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## ART VIEW; Exhibit Illuminates Sargent, Fortune's Favorite

By JOHN RUSSELL

At no time since his death in 1925 has the reputation of John Singer Sargent stood as high as it does today. To confirm this, we have only to go to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where a retrospective exhibition of paintings and watercolors by Sargent can be seen through Jan. 4, 1987. (It can also be seen from Feb. 7 through April 19, 1987, at the Art Institute of Chicago). Thanks in part to a hefty subvention from Merrill Lynch, the museum has been able to assemble a remarkably large proportion of the paintings by which Sargent is most likely to be remembered.

The exhibition comes, moreover, with a catalogue that doubles as a book, includes essays by seven learned hands, and is altogether a notable addition to the large body of devotional literature that has lately grown up around the subject of Sargent. Published by the Whitney in collaboration with Harry N. Abrams Inc., it costs \$35 in hardback and \$25 in softback. Coincidentally, Stanley Olson's new biography, "John Singer Sargent: His Portrait," has just come from the press.

The visitor to the Whitney will be left in no doubt that an immense public finds in Sargent not merely an artist whom they enjoy and admire but an index to the enviable life. As to how they should look at the world, how they should handle themselves and, if possible, how they should spend their time, Sargent is their arbiter. This is owed not only to the attractions of his work, but to the resurgence of a society in which ostentation and conformism are prized the way they were prized in the Edwardian England in which Sargent scored his greatest successes. His work functions, in fact, not merely as a source of delight but as a manual of etiquette.

In terms of prestige, and of magnetic attraction, he has for that reason a hold upon the public that Thomas Eakins - to name an incomparably superior artist - will never have. But then Eakins is a difficult, anxious, unsettling artist, whose every painting is a contribution to the moral history of humankind. If this caused him to be isolated, misunderstood and ostracized, he put up with it. Sargent, by contrast, was intent - from the outset, and with hardly a false step - on being assimilated, almost to the point of invisibility, into the world in which he most wanted to be at home. What we learn from him, most of the time, is that it is perfectly all right to want a bigger slice of the pie.

Once he had survived the unanchored, expatriate and vagabond childhood that Mr. Olson spells out for us, Sargent was fortune's favorite. All agree that he has in outward terms a completely happy life, and he died in his own bed, without pain, with Voltaire's "Philosophical Dictionary" open beside him. If he were able later - Voltaire notwithstanding - to look down from the gold bar of Heaven he could only have been pleased by what he saw. A special train took his body out of London to his chosen cemetery. Six days later there was a memorial service in Westminster Abbey to which "everyone" came. The sale of his studio at Christie's in 1930 could hardly have been a greater success. Memorial exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts and the Metropolitan Museum had the character of state funerals. Given that Sargent was in biographical terms an amiable blank, a man to whom absolutely nothing had ever happened, outside of his life in the studio, his apotheosis is matter for marveling.

Even his first biographer, Evan Charteris, who knew him well, could not break through that blankness. In 1981, an American art historian, Trevor J. Fairbrother, who is now at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, argued on the basis of an album of drawings of the male nude that Sargent in his youth had had homosexual leanings. It could be said without prejudice that in the drawings of handsome young men at the Whitney there is an evident depth and sincerity of feeling that contrasts with the careful, distanced eye that Sargent brought to his drawings of young women.

One may also speculate as to whether Sargent did not feel happiest during his years in Paris, in the company of people like the poet and friend of Marcel Proust, Robert de Montesquiou, who could be called an early exponent of the drug culture. We should further take into account Sargent's celebrated portrait of "Dr. Pozzi at Home," which can be seen in the Whitney show. With his white lace collar and cuffs and his cardinal's-red robe, Dr. Pozzi is the very personification of camp. We certainly have no trouble believing the friend who said of Pozzi that "he regarded his body and his personality as a work of art." Altogether, Sargent's visit to London in 1884, under the guidance of Henry James and in the company of these two remarkable people, must have been a high point in the social history of high Victorian London. (His friend Oscar Wilde must also have taken note of it.) The key event in Sargent's life was, as everyone knows, his decision to leave Paris in 1886 and set up in London. This is customarily attributed to the intense hostility that was aroused by his portrait of "Madame X" when it was shown at the Paris Salon, and beyond a doubt this was a contributing factor.

When we see "Madame X" at the Whitney, with other major paintings of the Paris period all around it, it has to this day an impudent candor. Taboos now long extinct were violated by "Madame X," and we should never underestimate their strength.

Even so, I sometimes surmise - with no warrant whatever for doing so - that Sargent may also have been motivated by the wish to escape, while there was still time, from the Parisian milieu to which he was so strongly drawn. Conceivably he did not feel equal to, or safe with, a long lifetime among people who were happy inhaling ambergris, a resinous substance - so the catalogue tells us - that "originated in the intestines of the sperm whale and was thrown out as debris on the shores of Africa, China and elsewhere." (The art historian Albert Boime tells us in the catalogue that, when taken internally, ambergris was supposed to act as an aphrodisiac.) Something in Sargent may have longed for a sniff, but something else said "Get out, while there's still time!" and won the day.

Relocated in London as a bluff, dexterous and super-amiable society painter, Sargent could live out his days among people who were only too happy to have him among them. To Sir Osbert Sitwell, who as a small boy figured in one of the most successful of his English portrait groups, it was clear that Sargent's popularity in London was in no way diminished by the fact that "he was so plainly more interested in the appurtenances of the sitters and in the appointments of their rooms than in their faces."

From their faces, he sought refuge in "the tilted top-hats, with their somber but water-light reflections, the cravats and fur coats of the men, or in the tiaras, flashing, stiff but uneasy, above the heads of the women, or in the brocades and velvets they were wearing. . ." Sir Osbert went on to say that these values, for his sitters, "were the true values, and so could not be resented: sables, ermine, jewels, bath-salts, rich food covered every defect."

Even Stanley Olson, elsewhere the most staunch of Sargent's admirers, lets it slip that when visiting in the United States he "put on the butler's baize apron and set about polishing egos." But I for one do not hold that against him, any more than I hold it against him that he expressed himself as "absolutely skeptical" that the paintings of Manet, Cezanne and their successors "had any claim whatever to be called works of art." Polishing egos is a part of the portrait painter's trade, and virtually every successful painter has a holy horror of those whom he conceives of as a threat. And if in more intimate matters Sargent thought it expedient to conceal or suppress a part of his own inmost nature, we should perhaps wonder how many of us have not at one time or another done something of the same sort.

Where Sargent can be faulted is that he so often fell short of his own highest standard. Looking at the late portrait of his old friend Henry James at the Whitney, or at the "Interior in Venice" of 1899, we can only marvel at the simplicity, the directness and the depth of feeling in the portrait, and at the superlative stage management of the human comedy implicit in the Venetian interior. We may also remember that Sargent was a particularly gifted painter of children and could endow them, as in "The Daughters of Edward T. Boit" in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, with a naturalness and an unforced poignancy that makes us think all over again about how difficult it is to be a full-grown human being.

Besides, how can we dislike a man who, painting away in a blue serge suit and a high white starched collar, would distract his infant sitters by lowering his head and, seeming to charge at the canvas, blotting out what he had just painted and bellowing at the same time, in his deep voice, the words "It's pea-green, pea-green, pea-green -it's all pea-green!" At such moments John Singer Sargent takes honorary rank among the great English eccentrics, and we cannot resist him.