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REPORT

EINSTEIN IN BRITAIN: A PORTRAIT

by

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After a prompt by a recent communication from Sir Paul Nurse PRS to Fellows regarding the Society's picture collection, the library was presented with a portrait (figure 1) of physicist Albert Einstein FRS (1879–1955). The lively sketch is executed in red chalk (sanguine) on paper. It is signed by both the Danish artist Ivan Opffer (1897–1980) and Einstein ('A. Einstein'), and is dated 1933.

The portrait was donated by Professors Deborah and Brian Charlesworth, both of whom are evolutionary biologists and Fellows of the Royal Society. Professor Deborah Charlesworth inherited the drawing from her parents. It was given to her father, John Maltby¹ (1910–80), who was primarily an architectural photographer, in lieu of unpaid photography fees. The artist (presumably Opffer himself) took a stack of his portraits to Maltby's studio in Hendon, London, to be photographed. Maltby kept back one drawing until payment was sent, but the money was never forthcoming. In a letter² to the National Portrait Gallery, London, 1994, Maltby's studio assistant offered the gallery 50 glass slides of images of portraits by Opffer, all of which were photographed by Maltby in the 1930s.

Although the drawing is inscribed with its year of creation, the artwork provides little clue as to the precise date and circumstances of its composition. The challenge is to ascertain where Opffer and Einstein's paths may have crossed and to try to deduce whether the portrait was produced as the result of a traditional sitting or whether it is an observational reportage drawing. In either case, Einstein's signature at the foot of the portrait provides some evidence that the two did meet. Matters are complicated by the fact that 1933 was a very busy and unsettled period in Einstein's life, a time involving regular travel between the USA and Europe. Personal circumstances and career opportunities also meant that Ivan Opffer relocated frequently during his lifetime. There are parallels in Einstein and Opffer's stories: both were geographically displaced as a result of the Nazi regime's rise to power, and both applied for US citizenship.

There is little biographical information on Opffer, but two short biographies help piece together his story. A short Web blog³ by Yvonne Opffer Conybeare (Opffer's granddaughter) written from the memories of her father, Sebastian, and aunt, Jocelyn Clark

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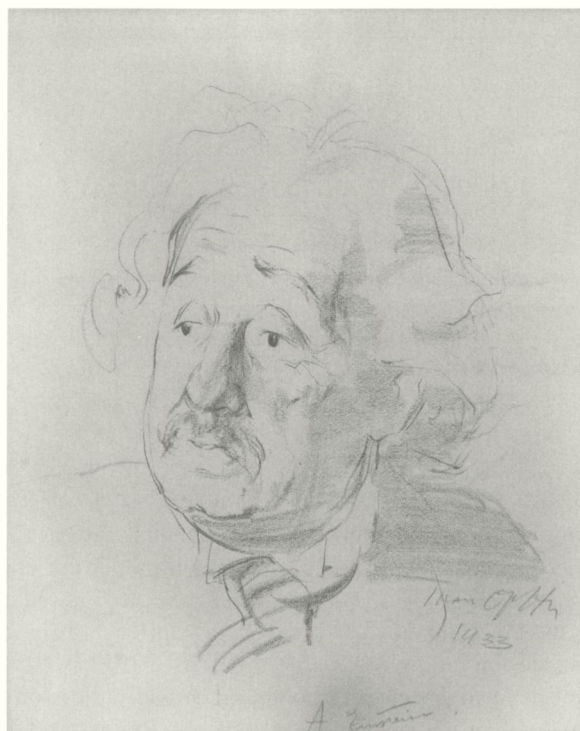


Figure 1. Albert Einstein, by Ivan Opffer, 1933. (Online version in colour.)

(Ivan's children), provides a brief overview of his life, and a letter⁴ from James Clerk (husband of Jocelyn) to the National Portrait Gallery bridges some of the gaps.

Opffer was born in Nyborg, Denmark, on 4 June 1897. He moved with his family to Mexico in 1906 and then to New York in 1909, where he studied art. In 1917 he volunteered for the US Army and on his return to New York he found work in drawing portraits of famous, mainly literary, figures (including James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw and Aldous Huxley) for newspapers including the *New York Daily Sun* and the *New York Evening Post*, as well as for *Dial*, *The Bookman* and other periodicals. When Opffer was aged 25 years, a philanthropist, Otto Kahn (1867–1934), provided funding for him to travel to Paris to continue his art studies. It was here that he met and married his wife, Betty (*née* Chumleigh). They moved to the UK in 1930 to be nearer Betty's parents and settled in London for seven years, during which time he worked producing portraits for the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Evening Standard* (1931–32) and the *Daily Express* (1932–34).⁵ It is from this period that the Einstein portrait originated.

In 1937 Opffer returned to Denmark with his family, having been offered a staff position with a Copenhagen-based paper. A few years later he was forced to leave his native country as a result of Nazi occupation and moved back to the USA. Here he continued to contribute portraits to the same New York publications. The family finally settled in Copenhagen in 1959, where Opffer remained until his death in 1980.

For Albert Einstein, 1933 was a life-changing year. It was the year in which he made the decision to leave Germany because of the seizure of power by Hitler's anti-Semitic regime.

Einstein travelled to Antwerp and, upon arriving on 28 March 1933, went directly to the German consulate in Brussels, where he handed in his passport and formally renounced his German citizenship.⁶ He then took a house in Le Coq-sur-Mer, near Oostende, Belgium, before travelling to the UK. National Museums Liverpool recently acquired Einstein's landing card⁷ dated 26 May 1933 (Oostende to Dover). On the reverse of the card Einstein had stated that he was bound for Oxford to give public lectures. On 10 June he delivered the Herbert Spencer lecture at Rhodes House in Oxford and, two days later, the Deneke lecture at Lady Margaret Hall, Christ Church, Oxford, has a portrait of Einstein by F. Rizzi that was created in 1933 during his visit to the city.⁸

Einstein left England around 25 June 1933 to return to Coq-sur-Mer. In early September, after Nazi threats, his wife, Elsa, in fear for his safety, asked her friend Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson MP to invite Einstein to stay in his holiday cottage on the Norfolk coast.⁹ It was at this house that he sat for Jacob Epstein's bronze bust.¹⁰ It could be that this was the location for Opffer's portrait sitting, too, if he, or a commissioning editor, had heard that Einstein was open to such a meeting. According to Denis Brian in his biography of the physicist, 'despite the demands on his time, Einstein was a sucker for anyone who asked to paint his portrait or make a bust of him.'¹¹

On 3 October 1933 Einstein delivered the principal address at a meeting at the Royal Albert Hall in London to an audience of 10 000. The event was organized by the Academic Assistance Council (now the Council for At-Risk Academics¹²) to assist Jewish academics to escape Nazi persecution. This occasion would perhaps have presented another opportunity for the portrait to be created. A few days after this meeting on 7 October, Einstein sailed from Southampton, arriving in the USA on 17 October, and took up a post at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. He would never return to Europe.

The National Portrait Gallery has 21 portraits by Opffer, but perhaps the largest collection of his work is at Det National Historiske Museum (Danish Museum of National History), which holds 154 portraits of Danish personalities. Neither of these two institutions has a portrait of Einstein by the artist, but other versions do exist. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas has a portrait (figure 2) in charcoal with a colour wash, with Einstein facing right as viewed. It is undated but was possibly created after the 1933 sketch because Einstein looks slightly older, with a whiter, fuller moustache and a more lined face. This points to a second meeting of Einstein and Opffer, possibly in the USA (where this watercolour is held); both were living there during the 1940s and 1950s.

A second, lithographed, version of the 1933 sketch was published (presumably commissioned) in the Christmas supplement of *The Bookman*¹³ in December 1933. The Harry Ransom Center holds an exhibition catalogue featuring a copy of this lithographed version, perhaps because the original sketch could not be found because it was then held in a private collection. The catalogue was produced to accompany a retrospective display (entitled 'Fra den lille—Og den store verden' ['From the small and the big world']) of Opffer's work at the Galerie Kasler (now closed), Copenhagen, in June 1967, to mark his 70th birthday.

It seems likely, because Einstein was in the UK for such a short period, that the original sketch and the lithographed versions originated from the same sitting or meeting. We know that both Einstein and Opffer were in the UK from June to October 1933, so it is reasonable to assume that the portrait was created in this country. Opffer was living in London during 1933 and used the London-based photographer John Maltby to capture his work; the meeting place can therefore perhaps be narrowed down to southeast England. The two could have met

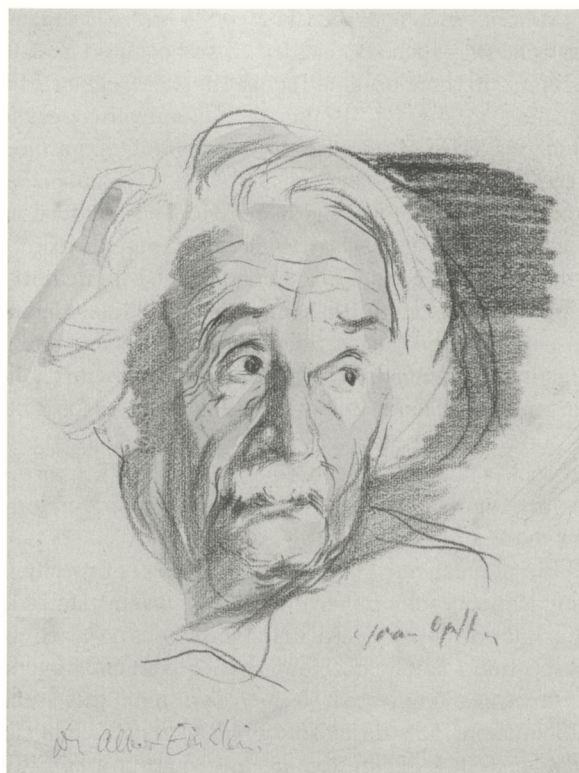


Figure 2. Albert Einstein, by Ivan Opffer, undated. (Copyright © Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Reproduced with permission.) (Online version in colour.)

either at a formal portrait sitting in Norfolk at Locker-Lampson's cottage or, perhaps more probably, at one of the public lectures that Einstein gave. The academic refugee event at the Royal Albert Hall would have attracted a great deal of press attention, and it could be that Opffer was commissioned by one of the publications that he contributed to (possibly *The Bookman*) to attend and produce a sketch of Einstein taking part in the proceedings. If intended for the 1933 Christmas supplement of *The Bookman*, we can tentatively date the work to October 1933.

Further research may yet yield the exact meeting time and place; but regardless, the drawing is an important addition to the Royal Society's portrait collection. It nicely complements the Society's other portrait of Einstein¹⁴, by Max Liebermann (1847–1935), painted shortly after he was awarded the 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics. Both portraits depict Einstein during pivotal, and often turbulent, periods of his life.

NOTES

- 1 The RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) photographic archive contains John Maltby's collection of negatives spanning his five-decade career in British architecture and design photography. RIBA published a book on the photographer and his work: R. Elwall, *John*

Maltby: *images from the photographs collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects* (RIBA Publishing, London, 2000).

- 2 'Ivan Opffer' file, from the 'Notes on Artist' series, reference NPG/50/16/46.
- 3 <http://www.geocities.com/yconybeare>
- 4 *Op. cit.* (note 2).
- 5 Thorkild Kjærgaard, 'Opffer, Ivan', *Weilbach Dansk Kunstnerleksikon*, vol. 6 (Munksgaard, Copenhagen, 1997), p. 282.
- 6 W. Isaacson, *Einstein: his life and universe* (Simon & Schuster, London, 2007), p. 405.
- 7 <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/visit/floor-plan/seized/objects/einstein/>
- 8 The drawing is reproduced on the front cover of P. W. Kent, *Einstein in Oxford: celebrating the centenary of the 1905 publications* (Department of Physics, University of Oxford, 2005).
- 9 D. Brian, *Einstein: a life* (John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1996), p. 249.
- 10 Six casts were made of this sculpture. They are held at the Tate Gallery, London; the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; the Science Museum, London; the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; the Public Art Gallery, Huddersfield; and the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.
- 11 Brian, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 250.
- 12 <http://www.cara1933.org/>
- 13 *The Bookman* was a London-based monthly magazine published by Hodder & Stoughton from 1891 to 1934.
- 14 <https://pictures.royalsociety.org/image-rs-9246>