



Sargentology – New Perspectives on the Works of John Singer Sargent

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To cite this article: Liz Renes & Emily Moore (2018): Sargentology – New Perspectives on the Works of John Singer Sargent, *Visual Culture in Britain*, DOI: [10.1080/14714787.2018.1445023](https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2018.1445023)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2018.1445023>



Published online: 22 Mar 2018.




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Introduction

In 1910 Walter Sickert penned an article titled ‘Sargentolatry’ that addressed the fervour surrounding John Singer Sargent as an artist and tastemaker. Using the language of religious devotion, Sickert writes of the ‘prostration before [Sargent] and all his works’ by the British art press, the effect this adulation had on other artists working in this period, and how this sense of complacency was bad for both critics and artists alike.¹ While Sickert’s criticisms can certainly be placed within modernism’s early antagonism to and rejection of Victorianism – an imperialistic golden age that Sargent was seen to represent – it marked the beginning of a line of debasement that would continue well after his death in 1925. Echoing Sickert’s sentiments as to the vapidness of the blind worship of Sargent, in his *Transformations* of 1926 Roger Fry decided simply that ‘it seems to me he brings no new or individual insight to the interpretation even of social values. Here he moves, and it is one secret of his effect, quite naturally in step with the crowd’.² Though talented, Sargent was ultimately considered a relic. Thus, at the start of the twentieth century, it would appear that Sargent would be relegated to history as an artist with nothing new or important to say to the generations of artists that succeeded him.

What Sickert and Fry could not foresee, perhaps, was the complexity of an artist whose person and work pervaded nearly every aspect of the late Victorian world – from music to literature to theatre, Europe to the East, Aestheticism to the First World War. Unable to erase the ‘Sargentolatry’, and the titanesque figure that Sargent represented, later scholars often misidentified, or possibly even corrected, Sickert’s term into ‘Sargentology’, a move that attempted to wash away the dogmatic tinge of the original by focusing instead on a more impartial, almost scientific study of Sargent as a distinct entity within the history of art. Though he brought seemingly ‘no new insight’, he was worthy enough to become a movement within himself.

Towards the later years of the twentieth century, however, Sargent studies began to reach a new crescendo as renewed interest in Victorian art began to emerge. The Sargent catalogue raisonné by Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, which began in the early 1990s, solved the ever-present problem of coming to terms with the *quantity* of Sargent’s work, but much was still to be done to interpret its significance. Recent blockbuster exhibitions – such as the recent *Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends* at the National Portrait Gallery (2015) and *Sargent: The Watercolours* at Dulwich Picture Gallery (2017) – represent just this type

of complicity within the complacency that has permeated much of Sargent study. By focusing on Sargent's bravado, beauty or technique, and not the more engaging aspects of his role in Victorian visual culture – as a patron, collector or educator, for example – these displays have failed to connect, conveying a Sargent who is lacking or out of touch with the modern world. Critics for both *The Independent* and *The Standard* remark on a sense of emptiness felt in these displays – they are 'over idealised' or 'too obvious', with Michael Glover more explicitly stating that Sargent lacks 'real emotional charge', for 'he [Sargent] seldom excites, unnerves or challenges us'.³ Sargentology, it seems, has veered back towards Sargentolatry – a vapid worship of beauty challenged by Sickert and Fry in the early twentieth century.

As a response to this, the aim of the conference 'Sargentology: New Perspectives on the Work of John Singer Sargent', held at the University of York, April 28–29, 2016, and this resulting collection, is to signpost a new trend in Sargent studies which seeks to explore outside the parameters of Sargent's superficial golden status as a 'prince of the atelier'. One aspect of the contributing complacency in Sargent studies has been categorization – an approach that always fails when applied to Sargent because he challenged and blurred a number of defined artistic and social frameworks. In response to this, this collection of scholarship will look to define a new direction for Sargent studies, one which works on a broader interdisciplinary and multinational framework that more fully encompasses the pervasive artistic figure Sargent represented. But it will also capture the spirit of new emerging work – as seen in Susan Sidlauskas's analysis of *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, or Catherine Maxwell's discussion of Sargent's Aesthetic 'curiosity' – that pushes back against the perceived idea of Sargent's vapidness to assert that his art and person often doggedly pursued the indistinct, the ephemeral and the sensual.⁴ Closer examination of the contradictions present in his body of work – from his rich Spanish colour and prismatic sunlight, to his pleasurable parties, to the sculptural form of men at war – indicates that not only did Sargent often seek to find the obscure spirit in the matter of the world around him, but that it was this element of the psychological and esoteric, or what Vernon Lee calls his unavowed love for the 'exotic' and 'rare kinds of beauty', that gives a lasting quality to his work.⁵

Fresh, new, and perhaps even controversial, our call for papers was a challenge to Sargent scholars, and many rose to the occasion. The articles in this collection represent only a small facet of the webs of thought and scholarship woven over the course of that two-day period, establishing a new direction of analysis for an artist who is now, seemingly, everywhere. Of vital new importance to Sargent studies are four works in this collection that challenge Sargent's typically British and American associations by honing in on his 'ardent Francophilia'.

Comically dissected in the introduction to Henry James' article on Sargent for *Harper's Weekly* in 1887, who mused 'Is Mr. Sargent, in very fact, an American painter? The proper answer to such a question is doubtless that we shall be well advised to claim him', the question of Sargent's nationality seemed to have been decided with more certainty in the British

direction after his death, with the opening of the Sargent dedicated galleries at the Tate in 1926.⁶ In the last half-century, American art history has more fervently claimed Sargent as one of its own, exemplified by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's assertion for its 'John Singer Sargent: Beyond the Portrait Studio' exhibition in 2000 that he was 'one of the most acclaimed American artists of his generation'.⁷

While a majority of scholarship seems to oscillate between these two nationalities, little work has been done to address Sargent's early engagement with French art, during his Paris years between 1876 and 1885 and beyond. Henry James asserts that French art was a key contributor to the development of American art late in the nineteenth century, with his claim that 'it sounds like a paradox, but it is a very simple truth, that when today we find for "American art" we find it mainly in Paris'.⁸ Sargent was a key figure at the centre of this new cosmopolitan group of artists who used French and British art historical sources and training to inform new American tastes. Therefore, further exploration of his French roots would provide vital new aspects of research that would in future inform our understanding of the international nature of emerging aspects of American and British art.

In our collection, three scholars will discuss Sargent's relationship with art and figures central to the French *fin de siècle*. Both Charlotte Ribeyrol and Hadrien Viraben will examine Sargent's role within French decadence, through his attraction to the curiously modern 'culture of mauve', and Robert de Montesquiou's assertion that his decadence was really, well, not decadent enough, through his critique of Sargent in *Le Pavé Rouge* of 1905. While the above works will assert that Sargent was well entrenched in French artistic circles, Emily Eells and Stephen Coon will argue that it was the *absence* of a relationship with a major French figure, Marcel Proust, that might also provide a further avenue for exploration into Sargent's labyrinthine connections with that country. As these articles will show, despite his later categorization as a British and American artist, Sargent courted aspects of French modernism throughout his working career, often using their more decadent qualities to give a lasting sense of depth and complexity to his work.

Another key component to our collection is the idea of Sargent 'beneath the surface'. In a play between the concealing and revealing of the fabrics that surround his male nudes, Ana Muñoz Martín's article will explore the little-discussed aspects of Sargent's queerness and homosociality, while Joyce Townsend and Georgina Raynor will reveal scientific details behind the surface minutiae of Sargent's pigments, paints and materials. Shifting from the tactility of objects to the emotions of music, our collection will conclude with Leanne Langley's insightful interdisciplinary piece on Sargent and contemporary music, building an important framework for further work exploring Sargent's engagement with and influence on other types of art.

We intend these articles to weave a thread in a new tapestry in Sargent's legacy – one which plays between his tonal inferences to documented truths; explores the materiality of his pigment, paint and pen; or which blurs the boundaries between writing about art to painting

music – all in order to challenge Sickert’s notion of the ‘quotidien’ in Sargent’s art and life. The pervasive nature of Sargent’s attachment to nearly every aspect of turn-of-the-century culture colours our twenty-first-century understanding of the time in which he lived. Edwin Blashfield, writing perceptively on this after Sargent’s death in 1925, asks that we consider merely that although there is an end to the man himself, ‘of his influence there is no end that can be perceptible to us’.⁹ Therefore, it is in the spirit of Sargent, as the man, the myth and, to some, the monstrosity, that this special edition seeks to fulfil the objective of viewing Sargentology in new and alternative lights.

Notes

1. Sickert, ‘Sargentolatry’, 56.
2. Fry, ‘J.S. Sargent’, 128.
3. Matthew Collings, ‘Sargent: The Watercolours Exhibition Review: An Utterly Absorbing and Pleasurable Experience’, *Evening Standard*, June 21, 2017; Michael Glover, ‘Sargent: The Watercolours, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, Review: Overwhelming Dullness’, *Independent*, June 21, 2017.
4. See Sidlauskas, ‘“Great Gaps and Voids”’ and Maxwell, ‘“Queer Sort of Interest”’.
5. Lee, ‘J.S.S.: In Memoriam’, 252.
6. James, ‘John S. Sargent’, 683.
7. *John Singer Sargent Beyond the Portrait Studio: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours from the Collection*, online ex. cat. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Blashfield, ‘John Singer Sargent – Recollections’, 641.

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Elizabeth Renes received her PhD from the University of York in 2015. A self-professed 'Sargentologist', her thesis explored John Singer Sargent's relationship with the British Aesthetic and French Impressionist movements in his early career between 1878 and 1886. She has a number of publications related to this work, including a chapter on Madame X in *Decadence and the Senses (Legenda, 2017)*, and an upcoming analysis of Sargent's relationship with Velazquez in *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide (Routledge, 2018)*. She is the editor for *Sargentology.com*, a webspace for Sargent studies, co-editor in chief for the *HARTS & Minds* journal, and is part of the Web & Digital team at Bath Spa University.

Emily Moore's research interests focus on Anglo-American artistic tradition, cultural history, print culture and portraiture primarily in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Having recently completed her doctorate at the University of York, she is now an independent researcher based in London. Her doctoral thesis, titled 'John Singer Sargent's British and American Sitters, 1890–1910: Interpreting Cultural Identity within Society Portraits', relates portraits of American and British sitters by John Singer Sargent to ideas of national identity in the period leading up to the First World War. Her work also addresses implications of social issues present within Britain and America during the 1890s and 1900s that can be related directly to the composition of the portrait and/or through the biography of the sitter. Currently, she has been working on expanding this methodology to mid-twentieth-century British portraiture and print culture.