

Introduction to Kilpin's Portraits

By Sonia Lochner

It is not surprising that a considerable portion of Kilpin's surviving oeuvre is in the form of single portraits. For centuries in England patronage meant portraiture. This preference for portraits continued to be characteristic of the British colonies in North America. Artists had a better chance of earning a comfortable income painting commissioned portraits than creating other types of artwork. Portraits celebrated the sitter's social or political status, marriage and family ties, and at times memorialized the sitter after death. Furthermore there was no greater set of challenges or opportunities for painters than creating portraits. It called on artists' skills in painting and drawing, and it allowed them to delve into the personality of their models. Portraiture also tested the artist's ability to capture a likeness, an important requisite of a good portrait.

In self portraits sitter and artist are one, and we can presume that no commission existed. In his self portraits Kilpin was free to paint himself exactly as he chose. Kilpin's earliest known portrait is probably the small *Self Portrait* of 1876, an early surviving sketch in oils, a work that reveals a youthful uncertainty. In a later self portrait of 1913 Kilpin chose to paint himself as a respectable middle-class professional instead of a painter who holds a brush and dons everyday work clothes. Rather, Kilpin's own face is the most focussed part of the composition.

Kilpin's clientele was drawn mostly from a small circle of friends and acquaintances in the professional and artistic worlds, and from members of his immediate family. A first-hand knowledge of his family offered Kilpin an advantage in terms of enhancing the creative process of portraying their special qualities. In the portraits of his brother George, his wife Blanche, and his daughter "Dickie," Kilpin uses a carefully detailed approach to capture their personalities.

In addition to his immediate family, a large number of Kilpin's sitters were from the professional classes: the educationist John Adami, the prominent businessman Joseph Learmont, the art dealer John Ogilvy, and Lady Lucy Van Horne. These sitters especially appreciated Kilpin's particular talent for injecting a convincing air of reality and likeness into their portraits.

Early on Kilpin had grasped the potential of the photograph in the process of portrait painting. The use of photographs as an aid for both his commissioned work and private portraits was a time-saving tool for his sitters. More artistically interesting, though, was that the camera could, at times, capture a fleeting, uninhibited moment and that Kilpin could use to bring likeness and verisimilitude to his portraits.

During his early years in Canada Kilpin likely contemplated portraiture as the main branch of his artistic career as an artist. From 1907 to 1911 Kilpin exhibited an inordinately large number of portraits at the exhibitions sponsored by the Art Association of Montreal. According to the exhibition records only a few of Kilpin's portraits post-date 1911. There does not seem to have been a sufficient number of clients for Kilpin to make a living by painting portraits alone.

When Kilpin gained full-time employment as an art schoolteacher, he was no longer dependent on portrait commissions for his livelihood. So, by 1912 much of Kilpin's artistic energy was devoted to the painting of landscapes, a choice probably encouraged by his friends Cullen and Suzor-Cote, themselves well-known landscape artists. There can be little doubt, though, that for Kilpin portraiture presented an exacting

artistic challenge as he strove to create a lasting record of his sitters' lives and character. For both artist and sitter the legacy remains.

Bishop Oxenden, 1909, oil on canvas, Collection of the Anglican Diocese of Montreal. Photograph, Notman collection, McCord Museum, Montreal.

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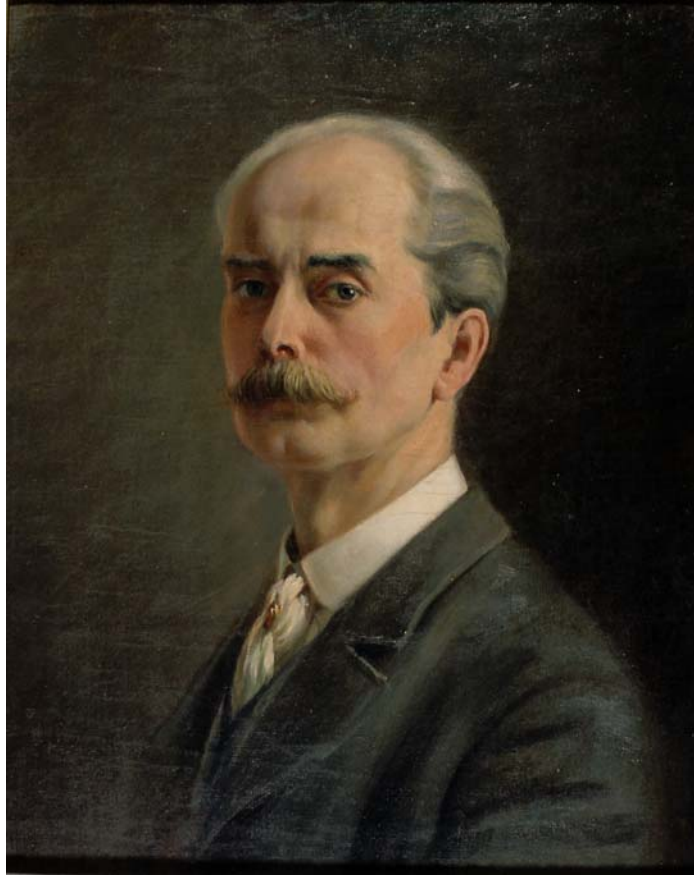
Ashton Oxenden was born September 28, 1808 in Barham, Kent. He enrolled at the University of Oxford in 1827, entered the ministry as a deacon in 1832, was ordained as a priest in 1833, and made curate at Barham the same year. In 1848 he became the rector of the agricultural parish of Puckley. In 1858 Oxenden was elected to the post of diocesan proctor, obtained his Masters degree from Oxford in 1859, and was appointed in 1864 to the position of honorary canon at Canterbury Cathedral.

His growing reputation, primarily as a writer, led to his nomination in 1869 for the combined posts of bishop of Montreal and the metropolitan bishop of the ecclesiastical province of Canada. After his consecration ceremony at Westminster Abbey, in the summer of 1869 he moved to Montreal to take up his posts. In 1878 Oxenden resigned his positions in Canada because of health concerns. After a short sojourn as a chaplain in Cannes, France, Oxenden, became rector of St. Stephen's Church near Canterbury. Ill health again forced Oxenden to resign his post in 1885. He died at the age of eighty-three in February, 1892.

The Bishop's portrait had enjoyed a particular importance in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge since the late sixteenth century. Portraits of bishops not only lent powerful popular expression to the Anglican faith, but also fostered a sense of national identity. While earlier conventions of episcopal portraiture conveyed rank and identity by inscriptions, coats of arms, and books, Kilpin describes Oxenden without such embellishments. As a result, the simplicity of the portrait matches the unpretentiousness that Oxenden brought to his faith. Bishops are generally shown in "convocation dress," which includes a black, full-length cassock, a white, full-length rochet, a black, overcoat or chimere with a black-sleeved scarf worn over the chimere, and a narrow collar or band. Oxenden believed that the way to salvation resided in a simple faith in Christ and in acceptance of the Scriptures. Kilpin's simple depiction of Oxenden wearing a white, linen rochet and black chimere against a plain background underscore the bishop's simplicity of faith as reflected in his life and writings. In addition, Oxenden's figure is large within the frame, which gives the bishop an immediate presence. This format is emphasized by a face that is both confident, unswerving, and compassionate in demeanour.

Oxenden's portrait was commissioned by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal in 1909. At the same time portraits of Bishop Bond, the first Anglican Archbishop of Montreal, and Bishop Carmichael, the 4th Bishop of Montreal, were painted by other artists. In 1910 the Diocese commissioned Kilpin to paint a portrait of the late 1st Chancellor of Christ Church, Strachan Bethune. In 1908 the Committee on Church Historical Research had established an archives for the diocese. These portraits were commissioned presumably as part of this endeavour to record the history of the diocese.

Self Portrait. 1913, oil on canvas, 49.2 X 39.2 cm.



For centuries the artist has used the self portrait as a means to project self image and desired social standing. The self portrait aided in the transformation of the artist from being seen as a lowly craftsman in medieval times to being recognised as a respected professional in the Renaissance. Ever since, artists have, for the most part, portrayed themselves as they wish to be seen. This work, Kilpin's self portrait of 1913, continues this tradition.

To achieve his aims, Kilpin draws on the standard conventions of traditional British portraiture as realized in dress, composition, and facial characterization. Dress is an important way of creating the image that a person wishes to project. Kilpin dresses in early twentieth century fashion of lapelled suit, a short white collar, and cravat. In his choice of attire Kilpin presents himself to the world as a respectable middle-class gentleman. His attire is barely distinguishable from that of his clients (for instance see Kilpin's portrait of Joseph Learmont). Kilpin's only deviation from the businessman's suit is his more decorative necktie, a nod perhaps to his artistic acumen. Kilpin's hair and moustache are neatly coifed, which show a man who cares about his appearance. He is a gentleman of professional standing who is as trustworthy, dignified, and responsible as his clients. The facial features emphasize these attributes. The proud yet sensitive face with the furrow between the brows suggests a discerning, intellectual nature.

Kilpin executed two self portraits which serve to frame his life as a painter. A very early self portrait in profile was painted presumably in his student days around 1876

as an exercise in light and shadow. Kilpin's self portrait of 1913 was painted some six years before his death of a heart attack in 1919. Kilpin had been plagued with heart problems for some years and, viewed in this light, Kilpin quite possibly made his portrait with an eye to posterity.

George Kilpin, nd, oil on canvas, 56 X 46 cm.



In 1905 Legh's youngest brother George visited the Kilpin family in London. George was a successful executive in Montreal where he was employed as the Vice-President and General Manager for the Imperial Oil Company. During this visit, George encouraged Legh to emigrate to Canada to enjoy a prosperity similar to his own. On September 6, 1906 the Kilpin family sailed to Montreal.

This portrait is an excellent example of the careful consideration that Kilpin brings to such aspects of portraiture as composition, lighting, format, and choice of colours. In composition there are no background accessories to detract from the sitter's essential features. Kilpin's use of light in this portrait is especially effective. He brings light to the subject's forehead, which illuminates the face. At the same time he similarly lights the shirt, which again draws attention to the face. In format Kilpin presents his brother in the traditional bust length against a flat backdrop. Kilpin balances this approach by using a fairly limited palette.

Yet Kilpin does not idealize his sitter. The facial topography reveals soft, droopy eyes with a slight puffiness, the indication of a double chin, and a receding hairline. It is the face of a confident, middle-aged professional, content with his achievements and his station in life.

From the sitter's perspective, an artist's ability to capture a likeness is probably the most important aspect of portrait painting. To ensure a satisfactory result Kilpin used photographs of his sitters as a means to capture a likeness. Kilpin's skill in the field of portraiture is seen in the sensitivity he has for his sitters. In this portrait, for example, he depicts the physical appearance of the sitter, but goes beyond the merely physical to communicate George's character and personality. Kilpin shows his brother as a capable individual, prepared to take on the challenges of his demanding position at the Imperial Oil Company.

Portrait of Lady Van Horne, 1912, watercolour, 20 X 36 inches. Collection of Heritage Branch, Province of N.B.



In 1864 Lucy Adaline Hurd met her future husband William Van Horne. Van Horne had just taken up a new posting for the Illinois Central Railway as a train dispatcher in Bloomington, Illinois. Lucy Hurd was the daughter of an Illinois civil engineer responsible for the construction of railroads. She was well educated, having obtained a degree from Lombard College in Galesburg, Illinois. William Van Horne, was born on February 3, 1843 in Illinois. He came from a prosperous family of landowners and businessmen who played important roles in the industrial and political arenas. The couple were married in March, 1867, and set up house with Van Horne's mother-in-law, his mother, his sister, and his new wife. Lucy and William Van Horne had three children: Adaline (born 1868), William (born 1871, died at age five), and Richard Benedict (born 1877). William Van Horne quickly rose to prominence within the company's ranks. In 1888 after a number of prestigious positions in both Canada and America, Van Horne took up the post of President of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Montreal.

In her portrait Kilpin situates Lady Van Horne next to a window. Deep in contemplation, she pointedly turns towards the window and the parrot as if to see beyond her interior world. The composition is a repetition of the popular Victorian motif of the "woman at the window," only here with the added motif of the bird on the windowsill.

Exotic birds have a long history in portraiture. In the 17th and 18th centuries foreign birds were exotic luxuries to be found only in the homes of the aristocracy. Their inclusion in family portraits was therefore a snobbish reminder that their owners were people of wealth, position, and power. By the 19th century the custom of collecting parrots was adopted by the middle classes while, by 1912, the parrot served an age that called on a woman of gentility to cultivate the love of gentle things by keeping pet birds. Of the different types of birds kept, the parrot was highly esteemed as a household pet.

The woman with a parrot theme has a long tradition in European art from the sixteenth century in the works of Rubens through to the nineteenth century in the works of Courbet and Manet. This long tradition might have appealed to Van Horne who was extremely knowledgeable about art.

Lady Van Horne's portrait was exhibited at the Art Association of Montreal Spring Exhibition in 1909, but was not listed for sale.

Mrs. Blanche Kilpin, 1908, watercolour, 42 X 35.5 cm.



In 1891 Legh married Blanche Margaretta Sangster, who was the daughter of the London publisher James Sangster. Upon their return from a honeymoon at Lake Como in Northern Italy, the Kilpins set up house in Hampstead in northwest London. They soon grew to a family of five with the births of, Noel Legh Sangster, Marie Elizabeth Blanche, and Eric Paul.

The late eighteenth century English portrait painter Thomas Gainsborough wrote "there must be a variety of lively touches and surprising Effects to make the Heart dance...so in Portrait Painting there must be a Lustre and finishing to bring it up to individual Life." Kilpin uses a variety of approaches to enchant the viewer and evoke the special characteristics of the sitter, which include a simplified composition, intensified lighting to indicate facial expression, and a plain backdrop. For example, Kilpin contrives an exceptionally affective representation through a minimally elaborated composition. Kilpin strips down the costume, setting, and colour scheme, and relies instead for expression on concentrated lighting that picks out the exquisitely delineated focal points of the sitter's visage. The warm, sunny light source creates cool shadows on the forehead, bridge of the nose, the right side of the chin, and ears and neck, and highlights along the right jawline and in the cheeks. The dark background emphasizes Blanche's light face, whereas the somewhat coarse and textured costume next to the skin accentuates its smoothness. Kilpin achieves dynamic skin tones by using transparent

colours, which enhances the hue and sheen of her skin. Overall Kilpin achieves a vivacity of approach which captures the sitter's personality but does not deny the artist's or viewer's presence. Rather, the portrait implies a relationship of loving respect and kindness between husband and wife.

Mrs. Kilpin's portrait was first exhibited at the Art Association of Montreal's 25th Spring Exhibition in 1909. In 1910 Kilpin travelled to Great Britain for two months and took along this portrait, which received the prestigious honour of hanging "on the line" at the Royal Academy in London in 1911.

Marie Elizabeth "Dickie" Kilpin, 1907, oil on canvas, 47.5 X 37.5 cm.



Marie Elizabeth Blanche (born?) was the only daughter and the second child of Blanche and Legh Kilpin. This portrait is one of four existing portraits that Kilpin painted of his daughter. All four paintings show Kilpin's creative versatility in the field of portraiture, which included portraits in oil, watercolour, and pastel in addition to miniature portraits.

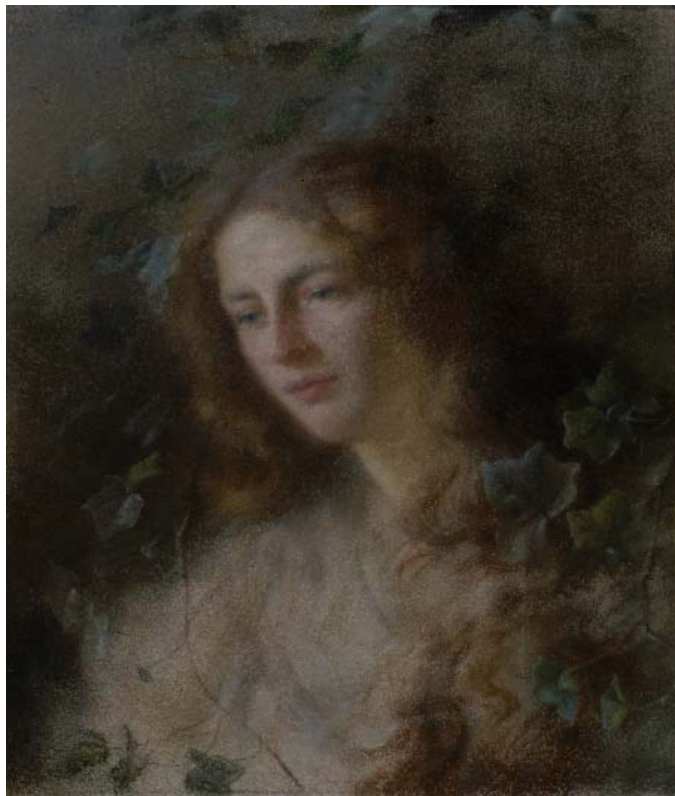
Legh Kilpin arrived with his family in Canada on September 6, 1906. As a newcomer to the Montreal art scene Kilpin needed to cultivate an audience for his work. The portrait of "Dickie" was painted within one year of his arrival in Canada. The

portrait likely served as an example of the type of work Kilpin wished to generate for this new set of clients. In fact, a perusal of Kilpin's early exhibition records in Montreal (1907-1911) supports this view. The titles of these early exhibits-- Miss Norah Bailey, Miss Adami, and Master J. Gordon--indicate the young age of his sitters. It seems then that Kilpin was deliberately attempting to fill a niche in the Montreal art market by painting the children of upper class merchants, businessmen, and professionals. In the context of the market for art in Montreal in the early twentieth century, Kilpin likely displayed this portrait of his daughter in his studio as an advertisement for prospective clients.

Stylistically, Kilpin's "*Dickie*" recalls the idealized female figures by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The most impressive of these, *Beata Beatrix* (Tate Gallery, 1864), is a portrait of Rossetti's wife Elizabeth Siddal. Like the pre-Raphaelites, who insisted on a faithfulness to nature, Kilpin filled his compositions with the real faces of his friends and family.

In addition, Kilpin's portrayal of "Dickie" recalls the work of the Victorian painter George Frederic Watts (1817-1904). Like Watts, Kilpin attempted in his portraits to bring a new intensity and concentration to the face as the arena in which character is shown. In general, allegorical allusion and rhetoric of pose and body play little part in Kilpin's portraits. Kilpin attempted to show the whole person in his portraiture: a union of character, personality, and appearance.

Elizabeth. Pastel on paper. 55.8 X 41.3 cms. n.d.



A close examination of this portrait with that of "Dickie" indicates that the sitter for both portraits is Kilpin's only daughter, Dickie. In facial detail and characterization

this portrait recalls the portrait of Dickie, whose second name was Elizabeth. The importance of this portrait, however, lies in the medium of the work. It is painted in pastels.

Painting portraits in pastel enabled Kilpin to explore the diverse qualities of the medium. The appeal of pastels stems from their bright, clear colours and soft, impressionistic handling of surface detail. Kilpin pays particular attention to balancing the areas of shadow and light, which is important to the overall design of the painting. The light areas become the focus of attention. Strong light, and the shadows it casts provide the underlying structure of the work. The resulting tensions between light and dark are responsible for the piece's impact.

Kilpin also used pastels to make portraits with exacting colour. Unlike oil paints, which can be mixed to create any desired colour or value, pastels are not miscible. Pastels then are limited to a prescribed range of values. Kilpin creates a sense of harmony by adding notes of rich colour to the clothing and hair. This results in a finished painting that is more interpretive and colourful than the original source material, the photograph.

Kilpin's portraits, for the most part, are based on photographic sources. This practice was largely a matter of practicality. It would be very difficult to expect a person to be available for the months it took to complete a finished portrait. Working from photos was also practical for the artist, because of the lack of models for drawing from the life. In *Elizabeth* Kilpin approaches the composition and posing in a very simple and straightforward manner. The pose is not elaborate and the backdrop is simple and plain. Yet her direct, full-frontal pose makes a strong composition and also conveys the personality of the sitter as self reliant, strong, and confident.

Upon his arrival in Montreal Kilpin attempted to break into the Montreal portrait market. His search for friends and reputation induced him to join gentleman clubs, study the works of the Romantics, and experiment with various media. Kilpin's portrait of Elizabeth takes visual description beyond the point of mere documentation. The eighteenth-century pastellist Rosalba Carriera is one artist who proved this in her pristine naturalistic portraits. Kilpin carries on the tradition of pastelists like Rosalba Carriera, Maurice-Quentin de la Tour, and Jean-Etienne Liotard, while pushing it to a contemporary level.