

My encounter with Valentino Rossi

The subject of my account of meeting a superstar, is an original oil on canvas painting by Anthony Dobson. This wonderful painting, being of Valentino Rossi, Italy's multiple motorbike champion at speed on his winning Honda RC211V at Mugello at the Italian Grand Prix in 2003, is delightfully depicted against a warm complimentary soft orange background. I have written this within a week of my encounter on Wednesday 26th June, so its *fresh off the cerebral press* as it were!

Anthony chose this event because Rossi wore a specific tribute helmet and in this second year with the Honda Repsol team, he won his third World Championship title whilst in the ascendancy of his career winning streak between 2001 and 2009.

Rossi retired from Moto GP at the end of 2021 and with a growing ambition to compete successfully at the Le Mans 24 hour race, joined the WRT GT3 team for the start of 2022.



The painting was scanned and a limited edition of prints was sold out and the original archived. In late July 2016, Anthony offered this original for purchase from his archive to me and on subsequent inspection, we agreed this magnificent work of art was understated within an inappropriate frame and plans were made for its reframing. Anthony chose a suitable modern frame from his preferred specialist frame suppliers and this upgrade followed in mid August 2017 at further value-adding cost.

The new presentation was outstanding and powerful, really showing off Anthony's precision photo-realistic painting style combined with the fluidity of motion as indicated by the wheels through which the beautifully blurred background can be seen. The bike is clearly coming under power, though still slightly leaning into what remains of a right hand bend and showing slight front wheel lift from the blurred track surface.

Anthony's approach to the painting additionally brings out the multi colourful angular and curved surfaces of both bike and rider, also conveying the various materials from which the bike was made. All these characteristics appealed to me, enhancing my new found appreciation of Valentino Rossi MotoGP rider extraordinaire.

On the 17th April 2024, I corresponded with one of my twin sons Philip, to endeavour to arrange to get this painting signed, an offer presumably made or discussed when he visited us that previous weekend, which was ahead of Philip's next trip to Imola in Italy for Motorsport Week. Philip is a freelance journalist for Motorsport week on an occasional basis, attending races abroad usually several times each year. So, my email in response the next day, read thus.....

Dear Philip,

Thank you for coming over on Sunday, it was great to see your new car and see you happy with it. We were pleased you could have lunch with us and help me setting up the new Mac Book Air, which is going fine thank you, but will inevitably need a little refinement here and there, to achieve optimal set-up.

- I have attached an image of Anthony Dobson's painting of Valentino winning at Mugello 2003, uniquely with that helmet and being the third win so far in 2003, his second of seven MotoGP Championship wins.
- This fabulous 60 x 90cm oil on canvas painting belongs to your dad/father and is treasured by him and he'd love it to be signed by Valentino at some point, perhaps on a visit to the UK, by arrangement.
- Give the rep', perhaps 'Emma' my business card with contact details on the reverse, web-site indicating seriousness on the front.
- Please obtain 'Emma's' contact details/business card in return for mine, or those of the PR person who can help.
- This is not a commercial exercise, rather a private ownership/fan situation.
- Please convey my thanks for anything they can do to assist.

Thanks Philip if you can get this information to Emma, or one of Valentino's PR colleagues and even show them and Valentino perhaps the image, if you can have it ready on your 'phone, for this image alone will excite him/them.

Have a great time in Italy again (Monza last year) and enjoy a new venue and have a few respectful thoughts on my behalf too, as you spend time at Tamburello (reference to Ayrton Senna who crashed fatally at that corner on 1/5/94). Wishing you a safe journey there and back.

Love, Dad

Over the ensuing days and weeks, Philip struck-up an arrangement with one of Valentino's PR folk, 'Luna' as it turned out and she said she'd be happy to help 'make this happen' for us. Over the following weeks/months, Philip encouraged by me, maintained contact with Luna and firmed-up arrangements as best he could, though remotely by WhatsApp etc,

Luna not usually responding immediately, but to her credit she did keep in touch, having much more important responsibilities on her mind, than the mere wishes of fans no doubt.

Being a scientist, I naturally likened the pain and struggle of this ambition to childbirth perhaps, where the joy of the newborn baby causes much of the mother's labour pain to be forgotten and itself enriches the joy of the new arrival all the more. Also, it seemed to me that the determined striving through a teeming mass of people and other obstacles, whether psychological, practical or anything else that seeks to obstruct one in achieving the almost impossible and reach this *superstar* and succeed in him actually signing the painting, would be like that of the winning spermatozoa amongst millions, that gets to fertilise the ovum.

Only days before we were due to set-off, on Tuesday 18th June Philip telephoned to say that Luna had just communicated to say that she could no longer offer any preferential help in getting the painting signed after all - adding that *our best option would be to join the public autograph session*, which Philip explained would be on the Wednesday late afternoon at the 'drivers parade' in the town square of the nearby market town of Spa, where thousands would gather to herald the arrival of the main draw of the GT3 series, Valentino Rossi.

This was a real blow and yet I wanted to and was surprisingly able to maintain the previous confidence derived from Luna's offer of help some weeks previously, but now the *goal-posts had changed* and the *rug had been pulled out from under our feet*. Philip said, '...well, It's up to you dad, do you still want to try it?' - what do I say to this last minute change, I thought? I didn't want to just give up, yet the odds were well and truly stacked against us now. There would be many 1000's there and everyone would want to see Rossi and get an autograph on a special item too. Instead of a private handing-over of a large and awkward item in the security of the WRT hospitality area at Spa Francorchamps, we now had to carry it through a local market town setting, amidst huge crowds and compete with myriad fans desperate to see him there. Having witnessed the public enthusiasm and adulation of Jackie Stewart or Emerson Fittipaldi at Goodwood and more relevantly perhaps the *almost mobbing* of Lewis Hamilton, Lando Norris, George Russell or Max Verstappen etc, I knew the odds were, that most likely we couldn't succeed, at least humanly speaking, but God is in the business of achieving *the impossible* I told myself... So, I said to Philip, 'yes we should still try and take the attitude that *we just had to succeed* and we simply *must get it done* and we had to *make it happen*, for there was *no room for failure*'. Philip for his part was going to research the availability of tickets, the ferry or Channel Tunnel tickets etc, also the passports and extra car insurance if I was to share any of the driving. I took this nervous excitement to our Bible study home group that evening and shared the unexpected sudden change of plans and the dilemma we found ourselves in and we all prayed for my success. Amongst Rosie and Anthony, Patti, Roger and John, Richard in particular identified with the challenge that God would be pleased to be involved and encouraged me, also saying 'if you have opposition, you'll know the devil is against you, so keep pushing' etc.

This didn't mean I wouldn't get cold feet over the next couple of days, but Philip kept coming back with comments like 'I think it's worth going, we'll do our absolute best to make it work. Hopefully Luna will be at the autograph session' and 'Yes, let's keep praying', 'I think we should still attempt it - we can go to the session, find the WRT guys and if we can see Luna, great. If not, we'll talk to one of the other team members and hopefully they'll be accommodating in helping us to get it signed'... etc, providing me with a further confidence boost. Philip spoke of some sort of hoped-for organisation and queues and folk being moved-on so that everyone who wanted something signed, had a chance to achieve this, not that I really believed for one minute in these latter aspirations, more likely a *free for all!* With new found confidence in Philip knowing some of the folk there and being willing to enlist their help, I felt better about our commitment to go. So we were set.

During the previous week, on 13th June as part of my earlier independent preparations, I had visited Collier Dobson (Fordingbridge) on my way back from visiting my uncle Brian in a

Care Home in Poole and had the painting further protected when Nicky provided correctly sized stiff card securely Handy Wrapped around the foam supported frame and all returned inside its original silver Jiffy bag over a meter long. Nicky hand-cut strengthened hand supports in three positions along the top edge of the silver Jiffy bag. I trial walked the package weighing about 5.5kg and being more than 3/4 of a meter tall, up and down her workshop to help perfect the bespoke hand grips.

After the news we received on the 18th, I realised that we were not going to have the luxury of sliding it out of the huge silver bag and taking the cling-film-like wrapping off the card protection in a Media or Hospitality centre. So, I designed a pair of 10" x 10" windows, which I hand-cut into the image-side card protection, one over the lower position where Anthony wanted Valentino to sign (18th May by text - 'position ahead of front wheel sounds good' he'd said) and another higher up in front of the bike itself where Valentino would have more space to sign over the evenly blurred yellow/orange background. These square windows in the card were strengthened with the Tesa tape Nicky had provided and were modified with lifting tabs and instruction to 'Lift', or in French (soulver) and in Italian (sollevare). I also began to realise that if we were stopped at any border, we might have to prove the painting had always been mine and not purchased abroad, so I rang Collier Dobson and Jo provided a statement saying I was the owner and I additionally printed off an invoice for its August 2017 re-framing. I asked Jo if she could print off some images on A5 fine art card and because Anthony was on holiday, she couldn't. Fortunately Jo was willing and able to print the image on good quality headed-paper instead and get these in the post to me ahead of our Wednesday departure for Spa Francorchamps. On the back of one of these, I wrote a note to Valentino, thanking him for signing the original, also offering him an A4 or A5 fine art print for him to frame and wishing him well for the race.

After the Sunday morning service at St Lawrence (Lechlade-on-Thames), I went forward to the side chapel to ask for prayer, Shirley and Linda being on duty as it were. I said, 'this might be an odd request, but my son and I are due to travel to Belgium later this week and we'd like to take a large original painting with us for signing by a driver', 'Who...?' they asked, 'Valentino Rossi' I answered,....'Valentino Rossi !!... ' Linda exclaimed in excitement and then we got down to some sincere prayer. We prayed for our safety, journey mercies, success in our mission and safety and success for Valentino in his racing that weekend. We prayed for our ability to return and give God the glory in what seemed humanly speaking, impossibly difficult in a little market square in Belgium packed-full of adoring fans.

My wife (Rosalind) and I were praying, as well as Philip and my sister Venetia and I also mentioned it to the Men's Bible study by WhatsApp messaging as I wouldn't be there that Wednesday evening, so we had a lot of people praying for our success as well as several non-church folk primed as to my expectations and aims to get this done.

Having travelled to Philip's Aylesbury home during the early hours of the Wednesday 26th June, I loaded the painting into his car, repacked our belongings around it and off we headed for Folkestone/Cheriton and the Channel Tunnel and soon we were on our way across France via Calais. We crossed into Belgium after 90 mins or so and across the low lying land and stopped for a sandwich lunch at a Service Station in the midday sun, before arriving at Verviers which was less than 20km from the Spa Francorchamps circuit - thanks Philip for doing the driving! Nearer, was the market town of Spa which itself was about 10km from the circuit. At 5.45pm, there would be the start of a cavalcade of competition cars assembling in the market square of Spa and so we should be in plenty of time, having arrived in Verviers at least an hour and a half before this. We unloaded everything into our airbnb and set-off for Spa with the painting on board and newly applied sun-tan lotion, some water to drink, hats and a little food.

On arrival in Spa, there was more traffic than we thought usual, with lots of folk walking about the streets, no parking at the principle car parks, being reserved for team personnel. You could hear the occasional short police siren, hooters and the general buzz of anticipation. We managed to park-up in a side street about half a mile away and walked to the town centre where barriers were now being erected on both sides of the roads and cars being prevented from entering the square and its surrounding road accesses. I asked if Philip had texted Luna to say we were actually there now and perhaps she might help us. Philip being there unofficially, was very reluctant to do this and I had a job to persuade him to at least let her know we'd taken her advice and come along with all the other hopefuls there, which he eventually did send a message to her. Police and security were in attendance everywhere and groups of photographers were gathering in favoured spots in and around the square. Philip not having the confidence that media accreditation would provide, didn't want to interact with them either, so I asked them myself, what they were expecting and whether they knew where Valentino would arrive and what he might do on arrival. They indicated we were in front of where he'd park his car and there was a bar over the road where he'd go in for a drink etc. So, we decided this was the place to be and returned to the car, took the painting out and ridiculous as it may have seemed to observers,



started to carry this rather large and conspicuous silver Jiffy wrapped object back through the filling streets to where we'd met the photographers. Things were noticeably more busy now with about 45 mins before the cars might start arriving. Across the street, amongst the obvious Valentino fans wearing all manner of Rossi merchandise from hats to shirts and waving flags, I noticed a man with a mainly fluorescent yellow helmet to sign and thought he might know something more than we did. Philip wasn't inclined to go and ask him, so being uncharacteristically bold, I did and after doing so felt it would be better if we were on the other side of the street, opposite to where the cars would be parked. So we crossed the street with our five and a half kilo ungainly package and got behind a barrier not far from the friendly devotee with the fluorescent yellow and black Rossi helmet.



The temperature rose in more ways than one as the sun beat down on us and ever more security staff walked the emptying street between barriers, team members handing out publicity, posters, foam objects to wave, flags etc. Then I noticed the French speaking lady to our left, who was equally pressed-up against the barrier, was talking to a guy over the barrier who I noticed was wearing a WRT

polo-shirt - 'he's a member of Valentino's team' I said to Philip, 'won't you ask him to at least take this printed image and get it to Valentino later on in the safety of their team hospitality?' but Philip preferred not to get involved, so I asked the team member myself, but he declined anyway, perhaps fortunately for I still had it for later, as *things would turn out*.

Police cars occasionally went by and eventually, at the advertised time, there was the increasing sounds of hooters and other commotion down the road as support cars with lights flashing and making other enthusiastic noises coming towards us, closely followed by the GT3 cars themselves, loudly roaring by at walking pace.



The first car came through, which just so happened to be the ultimate winner of the 24 hrs of Spa a few days later - the Aston Martin Vantage car 007 driven by Matt Drudi, Nicky Thiim and Marco Sorensen.



The excitement built as these cars parked up further down in the square and then suddenly the animated crowd livened up even more, with whoops and shouts and with general glee, welcomed the arrival of Rossi's car and that of the sister car.



They stopped right in front of us and manoeuvred into their preferential parking spots opposite us and the bar. Out came Valentino and the crowd went wild with whoops and shouts of 'Vale!, Vale!, Vale!' As he waved appreciatively, making his way across the street he was escorted into the bar behind us.



At this point, he disappeared and the crowd's attention returned to the cars that kept coming by thick and fast. It seems like tens of cars and perhaps up to a hundred filtered through over the next hour amidst much noise and the occasional cheering as gangs of team supporters pushed some silent cars through, whose engines had protested at having to crawl along at walking pace.

The crowds on the pavements either side of the street barriers was now dense as far as the eye could see and we hoped as others did, that Valentino would soon emerge out of the bar and have to pass us. We moved position several times across this pavement and into other

nearby areas and back again amongst what Philip described as *die-hard Rossi fans*, following any and every whim of ourselves and others, completely at the mercy of unsubstantiated rumour.

Standing in-line outside the bar with other devoted Rossi hopefuls, surrounded by the general noise of celebration, we had some admiring comments from those around us re our ambitious and impressive undertaking as depicted by an image on paper, so I sent my business card across as a gesture of thanks and mutual appreciation.

Eventually, surrounded by excitable overlapping conversation and the distant *sound of carnival* with those gathered near the entrance to the bar coming and going, we began to wonder if there was any point remaining where we were, apparently achieving nothing, this being some 60-90 minutes after Valentino disappeared into the cafe. So Philip suggested he went in search of him elsewhere as he'd seen some fans with memorabilia going off in a totally different direction. He suggested I stayed put, in case he did come out, while he'd indicate by text if he found anything out.

With Philip gone, and while potentially purposelessly just waiting, I spotted some folk clutching posters etc as they were leaving the bistro and asked them whether Valentino was still in there - 'not here' they said, adding a French word which sounded like 'partir, or parti..', which I took to mean he's left, gone home etc, with them pointing in the opposite direction to which Philip had gone, ie towards the direction *out of town* ie from where the driver's parade had come, back towards the circuit I guess. At that moment, in the milling crowd, I felt a cloud of utter despondence and the realisation that 'this was not going to happen after all', that it was 'just not meant to be' perhaps, in spite of all our previous hope and optimism.

After a quick prayer, I felt more focussed again and followed the crowd asking another purposeful person going in another different direction who was holding items for signing perhaps and he said 'Valentino had gone to the podium', which was in the opposite direction to the other person who'd said that he'd left the area already and this was in spite of any known positive sighting of him actually leaving the cafe by the way he had entered.

So, fighting alone through the teeming throng, with my rather large and vulnerable but well-packed painting, I set-off in the general direction towards wherever this 'podium' might be, onwards through the town square, under neatly cultivated trees, past pretty flower arrangements and elegant street furniture, slowly progressing through the surging crowds with the music and general hubbub getting ever louder and then into an open area packed full of people and the race cars we'd seen earlier.

At this point, I got a text from Philip stating animatedly that he'd seen him over by the stage which I'd only just caught sight of myself - so 'the podium' meant *the stage* that we'd not known about before. I negotiated the painting between the fans and the brightly coloured competition cars and got as close to the stage as I could and then Philip texted as to his own whereabouts in front of a shop not far from where I was, so we each looked up, caught sight of each other '*phones in hand*', met and fought our way forwards the last ten yards or so together, lining up behind a young lady and her partner who stood in front of a barrier at the periphery of the whole chaotic, hot and noisy scene.



At length, looking across, we saw Valentino some 20 or 30 yards away, signing autographs from within the safety of the barriers around the stage, over the other side of sound desks and other equipment surrounded by officials and team members, some of which might be Valentino's for we could see the blond haired 'Luna' Philip had met at previous races and who had weakly corresponding with Philip in recent months. Wearing one of his trademark yellow 'bucket' hats, Valentino was easily visible and we could follow his possible movements which were almost static, as he carried-on signing anything and everything that was pushed towards him, occasionally posing for *selfies* along the way.



After about ten minutes, we were aware by way of conversation that remarkably, the girl ahead of us was in fact English and she informed us that they had been doing driver interviews and

sure enough, he was duly called-up on stage and gave a short interview for a couple of minutes which I attempted to record. Then he returned to ground level alongside the stage front, still some considerable meters away from us, but at least visible.

The girl then said, 'he came here, by that moped', which was parked not ten feet to her right, adding 'he's got to leave via here, so he will come past us soon'. At this point, with mutual agreement and cooperation of the girl and her partner ahead of us, we lifted the painting up and over the barrier, placing it in prime position to get noticed.

Having manoeuvred our monumental treasure over the barrier for it to rest against the inside of the barrier for all to see where Valentino might come, we received more admiring looks from other 'Vale' fans as I flipped opened the window-flaps exposing tantalising areas of the beautifully painted surfaces, generating further respectful and positive comment. This impressive reaction included that from another hard-core Rossi fan over to our left, holding the fuel tank cover from the same 2003 Honda as in our painting. I asked Philip to take pictures on my behalf should he come over to us and then we waited expectantly.

Not long after, things changing quickly now, Valentino began to move out of the area by the stage, as if to leave towards the moped the girl has pointed out and so I started to wave the printed image of the painting in his general direction as others around us called out his name in an attempt to get his attention.

At the closest point to us not six feet away perhaps, he noticed our enthusiastic effort and detoured towards our group and signed the fuel tank cover and another item or two, only feet away.





Then, slowly side-stepping towards the exit and us, our moment finally came as he accepted the printed image as if to sign it, which I took it out of his hand and offered it back and said 'no, this is for *you* to keep' and pointed down to the painting offering the Medium Staedtler laundry marker and he kindly acknowledged the request, crouched down and signed the upper area carefully and boldly, adding his trademark '46' motif to finish off, followed by enthusiastic thanks from myself.

Turning to Philip to ask him if he got some photographs, he confessed he was so transfixed with the signing that he forgot, so I grabbed his 'phone and started taking pictures from our ultra close range, of Valentino still standing there signing more items and aiming to get the painting in, which stood close by his feet.

I then managed to get pictures of the unmistakably signed area of the painting with enough of Valentino in the shot for anyone to recognise himself and his signature and the painting in the same place at the same time.



Then, quick as a flash, he was gone to our right with his PR man or team member still clutching the printed image I had prepared for him, 'look Philip', 'he's got our printed image



on which I wrote,... he's going to keep it and read it' I said, so I remain hopeful he'll hang on to that and respond to it, requesting a Fine Art print on card at least - if so Anthony would be thrilled to oblige! The photos clearly show it was Valentino still clutching my printed image with written note and business card attached while he signed other items and also as he left the compound, rather than a PR man, such was the madness and confusion of the moment, where perceptions and memories can be unreliable.

Wow!, we were completely overwhelmed with the incredulity of our success and genuinely thrilled, for we could hardly believe what had just happened in front of us, the magical moment of *his condescension to get right down* and sign Anthony's painting and look us in the eye momentarily and take our good wishes with my messages on the reverse of the printed image. We were delighted and quickly hauled the painting back over the barrier into the thinning crowd at that point, 'Vale' having sped off on his moped, the scene now without its star attraction. We quickly closed the windows, unpeeled the protective Jiffy wrap-over and guided the painting safely back into the protective silver bag and sealed the open end.



We left the area as rapidly as we were able, picking our way through the still densely packed crowds powered by elation and desperate impatience to get the painting home and unveil Valentino's signature and really appreciate it.

Eventually onto the less busy side roads, we made our way towards the car some half a mile away or more, absolutely full of it and thrilled with how each stage had turned out, excitedly re-living every triumphant aspect of it! mad Englishmen! We didn't come as Rossi fans, but we certainly were now!



Back home in the airbnb in Verviers, we sorted ourselves out, had a shower and changed clothes before opening our precious package and feasting our eyes on this fabulously *now signed* painting of Anthony's, looking 'complete' at last.



I set it up on a table, still in its surrounding blue foam frame protection, positioned the unopened bottle of Prosecco (kindly gifted by our airbnb host) and two gothic-looking wine glasses in front of it and photographed the scene. Next came an excited round of WhatsApp messages with image attached declaring our success and thanking all for their support and prayers, some messages going to America as well as England. What a day, a long and determined day, full of faith and optimism, dashed by doubt at one or two points, but we had prayed again and pressed-on, not accepting anything but success in this *mission that had been accomplished* and victory achieved.





I couldn't have done it without everyone's prayers, neither of course without Luna's early involvement, nor Philip especially and as you can see, he was as pleased as I was! Here Philip poses with the signed painting, temporarily on the wall in our airbnb in Verviers.

What if's...

- If Philip and I hadn't had that discussion back in April about what might be possible...
- If Philip hadn't even considered having a conversation with one of Valentino's PR people at Imola, eg Emma or Luna....
- Because Luna was able and willing to offer help and confirm that, over two or three further WhatsApp conversations with Philip, I was up for making every effort to prepare the painting and myself and travel to wherever Philip said we could meet-up with the WRT people and hand it over for signing.
- If Luna's initial response hadn't been so positive and we were left with just one option ie to take it across to a European or British race meeting 'on spec', hoping to get some sort of luck in getting it near enough to wherever he'd pop up, well...I really don't really think I'd have been up for such a vague and spontaneous potential signing, knowing what Goodwood is like, where's there's generally 'no chance' with the trending superstars.
- If having come 'so far' psychologically, when Luna backed-out and pulled the rug from under our feet at the last minute and left us to fend for ourselves amongst the crowds who all wanted the same thing, if I'd said, 'no' to Philip and 'let's leave it until we organise something else another year' or something, then what...
- If Philip had submitted to my expressions of having 'cold-feet' the next day or two, think of what we'd have missed-out on, not to mention having to explain to all those praying that I'd bottled out, so to speak - isn't God big enough?, well, better enlarge your vision then, for He cares about trivial things too, in fact anything that we care about, for be encouraged, He made us in His own image don't forget.
- If Philip had been brave enough to speak to one of the WRT team members and leave matters in their potentially unreliable hands...
- If Luna had been able to get the painting signed back at their Spa Francorchamps pit-base and media centre, how much less rewarding an experience it would have been, or us being deprived of the lesson of dependence on God.
- If I'd succumbed to the first declaration from another admirer that he already left the area...
- If we'd found the stage earlier and simply gone to the front surrounded by 100's pressing in and never having a chance to present the painting, let alone get it over a barrier...
- If we'd not gone with whatever leading we had, to end-up to one side (the right side as it happened where unbeknown to us, Valentino's entry and exit point by moped was), we would have simply seen him in the distance somewhere and he'd have made off after the brief interview on stage, confirming 'it was not meant to be' and returned home deflated.
- If we hadn't happened upon an English speaking girl standing in the right place to one side where all the action wasn't centred on and there was enough space to come up behind her and that she made room for us to get the painting over when it was clear to us that he'd have to come over that way....
- 'for sure' (as all racing drivers say), God was in the detail...