THE SIGHT-SIZE PORTRAIT TRADITION

Since the earliest commentaries on painting, it has been acknowledged that in order to evaluate the work as a whole the artist should stand back at a distance. In *Della Pittura* of 1436, Leon Battisa Alberti proposes that if a painting be likened to a vertical plane which intersects the field of vision, then there is an optimal position from which it should be viewed: "Each painter, endowed with his natural instinct, demonstrates this when, in painting this plane, he places himself at a distance … from which point he understands the thing painted is best seen."[1] He further writes: "Know that a painted thing can never appear truthful where there is not a definite distance for seeing it."[2]

A generation later, in a passage from his *Tratatto della Pittura,* Leonardo da Vinci states: "It is also advisable to go some distance away, because then the work appears smaller, and more of it is taken in at a glance, and lack of harmony and proportion in the various parts and in the colours of the objects is more readily seen."[3] He is also the source of the maxim that the artist should stand back at a distance three times that of the largest dimension of the subject: "When you have to draw from nature stand three times as far away as the size of the object that you are drawing."[4]

It is noteworthy that these are the observations of Italian painters who, conversant with the demands imposed by large-scale fresco decoration, were everywhere concerned with breadth of effect. The notion of viewing a picture at a distance was of less consequence to painters in Northern Europe who usually worked on a smaller, even miniature scale,.

In his *Lives of the Artists,* at the beginning of the chapter on Titian, Vasari draws attention to the fact that Giorgione painted directly from life - as a criticism - and that he was one of the first to do so: "Despite his development of a fine style, however, Giorgione still used to work by setting himself in front of living and natural objects and reproducing them with colours applied in patches of harsh or soft tints according to life; he did not use any initial drawings, since he firmly believed that to paint directly with colours, without reference to drawing was the truest and best method of working and the true art of design."[5]

Vasari concludes the account of Titian with an assessment of the difference between his early and late manner: "For the early works are executed with incredible delicacy and diligence, and they may be viewed either at a distance or close at hand; on the other hand, these last works are executed with bold, sweeping strokes, and in patches of colour, with the result that they cannot be viewed from near by, but appear perfect at a distance … The method he used is so judicious, beautiful, and astonishing, for it makes pictures appear alive and painted with great art, but it conceals the labour that has gone into them."[6]

Titian's late manner is anticipated in his 1545 *Portrait of Pietro Aretino*, who complained on its completion that he found it *piu tosto abozzato che fornito* – more sketched than finished. The *Pietro Aretino* is, in fact, one of the earliest life-size portraits to convey unity of impression when seen at a distance. That the brushwork of the cloak comes into focus from afar indicates that Titian stood back while working.

The bold, sweeping strokes and patches of colour described by Vasari had a profound influence on painters who sought to emulate Titian's rich colouring and painterly technique. Rembrandt's *Portrait of Jan Six* (1654) shares many visual properties with the *Pietro Aretino*. The drapery and hand are painted very loosely in contrast with the focus on the face, and it is noteworthy that Rembrandt, like Titian, worked directly from life rather than from drawings. The broad approach employed by both painters demands that the portraits be viewed at a distance. In *The Artist in his Studio* of 1629, Rembrandt depicts himself standing back from his canvas, while in a letter of 1639 to Constantijn Huygens he advises that a certain picture be so hung "that it can be viewed from a distance."

Even during his lifetime, Frans Hals was renowned for his bravura technique, and for painting *naar het leven* - from life. Theodorus Schrevelius describes how "by his extraordinary manner, which is uniquely his, he virtually surpasses everyone. His painting are imbued with such force and vitality that he seems to defy nature herself with his brush. This is seen in all his portraits – and he has made unbelievably many. They are painted in such a way that they seem to breathe and live."[7] Although no accounts of Hals' studio methods survive, there is no question that his portraits come into the proper focus when one steps back from the picture. Indeed, it is improbable that a painter sitting at the easel would ever contrive, much less admit, such a rough and free finish.

Palomino de Castro Y Valasco offers an intriguing description of Velázquez's method while painting the *Portrait of Admiral Pulido Pareja* (1639): "He did it with Pencils and Brushes, which had extraordinary long Handles which he sometimes made use of to paint at a greater Distance, and more Boldness: so that near-hand, one does not know what to make of it: but far off, it is a Master-piece."[8] The long brushes are again mentioned with regard to other portraits: "He likewise drew the Picture of Seignor *Camillo Maximo*, a renowned Painter, the most illustrious *Segnora Dogna Olympia*, and *Flaminia Triunfi*, an exceeding fine Paintress: all these Portraits he drew with long-handled Pencils and Brushes, and in the strong Manner of the great Titian."[9] This approach is exemplified in his 1650 *Portrait of Juan de Pareja,* which was painted preparatory to the official portrait of Pope Innocent X. In his masterpiece *Las Meninas,* Velázquez portrays himself standing at work away from the canvas.

The practice of standing back to compare a portrait alongside the sitter on a life-size scale was first recorded by Roger de Piles (1635–1709) in his *Cours de peinture par principes* of 1708. After citing an account of Van Dyck's procedure, he concludes the section *La practique* with a paragraph on how to finish a portrait. He recommends putting the portrait next to the model so that the artist can judge definitively, at a reasonable distance, by comparison, what must be done to perfect the work: … *c'est de mettre le portrait aupres du modele, afin que dans une distance raisonnable vous puissiez juger definitivement par la comparaison que vous en devez faire s'il ne manque rien pour l'entiere perfection de votre ouvrage*.[10] In the English translation of 1743, *The Principles of Painting*, the passage is summarised: "The portrait being now supposed to be as much finish'd as you are able, nothing remains, but, at some reasonable distance, to view both the picture and the sitter together, in order to determine with certainty, whether there is anything still wanting to perfect the work."[11]

That both Reynolds and Romney owned copies of de Piles' *The Principles of Painting* should be mentioned with regard to the legacy of Van Dyck in England. His example had revolutionised British portraiture, bringing to it a grace and sophistication that set a precedent for all that was to follow. Van Dyck's *Portrait of Nicholas Lanier*, painted in 1628, typifies this *sprezzatura*. Although there are few references

to Van Dyck's working method, two unfinished heads, obviously painted from life, in the Ashmolean Museum reveal visual attributes - notably the broad handling - which indicate that they could have been painted alongside the sitter.

When he was elected President of the newly founded Royal Academy in 1768, Sir Joshua Reynolds became the first Englishman to reach the top of a profession previously dominated by painters from the Continent. After a short apprenticeship with Thomas Hudson, Reynolds studied in Rome and Venice before returning to London in 1753 where he developed a portrait style that combined allusions to sixteenth-century Venetian painting with poses taken from classical sculpture. According to his assistant James Northcote, Reynolds advised his pupils to "… paint at the greatest possible distance from your sitter, and to place your picture near the sitter… so as to see both together."[12] Reynolds apparently worked with the canvas beside the model throughout the painting process, whereas de Piles recommended using comparison at the end. Edmund Malone draws attention to the fact that Reynolds always stood while painting "… a practice which, I believe, he first introduced."

Lady Burlington's description to Sir Francis Grant of sitting to Reynolds confirms that he painted with the canvas alongside the sitter: "… he took quite a quantity of exercise while he painted, for he continually walked backward and forward. His plan was to walk away several feet, then take a long look at me and the picture as we stood side by side, then rush up to the portrait and dash at it in a kind of fury. I sometimes thought he would make a mistake, and paint on me instead of the picture."[13] To these may be added observations made while Reynolds was painting the Duchess of Rutland that also mention his use of a mirror: "… he would rush forward, and look closely into her eyes, take her well in, and then go back as far as possible, and look at the general effect in a distant glass, chiefly making his picture from that."[14]

Northcote adds that Reynolds' sitters chair was placed on a dais some eighteen inches high - to see the subject at eye level, that the shafts of his brushes were nineteen inches long, and that his studio, which measured twenty feet by sixteen, was illuminated by one small window nine feet four inches from the floor.

Thomas Gainsborough developed significantly as an artist after his move to Bath in 1759 where he was exposed to portraits by the old masters, principally Van Dyck, in the great houses of the West Country. During this period, Gainsborough began to paint on a life-size scale, while his colouring became lighter and more broken. The ephemeral sparkle of late works like *Mr. and Mrs. William Hallet* contrasts dramatically with the miniature perfection of his early style and is indicative of the changes in his method by the time he moved to London in 1774. In his Fourteenth Discourse, which was posthumously dedicated to Gainsborough, Reynolds draws attention to his characteristic brushwork: "To return to Gainsborough: the peculiarity of his manner, or style, or as we may call it – the language in which he expressed his ideas, has been considered by many, as his greatest defect; … However, it is certain, that all those odd scratches and marks, which, on a close examination, are so observable in Gainsborough's pictures, and which even to experienced painters appear rather the effect of accident than design; this chaos, this uncouth and shapeless appearance, by a kind of magick, at a certain distance assumes form, and all the parts seem to drop into their proper places; … he always expressed, that his pictures, at the Exhibition, should be seen near, as well as at a distance. "[15] The memoir of the painter Ozias Humphry records that Gainsborough's canvas "… was so placed on the Easil as to be close to the Subject he was painting, which gave him the Opportunity (as he commonly painted standing) of comparing the Dimensions and Effect of the Copy, with the original both

near and at a distance; and by this method (with incessant study and exertion) he acquired the power of giving the Masses, and general Forms of his models with the utmost exactness. Having thus settled the Ground Work of his Portraits, he let in (of necessity) more light, for the finishing of them; but his correct preparation was of the last Importance, and enabled him to secure the proportions of his Features as well as the general Contours of Objects with uncommon Truth."[16]

John T. Smith, Keeper of the Prints at the British Museum, often witnessed Gainsborough at work: "Mr. Gainsborough… allowed me frequently to stand beside him to see him paint, even when he had sitters before him. I was much surprised to see him sometimes paint portraits with pencils on sticks full six feet in length, and his method of using them was this: he placed himself and his canvas at a right angle with the sitter, so that he stood still, and touched the features of his picture exactly at the same distance at which he viewed his sitter:"[17] The biographer Allen Cunningham relates a similar account: "Like Reynolds he painted standing, in preference to sitting; and the pencils which he used had shafts, sometimes two yards long. He stood as far away from his sitter as he did from his picture, that the hues might be the same."[18]

During the 1770's and 80's, portraits by George Romney became increasingly fashionable, so much so that Sir Joshua would only refer to his rival as "the man in Cavendish Square." John Wesley noted in his *Journal* (January 5th, 1789) that Romney "… struck off an exact likeness at once, and did more in one hour than Sir Joshua did in ten." With regard to a pastel portrait of the poet William Cowper, Romney's friend and biographer William Hayley wrote: "He worked with uncommon diligence, zeal, and success, producing a resemblance so powerful, that spectators who contemplated the portrait with the original by its side, thought it hardly possible for any similitude to be more striking or more exact."[19] Romney's finest portraits are elegantly composed and painted with a classical sensibility, though he never exhibited at the Royal Academy.

American painters like Benjamin West (who became President of the Royal Academy after the death of Reynolds), John Singleton Copley, and Gilbert Stuart enjoyed considerable success in the British Isles throughout this era. Stuart received instruction from both West and Reynolds, although stylistically he was more influenced by Romney. Having fled London for Dublin in 1787 to escape his creditors, Stuart returned to America in 1793 to paint George Washington and eventually settled in Boston where his methods were recorded by his pupil Mathew Jouett: "The eye ought to be accustom(d) to distances & directions from point to point… Keeping of the very highest importance to good colouring, to effect which one should set a good way from his eazle and early accustom themselves to look at the subject and not at the features… Advantages of having the eazle before the sitter. By so doing you are enable(d) to embrace both objects at once… It gives a pleasing perspect(ive) to have your sitter a little elevated. good direction for the light. 8 to back (?) of light, eight to eazle & eight feet to sitter - light 2 ½ feet square."[20]

The Scottish painter Henry Raeburn was essentially self-taught. While apprenticed as a goldsmith he learned to make likenesses in miniature and was later granted a basic introduction to oil painting by a pupil of Allan Ramsey. R. A. M. Stevenson reports that in 1784, while visiting London en route to Italy, Raeburn sought the council of Reynolds who allowed him to work for a short while under his guidance. On his return to Edinburgh from Rome some two years later, Raeburn became the most accomplished portrait painter working outside London. Cunningham quotes the following from one of his sitters, "… and then having placed me in a chair on a platform at the end of his painting-room, in the posture required, he set up his

easel beside me with a canvas ready to receive the colour. When he saw all was right, he took his palette and his brush, retreated back step by step, with his face toward me, till he was nigh the other end of the room; he stood and studied for a minute more, then came up to the canvas, and, without looking at me, wrought upon it with colour for some time. Having done this he retreated in the same manner, studied my looks at that distance for about another minute, then came hastily up to the canvas and painted a few minutes more."[21] Because this description accords so closely with Reynolds' practice, even to the sitters' chair being raised, it seems likely that Raeburn picked up the practice when he visited London; indeed, Reynolds' influence remained stronger than anything he experienced in Italy.

The same sitter goes on to reason that although he had sat to other painters, Raeburn's method contributed more to the effect of the whole (although it is interesting that they too put the canvas 'close' to the sitter): "I had sat to other artists; their way was quite different - they made an outline carefully in chalk, measured it with compasses, placed the canvas close to me, and looking me almost without ceasing in the face, proceeded to fill up the outline with colour. They succeeded best in the minute detail - Raeburn best in the general result of the expression; they obtained by means of a multitude of little touches what he found by broader masses; they gave more of the man- he gave most of the mind."[22] Raeburn exploited comparison to find the unity of his construction, blocking in his shapes with a 'square touch,' whereas Gainsborough, in his late work, like Velázquez, suggested the poetry of form through loose veils of broken colour.

After citing Cunningham, Edward Pinnington gives two further eyewitness accounts of Raeburn at work, the first from Dr. John Brown: "His manner of taking his likenesses explains the simplicity and power of his heads. Placing his sitter on the pedestal, he looked at him from the other end of a long room, gazing at him intently with his great dark eyes. Having got the idea of the man, what to him carried farthest and 'told,' he walked hastily up to the canvas, never looking at the sitter, and put down what he had fixed in his inner eye; he then withdrew again, took another gaze and recorded its results, and so on, making no measurements."[23]

On hearing of the death of Raeburn, Sir Walter Scott recalled: "I never knew Raeburn, I may say, till the painting of my last portrait. His conversation was rich, and he told his story well. His manly stride backwards, as he went to contemplate the work at a proper distance, and, when resolved on the necessary point to be touched, his step forward, were magnificent. I see him, in my mind's eye, with his hand under his chin, contemplating his picture; which position always brought me in mind of a figure of Jupiter which I have somewhere seen."[24]

When he moved to London in 1787, the seventeen-year old Thomas Lawrence wrote to his mother, "… excepting Sir Joshua, for the painting of a head I would risk my reputation with any painter in London."[25] In 1790 he caused a sensation at the Royal Academy with portraits of Queen Charlotte and the actress Elizabeth Farren, prompting the ailing Sir Joshua to remark: "In you, Sir, the world will expect to see accomplished what I have failed to achieve." Lawrence was made Painter to the King in 1792 on the death of Reynolds, and he became President of the Royal Academy in 1820. His virtuosity and dazzling technique contributed great force to portraits like those of *Pope Pius VII* (influenced by Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X*) and *Cardinal Consalvi,* both painted in 1819 for the Waterloo Chamber at Windsor Castle. Unlike Reynolds, Romney or Raeburn, Lawrence began his portraits with a preliminary study, as here described by the Scottish painter Sir David Wilkie: "He would draw the portrait in chalk, the size of life, on paper; this occupied him but one sitting, but that sitting lasted nearly one whole day. He next transferred that outline

from the paper to the canvas. His picture and his sitter were placed at a distance from the point of view, where to see both at a time, he had to traverse all across the room, before the conception which the view of his sitter suggested, could be proceeded with. In this incessant transit his feet had worn a path through the carpet to the floor, exercising freedom both of body and mind; each traverse allowing time for invention, while it required an effort of memory between the touch on the canvas and the observation from which it grew."[26] Cunningham offers the following observations: "He could see at great distance, and also quite close, the first aided him in catching the general expression, and the other in communicating those finer touches, those half invisible lines, to his finished drawings and paintings, which go in the gross to makes up the excellence of the likeness."[27] Sir Walter Scott, whose memoir of sitting to Raeburn is cited above, sat also to Lawrence, although he left no account of the experience on that occasion. It is fascinating to see Scott as interpreted by two brilliant, yet quite different, masters using the same visual method.

Wilkie was one of the first painters to comment on the stylistic similarities shared by Velázquez and the British School. In 1827 he wrote to Lawrence from Madrid: "To our English tastes it is unnecessary to advocate the style of Velasquez. I know not if the remark be new, but we appear as if identified with him; and while I am in the two galleries at the Museum, half-filled with his works, I can almost fancy myself among English pictures. Sir Joshua, Romney, and Raeburn, whether from imitation or instinct, seem powerfully imbued with his style, and some of our own time, even to our landscape-painters, seem to possess the same affinity."[28]

In the introduction to Sir Walter Armstrong's *Henry Raeburn*, Stevenson equates the technique of both Lawrence and Raeburn to that of Velázquez, and also to certain contemporary French painters: "In the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, Lawrence offers the instance of a man inclined to paint directly, as may be seen in his unfinished profile of George IV at the National Portrait Gallery. It should be remembered that his name was always in the mouths of the artists who began the new French movement of 1830."[29]

Stevenson had studied with the Florence-born American John Singer Sargent at the atelier of M. Carolus-Duran whose fashionable portrait style was informed by his admiration for Velázquez. Of his approach to teaching Stevenson writes: "Now, we know Raeburn's way of using paint, and it is one which would be perfectly acceptable today. Indeed, it scarcely differs from that once taught in the Studio of M. Carolus-Duran."[30] He goes on to catalogue the similarities: "The likeness between the practice of Raeburn and that of recent French artists may be seen from the following particulars of his method: (1) He seldom kept a sitter more than an hour and a half or two hours. (2) He never gave more than four or five sittings to a head or bust portrait. (3) He did not draw in his subject first with the chalk point, but directly with the brush on the blank canvas. (4) Forehead, chin, and mouth were his first touches. (5) He placed the easel behind the sitter, and went away to look at the picture and the poser together. (6) A fold of drapery often cost him more trouble than the build or expression of a head. (7) He never used a mahl-stick."[31] Stevenson's *The Art of Velasquez* is a masterful analysis conceived in relation to the aesthetic philosophy of Carolus-Duran.

Edwin Blashfield, an American student at the atelier of Léon Bonnat, related of his teacher, "… instead of sitting or standing before his canvas with his model at a distance, he placed the latter close beside his canvas, and then went away from his subject to the very end of his studio. There dropping on one knee to bring the point of sight to the proper level, and half closing his eyes, he carefully compared model and

picture, then going quickly to his easel, painted a few strokes and repeated his journey. Whatever one's own mental bias, one felt the intense honesty of this method, and to any student who had any temperament of his own, Bonnat was an admirable teacher and guide."[32]

The Pre-Raphaelite painter and writer The Hon. John Collier had studied in Paris and Munich, but his portraiture was influenced by the mature work of John Everett Millais: "It was from Millais that he learned the method, which he has ever since adopted in portraiture, of putting sitter and canvas side by side, looking at them from some distance, and walking backwards and forwards to do the actual painting."[33] Collier gives a comprehensive account of this approach in *A Manuel of Oil Painting* of 1886 in which he also debates certain limitations intrinsic to the technique: "I have already mentioned the method pursued by Sir John Millais: that of putting the canvas side by side with the object, and walking backwards and forwards between each touch. Now, in many ways this is an admirable method, and is particularly well adapted for students, on account of the direct comparison it gives between the picture and the object painted. But it has serious drawbacks; the chief of which is that it leads to a certain looseness and sketchiness of touch, which is certainly not advisable for a student, however charming it may be in the hands of a master. Every touch that is given by this method has to be applied by memory, and not by direct observation, for the painter can only see his object properly when he is away from the canvas."[34]

James McNeill Whistler conceived his paintings as harmonious arrangements of tone and colour, rather than as naturalistic representation. To this end he could be extremely demanding on his sitters. Cecily Alexander recalled that she endured nearly seventy sittings for her portrait; yet Walter Sickert, pupil of Whistler, described his method as that of the *alla prima* painter, because he routinely rubbed out his work leaving only the ghost of an impression to serve as a basis for the next session. In his *Memories and Impressions of James A. McNeill Whistler*, A. J. Eddy describes Whistler at work: "If it were a full-length portrait, he placed the canvas near his palette and his sitter in pose about four feet to the other side of the easel. For observation he stood about twelve feet back towards the doorway… He then selected two or three small brushes with handles about three feet in length, stood back about twelve feet, took a good look at both sitter and canvas, then stepping quickly forward, and, standing as far from the canvas as the long handles and his arms permitted, he began to rapidly sketch in the figure with long, firm strokes of the brush. The advantage of the long handles was obvious, - they enabled him to stand back at quite a distance and sketch directly from his sitter… The sketch finished, the long handled brushes were discarded and work began in earnest. With one or more, sometimes a handful of brushes, - for they would accumulate without his realising it, - he would again stand back and carefully scrutinise sitter and canvas until it seemed as if – and no doubt it was so – he transferred a visual impression of the subject to the canvas and fixed it there ready to be made permanent with line and colour; then quickly, often with a run and a slide, he rushed up to the canvas and, without glancing at his sitter, vigorously painted so long as his visual image lasted, then going back the full distance he took another look, and so on day after day until the end."[35]

Walter Sickert is primarily associated with the Camden Town Group, but as Whistler's pupil he was an advocate of sight-size. In an article *Schools of Art* published in *The Speaker* of 1897 Sickert declares: "Now, in painting a life-sized realistic study from nature, the practice of the greatest masters has been to put canvas and model side by side, to view them both from a certain distance, to take certain observations, and then, walking up to the canvas, to place these observations, from memory, on the canvas, and to repeat this operation until the picture is finished. In almost all the written descriptions of the art of painting, a painter is

described as stepping back to view the effect of his work. This is only half a truth, and the less important half. What happens is that he takes his observations from afar, and only approaches the canvas to execute what he remembers to have noted from afar. Sir Edward Watkin once told me he had known an old lady who had sat to Sir Joshua Reynolds. 'How did he work?' said Sir Edward; 'I suppose he looked at you a great deal?' 'No,' said the old lady, 'he never looked at me at all. He looked in a large pier-glass, and kept running up and down the room all the time.' To quote no more than three instances more, the names of Whistler, Millais, and Raeburn, to all of whom there is evidence that my description of method applies, are enough to show that the method is not confined to any particular school but is made necessary by optical laws which are common to humanity."[36]

Sickert observes that when working under life-size the drawing must be placed somewhat in front of the model: "Your drawing must be reduced in proportion until it and your sitter look the same size … The scale of your drawing, then, must vary with two factors – with your distance from the model, and with your distance from paper or canvas."[37] Of the method in general Sickert goes on to conclude: "The reasons for the observation of this rule are so good, and so many, that I can only look on its neglect as sheer decadence, the inevitable doing of a thing the wrong way, because it has been done, so long, the right way. If the rule is observed, the operation of drawing becomes a direct comparison. If it is defied, it becomes a proportion sum."[38]

John Singer Sargent was the most gifted painter to emerge from the atelier of Carolus-Duran. With an assured eye for tonal values, sensibility to colour and brilliant facility with the brush, he became, in the words of Rodin, "the Van Dyck of our times." When William Rothenstein cited Sargent in his memoirs, he regrets that he had not acknowledged Sargent's superior skills while drawing particular attention to his use of sight-size: "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. He drew with his brush, beginning with the shadows, and gradually evolving his figure from the background by means of large, loose volumes of shadow, halftones and light, regardless of features or refinements of form, finally bringing the masses of light and shade closer together, and thus assembling the figure. He painted with large brushes and a full palette, using oil and turpentine freely as a medium. When he re-painted, he would smudge and efface the part he wished to reconstruct, and begin again from a shapeless mass. He never used what was underneath. I had acquired the habit of standing near to my canvas, some way from the model. If one paints sight-size there is method in this practice too; but often my figure was larger than sight-size, and I struggled in consequence with difficulties which, had I followed Sargent's example, I must have avoided."[39]

In his 1927 biography of Sargent, Sir Evan Charteris comments on the similarities of procedure he shared with Carolus-Duran: "In painting a picture [Carolus-Duran] would retreat a few steps from the canvas and then once more advance with his brush balanced in his hand as though it were a rapier and he were engaged in a bout with a fencing-master - these gestures were often accompanied by appeals to the shade of Velasquez. Those who watched Sargent painting in his studio were reminded of his habit of stepping backwards after almost every stroke of the brush on the canvas, and the tracks of his paces so worn on the carpet that it suggested a sheep-run through the heather. He, too, when in difficulties, had a sort of battle cry of "Dæmons, dæmons," with which he would dash at his canvas."[40]

Julie Heyneman recorded a wealth of valuable information with regard to Sargent's teaching methods during his brief tenure at the Royal Academy: "To watch the head develop from the start was like the sudden lifting of a blind in a dark room… Every stage was a revelation. For one thing he put his easel directly next to the sitter so that when he walked back from it he saw the canvas and the original in the same light, at the same distance, at the same angle of vision… He aimed at once for the true general tone of the background, of the hair and for the transition tone between the two. He showed me how the light flowed over the surface of the cheek into the background itself."[41]

Another former pupil, Henry Haley, quotes Sargent on the necessity of viewing the work from a distance: "Stand back - get well away - and you will realize the great danger there is over overstating a tone - keep the thing as a whole in your mind. Tones so subtle as not to be detected on close acquaintance can only be adjusted by this means."[42]

An evocative account of sitting to Sargent is given by Sir George Henschel: "'Standings', I should rather say, for he made me stand on a platform and sing – from Tristram and Isolde by preference – whilst he was at work… Now and then he would slowly and deliberately recede about a dozen steps from the easel, look at me steadfastly stop for a moment and suddenly, the brush lifted ready for action and without ever taking his eyes off me, made a dash for the canvas on which he then recorded his impression, generally accompanying the act by contentedly humming a little tune."[43]

In 1907 Philip de László moved to London from Vienna to pick up the mantle cast aside by Sargent when he retired from portrait painting. A detailed account of 1934, *Painting a Portrait by De László* with photographic illustrations, fully documents his use of sight-size from the first sitting: "Well, as you see, I set my canvas beside my sitter, but what I put on that canvas I judge from a certain distance. I must go fairly far off to see the general effect of my subject as a whole in all that rightness of relation upon which I insist so much. When I stand back I am recording mentally what I am going to put on my canvas when I walk up to it."[44] These remarks are predicted by Harrington Mann, a member of the Glasgow School, in *The Technique of Portrait Painting* of 1933: "A portrait ought to be seen at a sufficient distance to enable you to take in with your eye the entire canvas. Therefore the larger the canvas the further you must stand from it … I like to have my canvas as close to my sitter as possible on the same plane, and the head of the sitter and of the portrait at the same height. The shorter the distance your memory has to carry the impression the better. You are after all painting from memory. Every look you take at the sitter has to be held in your memory until it is recorded on the canvas. The shorter the lapse of time you employ, the more vital the impression. Therefore your canvas should be as close to your sitter as possible"[45]

Although many of de László's contemporaries were still using sight-size, students had to rely on painting manuals of the period such as *The Practice of Oil Painting and Drawing* (1910) by Solomon J. Solomon and *The Practice and Science of Drawing* (1913) by Harold Speed. In the chapter *Painting from Life* Solomon writes: "From time to time place your drawing alongside your sitter, on a level with, and as near as possible to, the face, and go back as far as you can to compare the drawing with nature, through the hand glass,"[46] while in the context of painting from a cast, Speed recommends: "Place your work alongside the cast, and walk back to correct it. Faults that are not apparent when close, are easily seen at a little distance."[47] Unlike de László, who used sight-size throughout the painting process, Speed and Solomon advise its use at the end, as did de Piles in 1708, or 'from time to time.'

In the aftermath of the First World War many artists turned to Modernism, and knowledge of the traditional methods fell into decline. Frank Slater was discouraged from becoming a portrait painter by Sickert, his teacher, after visiting Sargent's memorial exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1926; yet he embraced sight-size and left one of the last accounts of the method in his book *Portrait Painting Step by Step* of 1963. His recommendations are entirely consistent with those expressed by Northcote some two hundred years earlier: "It is best to stand while at work so that you can walk back frequently; the model should be seated on a raised platform to bring him up to your eye level. The platform need not be more than four feet square and from twelve to eighteen inches high, depending on how tall you are… Place the easel about three or four feet from the sitter, slightly to his right, so that you can see him and your canvas with as little gap between as possible. Leave at least six or eight feet behind you to walk back"[48]

Sargent's periodic visits to Boston from the 1880's to the 1920's sustained a link with European portrait practices that had been initiated by Gilbert Stuart in the early nineteenth century. The founding members of the Boston School, Frederick Porter Vinton and Dennis Miller Bunker had both worked with and been painted by Sargent. It is through the studio of R. H. Ives Gammell, pupil of William M. Paxton, that sight-size is still practiced and taught today.

Sight-size imparts certain aesthetic and technical attributes to a painting, notably the broad handling that comes into focus when seen at the proper viewing distance. Its principle aim is unity of effect, the *tout ensemble* advocated by de Piles in *Cours de peinture par principes* and by Reynolds in *Discourse XI*. Painters who employ the method work straight onto the canvas with colours keyed to, or which anticipate, those of nature, making changes to their endeavour as part of the creative process. A sight-size painting displays qualities of modelling and brushwork that owe more to the method itself than the stylistic conventions of a particular era. Thus, portrait painters born a century apart like Raeburn (1756) and Sargent (1856) can share a consistency of procedure and artistic intent.

The accounts affirm that sight-size is fundamentally a portrait practice, and that it has been used since at least the seventeenth century. As William Rothenstein concludes in his commentary on Sargent: "… 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 greater importance. The methods of Velazquez and Hals were not unlike Sargent's."[49]

I would like to acknowledge the contributions to this essay by Charles H. Cecil and his research into the history of sight-size, in particular the discovery of key references to its use by de Piles, Lawrence and Sargent.

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