

Arts

G6 SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1998

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Robert Seyffert's Forefather Images

*Local Painter Hopes Exhibit Will Help Rescue
Reputations of His Portraitist Uncle and Grandfather*

By Jo Ann Lewis
Special to The Washington Post

There was a time, back in the 1910s and '20s, when the name Leopold Seyffert meant something in the art world.

If his grandson has his way, it will again, thanks to an exhibition now underway at the Artists' Museum, 406 Seventh St. NW: "Leopold, Richard and Robert Seyffert: Three Generations of Artistic Vision 1905-1997."

A highly successful Missouri-born portrait painter, Leopold Seyffert (1887-1956) trained under William Merritt Chase and Cecilia Beaux at the Pennsylvania Academy, taught for a decade at the Chicago Art Institute and, with several gold medals under his belt, was elected to the prestigious National Academy of Design in New York by age 29.

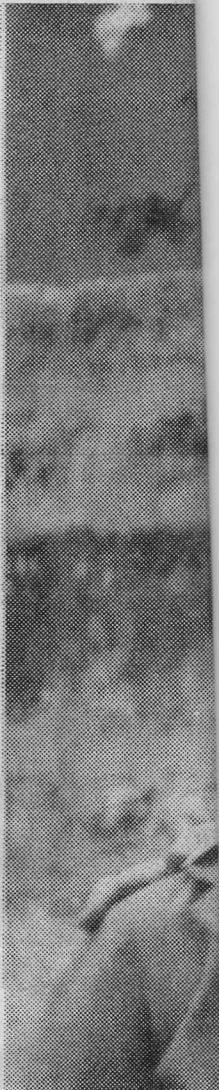
By 1929, he was painting more than a portrait a month at \$5,000 a pop.

Today, scores of Seyffert's portraits immortalizing founders and philanthropists, judges and businessmen and even football coaches still hang in museums, libraries, courtrooms and colleges across the country.



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

The family business: Leopold Seyffert painted a portrait of Fritz Kreisler, above, followed in his footsteps, painting a portrait of his nephew Robert, below, and Barbara, right. Man Ray photographed Leopold, above right, with sons Pe-



Ly and Education

Tickets on sale now at the Kennedy Center

and other famous ten-
gee musicians stand-

The best of them—often of family and friends—still crackle with life, as does the National Portrait Gallery's mesmerizing, half-length portrait of the darkly handsome violin virtuoso Fritz Kreisler. By sheer happenstance, it is being featured as a proud new acquisition in the Portrait Gallery lobby, and it is as good as Seyffert gets. It is the sixth work by the artist to enter the collection.

But there are also lesser examples, most from late in his ultimately unhappy, alcoholic life, that have long since faded into the woodwork. Two such portraits are at the National Gallery of Art: brownish depictions of early benefactors Rush and Samuel Kress, hanging in the West Building Founders' Room. It says everything, perhaps, that they hang in this lounge adjoining a coat-check room rather than in the galleries featuring work by Seyffert's far more daring American contemporaries, modernist Georgia O'Keeffe and "Ashcan" painter George Bellows.

It also points to the inherent curse of the commercial portrait trade: It's usually the subjects who are remembered and the portraitists forgotten.

For all of these reasons—and not incidentally the triumph of modernism over academic art—few know of Seyffert today. Even fewer have heard of his son Richard (1915-1979), also a New York portraitist, landscape painter and teacher of note in his day. Or his grandson and heir, painter and teacher Robert Seyffert of Takoma Park.

It's not a dynasty that threatens the Calders or Wyeths, but it's a heritage worth exploring.

Progressing through the show's 90 paintings can be a bit slow going. What sustains interest is the family biography, which weaves all the pieces together. We see, for example, the handsome, almost Whistlerian portrait of Leopold's first wife, Helen Fleck, who was the social engine behind his early success. We are also drawn to a boldly conceived painting of a languid nude lying on a couch, her features curiously generalized or obscured. She turns out to be Grace J. Vernon, known as Bobby, a showgirl and

model for whom Leopold eventually left his wife and children.

Fleck took the couple's two boys and moved to Senlis, a French town not far from Paris. It was during a 1924 visit to see his children that Leopold and his two young sons, Richard and Peter, were photographed by dadaist Man Ray. (A copy of that image is also on view, along with some other family memorabilia.)

After the family breakup, Leopold continued for 30 years to grind out commissioned portraits—more than 500 in all. But if this show reflects the truth, he grew weary of his trade, which by then was mostly about flattering strangers. A 1940 portrait of Gov. James Michael Curley of Massachusetts says something about his state at the time. As family legend has it, Seyffert had to be wakened in his studio from a drunken stupor by Curley's bodyguards to get it done. (He did a pretty good job, considering.)

Finally, in 1956—three years after the National Gallery's dreary Kress portraits were finished—Leopold Seyffert, 69, died a widower in a nursing home in Bound Brook, N.J. The work he left behind in his studio is what you see in this show.

At the time, his son Richard (1915-1969) was a teacher at the Art Students League in New York. Most significant in this show are his sketched portraits of poet W.H. Auden and inventor Buckminster Fuller.

Richard, however, had taken to painting landscapes to escape the monotony of doing commissioned portraits. And from the smattering of evidence offered in this show, that's where his heart was. His broadly painted views of the American and Canadian West, including the Grand Canyon, which takes modernism into account, have a particular



PHOTO BY MICHAEL LUTZKY

appeal. One small painting of Lake Louise even vaguely recalls Marsden Hartley, while another—a Victorian house in New Brunswick—conjures a Hopperlike nostalgia.

Richard's best portrait here, by far, is that of his nephew Robert in a leather jacket.

Which brings us to the third generation in the show. Robert, now in his forties, has

FAMILY PORTRAIT

"Leopold, Richard and Robert Seyffert: Three Generations of Artistic Vision 1905-1997" will continue through February at the Artists' Museum, 406 Seventh St. NW, second floor. Hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Admission is free.



FAMILY PHOTO, COURTESY OF ROBERT SEYFFERT

Today, scores of Seyffert's portraits im-
mortalizing founders of the nation

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COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS' MUSEUM

studios in Baltimore and at the Arts Club in New York and teaches at the Washington Studio School. Like his uncle (his father was a teacher of Spanish), he travels widely and has painted landscapes from Nova Scotia to California. He spends summers in Brittany, teaching at an art colony.

Robert has totally abandoned portraiture, which he calls "a dead art." He has represented himself here with landscapes that range from tranquil, tenderly observed impressionistic views of "Santa Barbara, Hendry's Beach" and "Brittany Cliff" to occasionally garish ones. He has also included several rather repetitious unpeopled urban scenes, each with a background of seemingly empty buildings or stores, and dominated by a single, abandoned-looking old car.

"I like to see evidence of the past in the present," says Robert Seyffert of his car paintings, which have titles like "Love Box," "Duster in Shadow" and "Band of Light."

The past is also very much present in this show—Grandfather Leopold is clearly the dominant figure. You soon find yourself wandering back to take a closer look at his work.

After a third trip abroad in 1915, Leopold began to attract patrons with his dramatic and insightful charcoal portraits of emerging musical luminaries who became close

friends. They included Kreisler, Hans Kindler, Leopold Stokowski and other famous refugee musicians stranded in America during World War I. (The National Portrait Gallery owns four such drawings, acquired from the family in the '60s, and the Corcoran exhibited them in 1930, purchasing two.)

Six such drawings are in this show, chief among them an intense self-portrait of Seyffert himself, along with a surprising image of the handsome young Stokowski (conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra), atypically portrayed when he still had a full head of hair. Seyffert also made an oil portrait of Stokowski that hung over the maestro's mantel until his death. Sadly, it disappeared soon thereafter, reportedly at sea. (Anyone seen it?)

Among the surviving oil paintings from this period is the 1917 portrait of cellist Kindler, who later became first musical director of the National Symphony Orchestra. Boldly composed against a nearly abstract background, Kindler is shown lost in reverie as he draws his bow across the strings. The Seyfferts often spent summers with the Kindlers and other musicians in Seal Harbor, Maine. And it is from this group—and this period—that Leopold produced many of his finest works, including the Portrait Gallery's new acquisition. Too bad we can't see more.

It has apparently fallen to Robert to tend, publicize and ultimately dispose of the family's accumulated holdings. He has already had some success: In addition to sales to the National Portrait Gallery, one early painting, "Dutch Girl" by Leopold Seyffert, recently sold at auction in New York for \$14,000.

He mounted this show, he says, because "there are still so many paintings, and because I thought it was time to get them out into the world."