QUEEN VICTORIA AND MR. SULLY

By ALBERT TEN EYCK GARDNER, Research Fellow

As far as we are able to determine, Miss Blanche Sully, a demure young woman of Philadelphia, remains the only American ever to wear the British crown. On Tuesday morning, May 15, 1838, Blanche and her famous father, the portrait painter Thomas Sully, rode out to Buckingham Palace, where Sully was then engaged upon the important commission of taking a portrait of the new Queen, Victoria. And that day Blanche assumed the royal crown, robes, and jeweled regalia and posed in place of the young Queen, whose time was severely limited by a dismaying number of state duties and a giddy round of social pleasures.

Blanche received her glittering diadem from the hands of that behind-the-scenes power, the Baroness Lehzen, the Queen’s governess-companion and private secretary. Mr. Sully, on discovering that the regalia weighed between thirty and forty pounds—the intangible weight of such symbols is of course not to be estimated—did what he could to relieve the Queen’s burden and asked her if there would be any impropriety in having his daughter wear the royal robes and jewels. The Queen replied, “Oh, no, no impropriety ... but don’t spare me, if I can be of service, I will sit.” However, in spite of the Queen’s generous willingness to endure the tedium of posing, for one bright May morning at least, Blanche Sully, crowned, took her place upon the dais.

Victoria, since her accession to the throne in June, 1837, had been as a magnet for all the prominent portrait painters of the realm, and with the rising excitement and activities preparatory to her coronation, on June 28, the royal physicians had decided that a limit must be placed on the time and energy the Queen could devote to posing. With each new monarch, of course, there were the usual state portraits to be recorded, but Victoria for many reasons was a more than usually attractive subject for the painters. She was, in the first place, almost completely unknown, having led a very sheltered life at Kensington, and everyone was curious about her appearance and character. Then, too, she was a sweet-faced young maiden of eighteen, in striking contrast to her immediate predecessors on the throne, the elderly sons of George III.

At the time Sully painted her he was in his prime, the most famous American portrait painter. When it was known in Philadelphia that he contemplated a trip to England the Stewards of the Philadelphia Chapter of the Society of the Sons of St. George commissioned him to paint a portrait of the Queen. This organization, formed of American citizens of British descent, devoted itself largely to charitable purposes, giving financial aid and advice to any deserving applicant of British descent who found himself in distress. The society gave Sully a formal petition to Victoria begging her to honor them by posing for the American artist. As the petitioners were unaware of the rules governing the presentation of such a document to the Queen, it was delivered to Sully sealed up, and he found on his arrival in London that it could not be accepted. Fortunately, he also had an unsealed copy, but, what was infinitely more important, he had a number of very influential friends in London. Finally, through their efforts, he was informed on March 21 that the Queen would sit at noon the following day. Sully and Blanche had been waiting for this notice for four months.

The artist had been well primed with all the rules of etiquette for such an occasion; what to wear (“dress as though going to a party”), when to bow, what to say, and so forth. He was advised to arrive at the palace two hours before the appointment to see that all preparations were made and to take with him a duplicate set of paraphernalia in order that there might be no embarrassment for lack of proper tools. It was said that some artists even carried this pre-

cautions to the extent of arriving with two easels, as well as two canvases and two sets of colors. How many things there were to remember! Never ask questions, never be the first to speak, convey all requests through an intermediary, the Queen is addressed as Your Majesty only at the beginning of a conversation and thereafter as Madam.

The sittings are described in Sully's Journal: "Thursday, March 22.—... At a little before
12 I was set down at Buckingham House—not through the front entrance, as that was not permitted to any but private carriages. . . . I rang at the door, gave my card for the Baroness Lehzen—I and my pasteboard were consigned to a page and led forward. . . . After reaching the ante-chamber of the room appropriated to painting, . . . I had time to look about me. . . . The walls were well covered with pictures. . . . The Baroness left me to bring in the Queen, and in ten minutes after the appointed time, she was announced and entered the room. She curtseied politely, and with the assistance of the Baroness ascended to the chair I had arranged for her—of course I made a low bow . . . without saying anything. 'Am I in the position you require, Mr. Sully?' were the first words she addressed to me, and in a rich musical voice. I requested Her Majesty would indulge me by turning her head in another position. While making my sketch on the bristol board, which I held in my hand, she remarked to me that perhaps I found that mode of proceeding inconvenient—and by her manner intimated that I must consult my own wish as to accommodation while at work—I assured her that my pres-
next.' They all looked at what I had done and warmly approved of the design. . .

"Wednesday, April 4.—At 10 I went to the Palace. . . . It was nearly 12 before the Queen sat. Two ladies in attendance were announced. . . . Their dog was with them and what with caressing the animal and cheerful conversation, the sitting went merrily on. . . . She has promised to sit to me again on Saturday at 11. . . . The Baroness brought the crown to me to paint from. . . . Finished with it at 9, having sent for her, delivered it safe into her hands, . . . and left the Palace. . . . How smoothly has Providence thus far shaped my course! By some secret impulse, I have visited London; and at a time when through the 'pressure of the times' I might have been unemployed at home. . . . Introduced to distinguished people, and kind friends, enabled to converse familiarly with the sovereign of the . . . greatest Empire in the world—and if I succeed in painting an approved portrait of her, the firm reputation it will give me in my adopted country and home. . . .

"Saturday, April 7.—At 10 went to the Palace, . . . but the Queen did not sit until 12, and but three-quarters of an hour. . . . One long sitting I would make do, but I dare say I shall make two more. . . .

"Monday, May 14.—Received a short notice and was at the Palace at 11. While I was setting my palette, Lord Conyngham was shown into the room to wait upon the Queen. Her Majesty gave me a very long sitting, which has enabled me to finish the head. . . . The likeness was much commended by all. The Queen quite approved of the style I had adopted and said it was a nice picture. . . .

"Tuesday, May 15.—Bright, clear and cold. At 10 I called a hack and rode to the Palace with Blanch, the Queen having arranged that she should sit with the crown jewels instead of herself. The Baroness Lehzen . . . fixed the trappings on Blanch. The Queen sent to ask leave to visit us—on condition that she might not interrupt business—but of course, on her entrance, Blanch paid her respects. She was very affable, asked many questions, smiled at the appearance decorated with her jewels and orders—but she observed, 'I am interrupting business,' curtsied and left the room. I reminded the Baroness that she promised to give the exact measurements of the Queen's length, and as a remembrance, Her Majesty's autograph, the which was presently brought by her. She said on giving me the tape measuring her height: 'The Queen says: if you show this measurement when you return to America, they will say: What a little Queen the English have.' . . . After putting away my things, . . . Blanch and I sauntered through the Picture Gallery. . . ."

Having completed his studies, Sully painted from these a half-length portrait for the engraver Wagstaff, which is now in the Wallace Collection in London. Then he returned with his trophies to Philadelphia. Once again in his familiar and comfortable painting room he
proceeded to paint a full-length canvas for the St. George Society and at the same time to make another full-length replica for himself, which he later presented to the St. Andrew Society in Charleston, South Carolina. The St. George Society, on realizing what an imposing treasure they were to receive for their outlay of $1000, sought by legal means to restrain Sully from making further copies or exhibiting any of them for his own benefit. To enforce their exclusive possession of the picture, they even tried to claim all his preliminary drawings and studies for the portrait. Sully, however, refused to relinquish his rights and the opinions of the leading Philadelphia lawyers approved his action. The Sons of St. George wanted to exhibit their picture and charge admission to the show, and they did not want any competition from the artist. It was soon discovered, however, that the enterprising Emanuel Leutze had already stolen a march on them all, for he was exhibiting a portrait of the Queen copied from engravings of the Sully half-length in London.

The original study for the head, now in this Museum, was hung in Sully’s picture gallery, adjoining his painting room, in his house on south Fifth Street. In this gallery the Queen reigned only as a secondary figure, for the place of honor here was given to a large portrait of Mrs. Sully with her pet dog Pinto.

Blanche often regaled her friends with accounts of her conversation with the Queen and told how it felt to wear a diamond crown. Blanche said the Queen asked especially to see her posing because she wanted to judge the effect of the robes and the crown on another person. Probably it is to this natural feminine interest on the part of the Queen in her state robes and jewels that Blanche gained her unique distinction.

At Sully’s death in 1872 the portrait of the Queen passed to his daughter Jane (Mrs. William H. W. Darley), and from it descended to her son Francis Thomas Sully Darley, who bequeathed it to the Museum, together with four Sully family portraits. The bequest caused some anguish among the proud institutions of Philadelphia; it seemed an act of treason to send such local treasures to foreign parts, as it were. The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, though its walls were then heavy with tier upon tier of Sully portraits, had been angling for twenty-five years for the sketch of Victoria, but some personal feud between the institution and Mr. Darley caused him to look abroad for a haven for his family treasures. Fortunately for us, the Museum’s Trustees had annually announced their belief in the importance of building up a collection of American paintings, and word of this had somehow penetrated to innermost Philadelphia.

The title of the full-length portrait belonging to the Society of the Sons of St. George is “Portrait of Her Majesty the Queen in Her Robes of State Ascending the Throne in the House of Lords.” From Sully’s studies at least seven finished portraits were made: the study of the head; the St. George full-length; the St. Andrew full-length; the Wallace Collection half-length; a copy of this (not by Sully) at Windsor; and a small replica of the St. George full-length (at one time in the collection of J. B. Roberts in Philadelphia), painted by Sully in 1871, when he was almost ninety years old; and the composite copy, from an engraving, painted by Leutze.

Of Sully’s portraits Tuckerman says, “One always feels at least in good society” among them; “he seems only to paint ladies and gentlemen.” The Museum has in its collection fifteen other works by Sully, all portraits except one. Of Sully’s social register, led by the Queen, we have Major and Mrs. John Biddle, Mrs. James Montgomery, Mrs. W. W. Worsley (a miniature), Mrs. Matthews, John Finley, William Gwynn, Jane Sully Darley with her son Francis (a detail is illustrated in color on the cover of this issue of the Bulletin), the artist’s wife (an oil portrait and a miniature), his daughter Rosalie, a self-portrait, and a drawing for a full-length portrait of President John Quincy Adams. The other works are a portrait of an anonymous infant, called The Rosebud, and a small study of a nude, titled Musidora.

The quotations from Sully’s manuscript journals are made with the generous permission of Mrs. Mary Harriss Sully.