

An Idiosyncratic Collection of Academic Art

By Jerry Weiss



Sidney Dickinson, *The Silk Drape*, 1925, oil on linen.

among both artists and their subjects—we're invited to admire the technical virtuosity on display while recognizing the cultural exclusion that was once the norm. William Merritt Chase, included here with a bust portrait, spoke for the least defensible aspects of the tradition when he fumed against the ascendancy of the Ashcan School, "They go to the wretched part of the city and paint the worst people." Yet Chase's elitism is bound to the genteel facility of his work, which aligns him with Velázquez and van Dyck.

Facility is here in abundance. Sidney Dickinson's study of a nude seated in a barren room is painted with naturalistic polish (Dickinson was a longtime League instructor, whose self-portrait still hung in the lobby when I studied there in the late 1970s). It's an example of the predicament artists have

An Artist's Eye: The Lukas Charles Collection is the current exhibition at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts. The show is curated by Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gurpide, co-Artistic Directors at Lyme, and features more than two dozen portraits painted in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the collection of Lukas Charles, a radiologist by profession and artist and musician by avocation. One's trepidation that the exhibition would be a dusty offering is dispelled by the quality and variety of choices. In his introductory essay, Romas Tauras gets it right: "Each artist here was schooled in the academic tradition, and yet the effects of their education are anything but generic."

While not generic, the portraits share an adherence to the genre's conventions. Subjects are posed in finery against simple (brown) backdrops, and the compositions are reliably pyramidal, as seated figures tend to be. A prominent wall note acts as a disclaimer, and admits to the lack of diversity



Eduardo Zamacois y Zabala, *Untitled*, oil on linen.

confronted in the studio for centuries, the attempt to reconcile personal and academic idioms through the depiction of the figure. The canvas is less a window into Dickinson's world than an exhibition piece demonstrating his mastery.

There's usually a distinction between a portrait that is painted on commission and a study whose purpose is more personal. One is essentially a public performance with the implicit goal of flattering, if not ennobling, the subject. The other affords greater freedom to experiment or create a more idiosyncratic interpretation of the model. There are portraits that refuse to slide neatly into either category, like Léon Bonnat's *L'Italienne* and a study of an aging cavalier by Eduardo Zamacois y Zabala, each demonstrating finesse in painting fabrics and the application of chromatic reds. Both portraits present exotic character "types" or *tronies*, a sub genre of portraiture first popularized in seventeenth-century Dutch art.

Typical of the commercial practice in England are paintings by Frank Holl and Oswald Birley, each of whom were portraitists of the British royalty. The understated flair of Birley's *Sir Gordon Cunard Bt*, the sitter seen in riding outfit, is of the English school that reached its apogee in Sargent and remains popular today. Holl's *Portrait of Sir R.N. Fowler Bart M.P.* is satisfying for its tactile response to the Lord Mayor of London's ceremonial ornamentation, without ceding the subject's gravitas. Cesare Tallone's sensitive and frenetic brushwork places him in the orbit of his friend Antonio Mancini. Tallone was a painter of sensual appetites—the richly worked surface of *Lady in Blue* is more likely to delight an artist than please the gentry for whom it was presumably painted, and the luminous palette and lively touch of the intimate *La Popolana (Commoner)* is characteristic of his celebration of the feminine.

Mancini is here, too, with a head-and-shoulders portrait of British diplomat James Rennel Rodd that confounds distinctions between commercial and personal portraiture. Its inclusion is a pleasant surprise—despite the advocacy of no less a figure than Sargent, Mancini was painfully uncomfortable around wealthy patrons, preferring the company of the working class. The hyper-delicacy of his canvases—all the small brushstrokes that activate the surface—was an extension, or

expression, of his tightly wound personality. The Rodd portrait is direct and unusually engaging, and suggests real warmth between artist and sitter.

Émile Friant's *Madame Coquelin Mere*, painted after his return to France from a trip to the Netherlands, utilizes the limited palette, affinity for strong value contrast and scrutiny of detail that are representative of the artist's early work. From the negative spaces around the figure's arm and the lightning bolt of carmine drapery to the specificity of her hands and extraordinary head, *Madame Coquelin Mere* is a stunningly composed and executed painting. Madame's unflinching countenance can hold its own with the best character studies of its time.

Another diminutive pleasure is *Portrait of Emilia Vasiljevna Borisova* by Ilya Repin, the Ukrainian master. Although it is dated 1881, it warrants consideration as a possible study for the earlier *Grand Duchess Sofia Alexeyevna* in the Novodevitchy Convent, now in the Tretyakov Gallery. Lastly, there is an echo of Velázquez in Solomon J. Solomon's soft-focus portrait of his sister. Like other artists here, Solomon specialized in the biblical and mythological narratives that were mandatory for exhibition, theatrical stuff played to the balconies, none of which can rival this portrait for simple enchantment.

An Artist's Eye would appear to be a natural fit for Lyme, which was founded as an art academy devoted to teaching traditional skills. Later, it became a college (during which time this writer taught there), then closed briefly before reopening as an atelier school, now with Sokol and Gurpide as artistic directors. The hallways and studios are decorated with figure drawings dating from the nineteenth century that are a source of reference and an ideological foundation. "All of our exhibitions," Sokol wrote me, "are curated primarily to supplement our student's education, and to showcase figurative and representational art, past and present." Specific to this show, he noted that the paintings are "a great reminder to our students of how academic training can lead to a diverse range of expression."

The exhibition does evidence diversity of expression that can be assorted by context, era and nationality: even though artists crossed oceans to study in Paris and Munich, regional mannerisms



Antonio Mancini, *Portrait of James Rennel Rodd*, 1885, oil on linen.

were retained, distinctive to French, British, Italian, Spanish, and American painting. A Raeburn is identifiably eighteenth-century British, and a portrait by DeCamp is unmistakably of this country. It's to the credit of the collector and the curators that the selections don't read as a manifesto for a particular ideology, but rather as something eclectic, a sampling of individual artists working within academic conventions. Good for the students, as well as the rest of us who don't get to see a Repin or Mancini every day, or who may not recognize other names, all but eclipsed by time and tide.

An Artist's Eye: The Lukas Charles Collection is on view at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts through February 18, 2024.



Emile Friant *Madame Coquelin Mere*, 1885 oil on panel, 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 in.



Solomon Joseph Solomon, *Portrait of Henrietta Lowy Solomon The Artists Sister*, oil on board 20 1/4 x 16 1/4 in.