

An American in Paris ... and London

A selling exhibition of the work of Cyrus Cincinnati Cuneo

(1879 - 1916)



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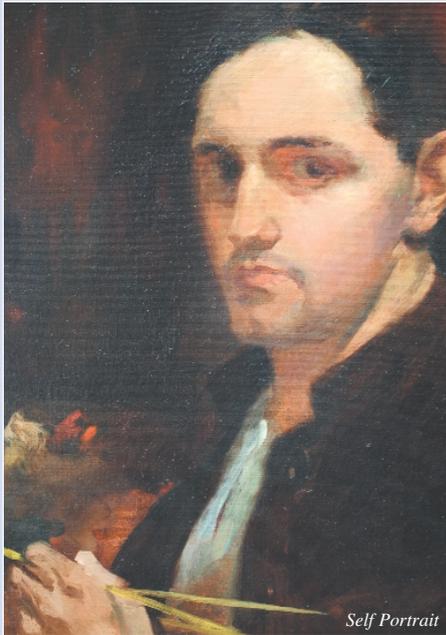


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London – are a testament to the immediacy and tactile power of Cuneo's on-the-spot sketching and its easy knack of evoking the everyday reality on which Whistler had advised his young pupil to concentrate.

Unlike his artist compatriot, John Singer Sargent, who had Europe thrust upon him by wealthy parents as a child, the working class Cuneo had to discover the continent of his forefathers under his own steam. He was born into a huge, Capra-like, family of Italian American immigrants in the North Beach area of San Francisco, where his father and mother ran a steamship ticket agency. Cuneo senior had little luck in persuading his children to follow in his footsteps: Cyrus had two brothers, Rinaldo and Egisto, who

became artists and no less than four musical sisters.

Family legend has it that Cyrus decided early in life that he wanted to become an artist and study in Paris. He began by saving money from paper rounds and, despite his diminutive size at the time, graduated to lucrative bouts of prize fighting in his early teens.

Surviving photographs of the young Cyrus show a decidedly un-aesthetic-looking young man with disproportionately muscular forearms and great haymaking fists. Aged just 16, he became the flyweight champion of the San Francisco area, raising in the process the funds to finance the long-desired trip to Paris.



Artist at the Langham Sketching Club

WHISTLER, on seeing Cyrus Cuneo's work for the first time in the Master's newly opened Parisian art school, told his 20 year old student: "Draw with your brush – endeavour to produce what you see before you. You may be shocked by the result".

The young Italian American took the advice to heart, eschewing academic painting to become one of the leading artist illustrators of his generation, rising to a position where, aged just 30, he was chosen by the Illustrated London News to represent the epoch-making events of the Edwardian era: King Edward VII's funeral and the Coronation of George V.

The pictures gathered together in this booklet - in Whistler's Parisian atelier and at the Langham Sketching Club in

Paris

Cuneo enrolled at the Académie Colarossi in Paris in 1896, where he studied for four years. The young student continued to box and to teach boxing to an appreciative Latin Quarter - a fact that amused and impressed the pugnacious Whistler. Cuneo also applied and was accepted as one of the 40 students in the Master's brand new academy in the Passage Stanislas. Cyrus later recalled how Whistler despised conventional academic training and sought out students "who were really artistic and in earnest" – most of whom, as it turned out, were women: "he never had a more ardent lot of followers, they adored him."



The young Italian American was an instant hit with Whistler, who appointed him massier or head student, a role that involved such glamorous tasks as holding a handkerchief upon which the maestro could wipe his hands between practical demonstrations. The pen and ink study of attentive female students in the exhibition (see page 7) dates from this period and had, remarkably, remained in the Cuneo family from 1898 until recently.



Cuneo spent six years in Paris altogether, meeting his wife, the artist Nell Tennison, in the process, before deciding that the best place for a young artist with a Whistler-inspired talent for recording the life he saw around him, was London. In the Edwardian era, London was not only the centre of the political world but also the indisputable centre of world publishing, and it was in illustrated magazines and books that Cuneo's future lay.

London and the Langham Sketching Club

According to family sources, Cuneo quickly found work and success. His instantly recognisable monochrome watercolours graced many magazines and novels. The pinnacle of the trade at the time was the Illustrated London News and it was there that the "Englishman by preference and adoption" (as Cuneo described himself) became established as one of the leading illustrators of his generation.

In 1903, Cuneo joined a club that was synonymous with the demi-monde of the illustrator – the Langham Sketching Club - a curious blend of gentleman's club and bohemian drinking hole. All the great names of 19th century illustration had been members at one time or another since its inception in 1838: including Charles Keene, Sir John Tenniel and Fred

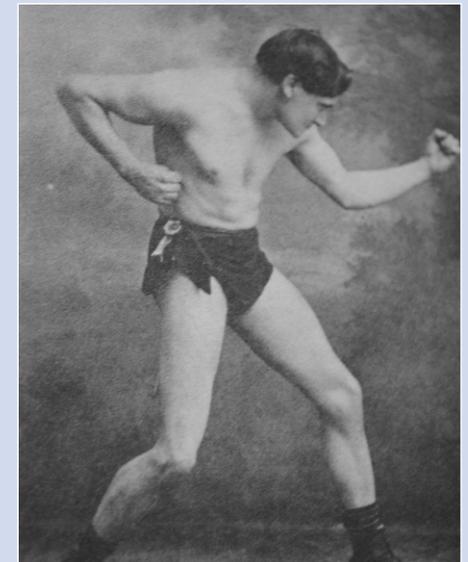


Walker. In the early years of the twentieth century, the membership was equally impressive, including the likes of Arthur Rackham and Alfred Munnings. It says something for Cuneo's personality and talent that, at the age of 29, he became chairman of the club.

The Langham's activities represented something of a busman's holiday for professional artists, as members would get together at 7 o'clock on a Friday evening to produce a two hour sketch, usually of a life model, after which lay members and guests would be admitted for supper, drinks and to view the work that had been produced.

Unusually, Cuneo took it upon himself to record these evenings in a series of

delicious oil sketches. These intimate portraits of fellow artists sketching may possibly have been produced on



Flyweight champion of San Francisco

"The Langham Sketching Club - a curious blend of gentlemen's club and bohemian drinking hole"

The other life studies in the exhibition – in graphite and red chalk – also date from this period, although only the female life studies could be ascribed to the Whistler atelier, as the latter only employed female models. The pictures are redolent of George Du Maurier's Trilby: an exotic, bohemian world of picturesque sordidity and seedy glamour, where would-be Sarah Bernhardts rubbed shoulders with penniless students and real-life Svengalis.

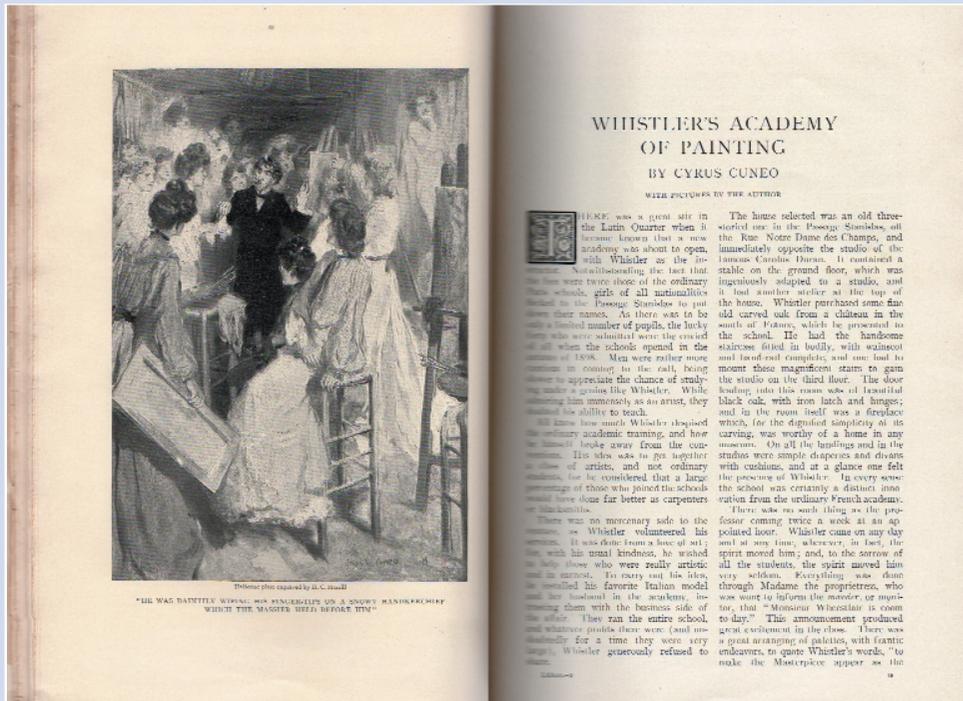
commission, but the medium – oil – would seem to suggest that they were not done for reproduction in a magazine. Remarkably, the set of portraits were retained by Cuneo and his descendants and have remained together as a group.

Not only do the sketches provide a fascinating window onto an important artistic subculture (which still continues today) but they also demonstrate the flowering of the nascent talent that Whistler had observed in his young student. Cuneo had a rare ability to sketch with a brush, to reproduce with immediacy and a vivacity, the life he saw before him. His oil sketches have the lushness of oil paintings but also the freeness and dash of a pencil sketch. Sadly, the burgeoning of Cuneo's talent

was brought to a bizarre and shuddering halt at the premature age of 36 by blood poisoning – brought on not by an accident in his beloved boxing ring but by the accidental prick of a hatpin at a dance.

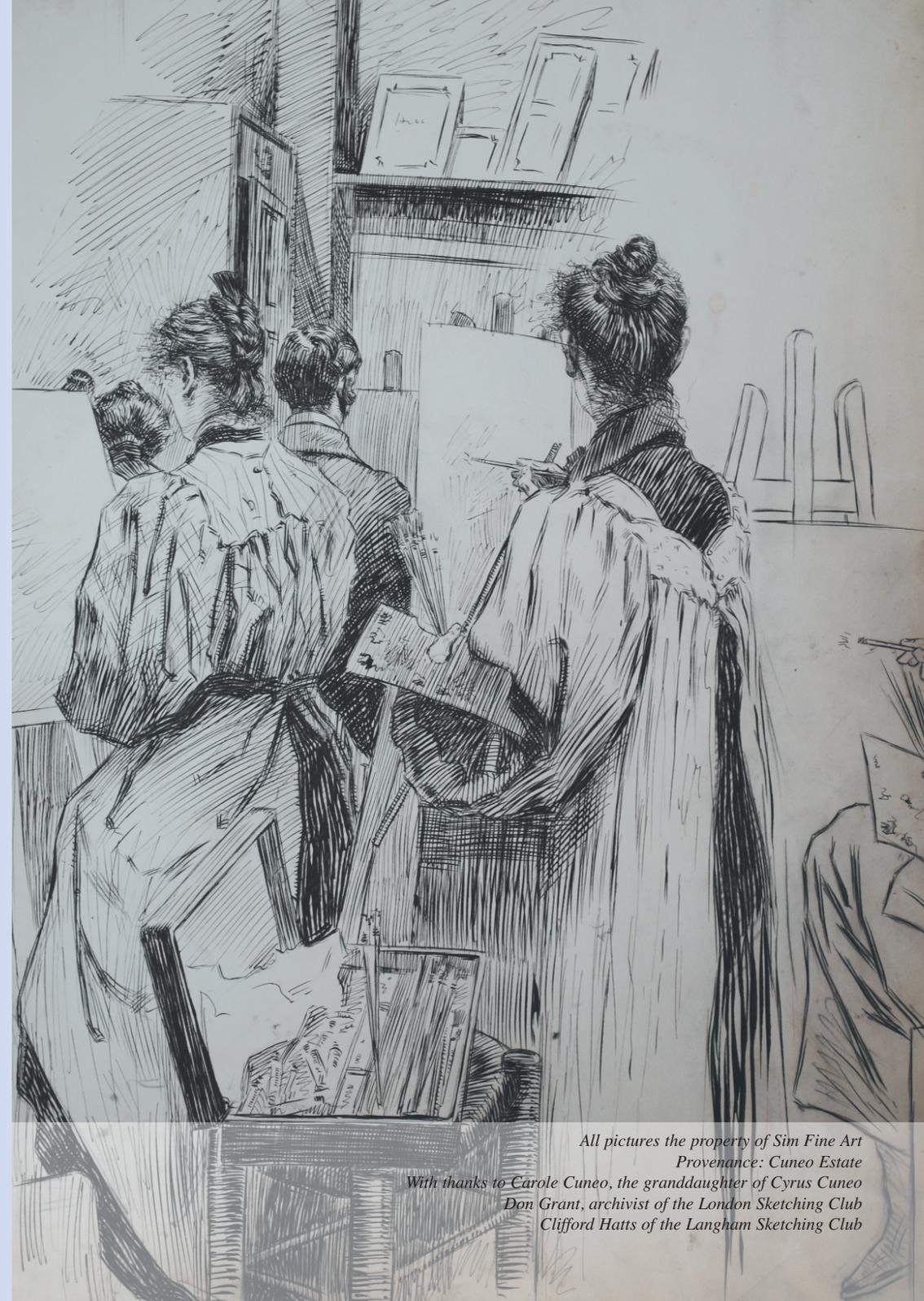
It was a tragic and absurd end to the life of a dynamic personality and a hugely talented artist, but the Cuneo genes at least, lived on. His son, Terence, inherited much of his father's (and mother's) ability and became one of the best-loved realist painters of the mid-twentieth century – the great railway painter in fact – as well, incidentally, as a pillar of the equally long-lasting Langham Sketching Club.

Andrew Sim, 2011



Century Magazine, 1906

Students at Whistler's atelier



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