

JUDGE MELLON'S PORTRAIT—THE ARTIST AND THE COPYIST¹

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I MAY abuse your kind invitation to say a few words on the artist and on the copyist of the portrait of Thomas Mellon which has just been presented to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. This is an opportunity for me to preach on many topics. I hope you will not mind. I will not keep you too long. I know only too well that no souls are saved after the first five minutes.

My first point is that when a portrait is presented or unveiled, be it on canvas or in stone, marble, or bronze, mention is rarely made of or credit given to the author. You have corrected that situation and I rejoice that with the subject of the portrait, honor is given also to the artist and the copyist.

And now is the occasion to get another topic off my chest. It is the subject of portraiture. It is unfortunately true that the portrayal of the great of the world by the great in art is very rare today. A portrait in the sense of a likeness may not be a fine painting; in fact, in many instances the artist is so intent on the good likeness idea demanded by the sitter and his family and his friends that what should be a work of art takes on the appearance of an enlarged, tinted photograph. Now, don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that a portrait should not be a likeness or even give satisfaction to the vanity of the subject, but the prime requisite of a good portrait is that it should be a good painting—a work of art. Eric Gill once said: "You may use a painting for a good or bad purpose, but to be a good painting it must be done according to

¹ An address which followed Mr. Evans' formal acceptance of this portrait at the meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 20, 1947. Mr. O'Connor is the assistant director of the department of fine arts of the Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh.—Ed.

the nature of paint." A portrait is a painting, and it must be done according to the nature of paint. I hold that what is important is that the portrait should be a *symbol*, as it were, rather than an exact or photographic likeness of the subject. May I explain this. We have in the permanent collection at Carnegie Institute a painting entitled "Portrait of a Boy" by John Singer Sargent. The subject is Homer Saint-Gaudens, now Director of Fine Arts. It is his portrait as a boy of eight or nine. Very few visitors know who it is and, to all intents and purposes, it really does not matter. The portrait is a symbol of *boyhood*. It is any boy of that age at the time the portrait was painted, or any time. And then at Carnegie Institute there is another painting with the same title, "Portrait of a Boy." It is by Frank Benson. The sitter is unknown. He was just a model, but the portrait is the symbol of the wonderment and wistfulness of youth.

Chartran was fortunate in many of his sitters, and in none was he more so than in Thomas Mellon. Chartran had a tremendous flair for portraiture in the sense of likeness, and he had the ability to pose his subject gracefully and even dramatically. In the case of Thomas Mellon he was particularly happy, even for one of my criterion for a portrait, as Judge Mellon lent himself as a symbol of dignity and integrity and the serenity of old age. He was a heroic figure, an elder statesman, as it were, and Chartran has so portrayed him.

Now my first subject is Verona Kiralfy, who copied the portrait. May I say that the copy which is being presented to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania today bears testimony as to Miss Kiralfy's ability as a copyist. I recall that she made a facsimile of the Chartran portrait of Andrew Carnegie. The portrait was copied under instructions from Mrs. Andrew Carnegie, who presented it to the Chamber of Commerce of Pittsburgh. When it was completed and framed, it was hung beside the original in a gallery in which there were no other paintings. The late Samuel Harden Church was asked to criticize. He was unable to say which was the original and which was the copy, and that was also true of others who saw the portrait. I recall, too, that Miss Kiralfy copied a portrait of John Burgwin painted in 1788 by John Singleton Copley. The original hung in the Hall of History, State Library Building, at Raleigh, North Carolina, and Miss Kiralfy went there to make the copy in 1943. I have never seen the

original, but I do not think that it could have been much superior to the copy, which was made for the late J. O. Burgwin of Pittsburgh. Miss Kiralfy was able to simulate the mellowness of the paint and to reproduce John Singleton Copley's work with great fidelity.

May I say, with no intent to depreciate her work, that Verona Kiralfy was not an important original artist, but I hasten to remark that this does not detract in the least from her ability as a copyist. American painters imitate Mexican craftsmen in that they do not like to make copies, but for a different reason. Not so with Verona Kiralfy. She was always delighted with a copying job and undertook the task with zest and enthusiasm. I have in my notebook a phrase which may be the key to Miss Kiralfy's ability. It reads: "Simplicity and humility, those essential fundamental Christian virtues." It was humility which enabled her to enter into the spirit and imitate the technique of the artist whose work she was copying. It was said of Joseph Pennell that he never said a kind word or did an unkind deed. Verona Kiralfy went him one better, for I never knew her to say an unkind word or do an unkind deed. Gratitude, a virtue of the truly great, she possessed in a high degree. It was almost embarrassing to do a kindness or even a routine favor for her so great was her thankfulness. A friend of hers said to me the other day that Verona Kiralfy was generous to a fault. I know she was, but I know too of the promise made to the poor in spirit and to those who give generously of themselves and of their little store of worldly goods. They know well that God is never to be outdone in generosity.

Verona Kiralfy was born in New York in 1893. She came to Pittsburgh as a young girl with her parents, who were members of the famous Kiralfy Brothers Ballet. She studied with William Chase, a great artist and an even greater teacher, and at the Art Students League of New York. Later she held a fellowship with the Tiffany Foundation. She began to exhibit with the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh in 1912 and was represented in many of their shows until her untimely death on September 1, 1946. Throughout her career she copied paintings in the permanent collection of the Carnegie Institute, notably "The Penance of Eleanor" by Edwin Austin Abbey, and the "Disciples at Emmaus" by Dagnan-Bouveret. The latter was given to the Saint Barnabas Home by Thomas Mellon II, and the impression seems to be that the original is there rather than at Carnegie Institute. That's just another tribute

to Miss Kiralfy's ability as a copyist. She was commissioned by Thomas Mellon II in 1935 to copy the portrait of Judge Mellon by Chartran which had been presented to the Carnegie Institute in 1933 by his children. The copy was completed late in 1935 and hung in the residence of Thomas Mellon II until his death. It is this painting that has been presented to the Historical Society today.

And now a word about Théobald Chartran, who painted the portrait originally. He was born in Besançon in 1849. Besançon is a proud old town of Roman origin in eastern France. It is also the birthplace of Victor Hugo. Chartran was a pupil of Cabanel and a student at the Beaux-Arts, Paris. He began his career as a genre painter but soon turned to portraiture. He received the Prix de Rome in 1877 and lived in the Eternal City from 1881 to 1883. On his return to Paris, it was said that it was the ambition of statesmen, aristocratic women, renowned artists, and the intellectual élite to be painted by him. He had done a portrait of James Gordon Bennett in Paris, and on its completion he was invited by the Belmont family to come to the United States. From then on, until his death in 1907, he spent part of each year in New York painting portraits of statesmen, industrialists, and the socially prominent in American life.

Perhaps Chartran's greatest patron and friend in the United States was Henry Clay Frick. He did a portrait of Mr. Frick and was commissioned by him to paint President William McKinley and Andrew Carnegie. Both portraits were presented to the Carnegie Institute and hang in the office of the president. Mr. Frick also commissioned him to paint the signing of the peace protocol between Spain and the United States, which he presented to the government. In 1895 Mr. Frick commissioned him to do a portrait of Judge Mellon which was presented to the Allegheny County Bar Association. It was accepted by the association with the most appreciative thanks to Mr. Frick at its meeting on February 1, 1896, and the portrait hangs in the association rooms in the City-County Building. It is said that this portrait gave such satisfaction both as a likeness and as an excellent example of the work of one of the most eminent portrait painters of the period, that the sons of Judge Mellon commissioned Chartran to do a second portrait of their father and also one of their mother, Sarah Negley Mellon. These two paintings were generously given to the Carnegie Institute in 1933 by James

R. Mellon, Andrew W. Mellon, Richard Beatty Mellon, and the children of the late Thomas A. Mellon. It is the Carnegie Institute portrait of Judge Mellon which Verona Kiralfy copied.

A superficial glance would cause one to surmise that the Carnegie Institute portrait is a copy of the Bar Association one or vice versa. That is not the case. I understand that Judge Mellon posed for the second portrait in New York and it is signed in the upper right "Chartran, New York, 1896." Then there are some striking differences between the two portraits. I do not want to be partial, but I feel that the Carnegie Institute portrait is the better of the two. In the latter the Judge is posed in a more straightforward manner; he is more expansive and more at ease, for the artist has introduced in the second portrait a table on which the Judge's arm rests, and then he has carried out my idea of a symbolic portrait, as he has some books on the table which lend color and interest. I am sure that one of the books was either Blackstone's or Kent's "Commentaries."

And now that we have paid our respects to the copyist, Verona Kiralfy, to the artist, Théobald Chartran, what of the subject of the portrait? You may remember my remarks about the portrait's being among other things symbolic of the serenity of old age. When I was looking up the record of the presentation of the portrait to the Bar Association, I came on the minutes of its meeting of February 10, 1908. They were on the death of Judge Mellon. The first paragraph, in an exquisite script, reads: "Thomas Mellon, born February 3, 1813, died February 3, 1908, in the house which he had built for a home and in which he had lived for fifty-seven years, at or near the same hour of the day that registered his entry into the world, at the dawning of his ninety-sixth year, his spirit left his body and returned to Him who gave it." And so the portrait takes on for me the symbolic aspect of the old yet ever young in Eternal Life.