

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a scandal that Sargent was found ‘dodging behind doors’ to avoid inevitable accusation, and the work was eventually withdrawn.¹ Though this *succès de scandale* has often been cited as the main cause of Sargent’s eventual relocation to London, there has been little discussion about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,

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