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Portraiture
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John Singer Sargent

Early Life:

John Singer Sargent was an American artist born in Florence, Italy on January 12, 1856. His parents, Mary Singer and FitzWilliam Sargent were two Americans who decided to move to Europe for health reasons. Singer and Sargent, both obsessed with their health, constantly moved around Europe to insure good health; moving to warmer climates during winter and cooler climates during summer. Spending no more than several months in one place, Sargent's childhood was unique. He was home-schooled until the age of thirteen and during those years received a very basic education. His mother, Mary Singer believed that their traveling held a good basis for education while his father, FitzWilliam disagreed. It was apparent at a young age that Sargent had some artistic abilities and was encouraged by both of his parents, (who could both be considered amateur artists) as a young child to be creative. His first known sketchbook was done around the age of five which included a portrait of his father. Since his family moved around, his early paintings were mostly of landscapes and architecture. In 1869, at the age of thirteen, Sargent attended Academia delle Belle Arti, where he began his studies in art. After spending several years taking course at the Academia delle Belle Arti, Sargent started working at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in France, in 1874. By this point Sargent had developed a strong sense of painting and started studying in the atelier of Carolus-Duran.

Early Work:

After creating portraits under Duran for three years, Sargent was finally recognized by the Salon (Paris) in 1877, where his portrait of Fanny Watts (a childhood friend of Sargent's) was displayed. During this time Sargent placed second in a contest held by the Ecole, this being the first time for a student of Duran's to place so well and the best placing an American has ever received. In 1878 Sargent painted, *Oyster Gathers of Cancale*, and received an award for the painting from the Salon. This painting was also the first painting of Sargent's to be shown in America as part of a Society of American Artist (SAA) exhibit in New York city. In May of 1879, Sargent received Honorable Mention from the Salon because of a portrait he did of Carolus-Duran. Sargent recognition for Duran's portrait started the beginning of his commissioned work. America started noticing Sargent as well and was asked to become a member of the SAA in 1880. Continuing with his paintings, he received very enthusiastic reviews for two of his paintings in 1882, *El Jaleo* and *Lady with a Rose*, which were both shown in a SAA exhibit in 1883. By this point Sargent had developed a name for himself not only in Europe but American as well. Throughout all of this recognition, Sargent portraits were constantly receiving mixed reviews. Some argued that his paintings contained no sense of artist creativity, saying that he simply "copied" his subjects. While others emphasized his ability to focus on realism. Regarding his ability to use light and color to depict his subjects in everyday life, without embellishing them or misinterpreting them.

Madame X or Madame Gautreau:

In May of 1884, one of Sargent's most famous painting was shown at the Salon, *Madame X or Madame Gautreau*. Sargent first met Virginie Avegno or Madame Gautreau, sometime in the early winter of 1882 and became immediately obsessed with her beauty and unique characteristics. In a letter to a friend Sargent says, "I have great desire to paint her portrait and have reason to think that she would allow it..." (Ormond, p113). He wasted no time and started sketching Madame Gautreau in February of 1883. During that summer Sargent stayed with the Gautreaus family, at their summer house, working on Madame Gautreaus portrait. During Sargent's stay with the Gautreaus family he wrote several friends, speaking on behalf of Virginie's dazzling features and her "unpaintable beauty" (113). When *Madame X*, was revealed at the Salon, the public was disgusted. The painting was viewed as offensive and atrocious. She was shown with one shoulder strap slipping off her shoulder, along with a very forward stance, showing her arm slightly behind her shoulder and having the curve of her hip emphasized, all of which gave a very "available" appearance to Madame X. Along with this misinterpretation, Sargent also received very displeasing comments on the paleness of Madame X's skin, mainly on her chest. Along with her skin, the pink of her ear led to questions of the interactions between the sitter and the artist. This portrait also steps away from the traditional principles of portraiture, where the sitters face is the main subject and where ones eyes are forced. When viewing Madame X, ones eyes seem to vior towards her chest while glancing at her profile, which is where the paleness of her skin becomes an issue. Causing much of an uproar, mostly from Madame Gautreau and her mother, Sargent took the painting out of the Salon and

repainted it as we see it today, with both shoulder straps sitting on Madame Gautreaus shoulders. Since the Gautreaus family was so upset by this painting, Sargent did not receive payment for Madame X's portrait. This portrait discouraged Sargent, his public image had changed and he decided to leave Paris for the time being.

After this scandal the relationship between sitter and artist was reinforced. When working on commissioned work, obviously the sitter plays a large role in the outcome of the image, and when an artist paints something that the sitter is not pleased with, the artist suffers. The artists reputation suffers and the artist may not receive payment for that commission work. The expectation that the artist is held to, to create an "copy" of the sitter is high and difficult to achieve.

Influences:

During the summer of 1885 Sargent went to Giverny, France to spend time with friend and colleague, Claude Monet. The two spent most of their time painting, such as Sargent's, *Claude Monet, painting, by the edge of a wood*. Looking at Sargent's paintings you are able to see Monet's influence. Sargent's paintings started to include a more Impressionist style, for example, in August, Sargent painted, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, and *Garden Study of the Vickers Children*, done around the same time. Both of these painting show Impressionism through use of large brush strokes to represent bold color and movement. Sargent's painting of *Ruth Sears Bacon*, done in 1887, is another example of Impressionism, not only because of the large brush strokes but because of the idea that Bacon had just flopped down on the chair for Sargent to paint her portrait.

Later Work:

Eleven years after Sargent's first trip to America, in September of 1887, Sargent went back to Boston to paint a commissioned portrait of Mrs. Henry G. Marquand. Which launched a series of commissioned portraits within the United States. Spending six months traveling between Boston and New York, Sargent went back to Europe having painted more than twenty portraits. Meanwhile Sargent had his first one-man show, held at the St. Botolph Club in Boston. The show exhibited twenty-two of Sargent's paintings including, *El Jaleo* and *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit*. *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit* was painted in 1882 and is one of Sargent's most famous paintings. The composition of the painting is unique, the room appears to be disproportionately larger than the girls and the lack of relationship between the girls gives the painting an sense of mystery (Ormand, p.66). This may be one of Sargent's more well-known painting because these qualities help to show both his artistic and creative abilities.

After painting *Madame X*, Sargent moved to Fladbury, England and despite his frequent trips to America, Fladbury is where he spent most of his time. Sargent quickly made a name for himself in Fladbury, being viewed as well developed artist. In 1890 he was commissioned to paint a mural in The Boston Public Library. Sargent took painting very seriously, this mural included, which he thought would be one of the most important pieces of his life. This mural was very difficult for Sargent. He spent most of his life "coping" portraits and for this piece there needed to be somewhat more of a

thought process. After spending five years of planning Sargent started the mural in 1895 and did not finish it until 1916. Throughout the rest of Sargent's life he continually returned to Boston for commissioned murals. In 1922 and 1924 he returned to Boston to commissioned a mural at the Widener Memorial Library at Harvard.

In 1907 Sargent decided to stop painting portraits. Stating on June 13, 1907, "I have vowed a vow not to do any more portraits at all.... it is to me positive bliss to think I shall soon be a free me" (Olson, pg. 157). Sargent pledged from that point on, that he would focus on watercolor and created thousands of paintings. Spending the rest of his life working with watercolors and doing commissioned murals, Sargent passed away in London on April 15, 1925 of heart failure.

Annotated Bibliography

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About Sargent's early commissioned work in America.