

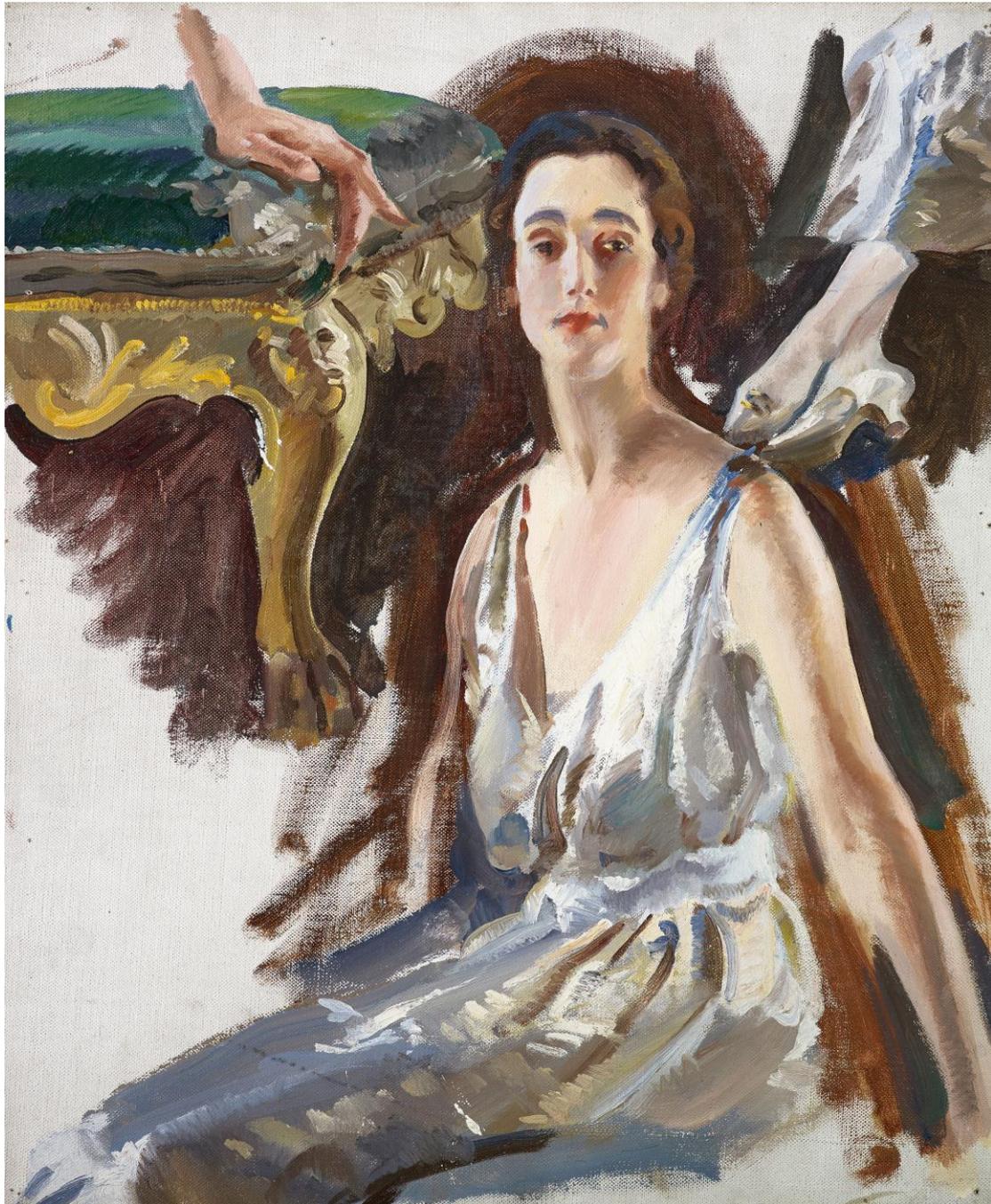
Charles Sims (1873-1928)

**SYBIL, COUNTESS OF ROCKSAVAGE, LATER MARCHIONESS
OF CHOLMONDELEY, c.1922**

Oil on canvas 55.3 x 45.7 cm

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Art Fund_



The Artist

Charles Henry Sims was a painter of portraits, figures, landscapes and imaginative semi-abstracts in oils, tempera and watercolours, and a mural painter. His work ranges from early outdoor figure scenes painted with a light, fluent touch, to formal portraits, and paintings in which he adopted a symbolist or primitive style. Sims was born in London in 1873, the son of a costume manufacturer. He was sent to Paris during 1887-88 to learn commerce, but began full-time studies at the Royal College of Art in 1890. Sims also studied at the Académie Julian in Paris during 1891-92 and at the Royal Academy Schools from 1892-95. At first influenced by William Quiller Orchardson and Jules Bastien-Lepage, his later work shows an interest in Italian 15th-century painting and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Sims exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1894. In 1903 he returned to Paris to study briefly under Marcel-André Basset. His continental training probably accounts for his fluent handling of paint and his confident treatment of space and atmosphere, qualities which rapidly gained him critical and academic success. His first solo exhibition was held at the Leicester Galleries, London in 1906. Sims subsequently exhibited widely, showing many works in London at the Royal Academy, the Leicester Galleries, the Royal Watercolour Society and Barbizon House. His painting *Childhood* was purchased by the Musée du Luxembourg, Paris in 1900, and two of his paintings were purchased by the Chantry Bequest for the Tate Gallery – *The Fountain* in 1908 and *The Wood beyond the World* in 1913. Sims was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1908 and a full member in 1915. He was also elected to membership of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters in 1904, the Royal Watercolour Society in 1914, and the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour in 1926. Sims won gold medals in Amsterdam and Pittsburgh in 1912 and held a solo exhibition at the Knoedler Galleries, New York in 1926. He was an Official War Artist in France in 1918, Keeper of the Royal Academy Schools 1920-26, and a Trustee of the Tate Gallery 1920-27. In addition to his many society portraits, Sims painted *King John Confronted by his Barons* for St Stephen's Hall, Palace of Westminster in 1925-27. In 1926 he began a semi-abstract series of *Spirituals*, pictures of a mystical nature which were initially rejected by the Royal Academy. Sims took his own life at St Boswells, Scotland in 1928, and was included in the Royal Academy *Late Members* exhibition of 1933. He was the author of *Picture Making: Techniques & Inspiration*, which was published posthumously by his son Alan Sims in 1934 with a critical survey of the artist's work and life.

The Sitter

Sybil Rachel Betty Cecile Sassoon was born in 1894 in London and was brought up there and in Paris. Her father was Sir Edward Albert Sassoon, 2nd Baronet (1856-1912), businessman and politician. Her mother was Lady Sassoon, née Aline Caroline de Rothschild (1865-1909), daughter of Baron Gustave de Rothschild (of the French branch of the family) and a famous society hostess and friend of the Prince of Wales. Her parents belonged to two of the richest and most prominent Jewish families of the 19th century. Her adored brother was the glamorous Sir Philip Sassoon (1888-1939), politician, patron of the arts, and one of the greatest hosts of his time. Following the deaths of their parents, Sybil and Philip were among the wealthiest people in England.

Sybil became Countess of Rocksavage on her marriage in 1913 to George Cholmondeley, Earl of Rocksavage (1883-1968), eldest son and heir of the 4th Marquess of Cholmondeley of Cholmondeley Castle, Cheshire, with its 7,500 acre estate. Sybil had three children: Lady Aline Caroline Cholmondeley (1916-2015), George Henry Hugh, who became 6th Marquess of Cholmondeley (1919-90) and Lord John George Cholmondeley (1920-86). The present Marquess of Cholmondeley is her grandson. In 1917, during the First World War, the Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS) was formed due to Sybil's influence with the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and she became its Assistant Principal.

Sybil became Marchioness of Cholmondeley in 1923 on the death of her father-in-law, and her husband inherited Cholmondeley Castle and became the 5th Marquess of Cholmondeley, Earl of Rocksavage and Viscount Malpas. He served as Lord Great Chamberlain of England in 1936 and 1952-66. The couple had lived at Houghton Hall, the Cholmondeley family's Norfolk seat, since 1919, and this remained their principal residence. After the 4th Marquess's death in 1923 his widow lived on at Cholmondeley Castle until her death in 1939 and, on his marriage in 1947, the castle became the home of Lord and Lady Cholmondeley's eldest son, Hugh, the future 6th Marquess. Nevertheless, Sybil and her husband made annual visits to Cholmondeley and took a great interest in the Cheshire estate and the welfare of its staff and tenants, who retained very fond memories of the couple's visits for decades afterwards.

Sybil was a lady of striking beauty and intelligence, highly cultured and a wonderful hostess, strong-minded and possessed of a very considerable fortune. She knew almost all the notable artists, politicians and

sportsmen of her time. She was also a good shot, and loved to race Bugattis to the south of France. Like her brother Philip she was an enthusiastic patron of contemporary art, and her portrait was painted by John Singer Sargent (a close friend since her childhood) and by Sir William Orpen (another close friend).

During the Second World War Sybil served as Superintendent of the WRNS from 1939-46, and virtually ran the service when the Director fell ill shortly after the start of the war. She was appointed CBE in 1946, established the Cholmondeley Prize for poetry in 1966, and was widowed in 1968. Her efforts over many years for Anglo-French friendship were recognised in 1984 when President François Mitterand, on a state visit to Britain, bestowed on her the Légion d'Honneur. Sybil is perhaps best remembered today for her restoration of Houghton Hall, one of England's greatest 18th-century houses. She died at the age of 95 in 1989.

The Portrait

The painting is a study for *The Countess of Rocksavage and her Son* by Charles Sims. The finished portrait, measuring 6 x 4 feet (183 x 122 cm), was exhibited at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition in 1922, where it was exceptionally well received. *American Art News* narrowed down the contest for 'Picture of the Year' to just Sims's portrait and Sargent's of the same sitter, while the *Illustrated London News* reported that it was "acclaimed as the most interesting Academy picture of the year". The finished portrait remains in the Cholmondeley family collection.

Sybil Cholmondeley had known Charles Sims since at least the First World War, and he did some decorations after the war for Philip Sassoon's London house. The portrait shows Sybil seated on a stool from the Green Velvet Bedchamber at Houghton Hall.

The canvas is painted in a remarkably brisk, confident manner as befitting a preliminary study. The brushstrokes vary throughout the work with short, choppy strokes intersecting long, sweeping ones. Areas like the stool are given a near-tangible presence through the use of impasto, capturing the details of the carved wood.

As well as a visually gratifying image, it is also a fascinating lesson in portrait painting, revealing much about the processes involved in capturing a physical likeness. Anatomy is notoriously difficult to translate to canvas, and here we see how Sims has focussed his attention

on recording the subject's feet and exposed hand, as well as ensuring he has recorded the correct proportions of the torso and head. A sitting with the countess was doubtless time-sensitive, and it would have been in the artist's best interest to record as much as possible in the allotted time. This same rapid process was also applied to the figure of the countess's son, who received a similar treatment in a study of the same dimensions now in a private collection.

A number of tiny pinholes around the corners and edges of the canvas suggest that it was originally fastened to a board when the study was made, and later stretched around the wooden support. This is frequently seen with preliminary studies, and indeed the same pin holes are also visible in the aforementioned study of the son.

Poems inspired by the painting

River Daughter, River Mother

For Sybil Sassoon, later Marchioness of Cholmondeley

She runs through my mind like a great river
rising out of desert rain or mountain glacier.
She binds continents, worlds together,
borders have no meaning to her.
She is confluence of East and West,
river daughter, river mother.
She gathers poets, painters to her.

She carves her passage patiently,
her tributaries stretch into the future.

She travels on, knowing
private reaches of slow green river,
weeping willows, water meadows
on English country house estates.
But Sybil does not laze.
She wends her stately, diplomatic course,
is friend and confidante of politicians, princes.

In flat north light she's cool as pewter,
yet sometimes a sadness lies beneath her surface,
clouds her heavy-lidded eyes.
Loss is not a stranger to her
though many things are left unsaid.

She is mystery, enigma.
She murmurs and meanders.
She is womanly, wears her power
lightly as a swan wears feathers.

And then the river falls
in cataracts of white lace tumbling over ...
In picture after picture
diamonds flash and sapphires glitter.
Artists try to capture her on canvas and on camera
in all her silken grandeur.

Sybil brings the silt of riches with her,
nurtures architects and gardeners.
She spreads the fingers of her delta,
river daughter, river mother.
At the point of her departure
many things are left unsaid.
Sybil travels on.

Tonia Bevins
2018

Of a Land – Four scenes across Cheshire

Mutability is the epitaph of worlds.

Change alone is changeless.

*People drop out of the history of a life as of a land,
though their work or their influence remains.*

Isabelle Varley (Mrs G. Linnaeus Banks)

Rocksavage

There were meadows and marshes where Arcton Plants now stand.
In a generation they were raised across our land.
Where once the reeds were bustled by the night-wind blowing by,
there's the endless roar of power and lights across the sky.

You'll find Norton, Sutton and Clifton – split upon the hill,
Aston rests upon the plain, Weston Point on the Canal.
By the hollow that is Halton the castle shambles down
into Runcorn New Town with its veins of old sandstone.

And when you hear the boundary grass shaken by the wind
cast your mind back to the days when farmers worked the land.
More productive than a cornfield the new crop may seem
but it's men and women built it all in plumes of smoke and steam.

People

Failed, crumbled walls re-call of Cromwell's guns
feudal lords and slaves who came and left
and lived and died within the haloed triangle –
hall, priory and castle, dug ditches, cut canals.

Who ordered a new order?
Not farm labourers; their fathers, mothers,
their sons or daughters.
Changelessness of change
drives baron into patrician. Enriched,
a peasant who thirty generations on remains
a serf. Dirty fingernails
transformed to algorithms – mud to mortgage.

These named and nameless ones
whose livelihood became Rocksavage Works,
the chemical complexity of engineering – days
days when Mond's word rang that paternalistic bell.

Who might now recall Keith, Fred,
Alan, Harvey. Family names too trip
across the mind; Hughes, Hayes, Betton ...
Who were the servants in the Hall
feeding swine, followed the painful plough?
While others enshrined in churches,
or noble chapels of hatchments, gilded lattens
held symbolic peerages, knighthoods of the shire,
left a grange or two, occasional appellation.
History is never kind and rarely just.
We cannot list nor marshal evidence
for all our epitaphs, our world's mutability.

Sybil – Marchioness of Cholmondeley, Countess of Rocksavage

*Dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen.
Heinrich Heine – Almansor 1821 (Where they have burned books, they
will end in burning human beings)*

Duttons, Baggiley, Danyers, Savage; nobility by possession.
Dynasties founded by selection, descent and death.
Normans to Georgians, an earldom bestowed
while Rocksavage Hall decays.
Three centuries dismembered to a green rough mound.
Though titles and influence remain.

Across the sylvan plain from Clifton
a more productive view, kinder than mudflats, cruel gales –
an aspiration rising, promising ancestral comfort's softnesses.
Selected love perhaps grows out of mutual security.

Respectfully Your Ladyship,
place never is a home. Cheshire, Norfolk
as with ancestors, its impetus
further shaping generations.
New age and old claims poor and noble.
No marchioness now, you are grains –
partner in a universal community of dust.

Long time ago, perhaps, worlds of bankers,
acres of landed gentry merged, re-emerged,
merged again. The wealthy have no need of country.
How will you find the time
sunk in good works and patronage?
And did you sense your heritage
catching up on you in 1933 – days of burning?
Or recall an occasion finding
that library book overdue centuries ago?
How did you spend your time, learning, gardening;
ways of life outside your gates
and claret stones or other honey walls?

New Crossing

Clifton chapel is for sale they say,
three hundred thousand pounds and more;
tastefully refined in oak with chandeliers
no trace of godly souls – folk who came

to praise and pray.

You'll drive for miles. The expressway
will take you far from that new home.
But will you find a library
or have the books been burnt,
the readers all been turned away?

In half an hour, across the bridge
a world full of consumptive stores
you'll pay the toll, not count the cost –
a new crossing, another dawning, computer phones,
navigation doors to doors.

Join those who know how pounds pave
a richer life. Choose a place,
reward yourself. Take leisure time
from what you've earned.
Determine your own pace.

Hills, rivers and canals pass below.
Ahead the swathe of towns; behind us homes
of those working folk who come and go
where generations add, subtract, bring their labour –
Multiplying.

Ian M. Parr
2018