41: [academia.edu/32201308/Germain_Krulls_Shadowplay](https://www.academia.edu/32201308/Germain_Krulls_Shadowplay).
- [10] Official Coronation Portraits featured on the site of the Royal Family (8.5.2023): [royal.uk/news-and-activity/2023-05-08/official-coronation-portraits](https://www.royal.uk/news-and-activity/2023-05-08/official-coronation-portraits).
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Alex Marshall: King Charles's Photographer Wanted a ,Little Piece of Theater'. In: New York Times (8.5.2023): [nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html).
- [13] Rebecca English, Elly Blake, Oliver Price: Official Coronation portraits show Charles is ,a King who knows his own mind' who has surrounded himself with a slimmed down monarchy of people he can depend on — and sister Anne being at his right hand is ,no accident', royal expert reveals. In: Mailonline (8.5.2023): [dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12059773/Its-official-Charles-slimmed-monarchy-unveiled-official-Coronation-portraits.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12059773/Its-official-Charles-slimmed-monarchy-unveiled-official-Coronation-portraits.html).
- [14] "Throne Room" — by the archaic sound of these words I cannot help but think about the black metal band Wolves in the Throne Room. I don't really know what to make of this synaptical oddity, but it sure is a fun experience to take their music as a soundtrack for analyzing the royal portraits. Their song Primal Chasm (2021) starts with fanfares, which seems fitting: [youtube.com/watch?v=m-sf8tGXWss](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-sf8tGXWss).
- [15] My translation. Orig.: „In der Promiskuität des Details und im Kitsch überfüllter Bildräume wird die visuelle ,Obszönität' bis an jene Grenze getrieben, die in Ekel umschlägt. Hier zeigt sich jene Maßlosigkeit digitaler Überschreibungswut, die auf der Bildebene sichtbar wird und im Modus des Ekels in einen Präsenzeffekt umschlägt." Markus Rautzenberg: Exzessive Bildlichkeit. Das digitale Bild als Vomitiv. In: Ingeborg Reichle, Steffen Siegel (Ed.): Maßlose Bilder. Visuelle Ästhetik der Transgression, München, S. 263–278, here S. 276.
- [16] Alex Marshall: King Charles's Photographer Wanted a ,Little Piece of Theater'. In: New York Times (8.5.2023): [nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html).
- [17] Mark Landler: For King Charles, Coronation Day Is a Step on a Tightrope Walk. In: New York Times (3.5.2023): [nytimes.com/2023/05/03/world/europe/king-charles-coronation-royal.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/03/world/europe/king-charles-coronation-royal.html).
- [18] Alex Marshall: King Charles's Photographer Wanted a ,Little Piece of Theater'. In: New York Times (8.5.2023): [nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html).
- [19] See the image linked in the Reddit thread: [rct.uk/collection/2999885/coronation-portrait-of-her-majesty-the-queen-1953](https://www.rct.uk/collection/2999885/coronation-portrait-of-her-majesty-the-queen-1953).
- [20] You can search the Royal Collection Trust's website for „Coronation Beaton“ to find other photos from the shooting: [rct.uk/collection/search#/page/1](https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/page/1).
- [21] Alex Marshall: King Charles's Photographer Wanted a ,Little Piece of Theater'. In: New York Times (8.5.2023): [nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/08/arts/design/king-charles-coronation-portrait-hugo-burnand.html).