

Painting the Masters

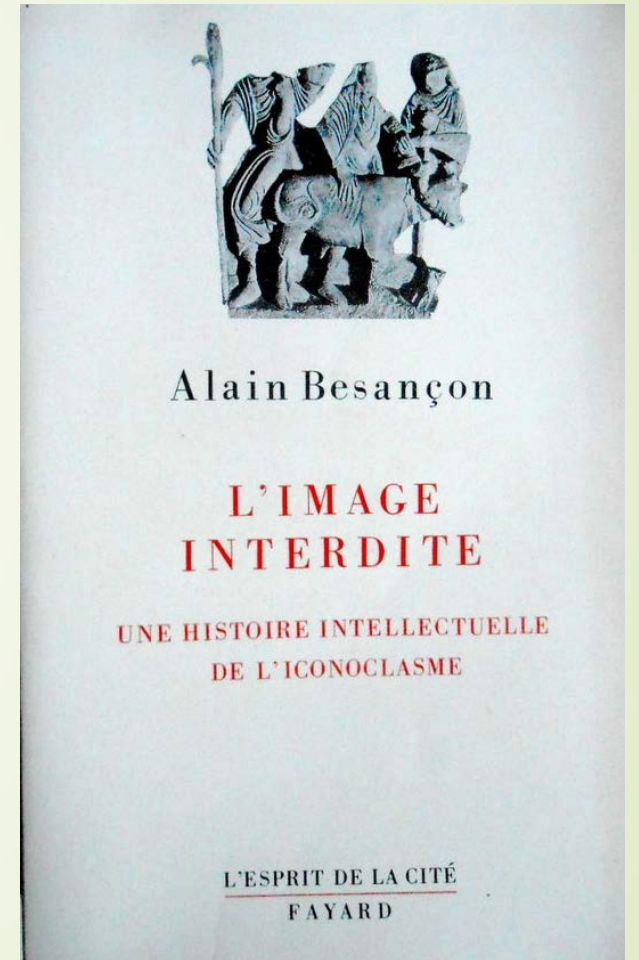
The Mystery of Hermann Schmiechen

Massimo Introvigne (UPS, Torino, Italy)

Besançon's *Forbidden Image*



- One of the first books where sociology of religion met history of art was *L'image interdite. Une histoire intellectuelle de l'iconoclasme*, published by French social historian Alain Besançon in 1994



Iconoclasm vs Iconodulism

- ▶ The controversial book argued that Western art history is defined by opposition between *iconoclasm* (i.e the idea that the sacred should not be represented visually) and *iconodulism* (i.e support for sacred images)
- ▶ Although the terminology dates back to the Byzantine iconoclastic riots of the 8th century (right), modern Western iconoclasm originated with John Calvin (1509-1564) and became culturally dominant after the Enlightenment



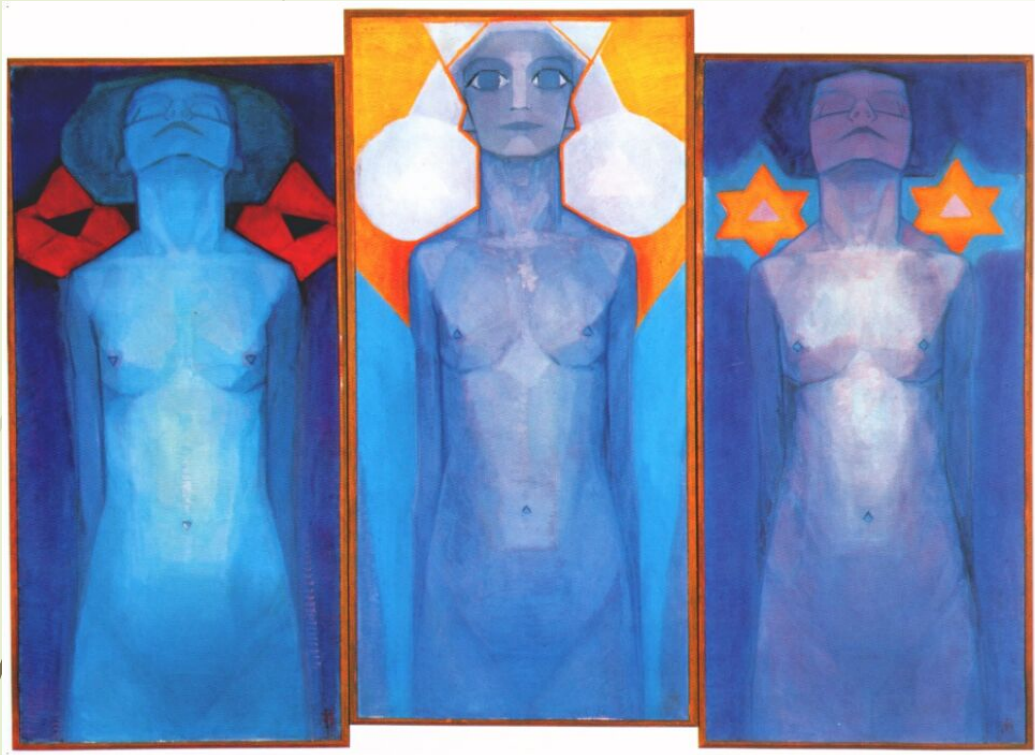
Iconoclasm: not against art, but against an art representing God or divine spirits

- ▶ Besançon's definition of iconoclasm is not identical with some dictionary definitions of the same word. For him, iconoclasm is not against art and may even promote it. It only excludes from the field of art the representation of God and divine spirits or beings



Image of Byzantine Emperor Leo III (685-741) on a coin: Leo, a leading iconoclast, was obviously not against representing *himself*

Abstract Art as Iconoclasm

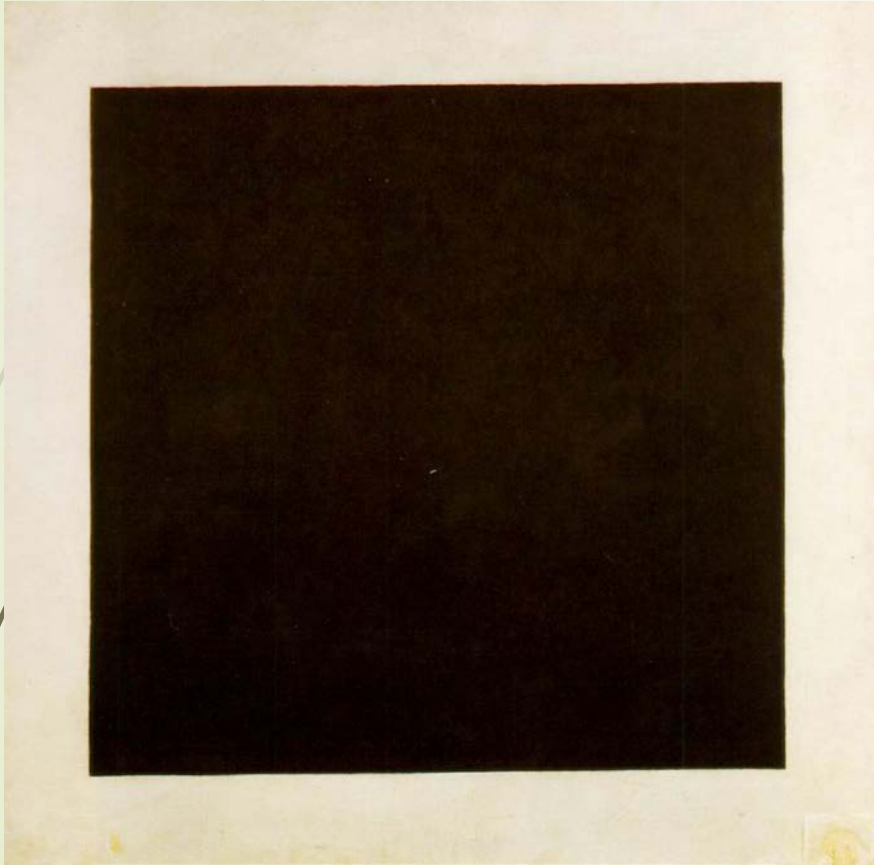


➤ Besançon* also argued that:

1. Iconoclasm is a distinctive trait of modernity, and abstract art is its most mature fruit
2. Symbolism, at first sight anti-iconoclastic, by substituting the Christian foundations of sacred art with a very different esoteric spirituality, in fact prepared the way for abstract iconoclasm
3. Several abstract painters, including Piet Mondrian (1872- 1944) passed at one stage through symbolism (*Evolution*, 1910-1911, left)

* ... with whom I do not necessarily agree

Besançon and Theosophy



- ▶ Besançon claimed to be among the first social historians to devote serious attentions to Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891) and other Theosophical classics. He mentioned the influence of Theosophy on Mondrian, on Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), and – through P.D. Ouspensky (1878-1947) – on Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935: *Black Square*, 1915, left)
- ▶ He firmly placed Theosophy in the camp of progressive, modernistic iconoclasm (again, not because Theosophy was supposedly against art – it was not – but because it was against representing God through art)

Theosophical Symbolism

- ▶ That symbolists such as the Belgian Jean Delville (1867-1953: *Angel of Splendours*, 1894, right) were also Theosophists didn't disturb Besançon's thesis. For him, Symbolist spirituality prepared the abstract triumph of modern iconoclasm



A Master Problem for Besançon



- Besançon didn't notice another problem. The Theosophical Society allowed and even organized, starting with the founders (left) Blavatsky and H.S. Olcott (1832-1907), the production of portraits of its Masters
- The fact that the Theosophical Masters are not divine beings but highly evolved humans does not really solve the problem. They are obviously sacred persons and the object of special reverence by Theosophists, and should be included among the figures iconoclasm would forbid to represent



Why the Portraits?

- ▶ I would argue that the portraits of the Masters do not contradict Besançon's idea of Theosophical «iconoclasm», nor do they reject Theosophy from progressive modernism into the realm of a «reactionary» relationship with the sacred. In fact:
 1. The portraits appeared rarely, in times of crisis
 2. Although often made by professional artists, they were not regarded as «really» produced by human hands
 3. Their use was strictly regulated and restricted

Earlier «Productions»

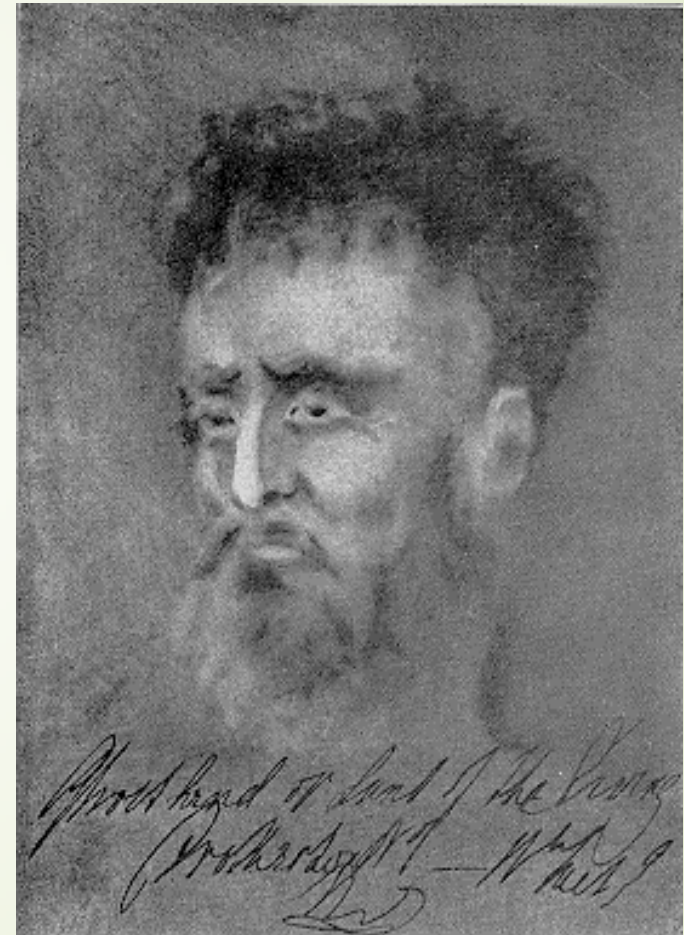


- ▶ That the portraits appeared rarely was not true in Blavatsky's early career, grounded in a previous tradition of spirit painting. In his definitive 2001 study, John Patrick Deveney claimed that the number of «portraits of and by her Masters», produced by different supernatural means, was «in the dozens»*
- ▶ They normally appeared when she was under attack and included a portrait made in 1875 of the mysterious John King (left) – who, Blavatsky later claimed, was one and the same with Master Hilarion – ...

* J.P. Deveney, «H.P. Blavatsky and Spirit Art», in R. Caron - J. Godwin - W.J. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Ésotérisme, gnosés et imaginaire symbolique: mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, Leuven 2001, 525-546

Blavatsky: The First Theosophical Painter?

- ▶ ...and another, of 1877, of one «Tiruvalla Yogi» from «Ghost Land or the Land of the Living Brotherhood» (right). Although most of these works were «precipitated» in a mysterious way, they may imply that the first of a long list of Theosophical painters was none other than Madame Blavatsky herself

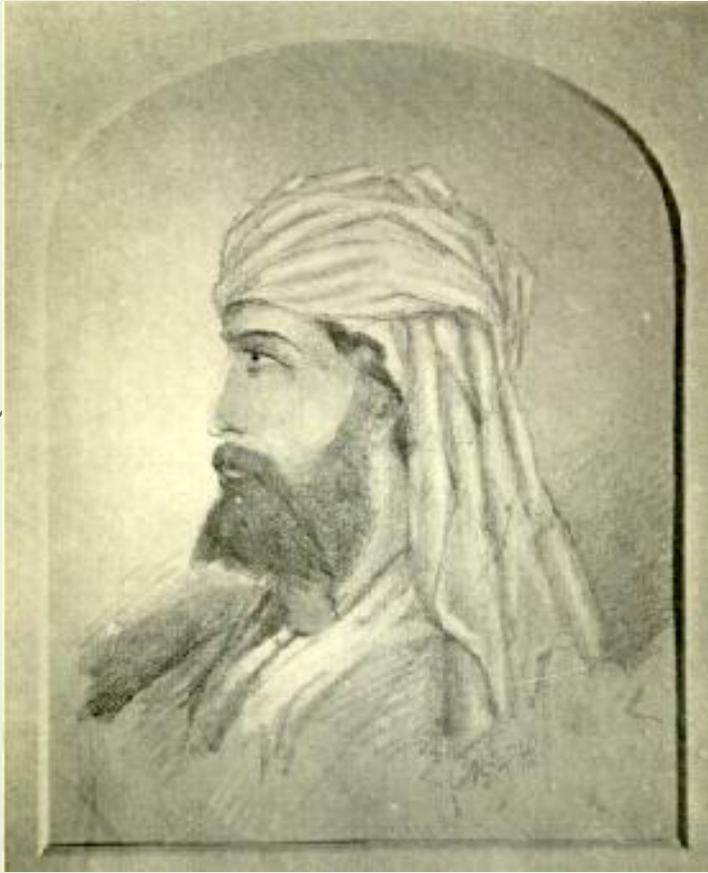


Albert Leighton Rawson (1829-1902)



- ▶ The first *professional* Theosophical painter was the American A.L. Rawson, who met Blavatsky in Cairo in 1851 (see his two sketches of her, left), accompanied her in some travels of the «veiled years» and was involved in several secret societies, before joining the Theosophical Society in its early days. As far as I know, he was however not involved in painting portraits of the Masters

The Harrisse Portrait



- After the Theosophical Society was founded, how portraits of the Masters were produced received more attention and was somewhat ritualized
- A proto-episode happened in 1876, when a French artist called «Monsieur Harrisse» visited Olcott and Blavatsky in New York and produced a portrait of Master Morya (left). Attempts by Deveney and myself to convincingly identify this «Harrisse» with any known individual of that time with the last name Harrisse have so far failed

Some Key Features

- ▶ As reported by Olcott (right) in *Old Diary Leaves* (I, 371-372), in the Harrisse episode there were several traits that will become typical in producing portraits of the Masters:
 1. The painting emerged in a time of crisis, amidst growing media criticism of the Theosophical Society
 2. A professional artist (although hard to identify) was employed (at that time, Blavatsky counted several well-known artists as friends)
 3. There was a definite touch of orientalism: Harrisse was «asked by H.P.B. to draw us the head of a Hindu chieftain, as he should conceive one might look»



«A Case of Thought-Transference»



4. The portrait was produced not so much through the painter's skills but through «a genuine case of thought-transference, the transfer [through Blavatsky, left] of the likeness of an absent person to the brain-consciousness of a perfect stranger»

5. The Master personally approved the painting: «the cryptograph signature of my Guru came upon the paper; thus affixing, as it were, his imprimatur»

6. No money changed hands. Olcott bought paper and crayons from a shopkeeper but, when he opened the package at home, found his money inside, returned to him. «The Master [...] meant to give me his portrait without cost to myself»

The London «competition» of 1884



- ▶ In 1884, in London, based on Harrisse's sketch, Olcott «wanted to get a better portrait if possible» and launched a competition among Theosophical artists. «The five – three professionals and two amateurs – whom I addressed, very kindly and willingly consented» (Olcott, *ODL*, III, 155-57)
- ▶ One of the professionals was Isabelle de Steiger (1836-1927, left)



De Steiger Disappointed

- ▶ In her *Memorabilia*, De Steiger – who would also paint an idealized portrait of young Blavatsky in 1887 (left) – claimed that she was approached first by Blavatsky and then by Olcott. She produced Morya's portrait, shipped it to Adyar and was disappointed it was not well received. She believed herself to be more avant-garde than Schmiechen, and typically insisted on her superior orientalism. She felt «quite competent» on «Oriental head[s], having at Alexandria and Cairo painted many pictures of Bedouins with their turbans»*

*I. de Steiger, *Memorabilia: Reminiscences of a Woman Artist and Writer*, London 1927, 178

Hermann Schmiechen (1855-1925)

- ▶ The most important portraits of the Masters in Theosophical history were produced by Schmiechen
- ▶ Born in Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz, Bavaria, on July 22, 1855, Schmiechen was a respected painter with a solid academic training. He studied under the well-known teacher Albrecht Bräuer (1830-1897) in Breslau, then at the Düsseldorf Academy and at the Académie Julian in Paris. His romantic portraits (*Lilian Nordica* [American opera singer, 1857-1914], 1878, right) were widely appreciated



Schmiechen in London



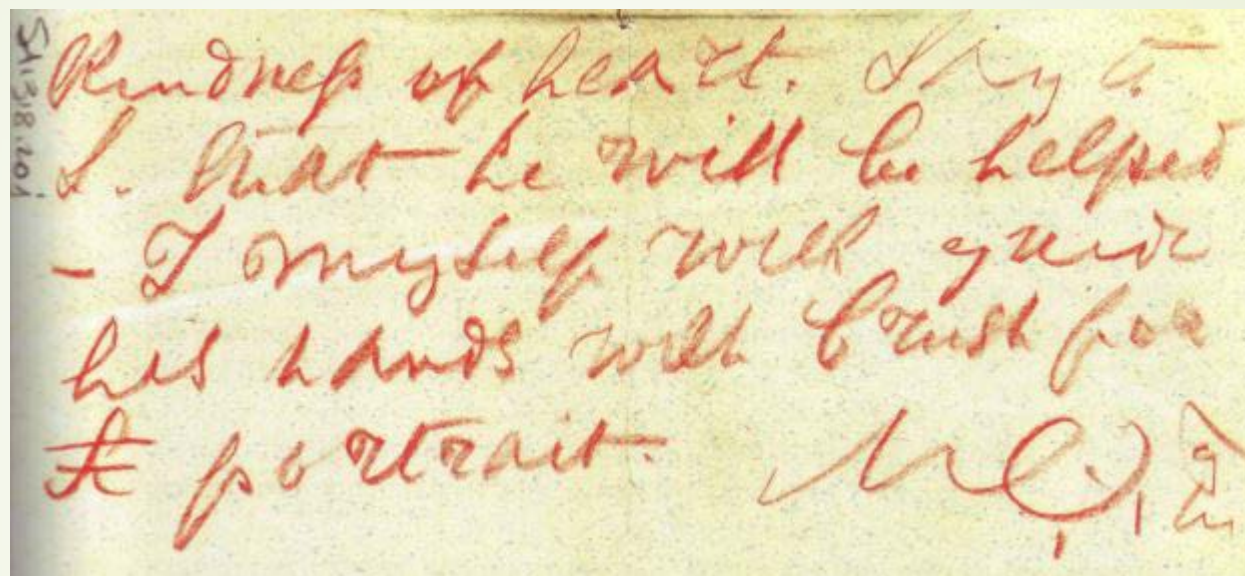
- ▶ Queen Victoria (1819-1901) personally suggested that Schmiechen be invited to London. He came there in 1883, and remained until 1901, becoming a favorite portrait painter for British aristocracy (from left: *Princess Maria Adelaide, Duchess of Teck*, 1882; *Mary Carmichael*; *The Countess of Cottenham*, dates unknown)

Schmiechen and the Theosophical Society

- ▶ On June 20, 1884, the year after he arrived in London, Schmiechen (*Bacchus*, right) became a member of the Theosophical Society. One day earlier, after the unsuccessful attempts by the other five artists, Schmiechen had started painting the portrait of one Master. It is unclear whether the Master was Morya or Koot Hoomi, but in the end he portrayed both of them



By Order of Master Morya



Kindness of heart. Say to
S. that he will be helped
- I myself will guide
his hands with brush for
K[oot Hoomi]'s portrait. Morya

- Schmiechen was personally selected by Master Morya. In a letter received by Madame Blavatsky in the previous days, now at the Winterthur Library in Winterthur, Delaware, Morya wrote: «Say to S.[chmiechen] that he will be helped – I myself will guide his hands with brush for K[oot Hoomi]'s portrait»*

* See D. H. Caldwell, *Mrs. Holloway and the Mahatmas*, Blavatsky Study Center 2012

Laura Holloway



- Morya also wrote: «Take her with you to Schmiechen and tell her to see». From the context of the letter, it was clear that the unnamed «hen» was Laura Holloway (1848-1930), a colorful American author, feminist lecturer, and Theosophist. Blavatsky and others regarded her with suspicion as a rebellious spirit and a flirt, who turned the heads of prominent Theosophists such as William Quan Judge (1851-1896) and Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921), both married*

*See the detailed biography by D. Sasson, *Yearning for the New Age: Laura Holloway-Langford and Late Victorian Spirituality*, Bloomington - Indianapolis 2012

Holloway and the Masters

- ▶ But Blavatsky also recognized Holloway as a gifted clairvoyant. She became part of the inner Theosophical circle and started receiving letters from the Masters. She was involved with Indian Theosophist Mohini Chatterji (1858-1936, right) – whom reputedly she also tried to seduce – in the clairvoyant production of the book *Man: Fragments of a Forgotten History*. By 1885, disturbed by her claim to be in independent communication with the Masters, Blavatsky had pronounced her «a candidate who failed»



Cigarettes and Masters



- ▶ Many years later, in 1912*, Holloway would tell the story of how she attended with several other Theosophists, including Blavatsky, a session in Schmiechen's studio. Holloway (left) was not a smoker, but Blavatsky insisted she smoke a cigarette (perhaps containing more than tobacco?), which put her in the right state to influence Schmiechen's mind

* «The Mahatmas and their Instruments», *The Word*, May 1912, 69-76, and July 1912, 200-206

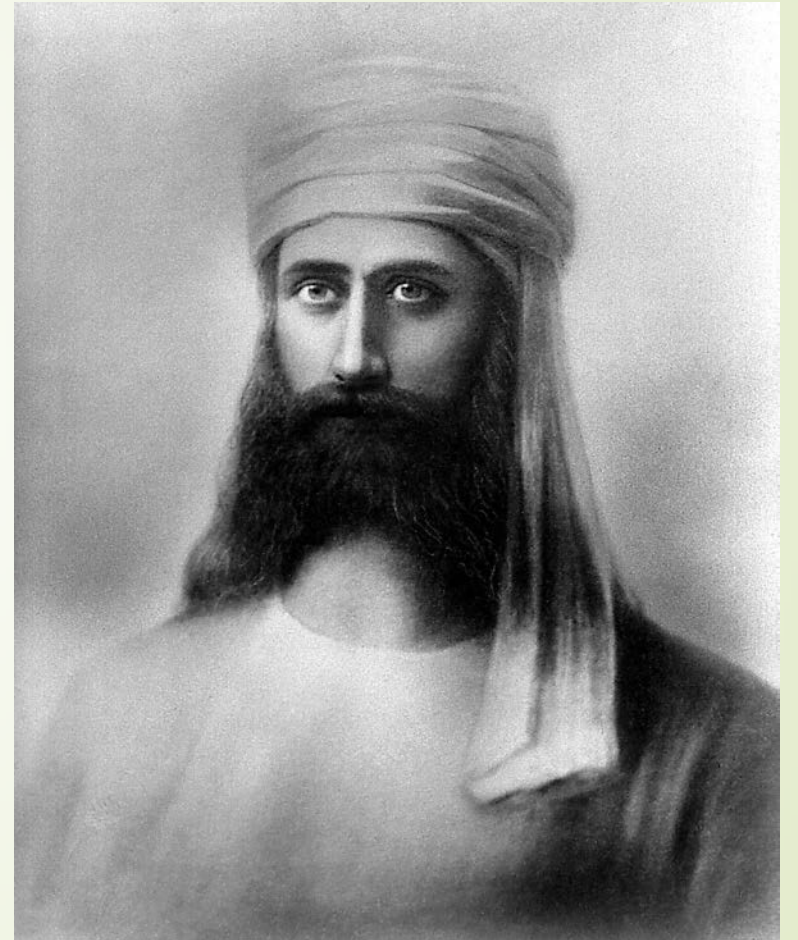
Painting the Masters



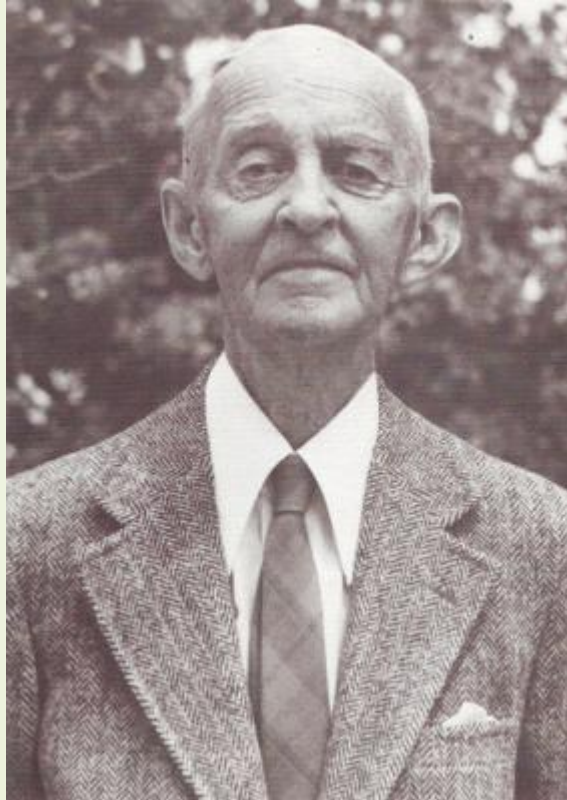
- ▶ If we trust Holloway's later recollections, Schmiechen painted Koot Hoomi (left) first. She saw the same Koot Hoomi «standing near Mr Schmiechen», and gave of him a typical orientalist description – «fine and rich Hindu dress», «flowing curly black hair» – insisting, to Blavatsky's annoyance, how much the Master looked like Mohini and how Mohini's special relationship with the Master was closer than Blavatsky's

Blavatsky and the Portraits

- ▶ Holloway, however, also gave Blavatsky her due, claiming that she repeatedly corrected Schmiechen, suggesting changes in order to make the painting more similar to the actual likeness of Koot Hoomi, although «she sat where *she could not see the easel, nor know what was on it*»
- ▶ Holloway reported that Schmiechen then went on to portray Master Morya (right), and this portrait was also approved by Blavatsky



Faulty Recollections?



- ▶ Theosophical scholar Boris de Zirkoff (1902-1981, left) questioned Holloway's account, suggesting that Schmiechen's hand was guided by Morya rather than by Koot Hoomi, and that Morya's portrait perhaps came first. Clearly, there was more than one session in Schmiechen's studio

Times of Crisis



- ▶ The portraits were produced at a time of crisis, two months after the Coulomb affair – where a couple of former housekeepers accused Blavatsky of fraud – started in May 1884 with the Coulombs' dismissal from the Theosophical headquarters in Adyar, India (above). In London, the dangerous investigation of Theosophy by the Society for Psychical Research was also ongoing

Orientalism and Imperialism



- The orientalist trait, and the Christ-like representation of the «noble Indian», served a political purpose, at a time when Sinnett (left) and others exhibited Anglo-imperialist prejudices against the Indian Theosophists

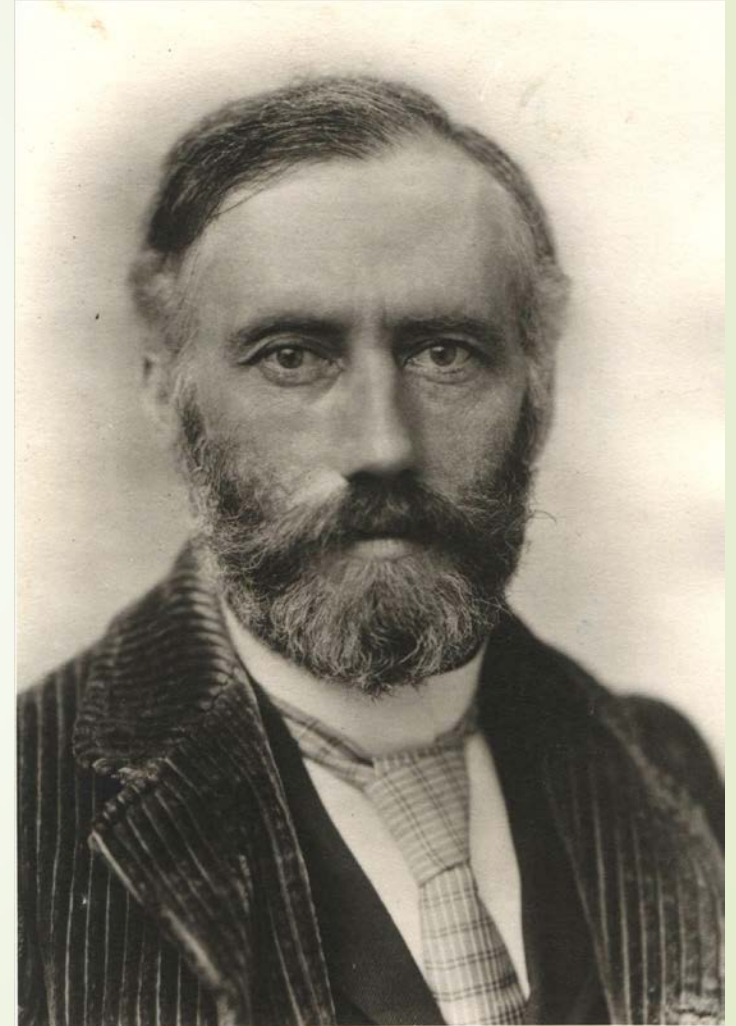
Semi-Canonical Status

- ▶ Blavatsky herself tried to produce portraits of the Masters in India in 1882 (with the help of «Tibetan brother» Djwal Khul) and again in Europe after 1884. But no portrait of the Masters ever attained the semi-canonical status of Schmiechen's, produced by a well-known artist who kept selling his paintings (*Lady with Rose Basket*, 1895, right) to British aristocracy and even royalty

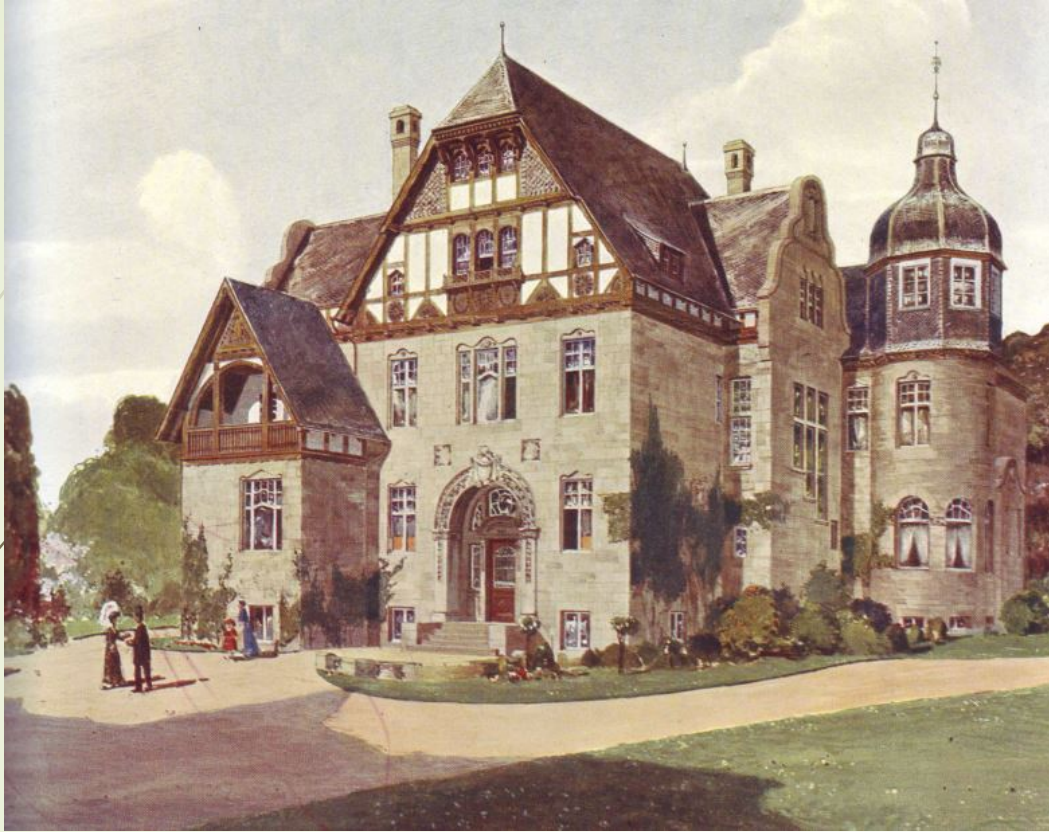


Keeping the Portraits Sacred

- Schmiechen's portraits were mentioned by the Masters in several letters, and brought to Adyar. Olcott deplored their photographic reproductions, claiming that photographs could not remotely compare to the strength and light of the originals. In 1890, Judge (right) condemned the attempt by some American Theosophists to sell photographic copies as «a scandal. In one breath, they are sacred and then they are sold for money»



German Copies



- Sacredness did not prevent Blavatsky to ask Schmiechen to come in September 1884 to Elberfeld, a suburb of Wuppertal, to the home (left) of the founders of the first German Theosophical lodge, Gustav (1828-1900) and Mary Gebhard (1831-1891) and to slightly alter the portraits. Schmiechen also painted a portrait (or two) of Blavatsky (right) and a copy of each portrait of the Masters, one for the Gebhards and one for Judge

Schmiechen and Steiner

- ▶ In 1901, Schmiechen returned to Germany, settled in Berlin and joined the German section of the Theosophical Society. In 1905, he made another copy of the two portraits of the Masters for the Section's leader, and future founder of Anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). They were ritually used for some years in the German Esoteric Section under conditions of strict secrecy*

*H. Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, Göttingen 2007-2008, I, 706



Schmiechen's Last Years



- Schmiechen continued a career of painter in Germany until his death in 1925 (*Mrs Wilfred Merton*, 1922, left). He left the Theosophical Society and in his later years was associated with Leopold Engel (1858-1931), to whom he left some of his copyrights. Engel was a former Theosophist, visionary, «irregular» Freemason, and founder with Theodor Reuss (1855-1923) of an Order of the Illuminati

Miraculous Miniatures

- ▶ The semi-canonical status of Schmiechen's works discouraged further portraits. However, according to an important study by Joseph E. Ross*, in 1897 painter Isabelle Varley (1847-1938) traveled astrally from London to Tibet, where Koot Hoomi sat for her
- ▶ Two miniature portraits were «phenomenally transported» to London. Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934, 1) donated them to the young Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (1875-1953, 2, the future president of the Theosophical Society) and Basil Hodgson-Smith (1880-1946, 3)



*J.E. Ross, «Portraits of the Brothers and How They Were Made», *Fohat* 3:3 (Fall 1999), 56-60 and 69-70

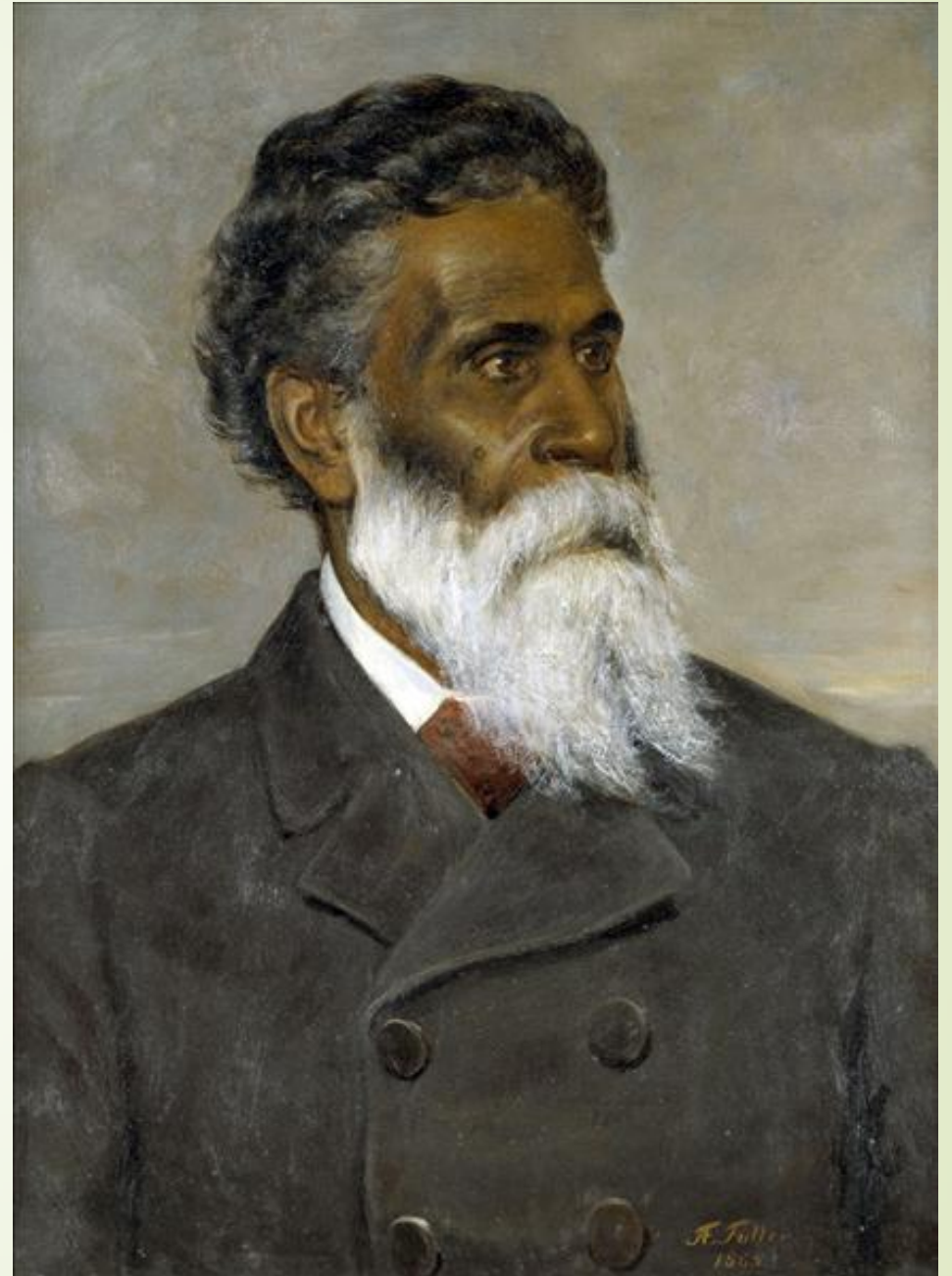


Additional Miniatures

- ▶ Ross claimed that Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986), the famous Indian dancer and Theosophical leader, had in her possession additional miniature portraits of Koot Hoomi and Morya, once kept by Olcott with a lock of their hair, and of Master Jesus, given personally by Jesus to Annie Besant (1847-1933, left), who originally didn't want to wear it due to her anti-Christian prejudices

Florence Fuller (1867-1947)

- In another time of crisis, when he was accused of pedophilia, Leadbeater was involved in the production of portraits of the masters by a prominent Australian artist, Florence Fuller. She had studied in Paris and London, where she was regarded as a child prodigy. At age 17, after returning to Australia, Fuller achieved national fame with her portrait of aboriginal chief William Barak (1824-1903, right)



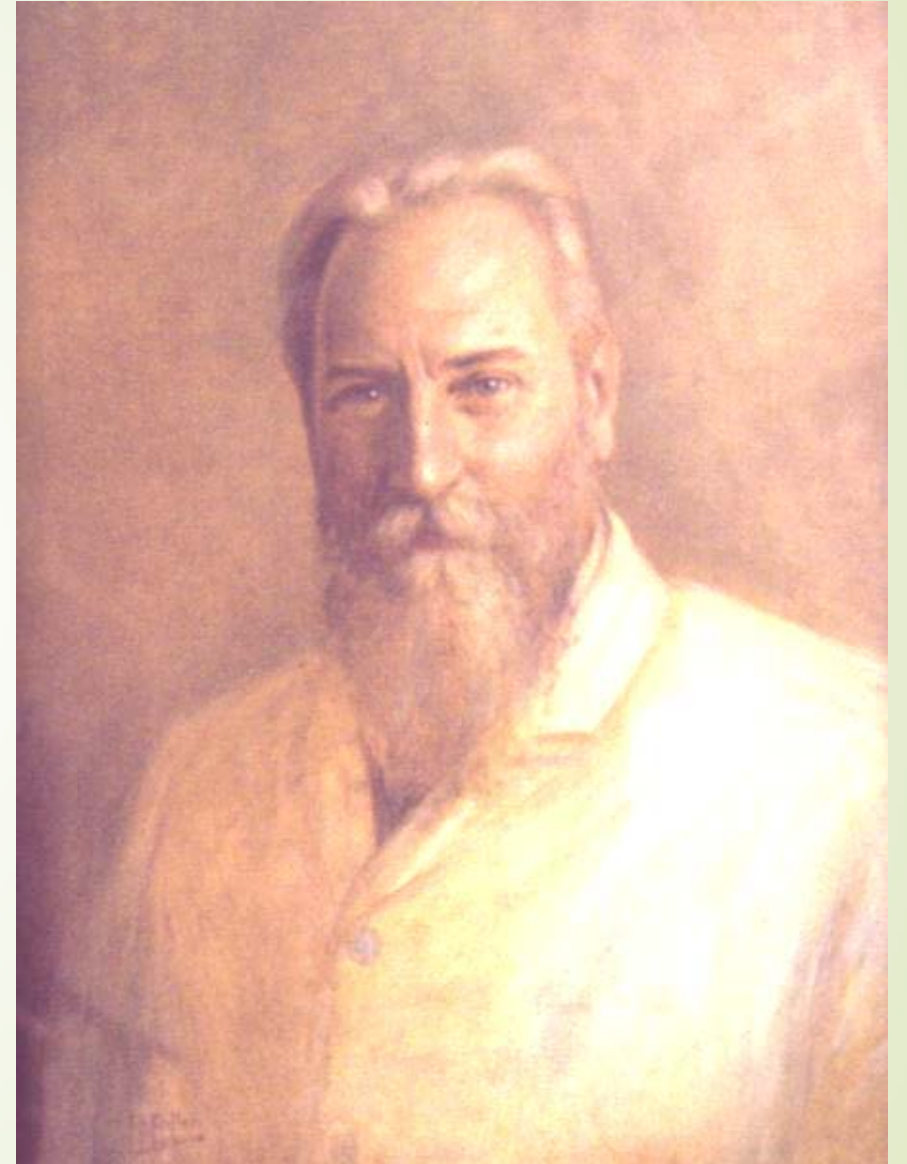
The Golden Hour



- In 1905, Fuller painted *The Golden Hour*, now in Canberra at the Australian National Gallery, widely regarded as a national Australian masterpiece

Meeting Leadbeater

- ▶ In the same year 1905, while the Australian media hailed her «triumph», Fuller met Leadbeater (of whom she will produce a portrait, right) and decided to devote her life to Theosophy



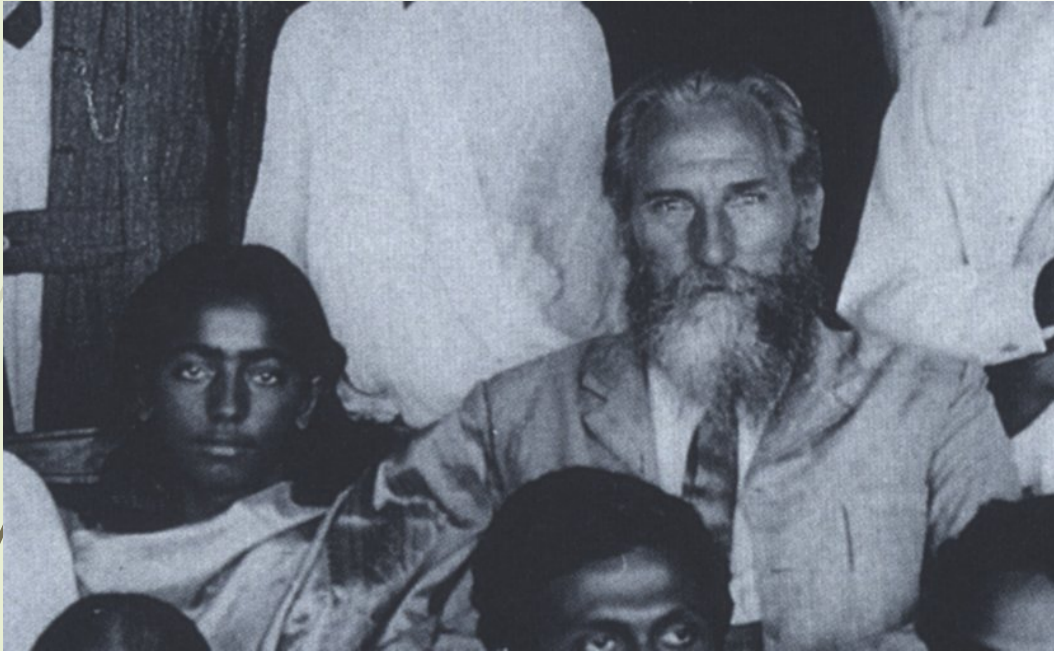
Fuller in Adyar

- ▶ Leadbeater induced Fuller to move to Adyar in 1907*. She painted there her portrait of Blavatsky (1908, right)

* For a detailed treatment, see Jenny McFarlane, *Concerning the Spiritual: The Influence of the Theosophical Society on Australian Artists, 1890-1934*, Melbourne 2012



Fuller and Krishnamurti

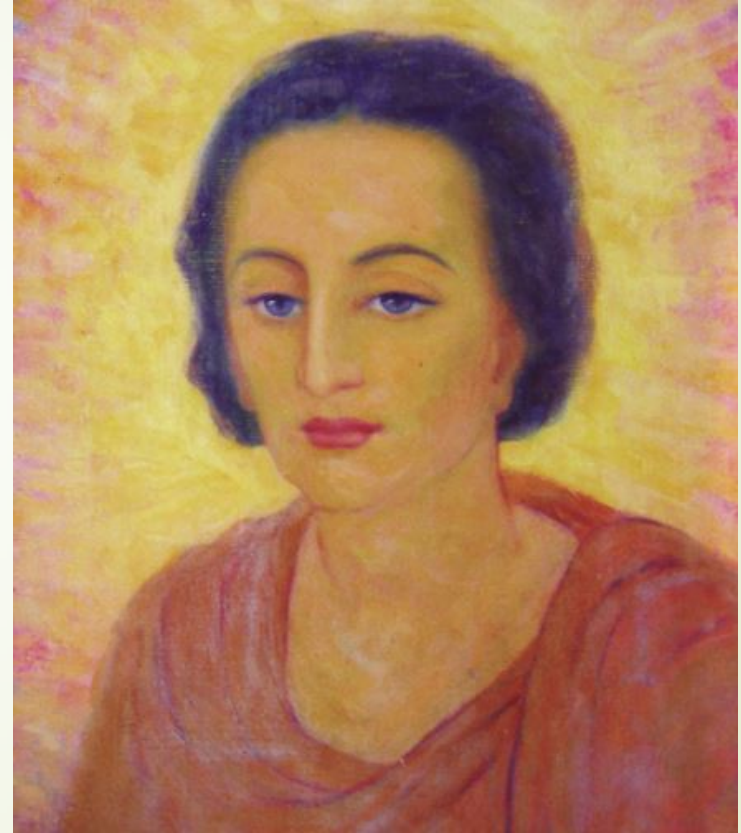


- In Adyar, Fuller was asked by Leadbeater to teach art to Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986), the young Indian he «discovered» in 1909 (left) as the future «World Teacher». Leadbeater claimed that Krishnamurti knew in past lives both Fuller and Maria Luisa Kirby (d. 1946), an Italian Theosophist who also «painted portraits of the Masters from recollections on the astral plane»*

*M. Luytens, *J. Krishnamurti: A Life*, New Delhi 2005, 65

Fuller's Portraits

- Between 1908 and 1911, under the guidance of Leadbeater, Fuller produced an unknown number of portraits of the Masters. There are different interpretations of how exactly she «saw» them, and she may also have used Varley's miniatures as models. Only the portrait of Master Buddha (right), in possession of the Australian Theosophical Society, has been published



Women Painters

The women painters marked an epoch in New South Wales Art circles when they formed a club and opened their own exhibition gallery. On Wednesday they started another era when their School of Fine and Applied Arts was officially opened by Mr. John Sulman, president of the National Art Gallery.

Mr. Sulman gave the three chosen teachers the sensible advice to be candid with young students in Art, and to tell them if they had no particular talent. Mr. Julian Ashton also gave a few words of congratulation and encouragement.

An exhibition of the work of Miss Eirene Mort (instructor in still life), Mrs. Hedley Parsons (landscape), and Miss Florence Fuller (life) proved of great interest to the many visitors. The most noticeable exhibit was Miss Fuller's portrait of Mrs. Hedley Parsons, the president of the society.

A Sad End

- Fuller returned to Australia in 1916 with Leadbeater. She was rarely mentioned (see Sydney's *Sunday Times*, July 4, 1920, left) outside Theosophical circles. Public controversies about Leadbeater, Krishnamurti, and the Masters contributed to marginalize the once popular artist

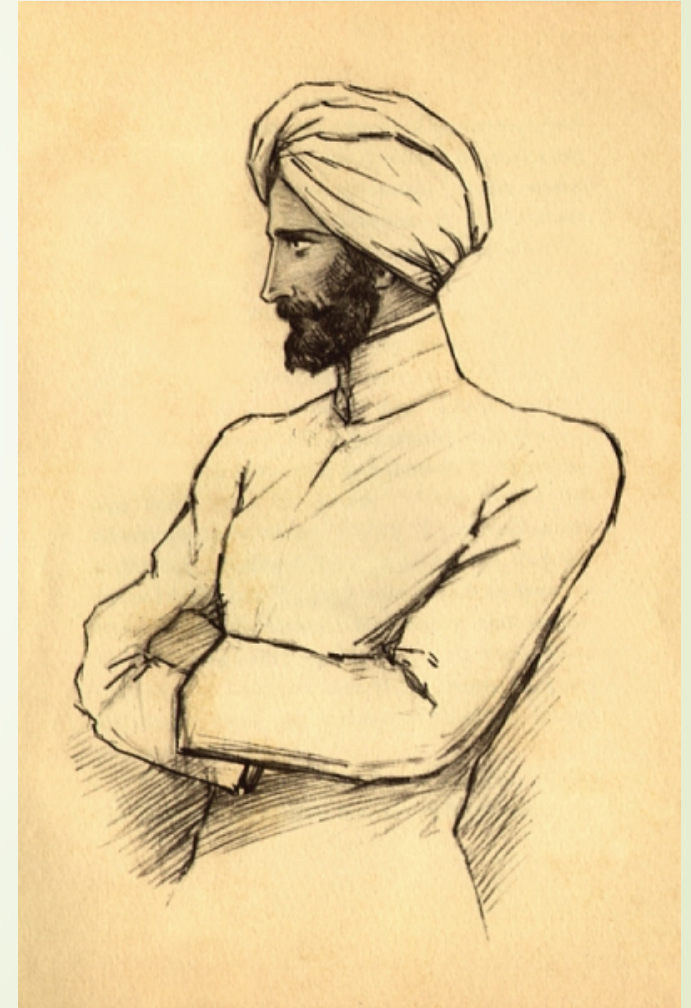
Forgotten and Rediscovered



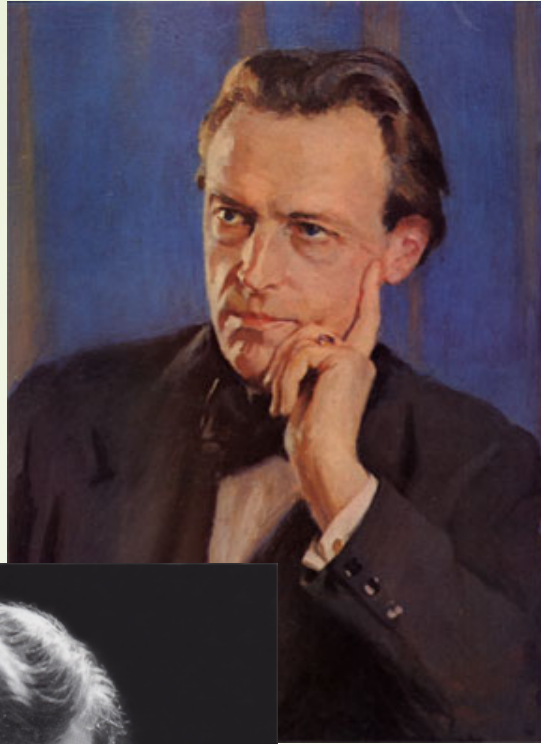
- ▶ Fuller spent the last twenty years of her life in a psychiatric hospital, and was almost forgotten. She was rediscovered thanks to Australian historian of art Joan Kerr (1938-2004, above)

The Krishnamurti Crisis

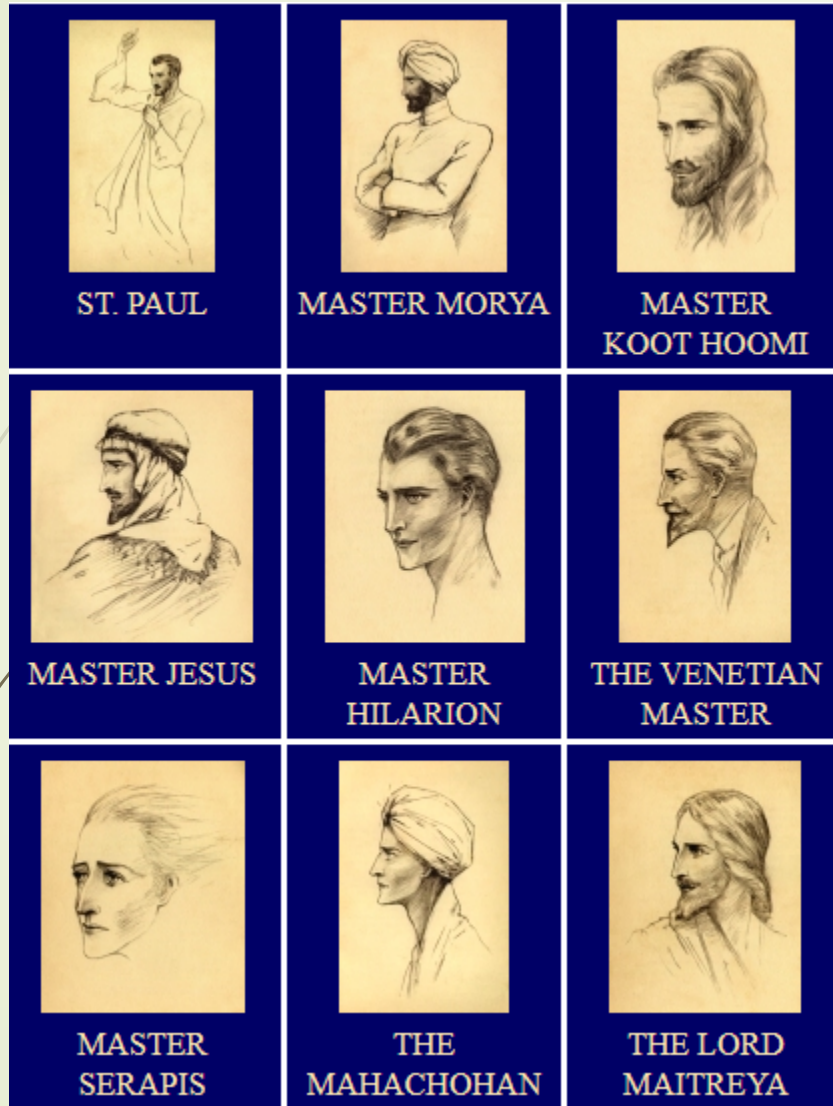
- ▶ The most serious crisis in the history of the Theosophical Society occurred in 1929, when Krishnamurti publicly renounced his role as World Teacher
- ▶ Not surprisingly, one of the reactions was the apparitions of nine new portraits of the Masters (including Morya, right), produced by the British artist and Theosophist David Anrias (pseud. of Brian Aurias Ross, 1887-1958) and published in *Through the Eyes of the Masters: Meditations and Portraits* (London 1932)



Cyril Scott



- Anrias' book carried an anonymous introduction by celebrated British composer and Theosophist Cyril Scott (1879-1970, above)
- Scott was on intimate terms with Koot Hoomi. In 1921, the Master appeared to him stating that for his spiritual evolution he needed to marry fellow Theosophist and novelist Rose Laure Allatini (1890-1980, below). Although Scott was also attracted to men, and Allatini to women, Koot Homi appeared to Rose too and the marriage promptly took place. Scott and Rose had two children, before they separated in 1939



Scott on the Portraits

- Scott explained «the reason why some of the Masters have permitted their portraits to be given to the world». «Within the last year or two Mr. Krishnamurti [...] has been preaching a form of philosophy in which he has depreciated the value of the Masters». As a consequence, «the Masters mentally impressed their portraits on David Anrias for reproduction in this book»*

* [C. Scott], «Introduction», in D. Anrias, *Through the Eyes of the Masters: Meditations and Portraits*, London 1932, 17-18

The Theosophical Society on Anrias

- «Mr. Ross, of course, has seen the pictures at Adyar of the Masters. Evidently he is a psychic and so draws his information along that line. As the general public has no criterion of judging whether the pictures do resemble the Masters or not, the best plan is to consider them as an artistic production which may or may not have some resemblance to the originals»

C. Jinarajadasa (right), Letter to the Esoteric Section of the American Theosophical Society, 1947 (in Ross, «Portraits of the Brothers», 57)



Postscripts: 1. Roerich and Morya



Roerich, *Saint Sergius of Radonezh*, 1932

- Although he eventually founded a splinter group, Agni Yoga, Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) was among the most important painters associated with the Theosophical Society. His wife Helena (1879-1955) claimed to have met Morya and Koot Hoomi in Hyde Park, London, on March 24, 1920, and it has been suggested that she recognized them based on Schmiechen's portraits*. Roerich «automatically» painted several sketches of the Masters. He also repeatedly portrayed the Russian saint Sergius of Radonezh (1314-1392), whom he regarded as an incarnation of Master Morya**

* A. Andreyev, *The Myth of the Masters Revived: The Occult Lives of Nikolai and Elena Roerich*, Leiden 2014, 70-71

** S. Fosdick, *My Teachers: Meeting with the Roerichs. Diary Leaves 1922-1934*, Prescott (AZ) 2015, 85

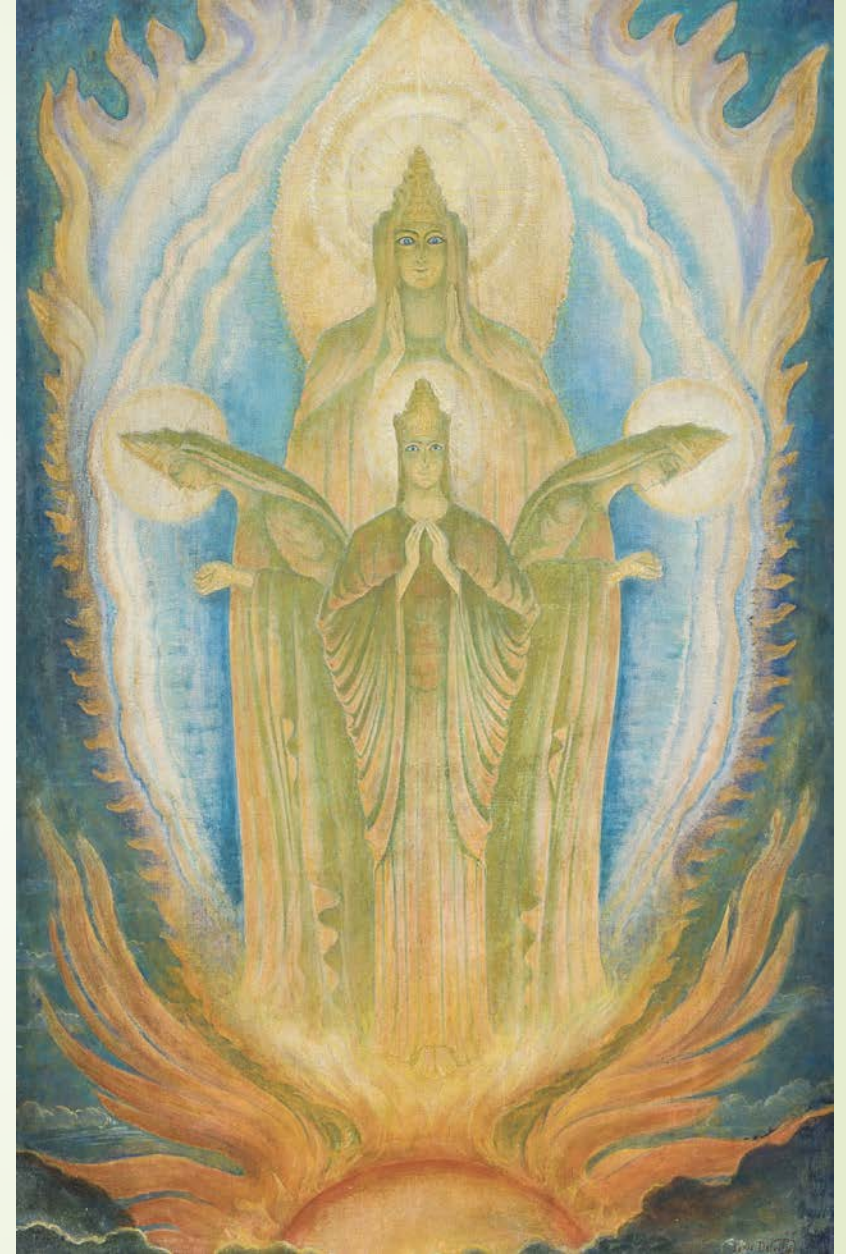
Allal Ming



- ▶ Roerich's early drawing, clairvoyantly sketched, of Master Allal Ming (left), later revealed as being another incarnation of Master Morya, is not too far from Schmiechen's portrait of the same Morya

2. Delville and the Kumaras

- ▶ In October 2014, an auction house in Lokeren, Belgium, sold a little known painting by Jean Delville. *The Kumaras* depicts the four «exoteric» Kumaras (there are also three «esoteric» Kumaras). They have a long story in Theosophy and according to Besant are at the head of the whole Occult Hierarchy. Unlike the Masters, no Theosophist dared represent the Kumaras before Delville. The circumstances and date of this painting remain unknown



Conclusion: Acheiropoieta



- ▶ During the Byzantine iconoclastic riots, an apocryphal document claimed that a Church Council of 836 produced a list of «acheiropoieta», i.e. paintings of Jesus, the Virgin or saints «not produced by human hands» that even the iconoclasts should respect
- ▶ «Acheiropoieta» (see an example venerated at the Holy Stairs in Rome, left) appeared in many religious traditions in times of crisis, including in the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, and in Hindu temples during the tragic partition between India and Pakistan

Modern Esoteric Acheiropoieta

- ▶ The Theosophical portraits of the Masters are *modern esoteric acheiropoieta*
- ▶ *Acheiropoieta*: they appeared in times of crisis and were not «really» produced by human hands
- ▶ *Modern*: unlike in the old *acheiropoieta*, the artist's name and credentials reinforced the authority of the painting
- ▶ *Esoteric*: Theosophists were reluctant to show them to the general public and the identity they wanted to reinforce was primarily the initiates'. To this date, the portraits remain sacred objects rather than mere works of art



That's
all
Folks!

