

Stephen Harper's portrait is loaded with secrets and clues. Here are some you likely missed

And if you look very closely you can see the tiny fix suggested by the former prime minister and amateur vexillologist (flag expert)

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An annotated image highlights areas of the portrait of Stephen Harper, seen at the official unveiling in Ottawa on Tuesday, Feb. 3, 2026. PHOTO BY HYUNGCHEOL PARK /Postmedia

Canadian artist Phil Richards has said he considers portraiture to be “a collaboration between artist and subject.” Perhaps nowhere is that more clear than in a tiny last-minute change in his newly unveiled portrait of former prime minister Stephen Harper.

The portrait includes many details and Easter eggs (more on that in a moment) but at the very top of the image is a collection of flags, one from New Brunswick, the ancestral home of Harper’s family. Barely visible (it’s a fraction of an inch across) is a red banner flying from the ship on the flag.

Richards painted it flying the wrong way.

He tells National Post: “If you’re driving a car and you hold a flag out the window, then the flag is going to be pointing behind you, because you’re moving forward. So I made the assumption subconsciously that this banner would be pointing back, in the opposite direction the ship is moving in. But the reality is that the banner is moving in the same the direction the wind is moving in, which is pushing the ship forward.”

Richards sent Harper some images from the portrait before it was finalized. Harper, a stickler for details (and author of *Flags of Canada*, one of three books he’s written), called him back.

“He said, ‘You know, I hate to say it, but there’s a mistake in the flag of New Brunswick.’” Richards thanked him and fixed the tiny banner. Here are other details from their collaboration.

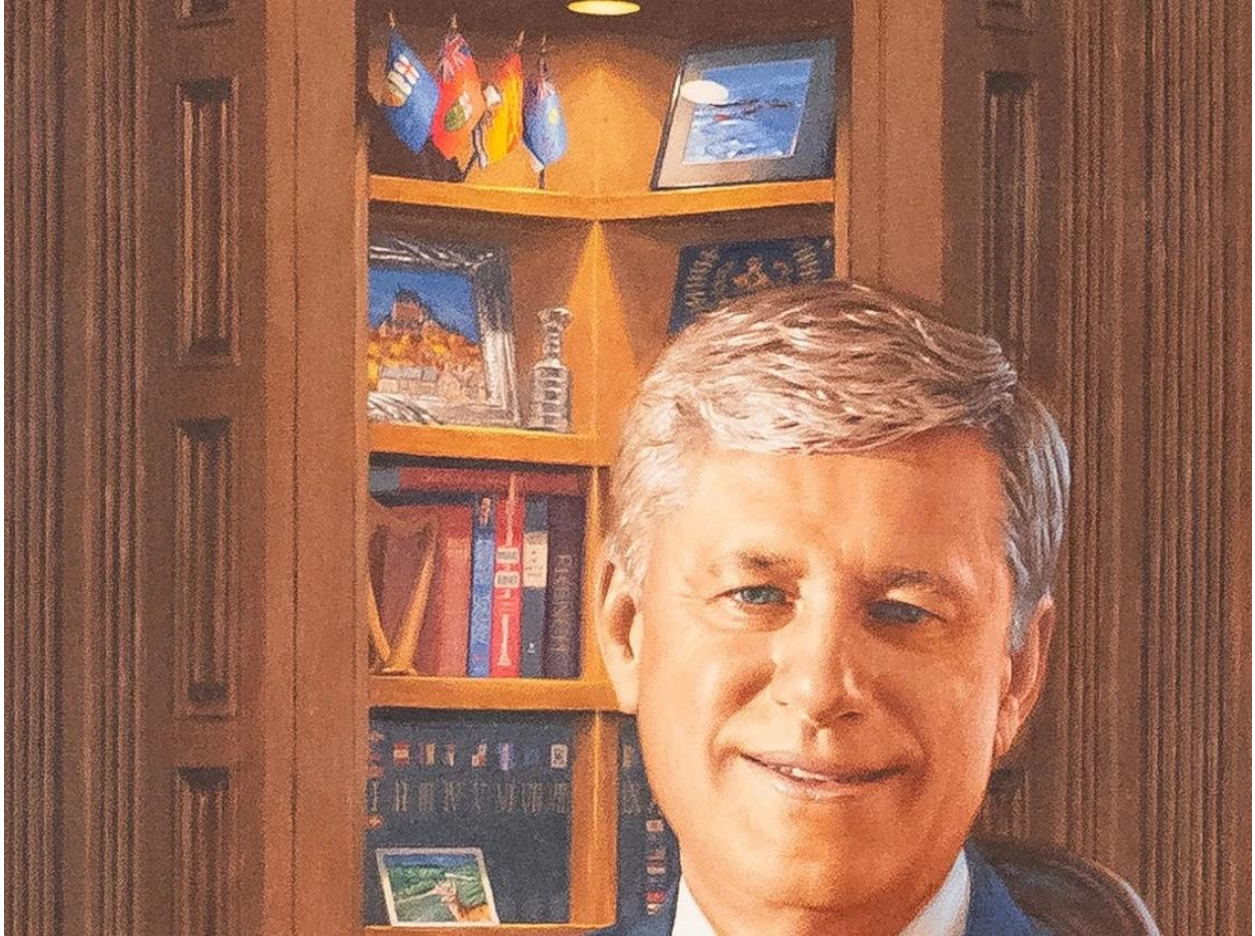


A detail of the portrait shows Stanley the cat, Harper's Canada pin, a cribbage board and two old photos.

The cat

Sharing the room with Harper is Stanley, a grey tabby the Harpers adopted from the Ottawa Humane Society while at 24 Sussex in 2011. Richards reports that Stanley is now 15 and in poor health, “so I’ve depicted him in his younger days.” The name was chosen in a national contest, and is yet another nod to the Stanley Cup.

Harper made note of Stanley during the ceremony to unveil the portrait in Ottawa on Tuesday night, calling the cat “one member of our family who consistently polled better than I.”



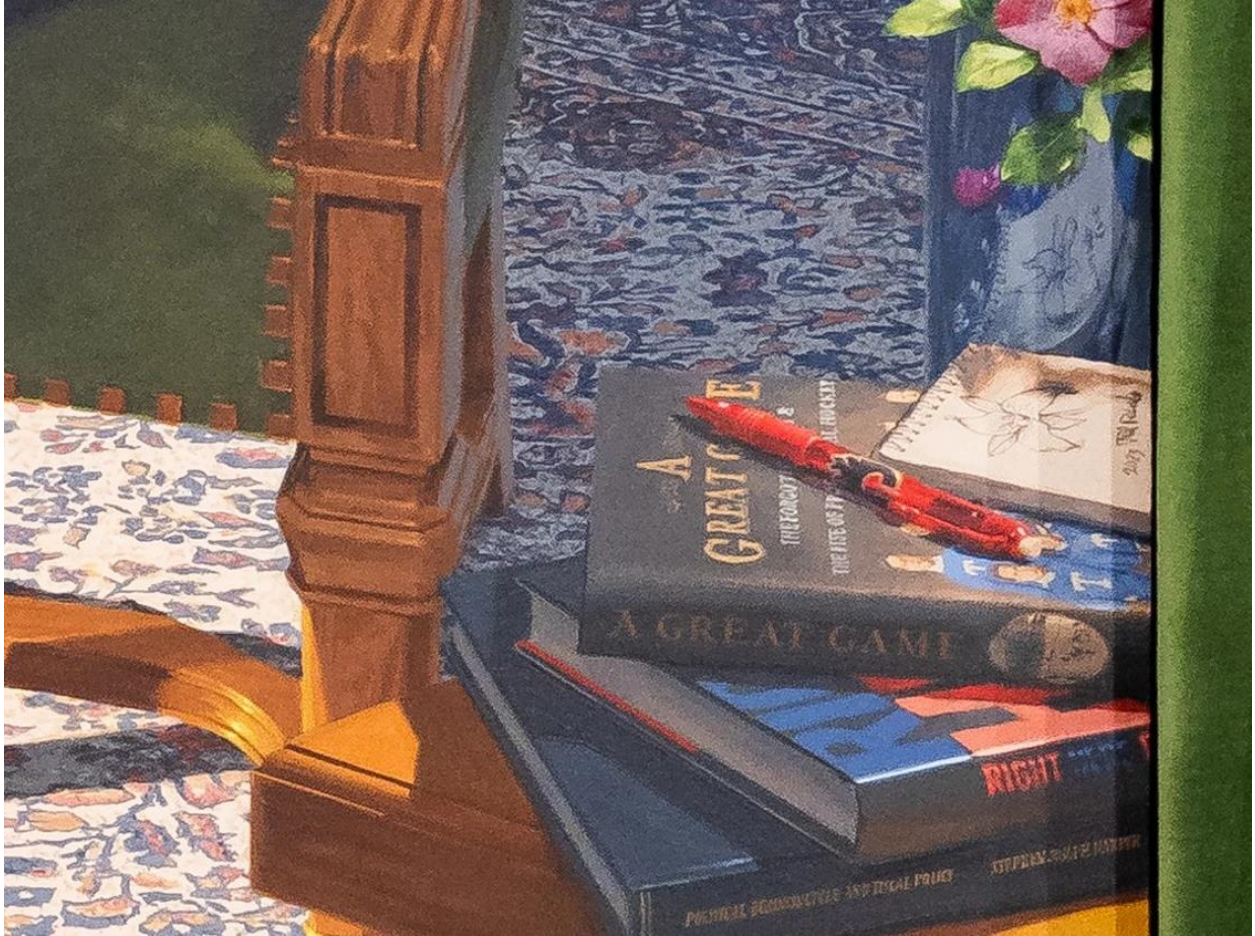
A detail of the portrait shows several of the flags and books that are meaningful to Harper, and a tiny Stanley Cup.

Flags

In addition to New Brunswick's, the bookshelf houses flags of Alberta (Harper's home in adulthood), Ontario (his childhood home) and Kainai First Nation of Alberta, of which he is an honorary chief. Harper also wears a Canada flag pin that he always wore while in office and continues to wear.

Photographs

On the bookshelf are photos of Alert, Nunavut, which Harper visited in 2006; Quebec City, Calgary's sister city; and a deer in the backyard of Harper's home in Bragg Creek, Alta. On the desk: a black and white photo of his childhood family in Leaside (now Toronto); and his family at 24 Sussex Drive. On the small table below the window with its view of Calgary: a photo of the Leaside train station that Harper and his brothers often visited with their father; and the Harper family home in the 1970s.



A detail of the portrait shows the books Harper has written and a sketch of a trillium signed by the artist.

Books

The bookshelf includes a French dictionary (Harper is bilingual), Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (he's also an economist), James Buchanan's *Democracy in Deficit*, *The New Canada* by Preston Manning, *Old Colours Never Die* by Harper's father, and a Bible. There are also bound copies of trade agreements made by Harper's government.

On the side table are Harper's three books, including *Right Here Right Now: Politics and Leadership in the Age of Disruption*, and *A Great Game: The Forgotten Leafs and the Rise of Professional Hockey*, as well as his master's thesis, *The Political Business Cycle and Fiscal Policy in Canada*. Harper is holding the 2015 Budget.

Passions

A cribbage board on the table below the window represents Harper's favourite card game, learned from his father. The miniature Stanley Cup on the bookshelf symbolizes his love of hockey. And the mug on the desk shows he is an avid Beatles fan. (This mug was actually on his desk during his time in office.)

The grand piano (Harper plays the piano) and the harp (for Harper) represent his love of music. And the colours in his tie represent his success in bringing together the elements of Canadian conservatism: dark blue for the Progressive Conservative Party; green for the Reform Party; and sky blue for the autonomist tradition of conservative francophones and Quebec nationalists.

Plants

To Harper's left are wild roses, the flower of Alberta. Just below them is a sketch of a trillium, the flower of Ontario, signed and dated by Richards. On the table beneath the window are purple violets, the flower of New Brunswick.

The office

While much of the furniture shown in the office was actually used by Harper, the chair on which he is sitting is his chair from the House of Commons. And although the office is currently under renovation, Richards used photos and architectural plans to recreate its look. He even had someone find the carpet (which is currently in storage) so he could duplicate its pattern.



A detail of the portrait shows a Beatles mug, two family photos and Harper's one-millimetre pen.

The Pen

While the pen on the pile of books bears the logo of the Calgary Flames, Harper's NHL home team, the one in his hand is less special — but also more so.

"It's a cheap, mass-produced pen," Richards says. "But this little number near the top of the pen says 1.0 and what that is, is it's a one-millimetre nib on the ballpoint pen."

Harper "always used this particular pen," Richards says. "So I put the one up there because I thought it was also symbolic of prime minister, like the number one minister in in the government."

He adds: "A lot of pens are point five. But he wanted this because he does so much signing of documents that he thought the point five millimetre, or even point seven five, it looked too thin and kind of scrawny. So this one had a little more heft to it."

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