

“A Fair Skinned Kashmiri Brahmana”

Annie Besant and the Portraits of the Masters

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How Fair Was His Skin?

- ▶ The images of Masters Koot Hoomi (left) and Morya (right) based on the 1884 paintings by Hermann Schmiechen (1855-1925) have a semi-canonical status in the Theosophical Society. Yet, Annie Besant (1847-1933) objected in 1911 that in the portrait of Koot Hoomi “the colouring [was] entirely wrong, the Master being a fair-skinned Kashmiri Brahmana.”



Whose Colors?

- ▶ As mentioned by Brendan French in his 2000 Ph.D. dissertation on the Masters, the question is very confused. It is unclear whether the colors Besant referred to were those of the original Schmiechen portraits or of the copies by Australian painter Florence Fuller (1867-1947)



Author unknown, Pen portrait of Florence Fuller, 1897

Spirit Paintings and Masters Paintings



Portrait precipitated by the spirit of Lincoln through the American mediums, the Campbell Brothers (Allen Campbell, 1833-1919, and Charles Shourds, 1863-1926)

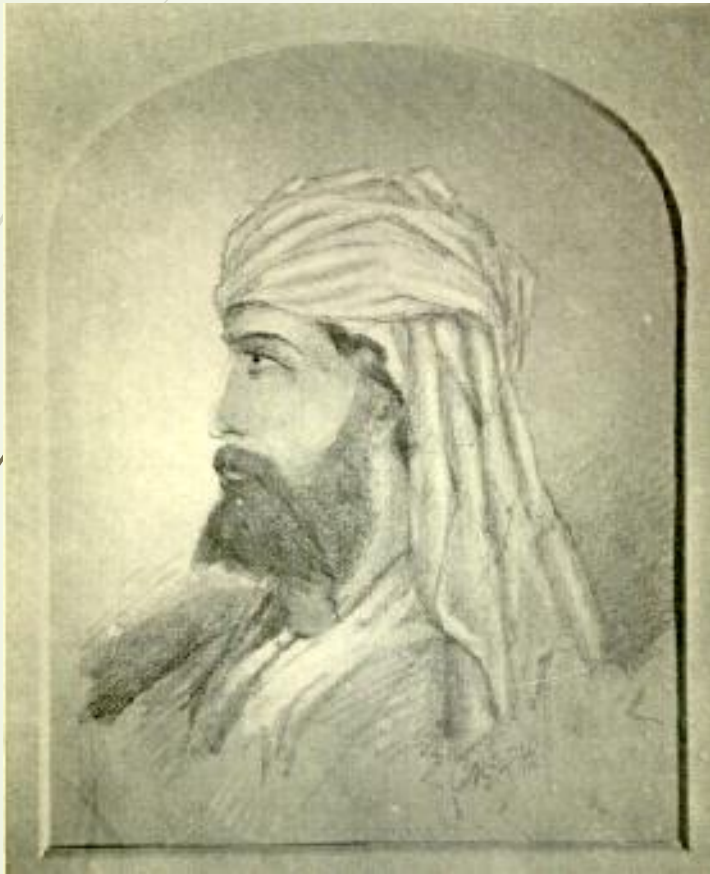
- Before coming to Besant, it is important to investigate the origins of “Masters paintings.” At the time of the foundation of the Theosophical Society, spirits of the dead were busy “precipitating” miraculously, or otherwise producing by guiding the hands of mediums, their own portraits. If common spirits could produce their portraits, so – Theosophists claimed – could the Masters, who were obviously not dead but were also much more powerful than most spirits

Madame Blavatsky, Spirit Painter

- Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1901) herself went to Masters painting from spirit painting. In his definitive 2001 study, John Patrick Deveney claimed that the number of her “portraits of and by her Masters,” produced by different supernatural means, was “in the dozens.” They included a portrait made in 1875 of the mysterious John King (right), well-known to Spiritualists, who, Blavatsky later claimed, was one and the same with Master Hilarion



The Harrisse Portrait



- ▶ In 1876, a French artist called “Monsieur Harrisse” visited Olcott and Blavatsky in New York and produced a portrait of Master Morya (left). Attempts by Deveney and myself to convincingly identify this artist with any known individual of that time with the last name Harrisse have so far failed

“A Case of Thought-Transference”

Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) claimed that the portrait was produced through “a genuine case of thought-transference” from Blavatsky to Harrisse. “The cryptograph signature of my Guru [Morya] came upon the paper; thus affixing, as it were, his imprimatur.” And Olcott had bought paper and crayons from a shopkeeper but, when he opened the package at home, found his money inside, returned to him. “The Master [...] meant to give me his portrait without cost to myself”



Painting Serapis Bey



- ▶ The Harrisse portrait was painted by a human artist telepathically guided by Blavatsky and was not a precipitation. The Theosophical Society, however, had not completely abandoned precipitations. Olcott (left) received a message from Serapis Bey alluding to a portrait of the same Master apparently in the possession of the Theosophical Society, which might well have been precipitated

Indian Portraits, 1882

- ▶ In 1882 in India, Blavatsky tried to sketch a portrait of Koot Hoomi, but the result was very poor. In the same year, Koot Hoomi precipitated two portraits of himself, reportedly of a better artistic quality. Also in 1882, Master Morya gave to a Theosophist from Tamil, S. Ramabadra Ramaswamier (?-1893), a portrait of himself. Ramaswamier died in 1893 and his son, who had repudiated Theosophy, published the portrait (right), very similar to the one by HARRISSE, in an anti-Theosophical pamphlet in 1894



The London Competition of 1884



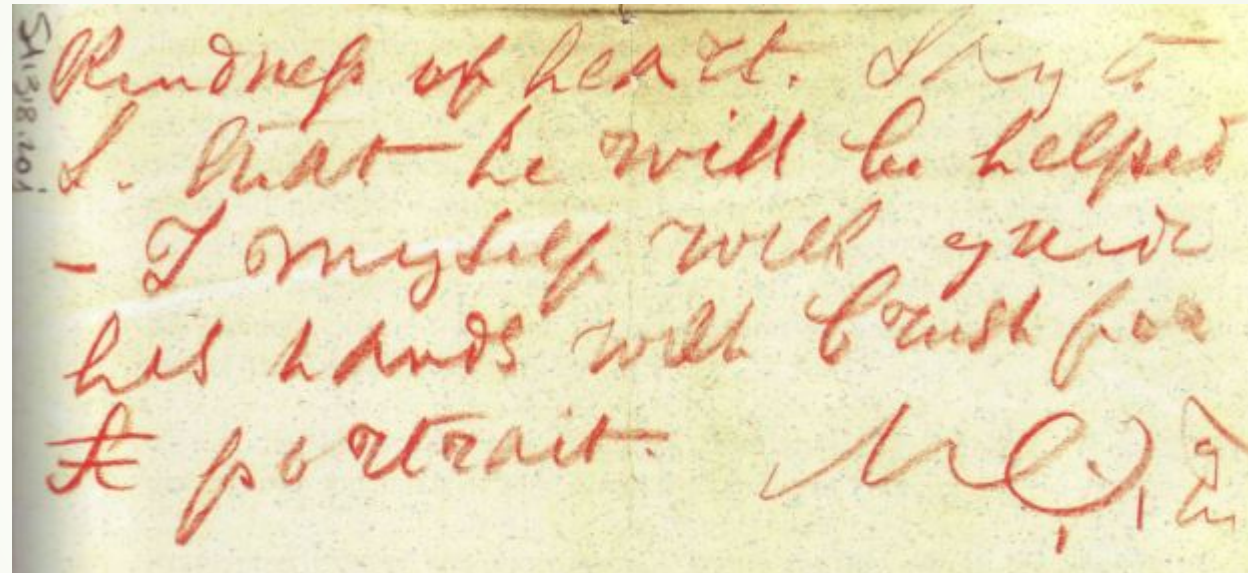
- ▶ In 1884, in London, based on Harrisse's sketch, Olcott "wanted to get a better portrait if possible" and launched a competition among Theosophical artists, with "three professionals and two amateurs." Isabelle de Steiger (1836-1927, left) painted Morya and perhaps Mary Gebhard (1831-1891) painted another Morya, mentioned in Olcott's will as "loaned to Annie Besant" and "to be returned to the curios at headquarters after her death." None of the portraits, however, was judged by Olcott as satisfactory

Enter Hermann Schmiechen

- ▶ On June 20, 1884, the year after he arrived in London, the highly respected German portrait painter Hermann Schmiechen (*Lilian Nordica*, right) became a member of the Theosophical Society. One day earlier, after the unsuccessful attempts by the five artists, Schmiechen had started painting the portrait of one Master. It is unclear whether the Master was Morya or Koot Hoomi, but in the end he portrayed both of them



By the Order of Master Morya



Kindness of heart. Say to
S. that he will be helped
- I myself will guide
his hands with brush for
K portrait. Morya

S113.8.101

- Schmiechen was personally selected by Master Morya. In a letter received by Madame Blavatsky in the previous days, now at the Winterthur Library in Winterthur, Delaware, Morya wrote: "Say to S.[chmiechen] that he will be helped – I myself will guide his hands with brush for K[oot Hoomi]'s portrait"

Laura Holloway



- ▶ Morya also wrote: «Take her with you to Schmiechen and tell her to see». From the context of the letter, it was clear that the unnamed «her» was Laura Holloway (1848-1930), a colorful American author, feminist lecturer, and Theosophist, also well-known in the Theosophical milieus as a famous, or infamous, flirt

A Spiritual Telegraph

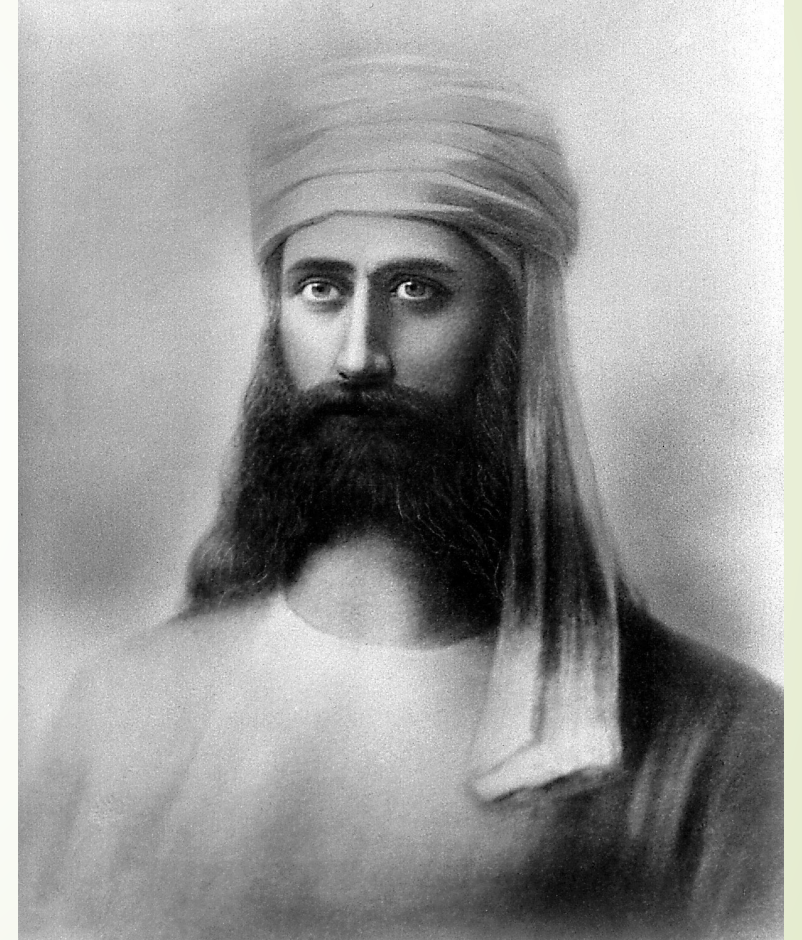
- ▶ According to Holloway's late recollections, the Masters transmitted their images to Blavatsky. She in turn transmitted her telepathically to Holloway (whom she didn't exactly like, but whose psychic powers she believed she needed), and it was Holloway who forwarded the images to Schmiechen



Painting the Masters



- ▶ If we trust Holloway's later recollections, Schmiechen painted Koot Hoomi (left) first and Morya (right) second, although others claimed it was the other way round. Schmiechen, who later became an Anthroposophist, made himself three copies of his portraits: for Mary Gebhard, for William Quan Judge (1851-1896), and for Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925)



Miraculous Miniatures

- ▶ In 1897, painter Isabelle Varley (1847-1938) traveled astrally from London to Tibet, where Koot Hoomi sat for her. Two miniature portraits were “phenomenally transported” to London. Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934, 1) donated them to the young Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (1875-1953, 2, the future president of the Theosophical Society) and Basil Hodgson-Smith (1880-1946, 3)



A Fairer Koot Hoomi?

- ▶ Reportedly, Besant declared the Varley miniatures as more accurate than Schmiechen's portraits as far as the colors of the Masters' skins were concerned. They may still be in possession of the Esoteric Section, but have never been reproduced



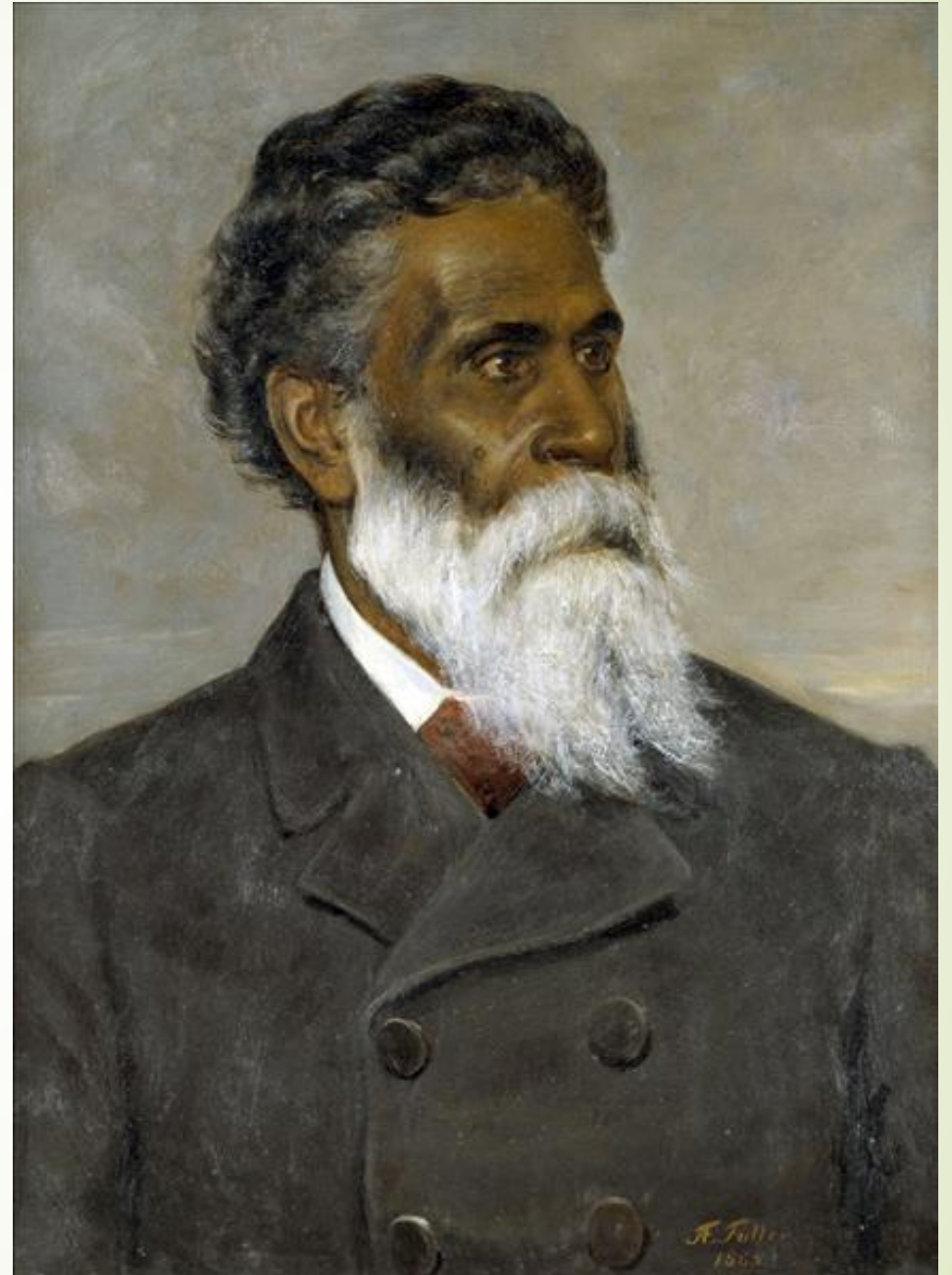


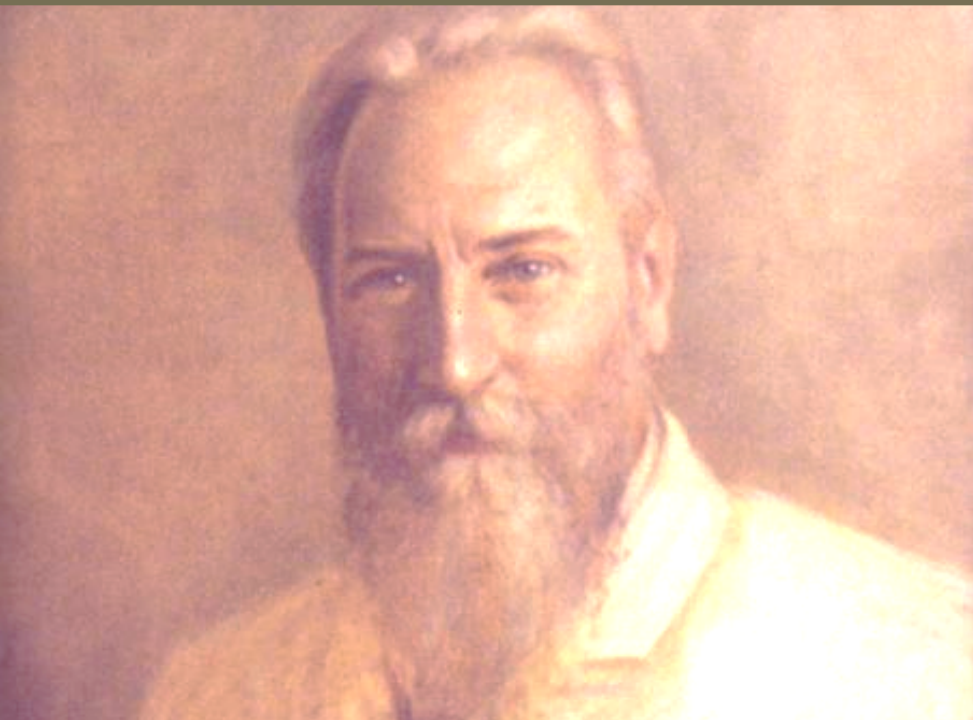
Additional Miniatures

- ▶ Joseph E. Ross claimed in a 1999 article that Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986), the famous Indian dancer and Theosophical leader, had in her possession additional miniature portraits of Koot Hoomi and Morya, once kept by Olcott with a lock of their hair. She may also have inherited a miniature of Master Jesus, given personally by Jesus to Besant

Florence Fuller

- ▶ The further production of Masters paintings in the Besant era involved a prominent Australian artist, Florence Fuller. She had studied in Paris and London, where she was regarded as a child prodigy. At age 17, after returning to Australia, Fuller achieved national fame with her portrait of aboriginal chief William Barak (1824-1903, right)



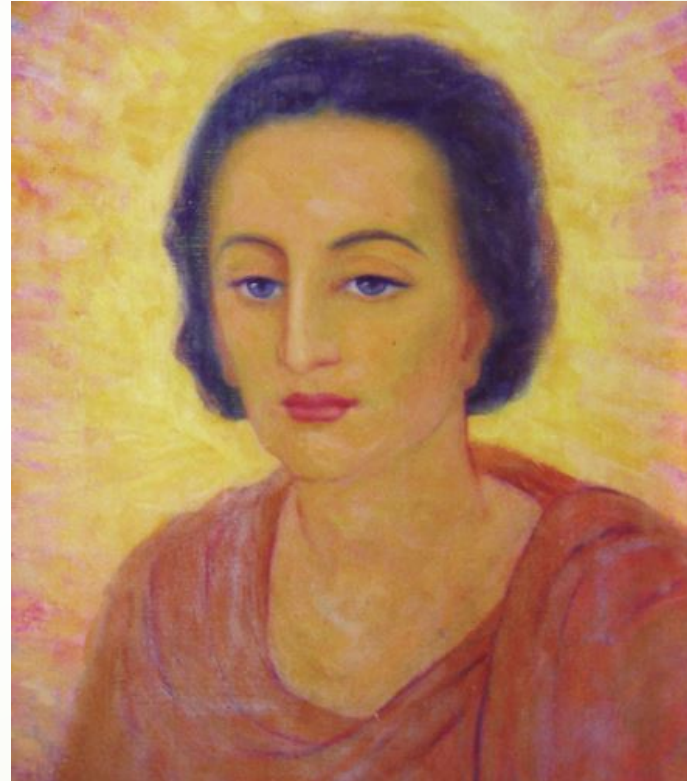


Meeting Leadbeater

- ▶ In 1905, while the Australian media were hailing her as a national painter, Fuller met Leadbeater (of whom she will produce a portrait, below) and decided to devote her life to Theosophy. Leadbeater induced Fuller to move to Adyar in 1907. She painted there her portrait of Blavatsky (1908, above)

Fuller's Portraits

- Between 1908 and 1911, under the guidance of Leadbeater, Fuller produced an unknown number of portraits of the Masters, including the Count (Saint-Germain). There are different interpretations of how exactly she “saw” them, and she may also have used Schmiechen’s and Varley’s works as models. Only the portrait of Master Buddha (right), in possession of the Australian Theosophical Society, has been published



The World Mother



- ▶ Fuller was also the probable author of a portrait of the World Mother, a new member of the Occult Hierarchy “discovered” by Leadbeater in 1928. As noted by Gregory Tillett, who published a black and white reproduction (let), this portrait reproduced the likeness of Ruth Elizabeth Roberts (1905-1982), a Theosophist who was a close associate of Leadbeater and the wife of Liberal Catholic bishop John Mohynian Tetteimer (1876-1949)

Women Painters

The women painters marked an epoch in New South Wales Art circles when they formed a club and opened their own exhibition gallery. On Wednesday they started another era when their School of Fine and Applied Arts was officially opened by Mr. John Sulman, president of the National Art Gallery.

Mr. Sulman gave the three chosen teachers the sensible advice to be candid with young students in Art, and to tell them if they had no particular talent. Mr. Julian Ashton also gave a few words of congratulation and encouragement.

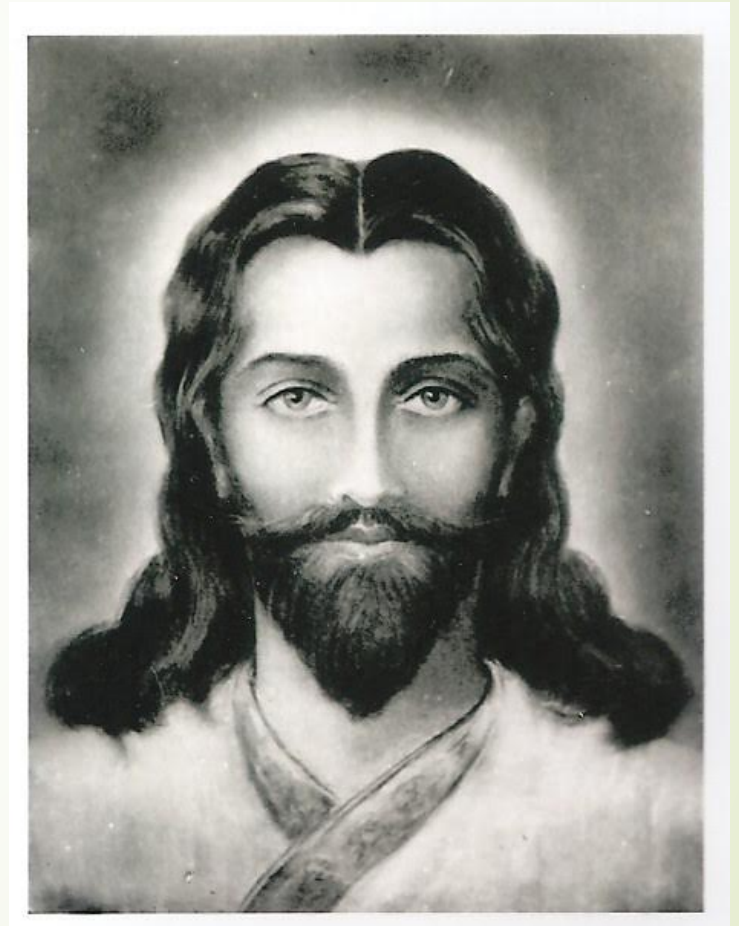
An exhibition of the work of Miss Eirene Mort (instructor in still life), Mrs. Hedley Parsons (landscape), and Miss Florence Fuller (life) proved of great interest to the many visitors. The most noticeable exhibit was Miss Fuller's portrait of Mrs. Hedley Parsons, the president of the society.

Fuller's Tragedy

- Fuller returned to Australia in 1916 with Leadbeater. She was rarely mentioned (see Sydney's *Sunday Times*, July 4, 1920, left) outside Theosophical circles. Public controversies about Leadbeater, Krishnamurti, and the Masters contributed to marginalize the once popular artist. She spent the last twenty years of her life in a psychiatric hospital, and was almost forgotten. Fuller was rediscovered only after her death, thanks to Australian art historian Joan Kerr (1938-2004)

Maria Luisa Kirby and the Lord Maitreya

- ▶ In Adyar, Fuller cooperated with Maria Luisa Kirby, née Fantoni (?-1946), an Italian Theosophist and the wife of Italian Theosophical businessman, writer, and composer William Henry Kirby (1872-1936). She also painted portraits of the Masters she saw on the astral plane, and an image of Lord Maitreya based on a rough sketch made by Leadbeater in 1911 (right). Theodora Mary Hand St John (1876-1958) also painted images of the World Mother, Lord Maitreya, and several Masters under the guidance of Leadbeater





A Most Sacred Portrait

- Kirby's portrait of Maitreya was regarded as very sacred and originally revealed only within the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, then within the "inner group" of the Order of the Star in the East. Later, it was made available for use in the Liberal Catholic Church, where it was (and, more rarely, still is) hung above the altar and described as "The Christ" (and usually confused with Jesus Christ). It was also used in rituals of the Order of the Round Table, the Theosophical Society's organization for children and teenagers

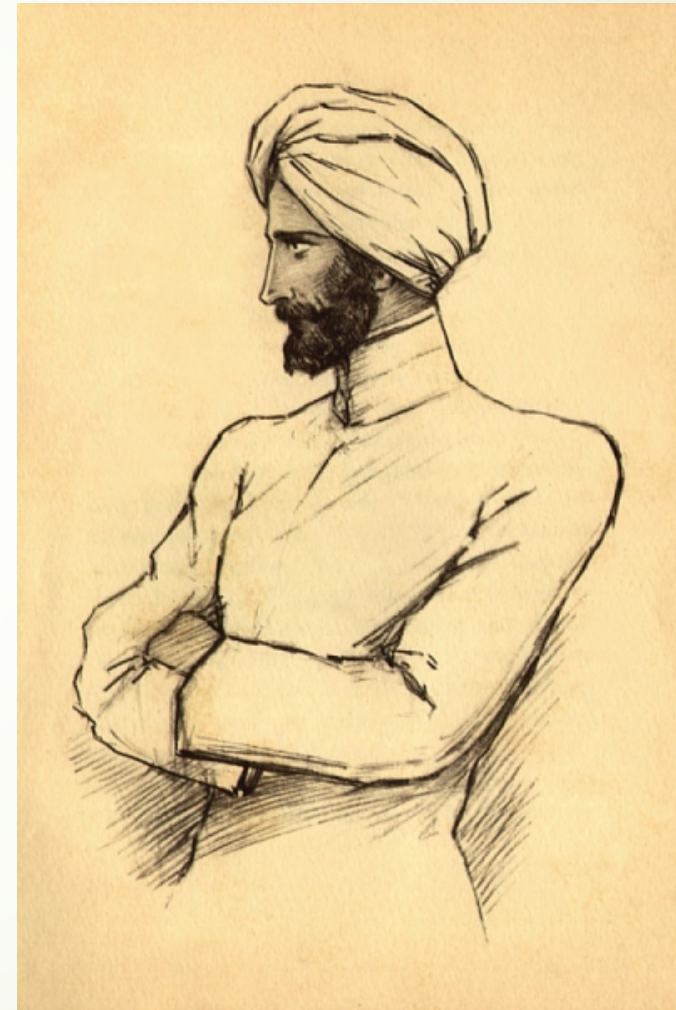
Precipitated Paintings, Again

- ▶ Paintings precipitated by the Masters did not disappear in this period either. The frontispiece of Leadbeater's 1925 book *The Masters and the Path* featured a painting called "A Ravine in Tibet," described as "precipitated by Master Djwal Kul on silk," "signed by the Master with his pseudonym 'Gai Ben-Jamin,'" and in possession of "the headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Madras." It featured small images of Master Morya riding a horse and Djwal Kul himself in a river. In the latter, claimed Leadbeater, the Master "shows purposely only His back, as He considered that His Mongolian features were not worth putting on record"



David Anrias' Portraits

- ▶ The apparition of nine new portraits of the Masters (including Morya, right), produced by the British artist and Theosophist David Anrias (pseud. of Brian Anrias Ross, 1887-1958) and published in *Through the Eyes of the Masters: Meditations and Portraits* (London 1932), concluded the Besant era of Masters painting



Cyril Scott

- Anrias' book carried an anonymous introduction by celebrated British composer and Theosophist Cyril Scott (1879-1970, above)
- Scott was on intimate terms with Koot Hoomi. In 1921, the Master appeared to him stating that for his spiritual evolution he needed to marry fellow Theosophist and novelist Rose Laure Allatini (1890-1980, below). Although Scott was also attracted to men, and Allatini to women, Koot Homi appeared to Rose too and the marriage promptly took place. Scott and Rose had two children, before they separated in 1939





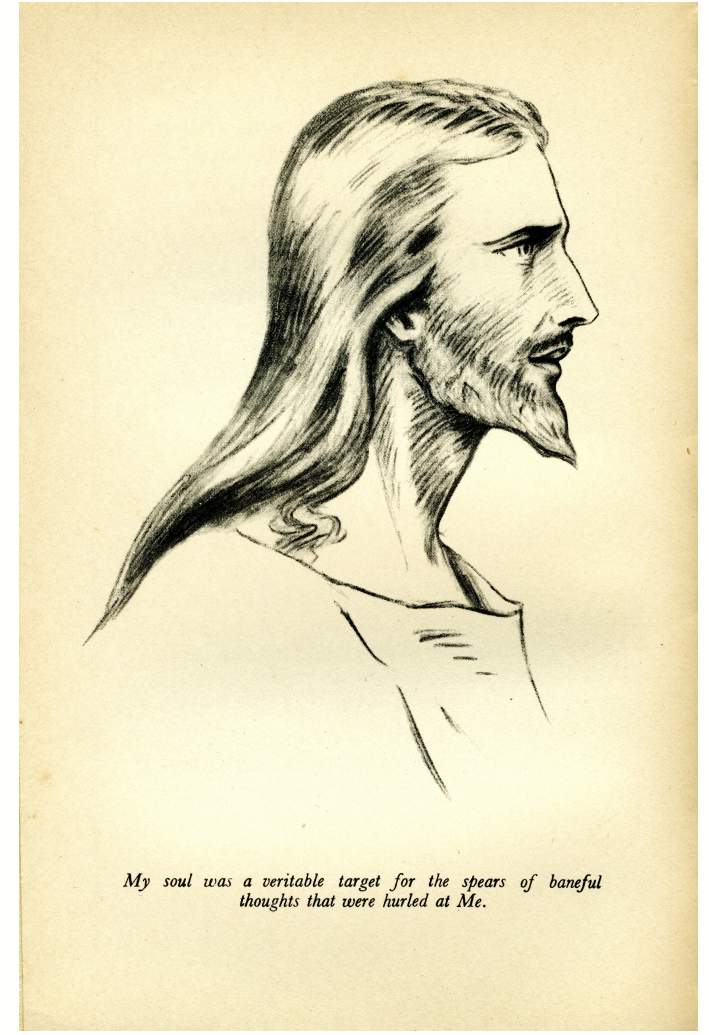
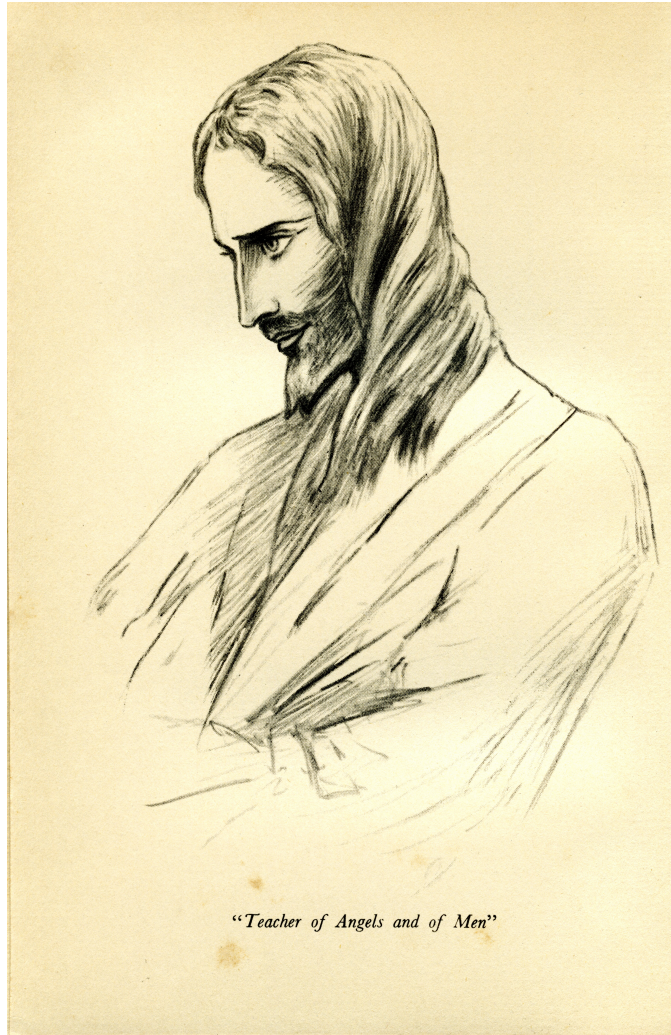
Koot Hoomi at Play

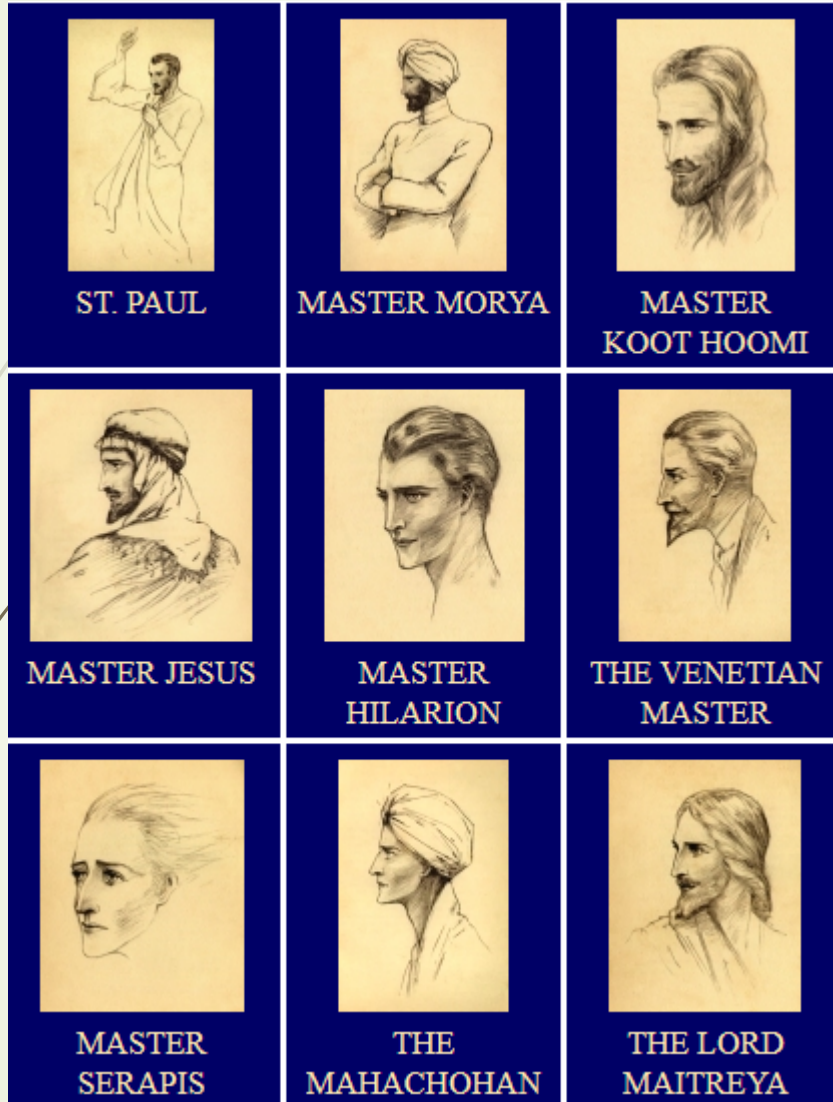
- ▶ The first and early editions of Cyril Scott's *Music: Its Secret Influence throughout the Ages* (1933) included a frontispiece by Ross of Master Koot Hoomi playing the piano*

*Thanks to Kurt Leland for the information and the images of this and next slide

Master Jesus

- ▶ Early and current editions of Scott's *The Vision of the Nazarene* (1933) include two portraits by Ross of Master Jesus





Scott on the Portraits

- Scott explained “the reason why some of the Masters have permitted their portraits to be given to the world.” “Within the last year or two, Mr. [Jiddu] Krishnamurti [1895-1986] [...] has been preaching a form of philosophy in which he has depreciated the value of the Masters.” As a consequence, “the Masters mentally impressed their portraits on David Anrias for reproduction in this book”

The Theosophical Society on Anriyas

- ▶ “Mr. Ross, of course, has seen the pictures at Adyar of the Masters. Evidently he is a psychic and so draws his information along that line. As the general public has no criterion of judging whether the pictures do resemble the Masters or not, the best plan is to consider them as an artistic production which may or may not have some resemblance to the originals” (C. Jinarajadasa, 1875-1953 [right], *Letter to the Esoteric Section of the American Theosophical Society*, 1947)



Postscripts: 1. Roerich and Morya



Roerich, *Saint Sergius of Radonezh*, 1932

- Although he eventually founded a splinter group, Agni Yoga, Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) was among the most important painters associated with the Theosophical Society. His wife Helena (1879-1955) claimed to have met Morya and Koot Hoomi in Hyde Park, London, on March 24, 1920, and it has been suggested that she recognized them based on Schmiechen's portraits. Roerich "automatically" painted several sketches of the Masters. He also repeatedly portrayed the Russian saint Sergius of Radonezh (1314-1392), whom he regarded as an incarnation of Master Morya

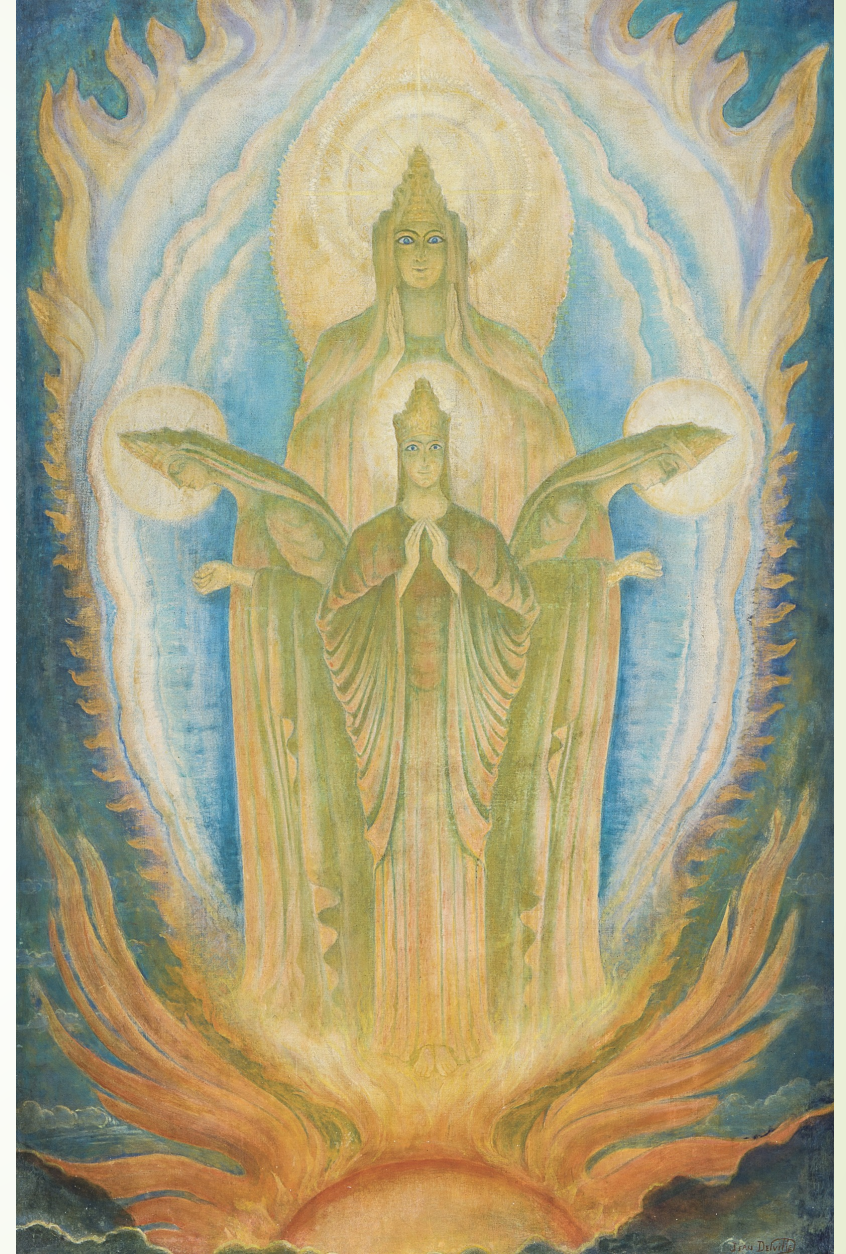


Allal Ming

- ▶ Roerich's early drawing, clairvoyantly sketched, of Master Allal Ming (left), later revealed as being another incarnation of Master Morya, is not too far from Schmiechen's portrait of the same Morya

2. Delville and the Kumaras

- In October 2014, an auction house in Lokeren, Belgium, sold a little known painting by prominent Belgian Theosophist and painter, Jean Delville (1867-1953). *The Kumaras* depicts the four “exoteric” Kumaras (there are also three “esoteric” Kumaras)





Sacred Paintings

- ▶ The Kumaras have a long story in Theosophy and, according to Besant, are at the head of the whole Occult Hierarchy. Unlike the Masters, no Theosophist dared represent the Kumaras before Delville (with Besant, left). The incident shows the never-ended potential for producing sacred paintings in Theosophy. Surely, there are other such paintings from the Besant era waiting to be discovered

That's
all
Folks!

