

Stop and Look – Cardinal Mariano Rampolla by Philip Alexius de László

Andrew Wilton October 30, 2021



Portrait of Cardinal Mariano Rampolla by Philip de László

De László's rise from an obscure background in Budapest to a position as the most successful portrait painter in Europe is one of the fairy-tale stories of art history. By the time he was thirty he had painted half the royalty of Europe and large swathes of the aristocracy. He went on to marry a British woman, of the Guinness family, and become a naturalised British citizen. He painted the present Queen as a little girl. By the time of his death just before the Second World War he had also bagged several Presidents, and notables in both Americas.

His reputation as a supremely accomplished 'society' portrait painter belies the range of his output. His early subject matter included large-scale history paintings and rustic scenes, tender celebrations of Hungarian life at every level of the population. In 1900 he made portraits of the German Imperial family, and went to Rome to create a likeness of the Pope, Leo XIII. It impressed the sitter himself as a penetrating insight into a wise but frail old man, and de László went on to paint his Secretary of State, Cardinal Rampolla. Both portraits were commissioned to enter the Hungarian national collection in Budapest. (The inscription on this picture reminds us that 1900 was a jubilee year for the Roman Catholic Church.)

Apart from his extraordinary technical facility, de László brought to these commissions both originality of conception and a profound understanding of the art-historical precedents that inevitably crowd round any artist engaged in such work. A great deal of formal portraiture is a subtle balance

between the expectations of the society that wants it – recognisability, dignity, a flattering likeness, and so on – and the original input of the painter, who must make his own statement while at the same time presenting another personality in the round. The criticism can be levelled at a lot of ‘modern’ portraits that they are more about the artist than the sitter. De László never obtruded his own identity in an obvious way, but his pictures are ‘signed’ by his fluent brushwork and inventive compositions.

This is one of his most remarkable inventions: a portrait that penetrates remorselessly into the character of a powerful man, and makes no attempt to disguise his awareness of that power. Velázquez’s famous portrait of Innocent X in the Doria Pamphilj collection in Rome is an obvious inspiration – yet de László goes out of his way to avoid copying any features of that work: he achieves something comparable by his own means: acute observation and unaffected directness of presentation.

The result is a portrait of almost shocking power. It breaks no formal rules, in fact it’s deceptively simple in the frontal pose of the sitter and the full-face likeness. But that simplicity somehow alerts us to the hidden depths, the oddly occluded stare, the firm set of the mouth that refuses to hint at a smile. Rampolla earned the hostility of the Austrians when he refused Catholic burial to the royal suicide Crown Prince Rudolph in 1889. (That hostility was to cost him the Papacy.) Perhaps he is looking a little askance at the young Hungarian – a subject himself of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Would we feel at ease in the presence of this man? Despite that look, the precociously confident thirty-year-old de László seems to have been.