

SARGENT TRADITION- AL SOCIETY PORTRAIT PAINTER OR REVOLU- TIONARY LANDSCAPE PAINTER?

Si Sapsford in conversation with the curator Richard Ormond and the painter Rupert Alexander.

Surrounded by the better-known Sargent paintings: Dr. Pozzi; Carolus-Duran; and Sargent's first double portrait of the children of Édouard Pailleron, we start talking about the painting of Marie Buloz Pailleron, Madame Édouard Pailleron, which – whilst both Rupert and Richard agree that is not their favourite painting – does bring the conversation immediately to the subject of Sargent's technique and to his modern impressionistic style; something that I am keen to know more about. It doesn't seem possible to look at his work without acknowledging his technical virtuosity; he really was one of the great innovators of his day, and it's not just the portraits but also his landscapes and watercolours which demonstrate his consummate skill.

Si Sapsford: Rupert you were saying earlier that the few notes that exist from Sargent are reports of how he taught. Sargent encouraged his students to use plenty of paint, because he said “*The more paint you use the more the colours will flow into each other and you will get much looser modelling*”. But in these earlier paintings the paint is actually quite thin.

Rupert Alexander: Yes, it's more like how it was taught at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Not quite to the degree of Bouguereau who used a very thin paint layer, but much less than he was doing later on. Early Sargents are still quite bold, but they don't have the body that is so indicative of his work later on.

SS: So the impasto surface is missing in the earlier work?

RA: Yes, and because of this, the paintings don't have the reflection off their surfaces, and this essentially lowers their tonal value. The point of impasto is

that the light bounces off the ridges of the paint and raises the tonal value of that particular area; that's why it always catches the light. Because he doesn't have this early on, the tonal range is somewhat compressed. Later, the lightest light becomes extended because of the impasto that he uses – the kind of impasto Rembrandt and Titian pioneered.

Richard Ormond: Yes. Like the painting of Dr. Pozzi – this passage here is straight out of Van Dyke and Titian – he's even got the gesture and, also, the way that he has painted the white is very Velázquez; there's a looseness and abstraction coming through.

RA: Well, as Carolus-Duran taught him, painting was all about abstract shapes; not thinking too much about what you are painting but more about tonal shapes and how they relate to each other.

RO: Even the shadows.

SS: The two portraits of Charles Stuart Forbes, from 1882 or 1889, and the one of Albert Belleroche which is from 1883, seem quite different but they are painted at a similar time, are they good example of the two approaches?

RA: The *Forbes* portraits show *alla prima* at its best, so everything is done in one shot; maybe two sittings. There is evidence within the impasto under the forehead that there might be a second layer under there and he's just responding to an inflection of light – putting it down, mixing up, putting it down; *alla prima* painting – adding the highlights, working it out, constantly moving around the head wet on wet, coming up with a finished wet on wet painting; much more impressionistic. Whereas the Belleroche shows a very different approach: it's much more about looking back to the seventeenth century – how *Old Masters* built up layers – although it is still done with a certain flare, he spent twenty sittings on it.

RO: It's very sculptural, very carefully done – a studio piece.

RA: Yes, and much more academic in



The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy
1907
Oil On Canvas
71.4 x 56.5 cm

The Art Institute of Chicago



its simplification of form. Whereas in this *Forbes* painting, he is going for every nuance of a scattering light effect, but in a much more impressionistic way. The later painting is much more simplified and academic, almost like a cast painting.

RO: The shadow of the eye is so strong that the furthest eye barely seems to exist.

RA: It also has much more of the tonality of the *Old Masters*, so everything is at the lower dark red end of the range. This *Forbes* portrait is keyed much higher, not just in the shadows of the eye, there is a general depth of tone and richness of colour. I think, in a sense, the two techniques were combined later on. I keep going back to the *Henry James* portrait, it has great *alla prima* technique, but it is also done in the layered manner; having the depth of tone that you find with layers combined with a *bravura* manner of painting.

RO: You get the feeling that Sargent works on the whole picture; it's the overall impression that he is after and he skips the detail – abbreviates the work. He would never work in piecemeal fashion – one in which you work on one part one day and then another part on another day – he's always working over the whole painting; the background at the same time as the head.

SS: Looking at the 1893 painting of the actress Eleonora Duse, you can tell it's very quick. You told us "*He only had one hour to do this*".

RA: He wasn't expecting her to leave after an hour, so it leaves future generations of artists with an insight into how he painted. There's just one layer, and so to see the first hour of a Sargent is incredibly instructive. He's just working on the big shapes. If we were to look at it in the dark, there is absolutely no variation; we don't even see where the edges of the shoulders are. We can barely see where the edge of the hair is. He simply keeps thinking about the abstract idea of light into dark; the light shapes are cut out from dark.



Opposite: **Dr. Pozzi at Home**
1881
Oil on canvas
201.6 x 102.2 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Clockwise::

Group with Parasols (Siesta)
Around 1904–5
Oil on canvas
56.8 x 72.5 cm

Private Collection

Carolus-Duran
1879
Oil on canvas
116.8 x 95.8 cm

*Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute,
Williamstown, Massachusetts*

Robert Louis Stevenson
1887
Oil on canvas
51 x 61.8 cm

Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio



Yoho Falls
1916
Oil on canvas
37 x 113 cm

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum,
Boston, Massachusetts

RO: It's the total impression. Unlike Van Dyke, Sargent is a supremely visual artist and he would always say "*I just paint what I see*". It's the quality of observation that matters and you feel that the means were kind of secondary.

RA: And that's why his studio practice translated so well out of doors in terms of landscape painting – something which was not often the case. For example, if you were to take an academic painter

outside they would be floundering, whereas Sargent had such a keen understanding of simply translating visual impressions onto canvas, whether just a head in his studio or a landscape outside. To my mind, as soon as he went outdoors he was painting landscapes at the level of any landscape painter who has ever lived. But I can't think of another portrait painter who was able to paint landscapes. **SS:** Why did Sargent stop painting the

portraits?

RA: He wrote to someone, didn't he, saying portraiture was "*a young man's sport and I'm tired of it*"? I understand that I'm personally only forty, and I sometimes tire of the commissions because they're creatively restrictive and because, to a certain degree, you have to paint what the client wants. It's a kind of battle between what you want to paint and what the client wants. But sometimes you do get an enlightened patron who lets you paint the portrait how you want and that's kind of an ideal.

SS: The early paintings that he did of Robert Louis Stevenson are so interesting compositionally, and we also seem to get a return to an *avant-garde* compositional style with the landscapes. I am thinking particularly of the *Group with Parasols* from 1905 which seems almost abstract, and also *The Fountain* (1907), in the way that he paints the white fabrics. Is this true?

RO: Yes. The landscape is given equal value to the figures and so there is no cessation whatsoever, and it's all about surface texture and about the play of paint, and you don't know where you are in space or how the bank on which they are resting works, and you don't get more liberating than that.

RA: I find the fact that he chose to paint this absolutely extraordinary. About half the painting is just a pile of rocks. He would often see the subject and say "*Only a madman would paint this*", and then promptly set up his easel and start painting it. It is wonderful essentially. It's a painting of an artist surrounded by a group of figures, but they are just one tiny portion of a canvas that is otherwise a still life with rocks.

RO: It's really an abstract painting, flattened out.

RA: And this is why Sargent is so misunderstood; he is thought of by many contemporary mid-century critics as being a society portrait painter and his landscapes are overlooked, but I think that he was actually a revolutionary

landscape painter. Obviously Monet was painting these abstract ideas of light and shade, but we find that Sargent was right in there – of that ilk – and painting, as Richard says, these completely flat compositions which are just abstract designs. I mean, where is there to be found a Sargent painting with a classical composition – one with foreground, middle ground, and distance – with a sunset or clouds?

I love the synthesis of these very modern sensibilities but with his academic training still coming into it. The beautiful drawing of the wrist and hand, the articulation of the wrist, and the sense of the thighs and knees under the trousers is so well-drawn. And it's the coming together of these two worlds – of academic precision, with raw abstract modernism – that I think really sets Sargent apart. Because, yes, Monet was doing very clever revolutionary things in painting but he didn't have Sargent's ability in terms of drawing or strength in terms of the characterization of form and shape.



Cathode – Si Sapsford
2012
Acrylic paint on board
41 x 51 cm

Courtesy of the artist