

# Cyrus' Ransome

David Bennett

Last month you may recall the saleroom pages at the back of the Journal featured a portrait by Cyrus Cuneo. The catalogue, from Rosebery's Auctions in London said it was 'a self-picture of the artist'.

However this was clearly not the case. Images show that Cyrus looked very different from the balding, moustachioed subject of the painting. The subject is an artist shown painting at a desk in front of book cases. I did email Rosebery's to suggest it had been misdescribed as a self-portrait and had a response which acknowledged it was not of the artist. Their email says, '*this is not a self-portrait of the artist and is just a portrait of an artist at the Langham.*'. But the catalogue and online descriptions were not updated.

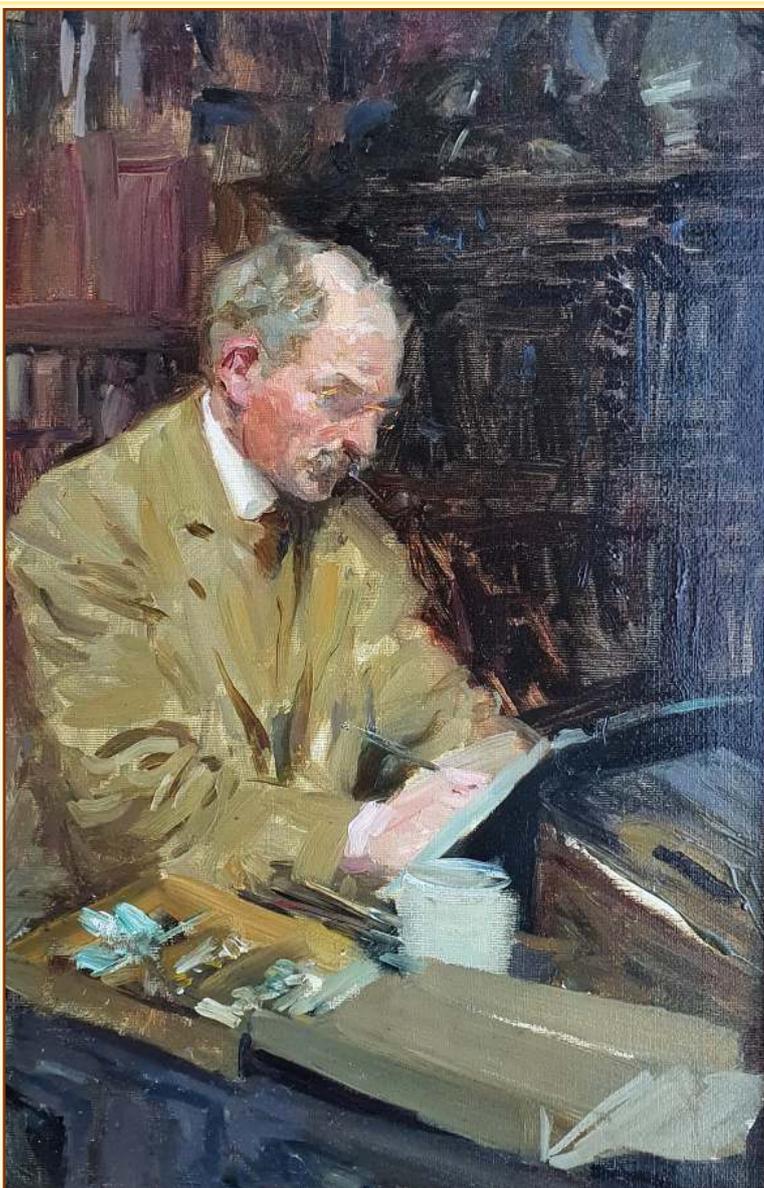
So the hunt began...with time to spare the weekend before the auction (and rain outside) I delved into Cyrus' life story. The only hint was a label on the picture saying it was painted at the Langham. Today it is a modern hotel – as it was actually in the 1900s (in between it became overspill offices for the BBC nearby). But there was no link to the hotel.

Instead, I came up with the Langham Sketch Club. This was a club for artists which met for two hours every Friday evening in the winter to sketch and chat. In fact dinner was served and in 1898 this had caused a schism – some members wanting a cold supper, others preferring hot. And so a splinter group split off to form the London Sketch Club (hot dinners) which exists to this day, and by some irony, is where the Langham Sketch Club, also still in existence, now meets. *The Society has visited previously. (Journal Vol 4, N° 2, Page 18)*

Cyrus joined the club in around 1903, and in 1908 became its Chair. His biography, principally written by Nell Cuneo, his wife and later widow, described 'some gay, mad times at the Langham Club' where fellow members and friends included Alfred Munnings, and Arthur Ransome. The latter was specifically mentioned with reference to early 1914.

*'About this time Cyrus gave up doing the two hour subject sketches at the Langham Sketch Club, and started doing portraits of the members at work. Afterwards some of these were sold to sitters, who included Arthur Ransome.'*

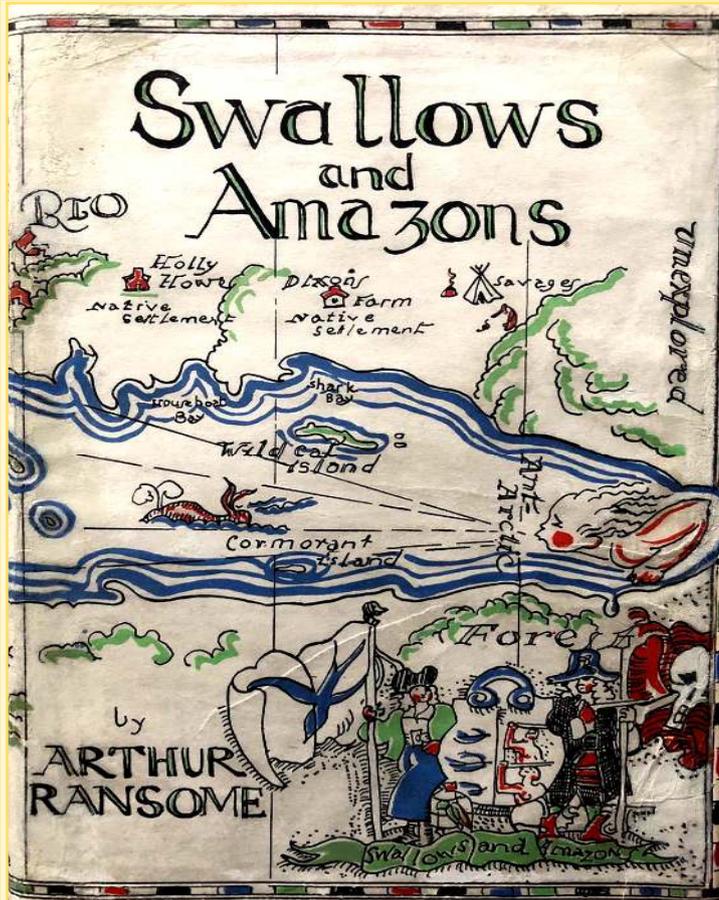
My research had produced a result, and more in hope than anything else I went after the aforementioned Arthur Ransome as a first target for the artist in the picture. And came up trumps through Google.



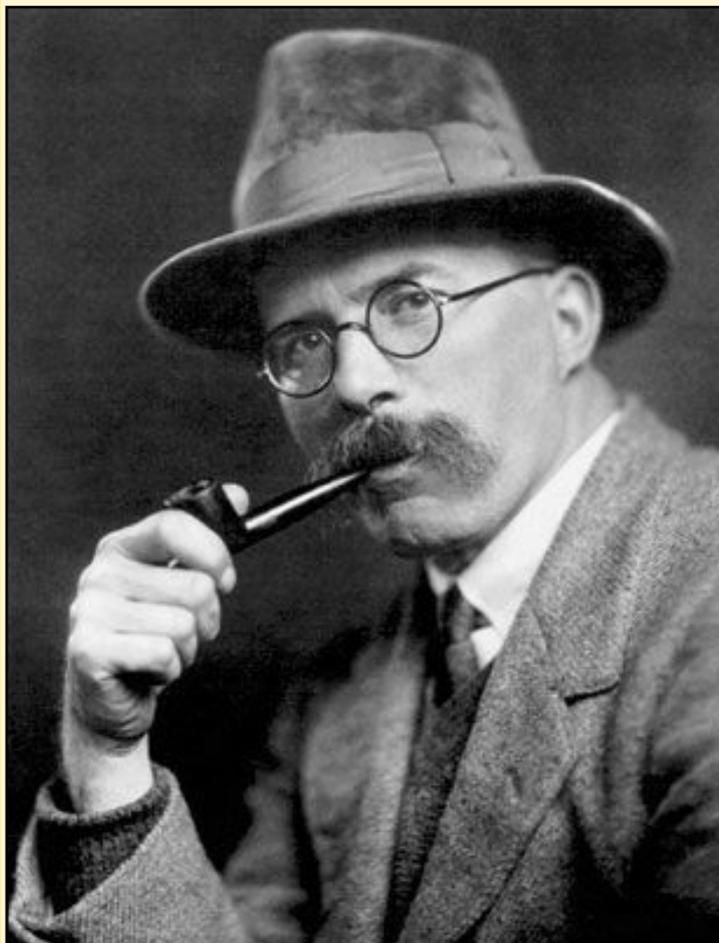
Arthur Ransome by Cyrus Cuneo



Cyrus Cuneo at work



Arthur Ransome's most famous work



Arthur Ransome 1884-1967

Keswick Museum has an oil painting of Arthur Ransome by Dora Altounyan, from 1930. (Available online - the Journal was reluctant to pay their requested £70 fee for reproduction). All the familiar features are here. Balding, ginger hair, round glasses, moustache, same colour jacket as he later wore. I had (at that stage) convinced myself, and so the following week I bid and won the picture for £480.00.

There is considerable interest in Terence Cuneo, and his mother and father, Cyrus and Nell, as well as the more extended artistic family.

But this is nothing compared to the interest in Arthur Ransome, with clubs both in the UK and USA. He was an artist, and of course an author ('Swallows and Amazons' being the most well-known work). But he was also alleged to have been a spy and certainly met Lenin and Trotsky in Russia. Post WW1 he became for a time the Daily Telegraph's Moscow correspondent. This painting, tied pretty well to the start of 1914, is just before all that excitement began.

The next call was to Cuneo Society President, Carole Cuneo, who recognised the picture.

'Yes, definitely by Cyrus, (it has no signature) from the Langham Sketch Club, and definitely Arthur Ransome,' said Carole.

How did she know? Because this painting hung on the wall of her father's studio until after his death. Carole knew it first in the 1950s, and Terence had told her of the work's provenance.

Carole became its owner before selling it to Sim Fine Art, with other works by Cyrus, some ten years ago. It was sold again, before turning up at Rosebery's auction, identified as a Cyrus' self-portrait. I asked Carole for a written statement and paid her for such (if you need the same advice the details are at the back of the Journal). This records the picture's provenance for the future.

This portrait has artistic merit and interest to me. Also, like others, I collect in part as an investment. I hope I never have to sell, and my only reason would be falling out of love with a picture. But if hard times do lie ahead then so be it – and having established this is a very rare picture of Arthur Ransome, just at the start of his wartime exploits, I hope I've added value through a bit of diligent research. I wish all readers such luck!

*'Another famous artists' club is the Langham Sketch Club, whose rooms are close behind the Queen's Hall. Artists meet there regularly, and draw and make pictures all in a room together, with a time limit set for the performance. At intervals they exhibit the harvest of their evenings on the walls. They have also merry parties, for men only, when the doors are opened by fantastical figures, and scratch entertainments go on all the time, and there are songs and jovial recitations. Nights there are as merry as any, and the rooms are full of celebrated men, and men about to be celebrated; for the club does not tolerate bunglers.'*

**Arthur Ransome – Bohemia in London. 1907.**