1962

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LELIA MARIA COCKE
AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS
By
Lelia Maria Smith Cocke

In the ever growing company of portraits that adorn the walls of public and private institutions, it is rare to find one which not only arrests the glance by the interest of its subject but holds the observer in admiration of its qualities as a painting. Hollins College owns such a work in the portrait of Susanna Pleasants Cocke, which was painted by the subject's daughter-in-law, in 1895. The painting imposes itself immediately by its forthright simplicity of style, its unaffected but distinguished composition, and by the bracing authority of its execution. The obvious excellence of this portrait invited an examination of other works by the artist, and suggested a study of her training and activity. The organization of the present exhibition is the result of that study.

Lelia Maria Smith Cocke was unique in her time, in that, as a daughter of the South, brought up in Virginia during the War of Secession and its difficult aftermath, she nevertheless felt her vocation so strongly that she sought the very best instruction available to a woman. At the age of sixteen she went to New York and enrolled in the School of Design for Women at Cooper Union. Her exceptional abilities quickly distinguished her in life-drawing and painting classes. In after years one of her teachers, himself a celebrated artist, confided that Lelia Maria Smith had been the most gifted and promising of all his students.

The particular quality of instruction offered at the School of Design is evident in the studies which Lelia Maria Cocke made there. For four years the school had been under the direction of Dr. William Rimmer, a great sculptor, who has been called the finest teacher of anatomy in the world. Wyatt Eaton and Will H. Low, the two teachers who were most active in the formation of Lelia Maria Smith, had both followed Thomas Eakins into the Beaux-Arts studio of Jean-Louis Gerome, in Paris. After two years of this rigorous regime, Eaton, a native of Canada, had transferred to the more
sympathetic ambiance of Barbizon, where he was admitted into the intimacy of the aging Francois Millet. He succeeded the American William Morris Hunt in the affection of the French master, and, like Hunt, he was to stimulate American interest in the modern French school. While studying with Eaton at Cooper Union, Lelia Maria Cocke became acquainted with some of the painter's friends, among them Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who conceived a respectful admiration of the young Virginian's talents and accomplishments. When the obligations of success made Eaton retire from teaching, he recommended Lelia Maria to his friend Will H. Low who undertook her training. Low was also at the threshold of a successful career in painting. He too had frequented Barbizon, and was to find his happiest expression in quiet, Barbizon-like compositions of American country life. More fortunate than Eaton, he had enjoyed the coveted opportunity of studying with Carolus-Duran, that exclusive teacher who had been so valuable to Sargent, then in search of the dashing style that made him famous. Low may well have been the agent for transmitting to Lelia Maria Cocke Duran's system of proceeding directly in paint, when working from a model, without recourse to a preliminary drawing. Low had been associated with John La Farge, and was to become an important mural painter and decorato in his own right. His decorations at the old Waldorf-Astoria were once the admiration of New York.

Some of the life studies which Lelia Maria Cocke executed in oils, at Cooper Union, recall certain works of Eakins. There is the same assurance in the presentation of forms that have been thoroughly understood, the same intensity of interest in all aspects of the problem at hand, which goes beyond the recording of mere facts of light and shade. The power of her draughtsmanship appears to be due more to this same invigorating intensity than to any innate facility.

Lelia Maria Cocke was the daughter of Dr. Francis H. Smith, professor of natural philosophy at the University of Virginia. She was born in 1859 in Pavilion V, on the west side of Jefferson's famous quadrangle. Her mother, Mary Stuart Harrison, was the daughter of Gessner Harrison and
the granddaughter of George Tucker. The artist's family stimulated and encouraged her intellectual interests, and welcomed the early manifestation of her natural disposition for drawing. She was sent to school at Wesleyan Female Institute in Staunton, Virginia, and, upon completing her program there, she was furnished the means to study in New York. In 1883 she joined her younger brother, G. Harrison Smith, at his vice-consular post in Berlin. Although she continued her art studies in the German capital, it has not been possible to identify her teachers. As much as her limited funds for travel permitted, she visited the great collections of Germany. In one of her letters she recounted a visit to the Munich Pinakothek and to an international exhibition of contemporary painting being held in the Bavarian city. She was thrilled by the great Italian and Flemish masterpieces, but she deplored the "slim" selection of American work on display, and smiled at "the everlasting red fish and ... peaches" of a sister American. She wrote of her plans to study in Paris, but no evidence can be found that she was able to realize this project. She returned to Virginia in 1884, and two years later she married Lucian H. Cocke, an attorney of Roanoke, Virginia. While maintaining a home, caring for her four children, and participating fully in community activities, she continued to practice her profession of portrait painting. After her premature death, in 1899, it was estimated that her production of portraits had exceeded sixty works, including six of the full length figure. One of these is the portrait of her father-in-law, Charles Lewis Cocke, which hangs in Bradley Hall at Hollins College. She also carried out several figure compositions, but none of these can be found today.

It is hoped that the present exhibition will furnish an interesting opportunity to follow the development of a gifted nineteenth century woman artist, and to judge her accomplishment. The assembling of these pictures is itself proof of the artist's appeal. It is also hoped that, by fixing the attention of the public upon this achievement, it will do honor to a young woman who represented her state with worthy distinction.
3. HEAD OF A YOUNG WOMAN. About 1878.
   Oil on canvas, marouflayed on composition board. 16¾ x 13¾ in.

4. PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG WOMAN. About 1878.
   Oil on cardboard. 26½ x 18½ in.

5. STUDY OF A MODEL. About 1878.
   17 x 13 in.

6. PORTRAIT OF A NEGRO WOMAN. 1881.
   Signed and dated: L. M. SMITH, 1881. 20 x 16 in.

7. PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG BOY IN A BLACK CAP.
   About 1880. 16 x 13½ in.

8. PORTRAIT OF A LITTLE GIRL IN A STRAW HAT.
   About 1880. 18½ x 14½ in.

9. PORTRAIT OF A CHILD. About 1880.
   16 x 13 in.

10. YOUNG WOMAN DUSTING A CHAIR. About 1880.
    12½ x 9 in. (Reproduced on cover)

11. WOMAN CARRYING A BASKET AND A PITCHER.
    About 1880. 16¾ x 11½.

12. GIRL IN A ROWBOAT. About 1880.
    12 x 10¾ in.

13. PORTRAIT SKETCH OF A YOUNG WOMAN. About 1880. 13½ x 9 in.

14. THE ARTIST'S MOTHER READING. About 1890.
    24 x 17½ in.

15. PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S DAUGHTER AND HER FRIEND. 1893.

    Note: The subjects of this portrait are Mrs. William H. Goodwin (nee Mary Stuart Cocke) and Mrs. Leslie H. Buckler (nee Elise Miles). This picture and its pendant, No. 16, were painted, on request, to be displayed in the
Virginia Pavilion, at the Columbian Exposition, in Chicago.

Signed and dated l. r.: LELIA M. COCKE, 1893.
62 1/4 x 44 1/2 in.


Note: This picture, the pendant of the preceding, No. 15, represents Mr. Lucian H. Cocke, on the left, and Mr. C. Francis Cocke.

Signed and dated l. r.: LELIA M. COCKE, 1893.
62 1/4 x 44 1/2 in.

17. PAIR OF SKETCHES FOR THE PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST'S CHILDREN. 1893.

On a single piece of canvas. 18 1/4 x 24 in.

18. CHARLES LEWIS COCKE. About 1895.

Note: Charles Lewis Cocke was the founder of Hollins College and its president from 1846 to 1901. He was the father-in-law of Lelia Maria Smith Cocke.

7 feet, 6 inches x 5 feet (too large to be hung in the gallery, this painting may be seen in Bradley Hall).

19. STUDY FOR THE PORTRAIT OF CHARLES LEWIS COCKE. About 1895.

Note: This a study for No. 18.
Oil on cardboard. 19 x 12 1/2 in.

20. SUSANNA PLEASANTS COCKE. 1895.

Note: Susanna Pleasants Cocke was the wife of Charles Lewis Cocke.
Signed and dated l. r.: LELIA M. COCKE, 1895.
33 1/2 x 29 1/2 in.

21. LUCIAN H. COCKE, SR. About 1895.

Note: Lucian H. Cocke, Sr., was the husband of Lelia Maria Smith Cocke. He was vice-president and then chairman of the Board of Trustees of Hollins College.
24 x 22 in.

22. BESSIE COCKE BARBEE. About 1895.

Note: Mrs. Bessie Cocke Barbee was a daughter of Charles Lewis Cocke. For many years she was associated with the social direction of Hollins College. Barbee
House, on the Hollins campus was named in her memory.

23. WILLIAM BARTON ROGERS. 1881.

Note: William Barton Rogers, Ph.D. (1804-1882), was the founder (1859) and president (1865-1870, 1878-1881) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was the teacher and predecessor of Francis H. Smith, the artist's father, in the chair of natural philosophy at the University of Virginia.

Signed and dated u. r.: LELIA M. SMITH, 1881.

28 x 24 in. (Lent by the Department of Chemistry, University of Virginia.)

24. OLD MAN READING.

16 x 13¾ in.

25. LANDSCAPE WITH TWO FARM BUILDINGS.

13½ x 17¾ in.

26. FLOWERS.

21 x 15½ in.

27. SKETCH OF AN OLD BEARDED MAN.

15½ x 12¼ in.

28. SKETCH OF A MAN.

15 x 12⅛ in.

29. UNFINISHED STUDY OF A NEGRO BOY.

19½ x 15¾ in.

30. STUDY OF A NUDE.

Oil on wood panel. 16 x 10½ in.

31. STUDY OF A WOMAN. 1877.

Note: This drawing won first place in the competition of applicants for free admission to the life class of the School of Design for Women at Cooper Union.
32. **YOUNG WOMAN SEATED.** 1877.
   Signed l. r.: L. M. S.
   Charcoal. 21½ x 15½ in.

33. **STUDY OF A BOY.** 1877.
   Signed and dated l. r.: LELIA M. SMITH / NOV. 9th, 77.
   Charcoal. 22¾ x 17¾ in.

34. **OLD MAN WITH AN UMBRELLA.** About 1878.
   Signed l. r.: L. M. SMITH.
   Charcoal. 24½ x 18½ in.

35. **STUDY OF MALE TORSO FROM A CAST.** About 1878.
   Signed l. r.: L. M. S.
   Charcoal. 24½ x 18½ in.

36. **BEARDED MAN.** 1878.
   Signed and dated u. r.: L. M. SMITH / APRIL 78.
   Charcoal on gray paper. 24 x 18 in.

37. **YOUNG MAN.** 1878.
   Signed and dated u. r.: L. SMITH / JAN. 23d 78.
   Charcoal. 24 x 18 in.

38. **OLD MAN.** About 1877.
   Charcoal. 24 x 18 in.

39. **YOUNG WOMAN SEATED.** 1877.
   Charcoal. 24½ x 19 in.