

De László, Royalty and Tradition

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Statistically, it is probably safe to assert that Philip de László depicted more royal sitters than any other painter in the history of art. Perhaps only Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805–1873) offers a serious challenge in this respect, but then de László's oeuvre extends further, to include Popes, Archbishops and Presidents of the United States, in addition to the highest ranks of society. Certainly, de László benefited from historical circumstances in so far as the traditional fabric of European society remained intact while he was establishing his reputation and continued in being even in a diluted or fragmented state for the rest of his lifetime. Added to this is the fact that de László was a cosmopolitan figure who was able to move throughout Europe with ease, gaining the confidence of his far-flung and distinguished clientèle by his artistic skills and personal charm. To paint "an extraordinary succession of portraits of great personages and of notable people who have taken their fair share in the affairs of the world" became de László's mission, to the extent that his "portraits should last and continue to be available many generations hence for the information of students of humanity and for the enlightenment of the historian".¹ Such an ambition, which he surely abundantly fulfilled, immediately places de László's work in a sequence of artists extending from Holbein through Titian, Van Dyck and Velázquez to Goya, Lawrence and Ingres.

No intelligent portrait painter when confronted by a royal sitter can remain unaware of the tradition in which he is being asked to work, and de László was sensitive to such issues. When, for example, he was commissioned to paint Francis Joseph, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary (fig. 19), it would have been unwise of him to

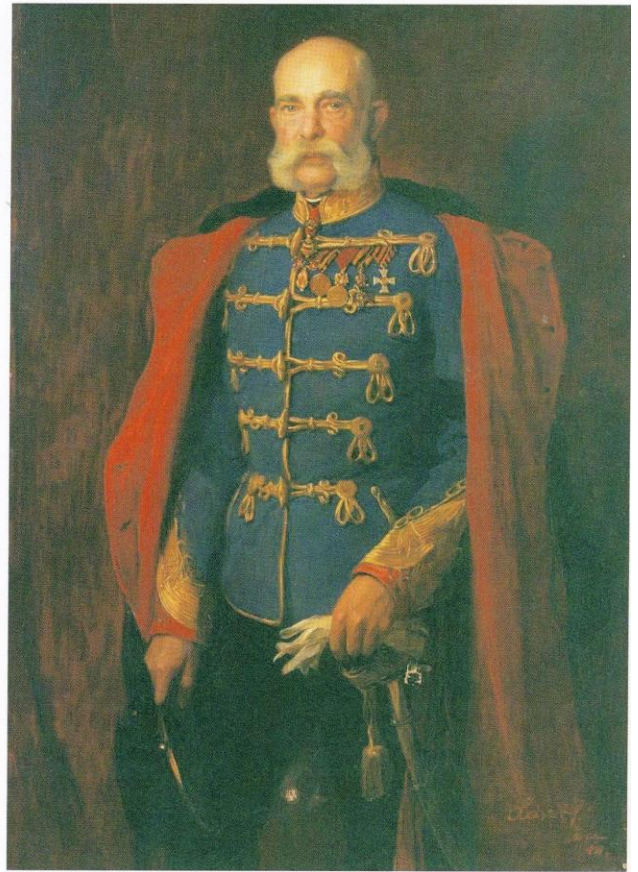
discount the success that Titian had achieved with the Habsburgs, notably Charles V, or his son Philip II (fig. 18). As a result, de László's image of 1899 echoes the earlier master in the restrained formality of pose, colour, lighting and background. Similarly, the portrait of Queen Marie of Roumania, the daughter of Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, the second son of Queen Victoria, and his wife the Grand Duchess Marie Alexandrovna (fig. 21), dressed in shimmering silk and wearing her Russian sapphire and diamond-encrusted tiara, brings to mind the elaborate Persian costume worn by Teresia, Lady Shirley by Van Dyck (fig. 20).

These are, of course, not quotations or direct borrowings, but rather associations. Such comparisons may be seen in the light of a shared heritage, like a pattern book or memory bank, that a portraitist might automatically call upon – even unconsciously – when confronted by a sitter. The swirling red academic gown encircling the body of the Prime Minister A.J. Balfour (fig. 23) might in this way owe its origins to Van Dyck's animated portrait of Lucas van Uffelen (fig. 22). Not surprisingly, after de László had settled in London in 1907, eighteenth-century British portraiture became a source of reference to him. The dramatic full-length state portrait of Emperor William II in full-dress uniform standing with his charger in front of the Neues Palace at Potsdam (cat. 40) is reminiscent of *Captain Robert Orme* by Sir Joshua Reynolds (fig. 24). De László greatly admired the work of Reynolds, describing him as "the finest English portrait painter" and singling out the image of Lord Heathfield of Gibraltar (in the National Gallery) for special praise. Having been prompted to look also at Gainsborough's paintings, he must have found an affinity in the earlier artist's unorthodox technique and bravura brushwork, as well as in the element of risk-taking that Gainsborough relished. However, Gainsborough's attitude to his sitters, unless they were his friends ("they have but one part worth

Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, when Duchess of York
(cat. 98, detail)



FIG. 18
Titian
Philip II, 1550
Oil on canvas,
193 × 111 cm
Museo del Prado, Madrid



ABOVE FIG. 19 *Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria, King of Hungary*, 1899
Oil on canvas, 146 × 95.3 cm
The Historical Gallery, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

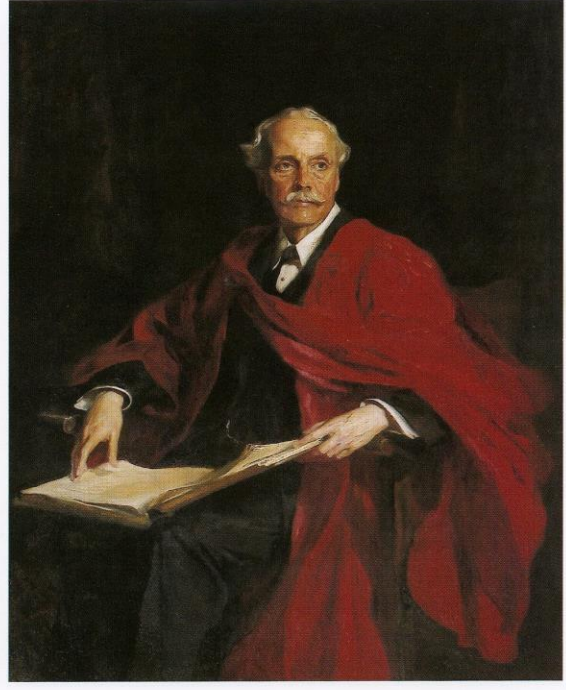
OPPOSITE PAGE

ABOVE RIGHT FIG. 20 Sir Anthony van Dyck, *Teresia, Lady Shirley*, 1622
Oil on canvas, 200 × 133.4 cm, Petworth House

ABOVE FAR RIGHT FIG. 21 *Queen Marie of Roumania*, 1924
Oil on canvas, 92 × 70 cm, National Museum of Peles Castle, Sinaia, Roumania

BELOW RIGHT FIG. 22 Sir Anthony van Dyck, *Lucas van Uffelen*, 1622
Oil on canvas, 124 × 100.6 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913

BELOW FAR RIGHT FIG. 23 *Arthur James Balfour*, 1914
Oil on canvas, 152.4 × 111.8 cm (60 × 44 in.), Trinity College Library, Cambridge



looking at, and that is their purse”), was diametrically opposed to de László’s, and in this respect his situation more closely resembles that of Sir Thomas Lawrence, also a dazzling technician.

Lawrence’s commission from George IV to paint the portraits of those statesmen, military commanders and diplomats involved in the overthrow of the Emperor Napoleon parallels de László’s own relationship with his sitters. Lawrence’s portraits were eventually installed in the Waterloo Chamber at Windsor Castle and reveal the artist at the height of his powers, in the variety of poses within the given formats dictated by status and in the dazzling application of paint. The portrait of *Pope Pius VII* (fig. 25) is a masterpiece in which Lawrence consciously strove to rival Raphael, Titian and Velázquez, and in so doing advanced the standing of British artists immeasurably. As it happens, de László was specially commissioned by the Hungarian government in the anniversary year of 1900 to paint a portrait of Pope Leo XIII to hang in the Museum of Fine Arts at Budapest. A comparison of the well documented experiences of both Lawrence and de László is instructive. Both were immediately made nervous by the inevitable comparisons that would be made with their predecessors; both drew inspiration from their surroundings in the Vatican; both prepared carefully by observing the respective popes at audiences and while performing their official duties; and both established a good rapport with their sitters that is reflected in the finished portraits. Pius VII was aged seventy-seven when painted by Lawrence and Leo XIII aged ninety when painted by de László: their portraits succeed in combining the outward authority with the inner spirituality of two of the greatest popes in history. Lawrence observed of Pius VII, “He has a fine countenance – stoops a little – with firm yet sweet-toned voice ... and through all the storms of the past he retains the jet black of his hair”.² De László described Leo XIII coming into the room for his first sitting: “The bent, ascetic figure entered, with his intelligent and alert expression, clad in a heavy ivory silk cassock, white shoes, a white cappelletto, and the crimson silk cloak which had come down from the Roman Emperors and is worn only by the Pope”.³ In such descriptions the reader senses the artist’s visual appetite for his subject. As it happens, de László made a false start and Leo XIII was dismissive of his first attempt opining, “*Mais mon cher fils, ça ressemble à Voltaire, et je déteste cette créature*”.⁴ The portrait was begun again (cat. 18), and the outcome of the second attempt acknowledged to be hugely successful. The artist was created a Chevalier of the Order of Pope Pius IX and the portrait won a gold medal in the Paris Salon of 1900.

A measure of de László’s absorption of British portraiture is reflected in the way in which his own work was so readily perceived as being part of the national canon in spite of the political difficulties and prejudices he encountered during the First World War. For example, the vibrant portrait of the popular romantic novelist Mrs



Elinor Glyn (cat. 55) was declared by her lover, Lord Curzon, who had proposed the commission, to “rank with the best of all ages”.⁵ This startling image, born of late Pre-Raphaelitism and verging on Symbolism, caused quite a furore when it was first exhibited in London. Similarly, when Mrs Wilfrid Ashley, the daughter of Sir Ernest Cassel, was painted, her husband wrote to the artist declaring that the portrait “shows clearly that there is at least one artist of the twentieth century whose works can challenge the best productions of former times. The portraits by Van Dyck, Romney, Opie, Raeburn, Reynolds, Lely, Hoppner and Laurence [*sic*] in this house will welcome so distinguished an addition to their company.”⁶ An equal

FIG. 24 (LEFT)
Sir Joshua Reynolds
Captain Robert Orme, 1756
Oil on canvas, 240 × 147.3 cm
National Gallery, London

FIG. 25 (RIGHT)
Sir Thomas Lawrence
Pope Pius VII, 1819
Oil on canvas, 269.4 × 178.3 cm
The Royal Collection © 2004
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II





FIG. 26
Queen Alexandra, 1907
Oil on canvas
Private collection



FIG. 27
King Edward VII, 1907
Oil on canvas
Private collection

admiration was felt for the artist by the Duke of Portland, who made a direct comparison with Van Dyck and set up a de László Room at Welbeck Abbey, where there was already a famed collection of pictures.

Royal sitters, perhaps more than most, will almost certainly have expectations, and de László's introduction to British monarchy was not auspicious. Having recommended the artist to her mother Queen Victoria, the Empress Frederick of Germany instructed her secretary to write to de László in 1898 as follows:

"I beg to inform you that Her Majesty the Queen of England has expressed the wish to see some of your paintings I must tell you in confidence that Her Majesty is not very enthusiastic about modern art, especially when applied to portraits. Her Majesty likes correct drawing and clean colours as used, for example, by the painter

[Heinrich von] Angeli. Her Majesty has no feeling for the paintings of [Franz von] Lenbach."⁷ De László was not asked to paint Queen Victoria, but was commissioned to undertake a portrait of Field Marshal Sir George White, who had conducted the defence of Ladysmith in 1899–1900. This did finally meet with royal approval, after an objection was raised about the format. However, de László had greater success with the next generation, beginning in 1907 with portraits of Edward VII and Queen Alexandra (figs. 26, 27), and of their second daughter Princess Victoria (now in the National Portrait Gallery). A commission for a portrait of Princess Andrew of Greece (cat. 36), also of 1907, followed, but her husband, Prince Andrew (cat. 37), was not painted until 1913. The contrast between these two figures is marked and typifies other such pairings in the artist's oeuvre. While Prince Andrew is a dignified, reflective figure

silhouetted against a sombre background evoking Dutch seventeenth-century portraiture, Princess Andrew exudes a charm and allure redolent of the French or British eighteenth-century schools.

A decade later, in 1925, de László painted the Duchess of York, later Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother (cat. 98), in three-quarters length swathed in a blue stole with pearls. The position of the figure on the canvas, the direct gaze of the sitter, the angle of the shoulders and the play of the hands makes a fine, adroit composition. Sir Peter Lely used this format to similarly good effect and it is possible that the artist recalled Lely's winning images of the 'Windsor Beauties' painted for Anne Hyde, Duchess of York, ca. 1662–5 (fig. 28). The success of this portrait led to the commission for a pair of portraits of the sitter's parents, the Earl and Countess of Strathmore (cat. 120, 121). These are both good examples of de László's habit of bringing a portrait to the requisite degree of finish without actually overpainting the whole canvas.

The degree to which de László exploited lack of finish as an artistic principle becomes apparent in his portrait of Queen Victoria's third son, Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Strathearn (fig. 29), who pursued a military career before becoming Governor-General of Canada. The Duke of Connaught and his wife Louise, Duchess of Connaught, were painted by John Singer Sargent in 1910 (fig. 30). Conceived as a pair at three-quarters length in subdued tones (perhaps inspired by Frans Hals), both sitters are imbued by Sargent with a suitable hauteur, but he clearly felt more at ease in rendering the silk/satin of the Duchess of Connaught's dress than with the Duke's uniform. The Duke of Connaught is presented as a reserved figure with whatever aspects of personality he might have had masked by the cramping crispness of his uniform which has been so acutely observed by Sargent. On the other hand, de László, in what turned out to be one of his last portraits, created a pyramidal composition firmly anchoring the Duke of Connaught in the picture space with the blue of the robe of the Order of the Garter. The robe is treated functionally and not descriptively, so that the viewer concentrates on the head, which is seen slightly from below. The Duke's personality is no longer suppressed and he is revealed as alert, humorous and approachable, even playful – everyone's favourite uncle. De László has in fact treated the head as sculpture and his brush moves in and out of the concavities of the face like the incoming tide filling rock pools. The portrait is a perfect example of how an artist can reveal so much through a calculated process of understatement.

By contrast, the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II when Princess Elizabeth of York (cat. 124) is heavily worked. This was painted in 1933, when the sitter was seven. The artist found her "intelligent and full of character", but "very sleepy and restless" at the second sitting,



FIG. 28
Sir Peter Lely, *Frances Stuart, Duchess of Richmond*, ca. 1662–65
Oil on canvas, 125.8 × 102.7 cm
The Royal Collection © 2003
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

after having been to Queen Mary's birthday luncheon party.⁸ The results, however, are the quintessence of girlhood – a confection of soft powder-blues set in a fresh, verdant landscape. Positioned right in the front of the picture space, as though tilting slightly forward in the gold-backed chair, and holding a small basket of flowers to add variety of colour, this image, if expressed in allegorical terms, would be entitled *Innocence*. It is a portrait conceived in the tradition of Reynolds's *Lady Caroline Howard* (National Gallery of Art, Washington) or Lawrence's *Miss Julia Peel* (fig. 31), the elder daughter of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel. However, silhouetted in the background of Princess Elizabeth's portrait is a reference (albeit summarily painted) to her royal status, for in the distance on the right, raised on its pedestal, is depicted the bronze equestrian figure of George III by Sir Richard Westmacott.





OPPOSITE LEFT FIG. 29 Prince Arthur, Field Marshal the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, 1937
Oil on canvas, 99.7 × 74.9 cm, The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London

ABOVE FIG. 30 John Singer Sargent, Prince Arthur, Field Marshal the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, 1908
Oil on canvas, 163.8 × 110.2 cm
The Royal Collection © 2004 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

RIGHT FIG. 31 Sir Thomas Lawrence, Miss Julia Beatrice Peel, 1828
Oil on canvas, 142.1 × 111.7 cm, private collection, Canada (courtesy Christie's)



De László's success as a painter of royalty lies in his skill in breaking down the barrier between formality and informality adhered to in earlier centuries. By using more relaxed and unusual poses matched by a spontaneity of brushwork and different degrees of finish de László was able to penetrate the veneer that so often occluded royal portraiture. In so far as the ruling families of Europe were in themselves becoming more closely integrated with society de László's strategies as an artist account for his considerable success as a painter.

NOTES

1. A.L. Baldry, 'Recent Portraits by Mr. P. A. de László', *The Studio*, LXVIII, 1916, p. 145.
2. D.E. Williams, *The Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence, K^c*, II, London 1831, p. 153; letter to Joseph Farington, 19 May 1819.
3. O. Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter. The Authorized Life of Philip de László*, London 1939, p. 187.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90. 5. *Ibid.*, p. 299. 6. *Ibid.*, p. 390. 7. *Ibid.*, pp. 165–66. 8. *Ibid.*, p. 374.