

Philip Alexius de László (1869-1937)

RICHARD CREWE-MILNES, EARL OF MADELEY, 1914

Oil on artist's board 67 x 67 cm

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The Artist

Philip Alexius de László was born in humble circumstances in Budapest, Hungary. He left school aged nine and took apprenticeships to support his family. While still working, he earned a part-time place at the Drawing School in Budapest and later won scholarships to study in Paris and Munich. In 1900 he married Lucy Guinness, of the banking line of the family, and settled in London in 1907, the year John Singer Sargent retired from commissioned portraiture. For the next thirty years he was one of the most celebrated portrait painters in Britain and, indeed, in

Europe. Cosmopolitan, international in outlook and a master of high style and painterly panache, his bravura portraiture in the grand manner is the last great flowering of a style stretching back to Van Dyck. He depicted more royal sitters than any other painter in the history of art, together with popes, presidents, prime ministers, statesmen, aristocrats, industrialists, financiers, members of the armed forces, academics, teachers, actors, musicians, writers, fellow artists, children, and his own family. His portraits are marked by flowing brushwork and scintillating effects of light and colour that bring his subjects vividly to life. His sitters are invested with the aura of wealth and glamour, power and prestige. De László was renowned for his ability to capture likenesses and convey character, his speed and directness, and his enormous gift for friendship.

The Sitter

Richard George Archibald John Lucian Hungerford Crewe-Milnes, Earl of Madeley, known as Jack, was born on 7 February 1911. He was the only son of Robert Crewe-Milnes, 1st Marquess of Crewe (1858-1945) and his second wife Margaret (1881-1967). Lord Crewe was a distinguished Liberal Statesman, successively Lord Lieutenant of Ireland 1892-95, Lord President of the Council 1905-08, Secretary of State for the Colonies 1908-10, Leader of the House of Lords 1908-16, Secretary of State for India 1910-15, Ambassador to France 1922-28, and Secretary of State for War 1931. In 1899 he married Lady Margaret Primrose, daughter of his political ally Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (Prime Minister 1894-95) and Hannah de Rothschild (heiress to Mentmore Towers). Lord Madeley's sister Lady Mary Crewe-Milnes (1915-2014) married George Innes-Ker, 9th Duke of Roxburghe in 1935: she inherited this portrait of her brother and kept it until her death in 2014. In 1894 Lord Crewe inherited Crewe Hall, one of Cheshire's grandest country houses. Lord Madeley was heir to this great estate and grew up here and at Crewe House, Curzon Street, Mayfair (now the Saudi Arabian Embassy). Tragically, he died on 31 March 1922 of measles, mastoiditis and meningitis: he was just eleven years old. His funeral was reported in *The Times*:

The funeral of Lord Madeley took place yesterday at Barthomley Church, a few miles from Crewe, where the ancestors of the Marquess of Crewe are buried. A large crowd of villagers, tenantry, and others of neighbouring places were present. The procession came by road from Betley Road Station, the coffin being placed on a wagon and bearing several beautiful floral tributes ... workers on the estate acted as bearers.

Lord Madeley was buried in the churchyard at Barthomley, and both his parents were subsequently buried there. In 1925-26 Lord Crewe had the chancel of Barthomley Church rebuilt by the Gothic Revival architects Austin & Paley in memory of his son. The lack of a male heir was one of the key reasons why Lord Crewe subsequently sold the Crewe estate to the Duchy of Lancaster in 1936, and the marquessate became extinct on his death in 1945.

The Portrait

Lord Madeley was painted at the age of three and a half in de László's studio on Campden Hill, London. Portrait studies like this could be completed in two or two and a half hours, but Lord Madeley's seems to have taken at least two sittings, since de László's Sitters' Book records 'Jack Madeley' on 28 October 1914 but the painting is dated November 1914.

De László was often asked to paint children, and his fluid and rapid technique allowed him to capture their animation and inquisitive innocence. By 1914 he had five sons under the age of thirteen and all were regular models for their father, resulting in some of his most imaginative study portraits.

De László's work involved a high level of technical skill, exact but never over-detailed. He never sketched his sitters' faces beforehand but simply took up his brush and started the picture, beginning by shaping the principal contours. His technique naturally lent itself to the portrait study, of which he was an absolute master. When painting a simple head or a head and shoulders, he would rapidly complete the face and head, allowing his brush strokes for the flesh or the clothes or drapery to fade away, so leaving much of the canvas blank. These portraits have a freshness and spontaneity that many have admired more than his finished portraits.

De László's greatest strength was his ability to make his sitters look relaxed, animated and natural. As Anthony Tahi observed in *The Studio* in 1901, "He insists that the eye should not seem to be *painted*, but should actually *see*; that the lips should not be painted and drawn but really exist on the canvas. Thus it comes about that there is a certain charm in all of de László's portraits".

De László wrote "I always prefer to paint in the frame, and if possible choose a genuine old one"; "I believe that the frame is an integral part of

the picture and must be there from the beginning.” The carved and gilded frame of Lord Madeley’s portrait, in an early Louis XV style, was chosen by de László. An identical frame is shown in a photograph of a de László portrait dated 1912 (current location unknown). De László obtained the majority of his frames from two London framemakers: the frame of Lord Madeley’s portrait was probably supplied by Emile Remy, who carved replicas when antique frames were unavailable.