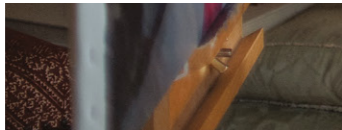


FAMILY FRESCO: PHOEBE DICKINSON AND THE ART OF PORTRAITURE

Text — CHARLOTTE URBAIN
Photos — OLIVIER CAPP
& HARRY CORY WRIGHT

A family-owned company for four generations, Fragonard preserves a distinguished collection of painted portraits of figures who have shaped the House's history. These moving testimonies depict successive leaders at different stages of their lives, images that invite visitors to quiet contemplation. From this tradition arose the idea of commissioning portraits of the three sisters, Anne, Agnès, and Françoise Costa, from the English portraitist Phoebe Dickinson, an artist of considerable talent.



Born in London, Phoebe Dickinson was introduced to art at a very early age by her father, Simon, a renowned art dealer. The works exhibited in his gallery spanned periods ranging from the Renaissance to modern British art. Trained at the London Fine Art Studios and the Royal Drawing School, she also spent three years in Florence, Italy, studying in the studio of Charles H. Cecil. His traditional instruction from the live model instilled technical rigor and precision, enabling her to progress seamlessly from drawing to oil painting. She retains vivid memories of Florence: its architecture, cuisine, and culture. Upon returning from Italy in her early twenties, she painted her first portraits, which quickly met with success. As an artist of her time, she understands the central role Instagram plays in shaping visibility and enabling connections with clients around the world. It was through this medium that Agnès Costa, highly skilled in navigating algorithms to uncover rare discoveries, first contacted her.

In a serendipitous digital coincidence, Phoebe discovered Agnès's message just after listening to a podcast devoted to the Musée du Parfum Fragonard.

The English artist draws inspiration from the great painters of the nineteenth century, her period of predilection. Light, a softness of touch, naturalness, and spontaneity define her style. Among her favored painters are the American John Singer Sargent 1856-1925 and the Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla 1863-1923. When creating a portrait, she seeks to capture not only the sitter but also the environment that lends the subject presence and depth. Entering her clients' homes and, together, selecting a room, a detail of interior decoration, or an article of clothing allows her to establish a connection, one she then strives to translate through her brushwork. In her practice, she confides that she particularly cherishes this intimate journey into the private worlds of her sitters. Bonds are formed that often evolve into friendships. A portraitist in high demand, her painting of the Cholmondeley



children at Houghton Hall was selected for the 2018 BP Portrait Award exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Beyond portraiture, Phoebe Dickinson also devotes herself to landscape painting, a genre she explored during her six-month Grand Tour, traveling across Europe as well as the United States and Iceland with her husband, Luke Rodgers. Her most recent solo exhibition, *Great Houses and Gardens of England*, documented some of Britain's most emblematic estates, their inhabitants, and the methods by which they are restored and stewarded to ensure their continuity. Her works now belong to the collections of Houghton Hall, Daylesford House, Belvoir Castle, and Blenheim Palace.

For the creation of the Costa sisters' portraits, Phoebe Dickinson traveled to Grasse, where she spent several days in each of their respective homes. She was particularly drawn to the abundance of colorful patterns, unmistakably Fragonard in spirit, found in the garments the sisters proposed, which harmonized effortlessly with their interiors. Elegantly decorated and rich in works of art, the houses provided an ideal setting for painting. Only Agnès was not portrayed in her own home. Captivated by the trompe l'œil *grisaille* in the studio of banker and photographer Jean Luce, Phoebe chose, in agreement with Agnès, to paint her in this remarkable space located within the gardens of the Musée Jean-Honoré Fragonard.



Never without her Pépito, Agnès poses alongside her faithful companion. In her home in Grasse, Anne is seated in an eighteenth-century armchair before her collection of blue porcelain from diverse periods and origins, the oldest pieces originating in China, whose hues are echoed beautifully in her coordinated attire. Françoise, in turn, chose to pose before her eighteenth-century painted Marseille canvas wall hangings in the dining room, with a bouquet of wildflowers resting on the table in a head-shaped vase created by the Spanish artists The Exvotos, a gift from her sister Agnès.

