

LONDON CALLING

The Joy of Portraiture

By Paul Johnson from the July 2009 - August 2009 issue

Painting the human face and form, the most difficult and precious of the fine arts, reached its maturity in 15th-century Florence and 16th-century Venice. Thereafter it was elaborated and varied by a succession of great masters for 300 years, until in the late 19th century it went into sudden and irrational decline. The 20th century was a catastrophe for fine art, and at the beginning of the 21st we live in a wasteland dominated by the most brutal form of commercialism, ephemeral fashion, and cynical abuse of talent.

Many sensitive people, hungry for beauty, deplore the state of art but do not know what to do about it. But there are exceptions. One is Charles Cecil, an American painter who has gone back to Florence to make his contribution and, since 1991, has been running the Charles H. Cecil Studios there. The studios teach the best traditional methods of drawing and painting, specializing in portraiture. For nearly 20 years now he has been fighting a strenuous battle to teach the highest skills and is turning out a steady stream of young men and women who have absorbed his methods, share his enthusiasm, and are now making their living as practitioners. They and their successors will, I predict, eventually have a huge and cumulative impact on the art of the West.

Some express surprise that an American should come to the rescue of a stricken art that has always been regarded as a peculiarly European phenomenon. In fact it seems to me perfectly natural, for since the early 19th century Americans have been taking an increasingly important part in the development of fine-art painting. In some fields Americans have been supreme. In large-scale landscape painting, particularly of the sublime, Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt stand alongside Turner. Winslow Homer and Maurice Prendergast took over the leadership in watercolor from the fading English school, James McNeill Whistler ranged over the whole field with striking originality, Mary Cassatt achieved prodigious grace in depicting the woman and child, recalling Raphael, and John Singer Sargent made himself one of the world's greatest portrait painters. Indeed, since his death in 1925 there has been no comparable performer at the summit of fine art, and there is an increasing tendency to refer to him as the last of the great masters.

The art world is slowly coming to recognize the breadth, depth, and variety of America's contribution, and this has been reinforced by the publications of the Yale University Press, which is now not only the world's best art publisher, with its magnificent *catalogues raisonnées* of the masters, but also has given American artists a prominent place among them. Not least, its

monumental work on the entire output of Sargent, which has now reached its sixth large volume, has successfully established his position as a major figure by any standards.

Sargent has also played a dominant role in the art education of Charles Cecil, and in inspiring him to bring back the highest standards. Cecil studied art history at Yale and later did figure painting with Sargent's follower R. H. Ives Gammell, and with Gammell's best pupil Richard Lack. Cecil has no doubt whatever about the greatness and centrality of Sargent and the amount that can be learned from his works and methods. In particular Cecil believes that, in portraiture, the best way to produce accuracy and truth is by adopting the so-called sight-size procedure, as practiced by Sargent. Under this, the canvas was placed alongside the sitter, who was on a platform raising the face to the eye level of the artist.

Before making a stroke the painter backed away as far as the studio would allow, compared the two images, reality and art, and then dashed forward to add the next brushstroke. An eyewitness recorded:

[His] energetic approach to painting was closer to fencing. With a brush in one hand, palette gripped firmly by the other, a cigarette or cigar smouldering in his mouth, he backed away from the sitter and canvas with slow but deliberate steps, further and further. He stopped, then lunged at the canvas. Over and over again he performed this ritual dance....By retreating he was able to make the model and canvas equal before his eye.

Sargent himself calculated that he walked four miles a day in the studio while painting, and his tracks so wore the carpet that it resembled a sheeprun through the heather. He talked to himself when difficulties arose, and had a battle cry, "Demons, demons!" before dashing at the canvas to overcome them.

Sargent himself did not invent this method, though he adapted and improved it. Sight-size technique is very old, going back to the early Renaissance. It was probably used by many Flemish artists, by Leonardo at times, and by Giorgione and Titian. Later it became standard for Van Dyck. It reached written form in the chapter on portraiture in the manual *Cours de peinture par principes* published by Roger de Piles in 1708. It was translated into English in 1743, and it is likely that most English portrait painters read it: two of them possessed copies. We know that Joshua Reynolds, for instance, painted with the canvas alongside the sitter, for one of them, Lady Burlington, described the process: "His plan was to walk away several feet, then take a long look at me and the picture as we stood side by side, then rush up to the portrait and dash at it in a kind of fury. I sometimes thought he would make a mistake, and paint on me instead of the picture."

George Romney used the same method with modifications and much greater speed, notably in his portrait of William Cowper the poet, probably the finest pastel ever produced by an Englishman and now in the Wordsworth Museum and Art Gallery in Grasmere. Romney's friend William Hayley wrote: "Spectators who contemplated the portrait with the original by its side thought it hardly possible for any similitude to be more striking or more exact."

According to a paper on the sight-size tradition written by Nicholas Beer in 2007, Gainsborough used a similar method, but making use (in the preparatory work) of pencils on sticks six feet long, so he could position himself more easily to see both the sitter and the emerging portrait in

the same glance. The Scottish painter Henry Raeburn followed in the same tradition, as did Sir Thomas Lawrence, who succeeded to Reynolds's position as the maestro of English portraiture and president of the Royal Academy. The Scots painter David Wilkie, who watched Lawrence at work, described his energetic movements up and down the studio: "In this incessant transit his feet had worn a path through the carpet to the floor."

Many other examples could be quoted. Indeed it is likely that most successful portraits, in which accuracy of the features is combined with evocation of the sitter's personality, are achieved by this method in one form or another. Naturally the sight-size technique is only one of the methods taught in Cecil's studios. They are housed in the former church of San Raffaello Arcangelo in Florence, and the traditions of this great capital of fine art, especially in accurate and meticulous drawing, are paramount. As with most successful studios from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century, Cecil's has a great stock of plaster casts from the antique, which students are taught to copy. But most emphasis is placed on drawing and painting from the live model, both nude and clothed. It is of the essence of Charles Cecil's teaching that nature, and natural forms, are sovereign in art.

What will be the outcome of Cecil's bold venture? So far the impact has been mainly in Britain, where there was already a long tradition of young men and women going to Florence to learn drawing and painting. It is highly desirable that more pupils should come from the United States, hence the importance of Cecil's revolution in art teaching (restoration might be a better word) being known in America. Equally desirable is that those in charge of art education in the U.S. should be aware of what is happening, and its success.

This success is twofold. Cecil's studios enable young artists to acquire an enviable technique and a multitude of practical skills. But equally important, they take manifest delight in the teaching, and in practicing what they learn. Art has become a joy again, instead of an exercise in fraudulence.

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