

WINSTON CHURCHILL – HIS ART REFLECTS HIS LIFE

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President Traer, Mr. Crosby Kemper, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Standing in the snow in St. Petersburg, Russia, last month, I watched the eternal flame flickering at the tomb of the unknown warrior. Something about the scene – the violet shadows on the snow – made me think of one of my grandfather's paintings – winter scene at Chartwell. I thought about the 900-day siege of Leningrad, and the brave Russians who once again turned back an invader inside their own territory. *What if* the allies had ignored Russia's pleas for aid? *What if* the allies had stood by and left Russia to fight it out alone with the Germans? *What if* is a wonderful game to play with the benefit of hindsight.

If an unaided Russia had been defeated then, think what the world might have looked like today! I am an artist not a historian, but occasionally I look at a map. History is shaped by geography. Picture Hitler's empire stretching from Munich through Vienna, through Moscow all the way across Siberia to Vladivostok – to join up with his allies in Tokyo. A belt of terror encircling the globe. No wonder Churchill and Roosevelt banded together to prevent it.

History is the reason we are gathered here in Fulton, in a Christopher Wren church plucked from a bomb site in London. Today is the latest in a chain of events which began almost 50 years ago in 1946, when my grandfather stood here to deliver his "Sinews of Peace" speech. That was the *first* link in the chain. The famous phrase, "the Iron Curtain," had stayed in people's minds until the building of the Berlin Wall became the physical embodiment of that "curtain."

The *second* link of the chain, of course, is this beautiful church, brought here stone by stone. The love and imagination of the people of Fulton, and their skill and determination in re-constructing it here to celebrate an ideal, stands as one of the miracles of modern days.

Since these larger than life events, others have followed. Many individuals have given their time and effort to build a memorial and library in which my grandfather would surely have felt at home.

Now let *me* enter the picture for a moment. One thing leads to another. Life inspires Art. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, I read that people were chipping away pieces of the wall for souvenirs. I knew in a flash what had to be done. It was an opportunity of a lifetime. I called Dr. Saunders, then President of Westminster College, and said, "Harvey, if I can get a piece of the Berlin Wall, and make a sculpture out of it, would you like to have it in Fulton at the site of the "Iron Curtain" speech?" "Wonderful idea!" he said.

My grandfather's speech was in my mind all the time I was planning what the sculpture would be. I wanted to portray Freedom – Breaking through the Iron Curtain – Breaking through the Wall.

On the first anniversary of the fall of the Wall, my sculpture, “Breakthrough,” was dedicated here by Ronald Reagan, the man who had said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall!” We had come full circle.

Or so we thought. But, Lo and Behold, last year, Mikhail Gorbachev, drawn inextricably by this chain of events, decided to make his major speech in the USA right here at Fulton. Newly thrown out of office, like Churchill in 1946, the deposed Russian leader walked through the “Breakthrough” sculpture, from the drab communist side of the wall to the colourful freedom side, to the cheers of 15, 000 enrapt admirers. Life had indeed inspired art – and Art, in turn, had returned the compliment by inspiring Life.

It is a great honour and pleasure to give the eleventh Crosby Kemper Lecture on the subject of my grandfather, Winston Churchill.

President Traer, and my friend, Jack Marshall: -- You have doubly honored me today – as Speaker at this Lecture, and with an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Fine Arts. As Doctor of Fine Arts, it seems appropriate today for me to speak about:

**The Fine Arts of Winston Churchill:
His Art Reflects His Life**

Winston Churchill was unusual as a grandfather. What was unusual, from my point of view, was that whereas he belonged to us as a family, he belonged to everyone else as well. The world over, people felt intensely about him. Even today, he is as much yours as he is ours.

Some of my most vivid memories of my grandfather are of him as a painter. He was the first artist I ever knew. As a child I would stand behind him and watch, spellbound by the magic he was creating. As he was the “expert” in the family, I would sometimes show him some small effort of my own.

How do you get to know someone? How did you first become attracted to your wife or husband? A glimpse across a crowded room, an intriguing snippet of conversation? At first you get to know a small part of a person, which gives you an appetite for more. Later you find that this small thing is part and parcel of the whole person.

You can see Winston Churchill in the little things of life, by the way he enjoys his dinner, by the way he plays at cards, by the way he pats his poodle, and – by the way he puts paint onto his canvas.

His art reflects his life

Not that Churchill mixed politics with his paint. There was Art in his politics, but no politics in his Art. Some artists like to bring in a “message,” or make a political statement with their art. Some just concentrate on the statement and don’t bother with the art at all, creating “works” solely consisting of the message. Not he! Unashamedly, he painted for pure pleasure, channeling his joie de vivre onto the canvas.

There are five descriptive words that are often used to characterize Churchill. Please imagine with me now, how these five descriptions of him in his Public Life show up repeatedly in his paintings – that is to say his Private Life.

He was **PRODIGIOUS**.

He was **BOLD**.

He was filled to the brim with a **LOVE OF LIFE**.

He was **IRRESPRESSIBLE**.

And finally, he was **INSPIRING**, that quality of which, more than any other, shaped world history. It is through these descriptions that I will try to bring him back to life for you today.

PRODIGIOUS

Nearly 70 out of his 90 years were spent in Public Life. There was hardly anything that was going on in the world between 1890 and 1960 in which he was not vitally involved. In 1893, he was fighting the Dervishes at Omdurman in the last cavalry charge in history. In 1915 he was planning the first tank, and in 1945, he was laying the ground rules for the United Nations. He was literally “into everything.”

He was **PRODIGIOUS** as a **PAINTER**, as well. During a span of 45 years, from 1915 to 1960, he produced more than 500 paintings.

Today many of these paintings hang in museums and private collections from Buckingham Palace to Brunei.

Although he gave away about a hundred paintings during his lifetime, he hated to part with them – every artist does. The only ones we don’t mind parting with are the bad ones – and those we daren’t give away.

The list of owners of his paintings reads like a thumbnail Who’s Who of his life. Apart from members of the family, there were: Beaverbrook, Eden, F.E. Smith, Eisenhower, Harriman, Heath, Vivien Leigh, Montgomery, Onassis, Roosevelt, Smuts, Truman, and on and on.

In spite of these gifts, there were still plenty of paintings to keep for himself. My grandmother hung them in the main rooms at Chartwell, but more kept coming. She dealt with these in a novel way – wall to wall Winstons. The hallways and passages were stacked with canvasses, two or three high, like a page of postage stamps. Very effective – very exciting – very democratic, really. Viewing for all sizes and ages – high enough so the lofty General de Gaulle would not have to stoop his head – low enough so the small grandchild would not have to stand on tiptoes.

BOLD

A wonderfully descriptive word for Churchill is **BOLD** – Bold in all the Battlefields of Life. You could fill a library with examples of his daring, as indeed you have here at Fulton.

One particular episode that I’m fond of happened in 1916. Churchill was commanding a Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, stationed in a village called Plugstreet, just over the

French border into Belgium, less than a mile away from the front line. His battalion was in and out of action – by turns in the trenches and by turns “resting.” Within earshot, eyesight, and gunshot of the enemy, Churchill set up his easel and painted the scene around him. A ground of farm buildings increasingly riddled with shells appeared on his canvasses. One of these paintings, “Plugstreet Under Shell-Fire,” shows men running to escape the bombardment. Churchill had stayed at his easel and caught the danger of the moment. “Laurence Farm,” done at the same time, is another example of his sangfroid. This painting shows the elegant figure of his friend, Archibald Sinclair, casually reading a newspaper, oblivious to the destruction happening around him – the epitome of the Scottish Gentleman. “If you can keep your head about you, when all around are losing theirs...” I’m sure both artist and sitter had these lines from Kipling in mind while this scene was being painted.

He was BOLD as a man and bold as a PAINTER. Churchill was already 40 when he first began to paint. It was 1915. He had left the Admiralty, cruelly forced out of office, in the middle of the Dardanelles disaster. Inactivity was intolerable. He cast about for a way to channel his energies. In his book, “Painting as a Pastime,” he describes his first efforts:

“Everyone knows the feeling with which one stands shivering on a spring-board, the shock when a friendly foe steals up behind and hurls you into the flood, and the ardent glow which thrills you as you emerge breathless from the plunge ... This beginning with Audacity, or being thrown into the middle of it, is already a very great part of the art of painting. For a joy ride in a paint-box, Audacity is the only ticket.”

He was BOLD in his choice of colours. So BOLD were they that many people, including Clementine, would sometimes suggest that he cool them. In particular, Clementine promoted the friendship and influence of the eminent painter, Sir William Nicholson, encouraging her husband to tone down his brilliant colours to the cooler and more subtle hues of Sir William.

Whatever the advice, and from whatever quarter, Winston could not bear to give up his bold colours. He insists: “I must say I like bright colours. I cannot pretend to feel impartial about the colours. I rejoice with the brilliant ones, and am genuinely sorry for the poor browns.”

“When I get to heaven I mean to spend a considerable portion of my first million years in painting, and so get to the bottom of the subject. But then I shall require a still gayer palette than I get here below. I expect orange and vermilion will be the darkest, dullest colours upon it, and beyond them there will be a whole range of wonderful new colours which will delight the celestial eye.”

IRREPRESSIBLE

He was IRREPRESSIBLE in Public and in Private Life.

During the Boer War, as a civilian press correspondent, not under military command, he simply took over a de-railed troop train en route to Ladysmith, issuing orders and rescuing soldiers.

During the General Strike of 1926 he exulted in running what turned out to be more or less his own newspaper – the British Gazette, which briefly had a circulation of more than a million.

Look at the photographs of Churchill during the gravest days of the Second World War. Anyone can see, within that resolute man with the bulldog face, there's a cheeky little red-haired boy bursting to come out. "I do not need to be prodded," he said. "If anything, *I am a prod.*"

He was IRREPRESSIBLE as a PAINTER.

Whereas statesmen today will grab an hour or two on the tennis court or golf course to refresh themselves after long hours of negotiating, Churchill would don his own peculiar form of leisure clothing and his latest hat, and escape like a naughty schoolboy, with his paints and brushes. Whatever he was and whatever he was doing, he always tried to make it fun. On a trip to Egypt in 1921, he paints "Cairo from the Pyramids." In this majestic landscape with purple mountains, and billowing clouds, he has been unable to resist puckishly inserting a tiny "Winston" in the foreground.

His sense of humour never deserted him. After his election defeat in 1945, he was offered the Order of the Garter, which he refused with the quip, "Why should I accept the Order of the Garter from His Majesty, when the people have just given me the Order of the Boot?"

LOVE OF LIFE

No one had a LOVE OF LIFE more than he did. He loved his work, he loved his family.

Most men keep their work in the office. Whenever possible, Churchill brought his home. No time or place was exempt. Wherever *he* was, was "Where it was at." The dinner table at Chartwell was the Mecca to which all were attracted. It was always the hub of the household, and frequently the hub of the world. It was the center both in time and place for family and friends, where discussion with a grandchild about the nesting habits of the black swans was as important as an argument with Monty about the Battle of Alamein. The guiding light on these occasions was my grandmother, who was always ready with a word or a look to keep things under control.

LOVE OF LIFE shone in his PAINTING and how he felt about it.

"Just to paint," he wrote, "is great fun. The colours are lovely to look at and delicious to squeeze out."

He had a physical affinity with his materials, like a good workman with his tools. In a "Painter's Painting," he did what most artists do sooner or later. He painted his own paints – the result, a tactile still life of squidgy tubes of colour.

To me, one painting sums up his LOVE OF LIFE – his love for the good things in life. This painting, "Bottlescape," which still hangs at Chartwell, takes me back to my childhood.

A fine array of decanters and bottles mostly opened, and a fine disarray of half-filled glasses, all bathed in orange light, evoke the warmth of the dining room. It is painted in rich reds and browns, with bold white highlights on all the shiny objects – quite loosely painted, but you know exactly what each bottle holds, and how it tastes. You can almost smell the cedar wood cigar boxes stacked up on the side of the painting.

Through his painting, Churchill also achieved a heightened awareness of the beauties of nature. He explains that he has discovered “a tremendous new pleasure and interest which invests every walk or drive with an added object I found myself instinctively as I walked noting the tint and character of a leaf, the dreamy, purple shades of mountains, the exquisite lacery of winter branches, the dim, pale silhouettes of far horizons. And I had lived for over 40 years, without ever noticing any of them except in a general way, as one might look at a crowd and say, “What a lot of people!”

‘Scapes: -- landscapes, seascapes, skyscapes – he loved to capture on canvas *‘scapes’* of all kinds. When asked why he preferred landscape painting to portraiture, he replied, “A tree doesn’t complain that I haven’t done it justice.”

After his initial baptism with turpentine, Churchill discovered that the whole world was open with all its treasure. Painting became a spur to travel and he actually sought out what he called “paintatious” landscapes. It was total immersion. Painting was now a positive pleasure rather than simply a release from tension and the Affairs of the State. In the South of France he would stand at his easel, without tiring, for three or four hours at a stretch, totally absorbed in “Sunset at Cannes.” Cigar and brush were both so much a part of Churchill that it’s not hard to picture him putting the paintbrush in his mouth and stabbing the canvas with his cigar.

INSPIRING

Throughout his Public Life, Churchill was an INSPIRATION to people – through his actions and through his words.

The sort of thing that makes a speech good also makes a painting good. Contrast, imagination, clarity. There was nothing wishy-washy in his speeches or his paintings. The French painter, Paul Maze, gave him this advice: “Paint like you write or speak. You can do it – every stroke of the brush must be a statement felt and seen . . .”

And in some ways his painting started to affect his words. He uses vivid imagery gained with his new painter’s eye. His World War II “Finest Hour” speech ends with the painterly metaphor. “I see a day when men and women walk together in broad sunlit uplands . . .”

Churchill’s joy in painting has become an inspiration to others to take up the paintbrush and “have a go!” What he did for his own pleasure also gave pleasure to others – at first to those around him, and later to a wider circle, through exhibitions both in Britain and abroad.

In 1958, his great exhibition at The Royal Academy drew crowds. The art critic, John Russell wrote: “Nearly all of us are pleased when an amateur outdoes the professionals.” My

Aunt Mary Soames recalls a woman standing next to her in the gallery, saying to her companion, "He must have had such lovely holidays!"

Last summer, a show of Churchill's paintings was held at Hyde Park, the home of his friend and ally, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Director of Vassar Art Gallery, James Mundy, commented, "His best stuff is his earlier stuff, and if he'd stayed with it, he could have had a major career in art." This was also the view of Picasso, who once said, "If that man were a painter by profession, he would have no trouble in earning a good living."

Modest though he was about *this* particular activity, Churchill *did* want his paintings to survive and be known to future generations. David Coombs, who compiled the definitive catalogue did so on the instructions of this cryptic 1950 memo: "Mr. Churchill wants a catalogue of his pictures made."

Three times in his life, the Muse of Painting came to Churchill's rescue – twice when he was thrown out of office, -- in 1915 and in 1945, and then again in 1955, when he finally retired from office. On this occasion, at the age of 80, he said, "If it weren't for painting, I couldn't live; I couldn't bear the strain of things."

Painting was only a thread of the tapestry of his life, but in these descriptions, I've tried to illustrate how my grandfather's Art and Life were intertwined – **His Art Reflects His Life.**

The paintings of Winston Churchill endure, and like a ripple in a pond are enjoyed by an ever-increasing circle of people. We are all the inheritors of his art. His paintings are a tangible part of his life, made by his own hands and touched by his spirit.

So, the ending is not the ending – the spirit of Winston Churchill lives on – in us and in ours. It will never die. The paint is dry on the canvas, but the image lingers on.

Note: I gratefully acknowledge the following sources of information:

Painting As A Pastime by Winston S. Churchill

WINSTON CHURCHILL His Life as a Painter by Mary Soames

CHURCHILL A LIFE by Martin Gilbert