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## A LIFTED VEIL by Suzanne Tatian

Last summer, while compiling a checklist of art objects owned by the Clark Library, Renée Chin, a UCLA undergraduate and a Getty intern, discovered a portrait of George Eliot in the art storage room. Senior Library staff had not seen this portrait before and an internal inventory conducted in 1936 appears to have been the last documentation of its existence.

The painting was executed early in 1850 during Eliot's stay abroad. The previous summer, Eliot had travelled to the Continent with her friends Charles and Cara Bray. When the Brays returned to England, Eliot remained in Geneva and in October became a boarder at the home of a Swiss artist, François D'Albert Durade, and his family. In a letter to the Brays dated 15 February 1850, Eliot writes: 'You will be amused to hear that I am sitting for my portrait – at M. D'Albert's request – not mine. If it turns out well, I shall long to steal it to give to you – but M. D'Albert talks of painting a second and in that case I shall certainly beg one' (G. S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, Yale, 1954-78).

Although there is no evidence that the Brays ever received a copy, D'Albert did eventually paint several. Kathleen Adams (*Those of Us Who Loved Her*, George Eliot Fellowship, 1980) identifies three copies: 'One of them was purchased from the painter's son Alphonse in 1905 by the National Portrait Gallery.... A second copy was given to Mary Ann [George Eliot] and was sold with other relics of George Eliot by the executors of Gertrude Lewes . . . in June 1923. Its present whereabouts are unknown. A third copy was painted for John Cross in 1881 and this now hangs in Coventry City Libraries.' Haight mentions a fourth, an enlarged version painted by D'Albert in 1885 and presented by his sons to the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire in Geneva.

The portrait given to Eliot and eventually sold at auction is the one that has come to light at the Clark. A label on the back of the portrait indicates that it once belonged to 'Mrs C[harles] L[ee] Lewes' (Gertrude). It was Charles Lewes's father, George Henry Lewes, whom Eliot lived with for twenty-four years until his death in 1878. Eliot thereupon named Charles her heir, and in 1880 he inherited the painting. A second label shows that, shortly after Charles's death, his widow lent the portrait to the New Gallery for the Victorian Exhibition, 1891-92. Some thirty years later, on 27 June 1923, Sotheby's auctioned it among a lot sold 'by Order of the Executors of the Will of Gertrude . . . Lewes, being part of the Property of George Eliot bequeathed by her to Charles Lee Lewes.' It went for six pounds to 'Spencer' – probably Walter T. Spencer, a London rare book and print dealer. From Spencer the painting passed directly or indirectly to an American bookseller, Alice Millard, who in turn sold it to William Andrews Clark, Jr., on 1 January 1924 for \$325.

A local conservator, Susanne Friend of ConservArt Associates, was called in early this year to analyse and treat the painting. She determined that it was not executed in oil, as

earlier commentators had thought, but in a water-soluble paint. This discovery suggests that the portrait now at the Clark may be the original, the preliminary study from which D'Albert later made the copies in oil. Although it was in generally good condition, layers of dirt and mold obscured the background, highlights, and details of dress, which are reemerging with vivid clarity as the surface is cleaned. When the cleaning is complete, the portrait will hang in the drawing room. We hope that this will be the first of many restoration projects to preserve the Library's artwork.