

JOHN SINGER SARGENT

with

Dr. Bill Thierfelder

Professor of Arts and Humanities (retired)

Writer, Artist, Lecturer (Portland, OR)

Visiting Docent, American Museum of Natural History (NYC)

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La Jaleo 1882; *The Spanish Dancer* 1879

John Singer Sargent, the son of an American doctor, was born in Florence in 1856. He studied painting in Italy and France and in 1884 caused a sensation at the Paris Salon with his painting of Madame Gautreau. Exhibited as Madame X, people complained that the painting was provocatively erotic. The scandal persuaded Sargent to move to England and over the next few years established himself as the country's leading portrait painter. This included portraits of Joseph Chamberlain (1896), Frank Swettenham (1904) and Henry James (1913). Sargent made several visits to the USA where as well as portraits he worked on a series of decorative paintings for public buildings such as the Boston Public Library (1890) and the Museum of Fine Arts (1916).

In 1879, Sargent painted a portrait of Carolus-Duran; the virtuoso effort met with public approval and announced the direction his mature work would take. Its showing at the Paris Salon was both a tribute to his teacher and an advertisement for portrait commissions. Of Sargent's early work, Henry James wrote that the artist offered 'the slightly "uncanny" spectacle of a talent which on the very threshold of its career has nothing more to learn'.

In the early 1880s Sargent regularly exhibited portraits at the Salon, and these were mostly full-length portrayals of women: Madame Edouard Pailleron in 1880, Madame Ramón Subercaseaux in 1881, and Lady with the Rose, 1882. He continued to receive positive critical notice.



Sargent; The infamous portrait of "Madame X" (1884)

Sargent's best portraits reveal the individuality and personality of the sitters; his most ardent admirers think he is matched in this only by Velázquez, who was one of Sargent's great influences. The Spanish master's spell is apparent in Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, 1882, a haunting interior which echoes Velázquez' *Las Meninas*. Sargent's *Portrait of Madame X*, done in 1884, is now considered one of his best works, and was the artist's personal favorite; eventually Sargent sold it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. However, at the time it was unveiled in Paris at the 1884 Salon, it aroused such a negative reaction that it prompted Sargent to move to London. Prior to the *Mme. X* scandal of 1884, he had painted exotic beauties such as *Rosina Ferrara of Capri*, and the Spanish expatriate model, *Carmela Bertagna*, but the earlier pictures had not been intended for broad public reception.

Before his arrival in England, Sargent began sending paintings for exhibition at the Royal Academy. These included the portraits of *Dr. Pozzi at Home*, 1881, a flamboyant essay in red, and the more traditional *Mrs. Henry White*, 1883. The ensuing portrait commissions encouraged Sargent to finalize his move to London in 1886. His first major success at the Royal Academy came in 1887, with the enthusiastic response to *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, a large piece, painted on site, of two young girls lighting lanterns in an English garden. The painting was immediately purchased by the Tate Gallery. In 1894 Sargent was elected an associate of the Royal Academy, and was made a full member three years later. In the 1890s he averaged fourteen portrait commissions per year, none more beautiful than the genteel *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*, 1892. As a portrait painter in the grand manner, Sargent's success was unmatched; his subjects were at once ennobled and often possessed of nervous energy (*Mrs. Hugh Hammersley*, 1892). With little fear of contradiction, Sargent was referred to as 'the Van Dyck of our times'.

Sargent painted a series of three portraits of Robert Louis Stevenson. The second, *Portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson and his Wife* (1885), was one of his best known. He also completed portraits of two U.S. presidents: Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.



Oil portrait of Teddy Roosevelt, 1903; watercolor of Bedouins, 1906; charcoal portrait of W. B. Yeats, 1908

During the greater part of Sargent's career, he created roughly 900 oil paintings and more than 2,000 watercolors, as well as countless sketches and charcoal drawings. From 1907 on Sargent forsook portrait painting and focused on landscapes in his later years; he also sculpted later in life. His oeuvre documents worldwide travel, from Venice to the Tyrol, Corfu, Montana and Florida, and each destination offered pictorial treasure. As a concession to the insatiable demand of wealthy patrons for portraits, however, he continued to dash off rapid charcoal portrait sketches for them, which he called "Mugs". Forty-six of these, spanning the years 1890-1916, were exhibited at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in 1916.

Sargent is usually not thought of as an Impressionist painter, but he sometimes used impressionistic techniques to great effect, and his *Claude Monet Painting at the Edge of a Wood* is rendered in his own version of the impressionist style.

Although Sargent was an American expatriate, he returned to the United States many times, often to answer the demand for commissioned portraits. Many of his most important works are in museums in the U.S.; in 1909 he exhibited eighty-six watercolors in New York City, eighty-three of which were bought by the Brooklyn Museum. His mural decorations grace the Boston Public Library. For this commission, a series of oils on the theme of *The Triumph of Religion* that were attached to the walls of the library by means of marouflage, Sargent made numerous visits to the United States in the last decade of his life, including a stay of two full years from 1915-1917.

It is in some of his late works where one senses Sargent painting most purely for himself. His watercolors, often of landscapes documenting his travels (*Santa Maria della Salute*, 1904, Brooklyn Museum of Art), were executed with a joyful fluidness. In watercolors and oils he portrayed his friends and family dressed in Orientalist costume, relaxing in brightly lit landscapes that allowed for a more vivid palette and experimental handling than did his commissions (*The Chess Game*, 1906).

Among the artists with whom Sargent associated were Dennis Miller Bunker, Carroll Beckwith, Edwin Austin Abbey (who also worked on the Boston Public Library murals), Francis David Millet, Wilfrid de Glehn, Jane Emmet de Glehn and Claude Monet, whom Sargent painted. Sargent developed a life-long friendship with fellow painter Paul César Helleu, whom he met in Paris in 1878 when Sargent was 22 and Helleu was 18. Sargent painted both Helleu and his wife Alice on several occasions, most memorably in the impressionistic *Paul Helleu Sketching with his Wife*, 1889. His supporters included Henry James, Isabella Stewart Gardner (who commissioned and purchased works from Sargent, and sought his advice on other acquisitions), and Edward VII, whose recommendation for knighthood the artist declined.

Sargent was extremely private regarding his personal life, although the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche, who was one of his early sitters, said after his death that Sargent's sex life "was notorious in Paris, and in Venice, positively scandalous. He was a frenzied bugger." The truth of this may never be established. Some scholars have suggested that Sargent was homosexual. He had personal associations with Prince Edmond de Polignac and Count Robert de Montesquiou. His male nudes reveal complex and well-considered artistic sensibilities about the male physique and male sensuality; this can be particularly observed in his portrait of Thomas E. McKeller, but also in *Tommies Bathing*, nude sketches for *Hell and Judgement*, and his portraits of young men, like *Bartholomy Maganosco* and *Head of Olimpio Fusco*. However, there were many friendships with women, as well, and a similar sensualism informs his female portrait and figure studies (notably *Egyptian Girl*, 1891). The likelihood of an affair with Louise Burkhardt, the model for *Lady with the Rose*, is accepted by Sargent scholars.

In a time when the art world focused, in turn, on Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism, Sargent practiced his own form of Realism, which brilliantly referenced Velázquez, Van Dyck, and Gainsborough. His seemingly effortless facility for paraphrasing the masters in a contemporary fashion led to a stream of commissioned portraits of remarkable virtuosity (*Arsène Vigeant*, 1885, *Musées de Metz*; *Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps-Stokes*, 1897, *Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*) and earned Sargent the moniker, "the Van Dyck of our times." Still, during his life his work engendered critical responses from some of his colleagues: Camille Pissarro wrote "he is not an enthusiast but rather an adroit performer", and Walter Sickert published a satirical turn under the heading "Sargentolatry". By the time of his death he was dismissed as an anachronism, a relic of the Gilded Age and out of step with the artistic sentiments of post-World War I Europe. Foremost of Sargent's detractors was the influential English art critic Roger Fry, of the Bloomsbury Group, who at the 1926 Sargent retrospective in London dismissed Sargent's work as lacking aesthetic quality.

Despite a long period of critical disfavor, Sargent's popularity has increased steadily since the 1960s, and Sargent has been the subject of recent large-scale exhibitions in major museums, including a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1986, and a 1999 "blockbuster" travelling show that exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the National Gallery of Art Washington, and the National Gallery, London.

It has been suggested that the exotic qualities inherent in his work appealed to the sympathies of the Jewish clients whom he painted from the 1890s on. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his portrait *Almina, Daughter of Asher Wertheimer* (1908), in which the subject is seen wearing a Persian costume, a pearl encrusted turban, and strumming an Indian sarod, accoutrements all meant to convey sensuality and mystery. If Sargent used this portrait

to explore issues of sexuality and identity, it seems to have met with the satisfaction of the subject's father, Asher Wertheimer, a wealthy Jewish art dealer living in London, who commissioned from Sargent a series of a dozen portraits of his family, the artist's largest commission from a single patron. The paintings reveal a pleasant familiarity between the artist and his subjects. Wertheimer bequeathed most of the paintings to the National Gallery.

John Singer Sargent is interred in Brookwood Cemetery near Woking, Surrey.

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Portrait of Lady Agnew, 1892