CHAPTER 10

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'Selecting, transforming, recombining': John Singer Sargent's *Madame X* and the Aesthetics of Sculptural Corporeality

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In 1884, John Singer Sargent submitted his now infamous *Madame X* (Fig. 10.1), a striking portrait of the well-known 'professional beauty' Virginie Gautreau, to the Paris Salon. Exposed, in profile, and in a questionable state of déshabillé, the painting caused such a scandal that Sargent was found 'dodging behind doors' to avoid inevitable accusation, and the work was eventually withdrawn.[1] Though this *succès de scandale* has often been cited as the main cause of Sargent's eventual relocation to London, there has been little discussion about why exactly *Madame X* may have been quite so controversial. One answer may lie in the fact that the painting was viewed outside its intended original context, as Sargent had initially planned to exhibit it alongside a very different painting of a 'woman in white', *Mrs. Henry White* (1883) (Fig. 10.2), a portrait of the wife of an American diplomat.[2] Sargent's intentions, however, were thwarted partly because Mrs White had a lingering illness due to the effects of typhoid, which resulted in a series of rescheduled sittings and constant reworking of the paintings. *Mrs. Henry White* went to the Royal Academy, while *Madame X* remained in Paris for the Salon.

The complex story of these two paintings and their exhibition is nothing short of intriguing. The twinning of two images of women in 'white', or Sargent's 'white girls' as they might be described in homage to Whistler, prompts us to wonder what exactly Sargent wished to communicate by displaying two such seemingly disparate images together. For *Madame X*, in particular, we might wonder about her enigmatic 'whiteness', especially considering the highly sculptural and affected form of her pose. I suggest that a way of understanding this is to consider the discussions of corporeal whiteness and the sculptural body in the Aesthetic texts Sargent was reading and talking about in the years leading up to the exhibition of these portraits. By exploring the visual translation of these texts into Sargent's paintings it may be possible, I argue, to perceive a deeper layer of meaning in his complex compositional choices, specifically in relation to *Madame X*, as well as to comprehend his intentions about a dual exhibition.

For Aesthetes like Baudelaire and Pater, and those working later in the century,

FIG.

like Vernon Lee and Henry James, the white sculptural body acted as a fertile metaphor for Aestheticism's engagement with such taboo subjects as alternative sexuality, sensual hedonism, and unnatural desire. Statuesque and forcefully posed with crisp white skin set against the dark velvet of her dress, *Madame X* was perhaps not merely an exercise in conveying the eccentricities of the toilette, but (if we consider it alongside Sargent's plan to exhibit it with *Mrs. Henry White*) an exploration through contrasting imagery of Aestheticism's decadent obsession with the white sculptural body.[3] As such, I intend to argue that *Madame X* is a type of Baudelairean *biographie dramatisée,* where 'nothing, if one examines it, is indifferent in a portrait. Gesture, facial expression, clothing [...] everything must be used to represent a character'.[4] As a fashionable Parisienne posed in the diadem of Diana, *Madame X* can be viewed as an embodiment of the intersection between the classical and modern, the eternal and the transient, signifying far more than a mere young painter's desire for success and establishment. This portrait, and its intended dual exhibition, may represent Sargent's desire to proclaim an intellectual alignment with the complex boundaries being explored by Aesthetic and early Decadent figures, who saw whiteness as a highly symbolic motif through which to explore their more provocative concerns.

Relatively little attention has been paid to the fact that Sargent was deeply embedded in the Aesthetic circles in Paris and London in the 1870s and 1880s. Though it could possibly have been much earlier, Sargent was first connected to the movement in 1881, when he was just twenty-five and still studying under the portraitist Carolus-Duran in Paris. He writes to his childhood friend, Vernon Lee, initiating a dialogue with the enquiry: 'Tell me what you think of Pater's essays, I like one or two of them very much.'[5] The next month Lee met Pater in Oxford, beginning a friendship that she extended to Sargent. Her letters note that the three of them, along with Henry James, met at social gatherings at least twice in the summer of 1884.[6] During this period Sargent did not limit his scope to British Aestheticism, however; he also showed a sustained interest in French Aestheticism and 'l'art pour l'art'. In a postcard to her mother in 1884 Lee recounts a day spent sitting on the grass with Sargent at the Pre-Raphaelite model and painter Marie Spartali Stillman's house, discussing 'fantastic, weird, curious, cigarettes, bonbons, Baudelaire'.[7] Sargent also counted among his acquaintances in Paris many key figures in the Aesthetic circle in France: the writer and critic Judith Gautier, daughter of the novelist Théophile Gautier; Count Robert Montesquiou de Fezensac, who was rumoured to be the model for both Huysmans's Des Esseintes and Proust's Baron de Charlus; Paul Helleu, close friend of Proust; as well as Dr. Pozzi, who had significant ties to Sarah Bernhardt and who also most likely fostered Sargent's introduction to Montesquiou and his circle.[8] The majority of these figures were all captured in paint by Sargent in his early career, which suggests that in the most nascent stage of his artistic explorations Sargent actively cultivated Aesthetic and avant-garde contacts on both sides of the Channel.

Between 1881 and 1884 Sargent surrounded himself with writers and fellow artists who had a keen interest in the question of aesthetics in contemporary art and literature. At the end period of this slow Aesthetic simmer, Sargent would exhibit

FIG. 10.2. John Sing
White, 1883, oil on can

Madame X, a work decidedly different in method, colour scheme, and composition than his previous Salon works, such as *Oyster Gatherers at Cancale* (1878) and *Fumée d'Ambre Gris* (1880). If, as evidenced in the letters, he was reading Baudelaire and Pater in the years leading up to painting *Madame X*, it is possible that the development in Sargent's creative practice was influenced by his discussion with friends like Lee and also by the texts he was reading. The notion of the sculptural body appeared with some frequency in the works of Pater, and to a lesser extent Baudelaire, so Sargent's readings of their work may perhaps have been a source of influence for the dramatic way in which he decided to depict Virginie's highly contemporary form of beauty.

The concept of whiteness found in Aesthetic texts embodied a number of dualities, including bodily sensuality versus classical rationalism, purity and naturalism in contrast to the perverse and synthetic, matter versus form, male versus female. In Baudelaire and Pater, this combination of whiteness, sculptural-ness and the body was a useful allegorical vehicle for exploring complex dichotomies, but each writer had a different focus. For Pater, whiteness signified the wider principles of idealization, immortality, and transcendence. While it signalled the fleshliness of the (predominantly) male form, it also functioned to inspire the aesthete to transcend that corporeality in pursuit of a higher aesthetic purpose, one epitomized by the rational intellectualism of the Ancient Greeks. Whiteness simultaneously symbolized aspects of homosexual (i.e. 'perverse') desire and higher forms of creative expression and thought. While Sargent may have adopted aspects of this archetype to some degree, he modified the body and unlike Pater, made it female. This immediately changed the significance that the white sculptural body had for Aestheticism, creating correspondences between Pater's discussions and those of Baudelaire and Vernon Lee. By choosing to depict a white, sculptural *female* body in *Madame X*, Sargent added a rich and complex later of meaning to surrounding feminine beauty and virtue. In its broad range of influences, *Madame X* symbolized the uncanny and unnatural intersections between whiteness, the female body, and sculpture.

In this chapter I shall situate *Madame X* within the context of wider Aesthetic discussions about the white sculptural body — both male and female — principally in relation to issues raised in the work of Baudelaire and Pater, and also in the work of later writers, James and Lee. By studying the composition of *Madame X* and both its alignment to and divergence from Aesthetic discussions on bodily sensuality, femininity, and artificial theatricality, the work can be viewed as an early cypher of the tenuous boundaries between Symbolism and Decadence, as one which, as Andrew Stephenson has remarked in regards to later male Decadent artists, 'saw clothes and cosmetics, alongside striking a pose in public, as linked to modernity and as a sign of the breaking up of old-fashioned Victorian conventions'.[9] *Madame X* became Sargent's modern Diana and reverse Pygmalion's statue, one that advertised Sargent's cosmopolitanism.

The Baudelairean Diana

On first impression, it is difficult to deny *Madame X*'s visual connection to classical sculpture, considering her vast expanse of white skin and affected pose. Such connections were even made by Claude Phillips, a contemporary reviewer, who commented that it 'displays the sculpturesque beauty of her form with a liberality remarkable, and remarked, even in modern Paris.'[10] The posture itself is puzzling for a portrait, the focus of which is usually the facial features of the sitter. In Sargent's painting, the woman's pose explicitly obscures half of the sitter's face. This was not the first time Sargent had focused on compositional choice over mimetic rendering. His 1883 Salon submission, *Portraits d'enfants,* now known as *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, worked on a similar principle by depicting one of the girl's faces in profile obscured by shadowy darkness. This piqued at least one critic, M. B. Wright, who proclaimed that 'One naturally considers the living objects the chief consideration of portraiture, and does not ask for a portrait of fantastic light or for ostentatious proof of the painter's cleverness.'[11] The question that presents itself here is why would Sargent choose to paint portraits that do not show the entirety of the face? Perhaps it is possible that Sargent did not intend the painting to be a portrait at all, but rather a visual exercise in the boundaries between different forms of art, notably the painterly and the sculptural, in an exploration of Pater's concept of *Anders-streben,* by which 'each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art'.[12]

The transference between the arts that Pater emphasizes in the concept of *Anders-streben* also contributes to the overall synaesthesia of the portrait, in its evocation of rounded sculptural flesh projected onto a flat two-dimensional surface. It both invites and rejects touch, while simultaneously suggesting cold and warmth by the cool white of her skin and the flushed tint of her ears; she is both 'corpse-like' and a living being: she is both statue and human. This contradictory state of allure and rejection mimicked the unnatural magnetism that sculptural bodies had for many artists in this period. As Michael Hatt notes:

> On the one hand, sculpture is the most abstract of the arts; it is defined, at mid-century at least, as pure form, as the body transformed into an allegory of virtue or morality [...] Unlike the illusory window of painting with its own space, its own world, the statue is here with us, as substantial as if not more so than — those who view it, and while this presence is one of the elements that elevates sculpture, it also threatens its status, for this materiality can threaten sculpture's purity. The moral idea can turn into object; it can be reified, turned to a lump of inert stuff rather than the immaterial ethical ideal it represents.[13]

Aestheticism found particular validity in this idea of the infusion of the 'immaterial ethical ideal' into the inert matter of the sculptural body; as a literal blank space, it became a screen onto which one could project one's own desires, fantasies, and even contemplate the complexities of modern reality. However, it was not solely the white sculptural body itself that proved particularly meaningful, but rather its association with the art of the Ancient and Classical worlds. The rise in archaeological discoveries of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture during this

period inspired a renewed interest in and revisitation of classical Antiquity. As Frank Turner notes, these statues and the lost culture they represented quickly became a focal point for wider retrospection, and were a way for many to address 'the spiritual problems and aspirations of modern life and thought'.[14]

As once a powerful empire that spanned in all directions of the globe, ancient Rome had many similarities with the imperialistic culture prevalent in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. Not only did it inspire new directions in scholarly discussion, but it was also seen to represent 'forms and symbols once alive in the human mind and spirit and still capable of new life.'[15] For Aestheticism in particular, this came in the form of seeing these chiselled ancestors as a symbol of the primitive sensual self before its confinement within the rigid structure of Christian ethics. Paganism, hedonism, and the widespread acceptance of homoeroticism and other forms of alternative sexuality in the ancient world, provided great contrasts to the oppressive social strictures of Victorian Britain. As a movement that espoused the cultivation of the senses — or as Pater put it, the regard of 'all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations' — Aestheticism was particularly drawn to these more liberated aspects of Ancient society.[16] The classical naked sculptural body became representative of personal corporeal liberation, and as such Aesthetic writers often used this symbol in their writings to indicate the call to the inner sensual self, as a way to speak of knowledge and dedication to the pursuit of such desires to a like-minded audience.

One such example of this was John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873–76), in which he encouraged his readers to embrace the fluidity of the ancient identity for self-exploration:

> We must imitate the Greeks, not by trying to reproduce their bygone modes of life and feeling, but by approximating to their free and fearless attitude of mind [...]. We ought still to emulate their spirit by cheerfully accepting the world as we find it, acknowledging the value of each human impulse, and aiming after virtues that depend on self regulation rather than on total abstinence and mortification.[17]

Symonds's view that modern society should embrace the Greeks' ability to harness the 'human impulse' leads directly to Aestheticism, Pater, and his emphasis on the cultivation of sensual experience through aesthetic stimuli, as described in his well-known preface to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873). But for Pater, the white sculptural body was also a site of profound eroticism. As Stefano Evangelista and Linda Dowling have emphasized, studies in classicism during this period, particularly by the Oxford sect of aesthetes which included Pater, Wilde, and Symonds, were often part of a veiled exploration into aspects of perverse or censored sexuality, particularly if one studied Plato's concepts of *eros* in the *Symposium* (375–80 BCE), which 'persistently connects male love to higher forms of culture'.[18] As Dowling notes through David Halperin, these ancient texts allowed the aesthetes to perceive a state of 'sexual deviance' in the classical tradition that was similar to their own. Such 'object choice was viewed as merely one of a number of pathological symptoms exhibited by those who reversed or "inverted" their proper [hetero] sex roles.'[19]

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Inversion is apropos here, for not only did several aesthetes transpose their socially defined 'proper' sex roles through their desire for other males, but in their admiration for the classical sculptural bodies as a symbol of Platonic love, they were also 'inverting' their desire for flesh-and-blood bodies onto the symbolic ones represented by the sculptures — an exploration much safer than the illegal physical act itself. Thus when referring to oneself or another as a 'Platonist', as Swinburne does in his oft-quoted letter to Watts after the arrest of Simeon Solomon for indecency in 1873, it was a veiled allusion to contemporary homosexuality. Dowling posits this term, and 'Dorian' too, as part of Aestheticism's homosexual 'code', a set of literary signifiers that enabled dialogue of the unspeakable without concern over censure.[20] To this code, Catherine Maxwell has more recently added the word 'curious' amongst such signifiers, specifically as it relates to Sargent and Lee.[21] Sargent thus appears to be connected to an Aesthetic culture which not only used certain types of veiled language in order to speak of their subversive desires, but which also used the white sculptural body within these symbolic paradigms to allude to such concerns.

It was most likely Pater's *The Renaissance* that Sargent alluded to when he implored Lee in 1881 to 'tell me what you think of Pater's essays'.[22] The publication of *The Renaissance* was key in steering Aestheticism to focus on the primacy of subjective experience. In that book Pater placed Symonds's 'human impulse' above all other sources of inspiration with his repeated attention to the word 'impression'. But Pater also used the essays to discuss his understanding of the symbolic nature of the sculptural body. When it is mentioned, as in the case of Winckelmann and his epiphanic discovery, the ancient form acts as a priming point for a period of intense self-exploration and a stimulation of sensory awakening. Sculpture arouses a corporeal and intellectual response, and thanks to its generalized form, does not intrude on the spectator's internal reveries. Pater emphasized that sculpture does not have those modes of expression — colour, narrative, and context — that lend themselves to the implication of certain feelings. By this limitation it 'unveils man in the pose of his unchanging characteristics', unlocking aesthetic contemplations and drives:

> Its white light, purged from the angry, bloodline stains of action and passion, reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the god in him, as opposed to man's restless movement. [...] The base of artistic genius is the power of conceiving humanity in a new, striking, rejoicing way [...] of generating around itself an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect.[23]

Pater's insistence on the synthesis of sculpture, on its ability to 'recombine' images it transmits, relates directly back to *Madame X* and the image's seeming fluidity between modern and classical forms. As regards the latter, Sargent appears to do this quite literally, by making Virginie Gautreau's body an almost direct composition of classical sculptural poses. Consider, for example, the fact that she is depicted in an unnatural, uncomfortable position, one quite difficult to hold for the long periods of time a portrait required. By choosing this pose, and also by pairing it

with the diadem of the crescent moon of Diana placed on top of her head, it seems that Sargent intended to evoke a classical sculptural body. Further compositional elements also lend weight to this interpretation. Gautreau's right hand, which appears to hold the fabric of her gown bunched in order to aid movement, echoes visual depictions of the Venus Pudica or 'modest Venus' type, which frequently used either a hand or the hand holding fabric to shield the goddess's modesty from prying eyes. A well-known classical sculpture of this type, the *Aphrodite of Cnidus* by Praxiteles (4th century), was frequently copied (see, for example, the *Aphrodite of Menophantos* (1st century BCE)). Later replicas of these works would have been widely reproduced for educational purposes in art schools in the Louvre, Rome, and Florence, and it is likely that Sargent would have seen these images in his studies in Paris and abroad.

Another interesting feature of the painting is Sargent's decision to depict the fallen shoulder strap, evidenced in a contemporary photograph of the painting currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This decision may again relate to an intentional part of his classical agenda — the fallen strap had historical associations with the Amazonians, and Diana whose strap was frequently shown slipped down on the right side to allow access to the quiver of arrows on the back. A copy of a sarcophagus depicting Artemis and Apollo murdering the children of Niobe from the second century, now in the Glyptothek in Munich and the *Diana de Gabies* in the Louvre (1st century) both show the fallen strap and exposed shoulder.[24] In analyzing the portrait in this way, the work becomes less about Sargent using the fallen strap to court publicity, and more about his use of Gautreau as a representation of a new type of classical beauty, one who artfully blends Baudelaire's and Pater's concepts of the eternal and transitory, the historical and the modern, in pursuit of new, unique forms of personal corporeal aesthetics.

Madame X's classicism, in combination with the stark modernity of its sitter's corseted form and fashionable black gown, seamlessly blends the contemporary and the historical. To echo Pater's words, like classical sculpture she 'conceiv[es] humanity in a new, striking, rejoicing way' and generates 'an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits'.[25] But *Madame X* can also be viewed as a visual embodiment of the intersections between the various types of texts Sargent was reading at this point. If Pater can be seen to have inspired the classical elements of *Madame X* and its white sculptural body, then it can be argued that Baudelaire was the point of animus for Gautreau's contemporary and dramatically painted self-fashioning. Gautreau was often called a 'professional beauty' in the press, a phrase possibly taken from Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863).[26]

By painting a Baudelairean 'professional beauty', Sargent first establishes a frame of modernity for his figure, as such celebrities were indicative of à la mode standards of feminine allure, fashion, and social status. These aspects of modernity are, by their nature, fleeting and ephemeral, but the true aesthete or *flâneur* is able to 'distil the eternal from the transitory', or to see the 'poetry within history'.[27] Baudelaire also saw this ability as one of the aptitudes of the 'true' artist — one who was able to capture the beauty of a past age without focusing on its ugliness — and as such

is able to marry the modern with the eternal, the transitory with that element of beauty that is present in all ages. Baudelaire states at the outset of *The Painter of Modern Life* that 'the past is interesting not only by reason of the beauty which could be distilled from it by those artists for whom it was the present, but also precisely because it is the past, for its historical value'.[28] Modernity will one day become antiquity, and an artist must learn to embrace both the immutable and fugitive elements of his age in order to ease the transition from one to the other in his work. Baudelaire uses historical fashion plates as a prime example of this, for in them 'man ends by looking like his ideal self. These engravings can be translated either into beauty or ugliness; in one direction, they become caricatures, in the other antique statues.'[29]

Baudelaire sees the fluid blending of the historical and the modern as key to the timelessness of the art of the Old Masters. They were able to infuse spirit in the immaterial, to see the small elements of beauty present in their time, and in using this as their focus they did not fall victim to a falseness or 'mistranslation' by blindly copying current trends. In this estimation, it is also possible to transfer such views onto Sargent's choice of colour and composition for *Madame X*. If, as Baudelaire states, beauty can become either 'caricature or antique statue', then it is positioned as one of two opposing extremes — as either a focus on intensive individual detail, which becomes exaggerated, grotesque and 'caricature', or a minimalization of such detail to the point where the person becomes pure form, or 'antique statues'. *Madame X* oscillates between both types, dedicating itself to the capturing of Gautreau's unique and very contemporary exterior without creating such a defined focus that she becomes a satirical version of herself. Sargent's Old Master palette of blacks and browns contributes to this, creating crisp focus and alluring visual interest through simplicity and harmonization. She is the embodiment of Baudelaire's 'ideal self', an individuality that is very modern, with its cosmetics and corsets, but also timeless in its visual simplicity — a happy Baudelairean marriage of the modern and the timeless 'spirit' of its century.

Judith Gautier, who sat for a number of informal works by Sargent during this period, remarks in her review of the painting that there is a broader link between *Madame X* and this Baudelairean trope of feminine beauty:

> Is it a woman? A chimera? A figure of a unicorn rearing as on a heraldic coat of arms or perhaps the work of some oriental decorative artist to whom the human form is forbidden and who, wishing to be reminded of woman, has drawn this delicious arabesque [...].[30]

Though Gautier relegates the subject of the painting to an archetype as opposed to a living body, Sargent's translation of Gautreau into the medium of paint allows her figure to transcend the messiness of human form in a reverse Pygmalion process, achieving the status of spiritual 'chimera', one which Pater also addresses when he makes mention of sculpture's 'white light, purged from the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion, [which] reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the god in him'.[31] The blank space of the white sculptural body, and the transformations that body goes through in its translation into art and literature, allows the aesthete to purify sexual attraction and desire into an ideal of aesthetic appreciation. It allows

for the expression of a loftier purpose. If Sargent is presenting Gautreau in the guise of a type of classical beauty, it is possible that he is making a similar statement, negating the corporeal trappings that accompany work as a 'professional beauty' and transforming them into a more aesthetic appreciation of her provocative self-fashioning between historical and modern forms.[32]

On the one hand the body is the site of the senses, a place to cultivate experience and impressions, while on the other that body is to be transcended in order to reach pure enlightenment, revealing 'the god within'. Sargent's debt to Pater is clear. The critical responses to *Madame X* suggested this uncomfortable duality, where its subject is simultaneously likened to a 'corpse' and also pure spirit and ideal beauty, a tension articulated by juxtaposing Gautier's 'chimera' and Phillips's 'sculpturesque'.[33] Jane Thomas identifies this uncertainty as the innate struggle between two kinds of responses to the sculptural body; the 'kinesis of desire' and the 'stasis of the pure aesthetic response'. The former represents the bodily response to a sculpture or work of art — the visceral or emotional reaction it elicits — while the latter is a manifestation of one's potentially perverse desire to access a lost ideal beauty, or to 'stimulate longing for what can never be wholly realized in material form'.[34] Aestheticism's obsession with the sculptural form stimulated both the kinetic and the static; for Pater in *The Renaissance*, Winckelmann's discovery of Greek art presented a plastic embodiment of his reading of poetry and theory while simultaneously stirring his 'pulsation of sensuous life' and an 'enthusiasm that burned like lava within him'.[35] Baudelaire also speaks to the union of the historical and the modern, a kinesis reflected in the viewer's recognition of both the ephemerality and the timelessness present in the beauty of their own age. *Madame X* is a work that stimulates both the static and the kinetic for its viewer, evoking sensuality and beauty while also visually representing a lost classical ideal.

The Jamesian Juno

This struggle between the aesthetic and intellectual responses to the sculptural body may also have acted as a point of stimulus for other literary explorations on the topic in this period, specifically in the works of Sargent's lifelong friend, Henry James. James's tale 'The Last of the Valerii' (1874) also deals with the notion of the allure of the sculptural female form. Published first in *The Atlantic Monthly* in January 1874, and later as one of the short stories collected in *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales* (1875), the tale makes use of a number of significantly Paterian themes, notably the idea of the female sculptural body and the fluidity between intellectual and sensual aesthetic responses. It is curious to note that this work appeared less than a year after James wrote to his brother that he had encountered Pater's newly published *The Renaissance* in a shop in Florence. In a letter dated 31 May 1873 James wrote that he was 'in flames' about buying it and that it 'treats of several things I know nothing about'.[36] 'Flames' is a provocative term, recalling Pater's renowned phrase in the book's conclusion 'to burn always with a hard, gem-like flame', but also in its similarities to Winckelmann's burning 'like lava' at his introduction to sculptural form.[37] The publication of a tale that deals with the nearly devastating magnetism

of a sculptural body in such close proximity to his discovery of Pater implies a tantalizing thread of association between the works.

However, unlike Pater and more like Sargent in this case, James transferred his obsession with the aesthetics of sculpture onto a significantly *female* form. This may signify James's literary processing of a symbolic issue he saw in *The Renaissance* — the relationship between the statue and female beauty as sharing a symbiotic relationship that both gives life and inspiration to its viewer while also holding the potential to draw that viewer into a state of obsession, dissolution, and decay. Pater mentions this in his discussion of the *Mona Lisa* (1503–06), for she has

> a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions [...]. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire she has been dead many times [...]. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as an embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern ideal.[38]

The emasculating combination of power and beauty in vampiric women like Pater's *Mona Lisa* and *femmes fatales* like Judith and Salome is symbolized by the white skin of sculpturally posed women, frozen in time through paint. That Lady Lisa embodies both the 'old fancy' and its 'modern ideal' certainly carries through to *Madame X,* with Gautreau's crown of Diana and her corseted form. For Pater, the *Mona Lisa* represents a similar symbiosis between a living and an immortal beauty, first described in Pater's text as a 'living Florentine' who, through the medium of Leonardo's brush, has become an 'ideal lady' and a 'creature of his thought'.[39] The decadent, uncanny beauty of the female sculptural body is one that can pass fluidly between matter and form, and yet in James's tale, in a type of un-rendering of the aestheticization process that Pater explores with Lady Lisa, the reverse becomes true. Instead of translating hedonic female beauty into an immortal, and thus unnatural, point of desire by converting the human into the artistic object, in 'The Last of the Valerii' James instead transfigures the Juno statue from a sculpture to a living figure — an art form to a fleshly object — transformed through the obsession of one of the story's protagonists. J. Hillis Miller, in his *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990) explores James's story in terms of its Pygmalionism, but also in terms of its Paterian elements, particularly in relation to Pater's 'The Myth of Demeter and Persephone', published in the *Fortnightly Review* of 1876.[40] Despite its playful reversions of Pater in this respect, James still emphasizes here that it is unnatural or perverse *desire* that is both aroused by and instilled into art objects, uniting the static into the kinetic of aesthetic response through a body set (or turned) into stone. But what is also relevant is the tale's exploration of the restraint of the hidden aesthetic self. James uses the sculpture of the Juno to awaken the inner world of the senses. As Lene Østermark-Johansen comments, 'The notion of sculpture as a "dead art" connects the material with a dead past and a numbed audience in need of aesthetic stimuli.'[41]

In a brief overview, 'The Last of the Valerii' tells the story of the unnamed narrator's goddaughter Martha — a supreme example of sweet American womanhood with 'the air and almost habits of a princess' — and her early marriage to the emotionally and financially bankrupt Count Marco Valerio.[42] His only contribution to the marriage is his family's ancestral villa, which Martha's American fortune saves from

the depths of ruin. Upon her arrival in Rome, Martha sets about to improve its grounds, directing workers to begin archaeological excavations in order to search for lost historical treasures. After some time, the grounds produce a magnificent statue of a Juno, which appears to the Count in a dream just as she appears out of the ground. Bewitched by her beauty, the Count secretes her away to an old garden Casino, where he keeps her under lock and key, much to the increasing neglect of his poor new wife. He frequently sneaks away to the statue, being caught at one point by the spying narrator to be 'lying flat on the pavement [in front of it] prostrate, apparently with devotion' (p. 165). Eventually the wife, harnessing her American bravado, is stirred to act against the increasing distance between herself and her husband. Recognizing the statue as the cause of her marital discord, she has the statue returned to her earthly grave. Her husband acquiesces, but keeps, in secret and as a reminder, the Juno's fragmented right hand.

James makes use of a number of Aesthetic themes in this story, but none more wholly relevant to this discussion than that of the intersection between the modern and the classical. At one point in the story the archaeologist who digs up the Juno states to the narrator that he is not surprised by the Count's reaction to the statue, for 'Ancient relics may work modern miracles. There's a pagan element in all of us [...] and the old gods have still their worshippers. The old spirit still throbs here and there [...]' (p. 167). The Juno's sculptural body makes light of the fact that the Juno does not convert the Count into a pagan, but that it rather awakens the deeper sensual and Aesthetic self, or the 'pagan' within him. The Juno unlocks a bizarre and perverse animalism; as the reading of Plato's *Symposium* did for the Oxford aesthetes, she validates secret inner sexual inversions by drawing forth innate attractions to unnatural things, in this case a desire for paganism and a relationship with a woman who is not one's wife. This contrast between social morality and the epicurean self is made more evident at the beginning of the story, when Martha claims that her love for the Count would inspire her to convert to Catholicism, while the Count dissuades her by claiming that he is a 'poor Catholic' as his nature leans more towards paganism (pp. 132–33). The Count accepts Christianity as the established ethical code in the society in which he moves, but he does not agree that it is the one that speaks to him personally. When the Juno appears, she brings forth his 'paganism' into the moonlight for all, or at least the narrator, to see, symbolically representing the nature of the struggle between one's private, inner aesthetic and decadent self and one's public, socially-acceptable identity.

The Count's wrestling with his own passions in the face of social respectability is not the only duality present here. Just as *Madame X* visually represents the conflation of the modern and classical beauty, so too do the female characters in James's story present conflicting representations of femininity. James presents the only female characters in the story, Martha and the Juno, as representative of typical contrasting tropes. Martha is the modern beauty and dutiful wife in every sense of the word — she is all sweetness and light, and lives only for the pleasure of her husband and his caresses. She is also decidedly monotheistic. The Juno, on the other hand, embodies all those feminine attributes considered wicked, decadent, and sinful. Paradoxically, though her body is made of stone, she represents corporeal pleasure and sensuality

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as evidenced by the idolatrous response she evokes from the Count. His relationship with the Juno is one of wine and worship, libation, and licentious implication. The relationship between these women, however, is strikingly co-dependent. Instead of making these female characters separate or anathema to each other, James presents them as a symbiotic pair who pull life and energy from each other, so much so that at one point the narrator cries that 'to rival the Juno she [the Contessa] is turning to marble herself!' while Martha indicates that 'His Juno's the reality; I'm the fiction!' (pp. 167 and 169). Though textually they exist in separate bodies, James's pairing of their reactions in this way indicates that they are actually a unified self, linked together by the love of the Count. This echoes Pater's *Mona Lisa* who embodies both feminine archetypes, as she represents the grace and beauty of a living Florentine as well as the 'strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions',[43] but also Baudelaire's understanding that 'beauty is always and inevitably of a double composition'.[44] Martha is the modern and ephemeral, the Juno the timeless and eternal. Together they combine to challenge the Count's fidelity to each of the conflicting halves of his inner and outer self.

At the end of the tale, however, it becomes obvious which half must win. In order to spur the story to conclusion, and to regain her power (and her husband), Martha finally acknowledges that 'We must smother her beauty in the dreadful earth! It makes me feel almost as if she were alive' (p. 174). Her actions reverse the process by which desire gives life to inanimate objects through the act of looking. By burying the statue back in the ground, the Juno is made invisible and thus no longer able to withdraw life from the Count. His adoring and life-giving gaze is now correctly transferred back to the more appropriate place for it — the hearth and home. In this process, the Juno is transformed from object to Pygmalion and back to object in one fell swoop, and as the Count preserves a small piece of the Juno in secret, so too does James indicate that the Aesthetic self is not a piece of human nature that is wont to be wholly and utterly buried. As Leon Edel summarizes in his review of the tale in *Stories of the Supernatural*, 'civilized man does well to keep the primitive side of his nature properly interred'.[45]

The visual relationship between James's Juno and Sargent's *Madame X* is one of the symbolic unification of these two seemingly contradictory halves of the feminine self. James divides them into two characters, while Sargent brings them together into one body in his combination of living flesh and sculptural form. Both writer and painter, however, emphasize that there is a spirit in the inanimate — a ghost in the machine — delineated by Gautier's 'chimera' and the narrator's viewing of the Juno's spirit in the moonlight. *Madame X* is a work that represents the fluidity between boundaries, between the living and the dead, between art and immorality, between flesh and sculpture. This synaesthetic nature of the portrait and its existence between worlds speaks to the idea of the image as one that transgresses borders. As Lynda Nead states:

> Danger does not lie in any given category but in transitional states; it is the process of belonging to neither one state nor another that is most threatening [...]. Objects or individuals which transgress these classifications challenge correct definition and right order.[46]

Both *Madame X* and James's Juno exist on the peripheries of feminine boundaries and as such their allure is both perverse and undeniable. For James's story, this boundary is exemplified by the pure representation of the Count's wife, whose actions attempt to 'correct' or 'rectify' the wicked behaviour aroused by the Juno. In this light it is also possible to return to Sargent's original intention for the dual exhibition of the portrait along with *Mrs. Henry White*. If *Madame X* can be seen as an archetype of Pater's view of the co-dependent relationship between the beautifying and degenerate aspects of female pulchritude, then it is possible to apply this wider duality to the contradictory messages offered by the intended presentation of these two portraits. If *Madame X* signifies the Aesthetic alignment between modern and classical beauty, decadent and graceful form, the painterly alongside the sculpturesque, then what exactly does Sargent say with *Mrs. Henry White?*

On the one hand we might argue that *Mrs. Henry White* was intended to embody all the traditional connotations the colour white had for wider Victorian society. Lee, in her discussion on the symbolism of the colour in her essay 'Beauty and Sanity' (from *Lauris Nobilis* in 1908), not only discusses what these 'acceptable' forms of whiteness represent, but in a discussion germane to this text, also contrasts this whiteness with the Aesthetic inversion of desire and how that can be explored through lived female experience. In her first description in the text, Lee explores how the colour white is conventionally associated with concepts of purity, domesticity, and cleanliness, and although the text does not explicitly state 'femininity', they can certainly be read as such with their descriptions of 'daintiness' and 'fairness':

> For the love of white has come to mean [...] strength, cleanness, and newness of sensation. [...] The love of white means [...] in human beings good health, and youth and fairness of life [...] care, order, daintiness of habits, leisure and affluence.[47]

And yet as an aesthete, or one who aligned herself with that unwholesome and decaying breed who 'invert' their sexuality and find passion in unnatural pleasure and pursuits, she finds she does not like such things: 'But what if we do not care for white? What if we are so constituted that its insipidity sickens us as much as the most poisonous and putrescent colours which Blake ever mixed to paint hell and sin?' Thus, in this estimation, those who do not like the purity of white are labelled 'abnormal, unwholesome, decaying; very good, then why should we not get pleasure in decaying, unwholesome and abnormal things?'[48] These words find an echo in Sargent's own thoughts, written to Lee while he worked on *Madame X*, where he stated with a palpable sense of glee:

> Do you object to people who are fardées to the extent of being uniform lavender or blotting paper colour all over? If so you would not care for my sitter. But she has the most beautiful lines and if the lavender or chlorate-of-potash lozenge colour be pretty in itself I shall be more than pleased.[49]

Sargent is clearly aligning himself with that 'abnormal' sect of Aesthetes who took no pleasure in the wholesomeness of whiteness, but rather revelled in its

implications of a darker, dangerous beauty, fraught with hints of decay. But Lee posits that whiteness has this duality; for the 'normal' sects of society it is a colour of naturalness and purity, but for those with decadent inclinations it indicates something entirely different. Therefore, if Sargent intended to display two completely opposing representations of female bodily whiteness in his joint exhibition of *Madame X* and *Mrs. Henry White*, it is possible to consider that the works were intended to be a visual display of these symbolic attributes of whiteness as it intersects with the female form. For example, *Mrs. Henry White* certainly reflects these affirmations of 'good' whiteness — affluence, youth, vital health, and pure race — and as much was implied in the reviews of this piece. The *Art Journal* praised it for its 'freshness of youth, [with the] carriage of a graceful head', while R. A. M. Stevenson found it 'admirably filled' with 'quantities of tranquil space'.[50] *Madame X*'s whiteness was instead compared to a corpse and a chimera, with the less pejorative comments merely attributing her colouring to the 'sculpturesque'. Her whiteness, ensconced in a sculptural body, was an appropriate vehicle for Sargent to convey the decadent symbols and desires he found in the works of Baudelaire, Pater, and his relationships with fellow 'perverse' Aesthetes. It holds the potential for a vast amount of contradictions — a fleshly body in a frozen, hardened pose, a classical goddess under the guise of a contemporary beauty, the whiteness implied by moral purity negated by the indecent skin of a purportedly 'loose' woman. Everything that is white about this portrait is decidedly *not white* — even the whiteness implied by the sculptural body, with its Paterian evocations of immortality and deification are diminished by the image being an artistic 'impression' — a capturing of a mortal beauty eventually to fade.

However, one only has to consider the very tongue-in-cheek satirical nature of painting *Mrs. Henry White* in shades of white to ascertain which kind of 'whiteness' Sargent found more appropriate to his own tastes. For one critic, *Madame X* was 'Hogarthian [...] dictated by the impulse of painting a beauty *à la mode* in all the unbeautiful aspects of such a product of the art of society'.[51] But in light of the themes discussed in this chapter, it is perhaps more appropriate to see *Mrs. Henry White* as satire in its capturing of a beauty that was more 'traditional' in the face of *Madame X*'s decadent sculptural form. Both these images illuminate many late nineteenth-century preoccupations with the representation of the female body — the sculptural form as opposed to the fleshly one, feminine purity as opposed to decay, and the notion of the natural form versus Baudelaire's celebration of artifice. To return to Lee, who sums this up astutely for Aestheticism, and for Sargent's portraits of *Madame X* and *Mrs. Henry White* as well: 'As art is one of mankind's modes of expressing itself, why should we expect it to be the expression only of mankind's health and happiness? Since life has got two rhythms, why should art only have one?'[52]

Notes to Chapter 10

1. Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1927), pp. 61–62.
2. 'Just one illegible line. This is the evening of the fatal sending in day & I have sent nothing in. Neither you nor the Gautreau were finished. I have been brushing away at both of you for the

last three weeks in a horrid state of anxiety. Your background has undergone several changes and is not good yet. Well the question is settled and I am broken. Your frame is charming. One consolation has been that I know you do not care a bit whether your portrait is exhibited or not. Is not that true? May I send it to the academy? P.S. I send the Boit children to the Salon.' Washington DC, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, John Singer Sargent Letters, Roll 647, Frame 856, John Singer Sargent to Mrs. Henry White, 15 March 1883.

3. For an exploration of the social and cultural circumstances relating to the production and reception of *Madame X*, more specifically how it plays with ideas of fashion, identity, and cosmetics, see Susan Sidlauskas, 'Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*', *American Art*, 15 (Autumn 2001), 8–33.
4. Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1859', in *Curiosités Ésthétiques* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1868), pp. 245–358 (p. 318).
5. Richard Ormond, 'John Singer Sargent and Vernon Lee', *Colby Quarterly*, 9 (September 1970), 154–78 (p. 168).
6. See Irene Cooper Willis, *Vernon Lee's Letters* (London: Privately Printed, 1937), pp. 78–80; pp. 152–55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
8. See Caroline De Costa and Francesca Miller, 'Sarah Bernhardt's "Doctor God": Samuel Jean Pozzi (1846–1918)', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 47 (2007), 352–56.
9. Andrew Stephenson, 'Precarious Poses: The Problem of Artistic Visibility and its Homosocial Performances in Late-Nineteenth-Century London', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 8 (Summer 2007), 73–103 (p. 93).
10. Claude Phillips, 'The Salon II', *The Academy*, 632 (14 June 1884), 427–28 (p. 427).
11. Margaret Bertha Wright, 'American Art at the Paris Salon', *The Art Amateur*, 9 (July 1883), 24–25 (p. 24).
12. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1873), p. 139.
13. Michael Hatt, 'Thoughts and Things: Sculpture and the Victorian Nude', in *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, ed. by Alison Smith (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001), pp. 37–49 (p. 38).
14. Frank N. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (West Hanover: Halliday Lithograph, 1981), p. 78.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.
16. Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. xi.
17. John Addington Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 2 vols (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1877), I, p. 437.
18. Stefano Evangelista, '"Lovers and Philosophers at Once": Aesthetic Platonism in the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 36 (2006), 230–44 (pp. 231–32).
19. Linda Dowling, 'Ruskin's Pied Beauty and the Constitution of a "Homosexual" Code', *The Victorian Newsletter*, 75 (Spring 1989), 1–9 (p. 1).
20. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Swinburne Letters*, 2 vols, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), II, p. 261; Dowling, 'Ruskin's Pied Beauty', p. 1.
21. See Catherine Maxwell, '"A Queer Sort of Interest": Vernon Lee's Homoerotic Allusion to John Singer Sargent and John Addington Symonds', in *Writing Women of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Adrienne E. Gavin and Carolyn W. De La L. Oulton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 166–78.
22. Ormond, 'John Singer Sargent and Vernon Lee', p. 17.
23. Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 224–35.
24. This feature was also used by later sculptors, particularly in the eighteenth century, as in René Frémin's *A Companion of Diana* (1717) in the Louvre, and Jean-Louis Lemoyne's later version, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC (1724).
25. Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 224–35.
26. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 37.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Judith Gautier, 'L
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31. Pater, *The Renais*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
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37. Pater, *The Renais*
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 129–30.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
40. See J. Hillis Mil
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41. Lene Østermark-
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48. *Ibid.*
49. Ormond and Kil
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51. W. C. Brownell,
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52. Vernon Lee, 'Bea

29. *Ibid.*
30. Judith Gautier, 'Le Salon: Premier Article', *Le Rappel* (1 May 1884), 1. English translation taken from Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: The Early Portraits* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 114.
31. Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 224–25.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
33. 'The flesh painting [...] has far too much blue in it, and [...] more resembles a dead rather than a living body'. William Sharp, 'The Paris Salon', *Art Journal* (June 1884), 179–80 (p. 180); see also Ralph Curtis's description of the sitter as 'decomposed' in a letter home to his parents in Charteris, *John Sargent*, pp. 61–62.
34. Jane Thomas, 'Icons of Desire: The Classical Statue in Later Victorian Literature', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 40 (2010), 242–72 (p. 247).
35. Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 193–95.
36. Henry James to William James, 31 May 1873, in *Henry James Letters, Volume I: 1843–1875*, ed. by Leon Edel (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 390–92; quoted in Richard Ellmann, 'Henry James Amongst the Aesthetes', in *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire*, ed. by John. R. Bradley (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 25–44 (p. 25).
37. Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 250.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 129–30.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
40. See J. Hillis Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 211–42.
41. Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 118.
42. Henry James, 'The Last of the Valerii', in *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1875), pp. 125–78 (pp. 127–28). Subsequent references to this text are given parenthetically.
43. Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 129.
44. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 3.
45. *Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural*, ed. by Leon Edel (New York: Taplinger, 1970), p. 70.
46. Lynda Nead, *Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 31.
47. Vernon Lee, 'Beauty and Sanity', in *Lauris Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane and the Bodley Head, 1908), pp. 115–60 (pp. 134–35).
48. *Ibid.*
49. Ormond and Kilmurray, *The Early Portraits*, p. 113.
50. 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Art Journal* (August 1884), 241–44 (p. 242); R. A. M. Stevenson, 'J. S. Sargent', *Art Journal* (March 1888), 65–69 (p. 68).
51. W. C. Brownell, 'The American Salon', *The Magazine of Art*, 7 (January 1884), 492–99 (p. 494).
52. Vernon Lee, 'Beauty and Sanity', p. 122.

Decadence and the Senses

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