

*The figurine has given Rolls-Royce an image that no other car manufacturer has been able to emulate.*



*Photos: Rolls-Royce Ltd.*

# SPIRIT OF ECSTASY

Paul Tritton

**I**n 1901 a 26-year-old art student completed his studies at the Royal College of Art. In Newcastle upon Tyne, his father and uncle, designers and manufacturers of wallpapers

and friezes, were expecting him to return home to help them run their business, and pass on his knowledge to the city's up-and-coming craftsmen.

But Charles Sykes had other ideas. His three ►

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years in South Kensington studying under Arthur Thomson, MA, Professor of Human Anatomy and Walter Crane, a member of William Morris's 'arts and crafts' movement, have given him a taste for the life and *mores* of turn-of-the-century London. Newcastle's loss was the world of motoring's gain; Charles spent the next 40 years working and living in London, where he met many of the pioneer motorists who gathered there for meetings and trials. Within a few years he was creating the first of his many sculptures and paintings associated with Rolls-Royce.

The most distinguished of these, the *Spirit of Ecstasy* or Flying Lady figurine, was to become famous not only as a motor car mascot, but as a work of art that is now as instantly-recognisable as the Venus de Milo, or Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa'.

Charles' path through life is unlikely to have led him to create the Flying Lady if he had not been owed a debt by Cummings Beaumont, publisher of a Northumbrian county magazine. Beaumont commissioned Charles to produce some sketches, but was unable to pay for them. Instead, he offered to introduce Charles to John Montagu, who was recruiting illustrators and writers for his new weekly magazine, *The Car Illustrated*. Montagu, son of the 1st Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, was at this time a Daimler devotee, but one of his closest friends was Claude Goodman Johnson, then secretary to the Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland but soon to become a partner in the Hon. Charles Rolls' motor car company, C.S. Rolls & Co.

Montagu was impressed by Charles' work, and retained him as chief illustrator on *The Car Illustrated* for many years. He became a skilled artistic 'all rounder', talented not only in commercial art but also in cartoons, paintings, pastels and sculptures. He designed motor racing's first international team prize, the Montagu Trophy, for the 1903 Gordon Bennett Race, and at about this time created his first motor car mascot, *St Christopher*, for John Montagu's second Daimler car.

In 1906, the year when Rolls-Royce Ltd was registered, John Montagu – who had recently inherited the barony of Beaulieu – bought his first Rolls-Royce car. He would have done so entirely on the basis of his own judgement, and his belief that Rolls and Royce had by now developed a superior vehicle to his beloved Daimler. That said, we can be sure that Claude Johnson, who had been appointed



Various changes have been made to the mascot's shape and size.

managing director of the new company, was a most persuasive salesman, and anxious that his aristocratic friend – now one of the most eminent and outspoken motoring pioneers of his day – should henceforth be seen only at the wheel of the new marque from Manchester, and not its Coventry-built rival.

As a reader of *The Car Illustrated*, Johnson was familiar with Charles' illustrations, and no doubt had also admired his various bronzes and sculptures, such as *Phryne*, exhibited at the Royal Academy. Eventually, Johnson commissioned Charles to produce a series of oil paintings depicting Rolls-Royce cars in various evocative or dramatic settings – a task he was easily able to undertake, since he had ready access to Montagu's car and could accompany his employer on journeys and rallies and see Rolls-Royce cars in use in town and in the country. Some of Charles' paintings were reproduced in full colour in the company's 1910/1911 catalogue, the publication of which was soon followed by the introduction, in March 1911, of the *Spirit of Ecstasy*, the marque's official mascot. This was commissioned by Johnson to counteract a craze among motorists – including, sadly, some Rolls-Royce owners – for fixing golliwogs, toy policemen and other unseemly objects to their cars.

Announcing the *Spirit of Ecstasy* through the columns of *The Car Illustrated* and other motoring journals, Claude Johnson explained that it was intended to convey the spirit of Rolls-Royce: "Speed with silence, absence of vibration, the mysterious harnessing of great energy, a beautiful, moving, living organism of superb grace". In creating the figure, Charles Sykes had in mind "the spirit of ecstasy, who has selected road travel as her supreme delight and has alighted on the prow of a Rolls-Royce car to revel in the freshness of the air and the musical sound of her fluttering draperies".



## Eleanor Thornton – mistress, mother and mascot?

**E**leanor Velasco Thornton was born in Stockwell, south London, in 1880.

By the age of 22, after winning a scholarship to Greycoat Hospital, Westminster, then working for a period as a secretary to Claude Johnson at the Automobile Club, Eleanor Thornton became secretary, mistress and close companion to Johnson's friend John Montagu, who at that time founded the magazine 'The Car Illustrated'.

A year later, on 5 April 1903, Eleanor gave birth to Montagu's daughter, Joan. Montague visited the child regularly, but did not publicly acknowledge her. Joan's suspicions about her benefactor's true relationship to her were not confirmed until Montagu's death, when she read this note from her late father:

"If you ever have to open this letter it will probably be because I am no longer in the world to tell you," began Montagu in his stilted explanation of the affair.

"In the ordinary work of life I was a pioneer of motoring and she was a secretary to Mr Claude Johnson. She began to like me and realised my feelings as well.

"Finally, in February 1902, she became my secretary and together we started the 'Car'. Before long we discovered that we loved each other intensely and our mutual scruples vanished before our great love."

Joan Thornton lived until 23 June, 1979. Her mother, Eleanor Thornton's modelling sessions for Charles Sykes' *Spirit of Ecstasy* must have taken place some time around 1910, after Montagu introduced Claude Johnson, by now managing director of Rolls-Royce, to the artist and sculptor.

With the outbreak of the First World War Montagu began service commanding the second 7th battalion of the Hampshire Regiment. In January 1915 he was appointed Inspector of Mechanical Transport, India.

In December that year, during a voyage to Port Said accompanied by Eleanor Thornton, Montagu's ship was torpedoed by a German submarine.

It was lunchtime when the 7,900 ton SS *Persia* was stuck on its port edge. The ship's boilers exploded and it sank almost immediately, going down 71 miles off Cape Martello on the coast of Crete.

Eleanor Thornton lost her life in the disaster, but was later commemorated by Montagu in an inscription on his family pew at the parish church of Beaulieu:

"Erected by John, 2nd Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, in thankfulness for his miraculous escape from drowning after the sinking of the SS *Persia*. And in memory of Eleanor Velasco Thornton, who served him devotedly for 15 years. Drowned December 30th, 1915."

*Researched by Malcolm Tucker*

*Eleanor Thornton in profile.*

Although the creation of the *Spirit of Ecstasy* is well documented, the name of the model who inspired Charles Sykes to create it is still a mystery. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the model was Eleanor Velasco Thornton, who had been Johnson's secretary at the Automobile Club and was now John Montagu's mistress. Eleanor had posed for many of Charles' creations and was undoubtedly his favourite model in the early years of this century. Sadly, Eleanor did not live to tell later generations about her life among the artists, aristocrats and writers of Edwardian and pre-First World War London; she was drowned in 1915 when the ship on which she was travelling though the Mediterranean was torpedoed by a U-boat. Unfortunately, those

most likely to have known the identity of the model – Claude Johnson, John Montagu, Eleanor's sister Rose, and Charles Sykes – died long before motoring historians began asking who she was.

Claude Johnson wanted the *Spirit of Ecstasy* mascot to be hand-made, under the personal supervision of its designer, and therefore an agreement was made with Charles Sykes to the effect that he was to be the sole manufacturer for as long as he was able. His production method was the *cire perdue* or 'lost wax' process. The figurine was sculptured in wax, and this was used as a pattern for a mould in which four hand-finished, signed and dated wax copies of the original were cast. These copies became the patterns for refractory moulds for four



bronze castings which were the matrices for the wax replicas that had to be made for all the mascots produced by Charles and his assistants, one of whom was his daughter Jo.

Despite rumours to the contrary, the early mascots were not cast in solid silver but in white metal. Later, bronze mascots were offered with a brass, copper or silver finish. Chromium-plated mascots became common, silver-or gold-plated ones less so.

Rolls-Royce owners and the motoring public soon acclaimed the *Spirit of Ecstasy*, which received international recognition by winning the first prize in a competition held in Paris in 1920 to find the world's best motor car mascot. Charles received a gold medal, and made a gold-plated mascot for display at an exhibition of all the entries in the competition. He followed-up his success by producing presentation ashtrays, lamps, silver rose bowls and other ornaments featuring miniature Flying Ladies. He was also commissioned to make large bronze versions of the mascot, mounted on bases of Irish green marble, for the company's showrooms in cities all over the world.

Over the years various subtle changes have been made to the mascot's shape and size, notably the production of the so-called 'kneeling lady' for certain Phantom IIIs, Silver Wraiths and Silver Dawns. Collectors have great fun in dating and identifying the examples they acquire at auctions and through private sales, first checking the various inscriptions under the figure's wings and on its base. The one on the base will feature Charles' 'long signature' if it was made before 1928. After that year his 'short signature' (C. Sykes) was applied, to make the task of finishing the wax models – which was now supervised by Jo – easier and quicker.



A unique contribution to the art of motoring.



The Spirit of Ecstasy, the best mascot in the world.

Not all Rolls-Royce owners fitted the *Spirit of Ecstasy* above their radiators; Charles received a number of special commissions. For Princess Mary, the Princess Royal, he designed a gilded canary mascot. This was carried on many of her Rolls-Royces. John Montagu, though an admirer of the *Spirit of Ecstasy* – and indeed the owner of one – had his own Rolls-Royce mascot. This figure is similar to the Spirit of Ecstasy but instead of having her winged arms outstretched behind her, she is holding a finger of her left hand to her lips.

This figure is still something of an enigma among Rolls-Royce mascots, and its date of origin has yet to be established. Known to the Montagu family as *Silence and Speed*, it was at one time thought to have been an alternative design to the *Spirit of Ecstasy*, but Jo Sykes is emphatic that this was not the case and that her father created it as a personal mascot for John Montagu. Certainly, the only cars to carry *Silence and Speed* were the Silver Ghosts and Phantom I he owned between 1916 and the year of this death, 1929.

Jo Sykes once owned a bronze replica of *Silence and Sound*, made by her father, who called it *The Whisper* (or simply *Whisper*). Several replicas of apparently similar age have come to light during the past two years; there are also some unauthorized aluminium copies, made after Charles Sykes' death, in circulation.

Happily, Rolls-Royce enthusiasts enjoy a good-mystery and the story of the the *Spirit of Ecstasy* and her secretive sister will test their imaginations and powers of research and deduction for many years to come.

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Paul Tritton is an author and journalist.