

**Joseph Southall, *Contentment***  
Nottingham 1861 - 1944 Birmingham

watercolor on vellum, nailed to a linen-covered stretcher  
14 ½ by 10 ¾ inches (36.7 by 27.5 cm)  
signed in monogram and dated lower right: '1928'; inscribed on verso:  
'PORTRAITS OF BESSIE & TODDIE / watercolor on Vellum / Joseph Southall 1928'

- provenance: Mrs. A E Southall, her sale, Edwards Birmingham (March 23, 1948, lot 249);  
Sotheby's, Belgravia (March 19, 1979, lot 17);  
The Fine Art Society;  
Mr. & Mrs. Alan Fortunoff
- exhibited: London, NEAC, *Summer Exhibition*, 1928 (99).  
Birmingham, RBSA, *Autumn Exhibition*, 1928 (143).  
Paris, Société National des Beaux-Arts, Salon, 1929 (1573).  
London, Leicester Galleries, *Joseph Southall*, 1931 (46).  
Birmingham, RBSA, *Joseph Southall*, 1933 (57).  
Birmingham; London, RWS & Bournemouth, *Memorial Exhibition*, 1945 (65).  
Birmingham & FAS, 1980 (E12).
- literature: 'Up Front', *The Observer Colour Magazine*, March 18, 1979, p. 23.  
*Sixty Works by Joseph Southall, 1861-1944 from the Fortunoff Collection*, Fine Art Society,  
2005, pp 98-99, no. 23, illus.
- note: Joseph Edward Southall was born in Nottingham on August 23, 1861, the son of a grocer, Joseph Sturge Southall, and his wife Elizabeth Maria Baker, both scions of distinguished Quaker families.<sup>1</sup> The elder Joseph died the following year aged only twenty-seven and his widow and baby removed to her mother's house in Edgbaston, Birmingham. The young Joseph's childhood and schooling followed the traditional pattern for a family of his class and background; he attended the Friends' School at Ackworth and later, in 1872, the Friends' School at Bootham, York, where he was taught watercolor painting by Edwin Moore, a brother of the marine painter Henry Moore and the even better known artist, Albert Moore, whose stylish arrangements of classically-draped young women came to epitomize the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s. After Bootham Southall went to a school at Scarborough, whilst continuing to take lessons with Edwin Moore; then, on September 1, 1878, a few days after his seventeenth birthday, he entered the offices of the distinguished Birmingham architectural partnership of Martin and Chamberlain, where he was to work for the next four years. During these years he pursued his art studies at evening classes and also immersed himself in the writings of Ruskin and William Morris, which were to remain central to his concerns for the rest of his life.
- A few months before leaving Martin and Chamberlain Southall made his first trip to Northern France; inspired by his reading of Ruskin and Morris he visited Bayeux, Rouen and Amiens, where he was deeply impressed by the ancient cities and their Gothic Revival style popularized by Pugin, Scott and Street, and it was the young architects from Street's office – Morris, Webb and Sedding – who were to evolve and develop the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Amongst

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<sup>1</sup> Condensed from Peyton Skipwith's essay, *Joseph Southall*, Fine Arts Society, 2005, pp. 11-16.

these was a profound belief that architecture was in urgent need of reinvigoration from a craft-base upwards, and it was with this very much in mind that Southall left the architectural practice to pursue his studies in painting and carving. Early the following year, in the company of his mother, he visited Italy for the first time and took with him, as a guide to Venice, a copy of Ruskin's *St. Mark's Rest*, which had been appearing in parts since 1877. The two of them visited Pisa, Florence, Siena, Orvieto, Rome, Bologna, Padua, Venice and Milan, before returning through Switzerland. Southall came back from this trip with a profound admiration for the Italian Primitives and a desire to study and practice the art of painting in tempera. Over forty years later he recalled that he could never forget 'the thrill of joy which I experienced when, without any knowledge of what I was about to see, I stepped inside the enchanting cloisters of the great Campo Santo of Pisa. There I found myself at 21 years of age face to face with a vast series of frescoes, so quiet and yet so gay, so reticent in manner and so lively in essence that words must ever fail to convey even the faintest expression of what I felt.' On his return, inspired by the impact of Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes, he made his earliest experiments in tempera painting at the Birmingham School of Art, and it was here that he met Arthur Gaskin (1862-1928), who was to become his closest friend and confidant. Under the inspired headmastership of Edward R. Taylor, Birmingham had become one of the leading schools of art in Britain, and the foremost for the study of crafts. Taylor believed that students should be encouraged to increase their 'art power' by acquiring various skills in addition to painting and drawing, and that they should learn to express themselves in a variety of techniques.

By this time Southall was installed at 13 Charlotte Road, Edgbaston, a house which belonged to his uncle George Baker, which was to be his home for the rest of his life. George Baker was a friend of Ruskin's as well as being Master of the Guild of St. George, to which he had given a substantial amount of land in Worcestershire adjacent to his own home near Bewdley. Banker was to play an important role in his nephew's life, by showing some of his 1883 Italian drawings to Ruskin. Ruskin's interest in drawings, and his appreciation of Southall's grasp of architecture, had an immediate result with a summons to Brantwood and a commission to design a museum to be built on the property his Uncle Baker had so generously given. However, nothing came of this in the end as Ruskin resolved a long-running dispute with Sheffield Town Council and reverted to his original intention of establishing the museum there rather than at Bewdley, but not before Southall had made a second trip to Italy during the spring of 1886 partly with a view of seeking inspiration for the museum building. This visit took him to Pisa, Florence, Siena and Assisi. The next few years were hard for Southall; he was not only deprived of the chance of becoming an architect and realizing Ruskin's vision, but progress with tempera was slow and frustrating, leading him to abandon it for a time in favor of oil.

After a third visit to Italy in 1890, and a brief infatuation with the works of Titian and Veronese, he fell once again under the influence of the Italian primitives and gradually resumed his experiments with tempera. Over the next few years he was given considerable encouragement by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, a fellow Birmingham artist, who he had probably originally met as a visitor to the School of Art. Burne-Jones was personally responsible in 1897 for sending Southall's tempera self-portrait, *Man with a Sable Brush*, to the New Gallery, along with his own work, and he expressed particular admiration for *Beauty Seeing the Image of her Home in the Fountain* (fig. 1). These works, among others, established Southall as one of the foremost tempera painters in the country and led to his participation in the exhibitions of the Arts and Crafts Society and the exhibition of Modern Paintings in Tempera at Leighton House, which immediately preceded the foundation of the Tempera Society, of which he became one of the leading members.

In June 1903 Southall married his cousin, and long-time fiancée, Anna Elizabeth Baker. She was forty-four and he nearly forty-two; they had been intimate friends and companions for many years and had always intended to marry, but because of the close kinship had consciously waited until she was passed child-bearing age. An early image of his future wife is *The Coral Necklace* (fig. 2) of 1895, but many other portraits exist. The years between 1897 and the outbreak of the Great War saw Southall at the height of his powers and, after many struggles, finally receiving the recognition he deserved. His work was widely exhibited in Britain, France, Italy, Belgium and the

United States and he was elected a member of the RBSA, the Art Workers Guild and the Union Internationale des Beaux-Arts et des Lettres. The two most significant exhibitions of his work were probably the Birmingham Group show at The Fine Art Society in 1907 and his highly successful one-man exhibition at the Galeries Georges Petit in Paris in 1910, from which he sold over eight-hundred pounds worth of pictures as well as receiving a number of commissions. All this was brought to an abrupt end in 1914.

The interwar years were calmer with a regular pattern of spring or autumn travels to France and Italy. These travels invariably produced a body of work, mostly in watercolor, which was regularly shown in exhibitions at the Alpine or Leicester Galleries in London and the Ruskin Galleries in Birmingham, as well as RBSA, the RA and the Paris Salon. The 1930 Winter Exhibition at the Royal Academy devoted to Italian Painting, stimulated a renewed interest in tempera painting, with the result that at the ensuing Summer Exhibition an entire room was set aside for works in tempera; this was in stark contrast to previous years when the Hanging Committee were ambivalent as to whether tempera should be classed with oil painting or watercolor.

Joe and Bessie Southall made their last trip to Venice in the Spring of 1937; later that year he was taken ill and had to undergo major surgery from which he never fully recovered.



Fig. 1





Fig. 2