

PHILIP DE LÁSZLÓ

1869—1937.

BY

Dr. ANTHONY KAMPIS

His life was a splendid example of fulfilment. However daring the dreams of his youth, they were realized. His lot was one of personal, financial and moral success; with the aid of his brush his career was one of smooth progress from life as a poor art student in Budapest to one among the great, reaching the climax when the head of one of the States in another Continent did him the honour of sending a man-of-war to bring him over to paint his portrait.

The beginnings of Philip de László's life were humble. He was born on 1st June 1869, the son of a poor craftsman, who brought him up to follow his father's trade.

When his school days were over, he was apprenticed to a well-known photographer patronized mainly by the Hungarian aristocracy. After a few months of work in the photographer's studio, it was borne in upon the young man that his talents were lost on mechanical photography, and abandoning this craft he applied for admission to the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest.

His ability was recognized at the entrance examination and he was admitted. In the years following, with feverish assiduity he pursued the study of painting under the guidance of Bartholomew Székely and Charles Lotz. Success was not slow to reward him. In 1888, while yet a student of art, a painting of his, the portrait of a child, was exhibited in the Budapest Art Gallery with such marked success that he received a State scholarship. This enabled him to enter the Academy of Painting in Munich, where his teacher was

a famous master of Hungarian extraction, Alexander Liezen-Mayer.

In Munich he worked with fervour. Two of his well-known compositions date from that period: "The Story-Teller" and "In the Munich Hofbräuhaus". These pictures were exhibited in Budapest and the first-mentioned won for him the Friends of Art's prize. During his sojourn in Munich he also won two silver medals for pictures exhibited there.

Leaving Munich he went to Paris, where he remained a year, perfecting his art in the company of Benjamin Constant and Jules Lefebvre. The themes of his pictures at this time were the fashionable ones of the period (The Old Soldier, A Serious Question, Incroyable, etc.).

The influence of the years spent in Munich and the trend of art at home induced de László to try his hand with *genre* pictures, although even in his student days he felt his vocation to be portrait painting, and his fixed intention had been to devote himself to that branch of art. Contemporary students of his relate that during his student years Philip de László consciously strove to idealize the pose of the model set before him without detriment, however, to the figure or to the character of the face, and thus while the canvases of his fellow-students portrayed old drunkards, and toothless dishevelled crones, in de László's studies the same models assumed the aspect of dignified old gentlemen and worthy grey-haired ladies without any loss of likeness between the models and their portraits. It was a characteristic of de László's to seize upon the most favourable traits of his models without any hesitation or lengthy experimentation.

Yet, as we have said, for several years he could not emancipate himself from the dictates of the fashion of the age, but experimented with *genre* compositions. Success attended these efforts, it is true, but it is equally certain that had he continued on this path, had he not turned his back upon it no amount of perseverance or effort would have crowned his career with the success he was afterwards to achieve.

The turn came in the year 1894. That year de László was commissioned by the art firm Kosmos of Budapest to paint a life-size portrait of Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria. De László executed the task in a brilliant manner and the portrait reaped so great a success that the painter found himself overwhelmed with orders to paint the portraits of the most distinguished people. From that time on de László painted almost nothing except portraits.

His painting of a lady exhibited in the Budapest Art Gallery won for him the small Gold Medal in 1897 and in 1899 the Hungarian Mortgage Bank gave him a commission to paint a portrait of Francis Joseph I for the assembly hall of the Bank. These events marked sudden rise to fame of the young painter; but for the moment he was a prophet, that is to say a recognized master of portraiture, only in his own country. However, the same year his career abroad began and with it the conquest of foreign countries. He left Budapest for Berlin. The first portrait he painted there was that of the Duke Chlodwig of Hohenlohe-Schillingfürst, then Chancellor of the German Empire, and at the success of that picture the most exclusive doors were suddenly thrown open to admit him. The picture was hung; it brought him two gold medals and, what was of greater importance, so many commissions that he could scarcely accept them all. Kaiser Wilhelm himself was one of his patrons and he lavished every mark of favour on the young artist,

In 1900 he arranged a collective exhibition of his Berlin works at Schulte's and on this occasion it was established that de László's successes were by no means of an ephemeral art. Art critics of repute and unbiassed judgement acclaimed his works with praised of their form and *technique*, attaching considerable hopes to the future career of the artist.

Then de László took a great decision. He realized that never again would he deviate from the path towards which his individual inclination drew him. A pageant of the inspiring examples of the great portrait painters of bye-gone days passed before his mental vision; he felt that he could serve art well even if he confined himself to this one branch of it and that his name and fame would go down to posterity

if he perfected his knowledge and used his talents honestly, with faith and unflinching zeal.

He managed to secure a commission to paint Pope Leo XIII. This was no light task, for the aged Pope was a nervous, impatient man; he refused to concede de László more than one sitting and even then stipulated that neither the artist nor his work was to be visible. Another would perhaps have been daunted by these difficulties, either of which might well have spelt failure, but de László agreed and completed the work with such brilliance that his portrait of Pope Leo XIII may well be said to be the most excellent and poetical work of that period of his life.

The pose of the figure is simple yet arresting and full of dignity, and the frail gentleness is transfused with a spiritual force which reveals itself most strikingly in the fire of the eyes. The tone of the picture, which is of medium size, is light and the sensitively chosen colours range beside one another in delicate harmony. The execution is soft and tranquil. The virtuosity of a light and subtle play of the brush is noticeable in the treatment of the lace of the Pope's robes, the details of which though creating the impression almost of minuteness are limned in a sure and grandiose manner. These characteristics also mark the treatment of the transparent, finely-shaped hands and the rest of the details of the portrait.

While at the Vatican de László also painted a portrait of Cardinal Rampolla. In this picture the execution shows more of contrasting effects, the sweep of the lines is more decided, the expression of the face more purposeful, forcible and determined. The difference in the spiritual timbre of the two Churchmen and the difference of character and human values are magnificently portrayed in the two paintings, which at present hang in the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1900 de László won the Hungarian State Gold Medal with a portrait of the Countess Csekonics exhibited in the Budapest Art Gallery. This Gold Medal was the highest distinction conferrable at that time on artists in Hungary.

By this time de László was so much in demand abroad that he could no longer remain in Hungary. Although he

did not take definite leave of his studio in Budapest, he set up one first in Vienna and then in London.

His contacts with the English aristocracy and later on with the English Court grew in time so exacting that London came to be his permanent home. In this he followed in the footsteps of several Hungarian artists (Jacob Bogdán, John Privigyei and Charles Brocky) who, tearing themselves away from their native land in the preceding century, became part and parcel of English artistic life, enriching it with colours which by very reason of their strangeness and peculiarity were stimulating and arresting.

In 1907 he painted the portraits of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. The same year he arranged a collective exhibition of his works done in England. In 1910 he painted the members of the Spanish Royal Family.

America now began to take notice of him and President Roosevelt invited him to Washington to paint his portrait. From then on de László was a favourite portrait painter of the American plutocracy.

Financial success was attended in ever increasing measure by the appreciation of his fellow-artists.

In 1905 he won two medals at an exhibition in Munich. Next year he was elected honorary member of the Madrid Society of Artists. The Venice Exhibition of 1907 brought him a gold medal, and in the same year one of his pictures was purchased by the Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Rome and he was elected honorary member of the Royal Society of British Artists.

In 1912 Francis Joseph conferred Hungarian nobility on him with the forename of „Lombos”, and he also received a diploma of honour from Amsterdam. A few years later he became a British citizen and a professor of the London Royal Art School.

In 1908 he had arranged an exhibition of the best of his works in Berlin. This time his success was not so unanimous as on the occasion of his first Berlin exhibition. The public still accorded the same admiration to his paintings, but the critics found fault with his too great routine, with a too suave, too refined execution untrammelled by problems

of any kind. These objections continued to be raised by critics throughout the rest of his life, but they were powerless to influence the artist or his admirers, and even the critics themselves never questioned his ability, taste and great technical skill.

After the war he went to New York in 1925, where he arranged a collective exhibition. It was visited by an unparalleled number of people. The magic of de László's name and fame was so great that several American painters who copied his style were able to make considerable capital, financial and moral, out of their imitation of him. He arranged collective exhibitions in London in 1927 and 1929 and one in Paris in 1931, all of which were viewed by the highest social circles and represented a considerable financial success.

Besides Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, he also painted the portraits of Lord Northcliffe, Princess Chimay, and the editor of the "Studio", Mr. Holme. Among his models were the Archbishop of Dublin and many prominent politicians, such as Lord Balfour and the ex-Speaker of the House of Commons, Mr. James Lowther. Others to sit for him were the Princess Victoria as well as the well know society beauty, Baroness Bayens, and the Principal of Sommerville College in Oxford, Miss Penrose. It would, however, be impossible to enumerate the names of all the many people whom de László painted. All we would say is that he painted almost every member of the Royal Family more than once and that there is scarcely a single famous person in England whose portrait was not painted by him.

Besides his paintings which are in the possession of private individuals, one or more of his works are to be found in most of the important museums in Europe and his self-portrait hangs in the company of those of other famous Hungarian painters (Stephen Csók, Rippl Rónai, etc.) in the world-famed collection of self-portraits, to which only the very best are admitted, in the Uffici Gallery.

De László, though loyal to the country of his adoption in the latter half of his life, was bound to Hungary with inseverable ties. He often visited Hungary and painted many

portraits of outstanding people in Hungarian political and social life.

One of these is of special interest: the portrait of the Regent of Hungary in which the artist with cool technique and warm feelings depicts the virile strength and indomitable will of the Regent.

De László never ceased to be interested in Hungarian artistic life. He was a member, honorary or ordinary, of many societies of artists in Hungary. When possible he frequently visited the exhibitions in the Budapest Art Gallery; he continued to the end to be on friendly terms with his old colleagues and acquaintances and took a great interest in the rising generation of artists. Many young and struggling artists had reason to be grateful to de László for aid and scholarships.

De László died on 22nd November 1937 at the zenith of his career, in full possession of his creative powers as an artist and with no abatement of his ability to work. He had been knighted in the country of his adoption, was a frequent visitor at the English Court and died surrounded with wealth and the respect of two countries, in fact of the whole world.

The last two distinction which were conferred on him were the Hungarian Corvin Wreath, the highest recognition in Hungary of his merits as an artist, and the Chairmanship of the British Royal Society of Artists. He was on his deathbed when these distinctions reached him, as though to put a full stop to an artistic career the like of which would be hard to find among his contemporaries.

If now we seek to discover the reason of this unprecedented success, of the homage done to de László by countries and continents, if we ask wherein lay the arresting power which made peer and commoner bow in admiration before his pictures, we shall find some very interesting and characteristic traits in his art.

First of all his sure, certain knowledge of the art of drawing. Before he took his brush in hand de László had no need of a series of special sketches in order to catch the peculiarities of face and figure. One quick sketch, and he was ready to begin painting. He therefore did not tire his models, but rather stimulated their interest. His sure sense

of values (perhaps the most precious gift an artist can possess) enabled him to commit to canvas the picture as a whole, colour, background and the figure at once. This trait was supplemented by a great instinct for character, which resulted in his bringing out the likeness almost involuntarily while painting in the colour, lights and shadows. Bringing out the likeness was no separate task for de László, but merely a natural concomitant to the technical side of painting.

He enhanced the likeness by watching every little individual trick of manner of his model and conveying them to the canvas. He himself was heard to say that this was one of the secrets of the convincing power of his portraits.

He paid special attention to the eyes. In all his portraits the eyes are the central point, but he was just as careful in his treatment of the hands. Mention has already been made of these points in connection with Pope Leo XIII's portrait. This however does not mean that any part of the picture is allowed to dominate the rest, for picture and background are developed as an organic whole. By this means the minute elaboration of certain details here and there is compatible with the whole picture, while the broad sweeping lines of the other parts lend a character of grandeur to every single detail. Another sign that de László developed the entire picture simultaneously and uniformly is that he always worked on framed canvases.

But his most interesting characteristic as a portrait painter was his extraordinary sense of dignity and distinction. He painted his models as they would have liked to appear and posed the so as to charm and captivate the spectator. He stressed the refined, distinguished traits of his models, and where such were lacking, he smuggled them into the picture without spoiling a single line of the physical likeness.

He believed in his art and his vocation. He was the artist who painted the greatest number of the crowned heads and leading men of his day and he looked upon this work as one of the sources of future historical research. He himself said that this was one of the reasons why, besides striving to present a faithful physical likeness, he also strove

to mirror the spiritual and moral character of his models. In this he was but following in the footsteps of the great portrait painters of the past centuries. If he was not entirely successful we can at least say that with his death we have lost an able painter whose good taste and honest intentions were unquestionable.

OSZK

Nemzeti Széchényi Könyvtár

"Our responsibility dictates a solemn protest against the parliamentary practice which is digging the grave of democracy, sabotaging honest debate and rendering futile our responsibility towards the people." (From a speech delivered by M. Andrew Jaross, President of the United Hungarian Party of Czechoslovakia, in the Prague Parliament on 30th November.)

— y —