

# Geographical Magazine - That Moment Competition Prizewinner

## The eyes have it by Tilly Willis

Throughout my career as an artist, I have always kept a sketchbook. When travelling, I use my knack for capturing a likeness as a way of making new friends and gaining glimpses into ways of life to which, as a lone woman, I may otherwise be denied access. On this occasion during my 20s, on a journey of several weeks through West Africa, I spent a few days in the legendary town of Timbuktu, on the fringes of the Sahara Desert.

Sitting on the scorching sand, under a clear, cobalt sky, I gazed into the dark eyes of a middle-aged Tuareg tribesman. A lengthy transaction for a silver bracelet had been completed, and having parted with more cash than was prudent on my backpacker's budget, I plucked up the courage to ask – by showing him my sketchbook – if I might paint his portrait. With no apparent enthusiasm or interest, he consented, and led the way through sandy streets and alleys to a place where I could work: a low goat-skin tent, one of a cluster shaded by the vast, creeping dunes on the edge of the town.

He was dressed in a traditional robe and metres of indigo-blue cloth wound around his head and face. It's considered disrespectful for Tuareg men to expose their mouths to anyone but close relatives, so the only features visible were his steady, indifferent eyes and part of his nose.

We sat alone on animal-hides as I prepared to paint. As time passed, I became aware of people gathering behind me to watch. A lively hubbub of curious male Tamasheq-speaking voices gradually built up. In the 50°C heat, powerful aromas of camel, woodsmoke and testosterone-laden sweat saturated the air. Determined to concentrate, I resisted the urge to turn and gaze at what I guessed would be the line-up of a lifetime.

For speed and clarity, I decided to apply the watercolour straight to paper, no preliminary drawing; this is a high-risk strategy as there is little margin for error.



Loading my brush, I loosely outlined his robes; the paint dried instantly, so I worked quickly and economically to describe the folds swathed around his head and body, blocking in colour, until I was ready to paint what could be seen of the face.

The pressure mounted. Surprisingly, the desire to prove myself in this fearsome male-dominated society seemed critical; failure was unthinkable. I had to capture this man's presence through his eyes alone.

My audience instinctively hushed. With a deep breath and a few careful daubs of the brush, I painted the eyes. A sudden, spontaneous cheer of recognition went up. My heart pounded. I turned to meet expressions of ecstatic admiration and awe from the indigo-clad assembly. Intrigued by the hullabaloo, my expressionless sitter leapt to his feet and on seeing his likeness, for the first time during our brief acquaintance, a delightful smile lit up his eyes. Success.