ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

ROLLS-ROYCE ‘MAKERS OF THE MARQUE’:

CHARLES ROBINSON SYKES

(18 December 1875 – 6 June 1950)

Monday 16 December, Goodwood, West Sussex

* A brief overview of the life and career of Charles Robinson Sykes, born 18 December 1875
* A gifted artist, illustrator and sculptor, best known for creating the Spirit of Ecstasy mascot
* Original sculpture is displayed at the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu
* Closely connected with many of the leading actors in the Rolls-Royce foundation story
* Other notable works include motor-racing trophies and commercial art

*“Best known to posterity as the creator of the Spirit of Ecstasy, Charles Sykes was a multitalented artist with deep connections to the principal players in the Rolls-Royce story. His professional and artistic relationship with Eleanor Thornton was pivotal in his work, for which she was perhaps his greatest muse; he also benefitted from two powerful patrons in Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and Claude Johnson, on whose behalf he produced some of the finest and most enduring works of art. His paintings of Rolls-Royce motor cars uniquely capture their grace and beauty, and in his depictions of their almost exclusively aristocratic owners, he provides a fascinating window into a world that has now vanished.”*

**Andrew Ball, Head of Corporate Relations and Heritage, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars**

Charles Robinson Sykes was born on 18 December 1875 in Brotton, a mining village near Cleveland in the north-east of England. His father and uncle were talented amateur artists and encouraged him to pursue a professional career.

Sykes began his artistic training at Rutherford Art College in Newcastle. In 1898, he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in London, where he studied drawing, painting and sculpture, under eminent tutors including the anatomist Arthur Thomson, illustrator Walter Crane and, most significantly, the renowned sculptor Edouard Lanterie. Sykes remained in the capital after graduating and quickly established himself as a multitalented artist.

In 1902, Sykes was commissioned by a magazine publisher to produce some sketches. However, the client was unable to pay in cash. Instead, he introduced Sykes to John Montagu, who would later become 2nd Baron Montagu of Beaulieu but was, for the time being, trying to get his own magazine project, a glossy weekly called *The Car Illustrated*, off the ground.

With Sykes providing the ‘Illustrated’ elements, including everything from the cover artwork to fashion drawings, the magazine flourished. It was one of the first to print images in full colour, and Sykes took full advantage of the new creative opportunities this offered him. He had a particular interest in Greek mythology, and often introduced classical references into his work. One example, his Christmas 1907 front cover was entitled *Towards the Dawn* and featured what would become a recurring theme and, in time, a global icon: a lissom winged goddess.

It is very likely that the inspiration for this figure was a young woman named Eleanor Thornton, who was assistant to John Montagu; she was also Sykes’s long-time favourite muse, posing for him on many occasions. Since they now worked together on Montagu’s magazine, their stories inevitably became even more closely intertwined.

In 1903, the prestigious Gordon Bennett Motor Race came to Ireland. Montagu and his friend Charles Rolls had previously distinguished themselves in the long-distance road event. On those occasions, there had been a single trophy, awarded to the winning driver’s sponsoring club. Montagu wanted to donate a new trophy, to be presented to the club achieving the best aggregate performance. Sykes duly produced a silver sculpture of a female figure, very probably modelled on Eleanor, holding aloft a motor car with silver wings. Montagu was delighted, declaring, ‘Mr. Sykes has combined originality of design with beauty of conception.’

Alongside his commercial work, Sykes continued to develop his fine-art practice. Montagu commissioned a triptych for Beaulieu parish church, and a bronze Madonna and Child still displayed in the Montagu family home. Sykes’s talent for sculpture was formally recognised when his bronze ‘A Bacchante’ – again almost certainly based on Eleanor Thornton – was exhibited to considerable acclaim at the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) in London and the Paris Salon.

Sykes and his wife Jessica, his childhood sweetheart whom he’d married in 1903, became close friends of the Montagu family and often stayed as guests at Beaulieu. These visits gave Sykes numerous opportunities to view and travel in the latest Rolls-Royce motor cars, especially the Silver Ghost, which his host owned from 1908 onwards. These encounters inspired paintings depicting Silver Ghosts in scenes from the motoring life of the period. One example shows Montagu and his friends arriving for a day’s shooting in Montagu’s first Silver Ghost, chassis number 60751, named *Dragon Fly*. *A Nocturne in Blue* has a Silver Ghost arriving at a country house by night; in *A Ghost Overtaken by the Dawn* the car and its drowsy occupants are heading home as the sun rises over the countryside.

Sykes’s artwork naturally caught the attention of Claude Johnson, known to himself as the ‘hyphen in Rolls-Royce’ and everyone else simply as ‘CJ’, who was Rolls-Royce’s first Commercial Managing Director. In his previous role as Secretary of the Automobile Club of Great Britain & Ireland (later the Royal Automobile Club, or RAC), he too had employed Eleanor Thornton as his assistant, before she went to work for Montagu.

Characteristically, CJ saw a golden promotional opportunity in Sykes’s paintings. The company’s 80-page Catalogue for 1910-11 included six original Sykes oils showing Rolls-Royce motor cars arriving variously at the Opera, a Country House, the Golf Links, the Meet, the Covert-side and the Salmon Stream, accurately reflecting the aristocratic tastes and lifestyles of its patrons. The company also bought the copyright to other works depicting other Rolls-Royce motor cars at dusk, arriving at the top of a steep hill and effortlessly overcoming a snowstorm.

Soon afterwards, Sykes took on what would be his most famous and enduring commission. CJ wanted an official Rolls-Royce mascot – and he told Sykes he wanted it to look like the imposing Greek statue *Nike of Samothrace* in The Louvre in Paris. Dating from 190BCE and standing nine feet (2.75 m) tall, she appears as a winged deity descending from the heavens. Draped in a flowing tunic and mantle, her classical perfection is marred only by the absence of her head and both arms – perhaps excusable in one more than 2,000 years old.

Sykes, however, felt the Goddess of Victory was altogether too martial and domineering to be a suitable subject. Having often travelled in Montagu’s Silver Ghosts, he believed a more delicate, ethereal figure would better express his own experience of being. His daughter, Josephine Sykes (‘Jo’), later recalled he was ‘very impressed with the smoothness and speed of the car and imagined that even so delicate a thing as a fairy could ride on the bonnet without losing her balance’.

It is now generally accepted – though not undisputed – that, once again, Eleanor was his model for what Rolls-Royce described in a letter to John Montagu as ‘the spirit of the Rolls-Royce – namely, speed with silence, absence of vibration, the mysterious harnessing of great energy, a beautiful living organism of superb grace like a sailing yacht. Such is the spirit of the Rolls-Royce, and such is the combination of virtues which Mr Charles Sykes has expressed so admirably in the graceful little lady who is designed as a figurehead of the Rolls-Royce.’ The company was delighted with its ‘graceful little goddess’, in which Sykes had, in its view, perfectly captured, ‘the spirit of ecstasy, who has selected road travel as her supreme delight and 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’.

Sykes was appointed sole supplier of the new mascot, which he produced in his studio over Herbert Barder’s furriers’ shop at 193 Brompton Road in West London. From 1911 to 1928, he personally supervised his own production team, comprising a foundry man and a wax modeller; thereafter until 1948, his daughter Jo took charge. Rolls-Royce then undertook the work in-house, using new casting techniques with stainless steel.

Charles Sykes died in 1950. Though best remembered for his work with Rolls-Royce, and particularly the Spirit of Ecstasy, he enjoyed a long, varied and successful career as a commercial artist. He designed magazine covers, and advertisements for clients including De Reszke cigarettes, Ensign Cameras, Erasmic shaving soap and Ucal hair tonic; he also produced travel posters for the London & North Eastern (LNER) railway, as well as drawings, paintings and cartoons. His work is still highly regarded, and held in a number of important collections, including those of the British Museum and the V&A in London. In August 2024, Rolls-Royce released the Phantom Scintilla Bespoke Collection, inspired by the grace, dynamism and ethereal beauty of the Spirit of Ecstasy; a fitting tribute to Charles Sykes’s masterpiece and his enduring legacy.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

You can find all our press releases and press kits, as well as a wide selection of high resolution, downloadable photographs and video footage at our media website, [PressClub](https://www.press.rolls-roycemotorcars.com/rolls-royce-motor-cars-pressclub).

You can also follow marque on social media: [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/rolls-royce-motor-cars/); [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/user/RollsRoyceMotorCars); [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/rollsroycecars/); and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/rollsroycemotorcars).

EDITORS’ NOTES

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars is a true luxury house, creating the world’s most recognised, revered and desirable handcrafted Bespoke products for its international clientele.

There are over 2,500 people working at the Home of Rolls-Royce at Goodwood, West Sussex. This comprises both its global headquarters and Centre of Luxury Manufacturing Excellence – the only place in the world where Rolls-Royce motor cars are designed, engineered and meticulously built by hand. An [independent study](https://www.press.rolls-roycemotorcars.com/rolls-royce-motor-cars-pressclub/article/detail/T0414618EN/%C2%A34bn-for-uk-plc%E2%80%99:-rolls-royce-motor-cars-%E2%80%93-the-great-british-success-story) by the London School of Economics & Political Science confirms that since the company first launched at Goodwood in 2003, it has contributed more than £4 billion to the UK economy and adds more than £500 million in economic value every year.

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars is a wholly owned subsidiary of the BMW Group and is a completely separate, unrelated company from Rolls-Royce plc, the manufacturer of aircraft engines and propulsion systems.

120TH ANNIVERSARY

In 2024, Rolls-Royce marks the 120th anniversary of the first meeting between its founders, Henry (later Sir Henry) Royce and The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls on 4 May 1904. The meeting, at The Midland Hotel in Manchester, was arranged by a mutual friend, Henry Edmunds. Rolls agreed to sell all the cars Royce could make and the rest is, literally, history. Together, Royce and Rolls created what was soon dubbed ‘the best car in the world’ and gave their names to a dynasty of motor cars that continues to define superluxury motoring across the world.

The Rolls-Royce ‘Makers of the Marque’ series:

* Henry Edmunds, born 19 March 1853
* Sir Henry Royce, born 27 March 1863
* Eleanor Thornton, born 15 April 1880
* Ernest Hives, born 21 April 1886
* Lord John Walter Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu, born 10 June 1866
* The Hon. Charles Rolls, born 27 August 1877
* Claude Johnson, born 24 October 1864
* Charles Sykes, born 18 December 1875
* Eric Platford, born 25 February 1883

The Rolls-Royce ‘Models of the Marque’ series:

* 1900s: Royce 10 H.P. / Rolls-Royce 10 H.P.
* 1910s: Rolls-Royce 40/50 H.P. ‘Silver Ghost’
* 1920s: Rolls-Royce 20 H.P. the ‘Twenty’
* 1930s: Rolls-Royce Phantom III
* 1940s: Rolls-Royce Silver Dawn
* 1950s: Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud
* 1960s: Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow
* 1970s: Rolls-Royce Camargue

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