



**PHILIP ALEXIUS de LÁSZLÓ, M.V.O., P.R.B.A. (British, 1869-1937)**

*The Actress Anny Ahlers*

Seated full-length in three-quarter profile to the left with her elbows resting on a table, holding a red rose in her right hand and her left hand to her cheek, wearing a full white opera gown shot with blue and decorated with blue and pink ribbons, an emerald ring on both her right and left hand, a wide gold bracelet on her left wrist, a fan before her on the table and a green curtain behind on the left.

Oil on canvas

Signed and dated 'de László / 1933 - ', lower left

68 x 46 in. (172.7 x 116.9 cm.)

80 x 58 in. (203 x 147.3 cm.) (framed)

In the original frame

## Provenance

Sir Merrick Burrell, 7<sup>th</sup> Bt, commissioned from the artist.

By descent in the family.

Sold by Christopher Wood, London, in 2005, to the current owner.

## Exhibited

London, M. Knoedler & Co., *Portraits by Philip A. de László, M.V.O.*, 21 June-22 July 1933, no. 6: *The Late Miss Anny Ahlers*.

Dundee, Dundee Art Galleries and Museums, 1934.

London, Christie's, *A Brush with Grandeur*, 6 – 22 January 2004, no. 123.

Budapest, Hungarian National Gallery, *Philip de László (1869-1937): I am an Artist of the World...*, 27 September 2019 – 5 January 2020, no.16.

## Literature

Artist's Sitters Book, vol. II, f.74: *Anny Ahlers 26 XI 32*.

National Portrait Gallery, de László archive, 1933 Album p.10.

Paul Laib (photographer), negatives: L 17804 (531) / C1 (11); L91 / 22A (28).

*The Times*, 18 March 1933, p. 7, 'Miss Ahlers's Death'.

*The Sketch*, 22 March 1933, p. 499, ill.

*Daily Mail*, 21 June 1933.

*Evening Standard*, 21 June 1933.

*Sunderland Echo*, 21 June 1933.

*Nottingham Journal*, 22 June 1933.

*Northern Whig*, Belfast, 22 June 1933.

*Star*, 24 June 1933.

De László Archive (DLA), 1934 parcel, Hungarian publication, ill.

Owen Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter. The Authorized Life of Philip de László*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1939, p. 373, ill. opp. p. 384.

Derek Clifford, *The Paintings of P.A. de Laszlo*, Literary Services & Production Ltd, London, 1969, monochrome ill. pl. 46.

Sandra de Laszlo (ed.), & Christopher Wentworth-Stanley (asst. ed.), *A Brush with Grandeur*, Paul Holberton Publishing, London, exhibition catalogue, 2004, pp. 26, 60, 188, ill. p. 189.

Duff Hart-Davis, in collaboration with Caroline Corbeau-Parsons, *De László: His Life and Art*, Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 236-240, 245, 252, ill. 122.

Katherine Field (ed.), *Philip de László (1869-1937): I am an Artist of the World...* Hungarian National Gallery, exhibition catalogue, 2019, pp.82-3, ill. p. 83.

Included in Philip de László catalogue raisonné, currently presented in progress online: [www.delaszlocatalogueraisonne.com](http://www.delaszlocatalogueraisonne.com)



Portrait of *The Actress Anny Ahlers* in the original frame  
De László declared her eyes were 'blue as the skies of Italy!'

In the spring of 1932, Sir Merrik Burrell, 7<sup>th</sup> Bt, was taken by his daughter Dreda to Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket, to see a performance given by Anny Ahlers, the beautiful and talented German actress and singer making her London debut. She was playing the leading role in *The Dubarry*, an operetta based on the life of Louis XV's mistress Jeanne du Barry. Recently divorced from his second wife, Sir Merrik was immediately smitten by Anny's beauty and charismatic stage presence. He commissioned de László to paint a half-length portrait of her. Although Merrik Burrell, in his correspondence with de László, often referred to her as a 'child' or even a 'daughter', he initially urged the artist, before a party where they were going to see each other, not to reveal he was the commissioner of Anny Ahlers's portrait: 'Also do not forget that the picture of A.A. is a tribute of one artist to another.'



Photograph of Philip de László painting Anny Ahlers in his studio, 1933  
de László Archive © de László Archive Trust

De László was already well-known to Burrell, a prominent landowner and agriculturalist; some twenty years earlier Burrell had commissioned him to paint a portrait of Coralie, his second wife. The painting was completed in 1914, after numerous delays, and included their daughter Etheldreda (Dreda) and the family dog. Thus, what was to be a long-standing friendship was well established and de László was often a guest at their home in West Sussex. He also painted a half-length portrait of Sir Merrik in 1923.



*Lady Coralie Burrell and her daughter Etheldreda,*  
1914  
Oil on canvas, 66 ½ x 43 ½ in.  
© Antonia Reeve  
Private collection



From 'The Dubarry' programme

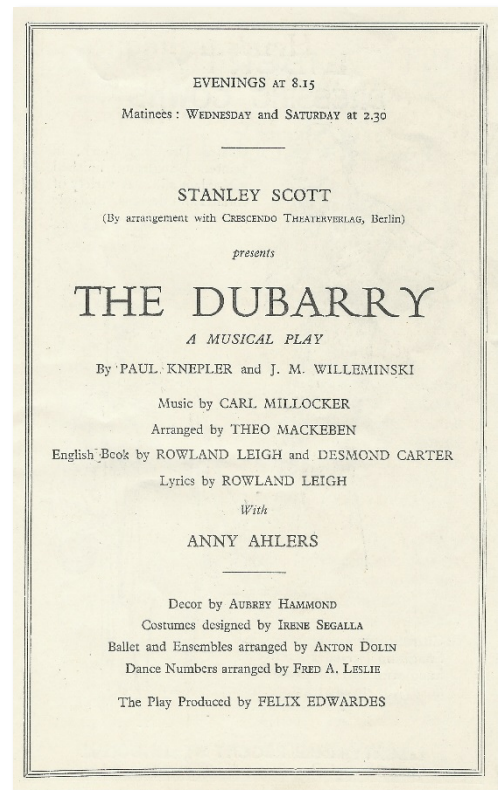
By 1932 Burrell was fifty-five and divorced from Coralie. Infatuated by Anny Ahlers, he had in mind the sort of portrait that leading ladies, especially on the Continent, would have on display in the foyers of theatres where they were appearing. De László, faced with a sitter of such striking appearance and personality, found the commission too subdued, and on his own initiation embarked upon the present full-length portrait.

Anny Ahlers was born in Hamburg on 22 December 1906, the daughter of Wilhelm Ahlers and Augusta Liebig. She made her first stage appearance at the age of seven. After the First World War she appeared as a *première enfant-danseuse* at the Vienna Opera House, and then at the Berlin State Opera House. In 1924 she returned to Hamburg to study operatic singing, and that year made her adult debut at the National Opera House [Volksopernhaus]. Her success continued in Berlin, where she co-starred with Richard Tauber in *The Song of Love*, and in Vienna. She also appeared in six films from 1928-1931.

In 1932 she was brought to London to appear at His Majesty's Theatre by a wealthy American impresario, Mr Stanley Scott, with whom she was said to be in love. She embodied the character of Jeanne in *The Dubarry*, but however successful, once in England, apart from presenting her with cheques she hardly knew how to cash, Scott largely ignored her. She found herself alone speaking little English and with no friends or relations. Already suffering from tuberculosis, for which the English climate provided no cure, Anny became increasingly reliant on alcohol and sedatives.



*Anny Ahlers, 1920s*  
Gelatin silver print by Dorothy Wilding  
National Portrait Gallery, London



Anny Ahlers often failed to appear for the appointed sittings in de László's studio, which upset him greatly. She continued to suffer from depression and ill health and by the autumn of 1932 she began missing performances at Her Majesty's Theatre. When Anny did appear, she was said to be consuming a small bottle of brandy between each act. Towards the end of November de László wrote to Anny imploring her to return to the studio that he might '... concentrate on your charming face, and when I begin to paint on it again I would like to finish it.'

The portrait remained incomplete, however, Anny managed to appear intermittently in *The Dubarry*, whilst struggling with bouts of laryngitis and depression. She relied heavily on medication to help her sleep and in addition had a supply of various tablets from Germany. At this point she was seeing Sir John Milsom Rees, the eminent Welsh surgeon and larynx specialist, every day. Rees was appointed Laryngologist to Her Majesty's Household in 1910. He had a successful private practice and was also a consultant at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; the singers he attended included Dame Nellie Melba and Kirsten Flagstad, the Norwegian Wagnerian soprano.

Anny's last performance on stage was on 6 March 1933. In the detailed report on the inquest of her death in *The Times*, 18 March 1933, her ladies maid and dresser Mrs Maud Farace, who had been with Miss Ahlers since her arrival in England, declared that on Friday 10 March Rees had performed a little operation at his surgery. Anny then returned to her flat in Duchess Street, off Portland Place. Since October 1932 Anny had also been a patient of a Dr Bonar who had been called in by the theatre to treat her various complaints of stomach pain, trouble with her voice and insomnia.



Scenes from 'The Dubarry' illustrated in the programme, including Anny Ahlers in her opera gown (top left) worn in the de László portrait. The window (top right) used for her escape in the performance

As instructed by Bonar, the sleeping tablets, a form of venoral (the sedative popular in the 1920s and 30s), were to be given to Anny only under his verbal instruction to Mrs Farace who kept them in a drawer in her own room.

As she had not been sleeping well, Mrs Farace gave Anny a tablet on the Saturday night. The porter in the building alerted Mrs Farace at 3am on Sunday morning that Miss Ahlers was on the stairs in her nightdress and no shoes. She managed to return her safely to the flat and when questioned about her behaviour Anny replied 'I always walk in my sleep when the moon is out.' On previous occasions she had been known to wander into her sitting room and play the piano and sing, apparently at times re-acting her part over again, whilst in her sleep. During the day on Sunday 12 March, Anny and Mrs Farace went by car to Hampton Court. The chauffeur dropped them back at the flat at around 4.30pm. At the inquest, as recorded in *The Times*, Mrs Farace recalls that Anny asked the chauffeur to come at 10.30 the following morning in order that she might go shopping before going to see Sir Milsom Rees.

Afterwards Miss Ahlers intended going to Horsham for a week or 10 days for a rest before she went back to the show. Although the specific destination of her intended visit to Horsham is not recorded in the article, as this was where Sir Merrick Burrell lived, it certainly suggests the nature of his relationship with the young actress. Tragically, Anny's envisioned recuperation did not come to pass.

Events unfolded, and although it was only around 5 o'clock in the afternoon, Anny changed into her nightdress and dressing gown, went into the sitting room and requested some champagne. Mrs Farace obliged and she drank one glass, while Anny consumed the remainder – having eaten nothing since breakfast. To her knowledge

Anny had not had any tablets that evening: 'Mrs Farace calculated that there should have been 12 of the drugs left in the phial, which was kept in Mrs Farace's room in a drawer, but when she found it on Monday morning it was empty.' Anny retired to bed and at around 8.15pm Dr Bonar arrived, as he did almost every day. Anny was asleep and Dr Bonar was reluctant to disturb her. However, she had asked to be awakened for his visit. Anny greeted him from her bed: 'Hullo, Dr Bonar' and complained of pain in the right side of her nose and head, which Dr Bonar attributed to a reaction to the cauterisation of her nose carried out by Sir Milsom Rees on Friday.

Anny then requested that he leave the bedroom, presumably in order to make herself presentable for the doctor's visit. When he expressed his concern to Mrs Farace that Anny looked 'a little dazed', she replied that she had had some champagne. Soon afterwards Mrs Farace went to ask Anny if she was ready to see the doctor again. To her horror, the bedroom was empty. Dr Bonar came in and the two discovered that the wind was blowing the curtains on the open window: Mrs Farace declared 'I pulled the curtains quickly and we looked out. She was on the pavement. The window is very narrow and I had to go sideways to look out. I saw her down below.' It was pointed out that there was a scene in *The Dubarry* in which Anny climbed out of a window to escape, suggesting that she had done the same under the influence of champagne and medication. Anny lay alive but unconscious. Her forearm was fractured and Dr Bonar dressed it and her head. She was taken to a nursing home and never regained consciousness, before dying on Tuesday 14 March. The verdict of the jury at the inquest was 'suicide while of unsound mind'.

Burrell, overwrought with grief, blamed Mr Scott, the impresario, writing to de László that Scott was entirely culpable for her death. It was suggested that Scott forced Anny to carry on working whilst she was clearly unwell; others declared that he was withholding her salary. Whatever the truth, for his part, Burrell was utterly enthralled by Anny and lavished her with gifts, including the emerald ring seen in the portrait, despite his descendants believing him to be no more than a platonic admirer, considering the age difference and his social status. Certainly Anny was pleased to have the attentions of an older, wealthy admirer to look after her.

A funeral was arranged at the actors' church, St Paul's, in Covent Garden, and Anny's mother and sister came over from Germany. Anny's body was cremated and her family returned to Germany with half her ashes, where they were buried in the Ohlsdorfer Friedhof cemetery in Hamburg and marked with a gravestone. To help finance the family's trip to England, Burrell bought back the emerald ring he had given Anny, and also an amber necklace.



Some months later the funeral directors contacted the Burrell family; Mr Scott had requested the retention of the rest of the ashes, but had made no further arrangements, practical or financial. Burrell arranged for the ashes to be buried at St Mary's, Shipley, his parish church in West Sussex. His elder sister Sibyl objected to his desire to have Anny's ashes placed in the Burrell family vault; however, they are buried in the churchyard.

Anny Ahler's gravestone,  
Hamburg



St Mary's Church  
Shipley, West Sussex

Burrell had a memorial tablet installed on the wall of north aisle of the church inscribed:

IN GRATEFUL AND LOVING MEMORY OF ANNY AHLERS. SHE WAS BORN ON THE 21<sup>ST</sup> DAY OF DECEMBER MCMVI. SHE DIED ON THE 14<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF MARCH MCMXXXIII. RENOWNED IN HER GENERATION FOR HER GENIUS IN DRAMATIC ART AND BELOVED FOR HER VIRTUES AND HER GRACE OF CHARITY TO ALL AROUND HER.

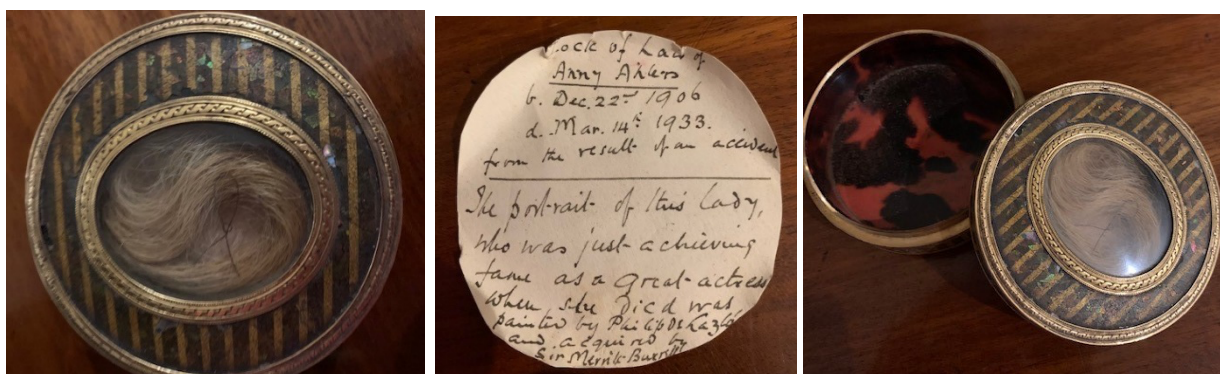


Memorial to Anny Ahlers  
St Mary's Church

Shipley, West Sussex

For the service of committal, such was Anny's popularity that the entire cast and orchestra from *The Dubarry* came down from London. The celebrated lyric tenor Heddle Nash sang in the church and there was a tremendous gathering afterwards at Burrell's home, Floodgates, the dower house, across the lake from the Knepp Castle, the Burrell family seat.

Desperate that de László should complete the portrait, Burrell lent him a lock of Anny's red hair, which he later kept under glass in the lid of an antique French box enclosed with an inscription in her memory. The box remains in the Burrell family to this day. As their looks and colouring were similar, Burrell's daughter Dreda agreed to sit for the completion of the portrait dressed in Anny's stage costume that Burrell had obtained from the theatre. De László described how the portrait of Anny was completed: 'I have the dress, and Dreda sat for me. I was lucky in being able to finish the head, and her beautiful hands. She was a most delightful personality, and a born genius, and the world is the poorer for her death. I am afraid she had been overworked by one man whose name I do not wish to mention, who tried to make as much money out of her as possible.'



*Lock of hair of  
Anny Ahlers  
b. Dec. 22<sup>nd</sup> 1906  
d. Mar. 14<sup>th</sup> 1933.  
from the result of an accident*

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*The portrait of this lady,  
who was just achieving  
fame as a great actress  
when she died was  
painted by Philip de László  
and acquired by  
Sir Merrick Burrell*

The finished portrait was exhibited to great acclaim at the Knoedler gallery that June under the title *The Late Miss Anny Ahlers*, and coloured reproductions of it were sold in aid of the Artists' Benevolent Fund. The *Daily Mail* wrote: 'by the liveliness of Mr de László's rendering [it is] a melancholy reminder of the fragility of life.' The *Star* pointed out that 'ever since the exhibition opened the portrait of poor Anny Ahlers has been the centre of an admiring group, and a bowl of Du Barry roses stands in front of it.'



*Miss Etheldreda (Dreda) Burrell*  
(later *Lady Charles George Tryon of Durnford*), 1933  
Sanguine chalk and pencil, 20 x 14 in.  
© Antonia Reeve  
Private collection

Following Anny Ahlers's tragic death, de László decided to waive his honorarium for painting her portrait, which he gave Burrell as a memento. The artist also made a fine sketch of Dreda in sanguine chalk by way of thanking her for sitting to him so that he could complete the portrait. De László and Burrell remained close friends – always linked by the beautiful and tragic Anny Ahlers. Lucy, the artist's wife, wrote to her husband: 'The Annie A. picture will always be a bond – such a strange adoration and real devotion in Merrik's life, which has no doubt left him a changed man as he says himself.'

Although the portrait was rather too large for his country home, nevertheless, Burrell hung it there and treasured it. He nightly communed with his beloved Anny and the portrait remained the object of his devotion for the rest of his life. On Burrell's death in 1957 the portrait was inherited by Dreda and it remained in the family by descent until it was sold by Christopher Wood to the present owner in 2004.



*Sir Merrik Burrell, 7<sup>th</sup> Bt*, 1923  
Oil on canvas, 35 ½ x 23 ½ in.  
Matthew Hollow ©  
de László Foundation  
Private collection

Lt Col Sir Merrik Burrell, 7<sup>th</sup> Bt (1877-1957) fought in the Boer War between 1899-1901. In 1918 he was High Sheriff of Sussex. He gained the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Dragoons, and was appointed Commander, Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) in 1919. He was chairman of the Board of Governors of the Royal Veterinary College in 1929, and also actively involved with the Royal Agricultural Society of which he was elected president in 1936. He married his first wife Wilhelmina Louisa Winans in 1902; they had three children and were divorced in 1907. His second wife was Coralie Adelaide Mervyn Porter, whom he married in 1908. Their only child, Etheldreda (Dreda) was born the

following year. Sir Merrik and Coralie were divorced in 1927. He died, aged 80, in 1957, and was buried in the family vault in St Mary's church, Shipley.

Theatrical portraiture in the Grand Manner style was a particularly English development of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by artists such as George Romney and Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose full-length portrait of *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* is the most famous example. A version from Reynolds's studio was part of the collection of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, near London. This is the same gallery where de László found inspiration for his portrait of the Prince of Piedmont based on Van Dyck's portrait of his ancestor, the Duke of Savoy. In a sense theatrical portraiture in England in the Georgian era supplanted the tradition of religious and mythological subjects. It continued to be a particular genre following through in the Edwardian era with the 'swagger portrait', of which de László was the most prominent exponent.



*Self-portrait*, 1911  
Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 in. Hungarian  
National Gallery, Budapest

Born in Budapest in 1869, the son of a tailor, Philip de László became a leading figure in the history of Hungarian art, and among the world's foremost artists of his age. He received commissions from Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, and virtually all the royal families of Europe. Ministers, dukes, counts and prelates, two popes and four American presidents, artists and scientists from every corner of the world were counted among his more than 2,000 patrons.

At the age of thirty, de László was already one of the wealthiest Hungarian painters and lived in a lavish studio villa that he built in the vicinity of Budapest's Városliget Park. Following significant commissions in Austria and Germany, he moved to Vienna in 1903 with his wife, Lucy Guinness. He lived there with his growing family until 1907, when they finally settled in London, by which time he had numerous patrons in France as well as England. In 1907 John Singer Sargent decided to give up portrait painting to concentrate on mural projects, thus de László's arrival in London was well timed. Over the next thirty years he became England's leading portrait painter. Indeed, well-known as one of

the greatest portraitists of his age with more than 4,000 pictures to his name, he rightly called himself 'an artist of the world', declaring that '[I] paint history, not only individuals'.

Philip de László was the last painter of the Grand Manner who indeed recorded an entire era of European history through his portraits of the great and the good. His oeuvre constitutes the last great chapter of classical portraiture rooted in the late Renaissance, and the Stuart period in England. With the decline of the traditional role of aristocracy after World War II, this kind of representational, iconic portraiture lost its significance. The established custom of patronage and commissioning portraits, painted from life, rather than from photographs almost ceased to exist.

De László became a British subject in August 1914, shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. Nonetheless, he was interned for over twelve months in 1917 for sending money via friends in neutral countries to help support his family in Hungary. He suffered a mental breakdown and was detained under house arrest until his eventual release on grounds of ill health; no evidence of disloyalty was found.

During the 1920s and 1930s de László continued to work relentlessly. He was elected president of the Royal Society of British Artists in 1930 and vice-president of the Royal Society of Arts in 1937. In October 1937 he had a heart attack and died a month later, on 22 November, aged 68, at his home Hyme House, in Hampstead.

The period of 1932-1933 continued to be productive years for de László, producing some of his finest work. Among his particularly noteworthy sitters during these years were Cosmo Gordon Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury. Dr Lang gave the blessing at de László's memorial service at St Margaret's, Westminster. In 1933 he painted the young H.R.H. Princess Elizabeth of York. The seven year old Princess Elizabeth came to the artist's studio in Hampstead for sittings and the landscape background was completed at Windsor Castle. He also painted an imposing portrait of Mabell Ogilvy, Countess of Airlie, looking marvellously aristocratic yet sympathetic, and the beautiful and talented young violinist, Lisa Minghetti.

For de László the frame was an integral part of the portrait. He completed most of his portraits with the canvas in the frame at the outset, placed on an easel. As evidence from the photograph of de László painting Anny Ahlers, the frame is the original. He applied the paint rapidly, with spontaneity and freshness of touch. In 1934 he published *How to Paint a Portrait*, explaining his methods. Working on a new canvas, already in its frame, he worked swiftly on the head and face, often deliberately leaving the background blank.

This portrait of *Anny Ahlers as Madame Dubarry* has always retained its captivating appeal. It was selected for inclusion in the 2004 exhibition 'A Brush with Grandeur' at Christie's, in collaboration with the Hungarian Cultural Centre, and supported by the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage to mark Hungary's entry to the European Union. This was the first retrospective to be staged since the artist's death in 1937. More recently the portrait was one of only 16 portraits from the artist's mature period chosen for the exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, in collaboration with The de László Archive Trust, *Philip de László (1869-1937): 'I am an Artist of the World...'*, (27 September 2019 – 5 January 2020, no.16), to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the artist's birth.

*We are grateful to Katherine Field for her assistance with this catalogue entry, which will be included in the Philip de László catalogue raisonné, currently presented in progress online: [www.delaszlocatalogueraisonne.com](http://www.delaszlocatalogueraisonne.com)*

*Katherine Field works as a freelance curator for the The British Sporting Art Trust and leads The De László Archive Trust's project to present a De László catalogue raisonné online. She has worked at Tate Britain, the Foundling Museum, The British Art Journal, The National Horse Racing Museum and the V&A Museum of Childhood and has been involved in the commercial art world assisting two well-respected London dealers in Old Master and British Pictures.*

#### **Correspondence in the De László Archive (DLA)**

- DLA052-0035, letter from Merrik Burrell to de László, 1 November 1932.
- DLA052-0031, letter from Merrik Burrell to de László, 9 November 1932.
- DLA052-0045, letter from Merrik Burrell to de László, 23 November 1932.
- DLA052-0044, letter from Merrik Burrell to de László, 27 November 1932.
- DLA052-0043, letter from Merrik Burrell to de László, 28 November 1932.
- DLA052-0042, letter from de László to Anny Ahlers, 30 November 1932.
- DLA020-0117, letter from Merrik Burrell to de László, 21 March 1933.
- DLA020-0225, letter from de László to Mrs. Richard Hermon (Dreda Burrell's mother), 22 May 1933.
- DLA027-0033, letter from Lucy de László to de László, 26 November 1933.
- DLA022-0035, letter from Merrik Burrell to de László, 28 November 1935.