

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS OF VIENNA

Author(s): JOSEPH MARSHALL FLINT

Source: *The American Magazine of Art*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (JANUARY 1931), pp. 24-30

Published by: The Frick Collection

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23931893>

Accessed: 19-04-2016 12:27 UTC

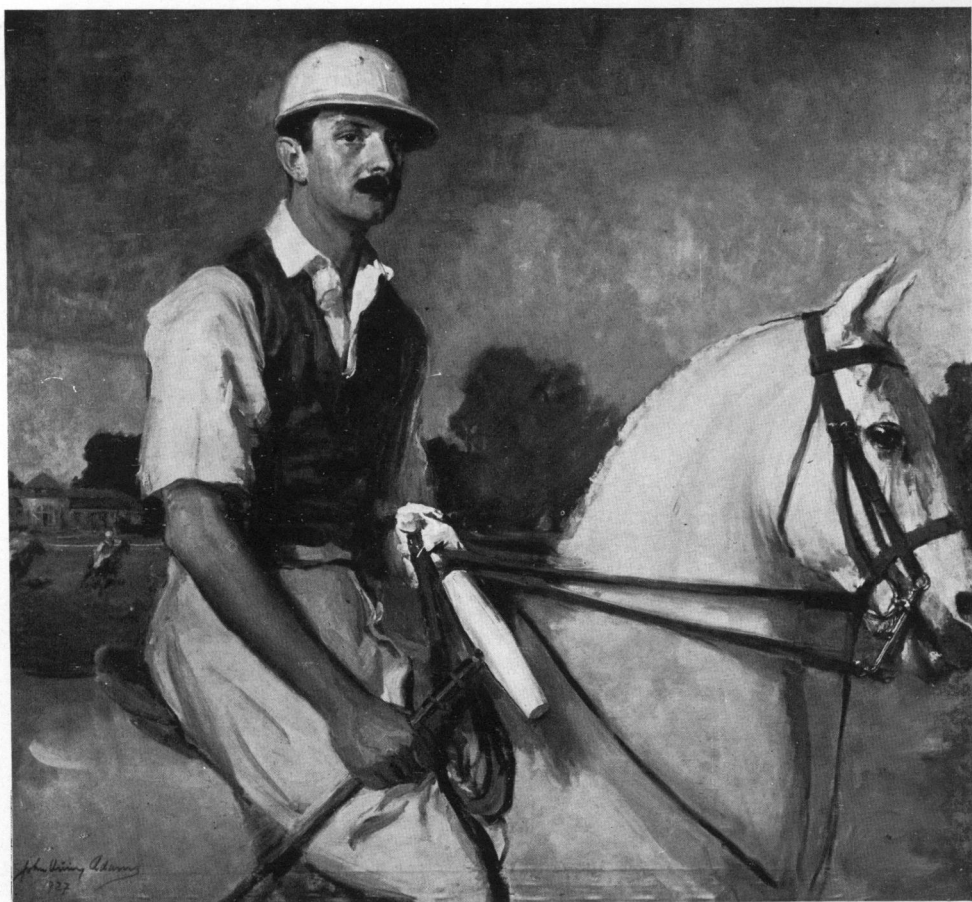
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Frick Collection is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Magazine of Art*



COUNT KINSKY, PRESIDENT OF THE VIENNA POLO CLUB

BY JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS OF VIENNA

BY JOSEPH MARSHALL FLINT*

PROBABLY both the intellectual insouciance of Imperial Austria and the artistic indifference of republican America have allowed Americans to remain in total ignorance of the fact that one of their compatriots has become the representative master of Vienna portraiture. Since the war, the American world has had other things to consider, and before the conflict Austria was so self-sufficient that foreign opinion, particularly American, carried little weight on either matters of politics or art. This fact, however, has an important and,

in some respects, historical significance. One has only to recall that since the days of Benjamin West, Copley, Stuart, Whistler, Abbey, Marr, and Sargent, America has always had in Europe an outstanding figure to represent, if not her artistic traditions, at least her artistic capacity. And it seems quite possible that the mantle of these representatives may fall on the shoulders of an American with the rather significant name of John Quincy Adams.

Adams' history is an intriguing one. His father, Charles Runney Adams,

*For many years Professor of Surgery at Yale University.



BARON ALPHONS ROTHSCHILD, JR.

BY

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts. As a young man, he developed a flair for music and went to Dresden to study with Ogeni. So talented did he prove that he was called to the Court Opera in Vienna as a dramatic tenor, where for a decade he sang the leading roles. His greatest distinction was the creation of the Prophet in Meyerbeer's opera. During this period, Charles Adams married a Viennese. Six months after the birth of his son, John Quincy, he resigned and returned to Massachusetts.

At the age of fourteen, the boy went back to Vienna with his mother, where he began to study painting with Eisenmenger and L'Allmand. The next stage in his training was under Carl Marr, Director of the Academy in Munich—himself an American—and he finished in Paris with Benjamin Constant and Whistler. It is of more than passing interest and, indeed, it may be ultimately significant that the two last stages of Adams' training were carried out under American masters. Seized with the *wanderlust* of a young artist in search of inspiration and material, he traveled through the Low Countries where he did a great deal of genre painting. The best known work of this period is the Triptyque, "The Way of Life," which now hangs in the National Gallery in Rome.

Later Adams returned to Vienna, where his social gifts, his love of people turned his interest and talents into their inevitable channel and he devoted himself exclusively to portraiture. Possessed of a sound and cosmopolitan training, endowed with an extraordinary sense of color, and eyes that while they saw truly only saw the best in people, it was not long before recognition rewarded his efforts. Elected to the *Künstlerhaus*, professional home of the foremost artists of Austria, of which he is now a leading and distinguished member, his canvases are among the outstanding features of its contemporary exhibitions. Upon nomination of the Academy, the Emperor conferred the Professor title upon Adams and then,

it might be said, he had arrived. Anyone at all worldly can realize, with the feelings of jealousy and nationalism common in artistic circles, such a career for an American in the mid-thirties called for something more than ordinary ability.

In Austria in general and Vienna in particular, ever since the latter part of the seventeenth century, princes have honored themselves by honoring the arts. Prince Lobkowitz drove Haydn to his birthday celebration, and Princess Esterhazy wrapt in her mantle the old son of a wheelwright lest he take a chill. Beethoven was a member of the household of Prince Lobkowitz. To this day, in Vienna, a master of the Arts takes his place with the best in the land. Professor John Quincy Adams' personal and social gifts, artistic skill and talents, it has been said, marked him as a painter of social history, for his canvases record the high-born, intellectual, and worldly personages of his time. While his reputation has traveled far and aristocrats of international repute are often found upon the dais in his atelier, it is curious that this man, who bore an American passport until 1917 and a distinguished American name, should have remained almost unknown to his countrymen.

The quality of Adams' art is not difficult to estimate. Like all the arts in Vienna, it follows the classical tradition. No trace of modernism with its inherent ugliness is found. It is only modern in the sense of his own dictum that anything really beautiful remains eternally modern. A skilled draughtsman, a master of lights and shadows, possessor of an uncanny feeling for textiles, he makes one want to lay one's cheek against his velvets and caress his diaphanous silks. But his greatest gift lies in the management of color; this is his forte. His canvases glow. No ordinary reproduction does them justice. It is no insult to the great Georgians to think of them as you gaze at Adams' work. In fact, one's mind reverts instantly to the best traditions of the



THE ARTIST AND HIS FAMILY

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

English School, although he, himself, acknowledges only Velasquez as the ideal he tries to follow. To the latter he certainly owes one of his fundamental rules—every portrait must be a picture irrespective of the person painted.

To one gallant trait Adams owes much of his success. He has a blind spot for ugliness. And while he is visually honest and paints what he sees to the last mole, wrinkle, or sagging jowl, nevertheless his peculiar gift of vision or artistic insight blends these things with the strong or beautiful features of a sitter ending in a portrait that represents the model's best. Some maintain that

Adams' finest results are with women. He paints men of strength, intellect, or beauty, and does them more than justice. But the appeal of a man to his art may not seem so great. This may be—probably is—due to the lack of textiles and color—the two accessories that offer him the greatest opportunity to exercise his particular gifts, for there is nothing rugged about his style. It is the painting of an exquisite.

Adams is a prodigious worker. He paints too much to maintain an output of even quality. He has his mediocre and his best. Whether it is the personality of his model or the complex of

spirit, face, figure and color that guides his brush to lay its utmost upon a canvas, it is difficult to say. But this much is certain: In the large format paintings, a type he still employs, one finds his greatest work; and at his best he ranks with the foremost painters of his day.

Among the canvases upon which Adams' reputation as a painter of social history is based might be mentioned those of Prince Adelbert of Prussia, Prince Lichtenstein, several of the old Austrian Emperors, the Archduke and Archduchess Hubert Salvator, Prince and Princess Fuerstenberg, Baroness Fries, Baroness Rothschild, Countess Karoly, Count Kinsky, and many others that belong to the brilliant days of Imperial Austria. Perhaps the best known and most sentimental of all his pictures is that of his own little daughter dancing to the music of Bach's Chaconne. This, known simply as "Chaconne," one sees everywhere in Austria—on post cards, calendars, and in colored process reproductions for house decoration. It is his "best seller" because of the tender presentation of the irresistible appeal of childhood. This same childish figure forms the central theme of Adams' well-known painting, "The Artist and his Family," interesting particularly because of the self-portrait and that of his wife and children.

Adams' technique varies with his moods and subjects. When a face is wholly satisfying he may let that remain as the one entirely completed part of a portrait. The details fade gradually from that central objective to the margins of the canvas, but it is supported by colors, materials, or a landscape or a room. The effect is a sort of semi-impressionism. When a face cannot be made the final dominating feature of a portrait, either from lack of character or beauty, he is apt to expend his talent on the accessories of background, colors or textiles. Sometimes his mood bids him combine the three, and the canvas from margin to margin is covered with meticulous work. In such portraits

one sees his finest style. Every now and then he has a flash of genius. . . .

With Adams there is always distinction in style, harmony, and composition. One sees the artist blended with the portraitist, especially in those examples of his work where he has given his sitters a landscape or a room as a background. Here pattern and lighting are essential and important elements of his craft, and he even handles shadows and perspective with a masterly hand to make the portrait plastic. And it is in the blending of these elements harmoniously, with color and insight into character, that Adams attains his objective of making every portrait a picture. In his more recent canvases, especially his portraits of men, he employs a monochromatic background that presents little but the sitter, whose portrait stands unsupported to be judged by the observer on its merits alone. This severe simplicity is a tax on skill, for it leaves the artist nothing but color, drawing, and portrayal of character to display his art.

* * * * *

During the war Adams was assigned to duty as an artist with the troops. From this period of activity emerged a number of works. One is exhibited in the War Museum in the Arsenal, another in Innsbruck. The latter, a large canvas of the Emperor surrounded by men from his favorite Kaiser Jaeger Regiment, hangs in the Museum of the Regiment at Berg-Isel, famed as the spot of Andreas Hofer's successive defeats of the French and Bavarians. The sketches for some of the figures in this picture must be placed among Adams' greatest work. Only two of the nine men survived the Armistice. Into their faces, without a trace of fear, Adams has painted this fate. Their eyes, expression, the lines of strain and tension display the war weariness of the men on every front. Anyone who suspects Adams of being incapable of painting men in the grand manner should study this work. They are only sketches, to be sure, and a soldier may offer the same satisfaction to his color sense that a



FRAU LILLY MARISCHKA

BY
JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

woman does. But here are the portraits of nine men in a strained spiritual state painted with superb virility.

* * * * *

Adams was about forty when the world catastrophe occurred, and his eyes, trained to see the beauties and color of the world, were forced to witness one of the ugliest half decades in history. Every other country regained soon after the conflict some semblance of its former existence; only Austria was left to pay the major portion of the bill. Destitute, shorn of all power, an economic monstrosity, permeated with Socialism, Vienna and its Hinterland offered in the post-war decade no spiritual stimulus or opportunities to a man of Adams' training or capacities. Nevertheless, he has kept faith with his talents and still produces beauty for a people to whom beauty seems more precious than food. He is, perhaps, the only prosperous artist in Austria, but his soul revolts as he contemplates the present life in Vienna in contrast to the brilliance of its past.

What Adams might have produced and what turn his career might have taken had it not been interrupted at forty by the world disaster, is idle speculation. But it is only fair to state the difficulties and obstacles he has to face during the period of his artistic maturity. Certainly no one who has not lived sympathetically with the uncomplaining and unresenting Austrians in the period of their adversity can realize the heroic sacrifices made to maintain their music, drama, and the arts up to something like their ante-bellum standards. Some day the world will recognize this courage, but until it does Austria provides sterile soil to maintain the arts, and no fertility to stimulate their growth. In such a milieu Adams worked for fifteen years. To his credit be it said no trace of ugliness or bitterness has ever left his brush.

Here, then, we have this curious phenomenon. An American, or half an American, to be exact, owing two-thirds of his training to two other Americans,

the acknowledged master of Austrian portraiture, almost totally unknown to his countrymen. Surely, with our need of beauty in this ugly age, with our questioned ability to produce creative artists, we are entitled to lay claim to this man who lost his citizenship through an accident of the war. And if, as seems probable, he is to inherit the mantle of those gifted expatriates who have represented in Europe for the past century the American capacity for art, then there is all the more reason to acknowledge and reclaim our own. Although almost so, Adams is not an absolute stranger to the land of his blood. He has exhibited single canvases in the Panama-Pacific Exposition ("The Amateur") and in the International Exhibition in Pittsburgh held under the auspices of the Carnegie Institute ("Contessa Portas"). Several of his portraits are owned by Americans, and one by Yale University. He is now revisiting this country, having come to New Haven in the Fall of 1930 to execute a second portrait commission for Yale.

John Quincy Adams is only fifty-five. He still stands on the threshold of his maturer period. Perhaps it may be given to America to provide him with the stimulus to produce from its life some of the remaining canvases that he has to offer the world.

Under the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry, established in 1925 at Harvard University as the gift of Mr. Chauncey C. Stillman of the class of 1898, Professor Arthur Mayger Hind, of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, London, is giving a series of lectures at the Fogg Art Museum this season on Rembrandt, beginning November 12 and concluding February 25. Under the auspices of the Division of Fine Arts of Harvard University this same great authority has given an additional course during November and December on "Early Italian Engravings and Woodcuts."