Advice on painting from John Singer Sargent

As excerpted from "John Sargent" by the Hon. Evan Charteris, K. C.

Annotated by
Thomas Jefferson Kitts

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 "Reconnoitering"
by John Singer Sargent

Preface

Sargent in his studio, with his painting, Madame X behind him.

This pdf booklet is for anyone who is interested in John Singer Sargent and his working methods. It is offered out of respect and admiration for a master artist and as an acknowledgement of how his paintings have affected my life. I first encountered Sargent in 1984 while studying to become an illustrator and that discovery convinced me to pursue a painting career instead. Back then Sargent was out of favor with the academic world so there wasn't much you could find on him or his methods, and whatever you could find was not particularly insightful and consisted mostly of conjecture and speculation. There was nothing from the man himself. Of course, after thirty years of searching I have come to appreciate one does not learn how to paint by reading a book – or many books for that matter – one learns how to paint by painting.

However, there are times when stumbling across an old book can help point the way forward. The following excerpts come from a biography written in 1927 by the Honorable Evan Charteris K.C., a man who knew Sargent and his family first-hand. Charteris' book offers insight into who Sargent was and how he came to be such an important figure in art. It also offers several accounts of Sargent's working methods, as described by two of his students, a rare thing indeed. Charteris' book is a terrific read for any painter, still relevant today, but sadly currently out of print. I wish I'd found

I am no Sargent, but if you are interested in my own work you can visit:

www.thomaskitts.com

JOHN SARGENT

BY

THE HON. EVAN CHARTERIS, K.C.

WITH REPRODUCTIONS FROM HIS PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

THE career of John Sargent, perhaps the greatest painter of his time, and surely one of the greatest portrayers and interpreters of it in his famous portraits of its most eminent and most representative figures, is here chronicled in successive stages.

The figure of the hero stands out in high relief from the narrative which his personality pervades. A wealth of anecdote and of letters enriches the record of work, travel, and triumph, from student days under Carolus-Duran to the time when the presidency of the Royal Academy could have been his; and in all this opulent detail the character of the man overshadows even the distinction of the artist as the true theme of the book.

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

it decades ago because it might have saved me much time. Or not. Because not having a copy forced me to learn how to solve my own problems and paint in my own way – an important thing for any artist to do when starting out.

If you are a painter I hope you will find this pdf valuable. Based on my own years of teaching I have annotated certain points to emphasize a few things Sargent said which should be of particular interest to the novice. But everything in these accounts is worthy of consideration, and in the end, what is most interesting about the following text is the way it reveals how straightforward and uncomplicated Sargent's methods and techniques actually were. I hope my surprise is forgivable because thirty years ago I was a naive young artist trying to reverse-engineer a genius on my own. And now, it is comforting to learn that it is the simple things that create great work: fine draftsmanship, solid painting skills, simple materials, hard work, a curious mind, and of course, a keen eye and lively hand.

Thomas Jefferson Kitts

A quick note concerning why Sargent rarely taught...

When Mr. John Collier was writing his book on *The Art of Portrait Painting* he asked John Singer Sargent for an account of his methods. Sargent replied:

> *As to describing my procedure, I find the greatest difficulty in making it clear to pupils, even with the palette and brushes in hand and with the model before me; to serve it up in the abstract seems to me hopeless.*

With the assistance, however, of two of his former pupils, Miss Heyneman and Mr. Henry Haley, it is possible to obtain some idea of his methods.

Here Sargent paints outside without much equipment, reminding us that it is not the gear we can buy that makes us as artists. Instead, it is the hard work and expertise we accumulate over a lifetime.

Also, it is worth noting that on the rare occasion when Sargent offered formal instruction he insisted on teaching only the basics. Sargent did not value complicated techniques or the use of esoteric materials. He preferred simplicity and directness instead.

Head of a Capri Girl, 1878

Don't be afraid of laying down a lot of paint early as you work. Once you have put enough paint down you can push it around to generate interesting textures and diffused edges. At the end of the day, the primary difference between a painting and a colored drawing is how much paint has been used.

Miss Heyneman's recounting of Sargent's Methods

When he first undertook to criticize Miss Heyneman's work he insisted that she should draw from models and not from friends.

> *If you paint your friends, they and you are chiefly concerned about the likeness. You can't discard a canvas when you please and begin anew – you can't go on indefinitely until you have solved a problem.*

He disapproved (Miss Heyneman continues) of my palette and brushes. On the palette the paints had not been put out with any system.

> *You do not want dabs of color, you want plenty of paint to paint with.*

Then the brushes came in for derision.

> *No wonder your painting is like feathers if you use these.*

Having scraped the palette clean he put out enough paint so it seemed for a dozen pictures.

> *Painting is quite hard enough without adding to your difficulties by keeping your tools in bad condition. You want good thick brushes that will hold the paint and that will resist in a sense the stroke on the canvas.*

He then with a bit of charcoal placed the head with no more than a few careful lines over which he passed a rag, so that is was a perfectly clean grayish colored canvas (which he preferred), faintly showing where the lines had

been. Then he began to paint. At the start he used sparingly a little turpentine to rub in a general tone over the background and to outline the head (the real outline where the light and shadow meet, not the place where the head meets the background), to indicate the mass of the hair and the tone of the dress. The features were not even suggested. This was a matter of a few moments. For the rest he used his color without a medium of any kind, neither oil, turpentine or any other mixture.

The thicker you paint, the more color flows.

He had put in this general outline very rapidly, hardly more than smudges, but from the moment that he began really to paint, he worked with a kind of concentrated deliberation, a slow haste so to speak, holding his brush poised in the air for an instant and then putting it just where and how he intended it to fall.

To watch the head develop from the start was like the sudden lifting of a blind in a dark room. Every stage was a revelation. For one thing he often moved his easel next to the sitter so that when he walked back from it he saw the canvas and the original in the same light, at the same distance, at the same angle of vision. He aimed at once for the true general tone of the background, of the hair, and for the transition tone between the two. He showed me how the light flowed over the surface of the cheek into the background itself.

At first he worked only for the middle tones, to model in large planes, as he would have done had the head been an apple. In short, he painted as a sculpture models, for the great masses first, but with this difference that the sculptor can roughly lump in his head and cut it down afterwards, while the painter, by the limitations of his material, is bound to work instantly for an absolute precision of mass, in the color and outline he intends to preserve.

To draw well with a brush requires a lot of time spent drawing from life. As the old artistic adage goes: "You can only paint as well as you can draw."

Lady Agnew of Lochnaw (detail)

One of the things that make Sargent such a master is the variety he invested in his edge work. He talks about overlapping the boundaries of his shapes to generate lost and found edges. Look at how the contour of Lady Agnew's hair ranges, from hard to soft edges, as it emerges or recedes into the background. Look at how Sargent selectively draws your attention to certain details within her face by setting a crisper edge against a softer one. And look at how he draws us into an area of the painting by accentuating (or diminishing) the contrast between values.

Economy of effort in every way, he preached, the sharpest self-control, the fewest strokes possible to express a fact, the least slapping about of purposeless paint. He believed, with Carolus Duran, that painting was a science which it was necessary to acquire in order to make of it an art.

You must draw with your brush as readily, as unconsciously almost as you draw with your pencil.

He advised doing a head for a portrait slightly under life-size, to counteract the tendency to paint larger than life. Even so he laid in a head slightly larger than he intended to leave it, so that he could model the edges with and into the background.

The human eye naturally gravitates towards areas of high value contrast and delineated edges. Perceptual painters have learned to exploit this tendency and lead the eye by consciously altering certain edges for compositional reasons.

Look at how the face of Lady Agnew seems to draw us into the painting. Note how the left side of her neck, and the chair behind, and the ruffles of her dress appear to transition into each other. The boundaries between those shapes become lost because the values are so similar. In contrast, the light and dark contrast found in Lady Agnew's features redirect our attention to her face.

Also, look at the way Sargent selectively accentuates certain parts of the dress using varying degrees of light and dark contrast and edge work. None of it occurred randomly. All the crisp edge work lead us back to her face.

Even so, you rarely, if ever, find a razor sharp edge in a painting by Sargent. What may seem crisp to you in this pdf is almost always softer in the actual painting. Reduced reproductions can be misleading.

Lady Agnew of Lochnaw, 1892
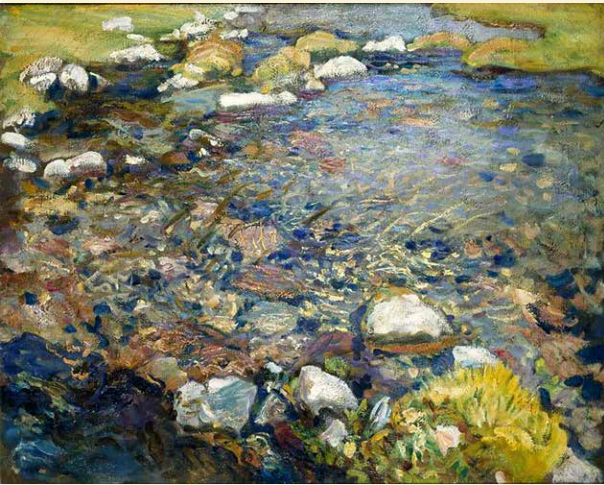
The hills of paint vanished from the palette, yet there was no heaviness on the canvas: although the shadow was painted as heavily as the light, it retained its transparency.

> *If you see a thing transparent, paint it transparent; don't get the effect by a thin stain showing the canvas through. That's a mere trick. The more delicate the transition, the more you must study it for the exact tone.*

The lightness and certainly of his touch was marvelous to behold. Never was there any painter who could indicate a mouth with more subtlety, with more mobility, or with keener differentiation. As he painted it, the mouth bloomed out of the face, an integral part of it, not, as in the great majority of portraits, painted on it, a separate thing. He showed how much could be expressed in painting the form of the brow, the cheekbones, and the moving muscles around the eyes and mouth, where the character betrayed itself most readily: and under his hands, a head would be an amazing likeness long before he had so much as indicated the features themselves. In fact, it seemed to me the mouth and nose just happened with the modeling of the cheeks, and one eye, living luminous, had been placed in the socket so carefully prepared for it (like a poached egg dropped on a plate, he described the process), when a clock in the neighborhood struck and Mr. Sargent was suddenly reminded that he had a late appointment with a sitter. In his absorption he had quite forgotten it. He hated to leave the canvas.

> *If only one had oneself under perfect control, one could always paint a thing, finally in one sitting. Not that you are to attempt this. If you work on a head for a week without indicating the features you will have learnt something about the modeling of the head.*
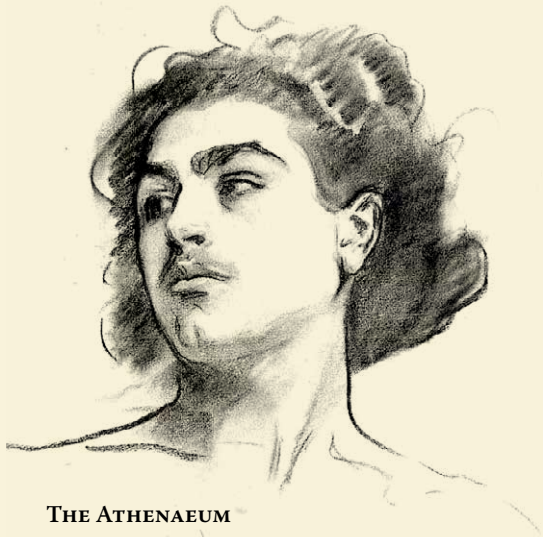
VAL D'AOSTA, CA. 1907-1908
(A STREAM OVER ROCKS)

Every brush stroke while he painted had modeled the head or further simplified it. He was careful to insist that there were many roads to Rome, that beautiful painting would be the result of any method or no method, but he was convinced that by the method he advocated, and followed all his life, a freedom could be acquired, a technical mastery that left the mind at liberty to concentrate on a deeper or more subtle expression.

I had previously been taught to paint a head in three separate stages, each one repeating – in charcoal, in thin color-wash and in paint – the same things. By Sargent's method the head developed by one process. Until almost at the end there were no features or accents, simply a solid shape growing out of and into a background with which it was one. When at last he did put them in, each accent was studied with an intensity that kept his brush poised in mid-air until eye and hand had steadied to one purpose, an then...bling! The stroke resounded almost like a note of music. It annoyed him very much if the accents were carelessly indicated, without accurate consideration of their comparative importance. They were, in a way, the nails upon which the whole structure depended for solidity.

Miss Heyneman subsequently left a study she had made, at Sargent's studio with a note begging him to write, "yes" or "no," according to whether he approved or not. He wrote the next day:

> I think your study shows great progress – much better values and consequently greater breathe of effect with less monotony in the detail. I still think you ought to paint thicker – paint all the half tones and general passages quite thick – and always paint one thing into another and not side by side until they touch. There are a few hard and small places where you have not followed this rule sternly enough.

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A few days later he called. Miss Heyneman's usual model had failed, and she persuaded her chairwoman to sit in instead; Sargent offered to paint the head of the model.

This old head was perhaps easier to indicate with its prominent forms, but the painting was more subtle. I recall my astonishment when he went into the background with a most brilliant pure blue where I had seen only unrevealed darkness.

Don't you see it? The way the light quivers across it?

I had not perceived it: just as, until each stroke emphasized his intention. I did not see how he managed to convey the thin hair stretched tightly back over the skull without actually painting it. He painted light or shadow, a four-cornered object with the corners worn smooth, as definite in form as it was indefinite in color, and inexpressibly delicate in its transitions.

He concentrated his whole attention upon the middle tone that carried the light into the shadow. He kept up a running commentary of explanation as he went, appraising each stroke, often condemning it and saying:

That is how not to do it! Keep the planes free and simple.

He drew a full, large brush down the whole contour of a cheek, obliterating apparently all the modeling underneath, but it was always further to simplify that he took these really dreadful risks, smiling at my ill-concealed perturbation and quite sympathizing with it.

The second painting taught me that the whole values of a portrait depends upon its first painting, and that no tinkering can ever rectify an initial failure. Provided every stage is correct, a painter of Mr. Sargent's caliber could paint for a week on one head and never retrace his steps -- but he

Mrs Hugh Hammersley, 1892

Sargent would often scrape off hours of work when painting a portrait and then expect the sitter to return the next day. Many clients complained about this trait and it reveals that even a genius such as Sargent didn't always get it right on his first attempt. Apparently, what was most important to Sargent was the final run up to the finish. Executed *alla prima* as much as possible.

never attempted to correct one. He held that it was as impossible for a painter to try to repaint a head where the understructure was wrong, as for a sculptor to remodel the features of a head that has not been understood in the mass. That is why Mr. Sargent often repainted the head a dozen times, he told me that he had done no less than sixteen of Mrs. Hammersley.

When he was dissatisfied he never hesitated to destroy what he had done. He spent three weeks, for instance, painting Lady D' Abernon in a white dress. One morning, after a few minutes of what was to be the final setting [sic], he suddenly set to work to scraped out what he had painted. The present portrait in a black dress, was done in three sittings.

He did the same with the portrait of Mrs. Wedgwood, and many others. Miss Eliza Wedgewood relates that in 1896 he consented, at the insistence of Alfred Parsons, to paint her mother. She sat for him twelve times, but after the twelfth sitting he said they would both be the better for a rest. He then wrote to Miss Wedgwood that he was humiliated by his failure to catch the variable and fleeting charm of her mother's personality–that looked like the end of the portrait. Some weeks later he saw Mrs. Wedgwood at Broadway, and struck with a new aspect he said:

If you will come up next week we will finish that portrait.

She came to Tite Street, a new canvas was produced, and in six sittings he completed the picture which was shown at the Memorial Exhibition.

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 of one. You can't do sketches enough. Sketch everything and keep your curiosity fresh.

Poppies, 1886

He though it was excellent practice to paint flowers, for the precision necessary in the study of their forms and the pure brilliancy of their color. It refreshed the tone of one's indoor portraits, he insisted, to paint landscapes or figures out of doors, as well as to change one's medium now and then. He disliked pastel, it seemed to him too artificial, or else it was made to look like oil or watercolor, and in that case why not use oil or water color?

Upon one occasion, after painting for me, he saw one hard edge, and drew a brush across it, very lightly, saying at the same time:

This is a disgraceful thing to do, and means slovenly painting. Don't ever let me see you do it.

I have also seen the assertion that he painted a head always in one sitting. He painted a head always in one process, but that could be carried over several sittings. He never attempted to repaint one eye or to raise or lower it, for he held that the construction of a head prepared the place for the eye, and if it was wrongly placed, the understructure was wrong, and he ruthlessly scraped and repainted the head from the beginning. That is one reason why his brushwork looks so fluent and easy; he took more trouble to keep the unworried look of a fresh sketch than many a painter puts upon his whole canvas.
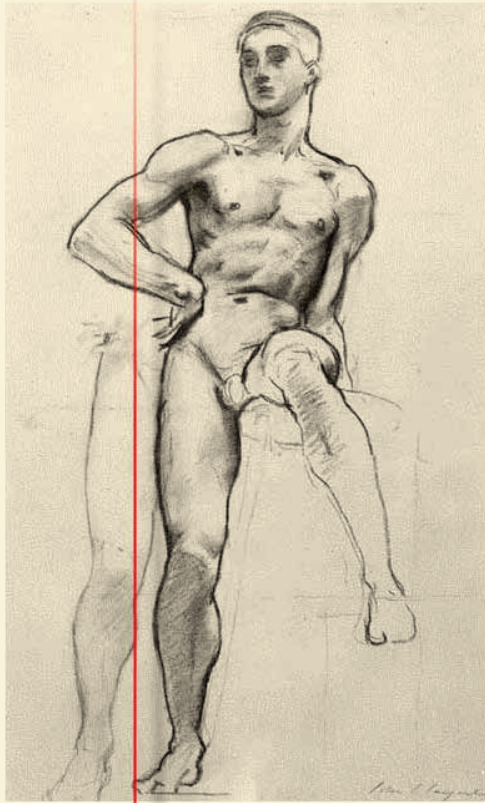
A plumb line held up in front of your subject will help you see subtle but important angles and negative shapes along a contour. It will also reveal how your subject is set against the vertical. You can make a simple plumb line by tying a hex nut to a white or black thread.

Mr. Haley's account

The following extracts from Mr. Haley's account of Sargent's teaching at the Royal Academy Schools, 1897-1900, throwing further light on his methods:

The significance of his [Sargent's] teaching was not always immediately apparent; it had the virtue of revealing itself with riper experience. His hesitation was probably due to a searching out for something to grasp in the mind of the student, that achieved, he would unfold a deep earnestness, subdued but intense. He was regarded by some students as an indifferent teacher, by others as a "wonder"; as a "wonder" I like to regard him.

He dealt always with the fundamentals. Many were fogged as to his aim. These fundamentals had to be constantly exercised and applied.

When drawing from the model, never be without the plumb line in the left hand. Everyone has a bias, either to the right hand or the left of the vertical. The use of the plumb line rectifies this error and develops a keen appreciation of the vertical.

He then took up the charcoal, with arm extended to its full length, and head thrown well back: all the while intensely calculating, he slowly and deliberately mapped the proportions of the large masses of a head and shoulders, first the poise of the head upon the neck, its relation with the shoulders. Then rapidly indicate the mass of the hair, then spots locating the exact position of the features, at the same time noting their tone values and special character, finally adding any further accent or dark shadow which made up the head, the neck, the shoulders and head of the sternum.

After his departure I immediately plumbed those points before any movement took place of the model and found them very accurate.

A preparatory sketch by Sargent for "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose". (shown on the next page)

Sargent's sketch shows how invested he was in rendering something as simple as the neck of a young girl.

The red dots and lines laid on top of his drawing are my own contrivance. They are intended to illustrate how straight lines can help you establish the general proportions of your subject before you start articulating the more complicated organic shapes and curves.

Sargent's approach to drawing was somewhat at odds with classical atelier training. Rather than define and fill in a set outline, he preferred to establish the major shapes and masses, and correct errors as his image developed, much as he did when painting.
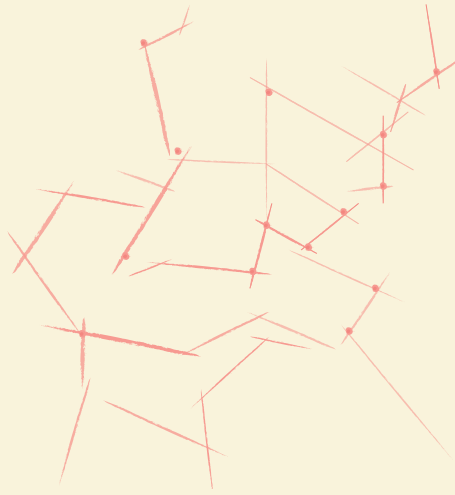
A formula of his for drawing was:

Get your spots in their right place and your lines precisely at their relative angles.

On one occasion in the evening life school I well remember Sargent complaining that no one seemed concerned about anything more than an approximate articulation of the head upon the neck and shoulders. The procedure was to register carefully the whole pose at the first evening's sitting of two hours. The remainder of the sittings were devoted to making a thoroughly finished tone drawing in chalk, adhering to the original outline, working from the head downwards, thus the drawing was not affected by any chance deviation from the original pose by the model. Sargent could not reconcile himself to this, the method he tried to inculcate was to lay in the drawing afresh at every sitting, getting in one combined effort a complete interpretation of the model. The skull to articulate properly upon the vertebrae. The same with all the limbs, a keen structural easy supple, moveable machine, every figure with its own individual characteristic as like as possible, an accomplishment requiring enormous practice and experience with charcoal, but taken as a goal to aim at very desirable, a method he followed in his own painting. To the student it meant a continually altered drawing, to portray the varying moods of the model.

In connection with the painting, the same principles are maintained.

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, 1885 - 1886

Above is sketch of the second girl in the painting. Note how Sargent has stressed some contours in this drawing over others, heavily delineating the transition between the front profile of her face and her hair, and gently emphasizing parts of her lower neck and back shoulder. Such stresses and omissions were intentional. They represented the shifts Sargent saw between greater or lesser areas of contrast and, taken together, they convey a sense of form without having to render everything out. Think of this as Sargent's visual shorthand. Note-taking for a more finished painting.

ROSINA FERRARA, C. 1878

Painting is an interpretation of tone through the medium of color drawn with the brush. Use a large brush. Do not starve your palette. Accurately place your masses with the charcoal, then lay in the background about half an inch over the border of the adjoining tones, true as possible, then lay in the mass of hair, recovering the drawing and fusing the tones with the background, and overlapping the flesh of the forehead. For the face lay in a middle flesh tone, light on the left side and dark on the shadow side, always recovering the drawing, and most carefully fusing the flesh into the background. Paint flesh into background and background into flesh, until the exact quality is obtained, both in color and tone so the whole resembles as wig maker's block.

Then follows the most marked and characteristic accents of the features in place and tone and drawing as accurate as possible, painting deliberately into wet ground, testing your work by repeatedly standing well back, viewing it as a whole, a very important thing. After this take up the subtler tones which express the retiring planes of the head, temples, chin, nose, and cheeks with neck, then the still more subtle drawing of mouth and eyes, fusing tone into tone all the time, until finally with deliberate touch the high lights are laid in, this occupies the first sitting and should the painting not be satisfactory, the whole is ruthlessly fogged by brushing together, the object being not to allow any parts well done, to interfere with that principle of oneness, or unity of every part; the brushing together engendered an appetite to attack the problem afresh at every sitting each attempt resulting in a more complete visualization in the mind. The process is repeated until the canvas is completed.

Sargent would press home the fact that the subtleties of paint must be controlled by continually viewing the work from a distance.

Stand back – get well away – and you will realize the great danger there is over overstating a tone. Keep the thing as a whole in your mind. Tones so subtle as not to be detected on close acquaintance can only be adjusted by this means.

When we were gathered in front of our display of sketches for composition awaiting some criticism, Sargent would walk along the whole collection, rapidly looking at each one, and without singling out any in particular for comment, he would merely say:

Get in your mind the sculptor's view of things, arrange a composition, decoratively, easy, and accidental.

It is fascinating to see how Sargent explored his ideas using little sketches. These drawings were preparation for his most notorious portrait, "Madame X". They also reveal how interested he was in Mm. Gautreau gallic profile – which in the final painting acts as a foil to the extreme supination of her right arm, the deep cleft of her bodice, and the provocative set of her hips. Sargent

This would be said in a hesitating manner, and then he would quietly retire. On one occasion, when the subject set for a composition was a portrait, the criticism was: "not one of them seriously considered." Many we had thought quite good, as an indication of what might be tried while a portrait was in progress. That would not do for Sargent. A sketch must be seriously planned, tried and tried again, turned about until it satisfies every requirement, and a perfect visualization is attained. A sketch must not be merely a pattern of pleasant shapes, just pleasing to the eyes, just merely a fancy. It

was a methodical artist who left little to chance, but with the goal of the finished work appearing fresh, and spontaneous. Or in his own words: "accidental".

must be a very possible thing, a definite arrangement – everything fitting in a plan and in true relationship frankly standing upon a horizontal plane coinciding in their place with a prearranged line. As a plan is to a building, so must the sketch be to the picture.

"Madame X"
(detail)

This portrait cost Sargent his career in France because he dared to paint the skin of Mm. Gautreau as she actually wore it in society, powdered with a pinkish color. He also provocatively painted her in a tight black dress with the right shoulder strap falling down – a scandalous touch, no doubt – but also a deft compositional ploy that would have dramatically emphasized the elegant line of her neck. Later, Sargent repainted the strap back up.

When Madame X was first exhibited as an *'anonymous parisienne'* at the Paris Salon of 1884 it shocked the public so much that Mm. Gautreau's identity could not no longer remain concealed. (As if her nose and skin weren't identifiable enough!) As a result, Sargent was forced to retreat to England and begin a portrait career all over again.

Mm. Gautreau never received this portrait because Sargent was convinced her family would destroy it. Eventually, believing it to be the finest thing he ever painted, Sargent sold it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it hangs today.

Madame X is considered to be one of Sargent's greatest masterworks.
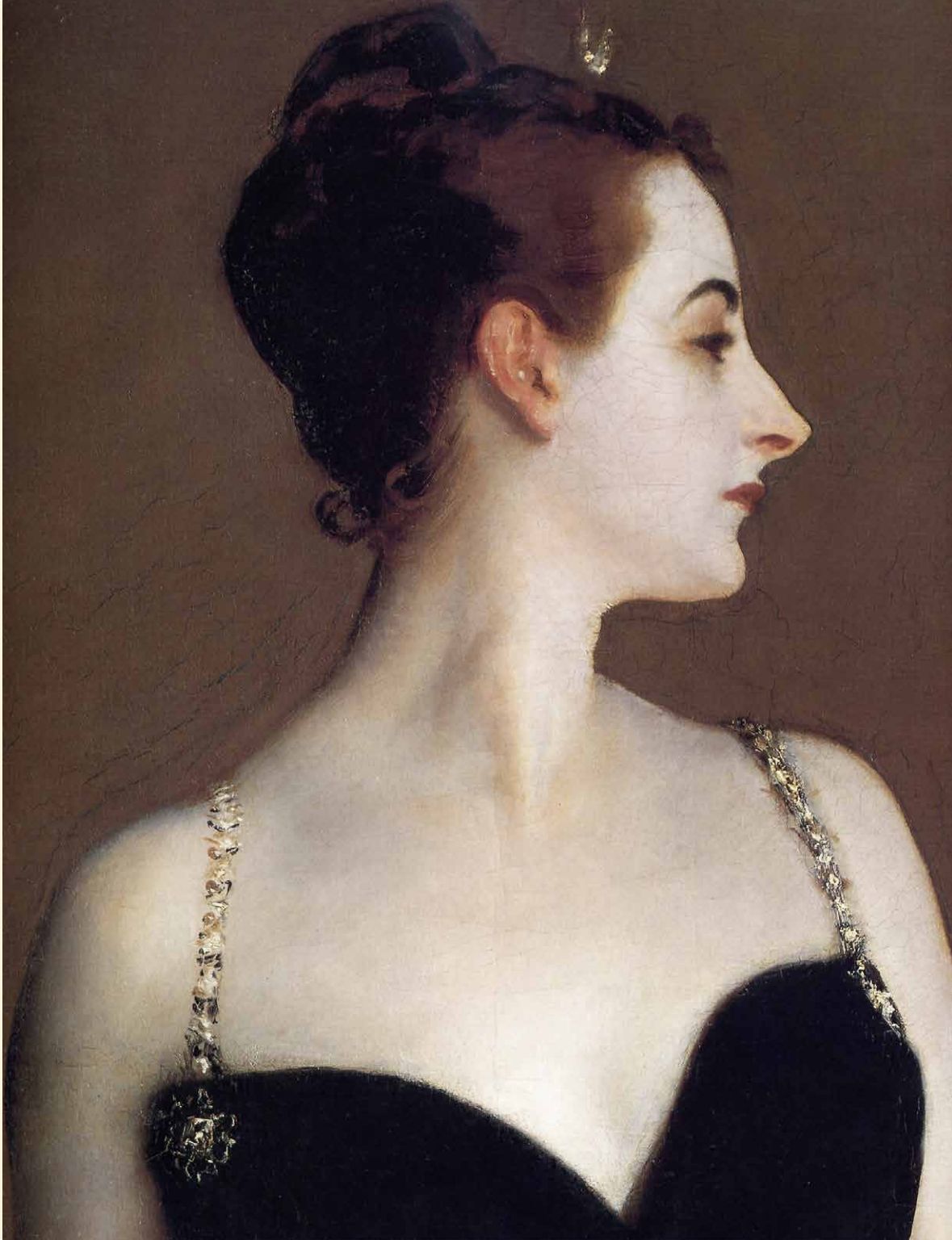
Cultivate an ever-continuous power of observation. Wherever you are, be always ready to make slight notes of postures, groups and incidents. Store up in the mind without ceasing a continuous stream of observations from which to make selections later. Above all things get abroad, see the sunlight, and everything that is to be seen, the power of selection will follow. Be continually making mental notes, make them again and again, test what you remember by sketches until you have got them fixed. Do not be backward at using every device and making every experiment that ingenuity can devise, in order to attain that sense of completeness which nature so beautifully provides, always bearing in mind the limitations of the materials in which you work.

It was not only students who acknowledged their debt to Sargent. Hubert Herkomer in his reminiscences writes: "I have learnt much from Sargent in the planning of lights and darks, the balance in tonality of background in its relation to the figure, the true emphasizing of essentials."

Sargent was well aware of the pitfalls that await the painter of the fashionable world, and as sitter after sitter took his place on the dais in his Tite Street studio he seemed to become more sensible of them. He tried again and again to escape, and he often, in his letters, expressed his fatigue. He wearied of the limitations imposed by his commissioned art. Painting those who want to be painted, instead of those whom the artist wants to paint, leads inevitably to a bargain, to a compromise between the artist's individuality and the claims of the model. Mannerism becomes a way out; that which pleases becomes an aim. Artistic problems give way before personal considerations: the decorative quality of a picture takes a secondary

"Madame X", 1884
(Madame Pierre Gautreau)

Parmigianino: the poster child of the Barogue Mannerists, centuries before Sargent. Note the stylized anatomy, the pasty flesh, the insipid light and the limp drapery – not to overlook the bizarre scale relationship between the foreground and background figures. Mannerism originates out of being overly invested in another person's idea of beauty.

place. Sargent's sincerity, the driving need he had to express himself in his own way, his satiety with models imposed on him by fashion, culminated in revolt. He was forced, now and then, it is true, to return to his portraits, but his Boston work absorbed him more and more. The call of his studio in Fulham Road when he was in London, and of the Alps and the south of Europe in summer, came first. In 1910 his exhibits at the Academy, instead of portraits, were Glacier Streams, Albanian Olive Gatherers, Vespers and A Garden at Corfu: at the New English Art Club, Flannels, On the Guidecca, The Church of Santa Maria della Salute, A Florentine Nocturne, A Moraine and Olive Grove.

When in 1901 Mr. J. B. Manson, then a student, wrote to Sargent for advice he received the following reply:

> *In reply to your questions I fear that I can only give you the most general advice. The only school in London of which I have any personal knowledge is the Royal Acdemy. If the limit of age does not prevent your entering it I should advise you to do so. There are also very good teachers at the Slade School. You say you are studying painting to become a portrait painter. I think you would be making a great mistake if you kept that only in view during the time you intend to work on a life class -- where the object of the student should be to acquire sufficient command over his material to do whatever nature presents to him.*

It is evident that in his student days Sargent shared the apprehension excited in the studio by his brilliant, free-spoken teacher Carolus Duran. *"En art tout ce qui n'est pas indispensable est nuisible* – In art, all that is not indispensable is unnecessary"* was one of the precepts which Duran had

Home Fields, c. 1885

Here is a painting devoid of any mannerism, painted outdoors directly from life. It was said Sargent could step outside and paint without any preparation or forethought and still make something magnificent out of the view. My guess is this is what happened above.

Can you see how Sargent has inserted you into this painting? If you can't, look closely at the grass to the left of the fence.

By including his own shadow in the field of view he turns you into the painter of this painting!

formulated after his study of Velasquez. It became one of the texts of his studio. He urged his students to make copies of the pictures of Velasquez in the Louvre, not laborious copies, but copies *"au premier coup."* In painting a picture he would retreat a few steps from the canvas and then once more advance with his brush balanced in his hand as though it were a rapier and he were engaged in a bout with a fencing master. These gestures were often accompanied by appeals to the shade of Velasquez.

Those who watched Sargent painting in his studio were reminded of his habit of stepping backwards after almost every stroke of the brush on the canvas, and the tracks of his paces so worn on the carpet that it suggested a sheep-run through the heather. He, too, when in difficulties, had a sort of battle cry of "Demons, demons," with which he would dash at his canvas.

It was, then, to such a workshop and under such a master that Sargent at the age of eighteen was admitted as a pupil, and the question arises, what did Sargent owe to the teaching of Duran? The question is best answered by remembering Duran's precepts and seeing how far they are reflected in Sargent's art. It has already been shown how Duran insisted on the study of Velasquez and the omission in art of all that was not essential to the realization of the central purpose of a painting. He had himself traveled far from the sharp contrast of values by which he had dramatized his picture *L'Assassiné*. He had got rid of his tendency to be spectacular. From Velasquez he had learnt to simplify. His teaching was focused on the study of values and half-tones, above all, half-tones. Here lies, he would say, the se-

Carolus Durand, as painted by Sargent

The Merry Drinker, Frans Hals

cret of painting, in the half tone of each plane, in economizing the accents and in the handling of the lights so that they should play their part in the picture only with a palpable and necessary significance. Other things were subordinate. If Sargent excels in these respects, it is sufficient to recall the fact that they formed the core of Duran's instruction. There is no need to put his influence higher. Few pupils in painting who have the talent to absorb their master's teaching fail in the long run to outgrow his influence and to progress beyond and outside it on lines of their own.

Sargent himself always recognized his debt to the teaching of Duran. At the height of his fame, when looking at a portrait by a younger painter, he observed to Mr. William James:

That has value. I wonder who taught him to do that. I thought Carolus was the only man who taught that. He couldn't do it himself, but he could teach it.

Again, when Mr. James asked him how to avoid false accents he said:

You must classify the values. If you begin with the middle-tone and work up from in towards the darks – so that you deal last with your highest lights and darkest darks – you avoid false accents. That's what Carolus taught me. And Franz Hals. It's hard to find anyone who knew more about oil-painting than Franz Hals. That was his procedure. Of course, a sketch is different. You don't mind false accents there. But once you have made them in something which you wish to carry far, in order to correct them you have to deal with both sides of them and get into a lot of trouble. So that's the best method for anything you wish to carry far in oil paint.

Mr. George Moore, in one of the most illuminating essays in Modern Painting, said: "In 1830 values came upon France like a religion. Rembrandt was the new Messiah, Holland was the Holly Land, and disciples were busy dispensing the propaganda in every studio." The religion had no more ardent apostle than Carolus Duran.

One picture Sargent exhibited at the Academy in 1896 may be especially mentioned because it elected the warm admiration of Mr. George Moore, who was far from being enthusiastic about Sargent. Mr. Moore wrote of this portrait (Miss Priestley): "Gradually a pale-faced woman with arched eybrows, draws our eyes and fixes our thoughts. It is a portrait by Mr. Sargent, one of the best he has painted. By the side of a Franz Hals it might look small and thin, but nothing short of a fine Hals would affect its real beauty. My admiration for Mr. Sargent has often hesitated, but this picture completely wins me. The rendering is full of the beauty of incomparable skill.

The portrait tells us that he has learned the last and most difficult lesson – how to omit. A beautiful work, certainly. I should call it a perfect work were it not that the drawing is a little too obvious: in places we can detect the manner. It does not coule do source like the drawing of the very great masters."

It was a common experience for Sargent, as probably for all portrait painters, to be asked to alter some feature in a face, generally the mouth. Indeed, this happened so often that he used to define a portrait as "a likeness in which there was something wrong about the mouth." He rarely acceded, and then only when he was already convinced that it was wrong. In the case of Francis Jenkinson, the Cambridge Librarian, it was pointed out that he had omitted many lines and wrinkles which ought to be shown on the model's face. Sargent refused to make, he said, "a railway system of him."

His refusal more than once led to scenes. On one occasion the lady who had taken exception to the rendering of her mouth became hysterical and fainted. Sargent was the last man in the world to cope with such a situation. A friend who happened to call found him helplessly contemplating the scene. The model was restored to sense, but the mouth remained as it was.

A sitter has given the following account of being painted by Sargent in 1902:

"At one of my sittings during which Mr. Sargent painted my hands I sat motionless for two hours. A certain way in which I had unconsciously put my hands together pleased him very much because the posture, he said, was clearly natural to me. He implored me not to move. We worked very hard – he with his magical brush, I with my determination to control fidgets and the restless instincts to which sitters are prone when forced to remain still for any length of time. For the most part we were silent. Occasionally I heard him muttering to himself. Once I caught: "Gainsborough would have done it! Gainsborough would have done it!"

He worked at a fever heat, and it was so infectious that I felt my temples throbbing in sympathy with his efforts, the veins swelling in my brow. At one moment I thought I was going to faint with the sense of tension and my fear to spoil the pose which had enthused him.

At the end of two hours he declared that the hands were a failure, and he obliterated them.

"I must try again next time," he said in a melancholy tone. At the next sitting he painted the hands quickly as they now appear, a tour de force in the opinion of some, utterly unsuccessful in the view of others.

My husband came several times to the sittings. On one occasion Mr. Sargent sent for him specially. He rode across the Park to Tite Street.

El Jaleo, 1882 a.k.a., The Spanish Dancer (with details)

Hands and wrists are a few places in the body where the bones of the skeleton rise to the surface, out of softer, rounder, flesh. Pay attention to how Sargent uses a figure's hands, wrists, feet, and ankles, as grace notes for a pose. Study these body parts as much as you might study the head.

He found Mr. Sargent in a depressed mood. The opals baffled him. He said he couldn't paint them. They had been a nightmare to him, he declared, throughout the painting of the portrait.

That morning he was certainly in despair. Presently he said to my husband: "Let's play a Fauré duet." They played, Mr. Sargent thumping out the bass with strong, stumpy fingers. At the conclusion Mr. Sargent jumped up briskly, went back to the portrait and with a few quick strokes, dabbed in the opals. He called to my husband to come and look: "I've done the damned thing," he laughed under his breath.

My sister, on the occasion of her visit to the studio during my last sitting, remembers seeing Mr. Sargent paint my scarf with one sweep of his brush.

What appeared to interest him more than anything else when I arrived was to know what music I had brought with me.

To turn from color to sound evidently refreshed him, and presumably the one art stimulated the other in his brain.

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Sargent and a New Way of Seeing

by Thomas Jefferson Kitts

Sargent and a New Way of Seeing
by Thomas Jefferson Kitts

"Choose simple subjects, near objects at first. Do not try to make a pretty picture so much as to render truthful effects."

John Singer Sargent

Sargent set out to challenge many of the artistic conventions of his day by constantly pushing the boundaries of what his audience would accept. The significance of this becomes clear when you compare his portraiture against the conservative nature of those who commissioned it – the aristocracy and high society of France and England, and the grand families of America' upper class.

Sargent eventually grew weary of formal portraiture and turned to more personal subject matter, traveling in search of inspiration. Once freed from the restraints of the client, Sargent began to experiment with visual ideas that would preoccupy the rest of the art world thirty to fifty years later. Most notably, the flattening of illusionary space and the disintegration of form.

From the 15th to the mid-19th centuries the principle expectation placed upon the painter was the need to create a three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional plane, or, as a non-painter might grasp it, to create a window a viewer could look through into another world. However, by the 1850s the means by which an artist could create such an illusion had been comprehensively mapped out, leaving little for later painters to explore. For generations artists had been judged on how good they were at creating such illusions until doing so began to feel formulaic to anyone who was interested in developing a new way to paint.

It has been noted Sargent usually preferred to depict a more intimate environment over a more expansive one whether or not his subject was indoors or out. If his subject was outdoors, or if it was the landscape

itself, he would often choose a setting that included a barrier to deep space: a drawing room, the exterior facade of a building, a narrow winding street, a dense row of trees, or nearby range of mountains. It was as if Sargent was more preoccupied with the compositional potential of moving the viewer's eye up and down or left and right than moving it in towards a distant horizon.

In addition, Sargent applied his paint in such a way that encouraged the viewer to become aware of the surface itself, which is another way to flatten depth and prevent the creation of illusionary space. He made little attempt to conceal the calligraphic nature of his brushwork, and instead, built up thick texture with his paint. Sargent worked *au premier coup* as rapidly as possible, pushing wet paint into wet paint until arriving at the most immediate and serviceable effect possible – and, if a passage of paint failed he would scrape it down to the canvas and build it up again. Yet, in spite of such exacting standards Sargent wanted his audience to feel as though they were looking at an impromptu depiction of life dashed off with ease and facility, an impression he managed to convey by integrating the gesture of his brush with the surface planes of his subject. All of which maintains the viewer's eye on the surface of the image the same way a reflection can keep your eye on the surface of a pond. In this respect Sargent was not the first of his kind. Centuries earlier, Diego Velásquez and Frans Hals began intentionally leaving noticeable brush strokes in their finished work, also countering the illusion of depth, and by doing so Velásquez and Hals were proclaiming their hand was just as important as the patron who would view the work. So it should come to no one's surprise to learn Velásquez and Hals were a great influence on Sargent.

There are other things Sargent did to flatten space which deserve scrutiny. There are his numerous surprising and sometimes unusual compositions. Until the mid-19th century, the classically-minded painter was likely to place his subject towards the middle of the canvas in a symmetrical arrangement and paint a supporting environment out to the margins. In essence, what was set into the middle foreground was deemed most important and what was pushed into the background or out to the edges was considered secondary. In contrast, Sargent began to arrange his subject matter distinctly off center, even going so far as to abruptly crop it off the side or bottom of the canvas. But if Sargent harshly cropped his point of focus off the edge of his canvas he would also provide a strong balancing force somewhere else within the image to draw or pull the eye back towards the center.

And yet for all of Sargent's compositional explorations, when painting in oil he seemed content to limit himself to using a palette of neutral greys and browns, giving form to his subjects with a finely tuned value structure and exaggerated warm and cool color shifts. Sargent's restraint with color is noteworthy because he lived and worked during a time of great artistic upheaval when chemists were inventing all sorts of intense pigments and the French Impressionists were attempting to portray the effects of light using optical theories that Sargent did not pursue with any great enthusiasm. Even so, Sargent was a close friend of Claude Monet, the only impressionist he ever admired, and Sargent did incorporate a few of Monet's ideas into his methods – such as intensifying the effect of reflected light within shadows. But Sargent seemed almost indifferent to the other essential tenets of Impressionism; such as Chevreul's Laws of Contrast of Color and the banishment of black

from the palette. At heart, when painting in oil, Sargent remained true to value painting.

But there was yet another strong tie between Sargent and the French Impressionists and it manifested in their common desire to leave the studio and paint in natural light. In the early days of Sargent's career, painting *en plein air* was still a relatively new phenomenon enabled by the invention of squeezable tubed paints and the ability to travel deep into the countryside by rail. Prior to both of these inventions the artist who wanted to paint the landscape would make small studies outdoors and returned to the studio to complete larger, more encompassing work. Sargent was of a new breed of landscape painters, an artist who would begin and finish a major work outside the studio, an artist who wanted nothing to come between himself and the subject. For Sargent, the ideal was to begin with an unmarked canvas and work directly from life as quickly as possible. But always after much study and preparation. His work may have appeared to be spontaneous but nothing was ever left to chance.

In the end, Sargent's training, skill, expertise, speed, and stamina allowed him to capture the most transitory effects of nature – effects that were often lost, forgotten, or disregarded by other artists who worked indoors. His disciplined work ethic, combined with a strong desire to be on the spot, allowed him to see and capture what most artists before him had not – the interplay of color and light in real time.

Thomas Jefferson Kitts

Selected Paintings...

Dramatic composition: Look at how Sargent has arranged a low horizontal line of dark guitar players, and dancers awaiting their turn along the far wall, all inside an enclosed cave. Note how the flamenco dancer has been placed at an angle, lit from below, and the way her fellow dancers twist and turn, waving their arms in response to the music. What a contrast between the static and dynamic!

Such a simple choice
for a subject: a stairwell
leading upwards and out,
illuminated with direct and
reflected light. Yet the vines
at the opening prevent
us from seeing past
the opening, and again,
Sargent contrasts the rigid
geometry of the stuccoed
walls with angular shadows
that cut across the space.

More shallow space: But this time, the complexity of the subject gives Sargent an opportunity to vary his paint application and brush strokes, physically building texture out of paint. The abstraction almost becomes like a Jackson Pollock. (see detail on the next page...)

Again, Sargent uses thick paint – but now in conjunction with a depiction of strong dappled light to both conceal and reveal what is going on in this painting. You might spot the naked hermit quickly but many viewers miss the other animals Sargent has hidden in this scene. Again, illusionary depth is held to the absolute minimum.
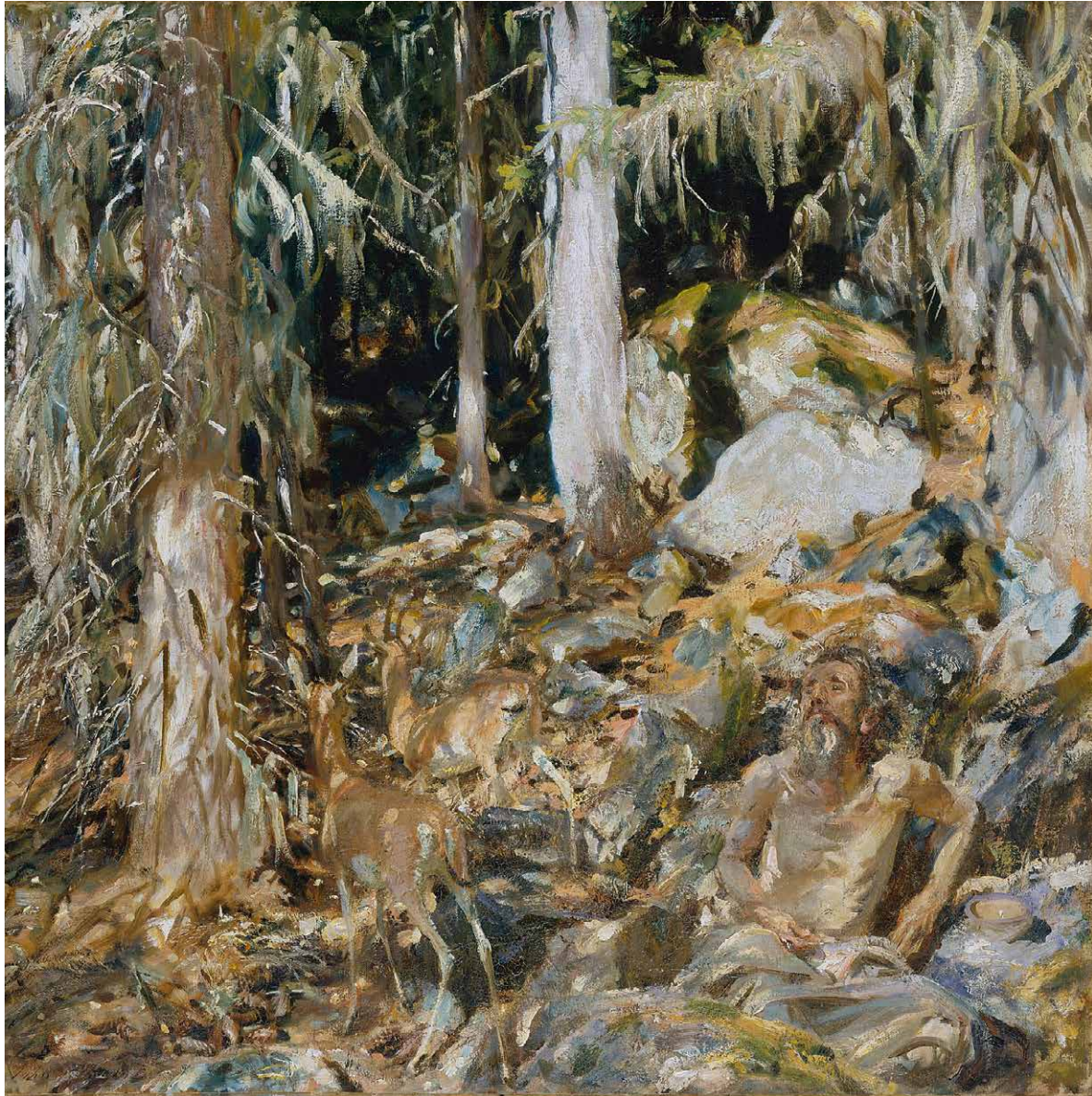
The beautiful collection of blues and greens in this room have been handled with thick and expressive paint. There are multiple sources of light entering this room and each one of them is clearly identifiable by color. The warmer, sunlight slips in between the slats of the venetian blinds, as if the sun was just on the other side of the wall. There is indirect light bouncing in from the blue sky through an open window on our left, out of view. So, the color of any surface that is turned to our left has been shifted towards the blue by that sky light, and any plane turned away from the open window has been illuminated by a light of a different color.

...Except for the burst of orange and red found at the bottom of the painting. We don't need to know exactly what is in those suitcases, but whatever they are, they reflect a warm glow from the sun light slipping through the blinds, warming up the immediate vicinity – the floor and other contents packed in the suitcases.
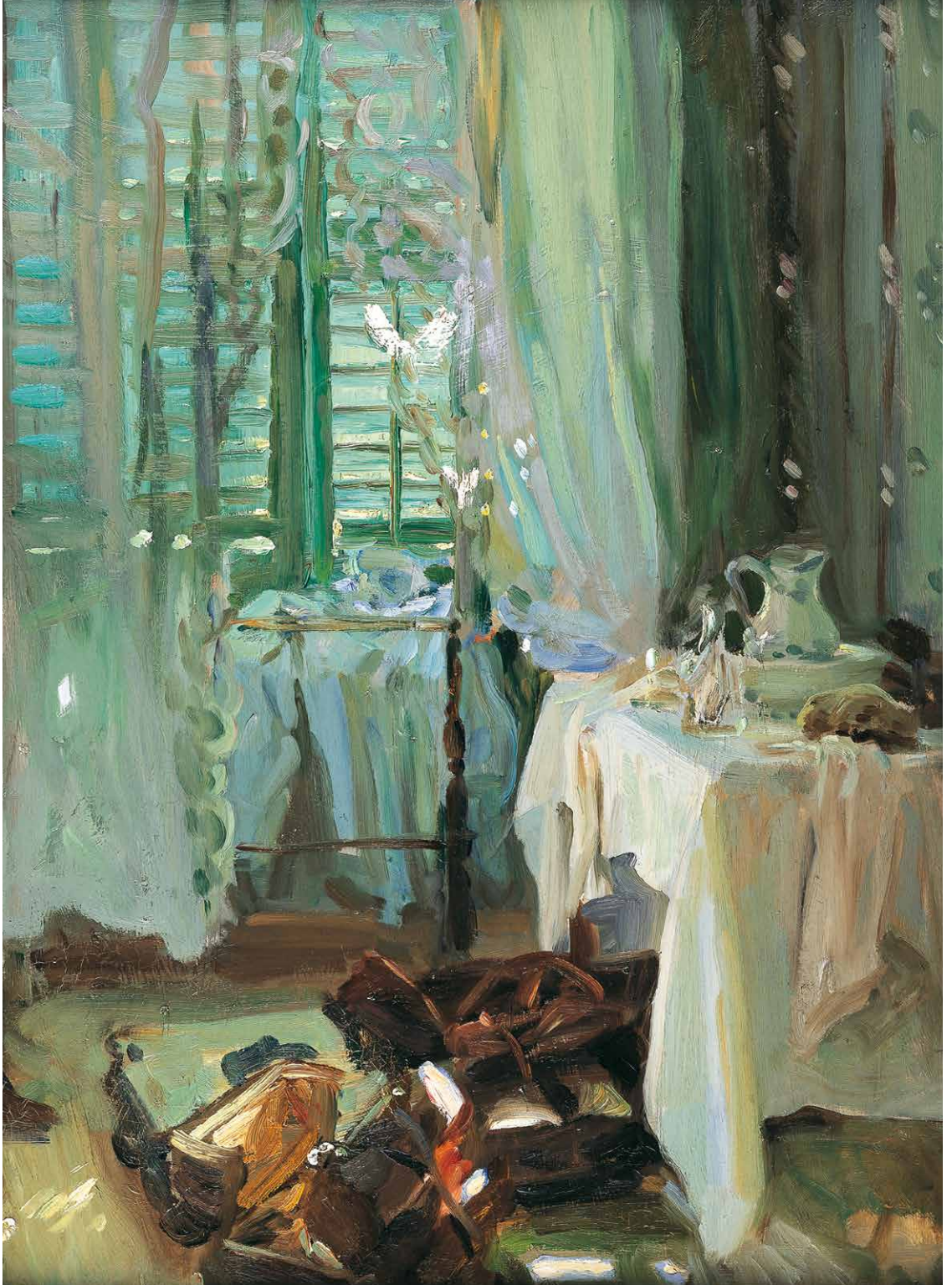
In this painting there is no direct
sunlight at all, only soft light washing in
from high above. But even so, Sargent
still uses contrasting warms and cools
to differentiate shapes and planes from
each other. Only this time the warm and
cool temperature shifts are subtle.
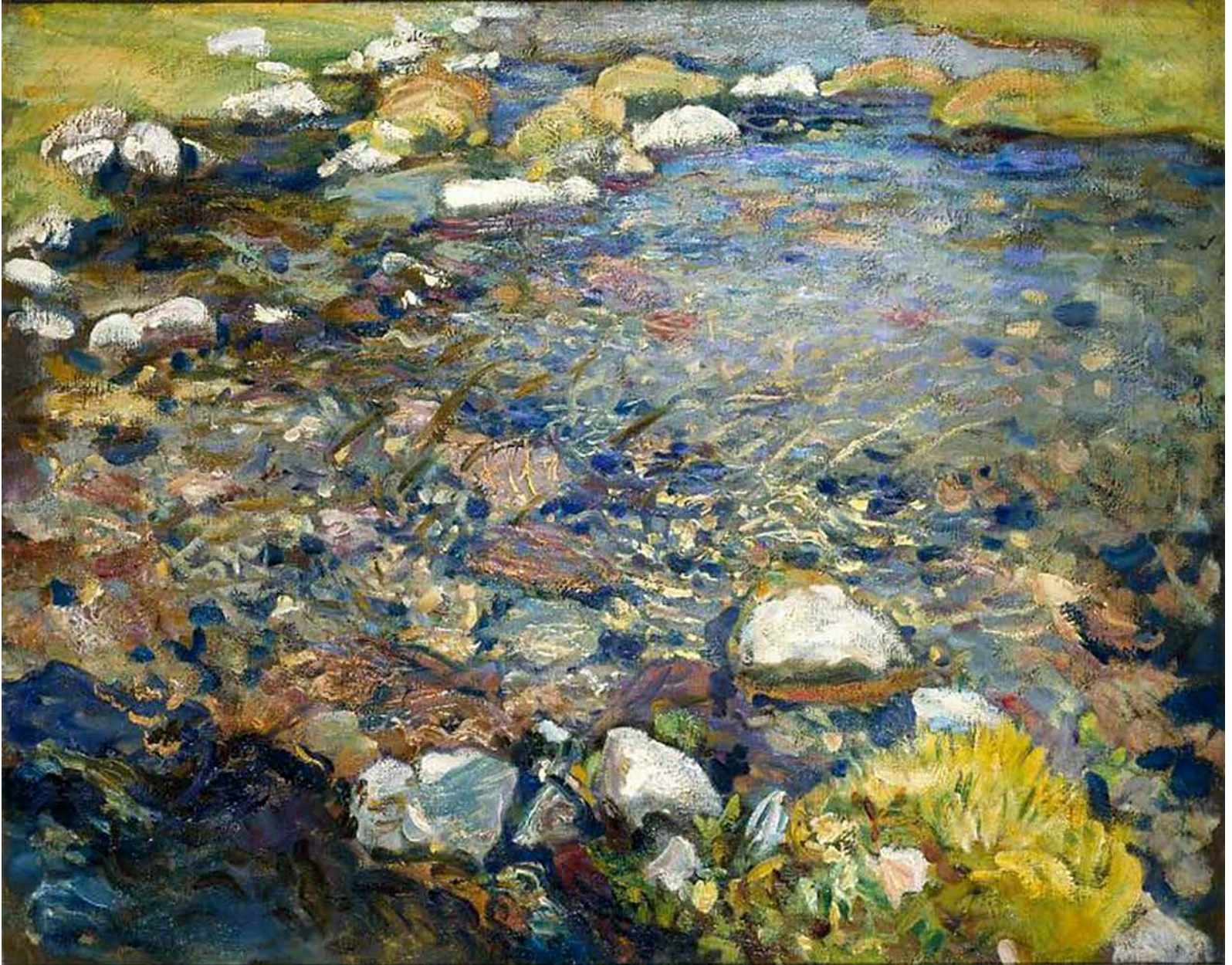
Do you see the trout hanging in the water? Can you see the shadows the trout cast over the rocks on the bottom of the pond? Can you separate the fish, shadows, and surface ripples from one other in a definitive way? Again, Sargent gives us a very abstract treatment of the subject, with shallow depth.

Lost and Found Edges: This figure study is lit from natural light from above, likely through a skylight high above our head.

Look at how Sargent simultaneously established and obscured certain edges within this painting. There are areas where he set a strong light against a strong dark to create a crisp edge, and there are areas where he lowers the contrast between the light and darks to lose the edge. All to keep your eye engaged and moving around.

Sargent was a master of suggestion. In this case he felt no need to complete the girl's earrings to their fullest extent, but instead chose to leave the geometry incomplete, thus inviting you to finish the painting with your own eyes.

Flat, flat, flat...

In this painting, Sargent limited himself to using just two compositional devices to position the flowers and children in space: size and overlap. When combined like this, both can offer a decorative, rhythmic, and graphic solution to the artistic problem of creating depth.

A fine example of direct and immediate planar painting: Planar painting is when the color and value of a surface changes as it turns away or into the light. In this case, the planes illuminated by the sun share a common quality – a lighter, warmer hue. The planes that are turned away from the sun share a common quality as well – a darker value with a bluish fill light. Note that the tip of the distant mountain and the clouds behind it were intentionally cropped out of the frame, which visually draws them closer to us.

The foreground figure has been cropped harshly along the bottom of this painting, and diagonally aligned with the fishing pole held out by the second figure, who himself is harshly cropped off the right side of the painting. And the background is cropped off the top as well. Again, creating flat graphic space and interesting negative shapes.

And finally...

I hope you enjoyed this modest little booklet and that in some humble way it has increased your appreciation and awareness of Sargent's work. If so, please share it with your friends. This effort is not meant to be definitive, or even authoritative, it is just intended to be a quick glance into the kind of artist Sargent was, and to share something concrete about his artistic process. In my opinion, Sargent was a nascent modernist, a painter who was once venerated for his facility, and then sadly, towards the end of his life, disregarded for being too facile – to the point of falling into obscurity soon after his death.

Now, almost one hundred years later, Sargent seems to have regained his place in the pantheon of important and influential painters. Among many others he would have been proud to associate with.

But no doubt, the pendulum of art history will swing again and another artist, living or dead, will come into favor. For that is how our culture works. However next time, when it happens, I believe Sargent will hold in his place.

He certainly worked long and hard enough to attain it.

TJK