

# “A Most Noble Old Village”





## John Singer Sargent and the Broadway Art Colony, 1885–1886

BY LISA BUSH HANKIN

Broadway’s “discovery” by William Morris (1834–1896), a principal figure in the English Arts and Crafts movement, spearheaded interest in the quiet village in the English Cotswolds (Fig. 1) and brought about its incarnation as an arts colony populated by a group of prominent painters, writers, musicians, and other creative souls who convened there in the mid-1880s, a tradition that continues today. The so-called “Broadway group” included a number of American expatriate painters, chief among them John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), hard at work on what would become his masterpiece, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (Fig. 2). Surrounding Sargent at this time was a congenial group of artist-friends whose relatives, spouses, and children posed, gardened, entertained, and established a sense of camaraderie in the sleepy village that bequeathed an enduring legacy as well as a remarkable group of artworks that capture the flavor of the colony.

For Sargent, Broadway represented a much-needed respite from Paris in the wake of negative controversy over his 1884 portrait of Madame Gautreau, *Madame X* (Fig. 3). The most noted artist associated with the Broadway colony, Sargent first went there to recuperate after he struck his head diving from a boat on



**TOP, BOTH PAGES:**

**Fig. 1:** Village of Broadway, Cotswolds, England.  
Courtesy of the Broadway Tourist Information Centre.

**PREVIOUS PAGE:**

**Fig. 2:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885–86  
Oil on canvas, 68½ x 60½ inches  
Courtesy of Tate, London  
Presented by the Trustees of the Chantrey Bequest, 1887 (N01615).

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**Fig. 3:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1883–84  
Oil on canvas, 82½ x 43¼ inches  
Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916 (16.53)  
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the Thames. His Broadway work shows him breaking free from the conventions of Salon-style studio painting to experiment with Impressionism and work *en plein air*, which he would continue for the next several years. Though the concept of painting outdoors was hardly new to Sargent—who had made

alfresco studies and watercolors on his travels ever since his youth—Broadway marked the first time he executed a major canvas, intended for public exhibition, in an outdoor setting.<sup>1</sup>

#### SETTING

Once a busy staging stop on the coach route

from Worcester to London, Broadway melted into a sleepy village (Fig. 4) after being bypassed by the development of the British railway system in the mid-1800s. By the time William Morris adopted the eccentric Broadway Tower as his country home in 1880, many of the once-bustling town's large stone buildings were vacant, making it an ideal spot for artists to set up for the summer. These picturesque Georgian and Tudor structures offered (at modest cost) grand settings, spacious interiors, and adequate studio space. Though distant from London, Broadway sits only fifteen miles from Stratford-Upon-Avon, whose summer Shakespeare festivals attracted leading thespians to the area, adding to the potent creative mix in the village.

Owing to the use of the local honey-colored limestone as a construction material, Broadway seamlessly melded town and countryside, exemplifying the Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Adding to the town's distinctive visual appeal were the vibrant English gardens that sat behind many of the old homes, as well as its chestnut tree-lined High Street (one of the longest in England) leading to Fish Hill, in the northern Cotswolds. Overlooking the village green stands the unofficial first home of the Broadway group of artists—the seventeenth-century Farnham House, leased by the American painter Francis Davis "Frank" Millet (1846–1912) for the summer of 1885. Millet—with his openhearted nature and boundless enthusiasm for the town—became the heart of the Broadway group. Along with his wife Lily, their two children, and his sister Lucia (whose detailed letters home served as a

#### TOP:

**Fig. 4:** Village of Broadway, Cotswolds, England. Courtesy of the Broadway Tourist Information Centre.

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**Fig. 5:** John Appleton Brown (1844-1902) *The Old Mill*  
Pastel on paper, 17½ x 21 inches (sight size)  
Courtesy Questroyal Fine Art

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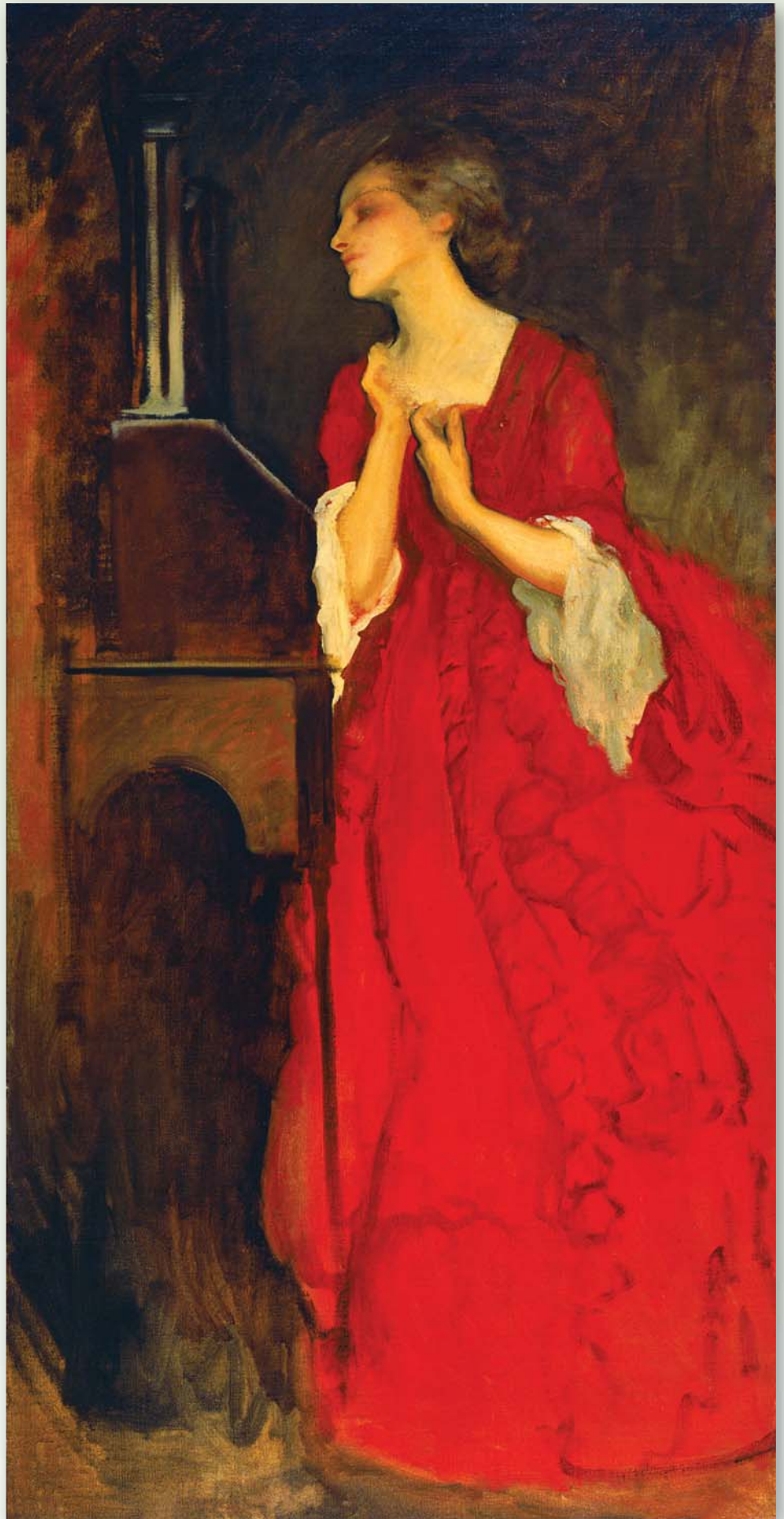
**Fig. 6:** Edwin Austin Abbey (1852-1911) *Lady Anne*, 1889  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 24 inches  
Courtesy of the Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio  
Museum Purchase (1923)

chronicle of the Broadway years), Millet set the tone of informality and conviviality that characterized the Broadway experience. By the time summer rolled around, Farnham House nearly burst at the seams with visitors; among the first artists to visit was the Boston landscape painter J. Appleton Brown (1844–1902) (Fig. 5).

Because the house was not large, Millet also took Abbot's Grange, a then-deteriorated fourteenth-century priory to serve as studio space.<sup>2</sup> The following year saw a move to the somewhat larger Russell House, complete with tennis court, barn, swimming hole, and an expansive garden. Just a few steps away sat the imposing sixteenth-century Lygon Arms, the local inn, which handled visitor overflow and served as supplemental indoor painting space when weather conditions dictated.

#### CHARACTERS

Millet had followed on the heels of Morris and his Arts and Crafts movement colleagues Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882). It was Millet's idea to spend the summer of 1884 in the English countryside, having heard about Broadway from Laurence Hutton, the literary editor of *Harper's* magazine. Several of his writers and illustrators played central roles in the Broadway group. Among these were the esteemed literary figure Henry James (1843–1916), who published a piece in *Harper's* about the artists at Broadway extolling the picturesque setting and describing it to a friend as "a most noble old village";<sup>3</sup> the painter and illustrator Edwin Austin Abbey (1852–1911) (Fig. 6), who had been to the village in 1878 when on assignment for *Harper's*; the English watercolorist and flower painter Alfred Parsons (1847–1920) (Fig. 7), whose second calling as a garden designer can be seen in English gardens of the Edwardian era, particularly some of Broadway's; the writer and critic Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), whose wife's sister was married to Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912), also a visitor; the illustrator Frederick Barnard (1846–1896), best known for his illustrations of Dickens' works; and the mural and genre painter Edwin Blashfield (1848–1936), among others.







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**Fig. 7:** Alfred Parsons (1847-1920)  
*English Borders in Full Bloom*  
 Watercolor on paper, 14 x 10 inches  
 Signed lower right  
 Image courtesy of Stair Galleries

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**Fig. 8:** Francis Davis Millet (1846-1912)  
*Between Two Fires*, circa 1892  
 Oil on canvas, 29½ x 36 inches  
 Tate, London  
 Presented by the Trustees of the Chantrey  
 Bequest, 1892 (N01611)

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**Fig. 9:** Francis Davis Millet memorial at  
 St. Eadburgha's Church, Snowhill Road,  
 Broadway. Photography by Hugh Brewster

Known primarily for mural decorations and historical genre paintings (Fig. 8), the Mattapoisett, Massachusetts-born Millet graduated from Harvard in 1869. In addi-

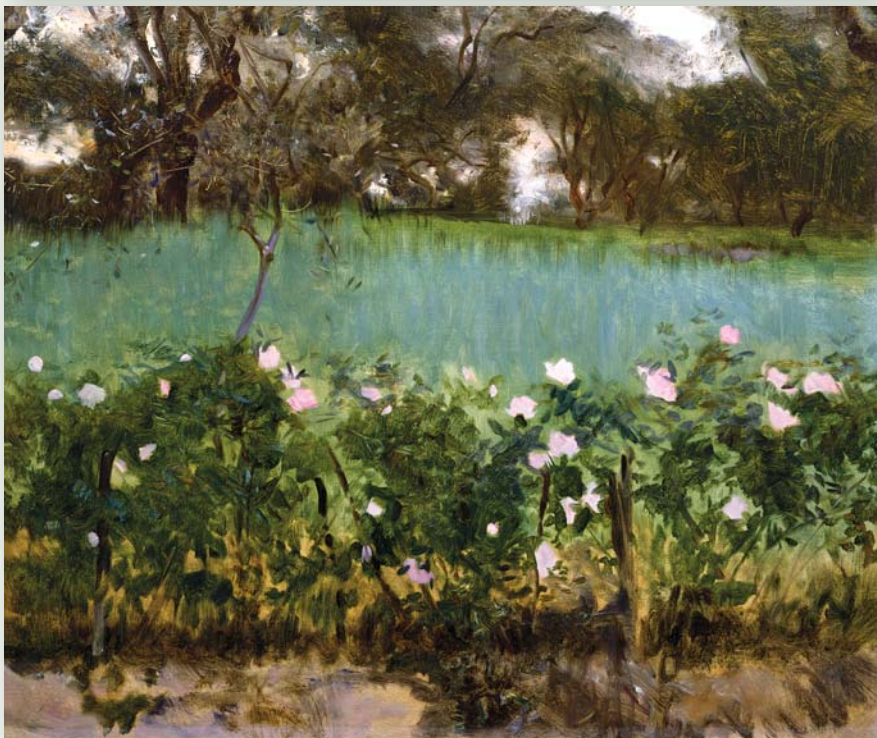
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tion to his career as an artist, he wrote for several newspapers and worked as a translator. Committed to the advancement of American art, he served on exhibition juries and in prominent advisory positions for arts organizations and committees including the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Millet died at age sixty-five when he gave his life jacket to a fellow passenger on the sinking *Titanic*. A memorial to Millet, donated by his friends, stands at the entrance to the upper graveyard of Saint Eadburgha's Church in Broadway (Fig. 9).

**WORK**

While the artists in the group often painted at the Abbot's Grange studio (where the writers also worked), Farnham House itself had a lovely garden that quickly caught Sargent's attention



and was to serve as the initial setting for a major subject picture that was to incorporate children in the garden at twilight—*Carnation, Lily, Lily Rose* (Fig. 2). This was preceded by a number of outdoor flower subject paintings (Figs. 10, 11) as well as highly finished studies for the major composition itself (Fig. 12).

Given the challenge of capturing the precise nature of Cotswolds summer twilight on canvas, it took Sargent two years to complete *Carnation*. He began work on it in August of 1885, continuing through the fall, until the short days and cold weather forced him to shelve the project until the following summer, when he took up work on the canvas again, this time in the garden of Russell House.

Broadway residents recalled how Sargent would break away from the heated lawn tennis matches that took place daily, to haul his giant canvas out into the garden, making sure his young models were dressed in their white smocks and that Japanese lanterns were placed in the rosebushes. In this way he ensured that that no precious painting time would be wasted when the light was right, just before and after sunset. Because of Sargent's stature and the affection the group had for him, his work on *Carnation* shaped the daily agenda for the Broadway colony. They



would watch with rapt attention as he painted, frequently chronicling the action in words or, in the case of Frederick Barnard, caricature (Fig. 13). Frank and Lily Millet's daughter Kate served as the original model, until replaced by the slightly older Barnard girls, Dorothy and Polly. When the group shifted their base of operations from Farnham House to the larger Russell House the following summer, Lucia Millet planted lily bulbs around the garden at Sargent's request, as indicated in letters home, as well

as by Sargent on canvas in *The Millet House and Garden* (Fig. 14), an unconventional composition that depicts the garden in bright sunlight, complete with empty pots along the garden path, having previously contained the lilies and roses planted to create the setting for *Carnation*.

Despite the seriousness of Sargent's endeavor, the group found plenty of opportunity for relaxation, cultural stimulation, and frivolity at Broadway. Descriptions abound of impromptu concerts, comic monologues, poetry readings, staged performances, birthday parties, and the like, as well as more organized outings such as a trip to the theater at Stratford to see the American actress Mary Anderson play *Rosalind* in *As You Like It* and a steam-launch cruise down the River Avon. Frederick Barnard captured some of the activities—and personalities—in a group of pen-and-ink caricatures discovered among the Millet family papers as did Sargent, in a number of intimate oils painted indoors and out (Figs. 15, 16).

**PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP:**

**Fig. 10:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*Hollyhocks*, ca. 1886  
Oil on canvas, 39¾ x 33 inches  
Private collection, courtesy  
Adelson Galleries, New York

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**Fig. 11:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*Landscape with Roses*, ca. 1886  
Oil on canvas, 20½ x 25 inches  
Private collection, courtesy  
Adelson Galleries, New York

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**Fig. 13:** Attributed to Frederick Barnard (1846–1896), Caricature of Sargent painting *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, ca. 1885–1886. Ink on paper, 3¾ x 3¾ inches. Francis Davis Millet and Millet family papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

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**Fig. 12:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*Study for 'Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose,'* 1885  
Oil on canvas, 23½ x 19½ inches  
Private collection, courtesy  
Adelson Galleries, New York

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**Fig. 14:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*The Millet House and Garden*, 1886  
Oil on canvas, 27 x 35 inches  
Private collection, courtesy  
Adelson Galleries, New York







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**Fig. 15:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*The Candelabrum*, 1885  
 Oil on canvas, 20¾ x 26¼ inches  
 Private collection, courtesy  
 Adelson Galleries, New York

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**Fig. 16:** John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)  
*Guinevere*, ca. 1885  
 Oil on canvas, 14¾ x 11½ inches  
 Adelson Galleries, New York

Despite the camaraderie among the artists working at Broadway, each appears to have pursued his own artistic path. While Sargent experimented with what was then a modern painting style in his outdoor studies and *Carnation*, Millet concentrated on the Dutch-influenced interior scenes for which he was known (Fig. 8). Alfred Parsons created works in the English landscape tradition, foreshadowing his burgeoning interest in garden design. Illustration work occupied several of the others. Scholars Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray have identified their common thread, if any, as being “a gentle period charm, a concern with detail, and a highly finished appearance.”<sup>4</sup>

#### LATER VISITORS ETC.

Though Sargent did not return to Broadway for any extended period of time after 1886, the Millets and Abbey maintained their presence there for quite some time. In subsequent years, Broadway has welcomed artists of all types, including the authors J.M. Barrie (*Peter Pan*) and Evelyn Waugh (*Brideshead Revisited*); the 20th-century furniture designer Sir

Gordon Russell (to whom a museum is now devoted); and the English composers Vaughan Williams and Sir Edward Elgar (*Pomp and Circumstance*), among numerous others.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

*Sargent and Impressionism*, on view at Adelson Galleries in New York from November 4 through December 18, 2010, will showcase thirty-one works painted at Broadway and in the English river towns of Henley, Calcot, and Fladbury, where Sargent continued experimenting with the impressionist technique begun at Broadway. A fully illustrated color catalogue accompanies the exhibit. For information, call 212.439.6800 or visit [www.adelsongalleries.com](http://www.adelsongalleries.com). Also this November, Yale University Press will release volume 5 of the Sargent catalogue raisonné, *John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes 1883–1899: The Complete Paintings*, in which Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray chronicle the Broadway experience, among other aspects of Sargent’s work in the years 1883–1899. For more informa-

tion visit <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=9780300161113>. Looking ahead, Broadway recently established a biannual arts festival to celebrate its rich artistic heritage. The next Broadway Arts Festival will take place in June 2012 and will feature a major retrospective of the work of Alfred Parsons. [AFA](#)

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1. Elaine Kilmurray has contributed a comprehensive account of Sargent’s work on *Carnation*, *Lily*, *Lily Rose* as well as a detailed discussion of the Broadway colony in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray’s forthcoming *John Singer Sargent: Figure and Landscapes 1883–1899: The Complete Paintings, Volume 5* (London: Yale University Press, 2010). The material in this article borrows extensively from her account.
2. Millet gradually restored the circa 1320 Abbot’s Grange (one of the oldest buildings in the Cotswolds) with advice from William Morris, today considered one of the founders of the historic preservation movement.
3. Henry James, “Our Artists in Europe,” *Harper’s New Monthly* 79 (June 1889): 50. Henry James to Henrietta Reubell, 18 November, 1885 (Houghton Library, Harvard University), bms 1094 (1061).
4. Ormond and Kilmurray, 99.

