

THE PAINTING OF THE PORTRAITS OF MORYA AND KOOT HOOMI

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In the July/August 1990 issue of The Eclectic Theosophist, I read with interest Boris de Zirkoff's letter (pp. 5-6) dealing with the "Portraits of the Masters." B. de Z. writes:

"...in June, 1884...Hermann Schmiechen started painting the portraits of Masters M. and K.H. in London. On June 19, the portrait of K.H. was begun, and ended on July 9th....H.P.B. was present at the first sitting at which Schmiechen began K.H.'s portrait....It appears from Olcott's Diaries (in Adyar Archives) that H.P.B. and Olcott went to Schmiechen July 9th, to see the portrait (apparently the finished one of K.H.)."

B. de Z. also states:

"I do not have information as to when Schmiechen painted the portrait of Master M. It was, however, near in time to the first portrait [of K.H.]."

Unfortunately, several serious errors are in B. de Z.'s account.

(1) Schmiechen painted Master M.'s portrait first and then Master K.H.'s portrait.

(2) H.P.B. was not in London on June 19 when B. De Z. says the portrait of K.H. was begun. She was still in France.

Colonel Olcott gives the correct sequence of events in A Historical Retrospect---1875-1896---of the Theosophical Movement, Madras, 1896, p. 13.:

"...At New York...I was given the portrait---a profile in black and white crayons---of [Master Morya]...At Bombay this had been photographed in my absence, and a copy of this photograph was with me on this European tour [of 1884]. Desirous of getting something better, if possible, than this amateurish sketch, I asked five of our London members, who were professional or skilled amateur painters, to compete in a friendly way in the attempt to get by intuition a clearer view of the Master's face. They willingly agreed and, each taking the photograph in turn, the five pictures were made and given me. Neither, however, were very successful. It was about this time that Mr. and Mrs. Schmiechen joined the Society, and I invited the former to compete, which he most kindly at once agreed to. The marvellous result---the seventh attempt at a portrait---is known to all of us; his portrait of this

Master [Morya], as well as the one of the other [Master Koot Hoomi], which he painted from a crude sketch in Mr. Sinnett's possession, seeming as life-like as if the subjects had posed to him in the usual way...."

Colonel Olcott also writes in Old Diary Leaves, Vol. III, pp. 162-163 (1972 printing):

"On 13th June I returned to London in company with Mr. Judge....A little while before this I had instituted a friendly competition between certain of our London associates who were either professional or amateur artists, to try an important psychical experiment....."

"...I wanted to get a better portrait [of Master M.] if possible, and bethought me to try whether my sympathetic artistic colleagues in London could get clearer, more life-like, spiritual glimpses of this divine face. Upon broaching the subject---three professionals and two amateurs---whom I addressed, very kindly and willingly consented, and I lent each in turn the photographic copy of the original crayon sketch that I had with me.

"The results were very instructive. One had got the right idea of his complexion, another of his profile and a third, my respected friend Mme. De Steiger, of the luminous aura that shimmers about his head. But neither of the five was, on the whole, a better likeness than the New York sketch by Monsieur HARRISSE. Before this competition was finished, Herr Hermann Schmiechen, a very well-known German portrait-painter, domiciled in London, joined the Society and, to my great delight, at once agreed to have the inspirational test tried with him. The photograph was handed him with no suggestion as to how the subject should be treated. He began work on 19th June and finished it on 9th July. Meanwhile I visited his studio four times alone and once with H.P.B....Unlike the others, who all copied the profile idea of HARRISSE, Schmiechen gave the face in full front view...."

We see from Olcott's own accounts that five different artists had agreed prior to Schmiechen to paint a portrait of Morya.

On June 15 (just two days after Olcott's return to London), Olcott writes in his diary:

"...In evening Mme. de Steiger brought a remarkable portrait of Mahatma M...."

Also consider these entries from Colonel Olcott's 1884 diary:

Friday, June 20: "...to Schmiechen's, the portrait painter...."

Monday, June 23: "...A.M. to Schmiechen...."

Thursday, June 26: "....Schmiechen's...."
Saturday, June 28: "Crossed over to Boulogne to meet H.P.B.
...H.P.B. arrived from Paris at 11 p.m...."
Sunday, June 29: "....retd. with H.P.B. to London...."
Sunday, July 6: "...lunched with Schmiechen's...."
Wednesday, July 9: "....with H.P.B. to Schmiechen's. The portrait
of our Master enchants us...."
Friday, July 11: "Left for Scotland...."
Saturday, July 19: "....at 1 left [Manchester] for London...."
Wednesday, July 23: "Left for Germany...."

Boris may have been misled by Mrs. Laura Holloway Langford's account of the painting of the portraits.

In her account (The Word, July 1912), she writes:

"As had been promised by the Mahatmas, Mr. Schmiechen, a young German artist then residing in London, was to paint their portraits. And, at the appointed time, a number of Theosophists gathered at his studio. Chief among Mr. Schmiechen's guests at that first sitting was H.P.B...." (p. 204)

She then goes on to relate how Schmiechen painted the portrait of Koot Hoomi.

Mrs. Langford ends her account with the following:

"The painting of the portrait of the Master 'M' followed the completion of the picture [of Koot Hoomi]...." p. 206.

But according to Olcott's narrative and the supporting documentation in his diary, we see that Olcott first conceived the idea of having a better portrait of Morya and this finally ended in the painting by Schmiechen of Morya's portrait. Upon seeing the completion of this remarkable portrait, Olcott and H.P.B. naturally wanted Schmiechen to paint one of Koot Hoomi.

In Mrs. Holloway's narrative Colonel Olcott is not mentioned as being present at the gatherings when Schmiechen painted Koot Hoomi's portrait. I would suggest that Schmiechen painted K.H.'s portrait sometime between July 11 and July 20 when Olcott was not in London.

The correct sequence of events is hinted at in the following extract from Morya's note to H.P.B.:

"Take her [Laura Holloway] with you to Schmiechen and tell her to see....Say to Schmiechen that he will be helped. I myself will guide his hands with brush for K[oot Hoomi]'s portrait." (Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom, 1870-1900, First Series, 1973 printing, p. 158.)