

# Jacob Eichholtz — His Life and Paintings

By HELEN W. HENDERSON

When, last September, I received from your librarian an invitation to address the Lancaster County Historical Society on that distinguished Lancaster painter, Jacob Eichholtz, I am afraid that the time being far distant, I agreed without taking fully into account that I was engaging to carry coals to Newcastle, so to speak, and that the members of the Society, being no doubt steeped in the history of their illustrious townsman, would be far more capable of informing me on the subject than would I be likely to bring fresh or unknown material before them.

Be that as it may, I only hope that it will be understood that I appear before you not at all as an "authority" on Jacob Eichholtz, but rather as an amateur of his art, an enthusiastic admirer of his portraits, of which Lancaster treasures so many, happily often in their original settings, in charming old-world drawing rooms, furnished in the period of the persons depicted and cared for lovingly by the descendants of the originals.

My interest in Jacob Eichholtz goes back to that highly important exhibition of local portraiture held in Lancaster in 1912, under the auspices of the Lancaster County Historical Society and the Iris Club, the first of its kind ever undertaken in this community. Its object both historical and artistic.

There were many committees; all the most distinguished Lancastrians then living being associated with this most worthy enterprise. A student at that time at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, but already associated as art writer for a Philadelphia paper, I found myself — I scarcely remember how — a member of the committee on hanging and display, together with my friends, Miss Martha Bowman and Charles Demuth (so fine an artist, later to become so celebrated) and G. Luther FonDersmith.

It was a very big affair. Everybody that was anybody in the art world was present at the opening; but for some reason I have, amongst a confused mass of memories, a most vivid picture of the painter, Thomas Eakins, (whose *Dr. Agnew's Clinic* was lent to the exhibition by the University of Pennsylvania) being escorted with something of pomp through the vast rooms of the Woolworth

Building, by a delegation worthy of this honour. He so seldom appeared at any such function that his presence here seemed momentous.

The splendid address delivered by Mr. W. U. Hensel upon this occasion, and afterwards printed in pamphlet form, is a treasured document and the source of much that we know of Eichholtz, his origin, his accomplishment, and his life.

My interest in the painter slumbered during a number of years—years spent mostly in Europe—although I retained always a lively recollection of this exhibition and the beautiful portraits which it displayed, its homogeneous character—Lancaster citizens, painted by Lancaster artists, owned by Lancaster descendants, shown in Lancaster. The idea appealed to me strongly. I had always felt that the true value of art was best appreciated when found upon its native heath. That it was this which made the galleries of Holland and Italy so precious, so revealing, so well adapted for study. I was to remark this later in studying the Peabody Museum in Salem, so vastly creditable to its native air, throwing as it does such light upon its most appealing period.

Then one hot summer's day two years ago I met my friend, Julius Bloch, on the street. He told me that as a member of the exhibition committee of the Philadelphia Art Alliance, he had suggested a retrospective exhibition of the works of one Jacob Eichholtz about whom he knew little except that he had seen, obscurely hung in the Atwater Kent Museum, in the old Franklin Institute Building, but belonging to The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, a portrait of a *Man Wearing Spectacles*, identity unknown, which had attracted his attention and on the strength of which single example he was prepared to recommend an exhibition of this painter's work. Some preliminary spade-work had been begun and a number of portraits located, chiefly in public collections—the Parkway Museum, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and such. These were readily obtainable and the committee thought would answer without going farther afield.

I begged to differ. I asked Mr. Bloch what about the portraits in Lancaster? He did not think the Art Alliance would care to undertake the responsibility and expense of bringing pictures from such a distance.

I am afraid that I horned in on this project. It was really an easy matter to persuade the Art Alliance that if an exhibition of Jacob Eichholtz were contemplated it was not a case for sparing expense or trouble—that if it was to be done it should be done properly. Obviously the first step was to consult Lancaster, and to go on from there. The result of all this was that Mr. Bloch and I made a pious pilgrimage to your city, which was productive of the brilliant exhibition which hung at the Art Alliance throughout the month of October, 1943.

It was my old friend, Robert Locher, who put me in touch with the gentleman who became our cicerone upon this expedition and whose word opened all doors to us. He led us into many homes in Lancaster, into many gracious old-world rooms distinguished by portraits of the forebears of the present owners, painted by Jacob Eichholtz, preserved, cared for, and venerated by their descendants. A number of these were generously lent to us and hung in our exhibition.

As was fitting, our first visit was to the quaint red brick house with the bronze plaque in quiet South Lime Street, in which the painter established himself and his ever-growing family after he had made his competence. Here to paint, to live robustly, to beget children (he had thirteen) and to end his days, still young, he was only sixty-six, in the peace of this shaded town one hundred and three years ago.

A flight of narrow stairs leads to a room at the back, which was the studio. No longer in possession of the family, only the walls and windows suggest its former designation; but below, in what was presumably the dining-room, is a large portrait of a dog with a very human eye. Now framed and hung upon the wall, it once formed part of a screen to block off the large open fireplace of this room. The same dog, a beloved member of Jacob's household, figures in the portrait of his first child by his second marriage. The boy, Edward, holds a frightened cat in his arms to protect it from the dog who seems ready to attack. This canvas, done from memory after the death of the boy, belongs to Mrs. Edwin H. Albright and Miss Katharine Eichholtz, granddaughters of the painter.

A peculiarly touching incident of our visit was a trip to the outskirts of Lancaster to see the collection of a grandniece of the

painter. She sat in her bower surrounded by these souvenirs of a rich past. A particularly charming phase of the artist's work is a series of small oval portraits on wood panels. Many of them are family portraits, and we were fortunate in securing several from this collection. An especially beautiful example of this type is the portrait of Barnard Wolff, belonging to Miss Nellie Appel of Lancaster.

One of the most interesting things we saw was the sign depicting the original *Earl of Chatham*, which for years swung over the entrance of the William Pitt Hotel in East King Street, and which Mrs. Demuth, after preserving it with intelligent care during her life-time, bequeathed to the Lancaster County Historical Society. We made the trip out to that extraordinary Landis Valley Museum and saw this fine specimen of Eichholtz's amateur work, painted when he was known only as a coppersmith.

Mr. Hensel mentions it amongst a multitude of similar signs advertising the numerous hostleries for which Lancaster was famous in the good old days and which, as he says, made these streets an out-door picture gallery, and indicates that these signs may have stirred in the boy a latent impulse towards painting and portraiture.

Eichholtz himself, as recorded by William Dunlap (*A History of the Arts of Design in the United States*, vol. 2, pp. 384-386 incl.) remembers his first urge towards art when, as a child of not more than seven years, slipping off unnoticed to the garret, when he should have been at school, he drew objects that struck his fancy on the walls with red chalk.

These first rude efforts did not impress his father, but he must have felt some pride in the lad's talent or perhaps saw for him the elements of a possible career in a commercial branch of art, for he finally engaged a common sign painter to give the boy the rudiments of drawing. "This painter," says Eichholtz, "being a man of strong passions, in a fit of unrequited love committed suicide by shooting himself. I shall ever remember the pang I felt on hearing of the destruction of my teacher. I considered myself forever cut off from a favorite pursuit. The instruction I received from this source was little better than nothing, yet the seeds were sown."

Let us pass rapidly in review the facts of Eichholtz's early life

as we know from his own account (published by Dunlap). His origin was of the simplest. He was of the third generation in America, born in Lancaster, of parents both descended from Germans. He was one of many children of parents whose circumstances admitted of no more than a plain education for their offspring, after which they were put to trades likely to become for them a source of livelihood.

Jacob was apprenticed to a coppersmith, his uncle, but while applying himself with diligence in learning his trade, indulged his passion for drawing by decorating the walls of his uncle's shop with charcoal sketches of his fellow apprentices. After serving his time he set up in business for himself, doing so well that he shortly married Mrs. Catharine Michael Hatz, a widow with two children and started raising a family of his own.

Meanwhile every spare moment was devoted to art. But he had no tools! Brushes were not to be had, not even in Philadelphia, and for a palette he "had nothing better than a boot jack."

At last chance brought to Lancaster an artist who gave him friendly recognition, and his future was determined. This artist was Thomas Sully, come to paint the portrait of Governor Snyder. Eichholtz lent him his studio and Sully in return gave him some professional advice and, being about to return to England, some half-worn brushes. This was in 1809. Eichholtz was then thirty-three.

"About this time," he writes, "I had a family with three or four children, and yet had not courage to relinquish the coppersmith and become a painter. To support my family as a painter was out of the question. I divided my attention between both. Part of the day I wrought as coppersmith, the other part as painter. It was not unusual to be called out of the shop and see a fair lady who wanted her picture painted. The coppersmith was instantly transferred to the face painter. The encouragement I received finally induced me to relinquish the copper business entirely."

Lancaster already believed in him. The prophet HAD honor in his own country. It does not seem likely that, beyond the gift of half-worn brushes, Eichholtz gained much from his encounter with Thomas Sully. Was there a spark of jealousy in what the latter wrote? And I quote: "When Governor Snyder was elected

[1808] I was employed by Mr. Binns to go to Lancaster and paint a portrait of the new chief magistrate of the state. Eichholtz was then employing all his leisure hours, stolen from the manufacture of tea kettles and coffee pans, in painting. His attempts were hideous. He kindly offered me the use of his painting room, which I gladly accepted, and gave him during my stay in Lancaster all the information I could impart. When I saw his portraits a few years afterwards (in the interim he had visited and copied Stuart) I was much surprised and gratified. I have no doubt that Eichholtz would have made a first-rate painter had he begun early in life, with the usual advantages."

There is an ungracious and patronizing air about this comment which a comparison of their relative work, after a century, scarcely justifies.

On the other hand when he was urged by his friend, "Mr. Barton," to visit the celebrated Stuart at Boston, he met with a handsome reception and Stuart gave him "sound lectures and hope." Before visiting Stuart, Eichholtz had painted a portrait of Nicholas Biddle, president of the United States Bank. This he took with him as a specimen of his skill, so that Stuart might not take him for an impostor, as he modestly puts it. Eichholtz no doubt felt that everything was at stake in this encounter with a great and celebrated professional. He speaks of it as a "fiery trial." His picture was placed alongside the best of Stuart's hand and that lesson our young friend considered the best he had ever received. The comparison, he thought enough, and "if I had vanity before I went," he writes, "it all left me before my return."

Eichholtz, however, had the one great indispensable gift for portraiture. He was able to seize the likeness, to grasp the character of the sitter at once without searching and fumbling. Therein lay his genius. His granddaughters have told me that he painted his portraits in two sittings. It is this which gives his heads, whether of men or women, and he was equally successful with both, that brilliant, sure, convincing quality. It was strikingly noticeable in the exhibition held at the Art Alliance. The gallery seemed full of real people—strong, vigorous personalities, never pretty-pretty (as some of Sully's women's heads) but people of character, with large, fine, fearless eyes.

So after developing, aided no doubt by Stuart's advice, some

technical skill, it was this gift for portraiture which enabled him, in a short time, but with utmost diligence and concentration, to feel that he could live by his art alone and support in comfort his rapidly growing family.

His industry was prodigious. We know that he painted over three hundred portraits. It is even said that he painted over four hundred. When sitters failed he fell back upon his family and some of his most beautiful portraits are those of his wives, his children, his sister, his nieces and nephews, and the persons intermarried into his family. But he outgrew the possibilities of his native town, having soon painted most of her people of consequence. For Lancaster, if too small for him, appreciated him. I need not tell YOU the names of his local patrons. The ledger which he kept, treasured I believe by the Lancaster County Historical Society, is an interesting and revealing document. It is in a sense a social register of Lancaster a hundred years ago.

He made frequent trips to Harrisburg to paint Lancaster families who had migrated there. His fame reached Baltimore. He spent weeks at a time in that city and painted numerous families in groups and singly. Many of these are scattered through the South and cannot be located. Here again his patrons were often Lancastrians removed to the larger city—the Schaeffers and Kurtzes identified with Trinity Lutheran Church; the Slaymakers, Reigarts, Frazers, Seners, Bethels, Mayers and other Lancaster families continued and increased their substantial encouragement.

His prices were derisory, even if we allow for the difference in the value of money then and now. For some of his finest efforts, such as the beautiful portrait of John George Hoff, the clockmaker, he received only \$30. This was in 1817. There is no record of excessive charges for his work—quite the reverse. In 1818 for the portraits of George Graeff and wife (Walter Hager's maternal great-grandparents) he was to get \$30 each, deducting \$10 for the double order. Their daughter, Maria, was painted later and he did it for nothing in fulfillment of a promise he made her—that if she would introduce him to Catharine Trissler, with whom after becoming a widower he fell in love at first sight, and he married her—he would paint her portrait and give it to her. This promise he executed and the portrait exists.

The dates of his first wife's death and his second marriage

fix the date of this portrait at about 1822. He painted four members of the Muhlenberg family, including that of Dr. Frederick Augustus Hall Muhlenberg, famous physician. This magnificent example of the painter's art belongs, as you know, to Miss Pauline Rengier.

His prices soared to \$300. His largest single charge for a picture occurs in 1830 when the Rev. Edward Rutledge paid him \$300 for a portrait of John Stark Ravenscroft, Bishop of North Carolina and twentieth in line of bishops of the Episcopal Church in the United States.

Now his fame was truly established and having, as we have said, exhausted the field of local patronage, Eichholtz felt justified in removing his studio and family to Philadelphia. According to his own account he spent in all ten years in that city, occupying a house, which I think still stands, at 730 Sansom Street.

Sansom is a narrow street, but at this point (that is the block between Seventh and Eighth Streets) it widens out considerably and may have been very desirable a hundred years ago. At any rate John Sartain, the famous engraver, when he first came to this country, in 1830, bought the house next to Eichholtz (728) and his son, Samuel, acquired the house next to that (726), so that a little artistic oasis was formed there. The two Sartain houses have been destroyed and replaced by modern horrors, but 730, albeit grossly disfigured, is of the period right enough and its iron railings and its attic window with small panes of glass, seem not to have been touched. These houses face north so that, together with the wide street, they were ideal for studios.

John Sartain came to Philadelphia from England. He records that Eichholtz was of the group of artists who welcomed him. Others were Sully, Neagle, Doughty, Shaw, and Child. One of Sartain's first commissions in Philadelphia was to engrave Eichholtz's later portrait of Nicholas Biddle, president of the United States Bank.

The records show that Eichholtz acquired title to the South Lime Street house, where he lived upon his return from Philadelphia and for the remainder of his life, in 1831. It was bought from Phillip Wager Reigart and became the old homestead for the Eichholtz family until comparatively recently. It was Robert Lindsay Eichholtz, (named for his brother-in-law) the painter's



next to youngest son by his second wife, who lived in the house after his father's death. He married Mrs. Ziegler and oddly enough his step-daughter, Susan Ziegler, was his chief heir. The pictures, however, were left to William H. Miller, his nephew, descended from Anna Maria, the painter's eldest daughter by Catharine Trissler. Will Miller, as he was called, was an artist as was also his daughter, Helen Miller Wellens, afterwards Dubbs.

Even so recently as 1912, as recorded by Mr. Hensel, a ripe sheaf of the Eichholtz harvest remained in the quaint South Lime Street home of the artist and of his children after him. "His studio into which only his ghost has entered for three score years and ten," says Mr. Hensel, "long the workshop of his expert sons, stands back from the building line and constitutes the north wing of the main building. It is built of fine old English brick."

Several masterpieces hung there. There was the Sully "Byron;" the Stuart portrait of Eichholtz himself (belonging now to his great-great-grandson, Henry Miller Dubbs, of Denver, Colorado). The granddaughters have spoken to me affectionately of his incomplete sketch of the "Peri at the Gates of Paradise" and a copy of an Italian Mary Magdalen.

But the most charming of the pictures are the portraits of the children. These *con amore* performances are really, in a sense, the cream of his production. One of the best known is that of the three heads on one canvas, portraits of Lavallyn, Robert, and Henry Clay, the youngest of the painter's children, aged about five, seven, and nine. Mrs. Albright, who inherited something of her grandfather's genius, made a remarkable copy of this canvas. It hangs in her home in West Philadelphia. The original evidently went to Robert and in 1912 was owned by his step-son, George Ziegler.

Miss Katharine Eichholtz owns a small head of her father, Henry Clay Eichholtz, which made an attractive spot in our exhibition. Mrs. C. W. Walker, of Bryn Mawr, a great granddaughter of the painter owns a beautiful portrait of her mother (later Mrs. Coppuck) as a girl. She is playing with a dog. But amongst all the family portraits none is more charming nor more finished than that of his daughter, Maria Catharine, on the eve of her marriage to Robert Lindsay. This is one of a splendid collection owned by Mrs. William M. Wills and Mrs. Charles Watson, great grand-

daughters of Jacob in descent from his first wife, Catharine Hatz.

Dunlap describes Eichholtz as a man of frank, simple, unpretending manners, whose conversation was marked by good sense and ultimate independence.

The several well-known self-portraits bear out this tribute. His regard is earnest and concentrated. The self-portrait considered his best is that in which the painter holds a scroll. This went to his daughter, Angelica Kauffman (who married Dr. H. A. Smith and lived at Intercourse). It now belongs to Henry Miller Dubbs. Another went to Henry Clay and now belongs to his son, Edward Grant Eichholtz. A third, less well known than the others but in a way more artistic and charming, belongs to Mrs. Charles Walker, a great granddaughter. There is a more youthful self-portrait owned by The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

In all of these we feel the energy which animated this man's full, vivid life. And if we turn from the commissioned portraits of men, women, and children to these uncompromising likenesses of the man himself, we cannot but be impressed by the frankness and originality of the work. For his contact with the work of contemporary artists was of the slightest. Sully and Stuart came briefly into his ken, but his work is highly individual and is in no sense to be considered "school of" either of these painters.

It is incredible that the exhibition which we held at the Art Alliance was the first one-man show of his paintings ever assembled. True his work dominated the famous 1912 Art Exhibition held in Lancaster. But Lancaster seems to have shared the painter's modesty. The wise French say: *il faut se faire valoir*—in other words people take you at your own valuation.

The portraits could not be better shown than upon the walls of your beautiful homes where everything is of the epoch. But things will change, oncoming generations will not think as we do and it is high time to be thinking about the future of these pictures.

I should like to see the day when Lancaster will have collected into a splendid memorial to her townsman the many portraits which have never as yet left the walls for which they were painted. What a wonderful thing for Lancaster should such a movement be set afoot and how, I like to think, the owners of his portraits would fall into line to embellish, enrich, complete such a shrine.