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Melissa Eddy, "Angela Merkel's Humanity, Captured in an Elizabeth Peyton Oil,"
The New York Times, July 23, 2017

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Angela Merkel's Humanity, Captured in an Elizabeth Peyton Oil

By MELISSA EDDY July 23, 2017



"Her face is so determined and tender," the artist Elizabeth Peyton said of Angela Merkel, the German chancellor.

Credit Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

BERLIN — The last time *Vogue* profiled a prominent European female leader, Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain, she agreed to be captured by Annie Leibovitz in a rainbow array of coats and her trademark leopard-print kitten heels.

But for the August 2017 issue, featuring another — perhaps the most — powerful woman in Europe, the likeness of Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany was rendered not in a glossy shoot by Ms. Leibovitz, the star photographer, but in an oil painting in muted primary hues by the American artist Elizabeth Peyton.

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As Kati Marton lays out in her profile of the 63-year-old German chancellor — made available to the author for a single question — Ms. Merkel is patently uninterested in the trappings of leadership in the modern, hypermedia age. She leaves tweeting to her spokesman and parcels out interviews based on her need to clarify a policy position.

It was not the first time that a United States publication has turned to an artist to capture the chancellor's likeness. When Time magazine named her Person of the Year in 2015, editors there tapped the artist Colin Davidson to paint an oil portrait of Ms. Merkel that appeared on the cover.

Ms. Peyton, born in 1965, began her career exhibiting work in unconventional settings like the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. At a time when figurative painting was deeply unpopular and portraiture was generally scorned, she became famous for her stylized portraits of pop-culture icons and historical figures.

For Vogue, Ms. Peyton drew from a vast collection of photographic images to contemplate the spirit of Ms. Merkel, a woman who had captured Ms. Peyton's imagination for her strength and, at the same time, what she viewed as her tenderness.

"I just looked at a million photos, the photos of her from the last 30 years," Ms. Peyton said. "I noticed how much her face changed in the last two years, especially in the last two months — there was such pain visible. I was really conscious of that."

Still, she wanted her painting to be more iconic than literal, she said. She captured the chancellor's intensely clear blue eyes and exaggerated the tilt of her mouth, giving her a bemused look.

"Her face is so determined and tender, there is this hopefulness that leadership could lead you to a better place," Ms. Peyton said.

She added: "I was feeling one of her biggest strengths is her humanity; there is just nothing like that in my world that I see right now. It's like a superpower."