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**'...very possibly the finest woman sculptor in the world': Dora Gordine's
Commissioned Work: 1930-1939.**

Career Overview, 1930-1939.

In January 1930 Dora Gordine (1895-1991) moved from France to Singapore. Within a couple of months she had set up in the southern Malayan state of Johor and had established a studio on the outskirts of the state capital, Johor Bahru. Where she lived was also convenient for frequent visits to the major cosmopolitan urban centre of Singapore, just across the Johor causeway. In September 1930 she gained a definite entrée into the upper echelons of the governing British colonial elite by marriage to a high ranking member of the Malay Medical Service, the Deputy then Chief Medical Officer for the State of Johor – Dr. George Herbert Garlick (1886-1958). The sister and second son of the Sultan of Johor attended her wedding as did the British General Advisor to the Sultan.¹ She soon befriended the Advisor's successor, Richard (later Sir Richard) Winstedt (1878-1966) and his friend C. Boden Kloss, Director of the Raffles Museum and Library, Singapore (1923-1931) and Director of Museums for the Straits Settlements (1927-1931) She also made a portrait head of the daughter of R.J. Farrer, the then President of Singapore's Municipal Commissioners (from 1921-1931). This body had paid for the island's new Municipal Buildings, which opened towards the end of 1929, at unprecedented expense.

After the success of her solo show at the Leicester Galleries in July 1933, Gordine decided she wanted to move to London. Her marriage to Garlick was in trouble and she may already have been thinking of divorcing him to marry the independently wealthy Hon. Richard Hare (1907-1966) whom she had known since about 1926. During two exhibitions in London, in October 1928 and in 1933, both at the Leicester Galleries she had assiduously cultivated a number of useful influential contacts in the capital ranging from collectors/connoisseurs such as George Eumorfopoulos, Sir Ernest Debenham, Sir Michael Sadler, Sir Samuel Courtauld, Oscar Raphael and Ernest Franklin to art critics such as Gerald Reitlinger, R.H. Willenksi, Arthur Symons and Robert Tatlock to museum curators such as J.B. Manson and H.S. Ede. In July 1935 she arrived in London from Singapore via Paris. A couple of months later work began on her studio home, Dorich House which would also serve as a marketing tool to attract potential buyers to see her work in a highly civilised setting. The house was finished just before she and Richard were married in November 1936.

Gordine's November 1938 solo exhibition at the Leicester Galleries proved to be both a critical and a commercial success. The portrait sculpture on display was particularly well received to the extent that Jan Gordon, critic of *The Observer*, wrote she was well on her way to becoming: ' ... very possibly ... the finest woman sculptor in the world.'² To a great extent she capitalised on the favourable publicity generated by the exhibition and by public commissions such as *Seated Baby* for the

¹ Gordine c.1932-33 produced a portrait head of Sultan Ibrahim's sister, known as the Tungku Ampuan, and exhibited it as *Malay Sultana* at the Leicester Galleries in July 1933. She also appears to have drawn a portrait of Sultan Sir Ibrahim ibn Abu Bakar wearing the uniform and rank badges of a Major-General in the British Army. The drawing is now in the collection of Dorich House.

² *The Observer*, 6 November 1938, p.14.

Westminster Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic and the *Head of H.S.E. Vanderpant* for the Royal Institute of British Architects to meet famous and influential people and invite them to Dorich House. Thus, between December 1938 and September 1939, one discovers a procession of the well-connected and the celebrated crossing the threshold of the House including travel writers Freya Stark and Robert Byron³; actors Edith Evans⁴, Alec Guinness and Michael Redgrave; collector and society hostess Lady Leconfield⁵; C.H. St., John Hornby⁶, collector and owner of W.H. Smiths; cartoonist and writer on architecture, Osbert Lancaster, publisher Jock Murray and Sir Sydney Cockerell, critic, art historian, connoisseur who seems to have known 'everyone who was anyone' in the British art world.⁷

Shortly after Gordine's exhibition at the Leicester Galleries had closed, towards the end of November 1938, Oliver Brown - a Director of the Leicester Galleries - wrote to the Vice Chancellor of London University that 'a body of subscribers' wanted to present the University 'with a bronze statue' by Gordine 'which they believe to be very suitable to adorn the new University buildings' [i.e. the recently completed Senate House and Library complex on Malet Street, Bloomsbury.] Brown offered the Vice-Chancellor, Lord Macmillan, a choice between *Walking Male Torso* and *Dyak*.⁸ During the following month the possible donation was discussed by the University Court with the proposal receiving warm support from, among others, Charles Holden (architect of the Senate House complex); Sir Eric Maclagan (Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum); Sir William Reid Dick (who had recently stepped down as President of the Royal British Society of Sculptors to become Sculptor to King George VI) and H.S. Goodhart Rendel - who, of course, was already a confirmed Gordine partisan.⁹ Indeed, in December 1938, Goodhart Rendel wrote to Charles Holden: '... I am so delighted to hear that there is a chance of Dora Gordine's wonderful *Torso* finding a home in your great University building that I must write to tell you so. I have, as you know, an enthusiastic admiration for her work and am longing for the moment when I can do myself the honour of getting her to do the sculpture on some appropriate new building of my own. But the *Torso*, really one of the very best things she has done, deserves a noble setting of the kind the University will provide, and if it does find a place there, I really shan't know which

³ Gordine drew Stark's portrait in charcoal while Byron (1905-1941), author of travel classic *The Road to Oxiana* (1937) sat to Gordine for a bronze portrait head - a cast of which was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in October 1945.

⁴ The November 1938 Leicester Galleries exhibition included a portrait head of Evans (1888-1976) and a nude standing figure of her which caused much discussion in the press of the day.

⁵ In October 1945 Gordine exhibited a gilded bronze cast of the *Hand of Lady Leconfield* at the Leicester Galleries in London. Violet Rawson (1892-1956) married Charles Wyndham, 3rd Baron Leconfield, in 1911

⁶ St. John Hornby (1867-1946) was introduced to Gordine by Sir Sydney Cockerell late in 1938. By the autumn of 1939 she had produced a bronze portrait head of Hornby - one of the last heads she was to have cast by Valsuani of Paris.

⁷ Cockerell (1867-1962), formerly Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (1908-1937), first encountered Gordine during a country house party in December 1938 held at Petworth House - the home of Violet Lady Leconfield. Cockerell Diaries, entries for 3-4 December 1938, British Library, London.

⁸ Oliver Brown to Lord Macmillan, 28 November 1938, London University Archives, Special Collections, Senate House Library, London.

⁹ During the first half of 1938 Goodhart Rendel sat to Gordine for a portrait head which he had commissioned from her. The head was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in November 1938 where its distinctive and subtle silvery patination was much remarked upon. The sitter was evidently delighted with the head as he donated a cast of it to the RIBA later that same month.

to congratulate most – you or Gordine. I believe that D.S. MacColl was particularly impressed by it ...¹⁰

Early in January 1939 the Court of London University formally voted to accept *Walking Male Torso*; it would seem this figure was preferred to *Dyak* because its genitals were less defined and therefore less ‘visible’ than of the strapping Borneo headhunter.¹¹ Shortly thereafter, Charles Holden had the figure installed in the main Lift Hall of Senate House. However, late in August 1939, as war threatened and as Senate House was requisitioned by the state to become the headquarters of a new Ministry of Information, the *Torso* was moved into storage in Oxfordshire for safekeeping. It did not return to Senate House until early in 1947 when it was installed in a boardroom rather than the Lift Hall where it was felt to be too vulnerable to the attentions of ‘boisterous’ undergraduates – especially those recently demobilised from the services.¹²

With the outbreak of the Second World War Gordine’s career – as with so many other artists – was essentially placed on hold. She found more and more of her time was absorbed with the running of Dorich House and with growing food in its grounds – early in 1940 householders were commanded to ‘dig for victory’ – as she let her gardener and housemaid go to join the services while Richard Hare re-joined the Foreign Office (which he had left in 1932) to work long hours as Personal Private Secretary to Lord Perth, Minister of Information.¹³ The war meant it was increasingly difficult for her to bring work to her favourite foundry, Valsuani’s, in Paris while it became virtually impossible to have work cast in Britain as bronze became a vital metal for war use only and all foundries were understandably directed to undertake orders solely for the war effort.

Commissioned Work c.1930-1939 – by both Organisations and Individuals - Created for Public and Semi-Public Spaces.

Municipal Buildings, Singapore (Now the City Hall, Singapore), 1930-34.

Four pieces of sculpture were commissioned from Gordine with funds left to the Municipality of Singapore in August 1930 by a wealthy Dutch planter: *Javanese Head*, c.1930-31, bronze, 48.1 x 20.1 x 26.6 cm; *Malay Head*, c.1930, bronze, 42.6 x 19.2 x 29.4 cm; *Chinese Head/Kwa Nin (Chinese Lady of Peace)*, c.1930, bronze, greenish-black patina, 38.3 x 18.7 x 25.2 cm and *Hindu Head*, 1930, bronze, 43.4 x 33 x 25 cm.¹⁴

The Municipality also purchased casts of *Male Torso* (1927) and *Mongolian Head* (1926-1928) for display within the new Municipal Buildings. She was given a

¹⁰ H.S. Goodhart Rendel to Charles Holden, 13 December 1938, London University Archives, Special Collections, Senate House, Library, London. The critic and art historian D.S. MacColl had previously sat to Gordine for a portrait head from c. November 1937 to March 1938. The head was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in November 1938 and at the Royal Academy in May 1939. On both occasions it was praised for being a particularly good likeness. It is possible that both Goodhart Rendel and MacColl were members of the shadowy ‘body of subscribers’, perhaps also with Richard Hare, to whom Oliver Brown initially referred.

¹¹ Clerk of the Court of London University to Oliver Brown, 11 January 1939, London University Archives, Special Collections, Senate House Library, London.

¹² Holden Papers, London University Archives, Special Collections, Senate House Library, London.

¹³ Ironically, Richard’s office was inside Senate House – where his wife’s figure of the *Torso* had so recently been on public view.

¹⁴ *The Straits Times of Singapore*, 31 December 1930, p.10. The ‘late K.W.B. van Kleef ... a former commission agent and broker left the Municipality £100,000 ... for the embellishment of the city.’

loose brief to produce heads of the different races that composed the population living in Malaya, on the understanding that the Singapore Municipality would buy at least four of them – having decided to use the same source of funds to buy the two pieces already cast in bronze – which Gordine had brought with her from Paris. In August 1930 the *Straits Times* ran the following article: 'More Sermons in Stone ... One of the committees of the Singapore Municipal Commissioners has suggested that Miss Dora Gordine, sculptress, should be invited "to submit specimens of her work for the Commissioners inspection with a view to a possible purchase of about six specimens for the hall landings in the Municipal Buildings." This encouragement to the arts, on the part of the City Fathers, is most praiseworthy ... Singapore has little to offer in the way of statuary. Apart from the statue of Raffles and the model of the famous Siamese elephant, the streets are unadorned for which we cannot be but grateful when we recall certain cities in Europe that are strewn with statues of forgotten worthies. But in the hall landings of the Municipal Buildings there is ample room for decorative work.'¹⁵

By the end of January 1931, the Municipal Commissioners had made their selection of Gordine's latest portrait heads for the interior of the new Municipal Offices. The *Straits Times* reported: ' ... Two heads of racial types will be in the hall at the top of the great exterior steps and two more on the floor above which is next to the Council Chamber. An over-life size torso will stand in the middle of the space there which overlooks the sea. The torso, which was taken from a Caucasian model, shows the ideal male form with broad shoulders and small hips ... A Malayan race head [*Malay Head*] which like the Mongolian Head is heroic in size has been chosen to pair with it. A Chinese female head of remarkable beauty [*Kwa Nin /Chinese Lady of Peace*] – a thoughtful Madonna – and an Indian Head [*Hindu Head*] which shows the probable origin of the Western classic type will complete the scheme. For the Council Chamber a fifth head is contemplated but not yet decided upon [a cast of *Javanese Head* was purchased from Gordine in 1933]. It is probable that the Chinese Head will be placed in the Council Chamber ... The final casting of all these heads will take place in Paris whither Dora Gordine goes shortly. The *cire perdu* process, which is necessary for them, cannot be done locally at present – although in the near future it is probable that the Municipal Workshops will be able to accomplish it as a result of Mr. C.P. Lee.'¹⁶

In August 1932, as Gordine and her first husband were about to embark on a ship to France with carefully packed plaster casts of works modelled in Malaya, Richard Winstedt - the newly appointed General Advisor to Sultan Ibrahim of Johor - praised the choice made by the Municipal Commissioners: ' ... By their purchase of six pieces of Dora Gordine's work they have made Singapore one of the art centres of Asia; so far as I know, the only Asiatic Centre for so much perfect European work. Their purchase will do far more than most propaganda to advertise this beautiful city to the outside world.'¹⁷

Seated Baby for the Maternity and Child Welfare Centre, Pimlico, London, 1937-38.

¹⁵ *The Straits Times*, 26 August 1930, p.12.

¹⁶ *The Straits Times*, 30 January 1931, p.11.

¹⁷ *The Straits Times*, 9 August 1932, p.14. Winstedt was Johor's General Advisor from 1931 to 1935. After retiring from the Malay Civil Service in 1935 he became a Lecturer in Malay at London University's School of Oriental Studies and, in 1940 was elected Director of the Royal Asiatic Society, London. He invited Gordine to give a talk to the Society and in December 1940 she lectured on 'The Beauty of Asiatic Sculpture.' Gordine later exhibited a portrait head of Winstedt at the Royal Academy in May 1944.

By the time Gordine returned to Singapore late in 1933, British Malaya was in the grip of an extremely severe trade depression caused by the Wall Street Stock Market Crash of October 1929. Singapore's Municipal Commissioners presumably felt they could not justify the purchase of further art works from Gordine. She probably concluded she would have to re-locate to London, where the economic situation was improving from 1935 onwards, to attract patronage and greatly improve her chances of being awarded public commissions. As it transpired she was proved correct. By late 1937 she was working on an over-life size bronze figure of a *Seated Baby* commissioned by Councillor Harry Sheil Elster Vanderpant (1866-1955), Mayor of Westminster. In May 1938 the statue was unveiled inside Westminster City Council's new Maternity and Child Welfare Centre, Bessborough Street, Pimlico (then a decidedly deprived part of the capital) which had been opened by Queen Elizabeth in November 1937. Vanderpant was a Governor of the Welfare Centre and had played a leading role in raising funds for its construction. *Seated Baby* was presented to the Welfare Centre by Vanderpant as his personal gift.¹⁸ A month before the statue was unveiled Gordine's career as a sculptor in the UK was given a definite boost when it was announced she had been elected an Associate member of the Royal Society of British Sculptors along with considerably better known figures such as: Frank Dobson; Eric Gill, Thomas Huxley-Jones and Maurice Lambert.¹⁹

The model for the plump child was one Verena Dawney. She had been a child bridesmaid at the wedding in November 1936 of Gordine's sister-in-law, Lady Patricia Hare, to Charles Milnes Gaskell.²⁰ Gordine certainly did not attempt to make the child appear conventionally pretty. Indeed, she is so chubby as to verge on the repellent. At the same time photographs of Verena indicate the figure was faithful to her actual appearance. It is intriguing that Gordine had no children from her first marriage nor would she ever have any with her second husband – the Honourable Richard Hare. She later said that her sculptures were her 'children.' Mayor Vanderpant was childless and never married though he took a close interest during his time in office in women's health issues.²¹

Portrait Head of Councillor Sir H. S. E. Vanderpant, 1937-38.

It is possible that Vanderpant was introduced to Gordine by H.S. Goodhart-Rendel, recently elected President of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1937. In August of that year Goodhart Rendel visited Dorich House and was greatly impressed with the building Gordine had designed and with the examples of her sculpture on display. He would be responsible for steering her second public commission her way – a portrait head of Vanderpant for the interior of RIBA's headquarters on Portland Place. In October 1937 Goodhart-Rendel wrote to Gordine asking her whether she could recommend a sculptor to execute 'a portrait bust of a benefactor to the RIBA.' £100 had been made available to fund the commission. By the end of October 1937 Gordine had offered to undertake the commission herself.²² The bronze head of *Councillor H.S.E. Vanderpant*, 42 x 18.5 x 24 cm, was unveiled

¹⁸ *The Times*, 21 May 1938, p.11.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 12 April 1938, p.12.

²⁰ *The Times*, 13 November 1936, p.19.

²¹ One of Gordine's sitters earlier in 1938, Lady Ina Cholmondeley, had founded, in 1928, the National Birthday Trust Fund for the Extension of Maternity Services in an effort to reduce the high level of infant mortality. She was also a leading member, during the 1930's and '40's, of the Managing Committee of the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies, Woolwich. Lady Ina's bronze portrait head was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in November 1938.

²² H.S. Goodhart Rendel to Dora Gordine, 23 October and 7 November 1937, G-REH/8/1, Goodhart Rendel Papers, RIBA Library.

on 7 November 1938 at the entrance to the Henry Florence Hall - which had been largely paid for with a donation of £10,000 Vanderpant had made in 1931.

At the unveiling ceremony Goodhart Rendel commented ' ... When in an hour or so we shall go home, we may by mischance leave behind us a few umbrellas or bags which will probably be restored to us later. Some of Mr. Vanderpant will go home but the rest of him will stay behind in bronze for as long as these walls stand to shelter him. Many men yet unborn will see his bust constantly in their daily lives and will, we may be sure, honour the memory of one whom we now have the privilege of honouring in person. They will also honour the work of a very distinguished sculptor, Miss Dora Gordine, whose reputation is known to you all and whose exhibition, now open at the Leicester Galleries, cannot but confirm and strengthen the admiration already evoked by her works in the Tate Gallery. Apart from the great sculptural merit of this bust, there is in it the very remarkable likeness to life that you shortly will all have the opportunity of judging for yourselves. To know Mr. Vanderpant is to feel oneself his friend and the bust, with its charming suggestion of modesty and kindness, is just what his friends would wish to be.'²³

After Goodhart-Rendel had spoken a bashful Vanderpant said that he had been told by many friends that: ' ... it is a speaking likeness ... ' The artist completed the trio of speakers: 'I know that you will not expect me to be an orator; my mediums of expression I hope are bronze and stone; but I do want to say how greatly I have enjoyed being here tonight and how grateful I am for all the kind things that have been said about my work. I feel very proud that I was selected as the artist to give you the permanent memorial of your friend and benefactor and I am glad to think that the head will stand in this wonderful Henry Florence Hall which is associated with the name of Mr. Vanderpant. I am happy that this commission gave me the chance of making a real friend, because it was wonderful to work with him and it was wonderful to think that he will always be appreciated by everyone. Thank you very much.'²⁴

Years later, in his will, Vanderpant left a cast of his head by Gordine, along with one of her earlier works – *Head of a Young Girl with Pigtails* (c.1926-1928) – to Christ's Girls School, Hertford (now Christ's Hospital School, Horsham).²⁵ For many years he had sat on the school's board of Governors and been a generous and regular benefactor.

²³ 'A Tribute to Mr Vanderpant', 7 November 1938, G-REH/39/2/1, Goodhart Rendel Papers, RIBA Library.

²⁴ *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 21 November 1938, p.67.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that in the 1950's Christ's Girls School was rebuilt by the architect Oswald Partridge Milne (1881-1968) who had sat to Gordine for a bronze head in the late 1930's. When the school reopened in January 1957, Gordine's head of Vanderpant was installed in a prominent position by the stairway leading to the main dining hall. *Architect and Building News*, 24 January 1957, p.121.