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**Sargent's Mysterious Sitter: Objectification and Subjectivity in *Madame X* and Other Works By John Singer Sargent**

By Silvia Lopez

Portraiture<sup>1</sup> of women has captivated the imagination of high art for centuries. In *The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality*, Lynda Nead argues that “For art history, the female nude is both at the center and at the margins of high culture.”<sup>2</sup> In these paintings, women are reduced to objects or artistic tools for the painter to convey any message, emotion, or idea they so choose. This is objectification in its purest form. Since men have created the female image in art, women have been subjected to this form of degradation for centuries. A woman can potentially be objectified by the portrayal of her image regardless if she is nude or clothed. John Singer Sargent's famous painting *Madame X* (1883), is a perfect example of this phenomenon.

Before the advent of widespread photography, painted portraits offered the best method to capture an individual's presence and visage. Due to the difficulty and complexity involved in accurately capturing an individual's appearance on canvas, artists of exceptional talent found themselves in high demand. One such famed artist was American expatriate, John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). This paper will explore how Sargent subjected his clients to objectification through instrumentality and denial of subjectivity by using the cases of Virginie Avegno Gautreau, Harry Vane Millbank, and Thérèse Aldringen as examples.

In her analysis of *Madame X*, art historian Susan Sidlauskas observes that, “John Singer Sargent's (1865–1925) best known portrait, *Madame X*... has become an icon of an elegant, but jaded beauty, a symbol of fashion at its most extravagant and narcissism

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<sup>1</sup> Portraiture is a means for artists to explore the anatomy of the body.

<sup>2</sup> Lynda Nead, “The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality,” *Signs* 15, no. 2 (1990): 323-325.

at its most insistent.”<sup>3</sup> The woman in the painting, Madame Virginie Avegno Gautreau, now better known as *Madame X*, was a social butterfly whose ethereal beauty captivated the Sargent. Sargent believed the painting of Gautreau would secure his career as an artist in Paris.<sup>4</sup> In the painting, Gautreau is presented in profile and clad in a midnight black gown that contrasts sharply with her pale skin. She leans against a table, with her right arm subtly twisted away from her body, while she looks away from the spectator. Everything about the painting is intended to create an air of mystery, from the stark contrast of black and white, Gautreau’s aloof stance, and even the very title itself. Sargent focused on Gautreau’s skin for so long because he was drawn to its paleness, suggesting that the artist merely saw the woman as an object: skin. The contrast between Gautreau’s pale skin and black dress appears to be the main subject of the painting. Sidlauskas suggests that, “Gautreau’s skin seemed to become for him [Sargent] almost a fetish.”<sup>5</sup> Sargent worked endlessly to bring Gautreau’s pale complexion to life on canvas, but he was never fully satisfied with the result. He returned to the painting repeatedly, even compulsively, in the end he was only able to tear himself away from *Madame X* in order to start a new project.<sup>6</sup>

Sargent used Gautreau for her skin as if she was an object, a mere tool to advance his own career. In order to properly explore how Sargent objectified and used Gautreau for his own benefit, it is necessary to define objectification more clearly. The article *Objectification* by prominent American philosopher and feminist thinker Martha C. Nussbaum, offers a clear framework for analyzing objectification in art. In *Objectification* Nussbaum outlines “Seven Ways to Treat a Person as a Thing.” According to Nussbaum, “What objectification is, is to treat a human being in one or more of these ways.”<sup>7</sup> Another characteristic of

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s Madame X,” *American Art* 15, no. 3 (2001): 8-33.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Mahon and Silvia Centeno, “A Technical Study of John Singer Sargent’s Portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005): 121-129.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s Madame X,” *American Art* 15, no. 3 (2001): 8-33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (1995): 249-291.

objectification is “instrumentality” which Nussbaum defines as “The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.”<sup>8</sup> Sargent employs “instrumentality” in the way he that he used the pale complexion of Gautreau’s skin as a subject for his painting—the same way an artist uses fruit for a still life. Nussbaum states, “Most inanimate objects are standardly regarded as tools of our purposes, though some are regarded as worthy of respect for their beauty, or age, or naturalness.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, a great deal of work went into preparation for the final version of *Madame X*, including a series of studies done in watercolor and pencil of his model before he finally decided how to pose her. In *Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s Madame X*, Sidlauskas explores Sargent’s struggles to determine how to paint his model. She observes that, “Many of Sargent’s preliminary sketches of Gautreau suggest the tactics of a hunter unsure about how to capture his prey.”<sup>10</sup> Several of Sargent’s sketches are of Gautreau’s profile as well. The artist’s perfectionism is evident even in the preparatory stages of the portrait. “Apparently the artist needed to contemplate the full range of Gautreau’s movements, so that he might later arrest them on the final canvas.”<sup>11</sup> Sargent regarded Madame Gautreau as a rare beauty for her pale skin and her profile which he rendered flawlessly and obsessively in *Madame X*.

Although Madame Gautreau was an affluent, independent woman, in order produce her portrait, Sargent went to great lengths to take total control of the scene, “even the smallest details of a sitter’s costume, pose, and affect.”<sup>12</sup> The artist dictated what Gautreau wore for the portrait and how she was posed, compared to an example written by Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik of a ‘Matisse set-up;’ “The female model is posed on an ancient overstuffed chair surrounded by patterned draperies in a large floppy hat and high-heeled slippers,” this is a similar way in which Sargent controlled the setting of the portrait.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Sargent’s obsession with the portrait, *Madame X*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” 249-291.

<sup>10</sup> Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s Madame X, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s Madame X,” 18.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik, “Re-viewing the Nude,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 1 (1999): 42-48.

was poorly received when it made its public debut in the Paris salon in 1884. The pale, ghostly image of Gautreau in the portrait was primarily responsible for the painting's frosty reception. Dorothy Mahon and Silvia Centeno observed that, "On the first day of the exhibition, crowds gathered ridiculing the image and impugning character of the sitter."<sup>14</sup> Such poor critical reception reflected poorly upon Madame Gautreau, despite the anonymous title her likeness was well known among the people that attended the salon exhibition.<sup>15</sup> Madame Gautreau was so haunted and disgraced by this that both herself and her mother, Marie Virginie Ternant, begged Sargent to remove the painting from the exhibition. Nussbaum's concept of "denial of subjectivity," provides an ideal framework to explore how Gautreau was harmed by Sargent's objectification. According to Nussbaum's concept of denial of subjectivity, "The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account."<sup>16</sup> Although Sargent painted Gautreau just as he posed her, when he refused to take down the painting he did so without consideration or care for how Gautreau and Tarnant felt about the portrait and its harsh criticism. Refusal to take down the painting as requested by the two women is a way that the artist objectified his sitter and her mother. The artist himself was also subjected to the negativity toward the famous painting. Mahon and Centeno suggest that Sargent's "hope and expectation that this submission would secure his reputation as a brilliant portraitist, to be followed by important commissions from Parisian society, were ruined. It is not surprising that, by 1886, he had left Paris to establish himself in London."<sup>17</sup> Sargent used Gautreau's image to boost his career and regardless of the criticism received, the artist subjected his model to "instrumentality" once more.

Gautreau was not the only model who Sargent objectified through his work. While working on *Madame X* between 1883-1884, Sargent produced a hastily painted sketch of Mrs. Harry Vane Millbank, the mother of his close friend Albert de Belleruche. In the sketch, Mrs. Millbank is dressed in a gown

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<sup>14</sup> Mahon and Centeno, "A Technical Study of John Singer Sargent's Portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau," 121.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Sidlauskas, "Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's Madame X," 11.

<sup>16</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Objectification," 257.

<sup>17</sup> Mahon and Centeno, "A Technical Study of John Singer Sargent's Portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau," 123.

similar to that of Gautreau; black with a deep neckline and cinched at the waist and in a similar pose. Through Sargent's portrayal, Mrs. Millbank was objectified through "instrumentality" in the similar manner to Gautreau. Mahon and Centeno contend that, "Apparently in progress at the same time, although signed, this casually painted portrait's sketchy and unfinished appearance and its close similarity to the X-radiographic image of *Madame X* suggest that it may have served as a practice piece for Sargent as he settled on his final ideas for *Madame X*."<sup>18</sup> In short, Sargent used Mrs. Millbank as a tool to prepare for his final painting of Gautreau.

Another painting done years following the poor reception of *Madame X* was that of Thérèse Aldringen in *Portrait of Thérèse Countess Clary Aldringen (1896)*. The portrait looks innocent and much more modest than that of *Madame X*, but when the viewer looks closely at Countess Aldringen's right hand, it becomes apparent that her fingers are positioned awkwardly, as if cradling an invisible cigarette. Sargent took control of how the painting would look by choosing not to include it. If Sargent painted how he saw his model when he painted *Madame X*, why did he not do the same when he painted Countess Aldringen? Sargent was obsessed with perfection and Countess Aldringen was merely another prop in the setting of his portrait. To Sargent, Countess Aldringen was merely a canvas upon which to project his own image of an ideal woman, he could change anything about her he desired in order to match the image he intended to project. Countess Aldringen was subjected to objectification via "instrumentality" just as Madame Gautreau had been before her.

The objectification of women in art possesses deep roots in artistic history, but questions of objectification remain omnipresent in art and media to this day. "Popular mass media in Western societies have been criticized for sexually objectifying the female body" writes Laura Vandebosch and Steven Eggermont, such as the female nude of ancient portraiture.<sup>19</sup> Objectification still remains, whether it be in a sexual or non-sexual way. Two of the

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<sup>18</sup> Mahon and Centeno, "A Technical Study of John Singer Sargent's Portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau," 123.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Vandebosch and Steven Eggermont, "Understanding Sexual Objectification: A Comprehensive Approach Toward Media Exposure and Girls' Internalization of Beauty Ideals, Self-Objectification, and Body Surveillance," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 5 (2012): 869-887.

“Seven Ways to Treat an Object as a Thing” helped analyze the manner in which Madame Gautreau, her mother, Mrs. Millbank, and Thérèse Countess Clary Aldringen were all objectified by the Sargent through his paintings. All four women were subject to objectification in one way or another and treated as objects to further the artistic career of John Singer Sargent. However, Sargent did not escape subjection to his own work when his portrayal of *Madame X* received a torrent of criticism at its Paris debut. Despite his failure to entrench himself in the Parisian art scene, Sargent’s long and successful career demonstrates that he was indeed a talented and prolific artist. His work remained in high demand throughout his life, and many clients commissioned him for portraits, many of those portraits being of women. Sargent’s work is abundant in these portraits, as explained previously, many of them had similarities in which it is safe to say that Sargent created this female image as a subject himself and imposed it on the subjects of his work, thus reducing them to mere objects for the advancement of his career.<sup>20</sup>

This characteristic of Sargent’s work is most notable in his objectification of Madame Gautreau, whose ethereal beauty he attempted to harness as a means to bolster his career. Through these actions, Sargent’s conduct clearly matches Nussbaum’s definition of “instrumentality” set forth in *Objectification*. Sargent ignored the feelings Madame Gautreau and her mother had toward the harsh commentary of *Madame X* by refusing to remove the painting from the salon, another way in which Sargent objectified these women with his work.<sup>21</sup> In retrospective, despite Sargent’s hopes that his artistic genius showcased in *Madame X* would catapult him into the limelight, it was the portrait’s poor reception that made him famous, or more precisely, infamous. In the words of Mahon and Centeno, “John Singer Sargent’s notorious portrait continues to captivate museum visitors today because of its commanding presence.”<sup>22</sup>

It is that very controversy and the mysterious sitter in the painting that made his name internationally recognized. Sargent made bold statements with his work by the way he painted his

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<sup>20</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” 257.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Mahon and Centeno, “A Technical Study of John Singer Sargent's Portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau,” 128.

subjects such as contrasting Gautreau's pale skin with a dark dress and possibly censoring the cigarette from Countess Aldringen fingers, all of which are deceiving to the eyes when the viewer learns the artist's true intentions.

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Silvia Lopez is an emerging artist that lives in Southern California with her family. She graduated from California State University San Bernardino with a Bachelor of Arts in Studio art to follow her lifelong dream of becoming an artist. Her artwork is often made with thick paint and various tools to create textures and to make her paintings three-dimensional. She also creates artwork about nature conservation to demonstrate the importance of all living things. In her free time, she enjoys sketching her favorite characters and hopes to become a character designer at Disney Animation Studios.

