

Citi Private Bank Art Advisory & Finance

Art Focus, Winter 2011

John Singer Sargent

From the time of John Singer Sargent's first submission to the Paris Salon in 1877 (when he was just 21 years old) both his portraits and subject pictures were well received. *En route pour la pêche* (*Setting Out to Fish*), painted in the artist's studio on the basis of sketches made in Brittany, was awarded honorable mention the following year. Despite his critical success, Sargent was not yet highly sought after as a portraitist, so in an effort to boost his profile and attract commissions, he convinced Mme. Pierre Gautreau to sit for a portrait. Sargent was under pressure to produce a masterpiece, as Mme. Gautreau, a renowned beauty and well-known figure in Parisian society, had previously refused many artists seeking to paint her portrait. He struggled to complete the painting, reworking the surface and changing the composition numerous times until at last it met with his satisfaction.



John Singer Sargent, *En route pour la pêche* (*Setting Out to Fish*), 1878, oil on canvas, 31 x 48 3/8 inches. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund 17.2.

John Singer Sargent is today recognized as one of the most important American artists working at the turn of the 19th century. Despite the fact he was born in Florence and lived primarily as an expatriate in Europe, Sargent always considered himself to be American, identifying with the manner and sensibility of his American parents. He received no formal education, but rather spent his childhood traveling throughout Europe, learning history, art, language, music and literature through the everyday experiences of a perpetual tourist. Sargent's talent for drawing emerged in the sketchbooks he filled with visual records of the family's travels. He received his first formal artistic training in Paris in 1874, studying under the French portraitist Carolus-Duran. Sargent was a quick study and was soon producing exhibition worthy oils. He submitted his first painting to the Paris Salon just three years later, in 1877.

When Sargent debuted *Portrait of Madame **** (now known as *Madame X*) at the Salon in May of 1884, he was unprepared for the uproar that arose from both the public and the press. The painting was met with such derisive commentary as: "Surely, no picture in the whole Salon can come more aptly under the head of 'eccentric' than the American Sargent's portrait of Madame Gautherau [*sic*]. It is depressing to look at this picture and, remembering what this clever, although always

sensationalist, pupil of Carolus-Duran has done in the past, to realize how he abandons true art and runs after the strange gods of notoriety and coarse sensationalism. This portrait is simply offensive in its insolent ugliness and defiance of every rule of art.”¹

In some measure to escape the chaos, Sargent removed himself to London, where he had earlier planned to spend some months fulfilling what few portrait commissions had come his way from England. In the late summer and early fall of 1884 he painted members of the Vickers family, one branch of which he joined at Petworth, in Sussex, on the south coast of England in October. Dating from this time, Sargent’s *Garden Study of the Vickers Children* illustrates his growing interest in Impressionism, particularly inspired by Claude Monet, whom he likely met in 1876. Sargent commented, “coming across a picture that looks like nature and gives the sense of living-for these reasons Monet bowled me over.”² The Impressionists, whose work Sargent was familiar with from his time in Paris, were taking risks with composition and color and using lively



John Singer Sargent in his Paris studio, ca. 1884 / unidentified photographer: photographic print: b&w; 21 x 28 cm. The Artists in their Paris studios collection, 1880-1890, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

brush work to elevate light and atmosphere over subject matter. They were also committed to painting outdoors, *en plein air*, completing their canvases in the field. Though Sargent had previously sketched outdoors, until this time he typically composed and painted his final works in the studio. Following a brief return to Paris, Sargent arrived at Broadway, a village in the Cotswolds west of London, in August 1885. His fellow artist and compatriot Edwin Austin Abbey recommended Broadway as a refuge where Sargent could recuperate from a head injury he suffered after an ill-fated dive during a boating



John Singer Sargent, *Garden Study of the Vickers Children*, 1884, oil on canvas. Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI / Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

trip on the Thames. He was received by the artist Francis D. Millet, an American who, with a wide circle of creative friends and acquaintances, including writer Henry James and painter Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, was part of a lively and relaxed artist’s colony. It was there, far removed from the critics of London and Paris and the *Madame X* scandal, that Sargent again experimented with Impressionist techniques, allowing himself to work in a more instinctive and casual manner. Elaine Kilmurray notes, “what remains distinct is the difference and the modernity of Sargent’s aesthetic and purpose. He had come hotfoot from Paris and brought a breath of the new painting with him. ...With regard to portraiture, he was dashing off to London now and then to work on a small number of commissioned works, and he painted informal portrait sketches, which were, by and large, done for friends and given as gifts.”³

During this first visit to Broadway, Sargent embarked upon his most ambitious painting of the period, a *tour de force* of Impressionism titled *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. He developed the subject from a scene of Chinese lanterns hanging in a garden that he came upon one evening on the Thames. Though *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* is characterized by the lively brushwork of the Impressionists, it is a carefully composed scene primarily concerned with evoking a mood and depicting



John Singer Sargent, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885-86, oil on canvas. Tate, London / Art Resource, NY.

a specific effect of light. Over two extended stays in Broadway, Sargent worked on the painting for just a few minutes each day at twilight, seeking to capture the ethereal glow that occurs just as the sun sets. The subject is made more challenging by the firelight emanating from the lanterns, illuminating the girls' faces from below. The painting was first shown at the Royal Academy in 1887 where it was a resounding success, confirmed by its purchase for the Tate Gallery at the encouragement of the pre-Raphaelite artist Sir Frederic Leighton, then president of the Royal Academy. With this work, Sargent's reputation was largely resurrected and he went on to become one of the most sought after portraitists of his time.

While commissioned portraits earned Sargent his reputation and living, he was frustrated by the restrictions of the genre, preferring to paint outdoor sketches in the Impressionist manner. Always a peripatetic traveler, after 1900 Sargent increasingly valued his time away from the studio, traveling with his sisters, nieces and their intimate circle of friends in Italy and the Swiss Alps. By 1907, around the time he painted *Dolce Far Niente*, Sargent had essentially given up formal portraiture in favor of depictions of his traveling companions dressed in exotic costumes and arranged in seemingly spontaneous compositions, sprawled in the countryside napping, reading, or playing a casual game of chess. Richard Ormond writes, "Sargent's Impressionist pictures of the 1880s had been similarly arranged around decorative picture subjects...Sargent had been attracted to the bizarre and exotic since his youth, and these extravagant late Alpine studies represent its climax. The paint is worked with incredible freedom and richness animating the whole surface of his pictures with thick splashes of pigment, and swirling



John Singer Sargent, *Dolce Far Niente*, c. 1907, oil on canvas. Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA / Bequest of A. Augustus Healy / The Bridgeman Art Library Nationality / copyright status: American / out of copyright.

brush-strokes. It is the force and vitality of the technique, transcending the particular subject depicted, which is so impressive."⁴ Now regarded as Sargent's most personal paintings, the freedom of composition and expressive color and light of the Alpine pictures are founded in his earlier experiments with Impressionism and *plein air* painting.

Valerie L. Westcott

Art Advisor

Citi Private Bank Art Advisory & Finance

666 Fifth Avenue, 7th Floor

New York, NY 10103

Tel: (212) 559-9474

Fax: (212) 793-4397

¹“Eccentricities of French Art,” *Art Amateur* II, no. 3, August 1884, p. 52; quoted in *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent*, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1997, p. 141

² http://www.adelsongalleries.com/exhibitions/2010-11-04_sargent-and-impressionism/press-release/

³ *John Singer Sargent: The Early Portraits*, New York, 1998, pp. 163, 164

⁴ *John Singer Sargent*, New York, 1970, p. 75

Citi Private Bank is a business of Citigroup Inc. (“Citigroup”), which provides its clients access to a broad array of products and services available through bank and non-bank affiliates of Citigroup. Not all products and services are provided by all affiliates or are available at all locations.

Citi Private Bank Art Advisory & Finance is a comprehensive fine art consulting service that provides collection administration, estate consultation, philanthropic planning and art financing. All credit products are subject to credit approval.

In the United Kingdom, Citibank N.A., London, and Citibank International plc, Citigroup Centre, Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5LB are authorised and regulated by the Financial Services Authority. In Jersey, this document is communicated by Citibank N.A., Jersey Branch which has its registered address at PO Box 104, 38 Esplanade, St Helier, Jersey JE4 8QB. Citibank N.A., Jersey Branch is regulated by the Jersey Financial Services Commission to conduct deposit taking business under the Banking Business (Jersey) Law 1991 and investment business under the Financial Services (Jersey) Law 1998. Citibank N.A., Jersey Branch is a member of the Depositors Compensation Scheme as set out in the Banking (Depositors Compensation) (Jersey) Regulations 2009. Further details of the scheme are available on request.

Alternative assets such as art are speculative, may not be suitable for all clients, and are intended for those who are willing to bear high economic risks. The Citi Private Bank Art Advisory & Finance does not advise clients how to profit from the purchase of art or guarantee that a particular piece can be sold or otherwise used for a financial transaction for any amount including an amount equal to the purchase price.

The information contained herein are those of Citi Private Bank Art Advisory & Finance and do not necessarily reflect the views of Citigroup Inc. or its affiliates. All opinions are subject to change without notice. Neither the information provided nor any opinion expressed constitutes a solicitation for the purchase or sale of any artwork.

Citi and Citi with Arc Design are registered service marks of Citigroup Inc. or its affiliates.

© 2011 Citigroup Inc., All Rights Reserved