

Thomas Sully's "The Student" "

Some Biographical Notes on the Artist and His Daughter Rosalie

Submitted by Edla Brabham

Thomas Sully was born in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, England in June, 1783, into a family of actors and circus performers. The family emigrated to the U.S. in 1792 and lived in Richmond and Norfolk, Va. before settling in Charleston in 1794. Most of the Sully children performed, and Thomas made at least one appearance as an acrobat before being apprenticed to an insurance broker. It was not a suitable placement, as the broker said "Tom spoiled every piece of paper that...he could lay his hands on," adding that if he "picked up a piece of paper in the office it was sure to have a face on it." (Biddle p.4) The broker urged Thomas's father to allow him to study art, but the short time in the insurance office may have benefited Thomas, who later became an astute businessman and a compulsive record keeper. During his 75-year career, Sully kept a register of the 2,631 paintings and miniatures that he completed, and the price he was paid for each one.

For his first art instruction, Sully was placed with his brother-in-law, Jean Belzons, a painter of miniatures. In 1803, after an argument with Belzons, Sully went to Richmond, Va., to study with his elder brother Lawrence, who was also a miniature painter; Sully opened his own studio in Richmond later that year. In 1804, after the sudden death of Lawrence, he set aside his plans to go to England to further his studies. Thomas took responsibility for his brother's wife Sarah and her three children, and two years later, Thomas and Sarah were married. By all accounts the marriage was a happy one, and the couple had nine children of their own, three of whom died in infancy. The surviving children: Jane, Thomas Wilcox Sully, Blanche, Ellen, Rosalie, and Alfred, were all professional or amateur artists. Sully's daughter Ellen married John Hill Wheeler, former Secretary of the Treasury and first superintendent of the branch of the U.S. Mint in Charlotte, NC.

In 1806, Thomas Sully moved his family to New York City, and later to Hartford, Conn. During his time in New England, Sully went to Boston for several weeks, and, as he wrote, "received the benefit of [Gilbert] Stuart's advice." (Fabian, p.11.) In 1808, Sully moved again, this time to Philadelphia, where he lived for the rest of his life; he became a U.S. citizen in 1809. That same year, Sully finally went to England, carrying with him an introduction to the elderly American-born painter Benjamin West, with whom he studied for nine months. West, who was noted for his encouragement of young artists, advised Sully to study human anatomy, especially the bones of the head, and to copy paintings by the European masters as well as classical sculptures. Sully also studied with Sir Thomas Lawrence, and learned a style of romantic portrait painting that he would popularize in the U.S. after his return in 1810.

Sully's reputation as a painter grew, and after the deaths of Charles Wilson Peale and Gilbert Stuart, he became the leading portrait painter in the U.S. He was especially known for his graceful, often flattering, portraits of women and children. At the height of his career, Sully painted an average of 35 to 40 pictures a year. He was commissioned to do portraits of the rich and powerful; of celebrated actors and actresses; and of political figures, including the Marquis de Lafayette, Daniel Boone, Benjamin Franklin, John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson.

Before Sully returned to England in 1837, the Society of the Sons of Saint George in Philadelphia commissioned him to do a full-length portrait of Queen Victoria, who had just come to the throne at the age of 18. After lengthy negotiations through royal protocols, Sully eventually began a coronation portrait of Victoria, which some consider his masterwork. Sully's 21-year old

daughter Blanche accompanied her father to England, and sometimes stood in for the Queen, wearing her forty pound robes during sittings. One day, Blanche wore the diadem that appears in the final portrait, becoming the only American ever to wear the English crown. (Barratt, p. 47) During that sitting, Victoria walked into the room, made a little curtsy to the "Queen," and the two girls had a companionable visit.

In addition to Blanche, other members of Sully's family, including his wife and children, often sat for his portraits. Sully painted many affectionate portraits of his wife Sarah throughout her long life. A portrait of his son Thomas Wilcox Sully, called "The Torn Hat" is one of the most popular works in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; a double portrait of daughters Blanche and Rosalie, or "The Lily and the Rose," is in the Columbia (S.C) Museum of Art. An 1848 version of a portrait of Rosalie, called "The Student" is in the permanent collection of the Mint Museum of Art; Sully painted the original version in 1839, when Rosalie was 21. Rosalie was a promising painter in her own right, and at the time of the portrait, she had five landscapes hanging in an exhibition in New York; she was also an accomplished miniature painter. "The Student" shows Rosalie with her hands resting on an artist's portfolio and holding a pencil, wearing a wide shade that casts a shadow over her face.

There are few references to Rosalie in biographies of her father. Most of what has been written about her appears in biographies of Boston-born Charlotte Cushman, who was the most celebrated international actress of her day. Cushman became famous for her performance as a commanding, even sinister, Lady Macbeth, and for her roles as Juliet, as well as a virile Romeo. In 1843, while Cushman was appearing at and managing a theater in Philadelphia, she commissioned Sully to paint her portrait (probably as Juliet.) Cushman was not a beauty, but Sully had learned that by softening the jaws and cheeks of his female subjects, he could draw attention to their eyes. His finished portrait of Cushman, shows "...a vibrant, appealing, young face with great luminous eyes, a softly molded jaw line and chin—all of it flushed with a sunny brightness and undeniable feminine charm. The picture was stunning, but hardly a portrait." (Leach, p. 113.) The portrait was, in fact, "an exquisite lie," (Fabian, p.65.) but Cushman was so pleased with it that she overpaid Sully.

Actresses were still not considered entirely respectable, but having been born into a theatrical family himself, Sully enjoyed the company of actors. He welcomed Charlotte Cushman into the studio at his home, and introduced her to his wife, and daughters Blanche and Rosalie. Cushman socialized with the Sullys, and came to think of them as her family, sometimes referring to Thomas Sully as "Father." Cushman developed a particular attachment to Rosalie, who was two years younger. Cushman "had a tendency to be effusive and overwhelm whomever was the object of her admiration..." (Merrill, p. 64) while Rosalie was gentle, self-effacing, and shy. Rosalie and Charlotte saw each other daily, as Cushman wrote in her diary, "passing hours of sweet companionship." (Merrill, p.8) Cushman's biographers can only speculate about the true nature of the relationship between the two women, because all but one of Rosalie's letters to Charlotte were destroyed, possibly by Cushman herself. However, Cushman gave Rosalie a ring in July, 1844, when "they swore eternal love." (Markus, p.14.) The next day, Cushman cryptically noted in her diary: " 'R' Saturday, July 6, 'married' " (Merrill, p. 9.) Rosalie painted an ivory miniature of Cushman, and behind its gold frame are intertwined locks of Charlotte and Rosalie's hair. (Merrill, p. 11)

Charlotte Cushman believed that her standing as an actress, and her financial security, depended on her having success on the London stage. She hoped one day to return to the U.S. in triumph "with money enough to support not only her only family but an independent life with Rosalie." (Markus, p. 16) Cushman's original plan was to be in England for six months, and she left with Rosalie's encouragement. In November, 1844, Thomas and Rosalie Sully went to New York with Cushman's mother and brother to see her off. Rosalie gave Cushman a bracelet with a miniature self-portrait. Although very close relationships between women were not unusual at the time, Rosalie and Charlotte

understood the need to be discreet. Before she left Philadelphia, Cushman had given all her possessions to the Sully family for safekeeping, including Thomas Sully's portrait of her. Rosalie wrote that she "hadn't dared call out for them not to place it in the picture gallery: 'No, no, I want it in my room.' " (Markus, p. 16)

Cushman's acclaim in London was so great that her stay there extended over several years. Early in 1845, Cushman had a relationship with another woman, who left her for a man. Shortly thereafter, Cushman began a relationship with yet another woman; they were constantly seen together, generating so much comment in the press that it reached Rosalie in Philadelphia. In her only surviving letter to Cushman, probably the last one she was allowed to write, Rosalie said, "Dear Dear Charlotte my grief is too deep for expression...never never question my love for you. I am unalterably yours forever...[I am] alone and heartbroken, praying fervently for death to end my misery." (Markus, p.16.) Cushman noted in her diary "May 10, Letter from Rose, breaking my heart." (Leach, p.157.)

In 1847, Rosalie Sully died in Philadelphia at age 29. No official cause of Rosalie's death has been discovered, but her brother had died of a fever a few weeks earlier. One author speculates that "Rosalie's despondency contributed to her untimely death." (Merrill, p.153) When she learned of Rosalie's death a few months later, Charlotte Cushman was overwhelmed with "nervous prostration," perhaps from overwork as much as grief, and left the stage for a time, going to the spa at Malvern for a rest cure. The Philadelphia newspapers published stories of Cushman's "collapse," and *The Spirit* reported that she was "sick in England and may retire forever." (Leach, p.195.) She recovered, and went on to have a long, celebrated, career; (and numerous relationships with other women) and died in 1876.

Thomas Sully painted the Mint Museum of Art's version of Rosalie's portrait, "The Student," in 1848, after her death. The original version, sometimes called "The Fair Student," was finished in 1839, probably on the commission of a patron; it is owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1871, Sully painted a third version, "A Portrait of Rosalie," for his daughter Blanche. It was sold at auction in January, 2008, for \$6000.

Thomas Sully continued to paint until the end of his life, but the quality of his work gradually declined because of age and poor health. He had taught many students during his career, and after his death, his family published his manuscript *Hints to Young Painters and the Process of Portrait-Painting as Practiced by the Late Thomas Sully*. Thomas Sully died in Philadelphia on November, 5, 1872.

Sources

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Note - Images from this paper can be seen in the hard copy version in the Mint Museum Library

Images -

"The Student" (Rosalie Kemble Sully, 1818-47) - Thomas Sully, 1839

Charlotte Cushman by Thomas Sully, 1843

Charlotte Cushman, by Rosalie Sully, 1844

"The Rose and the Lily", Thomas Sully, 1842

"Torn Hat", Thomas Sully

"Queen Victoria", 1838