

## THE 'CURIOUS' NATURE OF JOHN SINGER SARGENT: AN EXPLORATION INTO NINETEENTH-CENTURY MASCULINE DUALITIES

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### **Abstract**

In her introduction to *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories*, Vernon Lee, recounting her childhood wanderings in Bologna with John Singer Sargent, stated "Curious, that was the dominant adjective in John's appreciations." Curious is indeed, a curious term. This word and its associates; bizarre, strange, and exotic, appear habitually in the literature surrounding Sargent, including in critical reviews and personal letters. In the wider scope of the late nineteenth century, the term has an undeniable Aesthetic connotation, being used widely by Pater, Wilde and Lee herself, most notably in Pater's discussion of the *Mona Lisa* from his Leonardo essay of 1869.

Current scholarship has explored the Aesthetic use of these terms as implying the want or presence of homosexual desire, which for Pater and many other aesthetes signified a duality or androgyny. Therefore, Vernon Lee's description of Sargent's fascination with the "curious" and "exotic" becomes contradictory to Sargent's prototypically masculine persona, as exemplified in social accounts and critical reviews that repeatedly define him as the "penetrative" surgeon of human personality.

The aim of this paper is to explore the public versus private identity of the portraitist John Singer Sargent through an aesthetic cultural exploration of the word "curious" and its synonyms. My work will begin with mid century explorations of the term through the works of Baudelaire, moving forward to its use by Vernon Lee, Pater and Wilde. I intend to ultimately communicate Sargent as a figure who successfully engaged with both the subversive and conventional in Victorian society.

**Key Words:** John Singer Sargent, Vernon Lee, aestheticism, Walter Pater, curious

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Artists, by their very nature, inherently embody multiple points of duality: creativity versus organisational logic and accuracy versus artistic license, to name a few. In the case of the late Victorian male artist, another essential contrast becomes apparent: that of socially acceptable masculinity in the face of a genre that prides the artistic spirit on the more feminine attributes of sensitivity to beauty and a concern with visual aesthetics. In the case of the painter John Singer Sargent, this was compounded by his repeated use of such 'feminine' subjects as women and children. Yet, specific to the last half of the nineteenth century, another facet comes into play – that of the public versus private as a consciousness of the role of media, primarily newspapers and journals, became paramount. The artist had to learn to construct a specific face for public consumption.

For Sargent, that face became one of a penetrative surgeon of human personality, portraying his sitters with the detached air of accuracy that obscured any notion of his more Romantic characteristics. Yet in his personal and private life, as seen through fellow artists and friends, this 'surgeon' became a shy and unassuming man, with a penchant for the 'curious, strange and bizarre,' terms that alluded to more aesthetic and homosocial concerns. This paper seeks to delve into the public versus private aspects of the 'titan of art' John Singer Sargent, in order to convey how he carefully manipulated and constructed his persona to

appeal to the morals of the Victorian artistic public, which comprised critics, fellow artists and laypersons alike.

Unfortunately due to the lack of primary documentation coming directly from the artist himself (he never gave interviews, and much of his correspondence he personally destroyed), Sargent's ideas about the formation of his own identity are complex and difficult to ascertain. There is, however, a wealth of information from his close childhood friend and confidante, Vernon Lee. It also seems appropriate to begin with someone who was not only close to Sargent, providing a firsthand account of the man himself, but who was also a woman choosing to participate in the creation of an alternative identity. Born Violet Paget, she assumed the masculine moniker 'Vernon Lee' at the start of her publishing career in 1875 because 'I am sure that no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt.'<sup>1</sup> Aside from its occupational advantages, Vernon's adoption of a masculine *nom de plume* equally matched her self-identification – that of an asexual lesbian with feminist leanings who dressed *à la garçonne*, preferring instead to engage with society as an opinionated equal, enough so that Henry James once described her as a 'tiger-cat.'<sup>2</sup> When she met Sargent in Italy in 1866 at the age of 12, all this was yet to be revealed. Yet, as Lee herself recounts, there was a mutual attraction to otherness that defined their childhood play. In her introduction to *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories*, published in 1927, Vernon Lee recounts this in depth, describing their early mutual fascination with the portrait of an eighteenth-century castrato singer named Farinelli.

*Mysterious, uncanny, a wizard, serpent, sphinx; strange, weird, curious.* Such, at all events, were the adjectives, the comparisons, with which we capped each other, my friend John and I [...] And apparently continued exchanging impressions of this kind for some time afterwards [...] Thus in a letter of September, 1874[...] my friend John returns to the 'serpent, sphinx, wizard,' with the request: 'Would it be too much trouble for you to send me a copy of that wild enumeration of the picture's peculiarities that we scratched off one day while driving in Bologna?' And adds with youthful gravity: 'I hope you have not entirely put aside the thought of writing on such a curious subject.'

*Curious.* That was the dominant adjective in John's appreciations, perpetually recurrent during his youth, pronounced with a sort of lingering undefinable aspirate which gave it well, a *curious* meaning of its own, summing up that instinct for the esoteric, the more-than-meets-the-eye, which plays so subtly through his audaciously realistic work, so that, for instance, in the Spanish Dancers, the Shoeing of the Ox, the Smoke of Ambergris, are turned into incantations, and *Carnation Lily* into some sweet religious vigil before an unseen altar.<sup>3</sup>

As modern readers, it seems natural to connect a twenty-first century application to words such as 'weird' and 'curious'; they evoke our cultural descriptive norms of homosexuality and their foundations for the terms 'queer' and 'bi-curious.' While it is rarely productive to use modern social constructs to try and interpret the intentions of nineteenth-century texts, there is a root of truth here. When considering the concurrent use of such words by Vernon Lee's own mentors - Walter Pater, for example - there is a gesture towards what Linda Dowling designates the 'homosexual code': a complex network of images, metaphors and constructed language that allows writers to speak to a minority audience on subjects which 'dare not speak their name.'<sup>4</sup> As a self-proclaimed 'disciple' of Walter Pater and a knowledgeable writer on aesthetics, Vernon Lee's self-awareness of the use of such words suggests a more

marked meaning. However, the purpose of this essay is not to delineate Sargent's sexual status, but rather to identify his attraction to the Other and how it affected his work. Therefore the 'homosexual code' will be renamed the 'aesthetic code' for purposes of this essay, since many of these identifiers imply a connection with Aesthetic figures and texts.

In order to delve into what exactly Vernon Lee's exposition means for our understanding of John Singer Sargent, a nineteenth-century definition of the word 'curiosity' and its affiliates needs to be established. In his essay on *Curiosité*, John House indicates three sources from the 1860s for exploration of the term: Charles Baudelaire's *La Peintre de la Vie Moderne* and Emile Littré's *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, both published in 1863; and Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe siècle* of 1869. Both former and latter representations of the term deserve specific focus, as they apply uniquely to Sargent's case.

The end of Vernon Lee's text applies a religious and mystical interpretation to Sargent's work. Aside from conveying a sense of otherness hidden beneath the surface, she also alludes to it as a form of magic or spiritualism. Baudelaire's *La Peintre de la Vie Moderne* is one of the key texts that exposit a supernatural element to genius, a facet of the artist irrevocably intertwined with *curiosité*. John House argues that this text marks a significant transition towards Baudelaire's use of the word *curiosité* as being a 'mainspring of genius,' in contradiction to his previous work 'Le Salon de 1846,' where *naïveté* was the key element to accessing modern ways of seeing.

*Naïveté*, as characterised in 1846, is primarily about the artist's self expression, about his capacity to peel off the layers of academic learning and cultural conditioning, in order to realise his own *tempérament*, as fully as possible; Baudelaire associates *naïveté* with Romanticism. *Curiosité*, by contrast, is about a mode of engagement with the external world, and its corollary is not Romanticism but *modernité*.<sup>5</sup>

Baudelaire is moving his conception of the modern artist away from a singular force of creation and reflection, towards action and external engagement with the contemporary world. Art becomes less about a method of individualised production to appease the subjective muse, and more about how the artist can use the stimuli of the modern world to create works that share that impression with its audience.<sup>6</sup> To say that an artist has *curiosité* then places them in that active role - as a public intermediary.

Baudelaire holds Constantin Guys to be the supreme example of his painter of *curiosité*, as he is a painter who, like a convalescent:

in the window of a coffee house, pleasantly absorbed in gazing at the crowd and mingling, [in] thought, at the turmoil of thought that surrounds him [...] rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life [...] and... [who] hurls himself head first into the midst of the throng in pursuit of an unknown [...] countenance [...] that has bewitched him. Curiosity has become a fatal and irresistible passion!

The subsequent pages then define two contradictory concepts of *curiosité*, creating a sense of cognitive dissonance. The artist at once wishes to embody the powerful properties of genius through recovering a sense of childlike wonder, and yet finds it difficult to access this creative drive without opening a window to degradation. Baudelaire states 'But genius [i.e. *curiosité*] is nothing more or less than childhood *recovered* at will – a childhood now equipped for self expression with manhood's capacities and a power of analysis which

enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated.’<sup>7</sup> The modern artist, a being of genius, essentially embodies at all times a constant duality of birth and decay. For *curiosité* is at once the life giving property of creativity, like a child full of promise, and also the destructive force that drives the artist to madness and death. Externalisation is key. The production of art is one of the ways in which such divergent demons can be appeased:

And the external world is born upon his paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator. The phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature. All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged and harmonized, and undergo that forced idealization which is the result of a childlike perceptiveness – that is to say, a perceptiveness acute and magical by reason of its innocence!<sup>8</sup>

Pierre Larousse, in his entry for *curiosité* in the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* of the same year, gives a more literal but varied four-page definition. His first examples, however, hint at a more supernatural interpretation, evoking the way Baudelaire references key terms like ‘phantasmagoria’ and ‘magical.’ ‘The ardent and often indiscrete desire to know, to surprise and to penetrate the secrets, and the affairs of others,’ which in the ensuing examples, defines this desire more in relation to children and their natural curiosity. Secondly, ‘taste, amateur passion for original and rare things of any kind.’<sup>9</sup> Larousse is here working on the similar principle of the child being the site of genuine curiosity, coupled with a desire for that which is singular, ultimately echoed in Lee’s sentiments on Sargent. When combined, these definitions parallel Baudelaire’s concepts of genius, stating that the artist must have the child’s sense of wonder about the world, but must combine that wonder with an attraction to that which is different or unique. Yet again this ‘amateur desire’ for new things comes with a warning, another duality, which Larousse refers to as ‘*curiosité dangereuse*.’

Dangerous, it is the result of weak or incomplete men, whose organization is vicious, the diseased brain or the softened spine; such are those for who spells, magic, miracles, superstitions, turned tables, spiritualism, are acts of faith, and who spend their time in deepening this nonsense, such nonsense, and lies.<sup>10</sup>

Walter Pater, five years later, would give further characterisation to such *curiosité* in his article ‘Poems of William Morris’ for the *Westminster Review*. This text became influential in Aesthetic circles for initially coining the phrase ‘art for art’s sake,’ but in this discourse it is more remarkable in defining Baudelaire’s external ‘odours and senses of life’ as impressions.

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp, importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence, the cohesive force is suspended like a trick of magic, each object is loosed into a group of *impressions*, colour, odour, texture, in the mind of the observer.<sup>11</sup>

*Curiosité* and its resulting impressions again hint to a hidden otherness. Baudelaire remarks upon them as ‘beautiful and strange,’<sup>12</sup> while Pater evokes Larousse’s mystical ‘magic’ as the cause for the separation of impressions into the various senses. The way in which the artist translates this never-ending flow of stimuli is a constant source of confusion,

wonder and bafflement for the Aesthetic writer. Such feelings, with their evocative language, align later Aesthetic expositions more clearly on the side of degeneration.<sup>13</sup> Looking to counteract such an effect, in 1873 Pater clarifies that the foil to curiosity is the ‘desire of beauty’. In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci in *The Renaissance*, he states: ‘Curiosity and the desire of beauty – these are the two elementary forces in Leonardo’s genius; curiosity is often in conflict with the desire of beauty, but generating, in union with it, a type of subtle and curious grace.’ Pater later defines this in the sense that Leonardo’s quest for the aesthetic made him ‘go too far below that outside of things, which in art begins and ends.’<sup>14</sup> Again, there is a dissonance struggling within the artist – at first it is the seemingly benign desire for the visual, for things that are beautiful, experimental or strange – new colors, compositions and landscapes. Yet Pater credits this as the cause of Leonardo’s perpetual sense of *ennui*, and the general knowledge that a number of his works were left unfinished or in a state of decay. Pater observes that while genius gave Leonardo the ability to create on many levels, it also acted as the driving force that opened him to decadence – the bizarre, the unnatural, and the unproductive side of an artist’s life, giving him what Swinburne called ‘the identity of contraries.’<sup>15</sup>

With these antecedents in mind, what then is Vernon Lee implying in her personal reminiscences on Sargent? On the one hand there is no doubt that she views Sargent as exhibiting Baudelaire’s concept of genius, because he embodies both requirements – a childlike sense of wonder, that she literally bases in a story from childhood, coupled with the talent to create and produce art which interprets such wonder. This act of translation also makes him a man of modernity, an interpreter of the outside world. Yet Lee also uses other terms such as ‘wizard, serpent, sphinx,’ creatures which have all been historically defined on both sides of good and evil, depending on how their respective gifts are used. For Lee, Sargent himself is a type of sphinx, embodying masculine and feminine, human and animal qualities. He is at once ‘realistic’ and ‘more than meets the eye,’ while her language creates a contrast of the ‘dominant’ and ‘undefinable.’ What seems important here is not his sexuality, which she may allude to with her use of certain terms, but the fact that Sargent embodies the artist as duality and contrast. She does not seek to limit him into one type of category or another, but rather places him in a type of open space where he was, indeed, a true man of modernity, omnipresent in his search for inspiration. For Lee, influence takes precedence over morality.

Publicly, in many of the critical reviews, this kind of ephemerality was seen as unnatural. Artists were to be placed on one side or another of the morality binary, as seen in the overt masculine versus feminine language in Victorian art criticism. Ruskinian aesthetic theory during this period worked on this principle of the verbal interrelationship between morality and gender. Similar to Oscar Wilde’s assertion in *The English Renaissance*, that in the future children will ‘love what is beautiful and good, and hate what is evil and ugly,’<sup>16</sup> external beauty equals inner beauty and vice versa. On this same principle, an artist described in overly assertive terms is more morally acceptable for the viewing public than one who exhibits weaker or more ‘feminine’ characteristics. Aesthetic art criticism looked to redefine such notions, instead preferring to view art as androgynous in its embodiment of both characteristics. Whereas Vernon Lee looks to define Sargent within the Aesthetic framework, the critical reception of his works struggle and then later seek to delineate him to one side of this ethical binary.

One such review of Sargent’s 1882 Salon submission *El Jaleo (Danse de Gitanes)*<sup>17</sup> oscillates closely along this line, unsure of how to approach an artist who depicts the otherness of the Spanish dance hall. ‘To a certain extent the strength and energy, bizarre as the manifestation of the latter is, of M. Sargent’s *El Jaleo (Danse de Gitanes)* justify the large measure of praise which has been bestowed upon it [...] It is a *tour de force*, designed with an

astonishing energy and in a weird spirit which, if not agreeable, is vigorous and new.’<sup>18</sup> In a simple paragraph, we have a ‘vigorous’ and ‘energetic’ painter who also exhibits notions of the ‘bizarre’ and ‘weird spirit.’ *The Art Journal* follows by describing the ‘slow, measured, voluptuous, languorous action’ of *El Jaleo* and yet ends the review clearly with the statement that ‘the strength of the picture lies in the originality of the subject, and in its powerful and masculine rendering.’<sup>19</sup>

These reviews express a palpable sense of discomfort and a veritable mimicking of the attraction/repulsion that the aesthetes felt towards their own definitions of genius. Sargent’s more ‘alternative’ qualities are appealing and exotic – they do not deny that there is a force of attraction. Yet these feelings have to be repackaged into typically potent vocabulary in order to make the all-important judgment of morality, as seen when both of these reviews end forcefully on a note of strength. Other reviews looked to rework this sense of attraction/repulsion into more ambiguous language. Margaret Bertha Wright, in her review for Sargent’s *Portraits d’Enfants* the following year, couches her uneasiness as ‘showmanship’ and ‘cleverness’.

The artist choosing to do startling things rather than beautiful ones [...] All this is very well as showing the artist’s clever manipulation of ‘effects,’ but what in the world has it to do with portraiture? One naturally considers the living objects the chief consideration in portraiture, and does not ask for a portrait of fantastic light or for ostentatious proof of the painter’s cleverness.<sup>20</sup>

‘Clever’ was directly defined as positive in dictionaries of the period: ‘talented, dexterous, skillful.’<sup>21</sup> However, Wright uses it to imply that beneath Sargent’s bravado lays a man with no skill. Again this language still works on a duality. She subversively acknowledges that special effects, by their very nature, inspire and awe, but that instead the *intention* behind them (i.e. to cover lack of real talent) is vacant and reprehensible. Wright’s disgust with the ‘fantastic’ elements of Sargent’s work still walks along the binary of attraction/repulsion.

In terms of artistic androgyny, or the question of whether a specific piece of work can be viewed as having both inherent masculine and feminine qualities, criticism of Sargent appears to outwardly weigh more heavily towards an exclusionary rhetoric. These examples show an ebb and flow of attempts to place his work in one frame or the other. Yet regardless of this oscillation, they still conclude on relatively positive grounds. This is partly because, early in his career, Sargent worked within the parameters of the *juste milieu* – a term typically applied to artists such as his Parisian instructor Carolus Duran, who ‘towed the line’ between the Academic/traditional and the modern. Sargent painted in acceptable formats, i.e. ‘Velazquez inspired/Old Master’ and ‘Impressionist,’ with the more ‘bizarre’ experiments confined to subtle accents. The dark and foreboding presentation of *Portraits d’Enfants*, for example, was openly viewed as being his interpretation of Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*, and not as an interpretation of Walter Pater’s *The Child in the House*, which Sargent may have read in the months leading up to the painting’s execution.<sup>22</sup> However, such subtlety was eschewed in the execution of his Salon submission of 1884: the notorious *Madame X*, his portrait of the ‘professional beauty’ Virginie Gautreau, and the criticism reflects this.

This portrait was ultimately too decadent for public consumption. Sargent’s inability (or unwillingness) to couch his overt heterogeneity into any of these acceptable visual formats, past or present, meant condemnation in the critical reviews.<sup>23</sup> Virginie’s preference for the lavender of potash mixture, which gave her skin violet undertones, attracted Sargent’s innate obsession with the Other. ‘Do you object to people who are fardées to the extent of being uniform lavender or blotting paper colour all over?’ Sargent wrote to Vernon Lee on 10 February 1883, ‘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.<sup>24</sup> Yet that which Sargent found beautiful in its difference, reminded the critics too much of death and decay. They described it much in the same way they had censured Manet's *Olympia* in the Salon of 1865. *Olympia* was described as 'like a corpse on the counters of the morgue, this Olympia from the Rue de Mouffetard, dead of yellow fever and already arrived at an advanced state of decomposition,'<sup>25</sup> while *Madame X* was called 'strange, certainly, odd [...] close to macabre,'<sup>26</sup> and 'this portrait is simply offensive in its insolent ugliness [...] a willful exaggeration of every one of his vicious eccentricities.'<sup>27</sup>

There is a noted shift in the reviews' use of alternative terms from their implications of the previous year. Instead of alluding to an indescribable element – something new and different – strangeness and eccentricity instead becomes associated with ugliness and decay. The vocabulary shifts to the other side of the binary. In this case, Sargent's curiosity and genius have taken him, like Pater's Leonardo, 'too far below that outside of things.' The parallels between Leonardo and Sargent strengthen when listening to Pater's description of *La Gioconda* from *The Renaissance*, words that evoke the critical reviews of *Madame X*.

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave...and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, Sargent's very public attraction to difference pushed him towards the dangerous side of genius, and his career suffered as a result. Art historical argument has asserted that Sargent's 1885 move from Paris to London was a necessity of reinvention after the scandal of *Madame X*. However, instead of looking at the public damnation of *Madame X* as a blighted mark of shame on a previously successful career, it seems more apt to instead look at this work as simply ahead of its time. Had the work been exhibited a mere ten years later, during the Decadent and Symbolist movements, its reception may have been quite different. Mme Gautreau's bleak color contrasts and linearity would have anticipated the lines of Beardsley's drawings for *Salome* and echoed Whistler's 1892 *Arrangement in Black and Gold: Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac*. It seems more likely that Sargent's increase in English commissions and his nascent bond with Henry James and the English Aesthetes encouraged his relocation. With a new market came new visual expectations, and it thus became essential that Sargent redefined himself to appeal to the more conservative British critics.

His initial foray, however, proved unsuccessful. In a letter to Edwin Russell dated 10 September 1885, he acknowledges as such:

Since the last three or four years I have had more or less up and down of prosperity; just now as I am rather out of favour as a portrait painter in Paris, although my last Salon, two portraits done in England rather retrieved me [...] There is perhaps more chance for me there [England] as a portrait painter, although it might be a long struggle for my painting to be accepted. It is thought beastly French.<sup>29</sup>

Sargent thus needed to rid his works of the notion of otherness and duality to delineate himself as an artist who only exhibited his subjects with an impassive, logical rationality. Vernon Lee, writing for Evan Charteris' biography of Sargent after the latter's death in 1925, noted just such a change:

When I met him, during his Paris years, in 1881, he described himself as an Impressionist and an ‘intransigent’ entirely given up to the faithful reproduction of ‘les valeurs.’ Indeed for years after that, and maybe to the end of his days, I feel certain that his conscious endeavor, his self-formulated program, was to paint whatever he saw with absolute and researchful fidelity, never avoiding ugliness nor seeking after beauty.<sup>30</sup>

‘Conscious’ and ‘self-formulated’ seem apt here, and they imply that Sargent’s more direct approach in his post-1885 painting was a form of intentional refashioning against his attraction to the bizarre. This shift from the active to the passive state of the artist mimics the concepts of *curiosité* outlined by Baudelaire and Pater. Instead of acting as a translator for external impressions and creating images that were for beauty’s sake, he instead wishes to become for his audience a mirror, reflecting exactly what he sees. This places Sargent more in line with Baudelaire’s concept of *naïveté*, which adheres to the purity of an artist’s vision. ‘He [Arondel] paints with a great *naïveté* – without any pretensions to a school nor with the pedantry of an atelier.’<sup>31</sup> Sargent’s shift to painting simply what was in front of him, without excessive external influence (from modern styles or seductive stimuli), prototypically embodies the immersion into *naïveté* – but in his case it was more a subversion and homogenisation.

Sargent’s experiment ultimately worked, as the critical reviews after this period shift notably towards describing his more robust characteristics with little hint towards the alternative. *The Athenaeum* called him ‘highly scientific,’ while Royal Cortissoz remarked that ‘for he looks at life and art from a totally different point of view; not simply, or grandly, or tragically, or imaginatively, but with the detached, intellectual curiosity of a man of the world.’ The word ‘detached’ here, however, seems in marked contrast to another sentence from this review, which asserts that, ‘besides, he has portrayed the woman of fashion, in her infinite variety, with incomparable elegance and penetration.’<sup>32</sup> In a few pages, the writer oscillates from implying a type of asexuality – a detached and dispassionate nature that allows him to render the subject as nature presents – to a virile and erotic man intent on ‘penetrating’ women of fashion. Christian Brinton, in *Munsey’s Magazine*, similarly works on this duality, describing Sargent as ‘personally uncommunicative, his art is the essence of lucidity [...] Wonderfully endowed, he dedicates his ability almost exclusively to rendering the outward semblance of things.’<sup>33</sup> Yet these contrasts work together to form the perfect concept of the Victorian artist – one who is free from feminine ‘emotions’ and ‘passions,’ who is ‘productive’ and ‘forceful’ and yet can exercise a modicum of control and professionalism. For these reviews, rationality and (sexual) prowess seem mutually exclusive.

The idea of surgical penetration, as opposed to sexual penetration, however, belies another issue aside from its overt insistence on the masculine nature of Sargent’s art. It points to the wider Aesthetic discourse that contemporary art was in a constantly fluctuating state of ‘health’ and ‘disease,’ to which only the true artist (the definition of which was highly debatable) could provide the cure. Vernon Lee, for example, in her own letters called it ‘scrupulous English art’ and makes repeated mention that her visits to the Royal Academy and Grosvenor Gallery were ‘poor,’ disappointing and contained ‘nothing at all suggestive.’<sup>34</sup> Oscar Wilde, in his review of Whistler’s *Ten O’Clock* lecture at Prince’s Hall on 20 February 1885, notes that ‘He [Whistler] was like a brilliant surgeon lecturing to a class composed of subjects destined ultimately for dissection, and solemnly assuring them how valuable to science their maladies were, and how absolutely uninteresting the slightest symptoms of health on their part would be.’<sup>35</sup> Wilde’s suggestion that the audience is ‘diseased’ and the artist will act as the ‘surgeon’ who will provide comfort and health seems at odds with the



previous reviews of Sargent who was described only the year before as being veritably sick with his own eccentricities.

It seems that this use of the metaphor of doctor and disease needs to be added to the 'aesthetic code'. Wilde and Lee, both members of the Aesthetic minority, switch the core of the problem back onto the audience – that the lack of sufficient art education leads the majority to permit stagnation, typically associated with the body at the Royal Academy. Henry James expressed this more clearly, writing to Grace Norton after one of his early meetings with Sargent, remarking that: 'We are in the midst of an explosion of exhibitions; most of which are plentifully stocked with rot. The Academy is filthy,' to which he sees Sargent as the balm, 'But very few other people see that there (though Sargent has such a reputation in Paris...)'<sup>36</sup> The opinions of these three figures contrast wildly with one form of the public opinion, which deemed instead that Aesthetic views and criticism themselves embody such illness. 'The New Departure in Aestheticism,' from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, uses this language to chastise the Aesthetic critic for 'emotional and sensuous impressions.'

Now nature is the basis of all true art, and as soon as the arts take to feeding upon one another instead of upon nature, disease and decay ensue. Description in criticism is, in short, allowable only so far as to furnish a clear basis for the argument and verdict; and when, under the semblance of 'interpreting the spirit,' [...] when he sucks the blood of the artist's brains in order to supply his own brain with vitality sufficient to explore his aesthetic languors [...] [they run] the risk of being classed among [...] the vampyre school of critics. Such persons, having once learned to relish their sickly diet, thenceforth lose their appetite for wholesome nourishment. Nature is too fresh and hearty for them; until the meal which she affords has already been digested by somebody else they will not venture to touch it.<sup>37</sup>

The description of Sargent as a doctor, full of virility and health, implies a critical desire to associate Sargent with the Academic side of art, not the Aesthetic. However, on another level, it also negates any hint of the 'sexual disease' that may have been implied by his subversive attractions. This could be interpreted as a very public response to an acknowledgement of the 'homosexual code,' putting Sargent through a process of media-based purification for the moral sake of the art-viewing community. Alternatively, it was most likely the result of an inherent xenophobia, to rid him of the impurity of being too 'bestly French.' Repeated published documentation exists from this period espousing the perilous state of English art due to the encroachment of French taste. Ernest Chesneau even specifically calls it a 'disease,' 'which was certain to develop slowly but steadily and more virulently towards what I called 'cosmopolitanism in art.'<sup>38</sup> Sargent was highly cosmopolitan, and therefore describing him in sanitary terms would have openly rid him of any taint of foreign contamination.

This seemed, in part, to be Sargent's intention. Upon his move to England, his work goes through a type of visual transformation. Compare the linear execution and 'return to fifteenth century ideals'<sup>39</sup> of *Madame X* in 1884, to his first critical British success *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (begun in 1885) which was purchased for the state by the Chantry Bequest upon its initial exhibition in 1887. Gone are the macabre skin tones, deep shadows and stark contrasts, replaced instead with bright and airy colouration, set in a very traditionally English garden filled with very traditionally English children. The out-of-doors setting, though recalling Impressionist principles, harks clearly to the *Pall Mall Gazette's* opinion of nature and its 'wholesome nourishment,' while following in the footsteps of Millais and appealing to the fashionable taste for images of the innocent child.<sup>40</sup>

After Sargent's death in 1925, and even at some points earlier, art historians saw this change of styles as a form of 'pandering' to the English public - this reversal effectively secured him a place in the British art world, and an illustrious and prolific career ensued. Roger Fry, writing in his *Transformations* of 1926, saw *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* as a 'vulgarization' and 'emasculated version' of Impressionism, preferring instead Sargent's works pre-1885, when 'during Sargent's apprenticeship in Paris he must have caught, in however mild and transient a form, the infection of that curious passion of the artist for the discovery of visual relations that have [...] a significance for the spirit.'<sup>41</sup> Again, so many years later, Fry is using this term 'curious' to describe Sargent's early explorations in art. Here, the term is not deprecatory, but rather describes a more indistinct, attractive quality; similar to the way it was used by his critical reviewers before 1884.

Sargent's appeal to passions that were 'curious' or different ultimately aligned him with Aesthetic views on the nature of the artist and his participation in the surrounding world. Beauty was to be found and defined not specifically within terms of morality, but rather within itself, or for its own sake. This opened the discourse on aesthetics into a wider circle – but it also made the definition of the beautiful more complex, as it now could encompass those elements considered bizarre and strange. By contrast, published criticism seems to be reacting against this, and this can be seen in Sargent's case. As Elizabeth Prettejohn argues, the critics of the period were looking to 'systematically link works of art with specific cultural values.'<sup>42</sup> These cultural values promote health, sanity and masculinity as predominant above all else. Public perception appears to show that attraction to otherness walks a fine line between being new and exciting, and yet can easily transition to a form of decadence and immorality when taken too far. This is exemplified by the fairly neutral criticism in relation to *Portrait d'Enfants*, because it could be associated with an Old Master, to the outright negative comments directed towards *Madame X*, because no obvious associations could be made. Sargent's own private interests on the nature of art as beauty seemed at odds with what was required of him as a successful public painter, and an intentional shift was made in order to subvert these preferences for the sake of his public career.

The ebb and flow of the concepts of otherness in Sargent's public and private records connote a perplexing and unsettled idea of how he was viewed during his own time. The implication of his bizarre nature aligns him with the Aesthetic movement and their attraction to decay, beauty and madness. Yet later descriptions of him as a surgeon imply focus on virile masculinity in his surgical penetration and on his health in the dispassionate adherence to depicting nature exactly as it is presented. His intimate confidantes and those in his confined circle, Vernon Lee and Henry James specifically, in their writings describe his person and artistic agenda as being attracted to principles of difference. As the most reliable extant sources on Sargent, as art historians we are wont to believe that they convey the true nature of Sargent's artistic beliefs and intentions. Yet such principles were sanitised or negated in the media, thus allowing Sargent's works to gain public acceptance, creating an uncertain contrast between the public and private. Health would have been a valid concern for such critics, as viewing wholesome and healthy art no doubt provided relief to a culture constantly surrounded with illness and death. Sargent's intentional manipulation of both his style and his public persona post-1885 denote him as a man embodying the artistic androgyny that so attracted him; a shrewd and rational businessman on one level, and a man of decadent, alternative, but ultimately private passions on the other.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James to William James, 20 January 1893. Reproduced in Carl J. Weber, 'Henry James and his Tiger-Cat', *PMLA*, 68 (1953), IV (p. 683).

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: Jay Lane, 1927), pp. xxx-xxxi. Italics are Lee's own. I would like to thank Catherine Maxwell for bringing this text to my attention. To view this text in relation to its importance to Vernon Lee, please see Catherine Maxwell, '“A Queer Sort of Interest”: Vernon Lee's Homoerotic Allusion to John Singer Sargent and John Addington Symonds', in ed. Adrienne E. Gavin and Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Writing Women of the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 166-178.

<sup>4</sup> Thäis E. Morgan, 'Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater', *Victorian Studies*, 36 Victorian Sexualities (1993), III (p. 316). For Linda Dowling's original discussion on the 'homosexual code,' please see Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). 'The love that dare not speak its name' finds root in the poem 'Two Loves' by Lord Alfred Douglas, suspected lover of Oscar Wilde, so it does have an Aesthetic background of sorts.

<sup>5</sup> John House limits his references on *naïveté* to 'Le Salon de 1846', but there are also references to the term mentioned in Baudelaire's previous review 'Le Salon de 1845', both of which were collected in his 1868 publication *Curiosités Esthétiques*. John House, 'Curiosité', in ed. Richard Hobbs, *Impressions of French Modernity: Art and Literature in France 1850-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 33-34.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'impression' is obviously loaded with meaning here. For the purposes of my argument, and this essay, I want to convey impression not as it relates to Impressionism and brushwork, but rather to its use in Aesthetic texts. This definition will be further discussed later in this paper, but for reference please see Footnotes #11 & #12.

<sup>7</sup> All quotes on this page are from Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 2006), pp. 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Baudelaire, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Désir ardent et souvent indiscret se savoir, de surprendre, de pénétrer les secrets, les affaires d'autrui; Goût, passion d'amateur pour les choses originales, rares, en quelque genre que ce soit.* Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siècle, français, historique, géographique, mythologique, bibliographique, littéraire, artistique, scientifique, etc.* (Paris: Contre-Czyz, 1869), p. 681. Translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> *Dangereuse, elle est le fait des hommes faibles ou incomplets, dont l'organisation est vicieuse, le cerveau malade ou la moelle ramollie; tels sont ceux pour qui les sortilèges, la magie, les miracles, les superstitions, les tables tournantes, le spiritisme, sont actes de foi, et qui passent leur temps à approfondir ces billevesées, ces balivernes, ces mesonges.* Larousse, p. 681.

<sup>11</sup> Please see footnote #7 for original Baudelaire source for this quote. Pater's full quote on this: 'For our one chance is in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given times. High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the 'enthusiasm of humanity.' Only, be sure it is passion, that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most, for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for that moment's sake.' Walter Pater, 'Art. II – Poems by William Morris', *Westminster Review*, 34 (October 1868), II (pp. 310-312).

<sup>12</sup> See footnote #9 for reference.

<sup>13</sup> Pater does not specify the 'artist' per se in his description of how impressions are perceived, and it could be said he was identifying the general human process of sensory conversion. However, he does include this in an article relating specifically to William Morris, a painter and poet. Therefore, for purposes of brevity and to stay on the path of my argument, I will use the word 'artist' instead of human or person in my descriptions.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1873, repr. 1904), pp. 113, 116.

<sup>15</sup> A.C. Swinburne, 'Simeon Solomon: Notes on his "Vision of Love" and Other Studies', *The Dark Blue*, 1 (July 1871), V (p. 575).

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The English Renaissance of Art', in Robert Ross, ed. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 14 vols (Boston: The Wyman-Fogg Company, 1908), XIV, p. 271.

<sup>17</sup> Due to financial constraints, we were not allowed to reproduce any images for this paper. However, many of these paintings are well known and can be found easily online for reference.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Salon, Paris', *Athenaeum*, 2850 (June 10, 1882), p. 738.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Salon from an Englishman's Point of View', *Art Journal*, (July 1881), p. 218.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Bertha Wright, 'American Art at the Paris Salon', *Art Amateur*, 9 (July 1883), II (p. 24). I have done extensive research into critical reviews of Sargent's work up until 1885, and the words 'clever' or 'cleverness'

seem to appear with equal, if not more, frequency than the terms ‘impression’ and ‘impressionist.’ It is unclear how the reviews work with this term. On the one hand it is used as derogatory and on the other it seems to imply youthful spirit and panache. This exploration is currently a work in progress.

<sup>21</sup> *Cabinet Dictionary of the English Language* (London: William Collins & Sons, 1871), p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> Sargent mentions in a letter to Vernon Lee from 20 July 1881, ‘Tell me what you think of Pater’s essays, I like one or two of them very much.’ Richard Ormond, ‘John Singer Sargent and Vernon Lee’, *Colby Quarterly*, 9 (September 1970), III (p. 168). Very few Pater texts had been published by this point, his ‘Portraits’ in *Macmillan’s Magazine* came out in 1878, while *The Renaissance* was published in 1873. It is my theory that there are striking parallels between *The Child in the House*, one of the ‘Portraits’ of 1878, and *Portraits d’Enfants*, alluding to the fact that this essay may have influenced the unconventional way in which Sargent chose to depict the Boit Daughters. Vernon Lee had also published her work *Belcaro* this same year, which included an essay entitled ‘The Child in the Vatican’ which also may have been of significance.

<sup>23</sup> Vernon Lee, however, in her letters home to her mother, remarked that this painting was Sargent’s ‘return to fifteenth century ideals,’ implying that Sargent may have seen the crisp outlines as a form of homage to the Pre-Raphaelites and their mentors Botticelli and Piero della Francesca. None of the critical reviews seem to pick up on this, and Lee’s comment is something I’m still trying to work out in my current research. Vernon Lee to her mother, 8 June 1884, in Irene Cooper Willis, *Vernon Lee’s Letters* (London: Privately Printed, 1937), p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: The Complete Paintings*, 7 vols. (London: Yale University Press, 1998), I, p. 116.

<sup>25</sup> T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), p. 97. There were no references in the footnotes to a source for this review, although Clark indicates the critic’s name to be Victor Fournel.

<sup>26</sup> *Etrange, je le veux bien, singulier, je n’en disconviens pas, presque macabre: j’écrirai le mot, si l’on y tient, mais, pour ressemblant, il est ressemblant...* Translations are my own. Jules Claretie, ‘La Vie à Paris’, *Le Temps* (16 May 1884), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> ‘The Eccentricities of French Art’, *Art Amateur*, 11 (August 1884), III (p. 52).

<sup>28</sup> All quotes from this paragraph are Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 116.

<sup>29</sup> Sargent to Edwin Russell, 10 September 1885. London, Tate Gallery Archives, Acquisition file for *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. ‘Beastly French’ can mean one of many things in this context. Instinctually, and considering the backlash for *Madame X*, I think Sargent is making references to his work being too Aesthetic, Decadent or, facture-wise, Impressionist. The British public was developing a preference for more tradition-based portraiture in the style of Reynolds and Gainsborough – the works of Frederic Leighton were an excellent example. Sargent would have ultimately been considered too ‘modern’ to fit into this dynamic.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Vernon Lee, ‘J. S. S.: In Memoriam’, in Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1927), p. 251. I would like to thank Hannah Scott for recently pointing out to me that the term ‘les valeurs’ has associations with Balzac, who associated ‘valeur’ with a bourgeois sense of social and cultural values. I will need to research this more at a later date, but in a general sense, Lee’s statement seems to align Sargent with wishing to paint the anti-establishment.

<sup>31</sup> *Il est peint avec une grand naïveté – sans aucune prétention d’école ni aucun pédantisme d’atelier*. Translations are my own. Charles Baudelaire, ‘Le Salon de 1845’, *Curiosités Esthétiques* (Paris: Michael Lévy Frères, 1868), p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Fine Arts: The Royal Academy’, *The Athenaeum*, 3105 (30 April 1887), p. 580. I acknowledge the word ‘curiosity’ here, but since it appears to be making a more straightforward use of the term, I instead preferred to focus on the more scientific descriptors. Royal Cortissoz, ‘John S Sargent’, *Scribner’s Magazine*, 34 (November 1903), V (pp. 529, 532).

<sup>33</sup> Christian Brinton, ‘Sargent and his Art’, *Munsey’s Magazine*, 36 (December 1906), III (p. 270).

<sup>34</sup> Willis, p. 126. For further references to the poor state of British art, see letters from 5 July, 1881 (pp. 70-71), 8 June 1881 (p. 84), and 16 June 1882 (p. 87) in this volume. In terms of suggestiveness, Vernon Lee never mentions any of the more erotic or sexual overtones in her letters, so I think she’s using this term more meaning that there was nothing “suggestive” of anything that interested her.

<sup>35</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘Mr. Whistler’s Ten O’Clock’, ed. Robert Ross, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 14 vols (Boston: The Wyman-Fogg Company, 1908), XIV, p. 64. This review was originally published in the 21 February 1885 edition of the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

<sup>36</sup> Edwin T. Bowden, *The Themes of Henry James* (New Haven: Archon Books, 1956), p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> ‘The New Departure in Aestheticism’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4713 (1 April, 1880), p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Ernest Chesneau, ‘The English School in Peril’, *Magazine of Art*, (January 1888), p. 26. There was also frequent discussion in print with regards to the threat of France on the development of American art. See also Montezuma, ‘My Note Book’, *Art Amateur*, 8 (May 1883), VI (pp. 122-123); ‘The Art Works in Paris’, *The New*

*York Times* (29 September 1878), p. 2; Introduction of Henry James, 'John S. Sargent', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 75 (October 1887), CDXLIX (pp. 683-692).

<sup>39</sup> Vernon Lee to her Mother, 8 June 1884: 'His picture of Madame Gotreau is a solemn fiasco in the eyes of the world; you see it surrounded by shoals of astonished & jibing women. When it was first seen, the outcry was such that Mme Gotreau went into *crises* and her Mother rushed to John & said, 'Vous avez perdu ma fille!' – still he is prouder of it than Jaléo & I think it is, though bizarre and even unpleasant, a very grand work. He is tending entirely towards a return to 15<sup>th</sup> century ideals.' Willis, p. 143.

<sup>40</sup> See Millais's sentimental child images, such as *Bubbles* and *Cherry Ripe*, both of which were incredibly popular, and sold nearly half a million copies in print. For me, *Cherry Ripe* has an erotic element to it that makes it more uncomfortable than anything else, but it would have been placed within this sentimental genre during the period.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Fry, 'J. S. Sargent as seen at the Royal Academy Exhibition of his Works, 1926, and in the National Gallery', *Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), pp. 125-127.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Aesthetic Value and the Professionalization of Victorian Art Criticism 1837-78', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 2 (Spring 1997), I (p. 73).

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