

## CHAPTER 10



# ‘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a scandal that Sargent was found ‘dodging behind doors’ to avoid inevitable accusation, and the work was eventually withdrawn.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,

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.<sup>3</sup> 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'.<sup>4</sup> 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.'<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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'.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 Singer Sargent, *Mrs. Henry White*, 1883, oil on canvas.