

Sargent's Women

Nov 4th, 2003

New York City: In the early years of John Singer Sargent's professional career, from 1878 to 1890, the artist was strongly attracted to distinctive and glamorous women and exotic subjects.

From November 12 through December 13, Adelson Galleries, Inc will present "Sargent's Women," a unique loan exhibition of approximately 50 oil paintings and watercolors from museums and private collectors. Several of the paintings to be shown here have rarely or never been publicly displayed.

This exhibition was inspired by the revelation in a recently solved mystery as to the identification of a woman named Amelie Gautreau (who, it turned out, is "Madame X"). In a letter written jointly with Sargent to a mutual friend she reveals her true feelings toward her portrait, infamously known as "Madame X" (1884, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Warren Adelson, president of Adelson Galleries, decided to mount "Sargent's Women" as a way of examining the relationships that Sargent cultivated with the many extraordinary women in his life. "We felt a gaping hole in the understanding of Sargent was his obvious passion for the many young and exotic women that he encountered and painted, yet never discussed," said Adelson.

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) was born in Florence, Italy, to American parents. He studied in Paris at the atelier of Carolus-Duran and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. His career as a portrait artist began in Paris with a modest number of commissions, but it was not until the portrait of the Parisian socialite Mme Virginie Gautreau was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1884 that he gained notoriety. It was not, however, the acclaim he had envisioned. The audacity of the portrait so outraged the public and caused such a controversy that it compromised Sargent's career and contributed to his decision to leave France and resettle in London. There, he quickly rose to prominence and by the 1890s he had become the leading portrait artist to the upper classes. Sargent experienced a positive reception in America, particularly in Boston where he had been commissioned to paint murals for the Boston Public Library and subsequently for the Museum of Fine Arts. Sargent died in London in April 1925, on the eve of a trip to return to Boston to complete his mural installation.

Featured in "Sargent's Women" will be paintings of family members, including his mother and sisters, close friends such as Judith Gautier, Lily Millet, Fanny Watts, the remarkable Virginie Amelie Gautreau and his favorite models. Among the highlights of the show will be an oil study for "Fumee d'Ambre Gris (Smoke of Ambergris)," 1880, which has not been displayed in the United States in 40 years (it is the first version of the larger work in the collection of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass.), as well as an intimate pencil study for "Madame X" in a private collection that has rarely been seen. Making its debut public appearance will be the full-length portrait "Madame Pierre Gautreau," 1907, by Antonio de la Gandara, the last portrait the sitter commissioned of herself. It hung in her living room for the rest of her life and has remained in the possession of her American cousins since her death.

Two important artifacts will also be on view. First the letter written jointly by Mme Gautreau and Sargent to a mutual friend while her portrait was being painted, in which Mme Gautreau reveals that "Mr Sargent has made a masterpiece of the portrait." Also being shown is the ledger kept by Mme Gautreau's mother-in-law, in which she recorded in meticulous detail the amount spent on the young woman's rice powder -- the secret behind her legendary complexion -- and the black satin possibly purchased for the evening gown worn in the infamous portrait. The document offers fresh insight into reconstructing the family's life and dynamics.

On November 11, a preview of "Sargent's Women" to benefit the Pocantico Society of Historic Hudson Valley will be conducted. On November 19, a gala benefit evening for the National Breast Cancer Coalition will be conducted with a lecture by author Deborah Davis.

Adelson Galleries, Inc is in The Mark Hotel, 25 East 77th Street, Third Floor. For information, 212-439-6800 or www.adelsongalleries.com.

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