

A QUESTION OF CHARACTER
'Visibility' in the Portraits of John Singer Sargent

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ANN AXFORD FERGUSON

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**Annie Ferguson
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Paul Klee said, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible." While this idea clarifies the intention of the artist and the purposes of art in general, it further complicates the task of art to communicate. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, art served to illuminate or personify history, religion, and mythology and artists were designated as 'visual authorities' or 'scribes' of world history and its set of standards and beliefs. With the development of Romanticism and its offspring, Impressionism, Aestheticism, Symbolism, Primitivism and eventually Expressionism, the idea of "art for art's sake" became the vanguard of artistic thought.¹ And so it was that artists were charged not only with acquiring the skills necessary to depict the world, but also, to capture and reveal something of their personal view, communicating that view in a broad and recognizable way.

Portraiture, an aspect of historical painting, was significantly affected by this new philosophy of art. The new measure of a successful portrait was marked, not only by a reasonable likeness of the sitter, but most importantly, by the artist's ability to 'make visible' some degree of the sitters personality or character. In the words of the critic Konrad Fiedler, writing in 1876:

The artist is called upon to create another world beside and above the real one, a world freed from earthly conditions, a world in keeping with his own discretion. This realm of art opposes the realm of nature.... Artistic creativity begins when man finds himself face to face with the visible world as with something immensely enigmatical.... What art creates is the world, made by and for the artistic

consciousness.... It is not the artist who has need of nature; nature much more has need of the artist."²

With the insistence of artistic freedom expressed in the "art for art's sake" philosophy came a new artistic mandate: henceforth, true artistic achievement involved the mastery of 'visibility', the artist's implicit ability to communicate feeling and ideas, beyond the physical description.

John Singer Sargent, America's most renowned and prolific expatriate artist, spent the breadth of his career defining both the physical characteristics and personal qualities of his contemporaries with a virtuosity unparalleled in the history of American portraiture. Yet throughout his career, and even to this day, his ability to "look beyond the surface of things and paint what he could not see" continues to be debated.³

John Singer Sargent was born January 10th or 12th, 1856, in Florence, Italy. He was the eldest of three surviving children of Dr. FitzWilliam Sargent and Mary Newbold Singer, expatriate New Englanders. Dr. Sargent studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, earning his degree in 1843. He established his practice in Philadelphia and married Mary Singer in 1850. Mary Singer, the daughter of a well-to-do fur merchant, traveled to Europe as a child, establishing her love for Europe and an insatiable desire to live abroad as a married woman. When her father died in 1853, she received a small legacy, and later in 1859, she again received an inheritance from her mother. This inheritance enabled them to live in Europe without Dr. Sargent re-establishing his practice abroad.⁴

As a result, Sargent and his family spent their winters in southern Europe, Rome, Florence or Nice, and moved north in the spring to France, Spain or England. They traveled, entertained, and had servants, but they did not live lavishly. This nomadic lifestyle affected the education of the Sargent children and sowed the seed of restlessness that dominated Sargent's entire life. Stanley Olson, in *John Singer Sargent*, states:

If Sargent had anything when he was born on that dreary Saturday 12, 1856, in the apartment next to Palazzo Sperini in the Lugarno Acciaioli in Florence, it was his mother's well-thumbed Beadeker, and not a silver spoon, for he began his life much as he ended it - as a tourist. He was at home everywhere, and belonged nowhere.⁵

Dr. Sargent employed an unusual technique in attempting to educate his son. John was encouraged to read, play the piano, and sketch as an escape from the isolation and dullness of life; hence, work became play for Sargent, and he excelled at all the tasks he attempted. Language problems were overcome, and he spoke and wrote both French, Italian, and some German. He developed a worldly personality, and later at the studio of Carolus-Duran, he made a remarkable impression upon his fellow students.

Sargent was accepted into the atelier of Carolus-Duran in Paris during the spring of 1874. He was eighteen. His teacher, Carolus-Duran, was considered a modernist and innovator;⁶ his work was almost entirely influenced by that of Velasquez. Representation, based on extreme accuracy of vision, was his model and he continuously stressed, "Search for the half-tones, place your accents, and then the lights... Velasquez, Velasquez, Velasquez, ceaselessly study Velasquez."⁷ It is probable that the influence of Carolus-Duran is the foundation of Sargent's formula for painting a portrait. Carolus describes the process in which the planes for the face are laid upon the canvas with a broad brush, paying strict attention to the values and even tones of flesh color, strictly forbidding the use of lines to bound the eyes and other features of the face.⁸

Sargent sketched avidly to sharpen his vision. "Paint a hundred studies, keep any number of clean canvases ready, of all shapes and sizes so that you are never held back by the sudden need for one. You can't do sketches enough. Sketch everything and keep your curiosity fresh."⁹ Sargent made numerous sketches and paintings of his social circle, which was widening to include such noted artists as Monet, Rodin, and Mary Cassatt.

Sargent's portraits have a unique vitality and lively approach. The background and garments are usually accomplished with very simplified brushstroke. The faces

emerge from a dark background; their expressions are painted in a few quick strokes. He painted society hostesses and other artists, and saw himself as a portraitist in social and artistic terms. He was more eager to please people than to lure commissions: and his intense interest in portraiture was therefore doubly advantageous.

From the early 1880's, Sargent closely associated with Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Robert de Montesquiou, and Dr. Samuel Pozzi, all members of the Aesthetic movement. The Aesthetes proclaimed the idea of art as an activity for asserting the personality and gaining mastery over experience. James and Wilde believed that culture consists of the perpetual cultivation of the self, of eking out the artistic personality from life. Wilde believed that art should not imitate life but other art, and James insisted that the real and the actual were critical to the art experience, but the actual had to be refined and intensified. Both cultivated artificiality and style.¹⁰

Biographer Richard Ormand says of Sargent's work:

In the narrow terms of portraiture, Sargent's work undoubtedly liberated and invigorated the dreary tradition of Victorian realism, though other influences were at work beside his.... Sargent's painting postulated a new pictorial ideal, at once more elegant and astringent than the work of his predecessors. His portraits provided a surface scintillation, and a quite modern directness, to an opulent and amoral generation seeking to throw off the heavy chains of high Victorianism.¹¹

But despite Sargent's innovation and ensuing popularity as the portraitist of the elite, his work was greatly criticized for years after his death for lack of substance in his characterization of his sitters, and for depicting only the most affluent of society. In her article, "Fragments of a Lost World," Bonnie Barrett Stretch notes:

His portraits depict newly wealthy Americans, member of the English aristocracy, artists, writers, and actresses - in short, the entire melange of international high society at the turn of the century.... As art and culture turned away from fin de siecle esthetics, his portraits and even his plein-air oils and watercolors were condemned as the decorative

froth of an obsolete world... The judgement that Sargent's surfaces surpass his substance stood, and his work was largely ignored for sixty years."¹²

However, critics of his work overlooked the foundation from which Sargent's work developed. Largely, Sargent painted from his social experience, the *nouveau riche* and upperclass that he knew from both childhood and adulthood. His style developed from that of Carolus-Duran, who followed the work of Velasquez, an artist who painted the aristocracy of seventeenth-century Spain. And, Sargent's involvement with the Aesthete movement dictated his choice of subject and his expression of the artificial.

Further investigation into the character of his works might well be served by a brief analysis of the intent of Sargent's use of paint, brushstroke and color. Sargent used long, flowing strokes in a loose, painterly fashion, suggesting serenity, peacefulness, and an easygoing personality. His use of thin, transparent layers of paint alludes to the veils of reality, and his desire to see through them. Sargent's use of the color red indicates a passionate, energetic person; and the color white, his idea of truth and innocence. His use of soft, warm neutrals indicates a lack of judgementalism, a flexibility; dark browns, blues, and black reflect an interest in the mysterious and intriguing aspects of life.

Further, Sargent's choice of subject, that of men, women and children, garden and water scenes, and architectural forms, suggests that Sargent was a highly domesticated man with interests in people, their activities and their relationships. That Sargent painted these subjects in such a rich and luxurious manners reveals that he was an artist involved with a philosophy of the relationship between art and beauty.

A study of ten of his portraits reveals that Sargent gave sufficient 'visibility' for his viewers to 'imbue' character in his works by means of visual contemplation, while incorporating the principles of his artistic ideals.

5.

The Pailleron Children (Edouard and Marie-Louise), 1881

Oil on canvas, 60 × 69 (152.4 × 175.3)

Des Moines Art Center; Edith M. Usry

Bequest Fund in memory of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. George Franklin Usry, and additional funds from Dr. and Mrs. Peder T. Madsen and the Anna K. Meredith Endowment Fund, 1976



The Pailleron Children 1881

Two children, a girl and a boy, are seated on a long cushion. The girl stares out at the viewer with a look of anxiety and frustration. Her brother, a few years older sits near her, but not next to her. His position is turned to a profile; he leans in towards her, looking out at the viewer with a slight tilt of his head. The expression on his face is one of self-consciousness. The girl's hand rests anxiously on the edge of the cushion, as though she is ready to jump up and run off. His hands rest, one on his knee; the other is turned, palm upwards, with the weight of his torso resting upon it. His position seems a bit contrived, suggesting manliness and full control, as though he is about to advise his sister. But the look on his face reveals uncertainty. He wears a black suit with a large white collar typical of school boys of that era. He is placed in front of a fiery red background, suggesting the flames of youth. The girl is dressed in a fussy, ruffled and lace white dress. She sits at the edge of a dark and dreary background, void of light and color, a dead and lifeless place. Her look is fearful and unknowing, her mouth is expressionless and closed as though she cannot speak. The boy appears comfortable and flexible in his place; the girl appears rigid and lost in hers.

Dr. Pozzi at Home, 1881

Oil on canvas, 80½ × 43⅞ (204.5 · 111.4)

The Armand Hammer Collection, Los Angeles



Dr. Pozzi at Home 1881

A tall, slender and handsome man, in his early thirties, stands with one hand on his hip, the other, bent across his chest, touching the lapels of his full length dressing robe. Underneath the robe, he wears a fancy white shirt, ruffled at the neck and sleeves. His bearded face is turned slightly to the right; his eyes look away from us. His hands are delicate in bone structure, and one hand appears to have blood stains on its knuckles and fingers. The face of the subject wears a cool and distant look, and his head tips slightly towards us. His appearance is rather effeminate; his form fills nearly the entire background, which is painted in dark red, almost purplish-black tones. This man appears flamboyant, artificial, and dramatic. His dress suggests a sense of superiority, pretentiousness, and intense sexuality.

Dr. Pozzi was a well-known surgeon and gynecologist, who developed the current bi-manual method of pelvic exam. He was a close friend of Sargent, a member of the Aesthete movement and was murdered by a male patient.¹³



47.

Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau), 1884

Oil on canvas, 82 $\frac{1}{8}$ · 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ (208.6 · 109.9)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York;

A. H. Hearn Fund, 1916

Madame X 1884

A woman wearing a black velvet gown with a heart-shaped, plunging neckline, stands alone, her twisted upper torso facing us. Her significant neck and profile turn away from us as though she was stopped in action just long enough for us to take a long gaze. Her hourglass shaped figure is like a doll, or figurine, as though she was born to be on display. Her hands contradict her elegance and grace; they seem to claw and grasp. Her arms are fleshy, as though she over indulges. Her profile reveals a small pursed mouth, suggesting a lack of verbalness or expression. She exudes haughtiness, yet her choice of garment indicates a quality of availability and exhibitionism. This is a woman of artifice and intrigue, a *femme fatale*.



Mrs. Adrian Iselin 1888

An older woman wearing a black satin dress, carrying a fan, stands beside a carved table. Her arm extends forward, holding the edge of the table, as if to indicate a need for support. The dress is high collared with delicate lace cuffs. It is, perhaps, a mourning gown, though no veil is included. The woman appears to be approximately sixty to seventy years old. She stands against a sienna colored background. The woman wears a small ring. Her eyes engage the viewer, as though she is comfortable with herself and the painter. She is refined, distinguished and self-determined. Her hair is braided and worn close to her head, complimenting her sure set jawline. She is simple, dignified and stately. Her eyes reveal a quality of wisdom, confidence and shrewdness. She appears to be on equal terms with her environment; her garment suggests that she is a woman of sufficient means and social standing, gracefully approaching her older years.

104.

Mrs. Adrian Iselin, 1888

Oil on canvas, $60\frac{1}{2} \times 36\frac{5}{8}$ (153.7 × 93)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.;

Gift of Ernest Iselin

105.

Miss Elsie Palmer, 1889–90

Oil on canvas, 75×45 (190.5 × 114.3)

Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center



Miss Elsie Palmer 1889

An adolescent girl sits, her back straight, against a wall; her hair is unstyled, with short square cut bangs and it falls loosely about her shoulders. Her dress looks like a dressing gown. The carved wooden walls behind her give the impression of a church room or library, a space not her own. She is fragile in appearance; her wrap, which protects her, lies behind her, temporarily cast aside but not discarded. Her body is posed as if to meet an outer standard, giving little expression to her character. She appears virginal; her legs are casually crossed, and her hands, one covering the other, rest primly in her lap. Despite a look of propriety, restraint and resignation, there is a small glimpse of wildness in her eyes.

109.

Miss Helen Dunham, 1892

Oil on canvas, 48 · 32

(121.9 · 81.3)

Private collection



Miss Helen Dunham 1892

A young woman wearing a cream colored satin gown sits in a red, satin chair which merges with the red, satin background. Her face is turned slightly to her right, emphasizing her high brow, aquiline nose, and strong jaw line. Her lips are full and her chin dips slightly downward, indicating humility, or a lack of snobbishness. Her eyes are large, and look away from the artist and the viewer, as though to indicate her shyness or modestness. She is refined and dignified, pensive but not overwrought; she wears the color of purity or innocence. She holds her position well within the space surrounding her; she seems neither overbearing, nor overwhelmed by her place in the world. An active woman, she sits on the edge of her chair, as though anxious to resume her affairs. Her outstretched arms, the hands clasped, rest between her knees as though their idleness creates tension for her. Her smile is subdued; she appears educated, understanding and compassionate. Her gown is luxurious in fabric, feminine in design but neither seductive nor worldly. The sitter appears to be a woman of high standards and aspirations.



110.
Lady Agnew of Lochnaw, c. 1892–93
Oil on canvas, 49 × 39¼ (124.5 × 99.7)
The National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh

Lady Agnew 1892

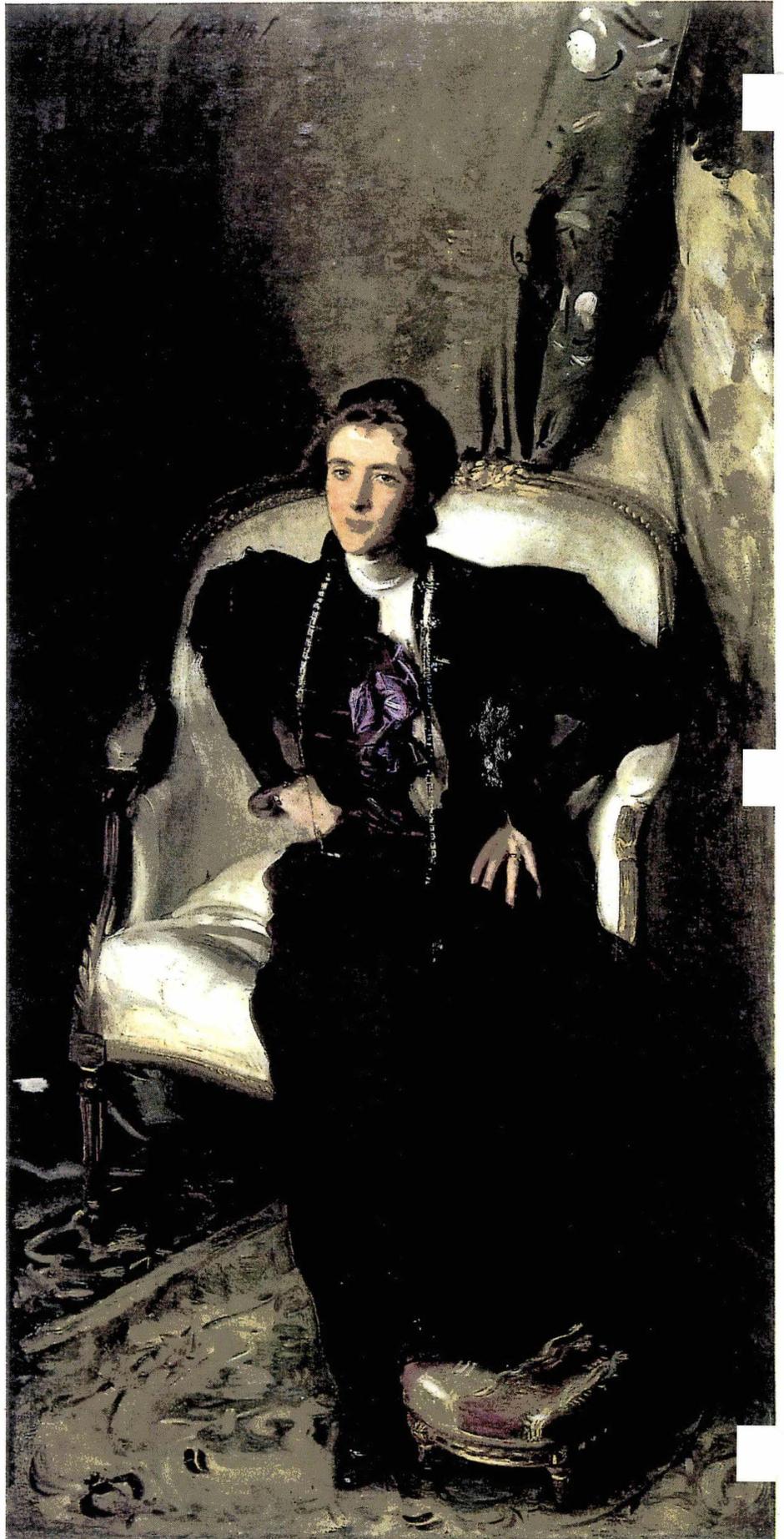
A beautiful woman sits in a floral patterned chair, the sunlight streams in upon her lilac ribboned dress. The chair wraps around her as though her comfort in life is all-encompassing, protective, full of cheerfulness and the vitality of nature. Her sensuality is defined by the long caressing line, of her dress, against her thigh and hip, which turn towards the viewer; the lilac sash hides any further revelation of her lovely form. One hand rests easily, in her lap, palm upwards, offering a small white flower. The other arm dangles, casually, down the edge of the curving arm of the chair, where her hand fondles its sensuous line. The look in her eyes is one of intent insight, and familiarity. Her chin is lowered, her full-lipped mouth is soft and relaxed, a slight smile compliments the inviting look in her eyes. She is a woman comfortable with herself, and her accessibility.

119.

Mrs. Charles Thursby, c. 1897–98

Oil on canvas, 78 × 39 $\frac{3}{4}$ (198.1 × 101)

The Newark Museum, New Jersey



Mrs. Charles Thursby 1897

A woman in her mid-thirties wearing a brownish-purple dress, sits erect in her white, satin chair; her legs are crossed, her hands are on her hips, and she looks directly at us, wearing a small pleasant smile. She wears a wedding ring and a long silver chain around her neck; her dress is that of a woman of financial means, and upperclass social status. She sits at the center of the chair and looks as if the pose has taken her from her busy day of important duties. This is a serious woman of action. She is intelligent, personable, independent and self-assured. Her hands on her hips, and her modest but very feminine dress predict the woman of the twentieth century; confident, responsible, and prepared.

Dr. FitzWilliam Sargent 1886

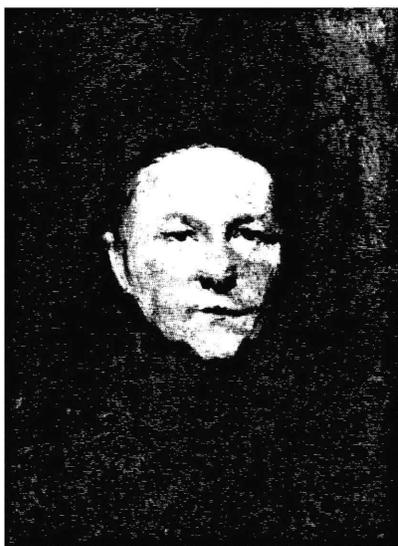
A portrait of Sargent's father, his head tilted to the side, his chin lowered and his eyes cast downward. He looks in the direction of the viewer, but does not engage our eyes. He is moustached and rather bald; he wears a light colored suit, a high simple collar and a black bow tie. He has the air of an educated man, but looks resigned, unhappy and dejected. He is sad; he appears to ponder his life, and is disappointed. The figure fills the entire space, and exudes a familiar presence.



Dr. FitzWilliam Sargent, 1886
Oil on canvas, $14\frac{1}{2} \times 13\frac{1}{2}$ (36.8 × 34.3)
Sargent-Murray-Gilman-Hough House
Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts

Mary Singer Sargent 1887

A portrait of Sargent's mother, her face and hair emerging from complete darkness, stares out at us. Her lips are narrow and tight, yet yield a touch of vulnerability and kindness; her eyes seem to look in two directions. One eye looks beyond us, and is slightly closed, as if measuring the past; the other is wide open and looks at us directly, with a sense of warmth and humour. Her form invades and overpowers the negative space around her, as though her environment is inconsequential. This is a woman of command and control, of cold calculation and stubbornness. Yet a part of her acknowledges her deep feelings for the painter. This a portrait of a woman who hides nothing from the artist.



Mrs. FitzWilliam Sargent (Mary Newbold Singer), 1887

Oil on canvas, $16\frac{3}{4} \times 13\frac{3}{4}$ (42.5 × 34.9)
Sargent-Murray-Gilman-Hough House
Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts

Sargent's works clearly provide us with 'visibility' into the character of his sitters. It is, fortunately, the task of the artist to present an interpretation of his view while allowing enough visual and perceptual space for the viewer to recreate and re-interpret his or her own vision. Sargent accomplishes the ultimate goal of artistic intention, that of communicating and exchanging ideas with the audience.

John Singer Sargent's contribution to portrait painting and the establishment of American art, as an entity in its own right, is immeasurable. He left us with an immensely rich, pictorial record of our American and European ancestors and their culture, living at a unique moment, the affluent and intensely romantic *Belle Epoque*.

ENDNOTES

- (1) de la Croix and Horst, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, Vol. II (New York; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) p. 791-93
- (2) de la Croix and Horst, p. 789
- (3) Bonnie Barrett Stretch, "Fragments of Lost World," *Art News*, Jan. 1987, p. 124
- (4) Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1970) p. 15
- (5) Stanley Olson, "On the Question of Sargents Nationalism," *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Harry Abrahms Inc. 1986) p. 25
- (6) Ormond, p. 15
- (7) Ormond, p. 16
- (8) Ormond, p. 18
- (9) Ormond, p. 21
- (10) Ormond, p. 25
- (11) Ormond, p. 54
- (12) Stretch p. 125
- (13) Albert Boime, "Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray" ed. Patricia Hills, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Harry Abrahms, Inc. 1986) p. 27

PLATES

Frontpiece

Self-portrait, 1892

Oil on canvas, 21x17

National Academy of Design,
New York, New York

6.

The Pailleron Children, 1881

Oil on canvas, 60x90

Des Moines Art Center; Edith M. Usry
Bequest Fund

55.

Dr. Pozzi at Home, 1881

Oil on canvas, 80 1/2 x 43 1/2

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Oil on canvas, 82x43

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Dr. FitzWilliam Sargent, 1886
Oil on canvas, 141/2x131/2
Sargent-Murray-Gilman-Hough House
Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts

Mrs. FitzWilliam Sargent, 1887
Oil on canvas, 16x13
Sargent-Murray-Gilman-Hough House
Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts

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