



Self portrait of the artist Philip Alexius de László, 1911. Bokor Zsuzsa & Katalin Feher © Hungarian National Gallery

PORTRAITIST OF PERFECTION

WORDS | ADRIAN HARVEY

Philip Alexius de László was an Hungarian painter born in Budapest in 1869, later naturalised British. He was known particularly for his portraits of royal and aristocratic personages, including many works related to Scotland. He painted prodigiously quickly with no studio assistants and in his lifetime completed several thousand paintings. The challenge now is for the de László catalogue raisonné team to record them all.



Left: Lady Rosemary Baring, 1925. John Pearson © de Laszlo Foundation. Main image: Miss Dorothea Carnegie. Born in 1906, she married Mungo David Malcolm Murray, 7th Earl of Mansfield in 1928. She died in 1985.



She looks down from the wall of the State Drawing Room of Scone Palace, in Perth. Dorothea Carnegie, wife of the 7th Earl of Mansfield, is seated leaning forward on a blue upholstered chair, and on her raised left arm sit two brightly coloured budgerigars. Dorothea looks directly at the viewer, the epitome of feminine beauty and grace. The portrait was painted in 1927 by the 58-year-old de László. Acclaimed worldwide, he had been at the top of his profession for nearly 30 years.

As a young man, he had been apprenticed to a photographer, working long hours and studying art part-time, eventually earning a place at the National Academy of Art in Budapest. He followed this with studies in Munich and Paris. In his youth de László



followed the fashion of his time and painted genre, history and symbolic rural scenes, such as 'Falling Leaves.' Amongst others, the catalogue raisonné team seeks one of his most celebrated early paintings, 'The Goose Girl' (1888), for which there is no visual record.

For his portrait of Pope Leo XIII, de László was awarded a Gold Medal at the Paris International Exhibition in 1900, the year he married Lucy Guinness, a member of the banking branch of the Guinness family.

In 1903 de László moved to Vienna and in 1907 to England. He remained London-based for the rest of his life while travelling the world to fulfil commissions and

consolidated his international reputation during the first decade of the 20th century. De László's Royal and Presidential patrons awarded him numerous honours and medals, and he was ennobled by Emperor Franz-Joseph in 1912.

For the sake of his family in England, he became a British citizen in 1914. His loyalty to his adopted country was unwavering. Indeed during the early years of the First World War he made many poignant portraits of young officers prior to their departures for the Front, charging far less than his usual fee and achieving brilliant likenesses in rapid time, all that these young men could spare. However in Autumn 1917 he was interned, on unproved suspicion of his being an enemy alien, until June 1919, when his name was cleared. His election as President of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in 1930 confirmed his full restitution in the art establishment.

Contemporary appreciation of his achievements is encapsulated in his patron Lord Selborne's question: "Has any one painter ever before painted so many interesting and historical personages?"

De László was particularly inspired by Scotland, and had many illustrious Scottish patrons and friends, who often made him welcome in their homes. He painted quite a number of views of its scenery despite a very busy schedule on each of his visits to paint the commissioned portraits. 'The Deerstalkers at Knoydart' is a fine

example of such, painted on the Invernessshire estate of the Bowlby family. Today there remain 33 of his portraits in Perthshire alone!

De László survived a heart attack in 1936 but despite his doctor's advice was unable to retire from his work, his life's passion. He was, after all, a perfectionist. The following year, however, he had another attack and died at his home in Hampstead. He left a devoted widow and five sons, all of whom followed successful careers, though none of them in painting.

1939 saw the publication of the book 'Portrait of a Painter: The Authorized Life of Philip de László' by Owen Rutter, based on the artist's copious biographical notes, but then the Second World War broke out. The Europe that de László depicted so elegantly was gone for ever and he fell into comparative obscurity, however undeserved. That was until the resounding success of the exhibition 'A Brush With Grandeur' held in London in Christie's Great Rooms in January 2004.

It is estimated that in his 50-year working life he produced more than 5,000 works in oil, the majority of which are portraits, mostly held in private collections. Thus far some 2,500 have been traced and recorded.

The de Laszlo Archive Trust was set up by his grandson Damon to research, catalogue, and administer the paintings and archive of de László. The Hon. Sandra de Laszlo, Damon's wife, started compiling the





De László was particularly inspired by Scotland, and had many illustrious Scottish patrons and friends.

catalogue raisonné some twenty years ago, and more than 400 illustrated picture descriptions are now available to view online on a dedicated website, launched in 2007. The catalogue raisonné is very much a work in progress, with entries being written and released as photography is achieved. The Archive Trust website also features many images of paintings where the sitter's identity or the whereabouts of the painting is unknown. It asks for the help of visitors for any information and also for their support for this important contribution to the history of European art.

The work continues from small busy offices in London and Vienna, assisted by volunteer and part-time editors worldwide, but funding is an ever increasing problem, as the Trust is only centrally supported by a

family charity with a fixed budget. Costs (especially for photography) are constantly increasing, with the average charge for professional photography of one picture at £200. With between 2,000 and 3,000 artworks remaining to record, the Trust is urgently seeking further sponsorship in order to complete the catalogue raisonné. www.delaszlocatalogueraisonne.com www.delaszloarchivetrust.com www.scone-palace.co.uk ■

Opposite page: Top left, *Falling Leaves*, 1895. Tibor Mester © Hungarian National Gallery. Top right, *Lieutenant James Robert Dundas McEwen*, 1915. © Antonia Reeve. Bottom: *Miss Christian Hilda Guthrie of Guthrie*, 1935. Roy Fox Fine Art Photography © de László Foundation. This page: Top, *The Deerstalkers*, Knoydart. © de László Foundation. Bottom: *A View near Dupplin, Scotland*, 1926. Roy Fox Fine Art Photography © de László Foundation.

