

Theodore Sanches de Pina Ramos

17 October 1928 – 11 April 2018

David Robinson Remembers the Distinguished Chelsea Artist

From his Chelsea Farm House Studio in Milmans Street, Theodore Sanchez De Pina Ramos created exquisite portraits of many of the great and good. The studios, built by the Council and leased to Chelsea artists, demonstrated the commitment of local planners in the 1960s to support artists by providing living and working accommodation within the Borough. Found just a few yards from JMW Turner's last house in Davis's Place (now 118-119 Cheyne Walk) and behind 'Whistler's Reach', Studio 3 was the birthplace for over 800 portraits.

This scribe is fortunate to have lived his formative years in Old Church Street, next door to Mallord House, then owned by Cecil Arthur Hunt, the watercolourist. After church service at Chelsea Old Church, he offered painting lessons to the scribe and his sister while mother finished cooking the Sunday lunch. Entering Hunt's studio, we were each handed a precious joss stick and invited to put a lighted candle to its end. A means of dispelling the smell of paint hanging on the air, we were told. What experience is that! Some memory. The exotic aroma from the joss stick, led us into a magic creative world of the artist's studio. Neither child retained any skill at painting from those lessons, but the experience of being given free rein in the studio was a rich one, that set a basic but clear understanding of the vital place of artists in Chelsea.



Theo Ramos at work on a portrait of H.M. The Queen

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For a new generation, Theo's studio took the place of Cecil Hunt's. On visits by our children, the identical ceremonial lighting of the joss stick was enthusiastically welcomed. A lifelong memory, a deep affection and the understanding of the importance of painters to Chelsea was instilled.

Theo was born in Oporto, Portugal on 17 October 1928, the third of five children. A mistake led to his birth date being registered as 30 October 1928. He celebrated his two birthdays, which was something he was proud to share with the Queen - whom he was commissioned to paint several times.

The historic Ramos family home was close to Seville. Theo's Spanish parents had fled unrest in Spain, moving first to Oporto and then to England, where Theo completed his education at the Royal Academy Schools. The Keeper at the time was Sir Henry Rushbury. His daughter Julia was Theo's fellow student. She received the Gold Medal for the year and he was awarded the Silver. They married. Throughout the course and later, Theo regarded Sir Henry as his mentor. His other influences were Velazquez and Van Dyke, Gainsborough, Titian and John Singer Sargent.

Sir Henry introduced Theo to his wide circle of painting contemporaries including Sir Gerald Kelly (with whom Theo worked) and Sir Edward Munnings. On one



Theo Ramos and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh

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occasion Theo arrived at the Kelly's home with a large bunch of red roses for Lady Kelly whose husband shortly afterwards wrote to Sir Henry: 'I do think your son-in-law cannot afford to give my wife red roses. It's a bit much.' Theo informed his father-in-law: 'My mother told me that when calling, you should wipe your feet on the mat and never come empty handed.'

Theo taught part time at the Royal Academy Schools. At Harrow School of Art one of his pupils was Malcolm McLaren. With Vivienne Westwood's shop at World's End moments from Milman's Street, they continued to meet.

Bohemian haunts such as the French House in Dean Street and the Queen's Coffee Shop in Cork Street provided Theo and Julia with a wide circle of artistic and creative friends, among them Winifred and Ben Nicholson, Dylan Thomas, Geoffrey Bernard and John Hoyland.

Theo's sitters included the Queen and Queen Mother. Two of his works are in the National Portrait Gallery collection. He was also considerable copyist. Arguably the most significant picture that he copied was a full-size copy of Raphael's *Transfiguration*, commissioned by Distillers Company for their headquarters at 20 St James's Square. This took Theo two years including time spent in Rome copying from the original. He was a skilled designer and typographer, producing the posters for Royal Academy exhibitions for a number of years. He also worked with Christopher Prater and the Kelpra Studio.



H.M. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother

The marriage to Julia produced four sons, three of whom survive him (two painters and one professional photographer), as well as five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Theo excelled at conversation. There was very little to give away his background to anyone meeting Theo for the first time since his diction was exquisitely Oxford, though from time to time his Mediterranean temperament could come through. A frequent visitor to Lord's and proud member of the MCC, he would remark on the good sense of the MCC

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authorities in choosing the Spanish national flag's colours for the Club's colours. Theo was in his element queuing early in the morning with fellow cricket fans at the Grace Gates. No time would be lost before conversation was engaged with those around him. That conversation would continue at 'Cads' Corner' as he called the front seats of the Allan Stand where a regular group of friends met. Conversation was fuelled by his cool-bag loaded with quail's eggs, prawns and champagne. Theo adored Lords on the first day of a Test Match as much as on the final of the Cricketer Village Cup when he celebrated the prospect of 'the village blacksmith hitting a six over the Grandstand'. When cricket was being played and Theo was in his studio, he became an ardent fan of John Arlott on Test Match Special.

For almost sixty years, Theo occupied Studio 3 where he was the first tenant. His early neighbours included the well-known Chelsea bohemian and impressionist painter Michael D'Aguilar at Number 4. More recently he shared the corridor with Victoria Baden-Powell and the sculptor William Fawke. It was his habit to breakfast at the same table at Picasso in the King's Road until its closure in 2009. Theo learned the name and biography of every waitress. He would greet them by their first name before issuing the same order (coffee with hot, but not, frothy milk on the side, and poached egg on toast or latterly a slice of dry toast).

As an enthusiast for dining, Theo could be frequently found in black tie, and occasionally white. A Liveryman of three Worshipful Companies (Painter-Stainers, Founders, and the Barbers), he had a regular supply of dinners to attend. These were supplemented by a myriad of other Clubs and Dining Clubs that he supported. With the Royal Academy his alma-mater, he considered it inevitable that that he should join the Devonshire Club in St James's. On its merger with the East India, Theo became a life member of the East India, enjoying various privileges. Its second-floor landing has a large collection of portraits by Theo of its past chairmen. When Livery Companies and Club dinners did not provide, then he turned to the Thunderers, the Bucks and Berks, the Crocks, and most recently the Devonshire Society of St James's, which he founded. But Theo was no stranger to local restaurants in Chelsea, his favourites being Le Colombier in Dovehouse Street, El Bodegon in Park Walk, and Frantoio (known to Theo by its earlier names, Leonardo and The Continental Barn).

A stroke affecting his right side deprived Theo of his two loves, his ability to paint and to speak. Cruel deprivations. He was sustained in his studio by sons, family and friends and, latterly, by a devoted team of carers. His death on 11 April 2018 deprived all who knew him of a great inspiration. More than 800 of his portraits which hang in palaces, military establishments, government offices, company board rooms and homes will reflect one of his talents. What we have all lost is Theo's other great love: his conversation. His death also ends a chapter of a

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family's connection with Chelsea lasting over 160 years, the earliest of which being the Hackney Carriage business on the site formerly occupied by the Duke of Westminster's Livery Stables in Old Church Street - now the site of the Red Cross Shop and what used to be the Essoldo Cinema. His sons' continued memberships of the Chelsea Arts Club open a different chapter.



Michael Robinson

Unsurprisingly, Theo never engaged with the internet and depended heavily on his local suppliers. One framer in particular, Derek Tanous, produced the most beautiful frames as Theo directed over a number of decades. Like countless other artists, Theo was also a regular customer of Rodney Baldwin's at Green & Stone.

Will there be other painters to follow in Cecil Hunt and Theo Ramos' place and keep a lighted candle in their studio in case some child or grown up child may be inspired to light a joss stick and through the threads of its rising smoke begin to understand the mystery of the artist's studio?

ADWR