John Singer Sargent at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Sargent and Paris*

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American artist John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) arrived in Paris in 1874 as a talented and ambitious young man determined to make a name for himself. About a decade later, Sargent left Paris for London after his portrait *Madame X* (1883-84) had caused a scandal and alienated his patrons. *Sargent and Paris*, an exhibition on view through August 3 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, focuses on this crucial period in the artist's career. It allows us to appreciate the sumptuous brushwork and compositional daring that contributed to his great success. It also underscores the fact that despite his modern techniques and penchant for provocation, Sargent held "self-consciously aristocratic" views about art and life.

The artist was born in Florence to expatriate American parents. His father, FitzWilliam Sargent, had retired early from practicing eye surgery in Philadelphia. His mother, Mary Newbold Singer Sargent, was the daughter of a prosperous Philadelphia tanner and hide merchant. The couple's first child had died at the age of two, and they had traveled to Europe to recover from the loss. At Mary's insistence, the couple had stayed in Europe, living on her inheritance. They moved seasonally between France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. Sargent was raised in elite cultural circles and became fluent in several languages.

Mary, herself an amateur watercolorist, encouraged her son's interest in art. Sargent assiduously practiced sketching and studied for a time at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. But he and his parents soon agreed that his talent would bloom best in Paris.

France had recently passed through a period of war, political crisis and revolution. In 1870, the Franco-Prussian War precipitated the collapse of France's Second Empire under Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. Months after the French defeat in January 1871, the workers of Paris revolted and established the Commune. The French Army had drowned this uprising in blood and restored capitalist order.

French imperialism was in full bloom. The Second Industrial Revolution was yielding not only innovations like railroads and electric lighting, but also a new bourgeoisie of industrial capitalists and financiers. This was the class from which Sargent's patrons later came. It had generally conservative tastes and found its ideological expression in bourgeois individualism and aestheticism. The new bourgeoisie pursued *haute couture* and conspicuous displays of its wealth.

But French society was polarized. Poverty was widespread, and the social system ensured a supply of cheap labor. In the wake of the defeat of the Commune, French workers faced intense repression and harsh conditions, including unemployment and poverty. The rise of heavy industry in areas near Paris led to "suburbanization" of a particular kind, the increasing segregation of working class families in outlying districts.

On his arrival in Paris in 1874, Sargent began studying at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he absorbed the academic tradition. He also joined the atelier of Carolus-Duran (1837–1917), who was renowned as a portraitist of high society. Carolus-Duran stressed realism, surface and bravura brushwork but not narrative. Sargent imbibed these principles so well that he soon rivaled his mentor.

Sargent also studied the work of Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) and Frans Hals (1582–1666) closely. He learned much from the former's austere, striking compositions and lighting. He also developed something of the latter's sensitive characterization. But Sargent did not only look backward for inspiration. He also experimented with the techniques of his contemporaries the Impressionists and became friends with Claude Monet (1840–1926).

Though he had bohemian inclinations, Sargent persistently strove for official recognition. This meant seeking acceptance and awards from the Paris Salon, an annual exhibition sponsored by the French government. The juries that accepted or rejected submissions tended to favor conservative, academic work. Sargent's portraits in the grand manner found favor with them. At the time, many avant-garde artists were rebelling against the Salon, but Sargent saw it as a means of gaining attention and commissions.

Sargent's portrait of Carolus-Duran, which he submitted to the Salon (and which is not included in the current exhibition), elicited broad public acclaim. Novelist Henry James wrote that Sargent offered "the slightly 'uncanny' spectacle of a talent which on the very threshold of its career has nothing more to learn."

During his student years in Paris, Sargent spent his summers traveling. Of the early works in the exhibition, the paintings that he produced during his voyages are among the most interesting. With an eye toward gaining exposure, Sargent chose popular subjects such as seascapes, local people and "exotic" locations. Sometimes working *en plein air* like the Impressionists, the artist demonstrated great skill in capturing the particularities of the landscape, architecture and light in Spain, Morocco and Italy.

Capri Girl on a Rooftop and *Dans les Oliviers à Capri (Among the Olive Trees, Capri)* (both 1878) reflect the bourgeois taste for exoticism. In the former, a peasant girl sits on the roof of a white stone building, playing tambourine, while another peasant girl dances a tarantella with graceful abandon. In the latter, a peasant girl in a white blouse and pink skirt leans casually on the gnarled branch of an olive tree, seeming almost to merge with it. Sargent's brushwork is comparatively free here. Both paintings imply a yearning for a "simpler," more "natural" life, as opposed to the industrial society of the European bourgeoisie.

In Venice, on the other hand, Sargent avoided the picturesque scenes familiar to tourists and sought out-of-the way settings. What are the man and woman talking about in the shadowy, narrow *Venetian Street* (1880-82)? The two women in the dark, spare *Venetian*

Interior (1880-82) are equally mysterious.

Of note is the study *Spanish Roma Woman* (c. 1876-82). Spanish culture was in vogue among Parisian artists at the time, but the Romani people generally were depicted negatively. Sargent's subject, however, looks straight at the viewer with dignity. The artist's sensitive treatment of her likely reflects his identification with (and romanticization of) her nomadic lifestyle.

Fumée d'ambre gris (*Smoke of Ambergris*, 1880) impressed viewers at the Salon. Inspired by a trip to Morocco, the tall painting shows a woman in loose white robes and a white shawl perfuming herself as she stands over an incense burner. The column and alcove that surround her are also white. The detailed and more colorful carpet and tile, which are sharply rendered, throw this striking, quasi-monochromatic composition into relief. Here, Sargent indulges in and caters to the contemporary fascination with the Orient then widespread in Europe. Many viewers found the painting mysterious, but Sargent stated that it was all about color.

As the artist's reputation grew, he began to attract portrait commissions from wealthy patrons. He became the most sought-after portraitist and commanded correspondingly high fees. Sargent's cosmopolitanism, good humor and charm enabled him to move easily in high society, where he seemed in his element. His portraits combine areas of fine detail with those of looser brushwork and emphasize color, light, texture and wealth.

Madame Ramón Subercaseaux (Amalia Errázuriz y Urmeneta) (1880) portrays the young wife of Chilean diplomat Ramón Subercaseaux in the couple's Paris apartment. In a stylish black and white dress adorned with red flowers, Madame appears to be pausing between songs as she sits at a midnight-black upright piano. Her blasé expression, which Sargent captures vividly, underscores the luxury that surrounds her, which includes a rich blue carpet and gorgeous red and white flowers.

One of Sargent's most compelling paintings is *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882). The imposing canvas shows four sisters, aged four to 14, in the entrance hall of their Paris apartment. Two blue and white Japanese vases tower over them, disrupting one's sense of scale and imparting a quality of monumentality to the portrait. Though the girls are near each other, each seems strangely isolated. Oblique light illuminates the two younger sisters, while the darkness of the cavernous interior threatens to swallow the two older sisters. The uncanny composition was unusual for the girls' stiff poses and unequal prominence, as well as for its vast empty spaces. It bears a striking resemblance to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), which Sargent had copied.

The exhibition climaxes with *Madame X* (1883-84), which Sargent believed was his best painting. It shows Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau, a woman born in New Orleans who had emigrated to France as a girl and married a French banker. Sargent was entranced by what he called the "strange, weird, fantastic, curious beauty" of this new-minted socialite — and doubtless felt an affinity for this fellow American expatriate. Wanting to create a great work for the Salon (and relishing the potential provocation), he convinced her to pose for him.

The composition has been stripped to a minimum: before a warm, brown background, Gautreau stands next to a small table. Her head is turned to her left, but her body is turned forward in an elegant but slightly unnatural posture. Her notable pallor, which she carefully maintained with makeup, contrasts sharply with her black, *décolleté* dress. Originally, the right strap of the dress was suggestively falling off Gautreau's shoulder. One notices the arch of her eyebrow, her prominent nose and her small, rouged lips. A diamond crescent ornament (recalling the Roman goddess Diana) in her swept-back hair, along with the Sirens supporting the table, impart a classical character to the portrait. Sargent has striven for realism and elegance. His brushwork is smooth, his colors lustrous. Gautreau is a striking, and perhaps dangerous, figure.

The painting caused a furor and divided opinion. Though many praised it, others saw it as an affront. Gautreau was well known in French society, and some of the elite saw her as an interloper. In the painting, she does have something of the bold *parvenue* about her. Other critics found her *décolletage* and falling strap *risqué* and alluded to her dubious reputation. Though Sargent repainted the strap so that it was no longer falling, his gesture came too late. Commissions from the French bourgeoisie dried up. Sargent had been considering a move to London, and the scandal gave him impetus.

At the Salon of 1885, Sargent managed to reassure French patrons with a more conventional portrait of Edith Vickers, a wealthy Englishwoman. Nevertheless, he completed his move to London the following year and lived there for the rest of his life. He gained a steady stream of commissions, often painting as many as 14 per year. His notable subjects included Isabella Stewart Gardner, the Boston patron of the arts; Gertrude Agnew, known as Lady Agnew of Lochnaw; industrialist John D. Rockefeller and President Woodrow Wilson. He also painted artists such as Monet and Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). Sargent's reputation was excellent, and his work continued to demonstrate sumptuous color and surface, technical facility and psychological realism.

But during and after World War I, amid the emergence of movements such as Cubism and Futurism, younger artists and critics began to see Sargent as a survivor of a bygone era, someone who was out of touch with contemporary reality. After Sargent's death, critical opinion of him became more favorable in acknowledgment of his painterly skill, but not of his ability to depict modernity and its upheavals.

"Sargent and Paris" provides ample evidence of Sargent's brilliance, as well as his willingness to use modern compositional or brushwork techniques. It also demonstrates that Sargent embodied the restoration of capitalist order after 1871 and the bourgeois ideals of refinement and cosmopolitanism. He hobnobbed with diplomats, aristocrats and industrialists, and his paintings idealized the dazzling surface of bourgeois life. He did not examine the origins of his subjects' wealth, not least because it could have jeopardized his own material interests.

In this way, Sargent's work contrasts with that of contemporaries such as Édouard Manet (1832–1883) and Edgar Degas (1834–1917), who often portrayed the working classes and urban alienation. To the extent that, early in his career, Sargent acknowledged workers, peasants and the poor, he generally romanticized them. The Capri paintings and *A Parisian Beggar Girl* (1880) are salient examples of this tendency.

Along these lines, in a 1952 essay, art historian Meyer Schapiro noted that

> The most advanced taste in the United States about 1900 had been self-consciously aristocratic, hostile to American customs, and deeply attached to the aesthetic as a superior way of life. Its representatives, [James McNeill] Whistler and Sargent, preferred to live abroad. These two painters were not in the vanguard of the world art of their time; but in their concern with a refined style and technique they were closer to the new European art than to the American. They lacked however the originality and robustness of the European innovators, their great appetite for life.

Sargent was one of the last of this species of American painter-aesthetes. The great changes in life and the encounter of US artists with "European innovators" in the Armory Show of 1913 and beyond brought about a new artist-painter personality, "who is both an inventive, scrupulous artist and a tough." (Schapiro)

Nonetheless, Sargent's talent was remarkable, and much of his work remains bold and fresh today. *Sargent and Paris* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art provides a welcome opportunity to re-examine his *oeuvre.*

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