

# Duke salutes Topolski chronicle



A detail of Topolski's 200ft Coronation frieze, commissioned by Prince Philip, which hangs in Buckingham Palace

## Valerie Grove

The Duke of Edinburgh first met the artist Feliks Topolski at the Thursday Club, an informal all-male luncheon club which used to gather in the 1940s in an upstairs room at Wheeler's fish restaurant in Old Compton Street, Soho, attended by such convivial coves as the actors David Niven, Peter Ustinov and James Robertson-Justice, the writer Patrick Campbell, the photographer Baron and the *Daily Express* Editor Arthur Christiansen.

"I didn't get to know Feliks Topolski as an artist, only as a fellow member of my club," Prince Philip confessed this week, on a visit to the late artist's remarkable gallery space under the arches of Hungerford Bridge.

Once he discovered the identity of his new friend, the Duke commissioned Topolski to paint a 200ft mural of the Coronation scene which now hangs in Buckingham Palace. The Duke also recalled that once, when visiting Topolski's earlier Maida Vale studio in the 1950s, he had spied a stack of charcoal portraits for John Freeman's iconic *Face to Face* television interviews. These included Augustus John, Lord Reith, Evelyn Waugh, Edith Sitwell, Nubar Gulbenkian, Tony Hancock, Compton Mackenzie, Hartley Shawcross and Stirling Moss.

"Do you want any of these?" the Duke asked. "No," replied Topolski. "Help yourself."

The Duke — who paints himself, as well as being a collector — was making a return visit to the cave-like

studio exactly 25 years after he had been there to open it to the public. Topolski called it his "Memoir", his eyewitness account of the main events of his lifetime, a modern Bayeux tapestry. Earlier this year it was reopened and renamed the Topolski Century. In this space, originally rented from British Rail, with trains roaring overhead, Topolski worked from 1975 until his death in 1989, chronicling everything he had seen and recorded.

After moving from Poland to Britain in the 1930s, he became an official war artist, vividly depicting the Blitz and Belsen, the Arctic convoys, the Nuremberg trials, uprisings in China, Africa and South America, the US civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the Black Panthers. He sketched and painted all the most notable personalities from Churchill and Gandhi to Chairman Mao, Martin Luther King, Picasso and JFK. In the evenings, when he stopped work for the day, the space was open to the public from 5pm, and his Friday open house became a social and hospitable mecca for the hippy young. He was still painting on the day before he died in 1989 — the day the Berlin Wall came down — in the middle of an illustration for Arnold Wesker.

"He was a great chronicler, a great talent and a very entertaining personality as well," Prince Philip said, before embarking on a tour of the newly refurbished space, in which the 600ft-long, 20ft-high mural snakes through three railway arches. The Duke pronounced it all "much improved".

"My abiding memory is of how dark

it used to be." It was also damp and rat infested, and after Topolski's death the paintings, in ordinary household emulsion, began to rot and discolour. It has taken Topolski's son Daniel (the Oxford oarsman, rowing coach and TV reporter) and daughter Tessa, the best part of a decade to raise £3 million in funds for the restoration to revive the artwork and open the exhibition space as a museum, a local centre for art education and an events venue.

The Duke unveiled a plaque listing those who donated to its redevelopment programme — the Heritage Lottery Fund chipped in £1 million — without mentioning that he was among the individual benefactors, along with others such as Olga Polizzi, Victoria Getty, Lord Gavron and Daniel Day-Lewis.

As he made his progress through the spaces the Duke was most engaged by the portraits — of Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, Nehru, H.G. Wells, Cyril Connolly and Jacob Epstein. He did not comment on Topolski's excellent likeness of Queen Mary, nor on the less easily identifiable one of his uncle Lord Mountbatten, but paused before that of Jomo Kenyatta and recalled the day he and the Queen presented Kenya with its independence. "It took place in a football stadium," he said. "The Kenyan flag went up, and there was a hiatus. There was silence for about two minutes. And I said to him, 'Are you sure you want to go through with this?' — which failed to be seen as a joke by some of the Kenyan listeners."