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A Brush with Grandeur – Philip Alexius de László



H.R.H. The Duchess of York, 1925 © Reserved/The Royal Collection

**EXHIBITION OF WORKS BY PHILIP ALEXIUS DE LÁSZLÓ,
M.V.O., P.R.B.A. (Budapest 1869- London 1937)
6 – 22 January 2004 at Christie's, 8 King Street, St. James's, SW1
Admission Free**

The exhibition is presented by the Hungarian Cultural Centre (HCC) in collaboration with Christie's and supported by the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage as part of Magyar Magic: Hungary in Focus 2004, a year long celebration of Hungarian culture in the UK to mark Hungary's entry to the European Union.

London – A groundbreaking exhibition celebrating the artistic career of Philip Alexius de László, the great painter of European Royalty and aristocracy, will take place at Christie's from 6-22 January, 2004. The exhibition will comprise over 90 oil paintings, including portraits of many members of the British and European Royal families, politicians and other leading men and women of the day alongside sketches, artist's materials, memorabilia and

photographs. It is the first retrospective of de László to be staged since his death in 1937 and will also include examples of his work as a landscape artist.

Sandra de Laszlo, one of the curators of the exhibition and author of the catalogue raisonné, said: “De László is now remembered chiefly as a society painter, especially of beautiful women. While this is certainly true, this does not do justice to the range of his talents. He was also a considerable draughtsman and a very perceptive and successful painter of men. The exhibition will show the full range of de László’s skills and will include landscape studies, painted in England, France and Egypt, still life paintings, animal pictures, street scenes and nudes, fine drawings and many charming, intimate studies of his own family.”

“Hungary’s talents have long been acknowledged around the world: names like Béla Bartók, Sir Alexander Korda and Dénes Gábor are household names across the globe. Philip de László (László Fülöp) has long been a member of Hungary’s Hall of Fame too. We are very proud to present a truly European journey of a great artist via this unique exhibition,” says Katalin Bogayay, Director of the HCC and Magyar Magic.

Philip de László was born in Budapest in 1869, the son of a tailor. From these humble beginnings he became the most successful court painter in Europe, painting members of almost every royal family of his day and four US Presidents.

De László’s life story is a rags to riches fairytale. While studying in Munich he met and fell in love with Lucy Guinness of the Irish banking family who he described in his journal as “the tall, lovely golden-haired Irish girl with the blue eyes on the threshold of life.” Lucy was on a Grand Tour with her sister Eva and when they left for Paris he followed them, borrowing the money for the fare. Such was the unsuitability of the match, that Lucy’s father forbade them to meet and they did not see each other again for seven years. After the death of Lucy’s father and with many important commissions behind him, de László’s circumstances were much improved. They met again and married in Ireland in 1900. Family pictures of the event show de László in traditional Hungarian dress – dark green velvet suit, high boots and hat trimmed with fur and an eagle’s feather, beside the more traditionally dressed Guinnesses. Their marriage was a happy one and they had five sons, one born in Budapest, two in Vienna and the others in London.

De László’s new wealth enabled him to build a magnificent home for his bride next to the Városliget Park in Budapest. This gothic villa contained three purpose-built studios and an apartment for his mother, to whom he was devoted. In 1907, after four years in Vienna, they

settled in England. Fortunately John Singer Sargent had virtually retired, apart from a handful of special commissions, leaving the path to success clear for de László.

The exhibition will include many of his most important commissions on loan from the Royal Collection, The National Trust, Lambeth Palace, Chequers, Mount Stewart and many distinguished private collections. A number of rarely seen pictures have been lent by the National Gallery of Hungarian Art in Budapest including *'The Hofbräuhaus'* (1892), showing the interior of a traditional German beer hall with Lucy Guinness posing as an enquiring English tourist, *'The Vesper Bell'* (1895), and also two of de László's most important early portrait commissions, Pope Leo XIII and Cardinal Rampolla (both 1900).

The highlight of the exhibition is the portrait of Her Late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, as Duchess of York in 1925. Also on loan from the Royal Collection are portraits of the Duchess's parents, the Earl and Countess of Strathmore, on loan from Glamis Castle and the present Queen Elizabeth as a girl, painted in 1933.

De László painted some of the great personalities of the age including statesmen, soldiers, scientists, writers, actresses and aristocrats. A portrait of the romantic novelist Elinor Glyn was commissioned by Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India who had been painted by de László in 1913. Curzon said "make a splendid thing of her, with her white skin, dark eyebrows, green eyes and Venetian red hair." The portrait of the spritely Mrs. Buchanan is another highlight. However, it has been said that the portrait was rather too revealing for Mrs. Buchanan and when the artist was called out of the room she rubbed her thumb on the canvas to blur the wet paint over her bosom.

De László also painted the beautiful young actress and singer Anny Ahlers who died after a fall from a balcony before the portrait was finished. The portrait had been commissioned by Sir Merrick Burrell whose daughter was persuaded to sit for the completion of the painting and wear Anny's sumptuous silk dress, which fitted her perfectly. Attached to the back of the painting are photographs of Anny on the stage and of her in the artist's studio posing for the portrait.

Other highlights include portraits of Vita Sackville-West aged 18 on loan from Sissinghurst Castle, Lady Castlereagh, the Duchess of Portland and a remarkable paintings of the distinguished Lady Wantage, and the Dowager Countess of Airlie.

De László also had considerable success in America, where his clientele included Presidents Roosevelt, Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, and many other eminent American citizens. He

also painted the industrial magnates of his day, the magnificent full-length portrait of the 1st Viscount Devonport will represent this genre. Among the other distinguished male sitters are Earl Curzon of Kedleston, Ernest Rutherford, Lord Louis Mountbatten, Field Marshal Lord Byng of Vimy, Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang, Sir Alfred East, and a conversation piece of Lord and Lady Lee of Fareham, who gave their house, Chequers, to the nation.

To mark Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004, the Hungarian Cultural Centre, with the financial support of the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, is organising a year-long cultural celebration, Magyar Magic: Hungary in Focus 2004. This will run from November 2003 to November 2004 in London and 10 major regional centres in the UK.

“When Hungarians move to a new home, it is customary for us to call on our new neighbours and say hello so that they can put a face to the new name on the door. When Hungary joins the European Union next year, our whole nation will become a new neighbour, and while we cannot introduce ourselves one by one, we would very much like to be more than just a new name on the list. And who could think of a better way of introducing ourselves than presenting our cultural heritage,” says Katalin Bogyay, Director of the HCC and Magyar Magic.

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Notes to Editors:

- The Artists' General Benevolent Institution, a charity supported by de László himself, will benefit from this exhibition.
- The exhibition will be selected and curated by Christopher Wood, Richard Ormond and Sandra de Laszlo, who is also compiling the catalogue raisonné. The project is managed by Beáta Somfalvi, exhibitions curator of the Hungarian Cultural Centre.
- **Press Private View:** Monday, January 5, 2004 at 10 a.m. - 12 noon, at Christie's.
- **Opening Hours:**
6 – 22 January 2004 at Christie's, 8 King Street, St. James's, SW1
Monday – Friday 9am to 4.30pm
Saturday and Sunday 12noon to 5pm
Enquiries: 0207 389 2978
- A fully illustrated catalogue will be available with picture descriptions by Sandra de Laszlo, essays by The Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, Christopher Lloyd, Richard Ormond, Christopher Wood, Suzanne Bailey and Gábor Bellák of the Hungarian National Gallery. The **catalogue**, 280 x 245 mm, 192 pages, printed in colour throughout, published by Paul Holberton publishing, ISBN 1 903470 18 8, price £30, will be available in hardback in bookshops worldwide from December 2003, and also in paperback at the exhibition at Christie's. Orders for the catalogue via www.paul-holberton.net or by telephone to Greenhill Book Distributors, 020 8458 6314.
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