



Sargent, John Singer (1856-1925)

by Julia Pastore

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Everyone who was anyone during the turn into the twentieth century had a portrait painted by John Singer Sargent. The wealthy, famous, and noble on both sides of the Atlantic flocked to the London studio of this expatriate American, sealing his reputation as one of the most famous and recognizable of American artists.

Born January 12, 1856 in Florence, Italy to American parents, Sargent lived a vagabond childhood, traveling throughout Europe with his parents. In 1874 he went to Paris to study painting.

A trip to Madrid in 1879 inspired the masterpiece of his youth, *El Jaleo* (1882). In somber colors reminiscent of Velázquez and Goya, *El Jaleo* depicts the passion and sensuality of flamenco dance and music.

Earthy and exotic, it created a scandal when it was exhibited, establishing a pattern whereby Sargent earned fame (and occasionally infamy) by shocking the artistic establishment and the social arbiters of his day.

Controversy followed other early portraits, such as that of gynecologist *Dr. Samuel Jean Pozzi at Home* (1881).

The famous full-length portrait of New Orleans beauty Virginie Gautreau (1884) brought Sargent notoriety. Considered ostentatious and brazen, the portrait of Madame Gautreau in a strapless black gown with a plunging neckline was eviscerated by the critics as scandalous.

From a contemporary perspective, it is particularly noteworthy as a depiction of a sexually aware and desiring woman and as a comment on Parisian social pretensions. Sargent eventually changed the title to *Portrait of Madame X* to protect the sitter.

To escape the scandal created by the *Portrait of Madame X*, in 1886 Sargent moved to London, where paintings such as *Carnation, Lily, Lilly, Rose* (1885-1886) and *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* (1892-1893) triumphed at the Royal Academy and where he established a brilliant career as a society and celebrity portraitist.

Because of his ability to capture the essence of male power and female beauty without superficiality, Sargent is considered by some to be "vanity's butler" for making everyone appear dashing and beautiful.

However, Sargent's work is often unsparingly candid, depicting his sitters' insecurity and awkwardness as well as their beauty and power. The delicate brushwork, nuanced color, and ingenious use of setting make his portraits uniquely vibrant and alive.



Three works by John Singer Sargent.
Top: Self portrait.
Center: A sketch of two nude men wrestling.
Above: Portrait of Carolus-Duran.
Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

Although Sargent's portraits sold for high prices and made his career, the assembly line nature of the work increasingly dissatisfied him. From 1900 to 1907, he painted from 15 to 25 portraits per year.

After painting over 700 portraits, he dedicated his last years to producing large murals for the Boston Public Library, the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, and Harvard University, as well as numerous watercolors. These works remain largely unrecognized.

Critics frequently comment on the tension between respectability and sensuality in Sargent's work, especially his ability to suggest the transgressive without actually violating social proprieties. Many find the same tension in Sargent's personal life.

Although he had many friends, including Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson, and associated with aesthetes and dandies such as Oscar Wilde and Robert de Montesquiou, Sargent was known as distant and reserved. He had no great romantic attachments, only flirtations with women and deep friendships with men.

Rumors circulated about his relationship with his long-time model and assistant Nicola d'Inverno, but no physical liaison of any kind has been documented. At his death, his family destroyed his personal papers, so the evidence for Sargent's homosexuality resides largely in his work, especially his genre paintings and male nudes.

American art historian Trevor J. Fairbrother believes that Sargent's drawings of the male nude show that Sargent had homosexual leanings. Gently erotic with an unabashed attention to genitalia, these were never exhibited.

Also of note is an early portrait that evokes a homosexual sensibility, *W. Graham Robertson* (1894), in which a slender 28-year-old dandy, dressed in a smoking jacket, stands in a provocative pose, while an elderly poodle rests on the floor.

One of his most beautiful works is *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller* (1917-1920). Found in his studio at his death, this oil painting of one of Sargent's favorite models, legs sprawled and eyes raised, challenges interpretation.

Also surprisingly erotic is the unfinished Boston Public Library mural *Triumph of Religion* (1890-1919), which features numerous images of young male bodies.

After a life filled with honors and prizes, Sargent died on April 15, 1925 in London. His grave stone inscription reads "to work is to pray."

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