

CONTEMPORARY MASTERS

Some forty-five years ago I had the good fortune to study with the Boston painter R. H. Ives Gammell, who about as many years before had the privilege of meeting John Singer Sargent – a span of almost a century. Through Gammell I was able to take a leap in time. At his atelier direct knowledge of the working methods of Sargent had survived, for Gammell's teacher William Paxton received his formative training from Sargent's close friend and colleague Dennis Bunker. Even though the Boston School had faded from the scene and Sargent's international reputation was at a low ebb, Gammell made it all still seem alive and conveyed the idea that Sargent, above all, is a very contemporary master.

Today, as Gammell predicted, the art of Sargent has returned to the fore. At the National Portrait Gallery the exhibition *Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends* currently features over seventy works with the claim that Sargent was the greatest portrait painter of his generation. Once dismissed as a fashionable society painter, Sargent is emerging as a prolific genius of vast range and originality. Nothing confirms this more than Richard Ormond's monumental catalogue raisonné, which in 2014 published the eighth volume of Sargent's oeuvre.

That Sargent's legacy is indeed actual is to be seen not far from the National Portrait Gallery at 34 Duke Street, St. James's. *Contemporary Masters* celebrates the work of three of my former pupils, Nicky Philipps, Jamie Routley and Jamie Coreth. I would like to express my appreciation for what Sara Stewart has achieved at Fine Art Commissions over the years. With regard to the exhibitors, Sara showed a keen eye for quality in discovering Nicky Philipps soon after Nicky's return to London from Florence. Her judgment proved right, as works by Nicky now grace the Royal Collection and the National Portrait Gallery. Sara's more recent discoveries include Jamie Routley and Jamie Coreth. In 2012 Jamie Routley received the BP Young Artist Award and the following year exhibited his allegorical self portrait *Inner Dialogue*. The newest arrival Jamie Coreth, having just completed his training in Florence and London, has already attained a level that shows him to be an artist of undeniable promise.

It is not by chance that these three gifted oil painters share a bona fide link to Sargent, as they each were trained in the visual method that he himself employed. The best eyewitness account of Sargent's use of this method is given by his friend Sir William Rothenstein in *Men and Memories* (1931, pp. 192-3): "Sargent, when he painted the size of life, placed his canvas on a level with the model, walked back until canvas and sitter were equal before his eye, and was thus able to estimate the construction and values of his representation." Rothenstein then goes on to observe that "...the placing of the canvas near to, or at a given distance from, the subject, so that the sitter and image can be compared together, is an essential factor of representative painting. Painters often deplore the loss of tradition, and speak with regret of the days when artists ground their own colours; but knowledge of the visual methods of the older painters, rather than of their technical practices, seems to me of equal, if not of greater importance. The methods of Velazquez and Hals were not unlike Sargent's."

In his account, Rothenstein uses the term *sight-size* for the visual method of comparing the canvas and model to scale. As far as I know, it is the first time the word appears formally in print. Gammell used the same term in Boston when he taught me to view the canvas alongside the subject from a distance. But as Rothenstein points out, the visual method goes back long before the term was coined. A sight-size portrait by a past or contemporary master is not static or photographic. It is characterized by a freedom of brushwork that comes into focus when observed from afar. Rather than restrict artistry, it liberates individual expression. Both Reynolds and Gainsborough used the same procedure, but their handling of paint and characterization can never be confused – so, too, with Velázquez and Hals, or Whistler and Sargent. Sight-size is not a stylistic convention, fashion or manner delimited by a particular epoch; it is, instead, a visual continuum that reaches both to the future and the past. For this reason masters of different eras and origins like Velázquez, Raeburn and Sargent can bear such a close kinship.

The art of oil painting will have a future, though, only if understood, for the subtleties of seeing take years of training and a lifetime of practice. We should admire the courage of those contemporary masters who put aside the camera lens and see nature through their own eyes, who paint directly from life and, in so doing, impart to their work the sense of life.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Charles H. Cecil". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

Florence, January 2015