



P. OPPE

PAUL OPPE

1878-1957

ADOLPH PAUL OPPE (he used only the initial of his first name) was born in London on 22 September 1878, the third son of Sigmund Armin Oppé, silk merchant of Lyons, and Pauline Jaffé.¹ His father, who had brought the family to London from Lyons in 1873, died in 1886 when Paul was 8; and his mother, with one son already at Charterhouse, and five more to follow, soon moved the family home to Godalming, near the school, to which Paul went as a scholar in 1891. His education was not to follow the conventional pattern. His health was not good; and after two years at school, he was taken by his mother on a sea voyage to New Zealand. From there he visited Japan; and on his return, instead of going back to Charterhouse, he entered the University of St. Andrew's in 1894. He was only 16, but he was evidently already a gifted scholar; in 1897 the university published his essay, *The New Comedy*, which had won him the Gray Prize; and in the same year he left St. Andrew's for Oxford, as an exhibitioner at New College. It was not surprising that there he obtained first class honours—in Classical Moderations in 1899, and in Literae Humaniores in 1901.

He had begun at Oxford an ambitious study of the Greek oracles; and he visited France and Italy in his vacations. Now, in pursuit of both classical and artistic studies, he travelled extensively, to Dresden, Vienna, Budapest, Prague, and Roumania, to Berlin, and finally to Crete and Greece, spending several weeks with the British School at Athens as his base, and making a tour, mainly on foot, through central Greece and to Olympia and Corinth. With this valuable experience he returned in the autumn of 1902 to St. Andrew's, as assistant to the Professor of Greek, John Burnet; and there he was able to complete part of his work on the oracles, *The Chasm at Delphi*, which was published in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* in 1904.

For one term only, in the same year, he took up a lectureship in Greek History at Edinburgh, where Baldwin Brown, the

¹ Pauline Jaffé was the daughter of a linen merchant of Belfast, who was also the great-grandfather of Professor Michael Jaffé, the present Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

first Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art in that university, encouraged his interest in European art; and it was he who recommended Oppé, two years later, to the publisher Methuen as a suitable author for a monograph on Raphael. At the beginning of 1905, however, he had chosen a career in the Board of Education, which brought him into the museum world, though only by the accident of the system at that time. It was then the practice to second a member of that department to the Victoria and Albert Museum, either in an advisory capacity or in the post of Deputy Director. Oppé was an obvious choice for the task, and he served the museum for two periods, as adviser 1906–7, and as Deputy Director 1910–13. He said afterwards that one of the best of his services was to recommend that the latter post should be abolished—in his own words, he ‘axed himself’. He remained at the Education Office, except for these two interludes and war service at the Ministry of Munitions, until he retired in 1938; and from 1930 to 1938 he was Principal Assistant Secretary to the Board. He was appointed Companion of the Bath in 1937.

The rest of his career, in his retirement, he spent on his researches into the history of early British draughtsmanship, and his expertise on the subject was by now widely recognized. In 1937 he had been invited to act as adviser in London to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa on the acquisition of drawings, and he remained in that post until his death. He was elected a fellow of the British Academy in 1952, and in the following year he became Hon. LL.D. of Glasgow University. He had married in 1909 Valentine, daughter of the Reverend R. W. L. Tollemache, and there were two children, a son Denys and a daughter Armide. Mrs. Oppé died in 1951. The marriage had been a remarkably successful union of two strong characters whose background and upbringing were different. Not long before Oppé’s death, Miss Aydua Scott-Elliot, who had been his devoted helper in his work on the English drawings at Windsor Castle, and was a close friend of his daughter, had consented to marry him; but he died suddenly on 29 March 1957, and this second marriage, which would have brought happiness again to him, as well as to her, was not to be.

Oppé wrote much on art, and his style, as was to be expected from a fine classical scholar, was elegant and correct, even if the ideas conceived in that fertile brain were sometimes expressed too economically to be easily understood. His early books, on Raphael (Methuen, 1909) and Botticelli (Hodder & Stoughton,

1911), are not the sort that are produced on such subjects nowadays by our highly specialized art-historians; Oppé's interest was aesthetic rather than documentary or attributionist. Both books, like others of their time, suffered from inadequate illustration. The recent re-publication of *Raphael* (Elek Books, London, 1970), with a vast improvement in the number and quality of the plates, including many of the drawings which Oppé left unconsidered, and a very valuable introduction by Professor Charles Mitchell, sufficiently emphasizes the point. These were—in a sense that I do not intend to be derogatory—the books of a perceptive amateur, one determined to approach his subject from an independent, aesthetic point of view, suspicious both of the 'scientific' method of the continental art-historians of the time, and of Bernard Berenson's Morellian system of attribution. It was the way of most English writers on art of those days, before the establishment of academic schools of art history on the continental model in our own universities. In this respect, one may say, these early books of Oppé's were typical of their period in England; only his were better written than most.

The 1914-18 war interrupted his study of European art, and from this time he made only an occasional further excursion into wider fields: he collaborated in Cecil Sharp's book *The Dance* in 1924; he drew attention to some new Tiepolo material in the *Quarterly Old Master Drawings* in 1930; and he returned to Raphael in 1944 with an article, *Right and Left in Raphael's Cartoons*, in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. The section on Art which he contributed to G. M. Young's *Early Victorian England*, 1934, is a masterly account of the state of the arts in this country in the middle years of the nineteenth century, packed with carefully researched and documented information (and entertaining anecdote) on the Royal Academy, patronage, popular taste, the training and status of the artist, the works of art produced, and the prices paid for them. But by far the greater part of his writing for the last forty years of his life was on the drawings and water-colours of the British schools of earlier date. His aesthetic interest never deserted him, but here he was much more than a perceptive amateur. To the learned publications of the *Walpole Society* he contributed pioneering studies of Francis Towne (1920) and his close follower John White Abbott of Exeter (1925), and of Alexander Cozens (*A Roman Sketchbook*, 1928); and he edited and introduced the memoir of the Welsh artist Thomas Jones in *Walpole*

Society, vol. xxxii (1946–8). For the *Studio* he wrote a book on Rowlandson (1923), and special numbers on the water-colours of J. S. Cotman (1923), and of Turner, Cox, and de Wint (1925); and his contributions to the *Burlington Magazine* included a typically sceptical essay, *The Parentage of Alexander Cozens*, which goes near to demolishing the current legend that the artist was an illegitimate son of the Czar Peter the Great. Most important, perhaps, and certainly most demanding on his time, were his two exemplary catalogues of English drawings in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, in the series published by the Phaidon Press—*Drawings of Paul & Thomas Sandby*, 1947, and *English Drawings, Stuart and Georgian*, 1950; and a separate book from the same press, *The Drawings of William Hogarth*, 1948, the first to deal critically with the artist's drawings. His last published work, issued by A. & C. Black in 1952, was one which will surely remain the last word on the subject, *Alexander & John Robert Cozens*. It is no exaggeration to say that without Oppé's researches, the history of British draughtsmanship would be decidedly less advanced than it is today. Among distinguished contemporaries, older or younger, who worked in the same field, Charles Bell, Martin Hardie, Laurence Binyon, Iolo Williams, and Edward Croft-Murray all acknowledged his authority.

His own collection of drawings, so far as the British schools are concerned—and that means the great majority—was complementary to his writings. Its scope may be assessed by reference to the catalogue of the exhibition held in the Diploma Gallery of the Royal Academy in 1958, the year after his death—an exhibition conceived as a memorial to him, including 453 of his best drawings, mainly selected and arranged by his daughter Armide and Aydua Scott-Elliot, who prepared the catalogue entries from Oppé's own notes. In every case the date of acquisition is given; there is a preface by the President, Sir Charles Wheeler; an appreciation of the collector by Sir Kenneth (now Lord) Clark; and a bibliography of Oppé's publications from 1897 to 1952.

Three of the four Diploma rooms were hung with British drawings, mostly of the eighteenth century, but including some earlier examples (Isaac Oliver, Francis Barlow, Francis Place) and many of the nineteenth century also. A small group represented accomplished amateurs, Lord Aylesford, Lord and Lady Farnborough, Lock of Norbury, and others, in whom Oppé was always interested; and there was a section represent-

ing another of his greatest interests, the Caricature, both English and foreign. The whole of the East room was devoted to drawings by continental artists, some of them of great importance—Claude, Poussin, Barocci, the Carracci family, Domenichino, and Guercino—some frequently exhibited before and since. But the array of British drawings in the three other rooms was such as could be gathered from no other private source; many of them acquired long before in the saleroom in groups of considerable size and at negligible cost. Thus in 1910, Oppé bought for twenty-five shillings seventeen water-colours by Francis Towne—now so famous, then hardly known—made on his journey to Italy in 1781; and these included the wonderful *Source of the Arveyron* in two versions, so often exhibited and reproduced since then. The story of his discovery, several years later, of the great bulk of Towne's work, still reposing in its original portfolios, in the possession of the Merivale family of Barton Place, near Exeter, where Towne visited and taught, is told in his essay on the artist in the Walpole Society publication of 1920.

Another *coup* was made in 1914, again for a trifling sum: a parcel of twenty-three very large landscape drawings by the celebrated portrait-draughtsman John Downman, done on his journey to Rome in the company of Joseph Wright of Derby in 1774, which reveal a hitherto unsuspected side of Downman's art. Italian views by British artists—William Taverner, Alexander and John Robert Cozens, Richard Wilson, William Pars, and others—were Oppé's special passion throughout his collecting career. But there was in fact no aspect of British draughtsmanship (except sporting subjects and political caricature) that was not represented in that memorial exhibition: fine landscapes by Gainsborough, Constable, Turner, comic drawings by Rowlandson and Dance, animals and birds by Barlow and Collins, all were there. The collection was divided at Oppé's death by his two children, Mr Denys Oppé retaining all of the British school, Miss Armide Oppé those of continental origin. His collector's mark, consisting of his initials in a small monogram, is recorded in Lugt, *Les Marques de Collections*, Supplément, The Hague, 1956, No. 2949^a.

A bronze portrait-head of Oppé by Uli Nimpf (1949), presented by his friends to the British Museum after his death, stands in the Students' Room of the Department of Prints and Drawings. He was small and thin. Lord Clark, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue of 1958 to which I have

referred, writes of his 'dark Disraelian head'; but whether or not there was any facial resemblance, the comparison is perhaps misleading, for he had nothing whatever of Disraeli's ostentatious appearance. He was quietly, sometimes even rather shabbily dressed; and in spite of his foreign blood he looked, as I remember him, an old-fashioned English gentleman. I remember particularly the silk hat he wore on formal occasions with evening dress—extra tall and slightly tapering, with a narrow curled brim, of the sort made by Lock of St. James's Street about the turn of the century. His manner was reserved, perhaps slightly forbidding to strangers; but to those who knew him better he was a companionable man, and he had many friends. In the summer of 1907, during his first attachment to the Victoria and Albert Museum, he travelled to St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Dresden with (Sir) Eric Maclagan, who later became Director of that museum; other friends were Charles Bell, who shared his interest in British drawings, Cecil Sharp, with whom he collaborated in *The Dance*, Thomas Girtin, the grandson of that famous water-colour artist, Richard Jennings the bibliophile, and the brothers E. H. and A. H. Coles, who gave or bequeathed to Oppé fine drawings by Alexander Cozens, Wilson, Sandby, Rowlandson, and others. To the end of his life he was a great walker, and I myself was one who had the pleasure of walking and talking with him, on summer evenings, across Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. He got on well with younger people, he was interested in their opinions, and was not himself dogmatic; in this he was like Campbell Dodgson of the British Museum, whom he greatly respected and who respected him equally. He was sometimes curiously diffident. Considering the difference in our age and status, I was surprised one day by his asking me whether I thought it too *pompous*—I believe that was his word—to refer in print to a friend, whose book he was reviewing, as 'a scholar and a gentleman'. It occurred to me that the expression was perfectly applicable to himself.

That his character was complex, I think no one who knew him well would deny. The diaries and notebooks of 1906 to 1908, when he was planning his *Raphael*, which are quoted extensively in Charles Mitchell's introduction to the recent edition, reveal not only his passionate desire to form an independent judgement of his subject, but also the tortuous workings of his own mind, the hesitations, doubts, impatiences, and enthusiasms that succeeded one another in the process. I am

not sure that Oppé himself would have been happy at the disclosure of such private thoughts; but the diaries were used by Mitchell with the generous approval of Oppé's daughter, and the extracts add a special interest to the book. He was certainly irascible, and his personal antipathies were sometimes unfair. His rigorous objection to over-optimistic attributions was often daunting to enthusiasts. The collector Randall Davies, who was his neighbour in Chelsea, used to mark some of his drawings *e.O.* in one corner, to signify—so he told us with a malicious smile—that *even Oppé* accepted those as genuine. And yet he made due acknowledgment to other collectors in his published work, and his knowledge and experience were always at others' disposal. To me personally, and to many others, he was a kind and generous friend; and some of those unfortunate victims of Hitler's régime in Germany, who were obliged to remove to a strange country before the outbreak of the last great war, had cause to remember with gratitude the support and advice which enabled one to continue his learned researches, another to find a new clientele, or another to make a new career, under Oppé's guidance.

JAMES BYAM SHAW

SOURCES: Brinsley Ford in *Dictionary of National Biography*, Supplement, 1950–60: Charles Mitchell, Introduction to A. P. Oppé, *Raphael*, new edition, 1970 (Elek Books): catalogue of Royal Academy exhibition, *The Paul Oppé Collection*, 1958: information from family and friends, particularly from Miss Armide Oppé and Miss Aydua Scott-Elliot: personal knowledge over about thirty years.