

Philip de László

in England

Christopher Wood

By 1907, Philip de László was thirty-eight years old, and had conquered Europe. Now he was to conquer England and America. His move to London in 1907 was for him a new artistic and social challenge; yet again, it was to prove a spectacular success, although not without its setbacks. Over the next thirty years, until his death in 1937, he was to become England's leading portrait painter. At the same time he maintained and consolidated his reputation in Europe, and built up a remarkable clientèle in America, painting four Presidents and many distinguished citizens.

In 1907 Sargent decided to give up portrait painting, and, as Richard Ormond demonstrates in his essay (pp. 41–49), de László literally stepped into Sargent's shoes, painting many of the same sitters. But de László's motives for coming to London were largely personal. His English wife Lucy wanted to come home, and to bring up their children in England. By 1907 they had three sons, Henry, born in 1901, Stephen, born in 1904, and Paul, born in 1906. A girl, Eva, was born in 1903, but died in the same year. In England, they were to have two more sons, Patrick, born in 1909, and John, born in 1912.

De László began writing the story of his life in 1917, but by the time of his sudden death in 1937 he had not finished it. His account was then used by his friend and biographer, Owen Rutter, as the basis of his book on de László, published in 1939. Rutter quoted at length from de László's writings, which are the basis for most of our knowledge of his career. He also left a huge archive of letters and memorabilia, hitherto largely untouched, but now used by Suzanne Bailey as the basis of her article in this catalogue (see pp. 51–64). We

know from Rutter that de László was already a great admirer of England before he came here. He appreciated England's history, and its democratic traditions. He particularly appreciated its great tradition of portrait painting, and wanted to be part of it. He also knew of England's traditional hospitality towards foreign artists, from Holbein and Van Dyck, through to Lely and Kneller, and on to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In de László's lifetime, such artists as Tissot, Whistler, Sargent, Alma-Tadema and Herkomer had all settled successfully in England; so had the sculptor Joseph Edgar Boehm, a fellow Hungarian. "All this," wrote de László, "led me to feel that here indeed I could make my life, in this home of the art to which I was devoted, and that I might aspire to become a link, however humble, in the great chain of foreign artists who had been received and treated by England as her own sons."¹

Before 1907, de László had already painted several English sitters, including Lord Stanley, Lord O'Neill and Sir George White. In 1904, two of his finest early portraits, of *Pope Leo XIII* (cat. 18) and of *Cardinal Rampolla* (cat. 19), had been shown at the International Society of Arts exhibition. To launch his career in England, de László decided to hold an exhibition in London, which was held at the Fine Art Society in May 1907. It contained fifty pictures, of both European and English sitters, including the Duke and Duchess of Teck, the Grand Duke and Duchess of Hesse (whom he had just painted in Darmstadt), the King of Portugal and Princess Louise of Battenberg. *Pope Leo XIII* and *Cardinal Rampolla* were shown again, and a charming early picture of a girl, *Daniela Grunelius*, plus a few family pictures. It was an impressive collection, and a typical de László mixture.

Count Mensdorff, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador, was a friend of de László, and an extremely popular figure in London society. He agreed to open the exhibition, and also ensured that it would be attended by the rich, the royal and the fashionable. On 7 June the exhibition was visited by King Edward VII and Queen

FIG. 10

Miss Irene Hirst, later the Hon. Mrs Rose, 1921
Oil on canvas, 129.5 × 104.1 cm
Private collection

Alexandra. On the very same day, de László was commanded by the King and Queen to come to Buckingham Palace and paint their daughter, Princess Victoria. He got there by 2.30 pm, and began the portrait at 3.00. Thus on that day de László's career in England was well and truly launched. This commission led to his painting both the King and the Queen (figs. 26, 27, p. 36). He painted King Edward VII in civilian dress, and found him an impatient sitter. His main concern was his necktie: "Please notice that it is not a ready-made tie," he said to the artist, "I arrange it myself, so see that you make that plain in the picture, for no gentleman wears a ready-made tie." The result was not one of de László's best works, as he was only allowed three short sittings. But he was to find many other better sitters in the English royal family over the next thirty years.

The reviews of the Fine Art Society exhibition were mixed, as one might expect, but all of them acknowledged his extraordinary technical skill in depicting grand and interesting sitters in a relaxed and informal way. *The Studio* commented in particular on his success "in catching the special fascination of women", always to be one of de László's strong points (fig. 10). Both *The Observer* and *The Sketch* referred to him as "the Hungarian Sargent", but *The Academy*, edited by the contentious and quarrelsome Lord Alfred Douglas, compared him unfavourably to Sargent. Douglas also pointed out that "as a portrait painter he had several equals and a few superiors in our country". Douglas does not name any names, but is clearly referring to such Edwardian painters as John Lavery, William Orpen, Frank Dicksee or Glyn Philpot.

De László was not a man to be deterred by criticism, and the Fine Art Society exhibition resulted not only in royal commissions, but in other important contacts. Arthur Lee M.P. (later Lord Lee of Fareham) became both a friend and patron (see cat. 88), introducing him to numerous clients, including James Lowther, Speaker of the House of Commons (cat. 38). It was Lee who commissioned de László to go to Washington and paint President Theodore Roosevelt (fig. 11). In March 1908, de László and his wife made the first of their five trips to the United States. He painted not only Roosevelt but several other important American sitters, including Andrew Mellon and George Eastman, who later gave him a ciné camera, of which he became an enthusiastic amateur. His American portraits were shown at Knoedler's in New York, and the critics praised his portrait of Roosevelt as the best of him ever painted – better even than Sargent's. So de László returned well pleased from his American trip, and £2,000 the richer.

Back in England, de László's life was to settle into the pattern he was to follow for the rest of his life – a busy and successful career in London, punctuated by regular trips to Europe and America. In 1908, the de László family moved to a new house in Kensington, 3 Palace Gate. It had no studio, but de László found one within walking

distance, on Campden Hill. He was to remain in Kensington until 1921, when he made his final move to a large house and studio in Hampstead, at 3 Fitzjohn's Avenue. Like Alma-Tadema, who died in 1912, de László was quickly accepted into the London art world. The landscape painter Alfred East (cat. 34) became a close friend, and introduced him to many other artists. He became an Honorary member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, and a member of the Arts Club in Dover Street. Although he never became an R.A., de László was popular, and very much part of the London art scene. He did not belong to the inner establishment, but he did not need to.

The years leading up to the First World War were to be tremendously busy and fruitful for de László, in England, Europe and America. The First World War was to lead, however, to the biggest setback of his career. The golden years of the Edwardian age had given no inkling of this. He was painting the royal family, and this royal cachet meant that many of the great families of the aristocracy wanted his services, too. Among his most loyal and faithful clients were the families of the Dukes of Portland, Devonshire, Wellington and Northumberland, who all commissioned numerous pictures over many years. Other families for whom he painted many portraits included those of Aberconway, Selborne, Londonderry, Brocket, Bowlby, Harmsworth, Schröder (cat. 39, 73), Cazalet, Chamberlain (cat. 89, 90), Cromer, Croft, d'Erlanger (cat. 27), Devonport (cat. 61), Haldane, Lansdowne, Minto, Stanley, Trouton (cat. 47, 66) and Verulam. He was also particularly popular in Scotland, painting the Strathmore (cat. 120, 121), Mansfield, Balfour, Airlie (cat. 127), Buchanan (cat. 119), Elphinstone (cat. 101) and Graham (cat. 103) families. In addition to the aristocracy, de László painted many of the famous personalities of the day, including politicians, soldiers, scientists, writers, and actresses. Before the First War, his sitters included Field Marshal Byng (cat. 118), Mrs Asquith, Arthur Balfour (fig. 23, p. 33), Lord Roberts (also painted by Sargent; figs. 35, 36, p. 45), Admiral Beatty (fig. 12), Lord Curzon (cat. 54), Vita Sackville-West (cat. 44) and Elinor Glyn (cat. 55) – this last commissioned by Lord Curzon, who thought the picture "a masterpiece of modern times".

In Europe, de László's career also went from strength to strength. In 1908 he went to Berlin to paint the Emperor William II, the Empress, the Crown Prince and the Princess Victoria Louise. The Princess said of the portrait of the Emperor, a half length, in a fur collar (fig. 64, p. 105), "*Endlich der Papa und nicht der Kaiser*" (At last my father, not the Emperor). The Emperor was so delighted that he commissioned de László to come back in 1909 to paint a full-length portrait of him with a black charger and borzoi dog (cat. 40). In 1910 de László went to Madrid to paint the King of Spain, the Queen and the Queen Mother. In 1910 the Uffizi asked him to present a self-portrait. (Holman Hunt had done the same three years earlier.) In Paris he had many famous sitters, including the Comtesse de



FIG. 11
 President Theodore Roosevelt, 1908
 Oil on canvas, 160 × 124.5 cm
 The American Museum of Natural History, New York

Noailles, the Comtesse Greffuhle (the original for Proust's Duchesse de Guermantes), Robert de Montesquiou, and numerous members of the de Gramont family (cat. 29). He also travelled to Athens to paint the Greek royal family (cat. 58–60). In 1912, the Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, Francis Joseph, conferred on de László the hereditary title of de Lombos. Henceforward, he was able to sign himself de László. It was the summit of his extraordinary career. But nemesis was in waiting, just around the corner.

It was the First World War which led to the first and only setback of de László's career. Just before the outbreak of war, de László was granted naturalization as a British citizen. His sponsors were Lord Devonport, Arthur Balfour, Arthur Lee and Howard Guinness, his



FIG. 12
 Rear Admiral David Beatty, 1911
 Oil on board, 79 × 63.4 cm (31 × 25 in.)
 Private collection

brother-in-law. Though he had thought of seeking it sooner, the timing was unfortunate, as Hungary entered the war on the German side. As a result, de László was attacked in the Hungarian press, and his money in Austria seized. It also meant that he fell under suspicion in England, which was to intensify as the war progressed. Despite his giving generously to the Red Cross auctions and other war charities, his pictures began to be refused at exhibitions. Desperate to keep in touch with his family in Budapest, and to continue supporting them, he sent money to them via friends in Holland and Spain. Although innocent enough, these letters were intercepted, and in 1917 de László had to appear before Sir Charles Matthews, the Director of Public Prosecutions, who gave him a

warning. Not long after this, de László unwisely gave £1 to a Hungarian internee who came to his house, begging for help. He later reported this, but as a result he was arrested, and confined in Brixton Prison. Paranoia about foreigners had become intense by this stage of the war, and de László was denounced by the newspapers owned by Lord Northcliffe, whom he had painted in 1909. After a trial, at which many loyal friends and patrons spoke up for him, he was moved to Holloway Internment Camp, and finally released only in 1918. His experiences led to a nervous breakdown, and he ended the war, still confined, in a nursing home. He consoled himself at this time painting many charming studies of his wife and children (cat. 74–87). He was able to recuperate at the country house of his lawyer and friend Sir Charles Russell. However, it was not until 1919, after a further trial, that he was exonerated and his naturalization re-confirmed.

This ordeal left its mark on de László, but, being a man of resolve, he threw himself back into his work with frenetic energy. His capacity for work was prodigious: he could often see three sitters each day, and is estimated to have painted over 5,000 portraits by the time of his death. He simply wore himself out with overwork. Even after the war he was still attacked by *John Bull* magazine, edited by the odious Horatio Bottomley, but soon his clientèle began to build up again. By 1923, he was ready for his first exhibition since the war, at the French Gallery in Pall Mall. In 1925 he was received at court by King George V and Queen Mary, thus marking his official re-acceptance into royal circles, and English society. In 1930, he became President of the Royal Society of British Artists, in succession to Walter Sickert. The pattern of his life resumed, but with one important change: he began to take holidays – to Egypt, North Africa, Italy and the South of France. On these trips he was able for the first time to develop his considerable talents as a landscape painter. The oil sketches made on these trips, which mostly still belong to his family (cat. 105–9, 112–5), will come as a revelation to those who think of de László only as a portrait painter.

De László was painting right up to the end, with no visible decline in his powers. The 1920s and 1930s were hugely busy for him, with royalty, aristocrats and famous personalities still knocking on his door. Perhaps no portrait painter has painted such an extraordinary range of famous people. In 1923 he went to Rome to paint Mussolini, of whom he was a great admirer. In 1929 he was in Egypt painting King Fouad (fig. 83, p. 176) and his son Prince Farouk. He then took a trip up the Nile, where he painted some of his best oil sketches of landscapes and buildings (cat. 112–5). The list of his famous sitters at this period is astonishing: Montagu Norman, Lloyd George, Lord Inchcape, Queen Marie of Roumania (cat. 128), the Duchess of York, later Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (cat. 98), Admiral Horthy (cat. 109), Sir Flinders Petrie, Princess Marina (cat. 126), Prince

Chichibu of Japan, Anny Ahlers (cat. 123), Gwen Frangcon-Davies (cat. 125), Philip Sassoon (fig. 13), Gladys Cooper – the list goes on and on. Certainly Sargent never painted such a range of sitters as this. In this respect the only artist with whom de László can be compared is Franz Xaver Winterhalter, who also painted all the crowned heads of Europe.

But the comparison ends there: Winterhalter's range was much narrower, and he never settled permanently in England. At this point, it seems a good moment to look at de László's style and technique. Like Alma-Tadema, de László came to London in his late thirties, when his style and his reputation were already firmly established. His training had been entirely European – he studied in Budapest, Munich and Paris, and spent several years living in Vienna. De László's style emanates from mid-Europe, although living in England had a definite influence on his later work. De László certainly admired the Hungarian artist Gyula Benczúr, who was twenty-five years older than him, and enjoyed considerable success as portrait painter to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. We also know of de László's admiration for the German painter Franz von Lenbach, although he deplored his use of photographs. The influence of both these artists is detectible in de László's work, but he was also much influenced by the Old Masters, in particular Titian and Velázquez. His list of paintings he most admired is revealing – Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, Frans Hals's portrait of himself and his wife, Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X*, Dagnan-Bouveret's *Country Wedding*, Reynolds's *Nelly O'Brien*.² This is an eclectic list, to say the least, with Dagnan-Bouveret perhaps the most surprising name there. The artists whose influence can most obviously be seen in de László's work are Velázquez, Hals and Reynolds. Van Dyck, surprisingly, does not get a mention. De László certainly took many of his repertoire of poses from Old Masters.

De László's early portraits such as *Pope Leo XII* (cat. 18) and *Cardinal Rampolla* (cat. 19) are painted with tight brushwork and polished colours, and look decidedly European, and of their time. By the time de László came to England in 1907, a complete transformation had taken place. His style had become bolder, his technique looser, his brushstrokes broader. From being a mid-European painter to the Austro-Hungarian Empire he had suddenly developed into an Edwardian painter in the international style. So whence did this new stylistic panache come? In his memoirs de László makes reference to the Old Masters, Velázquez and Reynolds in particular. But in Paris, and in London, he must also have become aware of the work of John Singer Sargent, Giovanni Boldini and the Impressionists. It is much more likely that their influence, and their success, propelled him along the same path, to become one of the masters of the broad brush. It was a style that had its followers all over Europe, from Sorolla in Spain to Serov in Russia. It remained the dominant high

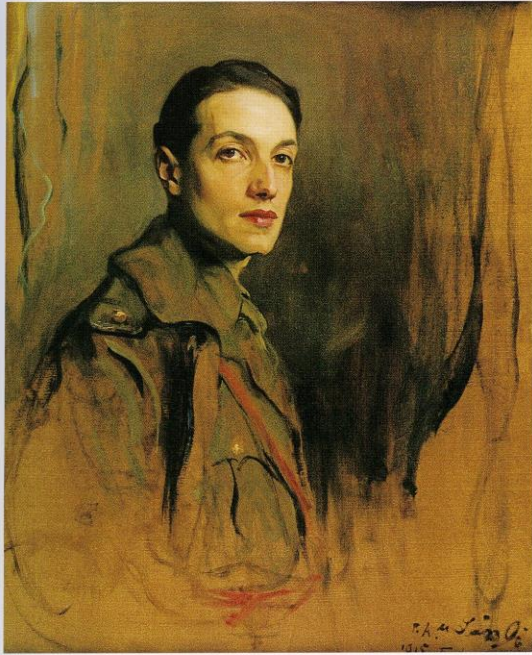


FIG. 13
 Sir Philip Sassoon, 3rd Bt, 1915
 Oil on canvas, 88.9 × 71.2 cm
 Private collection

style for fashionable portrait painting from the 1880s up to the First World War, and beyond. De László was to carry it on nearly up to the Second World War. At its best, it was a style brilliantly suited to portrait painting, and produced what are arguably some of the most striking portraits of all time.

In his early period, de László made figurative drawings and studies for his pictures, in the approved academic style of the day. Examples of these studies, for *The Hofbrauhaus* (cat. 8) and *Felicián Zách* (cat. 15), show what a highly accomplished draughtsman he was. But, as his portrait style developed, and his facility as a painter increased, he used preparatory drawings less and less, preferring to work directly on the canvas, usually in monochrome, then in colour, picking first on some salient feature, such as eyes, or nose, and then working

outwards and downwards to details of dress and background. It was a technique which demanded incredible sureness of touch. Often de László would discard one or two sketches, and then start again. But when it worked, the resulting portrait would have an immediacy and spontaneity that more laboured portraits could never have. "I draw with my brush, and all my painting is drawing," he wrote.³

Before the First World War, de László taught briefly at an art school, The London and New Art School. He gave his services for free, as he liked encouraging younger painters. He would not allow preliminary drawing on the canvas, and insisted that his pupils work only with oil, first monochrome, then colour. "More luminous, more luminous," he would say.⁴ In 1934, de László published a book, *How to Paint a Portrait*, using the Welsh actress Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as a model (cat. 125). Here de László explained his methods. Working on a blank canvas, already in its frame, he would start with three lines of the brush to indicate the angles of the eyes, nose and mouth; this was the foundation of the whole design. Then he would paint the shape of the head, but only by means of light and shade. Often he used a mirror. It was a technique that required extraordinary dexterity, and great powers of concentration. Usually he would work for three hours at a time without a break.

Like Sargent, de László did occasionally make portrait drawings, using pencil and black or coloured chalks, such as *The Duchess of Portland* (cat. 49), *Miss Diana Chamberlain* (cat. 90) or *Major-General Sir John Hanbury Williams* (fig. 14). He also made many charming drawings of children, such as *Robin Vane-Tempest-Stewart* as a page (cat. 50), and even made a drawing of his golf professional (cat. 69).

De László's technique naturally lent itself to the portrait sketch, of which he was an absolute master. Whether painting a simple head or a head and shoulders, de László would rapidly complete the face and head, and then deliberately leave the rest of the canvas blank. Often a flurry of brush strokes would spill out in all directions, giving the impression that de László had literally just stopped and put down his brushes, in mid-session. This technique can be seen in many portraits, such as *James Lowther* (cat. 38), *Baron Sir Rudolph Slatin Pasha* (cat. 110), *Lord Louis Mountbatten* (cat. 94), or in the study of two Sikh officers (cat. 70). These have a freshness and spontaneity that many have admired more than his finished portraits. The backgrounds are often a distinctive buff colour and de László was fond of greeny-blue colours, which make them instantly recognizable. De László's range of colours is highly distinctive, and quite different from those of any of his other contemporaries; they are probably a legacy of his mid-European background.

Inevitably, the majority of de László's sitters were women, and it is as a painter of women he will be chiefly remembered. Nearly all his male sitters, be they kings, emperors, dukes or commoners, wanted him to paint their wives, their daughters and their little children. This

is in no way to disparage the quality of de László's portraits of men, which were certainly just as good. But de László obviously responded to the attractions of beautiful, fascinating and stylish women, and he enjoyed painting them. As both Richard Ormond and Christopher Lloyd here point out, de László made queens and princesses look both regal and natural, interesting and modern, all at the same time. He re-invented royalty for the twentieth century. His picture of the beautiful and tragic Queen Marie of Roumania is a classic example of this (cat. 128). And he did just the same for his other sitters. However grand, distinguished or beautiful they were, de László could make them look interesting, make them come alive. That was what his sitters called "László's magic".⁵

De László liked his sitters to talk during sittings, so that their expressions and positions might look as lively and natural as possible. De László himself was an ebullient and entertaining character. To a particularly beautiful lady, he would say, "What an ugly girl you are".⁶ Rutter wrote that de László rarely painted a sitter without making a friend, whereas Sargent rarely painted a sitter without making an enemy,⁷ which is perhaps being unfair to Sargent. But it is certainly true of de László, and is confirmed by the many letters from sitters in the family archive.

De László was at his best painting a full-length portrait of a beautiful and elegant woman, such as Mrs George Owen Sandys of 1915 (cat. 64) or Mrs. Archie Graham of 1917 (cat. 71). These are both conventional Edwardian portraits, but with a distinctly stylish European chic. De László could be more daring on occasion, as in the extraordinary Viscountess Castlereagh of 1913 (cat. 57), represented full-length in a ballgown, in a moorland landscape, holding her pet lurcher, a dog at that time still largely associated with poaching. Later he was to paint her in uniform, with a restraint more suited to wartime (cat. 56). *Lady Alastair Graham* (cat. 103) he turns into an Italianate Madonna, in profile, holding lilies. *Vita Sackville-West* (cat. 44), in her large black hat, looks more like a Frans Hals. With Mrs. Edmund Buchanan (cat. 119) of 1929, a marvellously lively and animated portrait, we are instantly in the world of the 1920s, flappers and Bright Young Things. De László could move with the times, and his portraits of the 1920s and 1930s are as vivid a record of that unhappy era as one could wish. If a grand sitter wanted to look regal, then de László could oblige, as he did for *The Duchess of Northumberland* (cat. 138) in her robes for the Coronation of 1937. De László responded better to the charms of a beautiful actress or writer, as demonstrated by the mysterious, iconic portrait of the sensational novelist *Elinor Glyn* (cat. 55), commissioned by her admirer Lord Curzon. Another admirer or 'protector', as the phrase went, paid for the portrait of the beautiful German actress *Anny Ahlers* (cat. 123), who was to die tragically before her portrait was finished, making the liveliness and animation of the picture even more poignant.

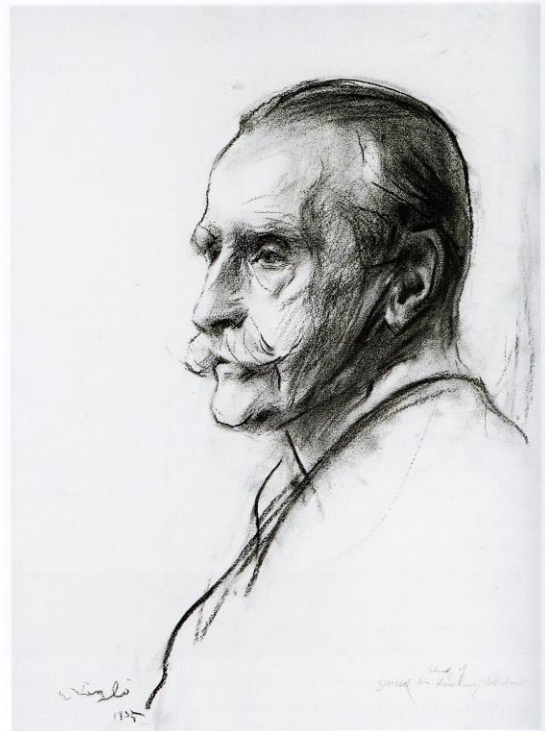


FIG. 14
Major General Sir John Hanbury-Williams, 1935
Charcoal on paper, 54 × 38.1 cm
Untraced

De László could also be extremely good at painting older women. His portrait of *Mabell, Countess of Airlie* (cat. 127) is marvellously aristocratic as well as sympathetic, and the redoubtable *Lady Wantage* (cat. 46) was greatly admired when shown at the Royal Academy in 1911. Many of de László's royal sitters were older women, and these could be some of his more sensitive and penetrating portraits, such as the wonderful *Queen Mother Maria Cristina of Spain* of 1910, or *The Queen Mother Olga of Greece* (cat. 58). Equally serious, and sensitive, is the portrait of a female academic, *Elizabeth Guinness* (cat. 45), the Vice-Principal of Holloway College, and a relation of de László's wife.

One of the many popular misconceptions of de László is that he was only a painter of smart society women. It is one of the aims of the exhibition this book accompanies to demonstrate that he was also an extremely good painter of men. If called upon to depict a major public figure in official robes, de László could certainly rise to the occasion. He was particularly good at painting clerics. Before coming to England, he had already painted *Pope Leo XIII* (cat. 18), *Cardinal Rampolla* (cat. 19) and *The Archimandrite Gregorius*.⁸ In England he was to paint two Archbishops of Canterbury, *Randall Davidson* in 1926 (fig. 34, p. 44) and *Cosmo Gordon Lang* in 1932 (cat. 122). These are arguably two of the best clerical portraits ever painted in England, even though de László makes them look more like Catholic cardinals than leaders of the Anglican Church. Indeed Randall Davidson, a retiring and modest Scotsman, was astonished to find himself depicted with a grandeur worthy of Titian or Velázquez.⁹

As a painter to most of the kings and emperors of Europe, de László found no difficulty in painting grand sitters in their robes of office. For his close friend and supporter *Lord Devonport* (cat. 61) he pulled out all the stops: the very picture of senatorial splendour, he stands in robes of a Privy Councillor by a classical column. Devonport not only loyally supported de László during his troubles during the Great War, but also commissioned other portraits from him, of Lloyd George and of Field Marshal Lord Roberts. De László greatly admired Reynolds's famous portrait of *Lord Heathfield*, the hero of the siege of Gibraltar. This is evident in de László's grand portraits of famous men, many of which are now rarely seen, because they hang in colleges and institutions. Hopefully, they will come to light in the future, and demonstrate that de László was the last great European painter in the grand manner. One grateful client, Wilfrid Ashley, wrote to de László, "The portraits by Van Dyck, Romney, Opie, Raeburn, Reynolds, Lely, Hoppner and Lawrence in this house will welcome so distinguished an addition to their company".¹⁰

Inevitably, de László was called on to paint a great many generals, admirals and other servicemen who served and, in many cases, died in the First World War. At their best, his portraits of high-ranking officers are commandingly stern and powerful, but also full of character. A good example is *Field Marshal Lord Byng of Vimy* (cat. 118); equally strong, if smaller, is *The Earl of Albemarle* (cat. 67). *Lieutenant Desmond Trouton* (cat. 66), who died at Passchendaele in 1917, is one of de László's many moving tributes to the doomed youth of that generation. As well as painting admirals and other naval officers, including Beatty (fig. 12, p. 23) and the Mountbattens (cat. 43, 94), de László was summoned back to Budapest twice to paint *Admiral Horthy* (cat. 109), the Regent of Hungary in 1927 and 1935.

In his half and three-quarter lengths, de László was more able to concentrate on the sitter's personality rather than on the trappings of

office. The steely gaze of *Lord Curzon* (cat. 54) and *Sir Austen Chamberlain* (cat. 89) make it clear that these men wished to be remembered for their powerful intellects as well as the appointments they may have held. De László was also particularly good at academics: his portraits of *Sir Ernest Rutherford* (cat. 99), *Dr Alfred Haddon* (cat. 100) and *Sir Flinders Petrie* are among the best of his male portraits. Inevitably, he painted the art world, too; his portrait of *Sir Alfred East* (cat. 34), the landscape painter, is particularly sympathetic. Painting the bearded art critic and historian Alfred Lys Baldry, a great supporter and friend, he put him in robes and made him look like a figure from the Renaissance (cat. 81). His portrait of the art dealer *William Lockett Agnew* (cat. 53) is both penetrating and sympathetic, and very like a Sargent. It was said of Sargent that the Edwardians did not realise how rich they were until he painted them. De László, too, painted many successful bankers, financiers and newspaper proprietors. *Baron Bruno von Schröder* (cat. 73) looks every inch the prosperous financier. *Lord Joicey* (cat. 116), on the other hand, looks more like a distinguished professor than a great coal owner.

De László was often asked to paint the children of his earlier sitters. For the Schröders, he painted their daughters Marga and Dorothee (cat. 39) and for the Troutons a delightful study of their daughter Olive (cat. 47) à la Gainsborough. For the Rallis he painted their two children Godfrey and Diana (cat. 91) with a Pekinese. For the Elphinstones, he painted a particularly delightful picture of their son Andrew (cat. 101), wearing a kilt and holding a bow. Many of de László's most charming pictures of children are of his own sons. As these have all remained in the de László family, they will feature as one of the delights of the exhibition. I would single out *Top of the Morning* (cat. 76), of his son Stephen, and one of his youngest son John with a goldfish bowl (cat. 79) as two of the best. De László also frequently painted his wife Lucy, both on her own and in family groups. These are some of his most delightful and appealing portraits, particularly one in which she looks in a mirror (cat. 77). Some of the portraits of Lucy and of her unmarried sister, Eva (fig. 15), particularly reflect the influence of Gainsborough on de László's style in the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹ De László would certainly have seen the exhibition of *English Conversation Pieces* mounted by that arbiter of taste, Philip Sassoon, in 1930 at his house in Park Lane, which helped to revive the reputation of Zoffany.

Another revelation of the exhibition will be de László's landscape sketches, all of which have remained in the artist's family, unseen until the present day. His landscapes painted in France, Italy and England, usually done for relaxation when he was on holiday, combine brilliance of colour and observation with a confident, flowing technique. Some of his best oil studies of places were painted on the Nile and in Venice (cat. 105–8, 112–5). Like so many artists, Lavery included, de László was hugely taken with the Orient,



FIG. 15
Miss Eva F. Guinness, 1910
Oil on canvas, 39.5 × 32.4 cm
Private collection

painting not only landscapes (fig. 17) but also heads of Arabs (fig. 16), street and market scenes, even nudes (cat. 129). His *Orange Seller* (cat. 97), painted in Rome, is as good as anything Sargent or Sorolla could do. At home, de László even found time to paint flowers, still life and their pet dog, Chinky (cat. 131–7). He simply could not stop painting.

De László was working right up to the end. He lost none of his zest for life, or his enthusiasm for painting, even though he knew he had a weak heart. "Life is so glorious!" he exclaimed to his wife after

his first heart attack. Even in his last year, 1937, he painted numerous portraits (fig. 1, p. 8), including *The Duke of Portland in Garter Robes*, *Prince Chichibu of Japan*, *The Duchess of Northumberland* (cat. 138) in her court dress as *Mistress of the Robes*, and the *Duke of Connaught* (fig. 29, p. 38). On 22 November, just before an exhibition at Wildenstein's in aid of the Artists' General Benevolent Institution, he had another heart attack, and died. His last words were. "I know I am going to die But it is a pity, because there is still so much to do."

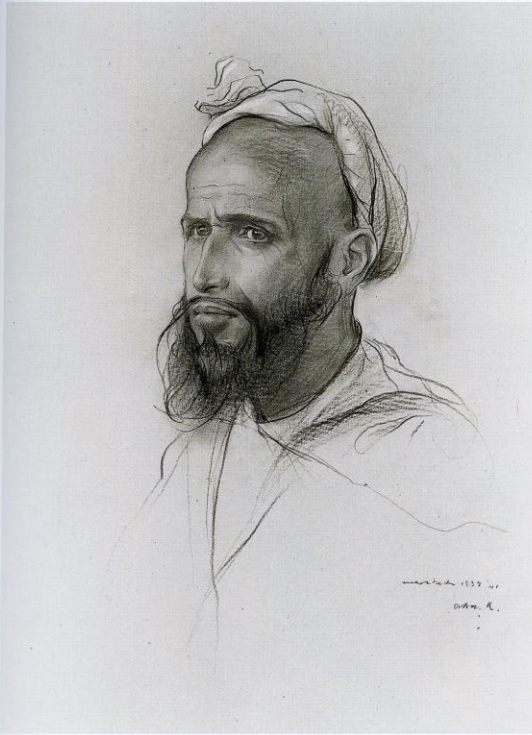


FIG. 16
An Arab, 1934
 Chalk on paper, 52.4 × 40.2 cm
 Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

De László wrote a great deal about his work, and about portrait painting, much of it faithfully recorded by Owen Rutter. Like any portrait painter who painted rich and famous people, he had to face a great deal of sarcastic and unpleasant criticism. Fortunately, he was resilient enough to shake it off. And there were critics who praised him. One of the most perceptive articles appeared in *The Studio* magazine as early as 1901, before he settled in England. The writer, Anthony Tahi, credited de László with all the gifts needed by a portrait painter – “charming conception, harmonious colouring, sureness of drawing, intense expression, and sound technique”. He also put his finger on de László’s greatest strength, his ability to make

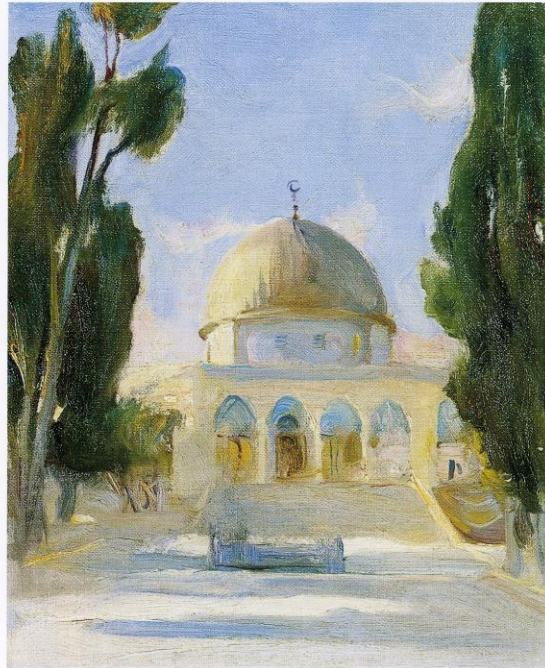


FIG. 17
The Dome of the Rock, Temple Mount, Jerusalem, 1936
 Oil on canvasboard, 39.4 × 32.39 cm
 Private collection

his sitters look relaxed, animated and natural. “He insists that the eye should not seem to be *painted*, but should actually *see*; that the lips should not be painted and drawn but really exist on the canvas. Thus it comes about that there is a certain charm in all László’s portraits ... Everyone has some good point in his face, if it can only be discovered, be he prince or peasant.”

NOTES

1. Owen Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter, The Authorised Life of Philip de László*, London 1939, p. 233.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 381. 3. *Ibid.*, p. 383. 4. *Ibid.*, p. 280. 5. *Ibid.*, p. 390. 6. *Ibid.*, p. 394.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 366. 8. *Ibid.*, p. 144. 9. *Ibid.*, p. 362. 10. *Ibid.*, p. 390. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 320.