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John Singer Sargent: The Great Good Painter

In the arts, to call someone “good” is a slighting compliment at best, a consolation prize for those who don’t win, place, or show. Like the Almighty, critics tend to divide those they judge into either the Blessed or the Damned, but the gravitational pull of these poles leave the equator largely uninhabited. While it takes skill, training and stamina to finish last in an Olympic footrace, by then all the cameras have turned elsewhere. The fact that most of the pleasures that brighten our existence fall into the “good” category is irrelevant to connoisseurs. The happiest lives consist of only a few great moments; for the most part we are sustained by good meals, good friends, and good sex if we’re lucky. But the good does more than make life tolerable, it also enables the great. Good may be the default for a great writer or great composer on a bad day, but it also establishes the base line upon which their peaks are built.

That the American painter John Singer Sargent was good at what he did was universally acknowledged, even by his harshest critics. He possessed an irresistible command of his medium and showed genuine sensitivity in painting subjects as diverse as toddlers and dowagers. During his prime, which bridged the 19th and 20th Centuries, he was widely hailed as the greatest portrait painter alive and not infrequently compared to Van Dyke and even Velazquez. He was the only artist of his time to establish

dominance in the radically different art centers of England, France and the United States. With such success, what made him merely good?

A large factor in this had nothing to do with the quality of his work; the man was betrayed by his genre. The primary attraction in portraiture is vanity; its subject is not picturesque brooks or cleverly arranged apples, it's me. When the me is rich and powerful, society shows the portrait the same deference it shows the person. When the person dies, the appeal of his picture usually dies with him. If you want to avoid the crowds at the Louvre, hang out in a gallery devoted to dead marquises.

All this is a pity since portraiture contains the subtlest effects found in the visual arts. Most of the impact of a landscape or a still life depends on how the elements are placed; placement counts for little in a portrait. The purpose of portraiture is identical with that of biography: to weld a consistent, comprehensible whole out of the welter of specifics: one can accurately record the shape of a nose, the set of the lips, the slope of the eyes and entirely miss the person lurking behind them. It is the expression rather than the features that conveys who a person is.

Sargent was famous for his portraits precisely because they capture that sense of character. His prowess is easy to recognize in his paintings of the celebrities of his day because their likenesses are known to us; we can appreciate what the artist adds to the established recipe. If all we knew of Robert Louis Stevenson's health was what we saw in Sargent's portrait of him, we would take the author for an affable invalid. Sargent brilliantly characterizes his subject through his consistent handling of detail: the long, lean legs and the long, lean fingers that barely secure a long, lean cigarette. Stevenson slumps in his chair, barely erect, sporting lank hair and a lank moustache. The eyes,

widely spaced like those of a porpoise, are nonetheless friendly: like the lit tip of his cigarette, they are the only sign of vitality the man projects.

Sargent's portrait of Theodore Roosevelt projects much that we already expect, with the subject's chest thrown out and one of his fists planted firmly on his hip. The surprise comes with the eyes which register not command but discomfort; here is a man who is more earnest than assertive, more prone to fret than gloat (he does, however, grasp the round finial on the banister to his right as if it were a small but inviting globe). Similarly, Sargent's rendering of Henry James conforms to the dour figure we know from photographs. To this, the painter adds an expression of assumed hauteur; this isn't a great novelist so much as an employer listening to an employee's unsuccessful request for a raise. Since the painting is at variance with the photographs, we realize that Sargent has recorded not how he viewed James, but how James viewed himself.

Sargent's skill in characterizing his sitters is nowhere more miraculous than in the way he conveys people we know nothing about. His portrait of Lady Agnew is a perfect example of this. Who is Lady Agnew? One of a legion of attractive trophy wives during the late Victorian period in England. Looking at her portrait, however, we feel something that makes her stand out from this generic description. With her lowered chin and level gaze, the woman projects unflinching candor, an unforced informality that feels almost intimate. Her right hand rests limply on her lap, loosely holding an orchid, while the left hand hangs to caress the side of her chair. Languorous but alert, she invites the viewer into her home without ceremony. We are no longer staring at a painting; we are visiting a friend.

Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes (English names tend to go on like freight trains) places not one but two subjects under Sargent's microscope. Even

though this is a double portrait, it has only one star. The glum Mr. Stokes stands a respectful step or two behind his wife, literally in her shadow. One can easily understand the deference: who could begrudge center stage to this vivacious young woman? Mrs. Stokes dominates the picture more by her charisma than her place in the composition. With her pert, boyish bowtie, a hand on one hip and a straw boater balanced on the other, she appears forthright in an unassertive way. The flush, friendly face is incapable of subterfuge, her expression an alloy of greeting and reserve: this is the way you look at a stranger who delivers the package you've been expecting.

From his many paintings of children, a viewer would never detect the exasperating struggle this life-long bachelor often had with his youthful models. The results are consistently disarming; his children appear to be unposed because they usually seem to be looking at other things. *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, his finest achievement in this realm, is a case in point. The four girls are scattered in a large room; Sargent's use of deep space pays direct homage to Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. The girls are placed like the remaining pieces in a particularly acrimonious game of chess: the youngest on the floor in the foreground, another to the left, and the two oldest grouped just off center in the doorway of a dark, adjoining room. The sisters convey nothing beyond mild curiosity. The stark lighting that comes in low from the left is softened with the room's lushly rendered detail: the tangled fringe of the rug, the glazed glimmer of the two oriental vases, a bright blot of paint that implies a distant window.

Sargent's quicksilver handling of children is typical of his deft summations of personality, his ability to deduce the characteristic in the cock of an eyebrow or the crimp of a lip; he reminds us how much information the human face contains for an alert

observer. We see the young English critic Edmund Gosse, wide-eyed and intense, looking like a startled terrier trying to decide if it should bark, or Lord Ribblesdale, standing in profile with his riding crop and habit. Beyond his dissolute reserve, a certain restrained impatience flickers in his eyes; here is a man unaccustomed to waiting, even for his pleasures.

Sargent's technique is so precise it neutralizes the occasional poseurs he painted. *Madame X*, his most famous portrait, illustrates this. Virginie Amelie Avegno Gautreau was a notoriously flamboyant figure in Paris during the tail end of the 19th Century. Sargent gives her a lot of leash. She was famous for her profile, so he paints her in profile. The full length portrait shows her standing in a dramatic, low-cut black dress with one hand (a thumb, actually) resting on a table. It's the pose of someone full of many things beside herself. While Sargent indulges her attitude, he doesn't necessarily endorse it. The painter achieves this by making sure there is nothing striking in her face to match her pose. Hers is an expression devoid of expression, an empty mask. The disparity makes it clear that the pose is not the person; what we see here is a dull woman inhabiting a glamorous life.

Sargent accomplishes the same end with the opposite approach in *Ena and Betty, Daughters of Asher and Mrs. Werheimer*. The younger sister on the left merely looks at us, but the older sister on the right is more ambitious. She slants her eyes and raises her chin to an aristocratic altitude. The fingers on her right hand curl daintily as if she is holding a glass that isn't there. Her pose is so obvious it disarms the pretense; it's tantamount to a confession. By portraying this fib so clearly, Sargent prompts us to forgive it. Nothing makes a person look less chic than looking strenuously chic. In *Mrs. George Swinton*, on the other hand, the subject confidently arches her back in a manner

one finds in aristocratic portraits going back to the Renaissance. Her eyes, however, are wide and uncertain, looking not at the viewer but slightly to the left, presumably at Sargent, who is telling her what to do. Despite her posh home and expensive apparel, Mrs. Swinton is still too *nouveau* to appear convincingly *riche*.

Individual works like these are so brilliant they tempt even the sourest critic to use the word “great” without qualification, but Sargent’s strongest work also contains a certain collateral weakness that only emerges when the pieces are viewed collectively. The artist’s precision can give his subjects an implied gravity they might not possess, as in the way Sargent makes the cigar-chomping businessman, Asher Werheimer, appear wise instead of merely shrewd. Then there was that endless array of rich people he portrayed. He doesn’t flatter, but he also never criticizes; the viewer senses something unobtrusively ingratiating at work here. The artist learned a lot from Velazquez, but he never picked up Velazquez’s ability to paint a court jester with the same dignity he gave a monarch. Sargent’s vision didn’t encompass the grotesque. He also lacked the palpable empathy for laborers that he felt for the leisured class; his *Women at Work* shows more interest in the dappled sunlight of the courtyard than the female figures leaning over their washtubs. The implication a survey of his oeuvre creates is that Sargent wasn’t so much an insightful artist as a highly sensitive recorder of visual impressions. When his subjects signaled something in their faces, he captured it with all its subtle nuances. When they kept him at a distance, he painted a locked door.

Sargent’s self-portrait appears to be one of those locked doors. For an artist who specialized in revealing portraits, he doesn’t reveal much about himself: he raises his chin slightly and tenses his eyes to give himself a serious, speculative look, but the thick, unresponsive beard almost seems like a deliberate barrier, as if he’s peeking at

you from behind a dense hedge. Sargent's self-consciously prescribed art reflects something in the artist. A man who has no vices has few virtues; the only vice anyone accused Sargent of possessing was an excessive fondness for eating. A big man with a big appetite, he attended all the society dinners and sat for hours, diligently shoveling in anything they served him. He spoke four languages, but had little to say in any of them. He compulsively attended social gatherings and remained unsociably mute. Born in Europe to American expatriates, he never developed roots in any of the countries he lived in. He first set foot in his native land at 21 to avoid losing his citizenship and invoked his Yankee lineage only once as an excuse for avoiding a knighthood in England. In his domestic life he was spare, almost Spartan, while in his artistic life he could be obscenely luxuriant, a Puritan sporting a silk blouse. He had the word "damn" engraved on a rubber stamp and, when exasperated, he stamped it all over several sheets of paper. Anyone who expresses the abandon of profanity in such an inhibited way keeps most of his other reactions under lock and key.

As a student in Paris, Sargent embraced Impressionism and even worked with several of the Impressionists. He not only mastered the new technique, he used it with flare. Part of the fun of Sargent's paintings comes in watching what he does with the paint. A watch chain is dispatched with a single, multi-colored comet of pigment. One's eyes skate over the creamy sheen of his satins. A few well-placed dashes of paint convey the floral pattern on an upholstered chair without imitating their stultifying repetition. Sargent refused to identify with the Impressionists and it's probably just as well: he appropriated their style but not their outlook. For painters like Monet and Degas, impressionism was a means for reinventing the visual world; for Sargent, it was

a way to obscure the inertia of his genre. In this, he was a lot like his old friend Henry James who used Edwardian slang to soften the sententious starch of long paragraphs.

Ironically, Sargent was at his best when he was most static; when he gives his subjects something to do, a certain staginess blunts his effects. The early work *El Jaleo* is a case in point. In it, a female Spanish dancer swirls before a line of ecstatic male musicians. The painter's greatest skill, conveying individuality, is lost here. The scene is an elaboration of sketches from performances Sargent attended. This isn't Spain, it's showbiz, as authentic as a belly dancer at Disney World. This isn't the real thing, it's an imitation of an imitation of life. Similarly, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* lacks the powerful simplicity of his children portraits because he pushes his effects. The scene, two children lighting paper lanterns in a patch of flowers, is so consistently pretty it feels pruned. If one of the girls had a scab on her knee the whole impression would collapse. Everything amplifies everything else: the curling flowers, the ruffled smocks, the frail light from the lanterns, the picturesque absorption of the children. The work was enormously popular for the same reason that chocolate is popular. Not only did Sargent include one too many lilies in his title, he insisted on gilding both.

By the early years of the 20th Century, Sargent's portraits had become so notorious everyone with money had to have one, and most got what they wanted. The strain of increased productivity began to affect their quality. The faces more and more register nothing beyond bland affability; all the porcelain-skinned debutantes seemed to come from the same well-connected family. To offset this, the artist tried grouping his subjects in elaborately connected compositions that resemble Annie Leibovitz at her frequent worst. Finally, Sargent switched to charcoal portraits which could be executed in a single sitting. He produced 600 of them, and they are almost universally vacuous.

The artist was ready for a change and a challenge, and he accepted two ambitious commissions in Boston. For the Public Library, he spent almost 30 years producing a series of murals he called “The Triumph of Religion.” For the Museum of Fine Art, he executed a number of wall decorations that mix mythology with allegory. Both proved to be disasters.

This doesn't mean they were incompetent; competence was their chief flaw: they represent the disreputable side of “good,” the good that is merely proficient. Sargent had no gift for explicit art; his greatest works were the product of suggestion. While highly cultured, the man was no intellectual. It wasn't until Sargent tried to portray ideas that one discovers he only possessed them third hand. Like a mime attempting to sing, these projects required the artist to abandon the only thing he excelled at: instead of individuals, he painted types, instead of finding identity in his subjects, he projected a ready-made identity on them. Following the example of the other allegorical painters of his day, Sargent used costumes and props to accomplish this. Historical figures stand in straight lines sporting cloaks and sashes and spears like the chorus in a grand opera. Unfortunately, it takes more than a turban to make a prophet. In “The Triumph of Religion,” the artist marshals the iconology of Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and ancient Egypt: here is the bull of Moloch; there is the crescent moon of Astarte. None of this, however, is meaningfully engaged. Like a cruise ship, the artist gives us seven religions in four days. The anonymity of type undermines even something as potentially dramatic as his depiction of Hell. Sargent has gigantic fiends devouring handfuls of the condemned, but these unfortunates have no personality; they are souls without souls, as anonymous as a bucket of chicken wings. A Hell this impersonal fails to accomplish the one thing that Hell must accomplish: it doesn't appall.

Sargent's traversal of culture for the museum is just as decorous and unfelt. He trots out all the trite tropes: togaed nymphs dancing in circles around gods who look suspiciously like antique statues, nudes riding chariots or strumming harps. This is nothing more than *Fantasia* without the ameliorating charm of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. When the First World War broke out, Sargent had a new outlet for predictable art. Those dependable characters of bad allegory, Death and Victory, are both depicted as attractive female models, robed and disrobed, each vying for the same attractive soldier. A block of toy soldiers march under the American flag and a fluttering eagle as grateful Europe holds broken swords and nursing babies from the sidelines. What meaningful meaning could any of these cliches suggest? When Sargent attempted to seriously engage the carnage in a frieze of soldiers blinded by mustard gas waiting for treatment, the results are too pretty and posed to convey the obscenity of the scene. This was a *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* with veterans.

It can only pain an admirer of Sargent's best work to confront his worst. His natural reticence didn't find ambition congenial. Luckily, the allegorical work wasn't the only form of painting he indulged in during these final years. Sargent's mother was a water colorist and her son returned to this mode with a vengeance late in life. He tended to dismiss the results, claiming they only had value when lumped together. If he really believed they were trifles, it would explain why his watercolors weren't overburdened with the ambition that ruined his murals. The quality of these watercolors is self-evident; in both handling and subject they are the most spontaneous work Sargent ever produced. Having neither rich patrons nor world events to contend with, the man painted whatever caught his fancy. The small things he responded to are ravishingly rendered: invertebrate reflections wiggling on the surface of a Venetian

canal, the sun-bleached clutter of rubble bordering a mountain stream, the inside of a pup tent glowing like a lamp shade, the whispered shadows of nearby trees on a white wall. This was the grit and stubble of realism and Sargent reveled in it, the minutia that unites to create the teeming world we occupy. The detail at the heart of these watercolors were the foundation of Sargent's art, and it was a strong and solid foundation, even if no building soared above it. Like Igor Stravinsky, Sargent was an artist not of forms but of effects, so his strongest paintings are portraits in which the details coalesce around a consistent personality which give them a larger purpose.

Only once did Sargent try to braid the two strands of his late career, combining narrative ambition with sensual emersion in detail in a painting he called *The Hermit*. It shows a half-naked, bearded man sprawled in a craggy mountain landscape. Sargent succeeds in almost completely subsuming the figure in the natural setting, an effect Cezanne failed to achieve in his Bathers series. Sargent accomplishes this by dappling the paint that renders the hermit in the same way he does the field of rock fragments that surrounds him. But the hermit's expression is too conventionally enraptured, one of 500 years worth of aesthetic holy men, John the Baptist down on his luck. A true hermit is as hostile to Nature as he is to his fellow man. He may reside outdoors, but he lives entirely inside himself. Introducing this figure adds just enough falseness to undo the veracity of the scene; it's the cough that disrupts the adagio.

So where does all this leave Sargent? Was he less than great or more than good? Or is his final measure nothing more than an average of the two extremes, a factoring of the accumulated merits and demerits? His striving in the last quarter century of his career only caused him to stumble. The gifts were there; they were just misapplied, like a sprinter who finds himself in a marathon. When he repeatedly

claimed all he did was observe, it turned out he wasn't being modest, just, as one would expect from him, accurate. There was a reason why Sargent was considered the finest portrait painter of his time and returning to that genre animates the reason. Sargent's most famous portrait was *Madame X*, but I've always found a preliminary oil sketch he did, *Madame Gautreau Drinking a Toast*, to be a superior portrait. The face is again in profile and inexpressive, but now it appears a little puffy around the eyes and bunched under the chin. The subject looks more coddled than regal as she slouches across the dining room table, barely lifting a flute of champagne, her arm sagging like a rope bridge. Nothing congratulatory can be detected in this toast; Madame Gautreau's indolence reduces a generous salute to a gesture drained of any feeling. More than a face, more than a figure, what we have here is a devastating depiction of character. To produce such mastery, even intermittently, transcends the qualifications of lesser work. To be this great is to be good enough.