

ELIZABETH PEYTON

ON JOHN SINGER SARGENT

On the eve of a major exhibition of Sargent's portraits, artist Elizabeth Peyton discusses his lasting influence

THE FIRST LARGE amount of work by John Singer Sargent I saw was at a retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York back in 1986. I was a student at the School of Visual Arts. I'd looked at Sargent's paintings before in reproduction and encountered a few of them at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but seeing this giant show of them was thrilling to me in every way.

The paint—Sargent's paint—and how he handled it were a revelation. It seemed like he painted in a way that was so fast, so open, and so abstract that it was almost a miracle that the paint somehow landed on the canvas to make a portrait. His watercolors looked like they were made so quickly, so urgently, and with such economy. I'd been reading a lot of Henry James novels at the time—*The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*—and I was eating up all the atmosphere in these stories of Americans moving around Europe in the late 19th century. That was Sargent's world too, and his paintings filled in all of the mental pictures that I had of those people and those places and that period. The show coincided with a moment in the mid-1980s when beauty—and painting—was being questioned in critical theory, so it was reassuring to see this huge body of work that celebrated both of those things.

Sargent moved in circles with other artists and writers, many of whom he painted—people like James, Robert Louis Stevenson, Walford Graham Robertson, and Edwin Booth. He liked to travel and went where the subjects and the locations were inspiring to him. There's a kind of disorientation and a shift in perspective that comes from moving around and finding yourself and your passions in a new environment. It becomes part of the work and changes it. This is something you see in Sargent's paintings. He was choosing to travel with people he enjoyed whom he could paint—to look at them, to think about them, and to somehow know them more.

Sargent, of course, also did a lot of grand commissioned portraits of society people. These paint-

ings have always felt more dutiful to me; the paint looks more in service of their subjects. I don't do commissions. I do make pictures of artists and my friends, though, and Sargent's are transformative. So many of them are about

people making art, with Sargent making pictures of his subjects painting or drawing outdoors. These were people he clearly admired, and the creative uniqueness he saw in them is written into the tones and shades of their faces. His portraits of the Italian artist Ambrogio Raffele, in particular, blow me away—as occasions for majestic painting (which they are) but also in the respect he seems to have for Raffele and the love of painting and artists dealing in nature.

There's something almost unsentimental about these portraits that isn't in his other paintings. As a student, I loved Sargent's *Madame X*. I loved her tone, her elegance—I thought it had a kind of perfection to it. Now, though, I'm not so taken with it. It actually seems a little stiff, like the idea of what's "perfect" got in the way of the expression. So many of his other paintings are more timeless, I think, because if you really capture the essence of what it means to be human, then that is a transcendent quality. Sargent's painting in pieces like *Fountain, With Girl Sketching* and *Group With Parasols (A Siesta)* is so not literal. The subjects are often enveloped in many lengths of material and veils or bonnets or hats, with just their eyes peeking out sometimes, to allow you to put the picture together. These paintings don't describe a leisurely lifestyle so much as a kind of freedom. There's a oneness, a rightness even, to them, as if these people, who seem to celebrate a kind of artifice, are part of the beauty of nature too. They're allowed to be less than perfect and more ecstatically human—real works of art.

As told to Priya Rao

"Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends" is currently on view at the National Portrait Gallery in London and travels to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in June

