



## LOUIS BETTS, PORTRAIT PAINTER OF HIGH SOCIETY:

The Meadow Brook Hall Portraits of  
Alfred G. Wilson, Matilda R. Wilson,  
Danny and Frances Dodge, and John F. Dodge

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Portraiture has a long established tradition in American art. Datable to the colonial limners, portraits were considered a practical mode which enabled an individual to establish his “sense of being” along with ties to his family and position. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth-century, it was the dominant art form of the middle class Protestant society. As the country grew and prospered, the wealthy merchants and plantation families had their portraits painted in the style of their mother country. Sir Godfrey Kneller, the official portraitist of the English aristocracy, established the model for the high court style. The Grand Manner was brought to America with the influx of immigrant painters, and gradually, by American-born artists who studied abroad. Patrons expected the painter to capture their likeness, as well as suggest their social position.

A new realm of portraiture was opened with the advent of the daguerreotype in the nineteenth-century. As the process evolved, photography provided an affordable means for the masses to have their images recorded for posterity. For some artists, the new visual realism of photography was an aid

to capturing an individual in action, a thought, a moment in time; other artists embraced new approaches to portraying their sitter in a more creative way.

The early twentieth-century found the national and international scene in a whirlwind; economic, political, social, and technological changes affected society's way of life and thinking. As the turn of the century approached, Louis Betts was coming of age—an impressionable young artist who was influenced by events in his personal life as well as the world around him. The artist had a long and distinguished career as a portrait painter of high society. He painted hundreds of individuals in public and professional life, exhibited nationally as well as internationally, and was the recipient of numerous honors and awards. Betts was elected into the exclusive ranks of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the National Academy of Design, yet he was reputed to be an unassuming, modest man who avoided notoriety.

Why was Louis Betts constantly in demand and esteemed by his contemporaries? What were the ideals of the prominent men and women of his era, such as the Wilsons? This paper will attempt to provide an insight into the artist and his work as a portraitist and to glean an understanding why he was commissioned to paint the portraits of Matilda and Alfred Wilson, John Dodge, and Frances and Danny Dodge for Meadow Brook Hall.

## *Louis Betts, the Artist*

Louis Betts was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, on October 5, 1873, to Edwin Daniel, Sr. and Anna (Manion) Betts. His father, a landscape painter, provided his early training. His mother, also an artist, died when he was a child. His father remarried and Louis was raised with “a large gathering of step-brothers and sisters with consequent shortage in the larder.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>W.H. de B. Nelson, “A Painter’s Painter: Louis Betts,” *The International Studio* 64 (May 1918), 78.

Louis, the oldest of the nine siblings, exhibited a natural aptitude for drawing. He was raised with paints and canvases as household staples. From the age of seven he sketched and painted still-lives and landscapes. Betts set out at the early age of fourteen or fifteen to support himself by selling painted objects such as tea trays.

An often-told story about Betts's humble beginnings centers on Little Rock's first music teacher. Professor Ferdinand Armellini, an Italian music master, was traveling from Australia to his home in Italy; he fell in love with the Arkansas hills and settled there around 1882. Louis, who was about sixteen years old, wanted to learn to play the violin. Due to the strapped circumstances of his family, he lacked the money to pay for lessons. Thus a bargain was struck; Louis painted his first portrait in exchange for the lessons. Betts's love of the violin remained a lifelong interest, a pastime he shared privately with friends on a quiet evening.

The elder Betts left his mark on Louis as well as his other children. Edwin, Jr. (1879–1915), who also studied with his father, became an illustrator and painter. Harold Harington Betts (b. 1881) specialized in western scenes of the Grand Canyon and Pueblo Indians. Louis's sisters, Grace May (b. 1885) and Vera (n.d.), worked together in California painting murals. Grace, the more well-known of the two, was once considered the "youngest accepted artist," having her work exhibited at the age of ten with the Art Institute of Chicago and the Salon in Paris.

The family's move to Chicago enabled Louis to take classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. Conditioned by his background, he specialized in landscape painting until he was about twenty-four years old. His first exhibition there in 1895 featured a water painting, which was followed the next year with seven landscapes in oil. In 1897, he enrolled in the life class taught by William Merritt Chase. This encounter was the beginning of a mentor-friend relationship that was to influence Betts's entire career.

Another momentous event occurred during this period;

Betts was commissioned to paint the portrait of Giovanna Kurzenknobe. She was the daughter of William Kurzenknobe, a Chicago manufacturer, art collector, and connoisseur. Louis and Giovanna were married in July 1899.

For an income, Betts worked as a commercial illustrator for books, prints, and advertising posters. According to James W. Pattison, “A romance based on American Indians brought him more money than he had ever handled in his life at one time.”<sup>2</sup> An illustration from the book, *A Child of the Sun*, substantiates his claim. The artist’s technical skill is evident in the handling of the figures and the compositional arrangement. Likewise, his experience in landscape painting enriches the scene with a light palette of pastels applied in dabs and sunlit streaks. Another illustration from a 1924 book, “*God Wills It!*” *A Tale of the First Crusade*, further displays his ability to compose a scene which highlights the narrative of the text. Symmetrically balanced, his delicate treatment of the figures lightens the drama of a fight to the death. He has rendered the foreshortened figure’s anatomy with accuracy and illustrates technical mastery of perspective.

The couple went to New York where he found a continuous source of jobs. The artist recalled that while doing some portrait heads for the St. Nicholas magazine, the art editor remarked, “Why are you wasting your time illustrating? You must join the Chase class at Shinnecock Hills.”<sup>3</sup> Betts and his wife left for Long Island where Chase was conducting his out-of-doors classes just west of Southampton. Established in 1891, it had evolved into an art community that attracted hundreds of aspiring young artists. Chase encouraged plein-air painting, a contrast to the dark tones of his own Munich training. Betts reminisced that his first study head was criticized in front of a gathering of students and friends. That evening he had his

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<sup>2</sup>James William Pattison, “Louis Betts-Painter,” *The Sketch Book* 6 (Dec 1906), 175.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Betts, “Experiences of a Portrait Painter,” *The Artist* 52 (Mar 1957), 116.

bag packed, ready to leave, but his wife convinced him to stay. His decision to remain resulted in his winning the Whiting Prize at the end of the season but also changed the direction of his current career. It was through Chase's encouragement that Betts applied for entry to the fall class at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He continued his study under Chase during the 1902–1903 academic year and won the coveted Cresson Traveling Scholarship. The \$3,000 prize enabled him to travel and study in Europe for two years.

Betts and his wife began their tour in Haarlem, Holland, where he studied the works of Hals, Rembrandt, Rubens and Van Dyke. He was particularly struck by the works of Hals, which he was adept at copying. Betts received a commission from Baron Kroll, an important sponsor of the Frans Halsmuseum. This, in turn, led to other commissions which kept him busy for the duration of his stay in Haarlem.

The couple next went to Paris where Betts rented a studio in the Latin Quarter. While in Paris, he sketched, painted, and led a very active social life. He attended many exhibitions which included the works of the American expatriates and new movements, such as Impressionism. When their lease ended in July, they moved on to London where, by chance, Betts found Chase conducting his annual summer class abroad. Betts joined him for the rest of the session and won the \$500 prize for the best portrait in London.

Betts intended to stay in Spain for ten days but it stretched to almost a year. The couple rented a French pension near the Prado. While studying and copying the works of Velazquez, his reputation grew and, aided by introductions through Chase, he received many commissions. His patrons included important men and women from diplomatic circles and the royal court. He made the acquaintance of the Marquis de Nurillo, who in exchange for a portrait, loaned Betts the use of his studio while he went on a yachting trip. Chase, who was conducting his 1905 summer class in Spain, encouraged Betts to see the works of El Greco, Goya, and Sarolla, but the masterpieces of Velazquez left the greatest impact. It was dur-

ing this period that Betts turned from landscape painting to a career in portraiture.

Although Betts returned to Chicago to continue taking and teaching classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, he traveled throughout the western and southern states. Through his contacts with members of the royal court in Madrid, Betts received commissions for portraits in California. During his frequent excursions to the west, Louis completed a series of paintings featuring Indians and works for the Santa Fe Railroad. During one trip to the San Diego area, sometime around 1907, he painted a number of scenes of the California coastline. These airy, light-filled scenes reflect his “plein-air” days at Shinnecock.

Betts was well aware of the growing Impressionist movement; his early exposure was through his father’s working method. It is safe to assume that he would have attended the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893 since his family had moved there by then. Furthermore, while studying in Europe, he attended exhibitions in Paris which included the works of major French Impressionist artists. His self-portrait was accepted and hung in the avant-garde 1904 Salon Des Independant.

At the turn of the century, Old Lyme, Connecticut became a famous Impressionist-oriented art colony. It dates to 1899 when the Griswolds, an old, distinguished family, fell on hard times. “Miss Florence” was forced to take summer boarders into her imposing Georgian mansion to make ends meet. The scenic community became a popular destination for artists and the colony grew under her patronage. With the arrival of Childe Hassam in 1903, the colony developed into an Impressionist gathering spot.

Betts spent summers at Old Lyme absorbing more of the impressionistic style that Chase had initiated. During these stays in the early 1920s, he executed a series of works featuring Southern belles from a by-gone era. Perhaps inspired by his return trips to the Mississippi Valley region, the lovely young damsels in *The Yellow Parasol*, *Ladies of Old Lyme*, and *Summer*

are garbed in flowing chiffon and wide-brimmed bonnets. Their parasols protect them from the hot summer sunlight which enlivens the garden scenes. Edward Quick, Director of the Swope Art Gallery, associated Betts with the American Impressionists tradition through his experimentation with the effects of sunlight on forms, brightness of colors, and wide brush strokes.<sup>4</sup> Donald D. Keyes, Curator of the Georgia Museum of Art, indicated that “Betts’s bright palette and broken brushstrokes pay tribute to his teacher Childe Hassam.”<sup>5</sup>

An earlier work of the artist, *Midwinter, Coronado Beach*, was included in a 1997 exhibition of “California Impressionists” at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. This show featured works done between 1895 and 1920 by thirty artists including William Merritt Chase, Childe Hassam, and William Wendt. Thus, Betts has a coast-to-coast association with American Impressionism, which is visible in theme, style, and technique.

William Merritt Chase expressed his thoughts concerning portraiture: “Some persons erroneously think the portrait painter finds his greatest pleasure in painting the ideal face. The real pleasure lies in painting the subject as he is whether he has an ideal or a commonplace face. The chief enjoyment consists in bringing out the character of the man as it is, expressing his personality on canvas as the artist conceives that personality to be.”<sup>6</sup> Betts learned this lesson well and remained true to his principal aim “character above all.”

Chase had a decisive impact on Betts’s career through his training and guidance. Chase received his initial training at the Royal Academy in Munich where he acquired his dark palette, loose, fluid brushstroke, and heavy impasto application. It was said that throughout his life, even after he had

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<sup>4</sup>Edward R. Quick, “ ‘Summer’ is from another time,” (July 19,1981).

<sup>5</sup>Donald D. Keyes, “Louis Betts,” Georgia Museum of Art catalog (title unknown), p.28.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Dayer Gallati, *William Merritt Chase* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), p.110.

turned to Impressionism, he would return to the dark palette and rich, painterly technique. Betts followed the same course, from the fresh, light palette to the dark tones and bravura brushwork of Hals and Velazquez.

Betts attributed the beginning of his success as a portraitist to the O'Brien Gallery in Chicago, which took an early interest in his work. He is reputed to have painted more men and women in Chicago than any other city. Pattison wrote that, "Betts has had sitter following sitter and every hour of his time occupied, while a line of candidates awaited their turn."<sup>7</sup>

A survey of portraits of men who had achieved national prominence reveals an obvious preference for an "official" pose. Since most portraits were destined for libraries and offices, not palatial estates, their scale was altered to three-quarter length informal poses; some relax in chairs while others stand. As a group, Betts has imbued his clients with the characteristics of professional men of high caliber: confidence, seriousness, intelligence, and respectability. Taken separately, each unique personage exhibits carefully observed physical traits.

The artist discussed obtaining a likeness: "This is one of the bugbears of the portrait painter, and is really about the last thing in a portrait to be considered. The establishing of the big masses of light and shade in proper relation in a head will very soon produce the best kind of a likeness, which a little elaboration will perfect. We see only the big things about him, no eyelashes or pupils of the eye, or, in fact, any detail whatever. Yet the identity is unmistakable. This is the attitude the student should take toward the matter of securing a likeness, for if he commences counting hairs and wrinkles, the head on his canvas will very soon look like a map."<sup>8</sup>

The reappearance of poses over the centuries bears testimony to the way artists adapted and modified works of earlier masters. The development of the seated and standing three-

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<sup>7</sup>James William Pattison, "Portraits by Louis Betts," *Fine Arts Journal* 29 (Nov 1913), 677.

<sup>8</sup>Maude Oliver, "Portrait Painting—An Interview with Louis Betts," *Palette and Bench* 2 (Feb 1910), 159.

quarter format originated with Raphael's *Baldassare Castiglione*, which in turn inspired Titian's *Man with a Glove* and Van Dyck's *William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury*. These master artists skillfully direct the viewer's eye to the most expressive parts of the body—the head and the hands. The triangular focus on the subject's eyes and gestures invites a psychological observation of his character.

Betts remarked that “a portrait painter is largely known by his ability to paint hands.”<sup>9</sup> Utilizing the same compositional arrangement in his works, the skillfully modeled hands of each sitter are prominently placed. Generally, one hand holds a personal attribute—a book, gloves, or a pair of glasses; the other rests on his knee or partially in a pocket.

Betts's early portraits, those until 1910, reflect the influence of Velazquez and Hals. Adapting the methods of his predecessors, Betts has placed his figures against a cool, empty background. Elaborate furniture, drapery, and decorative accessories are absent from his compositions, thereby directing the viewer's focus to the sitter. Through his study of Velazquez, Betts was skilled in manipulating light and shadows to accent the planes of the individual's face. His palette of darker, subdued tones favors the old masters.

The artist employed a painterly technique in the style of his mentor, William Merritt Chase. The portrait of *Miss Mary Hanna* by Betts closely models *Mrs. Francis Guerin Lloyd* by Chase. Neither lady is idealized. Their plain features, spectacles, and matronly coiffures convey a sense of stately maturity. The rich, fluid brushwork is apparent in the original work.

Femininity inspired Betts to his highest accomplishment. He endowed his women sitters with exquisite grace; each presented with classicizing formality indicative of her position in society. The artist's *Portrait of a Lady (Mrs. Wardwell)* and *Mrs. Edward Small Moore* may have been inspired by Chase's *Portrait of Annie Traquair Lang*. Through suppression of background

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<sup>9</sup>Louis Betts, “Experiences of a Portrait Painter,” *The Artist* 51 (Feb 1957), 80.

details, the figures dominate the picture space. The composure of each fashionable lady reflects a timeless attitude.

It was said that his “women look good and pure because those are the qualities he discerns in them.”<sup>10</sup> *Portrait*, an updated version of his Southern belle, depicts a refined, young woman sitting comfortably in a wicker chair; her soft dress and garden bouquet complement her femininity.

John Singer Sargent, Chase’s contemporary, was a prolific artist who painted more than 800 portraits in his lifetime. He influenced many younger artists who admired his expressive style. Betts’s *Portrait of a Lady* approximates Sargent’s infamous *Madame X* in the turn of the shoulders, extended arm, and the haughtily angled head. The décolleté and slipping strap of Betts’s lady is a dramatic contrast to his conservative *Miss Mary Hanna*.

New York City was the dominant art center in America. Numerous avant-garde galleries featured the works of artists aspiring to establish themselves outside the boundaries of the conservative academies. In 1908, the Macbeth Gallery hosted a show for “The Eight,” a group that banded together in defiance of the National Academy. That same year Macbeth exhibited works by Betts. In the midst of the revolutionary movements stimulated by the influx of foreign artists with varying styles and the controversial Armory Show, Betts maintained his conservative painting style.

In 1910 he moved his studio to New York City permanently, and for many years figured prominently in the annual exhibitions of the established academies. These annual exhibitions were where a painter’s reputation was established and evaluated. In 1912 he was elected a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, as well as an associate member of the National Academy of Design with full membership awarded two years later. Furthermore, he distinguished himself as president of the Salmagundi Club and vice-president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

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<sup>10</sup>Nelson, p.78.

Betts was lauded as “an outstanding portrait painter in command of the field, as accomplished as ever in the most exacting of arts.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the success Louis Betts experienced in Chicago was repeated in New York City, the connecting link to the Wilsons and Meadow Brook Hall.

## *The Wilsons and Meadow Brook Hall*

The early years of the 1900s were a time of transition for America. It was the era of the machine: factories, assembly lines, automobiles, airplanes, and industrial growth. The technological advances were accompanied by demographic shifts from the rural countryside to urban centers where jobs could be found. The nouveau riche gathered in the suburbs outside the crowded cities. The fashionable, well-to-do elite modeled themselves after the European aristocracy, decorating their suburban mansions with English and French decor that implied culture. The paintings of English eighteenth-century portrait painters and old masters were in vogue, as were the importation of entire period rooms.

Among these industrial millionaires were Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Wilson who commissioned portraits of the family for their estate. The history of Meadow Brook Hall begins with the marriage of Matilda Rausch Cline and John Dodge in December 1907. Their romance blossomed while she worked as his secretary at the Dodge brothers’ factory in Detroit. John, a widower with three children, took her to live in his Boston Boulevard home. Soon after their marriage John bought the 320-acre farm in Rochester as a country refuge for rest and relaxation. It was named Meadow Brook Farms for the spring-fed stream that ran through the property.

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<sup>11</sup>News clipping, “Portraits by Louis Betts At Howard Young Galleries,” no source, n.d. Courtesy of Archives of American Art, Helen Appleton Read Papers.

Although already successful businessmen, John and his brother, Horace, continued to amass greater wealth as they expanded their business of manufacturing automobile parts. In 1914 they produced the first Dodge motor car and became major players in automotive history.

In 1917 John and Matilda began building a mansion facing Lake St. Clair in Grosse Pointe but the \$2,000,000 project was never completed. While still under construction, the inseparable brothers contracted influenza at the Nation Auto Show in New York City. John died there in January 1920; Horace succumbed in December 1920. The Dodge brothers left estates of almost \$194 million to their widows, Matilda and Anne.

Matilda went on with her life, taking care of her children and keeping active in many charitable organizations. It was through her involvement in church that she became acquainted with Alfred Gaston Wilson, a lumber broker from Wisconsin. After a short courtship, they announced their engagement and were married on June 29, 1925. They immediately set sail for Europe where they spent seven weeks in London touring manor houses such as Compton Wynyates and Hampton Court.

The Wilsons decided to build a new home at Meadow Brook Farms. The architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls was commissioned to design a Tudor revival style mansion incorporating similar features of the Grosse Pointe house. Construction began in 1926 and was completed three years later.

Matilda was a practical woman who paid close attention to the details of design, construction, and decoration. Meadow Brook Hall was intended to be a home for a family with children; a combination of valuable antique furnishings collected during their travels to Europe and items that had personal appeal adorned the interior. Although modeled after English prototypes, Matilda took pride in the fact that Meadow Brook Hall was made by American craftsmen with American materials. The Wilsons contracted with firms in New York to complete the interior decoration. Hampton

Shops, Mrs. Wilson's favorite decorator, made many of the furnishings from drawings she approved. It was through her art dealer, Howard Young, that Louis Betts was recommended as the premier portrait painter of the American elite.

## *The Paintings in Meadow Brook Hall*

The Wilsons commissioned Louis Betts to paint portraits for their new home, Meadow Brook Hall. The artist completed portraits of Matilda Wilson, Alfred Wilson, John F. Dodge, and Danny and Frances Dodge in 1928. The companion paintings of Matilda and Alfred Wilson grace the east wall of the Christopher Wren dining room. The over life-size portrait of Matilda hangs to the left of a large bay window with Alfred to the right. The splendor of the immense dining room provides a befitting setting for the reigning couple.

Alfred exemplifies the English landed gentry (Fig.1). Dressed in riding attire, he presents the image of a man of leisure—a gentleman with his faithful dog at his side. His companion, a large German shepherd, reinforces the concept of masculinity. The prototype for the master with dog arrangement originated with Titian's *Charles V with Hound* which in turn inspired Van Dyck's *Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford*. Sir Joshua Reynolds painted his version *Mr. Peter Ludlow* in a similar manner. The bold, full-length figures are depicted in elaborate apparel signifying their wealth and elevated station.

Betts's compositional arrangement adheres to the traditional formula for court portraiture established by Titian: a full length figure in the foreground, drapery or a column in the middle ground, with a landscape in the background. Wilson's elongated figure and refined pose closely compares to the eighteenth-century portrait of *Captain Wade* by Gainsborough. Each man stands in three-quarter profile; his right arm relaxed at his side and left hand at his hip. Wade's architectural prop has been replaced with Wilson's trees. His manor

house, Meadow Brook Hall, is viewable in the distance. With ramrod posture, these men of distinction look down at the viewer with a regal air.

Matilda appears as society's Grand Dame (Fig. 2). In life she was a petite woman, but in the painting her attenuated figure suggests imposing grandeur. As was Betts's custom, she wears a simple but elegant rose taffeta dress, devoid of accessories and jewels. Her portrait conforms to a conventional pose often utilized by the artist. The portrait of *Mrs. Howard Young*, the wife of Matilda's art dealer, duplicates the stance, dress style, and Cinderella shoes. Similar works by Betts include *Miss Mary* and *Miss Kathleen Sinclair*. These ladies all preferred to be portrayed in the popular style of the Grand Manner. Gainsborough's *The Hon. Mrs. Thomas Graham* and *Mary, Countess Howe* illustrate the stylistic precedence for beautiful women adorned with splendid fabrics of silk, satin, and lace enjoying the surroundings of their country estate. The convention of placing the subject in an outdoor setting enabled Betts to display his early mastery of landscape painting.

If possible, Betts executed his painting in the home where the work was to be hung, but large canvases, such as the *Wilsons*, were completed in his New York studio. He indicated that his working method was to place the canvas near the model then step back to analyze the scene; noting each particular detail that contributed to the whole. The artist advocated making a preliminary drawing directly on the canvas, concentrating on the size and position of the figure.

Betts began the actual painting by establishing the areas of darks and lights, as was Velazquez's technique. The head, surrounding background, and neck areas were laid down to set the tones. He emphasized the importance of observing the planes of the figure and how light fell on them. He employed Hals's *alla prima* technique of applying his paint wet in one *impasto* layer, not successive thin glazes. This spontaneous technique ensured that his colors remained fresh and unmuddled.

Betts advised using a simple palette set from dark to light: ivory black, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, rose madder, deep,

medium and light cadmium red, light red, yellow ochre, deep, medium and pale cadmium yellow, and viridian. He did not combine more than two colors together nor did he mix them on his palette.

The painting of Matilda illustrates his mastery of color and light manipulation. The artist has captured the crisp sheen of her taffeta dress and vaporous black wrap. Close inspection will reveal that the edges of the material are not refined. However the paint was laid on by the loaded brush, it remained unaltered. The forms dissolve in the wide, visible brushstrokes which seem to cause havoc on the surface of the canvas, but viewed from a distance the well-placed strokes visually merge into a solid mass.

The artist recalled working on Matilda's painting: "I was at work on a full-length portrait of Mrs. Wilson of Detroit in my New York studio, and my color sketch for the work included an out-of-door background. The sky in the canvas did not seem the best I had done and it bothered me. While playing golf I saw just the cloud effect I wanted for the portrait. Artist-like, I dropped out of the foursome immediately and made a pencil sketch of the sky. The following morning I repainted the sky, which I had removed from the canvas with a palette knife. After my artist friend, Gardner Symons, who knew skies and how to paint them, said: 'those thunder heads! If you are not careful they will ruin a lovely gown.' At his suggestion I used a different palette when painting the sky. I followed the general design of the clouds, leaving out any color I had used when painting the gown."<sup>12</sup>

W. B. McCormick said about Betts's portraits, ". . . (viewer) is to be impressed with the fact that character glows in each of them to a great degree that it surpasses the external attributes of form, costume, background, color."<sup>13</sup> An appraisal of Wilson's portrait attests to McCormick's critique. Alfred's counte-

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<sup>12</sup>Betts, p.114.

<sup>13</sup>W.B. McCormick, "Louis Betts-Portraitist," *International Studio* 77 (Sept 1913), 525.

nance suggests “depth”—intense, serious, and steadfast. Yet this reserved man is about to scratch the ear of his loyal dog, a sign of his warm personality. At forty-five, he appears youthful; his well-scrubbed complexion betrays the hint of a five o’clock shadow. Still in his prime, he has achieved the height of success.

Upon entering the Great Hall, a visitor is welcomed by the endearing portrait of Danny and Frances (Fig.3). The scene presents a familial bond as Frances stands close to her brother with a protective arm around his shoulder. Danny seems relaxed for the moment, but like any active boy, he is ready to mount his waiting horse for a ride on the estate. The young heir is dressed in a suit complete with jodhpurs, vest, and tie. His horse, following European tradition, is a symbol of the young man’s status.

Although the portrait of Danny is thought to be based on a family photograph, he bears similarities to Betts’s earlier paintings of *Nicholas Tucker* and *Luther Tucker*. Danny and Luther both wear riding apparel and stand posed by their horse with hand on hip—miniature clones of Alfred Wilson. Nicholas is dressed more casually, but his hair and facial features approximate those of Danny.

Frances, on the other hand, is dressed in her party finery. The young lady demurely holds her skirt out as though ready to curtsy to a guest. Her flowing hair, dress, and genteel stance may have been inspired by the portrait of *The Laimbeer Children*. The artist’s ability to portray child-like innocence is evidenced by his handling of the children’s rosy complexion, delicate features, and wide-eyed gaze.

The artist retained his traditional palette of subdued shades of browns, golds, grays, and greens with dabs of rust and orange. The soft fabric of Frances’s dress, perhaps velvet with a satin sash, is executed in shades of ultramarine and cobalt blue. The filmy, transparent collar and sleeves add a delicate frill to the rich texture of her garment. The overcast sky and background landscape merge in an easy transition pushing the children into the center stage foreground. Viewed at close range the deft, bold strokes appear uncon-

trolled but from a distance they visually blend to form a convincing sense of tranquillity.

Since the painting was commissioned at the same time as the Wilsons', it can safely be assumed that the work was completed in Betts's New York studio without benefit of the horse's presence. Upon close inspection, a change in the horse's neck can be detected. The artist may not have been satisfied with the proportions and could not remove the paint with a palette knife, as was his preference. Instead, the alternative was to spray the dried section with retouching varnish before repainting, but the original painting shows. In addition, the reins of the horse are a bothersome item. They curve upward as though they should be held or tied; but the ends are not to be found in either of Danny's hands. This oversight is the only flaw in an otherwise charming scene.

Matilda was a woman with an eye for the future but she also remembered her past. When planning Meadow Brook Hall, she had the architects design the library fireplace for a portrait of her first husband that was to be painted by Louis Betts (Fig. 4). The portrait of John Dodge differs from the society portraits of the Wilsons in style and presentation. Based on a 1912 photograph, the three-quarter length view of Dodge is a posthumous character study of a man in his prime. From his commanding position over the fireplace, he looks out from the canvas with intense blue eyes which suggest deep thoughtfulness.

His warm, peachy complexion is cooled by the cobalt blues in his dark suit and toned-down white collar. Set against a complementary orangy-rust background, the treatment is simple and direct. The light source accents the planes of Dodge's forehead, brows, and nose; casting subtle shadows along his left cheek and chin. The variations of subdued color are achieved through masterfully placed brushstrokes that are less obvious than in his other works for Meadow Brook Hall. Although Betts was encumbered by the restrictions of painting from a photograph rather than life, he has admirably captured a man of distinction whose inner personality emerges.

After completion, the portraits of Alfred, Matilda, and the children were included in a 1928 exhibition at the Howard Young Gallery in New York City. Betts's works received favorable reviews; ". . . The present collection of recent portraits shows him as accomplished as ever in this most exacting of arts. The clients who seek Mr. Betts are invariably wealthy and the portraits which he paints of them are obviously destined for elaborate settings. Very striking is his full-length portrait of Mrs. Alfred Wilson posed against an eighteenth-century landscape background and wearing a bouffant scarlet taffeta dress."<sup>14</sup> The paintings were then hung in Meadow Brook Hall to be admired by family and friends, and now the general public.

Betts was an eclectic artist who selected and adapted the styles that worked best for him. The assimilation of influences encountered through years of study, travel, and experience was infused in his painting. His body of works may be divided into two groups: commissioned portraits and paintings of his choosing executed with impressionistic color and energetic brushwork.

A survey of his commissioned portraits reveals a repetition of stock poses. The faces are not photographic images but meant to be artistic likenesses. Critiques of his portraits range from coldness and indifference to capturing the real nature and thoughts of the sitters—their "inner face."

Betts was called "the good normal type." It was said that his tastes were refined, wholesome and above affection. He was praised for his lofty ideals, psychological insight and his contempt for unrealities and commercialism in his profession. Betts led a long, productive life working until he died in 1961 at the age of 87. His legacy to American art, the paintings that hang on the walls of hundreds of private collectors and museums, reflect the ideals of the man and the artist, Louis Betts (Fig.5).

Note: Additional documentation and other illustrations were omitted due to lack of space.

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<sup>14</sup>News clipping, "Portraits by Louis Betts . . .".



*Figure 1. Portrait of Alfred Wilson*



*Figure 2. Portrait of Matilda Wilson*



*Figure 3. Portrait of Danny and Frances Dodge*



*Figure 4. Portrait of John Dodge*



*Figure 5. Portrait of Louis Betts  
Louie Betts, 1873–1961, Self-Portrait, c. 1944, oil on canvas, Swope Art  
Museum, Terre Haute, Indiana*