PAINTING A PORTRAIT

BY

DE LÁSZLÓ
"HOW TO DO IT" SERIES

6

Painting a Portrait
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DE LÁSZLÓ

Recorded by A. L. Baldry

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SOME GREAT PORTRAITS

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There is no Royal Road to the painting of a successful portrait. Success depends upon the painter's observation, his understanding and the ability to paint what he wishes. It is a personal affair.

Much can be learned from those who have won for themselves the title of Master, but it is impossible to have our questions answered, first-hand, by great Masters who are no longer with us. De László has painted, and is painting, a great number of important people throughout the world. His name is a household word as a portrait painter of our time. I determined to ask him to paint a portrait especially for this book. He said he would, but he did not wish to appear to be a teacher of portrait painting. It was only
his way of doing it, he said, but he would try to answer any questions that might be put to him while he was painting.

I was again fortunate in finding A. L. Baldry—that enquirer into methods and reasons why people paint—enthusiastic for the experiment. Then the sitter—who was there with vivaciousness and with subtlety of expression, easy to behold? We didn't mention this when we asked her, but Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies undertook the double task of posing for painter and camera at the same time. To hold an expression and pose for nine hours odd is really hard work, and is not a talent usually possessed by the average sitter. Upwards of one hundred and forty photographs were taken by me in order to provide the pick for our illustrations, and I take this opportunity of thanking for their skill, patience and their enthusiastic support in producing this book, de László, A. L. Baldry and Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies.

C. G. HOLME
How many people are there who really appreciate what it is that enables an artist to take an honoured place in the higher ranks of his profession? Apparently the popular idea is that the master achieves distinction more or less automatically, because nature has endowed him with faculties which will bring him inevitably to the front without any particular effort on his part. He is, it is assumed, born and not made, and to be eminent is his birthright, his destiny which must be fulfilled.

This assumption, like so many more of the popular ideas, is based upon a misconception. That the potential master is born with
faculties definitely out of the ordinary may be true enough, and that by the exercise of these faculties he can hope to command success is probably not less correct, but to suggest that he can dispense with systematic study of the mechanism of his art is, of course, absurd. Indeed, there lies upon him a special obligation to develop to the utmost his power of technical expression because he has so much more to convey by means of it than comes within the reach of men less generously endowed, and this obligation he must always be ready to recognize. As a matter of fact, the artist of high rank is almost invariably an earnest student and a sedulous craftsman, consistent in his pursuit of knowledge and assiduous in his striving after the fullest control over executive processes—a firm believer in Emerson’s dogma “skill to do comes of doing.” It is only the smaller minds in the brotherhood of art that are too conceited to seek for self-improvement and too sublimely satisfied with themselves to trouble about the development of what powers they may happen to possess.

It would be difficult to find a better illustration of the working of a serious artistic conscience than is afforded in the career of de László, or of the earnestness with which a greatly gifted artist can approach the problems of his profession. The qualities by which his art is distinguished have their origin, no doubt, in the temperamental equipment which was born in him and are the natural outcome of those essential personal qualities by which his whole attitude to life has been determined. He has an exceptional acuteness of vision and a remarkable perception of both refinements of form and subtleties of tone, he is unusually shrewd in his insight into character and he has a ready responsiveness to impressions
which stimulate his imagination and appeal to his æsthetic sense. In the shaping of his individuality all these have played a part and the stamp of them is evident in his work.

But especially is it evident because to the presentation of them he has brought a completeness of technical resource that he has attained only by a lifetime of unflagging effort. Through a long series of busy years he has built up a record of progressive achievement in which there has never been any relaxation in his intention to master all the difficulties of the painter's craft and to gain by perfected practice the executive freedom which he knew to be necessary for full self-expression. Even to-day, with all his accumulated experience and with the quiet confidence which this experience justifies, he is as searching in his observation and as scrupulous in his transcription of significant realities as he was at the outset of his career.

By virtue of this conscience he is able to speak with full authority on all the practical questions with which his fellow artists are concerned; no one, assuredly, can accuse him of laying down the law about matters with which, through insufficient experiment, he is imperfectly acquainted. Nor can anyone say that the position which he occupies now in the art world is not one to which he is amply entitled as a reward for his devoted efforts to make his capacities entirely efficient. He has earned his honours fairly and squarely, but that they have been earned and not automatically acquired is just the point that needs to be impressed not only upon the unenlightened public, but upon the art student as well.

A. L. BALDRY
THE ARTIST'S PALETTE

The best way to make people understand properly the methods which de László employs in his work is to follow him through the evolution of a portrait, explaining stage by stage how he arrives at his results. Let us, by putting questions to him, get this explanation from him in his own words and induce him to tell us what he is aiming at as he builds up his pictures and what is the purpose of the various technical processes he employs.

First of all, it would be well to know something about the materials he uses, so the most appropriate question to begin with would be:

"What is your palette? May I have a list of the colours on which you mainly depend?"

"It is not a very long list. Here they are, in the order in which I put them on my palette—ultramarine, madder, rose madder, zinc white, light cadmium, dark cadmium, yellow ochre, burnt sienna. These are the chief colours I use and ordinarily they are sufficient for any work, but sometimes, when there is a particular reason, I add to them ivory black, Veronese green, lac garance and orange cadmium." (See Plate I.)

"I notice you choose zinc white. Why is that?"

"Because it is more brilliant than flake white and is not supposed to darken. I may say, too, that I have it specially prepared for me with poppy oil; I like it thin as it would not work freely if it were too stiff."

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The Artist’s Palette, showing the colours used and their arrangement.

Plate I.
THE MEDIUM

"What is your reason for having it prepared with poppy oil?"

"Poppy oil is a slow drier and that is the reason why I prefer it. I like my painting to keep wet as long as possible so that I can finish straight away the part of the picture I am working on before the paint dries; the slow drying is helpful, it enables me to finish more deliberately and it makes the consistency of the paint more pleasant to handle. Work finished while the paint is still wet always looks fresher and more direct."

BRUSHES

"You have there a remarkable sheaf of brushes; do you really use them all?" (See Plate II.)

"I do use most of them because I am very anxious to keep my colour always clean, and for a clean touch a clean brush is necessary. I have my sheaf beside me and I can pick a fresh brush from it whenever I want one. By the way, too, I would like to mention that for the sake of purity of colour I avoid, as far as possible, mixing more than two colours together at any time."

"Now tell me, how do you begin a portrait?"

POSING THE SITTER

"I find that people are often very shy and awkward when they come into a studio; they seem to look upon being painted as something of an ordeal which more or less alarms them. So, first of all, I like to have a little chat with my sitter, to make him feel at home. This gives me a chance to observe him quietly and to
Brushes used by de László. The artist allows himself a wide range so that a clean brush is always at hand.

**PLATE II.**
see what kind of pose and expression will suit him best and be most characteristic of his personality. As far as possible I try to get him to pose himself so that the suggested movement shall be easy and natural and free from self-consciousness.”

“Yes, I can imagine that to be very important. What comes next?”

THE FIRST SKETCH

“Then follows the consideration how to distribute the light and shade and last of all comes the decision on a suitable background in harmony with the intended colour scheme of the picture. When these matters have been arranged to my satisfaction I do a rapid drawing of the subject in my sketch-book to make sure that the movement, light and shade and placing are as I wish them to be; in other words, to be certain that the decorative effect of the picture is complete. (See drawing—Plate III.) But in the case of a larger picture or a group I do a similar sketch, from nature, in colour, to be able to judge the effect of the colour scheme in which I want to keep the portrait.”

“Do you transfer your drawing to the canvas?”

“No, I do not use it again; it has served its purpose as a record of my intention, and it has helped me to decide how I should deal with my subject. But the picture is by now fully formed in my mind.”

STARTING ON THE CANVAS

“How, then, do you start on the canvas?”

“My clean canvas is now on the easel before me, in its frame—”

“In its frame?”
The first sketch, made with black and white chalk on toned paper.

PLATE III.
"Yes, certainly. I believe that the frame is an integral part of the picture and must be there from the beginning. If it is added at the last moment after the picture is finished there is always the risk that it may not agree with the character of the work."

"Well, you have the canvas and the frame, what about the picture? What do you do to set that going?"

"You seem to think that my practice is full of dark secrets. I assure you, my dear friend, that I have no tricks to reveal; I have no enlarged photographs up my sleeve and no other mechanical devices which I can produce for your benefit. I just put my canvas beside my sitter and begin to paint." (See Plate IV.)

**THE GENERAL EFFECT**

"Do you really mean that you begin straight away with the brush?"

"Why, of course. With my brush I paint in a few lines to indicate the placing of the figure on the canvas. As a first step this is essential since the way in which the figure is placed in the space available is vitally important in the decorative arrangement of the picture. It is the foundation of the whole design."

"What next?"

"I begin to deal with the head, seeking to express by means of light and shade the construction of the skull and defining accurately the larger planes. In this I aim always at as correct a realisation as possible of the tones of nature which I see before me, and I strive constantly to establish the exact relation between the head and its
Above: The first brush lines of the portrait. Below: The gradual development of the main masses.

Plate IV.
surroundings. All this is a process of gradual building up but, mind you, it must be done rapidly and directly.

THE EVOLUTION OF DETAIL

"I take it that at this stage you are dealing only with the general effect; when do you begin to concern yourself with the details?"

"How can you separate details from the general effect? The details are a part of the general effect and come gradually and naturally as I develop it."

"But surely you cannot get correctness in your forms without drawing them precisely?"

"Can't you see that I have been doing nothing else but drawing from the beginning? I draw by putting lights and shades in their right places, expressing the forms thereby." (See Plate V.)

"It seems to me that you have been painting all the time, not drawing."

"Certainly you have seen me painting all the time, but whatever I do in the way of putting down lights and shades in their correct relationship to one another develops naturally both likeness and character, and that is what I call drawing. Don't you realise that I draw with the brush and that all my painting is drawing?"

"I am sorry to have been so dense, but I think I grasp your meaning now—may I suggest, though, that while we have been talking, your sitter has got very tired and ought to have a rest."

"You are quite right, a rest is overdue. I do not usually go on long enough to bring my sitter so near to collapse and on this occasion I fear that I have been too exacting. But my excuse must
Indicating the general form of the mouth.

PLATE V.
be that I was especially anxious to secure a record of the fascinating movement and expression which Miss Ffrangcon-Davies is giving me before any change was made in the pose.

DEVELOPING THE LIKENESS

"During the rest would you explain what you meant when you said just now that a likeness was developed by establishing the correct relation of light and shade?"

"I cannot think of a likeness as something apart from the general effect. There is definitely the beginning of the likeness directly the right beginning of the general effect is made and the development of the likeness goes on steadily as the general effect is amplified and made more complete. At first, as I have already told you, I deal with the larger planes only, but as I proceed I occupy myself more and more with the smaller planes and with those lesser subtleties by which what I would call the intimacy of the likeness is attained. But, of course, all through I aim at the correct relationship of values, because without that a real likeness is impossible." (See Plate VI.)

"It still seems strange to me that you can get a likeness in a portrait without a preparatory drawing on the canvas, something plainly stated that you can build upon—most artists seem to regard a drawing as an indispensable foundation."

"I do not believe in doing a drawing first and then painting over it. That way there is a danger of losing one’s freedom to take in the general effect and of becoming a slave to one’s own doings. I consider that an artist should acquire such a thorough understanding of drawing that he can use it instinctively in his work.
Developing the likeness.

Plate VI.
without thinking of it as being separate from painting—but I see my sitter is ready again so I must get back to my picture.”

**UNITY OF EFFECT**

“Well, what is the next stage?”

“Hitherto I have been concerned mainly with the head, as you have, I expect, noticed. (See Plates VIII and IX.) Now, before I carry that further, I want to bring the rest of the picture to the same stage of harmonious unity throughout. This is necessary to enable me to judge how much more development the head will require to have the strength and significance of effect at which I am aiming. But remember this, that no two heads can be treated in exactly the same way and that in each one the character and type must to a great extent dictate the manner of dealing with it which should be adopted. A head with strongly marked features, for instance, does not demand such detailed treatment as one with less definite forms. It can be presented much more broadly and simply because its characteristics are more immediately apparent.”

“For a while, then, you will leave the head as it is?” (See Plate VII.)

“Yes, before I finish it I must attend to the surroundings and give them, or at all events the more important part of them, their full strength. I can tell then what degree of force should be added to the head to make it, as it should be, the dominant fact in the picture. Even when I am not actually working on the head, I am still thinking about it and the relation which must be established between it and the accessories among which it is set.” (See Plate XI.)
Head and accessories receive almost simultaneous attention to achieve unity of effect.

PLATE VII.
STANDING BACK FROM THE CANVAS

"There is one question I have been waiting to ask you—why do you take so much exercise while you are painting? Why do you move backwards and forwards so incessantly?"

"Well, as you see, I set my canvas beside my sitter, but what I put on that canvas I judge from a certain distance. I must go fairly far off to see the general effect of my subject as a whole in all that rightness of relation upon which I insist so much. When I stand back I am recording mentally what I am going to put on my canvas when I walk up to it." (See Plate XII.)

"Really, one might say that you paint your picture while you are away from your canvas."

"In my mind; yes, I do. What I put on with my brush is considered and settled before I touch the picture, so much so, indeed, that I do not look at my sitter when I am close enough to put that touch on the canvas. How do you think I could judge the texture of any material if I were near enough to it to put my hand upon it? I must be sufficiently far off to appreciate properly the characteristic tones and values by which varieties of texture are made apparent."

THE VALUE OF A MIRROR

"Does that little mirror you keep looking into help you to decide what you are going to do?"

"Yes, to some extent it does. But its chief value is that it gives me a new view of both picture and sitter and therefore enables me to discover any faults there may be in drawing, or in the relations
The building-up process, alternately of the nose and mouth.

PLATE VIII.
of tones. It acts like the fresh eye which can often perceive defects that the painter, having got accustomed to them, has failed to detect. I take a look in the mirror from time to time as a sort of self-criticism—at any rate the mirror is an honest critic.” (See Plate XIII.)

“Is it useful as a means of studying your sitter’s expression?”

“No, not particularly. But sometimes a mirror can be used in such a way that it helps to give the sitter the expression I want. When, for instance, he is getting tired or restless, or even, in some cases, when he is shy and I cannot, by talking, arouse in him the vivacity that he must have to make his portrait reasonably successful, I place a mirror in his line of vision so that he can watch in it the progress of the picture as I work. I like my sitters to see what I am doing to the portrait at every stage and I am sure that by letting them look on in this manner I not only induce in them the interested expression at which I aim, but also offer to some of them, who have, hitherto, not had an opportunity to see a picture in the making, an educational experience which they enjoy.” (See Plate XIV.)

“Oh, yes, people always do enjoy being taken behind the scenes and shown how things are worked.”

**KEEPING THE SITTER’S INTEREST**

“Then why not encourage them? I have often noticed that a sitter’s interest in painting and even in art in general grows while he is in the studio and I do believe that as a result of his experience there he will always in the future approach art with much more interest than before.”
Using the mahl-stick as a support for the hand, the artist applies detailed touches.

PLATE IX.
"The only objection that occurs to me is that watching you at work might have a tendency to make him move about: don't you want him to keep still?"

"Naturally I do, but there is a great difference between being still and becoming set and lifeless. If the sitter's face is lacking in animation the risk that the portrait, no matter how hard one tries, will be a dull record is very great and I feel that such a risk ought to be avoided at all costs. My way of preventing it is to do all I can to keep his interest awake and to make him alert and lively. Still, I do not deny that it is difficult at times, as all people are not equally responsive."

"I suppose sitters do vary greatly in their ways: you cannot deal with them all in the same manner."

"Very definitely not, and what is the right manner in which each one should be dealt with is the first thing a portrait painter has to find out; indeed, upon that will often depend the success or the failure of his picture. Before he can decide what kind of treatment he should adopt he has to give at least as much attention to his sitter's mental characteristics as to his physical appearance; a portrait is not a still-life study, therefore it must be a good deal more than a simple record of a face. It must be a psychological revelation as well."

THE STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGY

"How can you manage that; is it all a matter of facial expression?"

"To a certain extent it is, but by no means entirely. If you study people observantly and with understanding, you will soon
The portrait after three hours' work.

PLATE X.
see that they have, each one of them, individualities of movement and gesture, tricks and mannerisms even, which are personal and characteristic, and in these individualities you can often find a very helpful clue to your sitter's temperament. They will guide you in choosing for the portrait the movement that is most natural and appropriate, and which agrees best with the expression of the face. To make a portrait convincing the right pose of the body is very important."

"Even so, I suppose the expression you get in the face is the chief consideration."

"Well, that is what people are interested in mostly, though it would be really amusing to paint a portrait in which the face did not show at all. It might be quite a good likeness if the general characteristics of the sitter had been skilfully realised. But the more shrewd the insight one can obtain into the sitter's personality, the more revealing will be the expression of the face and especially of the eyes. Who was it that called them the 'windows of the soul'? That just describes how they appear to the portrait painter who is exploring the sitter's mind. I concentrate on them from the first and I study them with the closest possible attention through every stage of the painting of the head so as to make them as expressive as I possibly can."

**THE TREATMENT OF HANDS AND BODY**

"And when the head is finished what do you do next?"

"By the time the head is finished I have the body and hands firmly sketched in and the background definitely suggested because, as you have seen, my method is to develop the general effect of the
While paying attention to the accessories, observation of head and expression continues.

Plate XI
picture continuously. (See Plate XV.) So I proceed with the hands—and the feet when the opportunity is given me to paint them—which I consider quite as important for the revelation of character and personality as the face itself and quite as enjoyable to paint.” (See Plates XVI and XVII.)

"Is it not supposed to be very difficult to paint a hand properly?

"A hand is in some ways more difficult than a head, for while the face has features which do not change their relative positions and which remain immobile until the whole head is moved, the whole appearance of the hand can be altered by even a slight movement of one of the fingers. I insist that the painter should take a hand every bit as seriously as a face and recognise how eloquent it is in its power to tell us what are the intellectual and physical qualities, and even the age, of the person to whom it belongs.”

ACCESSORIES

"What about the rest of the portrait, the draperies and accessories, how do they rank in relative importance?

"Most of what I have just said about the manner in which hands and feet reveal personality applies to the movement of the sitter’s body and, I repeat, rightness in recording that movement is necessary for the making of a successful portrait. There is, in the pose he adopts, an unconscious assertion of himself, and the way he wears his clothes emphasises this assertion. A woman’s dress, a man’s uniform, robes or everyday suit fall into lines on the sitters themselves quite different from those they would take on any model or lay figure and so you may fairly say that the arrangement
"When I stand back I am recording mentally what I am going to put on my canvas when I walk up to it."

PLATE XII
of the draperies must be seriously studied because in it is seen a further revelation of character."

WHEN TO STOP

"Is that why, as you put it, you develop the general effect of your picture continuously?"

"Yes; I say once more that by the time I have finished the head I reckon to have brought all the rest of the picture into harmony and right relation with it without necessarily dwelling upon the lesser details. That is the stage at which this portrait of Miss Ffrangcon-Davies has now arrived and there is, I think, no need to carry it any further. It is an example of a type of picture I often paint in which I concentrate on the head and hands and leave the rest unelaborated but, as nearly as possible, correct in forms and values. (See Plate XVIII and Frontispiece.) Still, now that the head and hands are finished, I could, if I wished, complete the draperies and accessories with the help of a model or lay figure, without losing the qualities of the picture, because I have already painted all the main facts of the draperies on the sitter. I might mention that when I do paint a completely finished large picture I endeavour to keep the draperies restrained in tone so that, however rich the dress or uniform and accessories may be, the attention of the spectator is not diverted from the head and hands by any over-insistence upon the incidentals."

"But surely your method is a little unusual. Do many artists paint the draperies in their portraits on the actual sitters?"

"I really cannot tell you, but I am inclined to think that a good
The chief value of the hand-mirror is that it gives a new point of view of both sitter and portrait. It acts as a check on drawing and the relation of tones.
many do not. You will often see in a portrait that the head gives the impression of not belonging to the body. This is generally because the head has been painted throughout and finished independently of the rest of the picture and then the clothes on someone else’s body have been added to it. The result must almost inevitably be a misfit, which is to be deplored. Of course, the risk of over-tiring the sitter must be avoided and for this reason I have always aimed at rapidity and directness in my handling of the draperies which the sitter wears. To paint a hand or foot from a model and not from the sitter would be, of course, unpardonable.”

WHEN A FRESH START IS NECESSARY

“I can quite appreciate that rapidity and directness are essential in all stages of work like yours, but I can also imagine that if you were not absolutely sure of yourself and knew exactly what you meant to do they might easily get out of control. What would happen if a picture did not develop in the way that you intended?”

“Before I go into that I would like to point out that no artist can ever be absolutely sure of himself; even to pretend to think that he is infallible would be a most dangerous form of conceit. At no time can he afford to relax his effort to acquire greater acuteness of vision and more complete command over the technical processes of his craft. Of course, because he is human, he will always be liable to make mistakes, and he must constantly be on his guard against them; and when they do happen they must be frankly recognised and boldly dealt with. I am convinced that when a piece of work has gone wrong it is no good tinkering with it
The standing mirror entertain the sitter and helps to maintain the desired expression.

PLATE XIV
and trying to pull it into shape. That only makes things worse. For myself, if I am not content with the way a portrait is developing, if from the moment when I have made my first drawing I cannot go straight ahead to a satisfactory finish, I throw aside what I have done and begin again."

"What! Another picture on a fresh canvas?"

"What else? To find that I was not succeeding in realising my intention would mean that I could no longer take pleasure in my work and decidedly I should not feel inclined to waste my energies on something that annoyed me. Besides, even if I did fight my way out of the difficulty, all the freshness and spontaneity of my picture would be gone. With a fresh canvas I have a new problem to solve and I can start with my way clear before me. I have even, on occasions, discarded a half-finished portrait and begun another because I chanced to discover that my sitter had a more interesting aspect than the one I had first chosen to paint. It seems to me obvious that I should want his portrait to show him at his best."

"Would it not be permissible sometimes to improve on the original? For instance, when you were painting a woman might you not idealise her a little?"

"Indeed, you surprise me! You are as bad as a very mature lady who once asked me to paint her, but insisted that I should make her look like what she told me she had been when she was twenty years younger."

"How amusing. Did you do it?"

"Can you imagine my doing anything so ridiculous? If I were so foolish as to start trying to improve on nature what could I expect but an entirely artificial and conventional result? In
The portrait after the second sitting of three hours, that is after six hours' work.

Plate XV
serious portraiture there is no place either for what you call idealising or for that sort of caricature which some people affect because they fancy that a portrait gains in strength by over-accentuation of the sitter's facial peculiarities. Very often these peculiarities are wholly accidental and have no significance whatever for the student of the sitter's character, and by exaggerating them a thoroughly false impression of his personality might be given. The painter's mission is to find and record intelligently the best and most characteristic view of his sitter, not to make him look like a freak."

"Do you think our modernist artists would agree with you in that?"

"To such a question I have nothing to reply. I am not discussing the opinions of other people, I am explaining to you what I believe. Whether others do or do not agree with me has nothing to do with the matter. I claim the right to think for myself."

CHOICE OF SUBJECT

"Tell me, which do you like best to paint, a man, a woman or a child?"

"I do not think I can answer that question either, as the point is one I have never considered. Really, I believe that they all interest me equally. It is fascinating to analyse in a man what makes him worth noting—his strength of character shown in his face, his masculinity, his racial peculiarities and the stamp impressed upon him by his station in life—in a woman, her grace and charm, her refinement, her subtlety and that appealing quality which is called
Work on hands and arms.

Plate XVI
femininity, in a child its innocent beauty, its miniature perfection, its delicacy of colouring. Why should a portrait painter limit himself to specialising in one sex or in a particular age? He ought to be receptive of impressions of all kinds and from all sources, and every new impression that is worth accepting should be to him a fresh inspiration. But whoever it may be that an artist is going to paint I am certain that he cannot hope for success unless there is between him and his sitter confidence and sympathy.”

WHAT MAKES A PORTRAIT GREAT

"By way of summing up would you say what in your opinion entitles a portrait to be called great?"

"The best summing up would be to repeat what I have just said, that confidence and sympathy between the artist and his sitter are essential, because the truly great portrait is the one in which this contact has been so close that it has spurred the artist to his highest achievement. Really, there is a collaboration in which the sitter and the artist both contribute something vital, the sitter a character and a personality which are inspiring and a right instinct, as well, for self-revelation in pose and gesture, the artist a special capacity to observe acutely and to record convincingly those subtleties of characterisation which the sitter consciously or unconsciously gives him and, in addition a finely cultivated taste which enables him to make his picture harmonious in design and satisfying in its colour scheme. The artist, it is true, can only record what he sees, but when the opportunity is afforded him to look into the mind and soul of his subject he can, if he is equal to his task, produce
Next in importance to the face are the sitter’s hands. The painter is here bringing the hands up to the necessary degree of finish.

Plate XVII
a portrait in which everyone will be able not only to recognise the physical features of the sitter, but to perceive also the deeper-lying qualities by which he is distinguished. That would be what I should call a great portrait."

"What responsible work then it is, portrait painting."

"Of course it is. On the portrait painter lies a very great responsibility indeed, for he has not only to satisfy his contemporaries but also on many occasions to create for the benefit of future generations an historic document of his times and this document would be without authority if it were not at least as much a study of character as a representation of plainly visible facts. The merely exact reproduction of the sitter's features at a particular moment—as a camera would do—is scarcely worthy to be called a portrait at all; I say, once more, that in this branch of artistic practice the only painting that can be held to justify itself is the one which in the rendering of those features expresses the full mental and moral stature of the human being to whom they belong. Here it is that the individuality of the painter appears and here it is that his powers are subjected to the severest test. Different artists painting the same sitter would produce differing results, because their individualities would vary; so, you see, the inadequacy of the artist who has assumed a responsibility he has not qualified himself to bear would show in his work and he must stand for all time self-convicted of failure."
The Sitter, the Painter and the Completed Portrait. In this instance the entire sitting occupied only eight and a half hours.

Plate XVIII
MRS. DE LÁSZLÓ

There is really no necessity to make a portrait always a piece of formal arrangement in which it is difficult to avoid giving to the sitter an air of self-consciousness; something which looks less studied will often serve the purposes of portraiture quite as well. Here is an example of a portrait which is agreeably intimate in its informality and an interesting illustration of the artist's meaning when he says that the pose and attitude of the body can do as much to reveal the sitter's characteristics as the expression of the face. This might almost be called a portrait without a face, and yet its realisation of the sitter's personality amply suffices and its pleasant unconventionality does not diminish its value as a record. It is successful because in its departure from convention it has been guided by a complete understanding of the problems involved in the subject and the manner of treatment.
HIS EXCELLENCY
COUNT ALBERT APPONYI

A portrait technically similar to that of Miss Ffrangcon-Davies, in which the head is carried to a high degree of completeness while the rest of the picture is for the most part little more than suggested. The aim in this manner of treatment is to focus attention upon what is, after all, the main fact of the picture—the sitter’s face—and to add in the surroundings and accessories only just sufficient details to prevent the head from seeming isolated in an empty space. The apparently haphazard lines by which an impression of the body is conveyed are, however, set down with full consideration for the part they play in an ordered composition, and everything that they suggest accords with the intention of the pictorial scheme—there is nothing careless or accidental in the freedom of the picture, it is directed throughout by confident understanding.
THE LATE MOST REV. J. F. PEACOCKE, ARCHBISHOP OF DUBLIN

It is interesting to compare this drawing with the other one shown in which de László set down his intention when he began his portrait of Miss Ffrangcon-Davies. The purpose of both was the same, to fix and make visible a mental impression of his subject and of the way in which he proposed to deal with it in his subsequent painting. But while in the slighter one he was content with a sort of shorthand note, which was sufficient to provide him with a reminder of what he had in his mind, he gave way in his drawing of the Archbishop to an inclination to go further and, instead of a brief note, to make a more searching study of his sitter. As an exercise in draughtsmanship this study is full of interest and it is important as an illustration of one phase of his practice.
DETAIL OF A PORTRAIT

This detail from de László’s portrait of His Eminence Cardinal Rampolla illustrates what he said earlier in these pages about the importance of observing the character in hands. The Cardinal was physically a man of large frame, but mentally he was exceedingly subtle, and he had hands which belonged rather to his mind than his body. De László, recognising this, dwelt specially on them, and in his arrangement of the portrait gave them particular prominence. When he came to the painting of them he asked his sitter to put them in the position in which they appear in the picture and to keep them without moving as long as possible; the Cardinal remained absolutely still for an hour and in that time they were finished.
SOME GREAT PORTRAITS DISCUSSED

The portraits which appear on the following pages have been selected for reproduction not because they can all be reckoned as masterpieces but because each one of them has qualities that can be profitably discussed and on which instructive comment can be made. They offer opportunities for comparisons which will help the student of portrait painting to understand how artists approach the problems of their craft and to see how, in the results at which they arrive, their individualities of outlook and practice are plainly reflected.
HOLBEIN (1497-1543)
The Duchess of Milan. National Gallery

If Holbein's Duchess of Milan were compared with Titian's portrait of Philip II of Spain, it might at first sight give the impression of being much more dry and formal and of lacking to some extent in spontaneity. But its formality is not of that lifeless kind which comes from mechanically conventionalising the facts of nature so as to shirk the task of studying them seriously, it is an expression of a deliberate intention to use these facts in the building up of a carefully considered decorative design in which they play parts of the greatest importance. Indeed, the essential character of the picture is its earnest and intimate statement of realities; there is nothing accidental in it and certainly it shows no attempt to rely upon ingenious suggestion to gloss over imperfect understanding of necessary details—everything that has been included in the design and that helps to make it complete is set down with the sincere conviction that is the outcome of exact knowledge. To the modern student the picture, with its exquisite precision of drawing, its delicate subtleties of tone gradation and its monumental simplicity of effect, can be confidently commended as a perfect example of what is attainable by the painter who brings to his art a devout spirit of research and has the ability to apply with intelligence the knowledge he acquires.
When Titian's magnificent portrait of Philip II of Spain is studied one thing becomes immediately evident, that he approached his subject with a full sense of the obligations which it imposed upon him and that in his treatment of it he overcame a difficulty which an artist of less commanding ability might well have found to be almost insurmountable. How to paint a sitter in a costume so sumptuous without reducing the portrait to a sort of still-life study in which the human interest was swamped by inanimate accessories might have seemed a puzzle even to a master. But Titian, although there can be clearly seen in his handling of the armour the keen enjoyment he derived from dealing with the technical problems it presented, was enabled by the acuteness of his psychological insight and by his masterly realisation of character to make the head of the king the dominating fact in the picture and to convey a convincing impression of his fanatical personality. The costume sets off the man, but everyone who looks at the portrait sees the man first. The pose of the figure is easy and informal and yet perfectly dignified, and there is in it a suggestion of movement that is kept discreetly from giving even a hint of restlessness.
FRANS HALS (1580-1666)
A Man and his Wife. Amsterdam

This fascinating portrait group belongs to the middle period in the life of Hals, before he had developed that characteristic liveliness of handling by which in his later years his paintings were distinguished. But even with its comparative restraint it is remarkable for its certainty and directness of execution and it shows throughout a confidence of statement that is entirely convincing because it comes so obviously from perfect accord between the painter's eye and hand. Possessed of powers of observation more than ordinarily shrewd, exceptional acuteness of vision, an extremely accurate perception of subtleties of colour and tone relation, and an unfailing gaiety of outlook, he was able to give to them all their full value in his work because he had made himself a brilliant executant and had the mechanism of his craft under complete control. The strength of the appeal which this picture makes is due at least as much to its technical mastery—to its vigorous draughtsmanship and its expressive brushwork—as to its atmosphere of good humour and its charm of scenic effect. It is interesting, too, because the artist in arranging his composition has chosen to depart from the more rigid conventions of portrait painting and to introduce a touch of comedy into the posing and treatment of his sitters.
VELASQUEZ (1599-1660)
Detail from 'The Surrender of Breda.' Prado, Madrid

If it were possible to pigeon-hole masters, or to draw up a sort of table in which each one was assigned his exact position according to the number of marks which his abilities might entitle him to claim, there can hardly be any doubt that the first place would have to be given to Velasquez as the master craftsman who in his work touched the highest level that the painter's art can reach. For him, certainly, painting seems to have presented no difficulties; his mastery is so serene, so unconscious, that it imparts a sort of inevitableness to his accomplishment. It may be, oddly enough, for that very reason that his greatness is apt to be insufficiently appreciated by the superficial observer; it is only the intelligent student who can estimate at anything like its full worth achievement so perfect that no sign of struggle or hesitation can be detected in it and, after all, what people without intelligence might think about such a supreme master as Velasquez does not matter in the least. To choose, from the series of memorable pictures he produced during his comparatively short life, one to represent him is not altogether easy, but perhaps the most suitable is The Surrender of Breda, which is an impressive record of an important historical event and a magnificently handled composition in which he brought together portraits of many Spanish notables. It was painted when he was between forty and fifty years old and when, with the accumulated experience of some five-and-twenty years, his powers had fully matured.
Although when Van Dyck died he was only forty-two he had done more than enough to establish fully his right to be counted among the greatest of the masters. He was exceedingly versatile and remarkably prolific, and throughout the whole range of his practice he maintained consistently a very high standard of accomplishment. As a portrait painter he was conspicuously successful, because to exceptional sensitiveness of draughtsmanship and an expressive directness of brushwork he added a delightful quality of style which gave to every canvas he handled an air of true distinction and the stamp of fine taste; and, also, because his pictures, with all their elegance and refinement of manner, were never lacking in frankness of statement or in firmness of characterisation. In the example of his achievement which is reproduced here all the technical essentials of his art are amply in evidence; the composition, drawing and executive rendering are completely satisfying but, in addition, the picture sounds a dramatic note which increases its significance. The story of the tragic circumstances in which the sitter was involved and the suggestion of his impending fate are conveyed with a subtlety that is wonderfully persuasive in the posing of the figures and the expressions on the two faces.
When Rembrandt painted this portrait of himself he was approaching the end of a career which, beginning in his early youth with every promise of a brilliant future, had brought him at the last, through years of increasing anxieties and troubles, to poverty and neglect. Yet the tragedy of his life did not weaken his powers and even when there might have seemed to be a danger that his trials would prove too much for him to endure he never failed to justify himself as a master of the highest rank. As he represents himself in this picture he does not suggest a man bowed down by misfortune; he is vigorous, alert and sure of himself and, if the face is that of a man fairly advanced in years, it gives no hint of senility. Indeed, the keynote of the portrait is a robust self-confidence, the confidence of a man who, as is plainly seen in his features, has suffered greatly but who still believes in his ability to deal firmly with whatever Fate may have in store for him. As an exercise in painting it is particularly instructive because the manner of the handling, loose and apparently careless as it is, shows very definitely the guidance of the knowledge of forms and modellings which he had acquired by years of searching observation. Only the artist who has subjected himself to strict discipline for a long period can hope to express himself with such freedom without running the risk of lapsing into incoherence.
To call Reynolds a follower of Van Dyck would not be unfair, for certainly he was greatly influenced by his famous predecessor and profoundly admired his work. But this admiration, though it persisted throughout his life, did not degenerate into merely mechanical imitation, and did not induce him to sacrifice his independence; rather can it be said that he used the inspiration of Van Dyck to stimulate the development of his own individuality, but that the character and quality of his paintings were determined by that individuality, which gave to them their special charm. Decidedly it is to him that must be ascribed the essentially English atmosphere which pervades his portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire and her daughter—even if in manner of treatment it is somewhat reminiscent of Van Dyck—for Reynolds was consistently English in sympathy and outlook. In other ways, too, it can be taken as a typical example of his practice; it has a characteristic suavity of design and beauty of decorative arrangement, it shows his finely cultivated taste in the rendering of the grace and distinction of the mother and the engaging innocence of the child and, though it is conceived in the joyous spirit appropriate to what may be called a domestic incident, it has no touch of triviality to diminish its dignity as a serious work of art.
GAINSBOrough (1727-1788)
The Morning Walk (Squire Hallett and his Wife)

Collection of Lord Rothschild

Gainsborough and Reynolds, the two most outstanding figures in British art history, were contemporaries and rivals, but they had one thing in common, their worship of Van Dyck. In all other respects they were widely apart; Reynolds was a student of styles who was interested in the theories of art and had a devout regard for tradition, Gainsborough was something of a revolutionary, cheerfully irresponsible and a passionate lover of nature, and he was content to seek in nature the inspiration for his work without stopping to consider whether or not the stylists would approve of what he was doing. His disposition was to take things as he found them and to paint them as he saw them, without troubling himself much about the reasons why they were as they were. With a weaker man this habit of mind might easily have led to superficiality, but he was too keen an observer to be satisfied with any incomplete record of his impressions. His pictures, indeed, were delightful in their freshness and delicacy of statement. To appreciate their qualities, to understand properly such a painting as The Morning Walk, it is necessary to take into account his temperament and his manner of approaching his subjects. This group, though in its general effect it does conform more or less to the conventions of portraiture as they were then accepted, has a freedom and vivacity of treatment which no one but Gainsborough could have given it.
RAEBURN (1756-1823)
The Macnab. National Gallery of Scotland

It is only in comparatively recent years that the greatness of Raeburn has been properly recognised and his right to rank among the best of the British masters admitted, yet by but few of the artists who were his contemporaries was he equalled and by fewer still was he surpassed. Possibly the straightforwardness and simplicity which generally characterised his work as a portrait painter may have kept from him a due measure of popular favour, or it may be that the majority of his works, despite their splendid vitality, were too unpretending in subject to appeal to more than a limited number of discerning people. Still, though this may be the reason, it is no excuse for the lack of appreciation of his portraits which was formerly only too common. For they have, and have always had, qualities which make them supremely distinguished, and among them there are some which must be reckoned as very definitely ambitious both in scale and manner of treatment. One of the most notable of these is the full-length of The Macnab, a striking figure of a Highland chieftain in the uniform of the Breadalbane Fencibles, of which he was lieutenant-colonel. It is an exceedingly powerful technical exercise in which Raeburn turned to full account the picturesqueness of the Highland costume and realised with a fine sense of character the rugged personality of his sitter. The robustness of sentiment is emphasised by the grim and lowering Scottish landscape which serves as background to the figure.
GOYA (1746-1828)
Charles IV of Spain and his Family. Prado, Madrid

In character and temperament Goya was essentially Spanish and in his art he reflected vividly the atmosphere of his country. Indeed, he is famous quite as much for his paintings of historical subjects as for his portraits, though in this latter branch of practice he showed clearly his remarkable powers of observation and penetration into human nature. Sometimes these powers were exercised with more than a hint of malice, as in the interesting collection of illustrations in which he depicted the dramatic events of the period during which he lived, a sort of pictorial commentary on Spanish history. But in portraiture he worked in a more serious spirit and, as can be seen in this Royal portrait group, his achievement was of high rank—it is worth while to quote what has been said about it by a man whose opinion deserves respect, De Beruete, the famous Spanish art historian: "It reveals the power of a mighty artist in the exact moment of his maturity and fullness, and is the summary, the synthesis and the archetype of his whole creation. The mastery of the art of painting shown in this work is perhaps what we admire most in it, for here, in a few days of work, he has shown us all the knowledge acquired in fifty odd years of toil and constant effort. It is truth itself, translated from nature to the canvas without formulas or preoccupation; and set there with paint brush, the palette knife, the finger and with the soul, with a spontaneity which enchants us, for it has something in it of the childish, and in its entirety astonishes us by its many traces of genius."
JOHN SINGER SARGENT (1856-1925)
H. G. Marquand. *Private Collection*

The master with whom Sargent might most fairly be compared is Frans Hals and that he was much influenced by Hals can hardly be questioned; there is a suggestion, too, of Raeburn in his work, something of that forcible directness which helped the Scottish painter to be so convincing as an interpreter of character. But, whatever may have been the influences which were combined to form the manner of Sargent's expression, it was assuredly the driving force of his own individuality that made him the dominant figure he became in our modern art world. He had an uncanny power of delving beneath the surface to read his sitter's mind, and this power enabled him to produce portrait after portrait which were amazing psychological studies marked sometimes by an almost disconcerting frankness but always observed and recorded with the shrewdest insight. He is excellently represented by this painting of Mr. Marquand, an uncompromising and, perhaps, unflattering likeness of a man with a very definite personality and mental characteristics well out of the ordinary, but a technical achievement that shows us, beyond possibility of dispute, what a splendid craftsmen Sargent was and with what depth of understanding and certainty of draughtsmanship and brush control he could create a portrait design that would do credit to a master of the first rank.