

Stanley Johnson: Never mind the chocolate King Charles sculpture, I've been immortalised in bronze

Sitting in a chair for hours while a renowned Czech artist carved my likeness was strangely peaceful – he even captured my quizzical look



STANLEY JOHNSON 26 April 2023 • 2:22pm



Stanley Johnson (left) and his bust

Hearing on the news this morning that a life-size bust of the King has been made from more than 17 litres (3.7 gallons) of melted chocolate has set me thinking about my own recent experience in this admittedly specialist field.

In the old days – I'm talking about Imperial Rome 2,000 years ago – you usually had to be dead before you qualified for a sculpture. Dr Jan Telensky, philanthropist and entrepreneur thought otherwise. He came up to me at a party almost three years ago at the Czech Embassy.

He took out his phone. "Let me show you some pictures."

I'd always thought the Czech Embassy was a genteel, respectable place. What did he have in mind? I didn't know what to expect.

I had met Telensky for the first time that day. His wife, Alena, and I had both just been awarded the Jan Mazaryk Medal [given to recognise efforts to develop relations between the Czech Republic and the UK] by the then Czech Ambassador, Libor Sečka.

I held his drink while Telensky showed me a series of photos, "These are some of Jakub Vlcek's recent pieces. He's a young Czech sculptor, one of the most brilliant sculptors in Europe."

Telensky sized me up, first from the front, then from the side.

"I'm going to ask Jakub to sculpt you. A proper Roman bust."

"Laurels and all?" I asked.

"Laurels are optional. You've still got plenty of hair." Covid intervened and I rather forgot about Telensky's surprising offer. But Telensky hadn't forgotten. Early one morning two years later, I drove up to Luton for my first sitting.



Stanley was 'staggered' by the detail on the bust

Why Luton? The answer is simple. In 1968, when Russian tanks invaded what was then Czechoslovakia, 20-year-old resistant-fighter Jan Telensky escaped with his life and came as a refugee to Luton with exactly £2 in his pocket. Luton welcomed him with open arms and over the years Telensky has returned the compliment in spades, launching a series of successful business ventures, which it would take too long to describe here.

Vlcek, who had flown in the previous evening from Prague, was waiting for me in a makeshift studio in one of the buildings Telensky owns in the town. I sat in the chair while Vlcek coaxed a likeness from the clay.

He worked for three hours that morning.

For me, it was a strangely peaceful experience. There was no need to talk and not much point in it anyway since I don't speak Czech and Jakub doesn't speak much English.

Telensky came down to the studio a couple of times that first morning to see how things were going, and we went out for lunch to a little Thai restaurant down the street. People smiled at him as we passed.

Six weeks later, Jakub flew in again from Prague and I drove to Luton for a second, longer sitting.

In artistic terms, this was a crucial moment. Vlcek had obviously done more work on the bust.

Telensky was as impressed as I was. "I told you: the man is a genius."

I only had one slight reservation at that stage. "I don't mind looking Roman, but I don't want to look too Roman if you see what I mean. Could Jakub get the hint of a smile in there somewhere, do you think?"

Telensky took the point. "You mean a bit more quizzical?"

"That kind of thing."

I didn't see the finished work until the actual official "unveiling" of the finished sculpture a couple of weeks ago.

Telensky is not a man who does things by halves. Ambassadors were invited. Friends and family were alerted. He hired the Churchill Room of the splendid Luton Hoo Hotel with its 1000-acre grounds. This is the place, Telensky told his guests when they arrived, where the great Winston himself had addressed an audience of over 100,000 people at the end of the Second World War.

I don't think any of us that night really knew what was in store. Yes, Telensky informed us in his opening speech that they were to see, as he put it, the presentation of a new work by renowned Czech sculptor, Jakub Vlcek. Yes, he revealed that the recipient of that "new work" was to be – "wait for it, ladies and gentlemen, Stanley Johnson, in recognition of his long-standing commitment to Europe, the environment and animal welfare".

But he didn't in those opening remarks reveal the nature of the item which stood shrouded in silk on a plinth beneath a portrait of the magnificent Winston Churchill himself.



Jan Telensky introduces Stanley while Jakub Vlcek looks on

When Telensky had finished his speech, it was my turn. I rambled on a bit because Leo (my second son) was driving down from Leeds from a business meeting “up North” and said he might be late. He finally arrived before I ran out of steam.

Of course, I am prejudiced. I must declare an interest. Full transparency. I admit to all of that. But I truly mean it when I say that, as I looked for the first time at the finished work, at the detail of the carving (if that’s the right word), as I took in the lustrous texture of the bronze, and – yes – the way Jakub had indeed caught the quizzical look, I was totally staggered. Complètement bouleversé.

When it was all over, and the captains and the kings had departed, Leo loaded the 50kg+ bronze bust into our car. Then he went back for the plinth. We waited patiently. It had been a long but great evening. “One day my plinth will come,” I said as it started to rain.

My wife Jennifer and I drove back down the M1 to London with my youngest daughter, Julia, and the sculpture sitting together on the rear seat.

The rain got worse. Visibility was bad. Drivers ahead of us were jamming on their brakes suddenly and unpredictably. Julia had her seatbelt fastened, but the bronze didn’t.

How ironic it would be, I thought, if I too had to stop suddenly with the bronze bust being flung forward through the windscreen decapitating the driver en route. Phew!

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