1999

A history of criticism pertaining to John Singer Sargent

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A HISTORY OF CRITICISM PERTAINING TO JOHN SINGER SARGENT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jennifer Lynn Friedman

May 1999

UMI Number: 1394524

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ABSTRACT

A HISTORY OF CRITICISM PERTAINING TO JOHN SINGER SARGENT

by Jennifer Lynn Friedman

This paper examines approximately one hundred twenty years of criticism pertaining to the life and work of nineteenth century international artist John Singer Sargent in an effort to understand how he was perceived at various points during his career and throughout history. There are often identifiable stylistic trends in scholarship on Sargent, although some critics and scholars do not employ current methodologies, making it difficult to classify their writing. It is also clear that there is a sixty year period during which Sargent's popularity waned.

Combined with a discussion of the history of criticism pertaining to the artist, Sargent's 1884 painting *A Dinner Table at Night*, is analyzed from four distinct methodological perspectives. This series of analyses illustrates the point that a single work of art may convey multiple meanings over time, depending upon viewers and historical contexts. What is ultimately gleaned is that art history and criticism are, like art itself, products of the historical, cultural, and ideological environments from which they derive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A completed master's thesis is ultimately the accomplishment of an individual, yet cannot be achieved in a vacuum. I could not have finished this project without the invaluable guidance of my thesis committee. Therefore, I extend my gratitude to Marilyn Wyman, Anne Simonson, and Billie Jensen for their time, patience, and constructive commentary. Thank you to Steven Nash, Lee Hunt Miller and Suzy Peterson at the Legion of Honor for their intellectual stimulus and flexibility over deadlines. To Jane Glover at the American Art Studies Center in the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, thank you for allowing me the use of your library, and for giving me access to your files on Sargent. To Martha Asher at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Julie Zeffel at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mary Haas at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Mary Sluskonis at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Elizabeth Gombosi at the Harvard University Art Museums, many thanks for your prompt assistance with reproduction rights. And of course to my loving family, and my remarkable friends who are my chosen family, your support and belief in my abilities was a bastion of strength during uncertain times. And finally, to John Singer Sargent for your courage and talent, even in death you continue to inspire the living.

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INTRODUCTION

Rereading the history of art history is, in particular, not an easy task. Its development is not simple, unilinear, progressive, or cumulative. The ramifications of its practices are often startlingly contradictory. Despite the accumulation of confident manifestos, pronouncements, methodological protocols, and intricate supportive technologies, art history seems to go off in different directions at the same time or tends to dissolve and to blur as one tries to fix it in clear and steady focus. The reader often longs for a magic solvent that will disclose on the pages of art history some more coherent subtext, some clear and rational agenda that must surely be written somewhere, perhaps in invisible ink.¹

Donald Preziosi's introduction to a 1989 survey of the "history of art history" expresses the difficulties and frustrations involved in studying the origins of an academic discipline.² Particularly prescient are his statements about its complete lack of a coherent structure, despite what an undergraduate course surveying art historical methodologies might otherwise suggest. A young student has the distinct impression that the ideas conveyed by each theorist, critic, art historian, and curator fit neatly into organized categories that one might picture as a set of gears

¹ Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), xi.

² Preziosi, xi.

working in relation to one another, creating a perfectly operating machine called "the history of art."

When one delves more deeply into the history of art history, however, it becomes quite clear that there is not really an overarching structure, but rather, a series of distinct ideas in which the preceding concept doesn't necessarily give way to the one following. Historical context is the framework which helps to provide a basis for understanding art historical methodologies or critical perspectives.

Within the history of art history there are times when interrelationships between methodologies occur,³ but as Preziosi suggests, they are not necessarily linear nor simple to diagram. Even if the scope is narrowed to an examination of the history of criticism, scholarship, reviews, exhibitions, essays, and articles pertaining to one specific artist, the task is hardly simplified. Examining the history of criticism as it pertains to the life and career of internationally renowned artist John Singer Sargent (b.1856 - d.1925) is one such challenge.

Sargent was in the public eye very early in his long and prodigious career.⁴ At the salon of 1879, he won an honorable mention for his portrait of Carolus-Duran, (fig. 1) at the young age of twenty-three. His rise to success in Paris was interrupted in 1884 with the negative reception of *Madame X*, (fig. 2) a painting

³ During the 1960s and 1970s, under the general term "Postmodernism," methodologies, concepts, and schools of thought such as Feminism, Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, and psychoanalysis, converge on a number of levels.

⁴ Although almost every monograph, exhibition catalogue, and biography mentions Sargent's critical acclaim as a young prodigy of Carolus-Duran in Paris, a particularly interesting account appears in a recent exhibition catalogue by Marc Simpson, with Richard Ormond and H. Barbara Weinberg, *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., 1997), 39-69. The first, very laudatory reviews referred, appropriately enough, to the portrait Sargent painted of Carolus-Duran which he submitted to the Salon of 1879, winning him an honorable mention.

perceived by the French critics as a visual affront.⁵ He then moved to England in 1884, and shortly thereafter set up his studio in Tite Street, Chelsea, the same address which James Abbot MacNeill Whistler had just vacated. The Tite Street studio remained home base for the duration of Sargent's life.⁶ Naturally, from that point on, criticism of his work was concentrated in England and America because he was exhibiting in those countries.⁷

After Sargent's death in 1925 both Europe and America metamorphosed into modernity with the spread of industrialism, and the horrors of WWI. Both affected by, and separate from the arenas of economics and politics, the art world changed significantly. The word "modernism," although an insufficient term to describe a series of complex ideas about art, applies in one of its permutations to what was happening in the art world during the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁸ Participating artists were supposed to make work that continually eschewed the old and reflected the new. The Armory Show changed the way both the American

⁵ Like the discussion of Sargent's early success, the scandal surrounding the reception of *Madame X* is a detail from Sargent's career that has received ample attention. However, I refer to it as a "visual affront" in direct reference to Albert Boime's essay in the Whitney Exhibition catalogue where, on page 91 he states: "The painting is a testament to a compact between two cocky Americans to thumb their noses at envious foreign hosts." Albert Boime "Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray," in *John Singer Sargent* edited by Patricia Hills (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), 75-109.

⁶ Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, Eds., *John Singer Sargent*, exh. cat. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 129.

⁷ French critics did not completely lose interest in Sargent after the *Madame X* conundrum, but since he was exhibiting mostly in the U.S. and England, American and English critics were writing the bulk of the reviews of his work.

⁸ Modernism is extremely difficult to define. This sentiment is aptly captured in a quote on page 142 of an essay by Charles Harrison, entitled "Modernism," in *Critical Terms for Art History* edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 142-55. "It is a problem for any broadly conceived inquiry into the meaning of modernism that the term acquires a different scope and penetration in each academic discipline . . . in the history of art [for example] the student of modernism can expect to run a gamut from the French painting of the 1860s to the American art of a century later and may even be directed as far back as the later eighteenth century."

public and the intelligentsia perceived art.⁹ This environment proved unfriendly to Sargent's work, reflective as it was of aristocratic and nouveau riche tastes, thereby causing his paintings to fall out of favor with critics of the avant garde.¹⁰ As such, there is a subsequent lull in criticism pertaining to Sargent for a period of approximately sixty years.¹¹

By 1986, Sargent was fully reinstated as a viable topic for discussion in the art world as well as in popular magazines.¹² The Whitney Museum of American Art

⁹ The spirit of the Armory Show, held in New York at the Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory in 1913 is captured in an essay by "modernist" critic Meyer Schapiro where he states: "In this continuous process, the Armory Show marks a point of acceleration, and it is instructive for the student of social life as well as of art to observe how a single event in a long series may acquire a crucial importance because it dramatizes or brings into the open before a greater public what is ordinarily the affair of a small group. The very scope and suddenness of this manifestation of the *new art* were a shock that stirred the sensitive more effectively than a dozen small exhibitions could have done." (emphasis mine). Meyer Schapiro, "The Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show," In *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries* (selected papers) (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 135-177.

¹⁰ There are many reasons that Sargent's work was not popular during this period. His portraits of wealthy people in full regalia were seen as gauche or vapid when held up against the serious social and political issues of the early part of the twentieth century, as suggested by Richard Ormond in an introduction to a 1979 exhibition catalogue. James Lomax and Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent and the Edwardian Age*, exh. cat. (London: Leeds Art Galleries and National Portrait Gallery, 1979), 8.

¹¹ During the period between 1925 (Sargent's death) and 1986 (the year that most vividly marks the resurgence of interest in Sargent as a viable subject), there were three one-man retrospective exhibitions with accompanying catalogues, and three group or survey exhibitions in which Sargent's work was included. Also, in 1955, one of four Sargent biographies was published and in 1970, a monograph. The existence of these books speaks to the fact that although the avant garde emerges in survey courses or texts as the only voice, there is always another series of voices in the art world speaking simultaneously. The tension between avant garde and traditional has been encapsulated during many different periods in the history of art. For example, during the late 18th - early 19th centuries in Paris, Ingres and David are situated on the academic end of the continuum with Neo-Classicism, and Delacroix and Gericault on the "avant-garde" end of the spectrum with Romanticism; in mid-nineteenth century Paris, Courbet, and later, Manet stand out as "heroes" in the history of art because they were challenging tradition, but at the same time, Academic artists like Bouguereau and Gérôme were enjoying great success and contributed significantly to the history of art although staunchly "traditional." This is not to suggest that the history of art need necessarily be viewed in terms of polarities, but these examples at least illustrate the point that during any given period throughout the history of art, there are many examples of simultaneously coexisting schools of thought.

¹² The year 1986 is significant in terms of Sargent criticism because there is a veritable explosion of interest and press coverage on the artist's work because of the major retrospective mounted by the Whitney. In a recent conversation with Steven Nash, Chief Curator at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, we agreed that the exhibitions staged during the sixty year "lull" in critical interest in Sargent's work weren't poorly conceived or executed compared to the Whitney show in 1986, they merely appear that way now in terms of the lack of critical responses they engendered at the time.

in New York mounted an ambitious retrospective of Sargent's work which provoked a flurry of press reviews.¹³ Since the Whitney show, much has been written about him in popular, as well as scholarly, publications.

Although Sargent is currently receiving more attention overall, one painting from his oeuvre that deserves closer inspection is *A Dinner Table at Night*, (fig. 3) finished in 1884, and first exhibited at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris the following year.¹⁴ Although it is a small canvas, *A Dinner Table at Night* is compelling for its lush color, scintillating brushwork, and compositional tension. Not exactly a genre picture, double portrait, nor completely Impressionistic in spite of its photographic cropping and gestural brushstroke, it is a painting that is not easily classified. Almost all reviews, articles, or exhibition catalogues referring to it - most of which are notable for their brevity - have been positive. But in an oeuvre that is vast and varied, most of the critical attention focuses either upon Sargent's society portraits or upon the works that received the most accolades during his lifetime.

The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit (fig. 4) is one of Sargent's works often singled out for its excellence, or included in surveys of "western" art.¹⁵ Although formally comparable, *The Daughter's of Edward Darley Boit*, 1882, stands out as one of his seminal works, while *A Dinner Table at Night* has typically escaped critical notice. Similarly, paintings like *The Breakfast Table*, 1883, (fig. 5) and *Robert Louis*

¹³ Not all of the reviews of the show were entirely positive, but the fact that it caused a din at all where the earlier shows did not points to a successful marketing campaign by the Whitney, its clout as a cultural institution, its location (New York - the art capital of the world during the 1980s), the willingness of the press to receive Sargent again, or perhaps it is reflective of some combination of these factors.

¹⁴ Also called *Glass of Claret* or, as in an article from the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* reviewing the show, *Verre de Porto* (Glass of Port).

¹⁵ I am loathe to use the term "western" because of its loaded implications, and Euro-American is not much better.

Stevenson and His Wife, 1885, tend to be relegated to the margins in virtually every discussion of Sargent's work, even those revolving around an exhibition in which they have been included.¹⁶ This fact is consistent throughout the history of criticism on Sargent, and curious because *A Dinner Table at Night* has never been overtly criticized. In an effort to determine how critics might have dealt with the image more fully at various points in history, *A Dinner Table at Night* will be "reviewed" in the prevailing style of each period of criticism pertaining to John Singer Sargent.¹⁷

¹⁶ *The Breakfast Table*, 1883, and *Robert Louis Stevenson and His Wife*, 1885, are pictures which are often mentioned in conjunction with *A Dinner Table at Night* for their compositional similarities. Like *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, they are all interiors, and are all somewhat Impressionistic in terms of brushstroke and photographic cropping. But unlike *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, the other three paintings are, to varying degrees, relegated to the margins of Sargent's oeuvre in most discussions of his work.

¹⁷ In the history of Sargent criticism, there are periods when scholars or critics writing about him do not use the prevailing methodology. In those cases, the painting will be reviewed as if it had been analyzed from within the *dominant* methodological perspective.

SARGENT'S CONTEMPORARIES

The exhibition catalogue as we have come to understand it had a very different format in the late nineteenth century from its current manifestation. It commonly served the purpose of providing a guide for exhibition visitors, stating the names, dates, and titles of works, donors and lenders, place, date, and time held, sponsoring institution, and so on. Occasionally, a short essay of introduction to the artist or his work would appear as a preface to accompany what was, in actuality, a glorified list. These early catalogues were pamphlet-sized and mostly devoid of critical essays or biographical information on the artist.¹⁸

The earliest catalogues accompanying exhibitions of Sargent's paintings are no exception, and ultimately most of the initial responses to his work came in the form of critical reviews of shows at the salons and galleries in Paris, and the Royal Academy, the Tate Gallery, and the Grosvenor Gallery in London. Since Sargent

¹⁸ Four exhibitions were organized, with accompanying catalogues just before, and immediately following Sargent's death, for example: *Retrospective Exhibition of the Work of the Late John Singer Sargent* exh. cat. (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1924), *Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition of the Works by the Late John Singer Sargent* exh. cat., with a foreword by J. Templeman Coolidge (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1925), *Exhibition of Works by the Late John S. Sargent, R.A.*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1926), *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of the Late John Singer Sargent* exh. cat., with an introduction by Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1926), and a lengthy article by J.B. Manson entitled, "Notes on the Works of J.S. Sargent," *The Studio* 90 (August 1925): 79-87.

did enjoy great success during his lifetime, he received a lot of critical attention from the art world. But the buzz wasn't always positive. Articles, reviews, and exhibition catalogues written by Sargent's contemporaries were published between the years 1879-1926,¹⁹ and while varied stylistically and focally, there are some common elements.

The first and perhaps most immediately recognizable quality is the formality of the language.²⁰ Whether a short text from an exhibition catalogue, a critical review, or an article by Sargent's friend Henry James,²¹ the style is consistently "literary," and the articles read more like romantic epics than theory-laden criticism. There is a recurring focus, first and foremost, upon the subject of the picture. Combined with the initial discussion of subject is a tendency to present biographical details about the artist, and in fact, some of the early essays do little else.²² Technique is often a consideration, usually discussed within the context of a school, atelier tradition, or movement. Valuation of the work is primarily based upon prevailing aesthetic standards, which may vary depending upon when the article or review was published. Focusing briefly upon the well-known scandal surrounding the reception of Sargent's portrait of Virginie Gautreau in 1884,²³ a pattern begins to take shape.

¹⁹ Although Sargent received some critical attention in reference to his portrait of Carolus-Duran exhibited in 1879, the year 1884 marks an explosion of material written about the artist, both negative and positive. Likewise, although Sargent died in 1925, there were a series of retrospective exhibitions in 1926.

²⁰ Criticism by Sargent's contemporaries tends to have literary overtones.

²¹ Henry James, "John S. Sargent," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 74 (October 1887): 683-91.

²² James, 683-91. Although Henry James does discuss Sargent's works and his style, the overall emphasis is on John Singer Sargent, *the man*.

²³ Sargent's 1884 portrait of Virginie Gautreau is more commonly referred to as *Madame X*.

Since the painting was first exhibited in Paris at the Salon of 1884, it was the Parisian press that naturally responded to it. Characteristic of Sargent's contemporaries' interest in subject, the French critics lambasted *Madame X* because they thought it conveyed the excessive narcissism of the sitter. Combined with Sargent's bravura brushstroke and mannerist rendering of the figure, the overall statement was perceived by the Parisian art community as a flagrant offense. Albert Boime aptly attributes the failure to bad-timing and a strained political climate between France and America.²⁴

As Richard Ormond points out in *Uncanny Spectacle*, to be fair, "reviews of the picture were, in fact, mixed, but the verdict of the Establishment was against him."²⁵ Regardless of the tone of the reviews, critics consistently attacked the subject (Virginie Gautreau) first. Remarks about the sitter were often extended to include criticism of Sargent on a personal level, then his style, and finally a judgment of the aesthetic success of the painting. Unfortunately the negative response was more powerful, and those who considered *Madame X* a disrespectful display staged by two haughty ex-patriot Americans symbolically thumbing their

²⁴ Albert Boime, "Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray," in *John Singer Sargent*, exh. cat., (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), 92.

²⁵ Marc Simpson with Richard Ormond and H. Barbara Weinberg, *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* exh. cat., (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., 1997), 2. In his biography on the artist, Stanley Olson contends that "... only the *Gazette des beaux-arts* (sic!) printed a few balancing words of unenthusiastic praise." Stanley Olson, *John Singer Sargent, His Portrait* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 104.

noses at Parisian sensibilities, verily ended Sargent's career as an avant garde painter in Paris.²⁶

Shortly thereafter, another French review including a discussion of Sargent's work appeared in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* pertaining to an exhibition at the Galerie Georges Petit to which Sargent submitted *A Dinner Table at Night*.²⁷ Like most reviews of the painting, it is brief but full of praise.

... *The Glass of Port!* A red dining room illuminated by lamps with shades of the same color; a finished meal with two guests. It is the last word in lively painting . . . when one accounts for one's own point of view, the illusion becomes complete.²⁸

Like the *Madame X* reviews, de Lostalot focuses first on the subject; "... a red

²⁶ The details of "the Madame X scandal" have been addressed often. A particularly astute reading of the event was documented by Albert Boime in his contribution to the 1986 Whitney exhibition catalogue. He also points to the exhaustive documentation that exists on the subject. Albert Boime, "Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray," in *John Singer Sargent* exh. cat. Patricia Hills, ed. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1986), 86-95. Also, Marc Simpson refers to a universally held truth among Parisian art critics that foreigners came to their city to become great artists. John Singer Sargent, at least in their eyes, forgot himself, and the offense was exacerbated by the fact that his subject was also a foreigner, and notorious for her vanity and extra-marital affairs. Marc Simpson with Richard Ormond and H. Barbara Weinberg, *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* exh. cat., (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., 1997), 41. Also, Stanley Olson refers to the event within the context of a personality and career that had received only praise until that point. He writes: "Now John had no other option but to overreact, distort the gravity of the whole unpleasant episode. A slow-acting poison began to work. Paris turned from 'the only place' to an unwelcoming, uncomfortable one. His security was endangered. His attraction to Virginie Gautreau's 'most beautiful lines' had proven to be a most destructive seduction." Olson, 105. This biographical account helps to provide a context for perceiving Sargent's move to London as a retreat both from Paris, and from avant garde painting itself.

²⁷ This exhibition marked the picture's debut. It was shown under the title: *Verre de Porto*, or *Glass of Port (Claret)*, a (sub)title which is still attached to the painting.

²⁸ Alfred de Lostalot "Exposition Internationale de Peinture: Galerie Georges Petit." *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 31, no. 16 (1 June 1885): 531, translation mine. The translation in the most recent exhibition catalogue edited by Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond is slightly different, instead using *bravura* where I used *lively*. Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, eds., *John Singer Sargent* exh. cat. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 106.

dining room illuminated by lamps with shades of the same color; a finished meal with two guests . . .” Then comments on specific qualities of the technique saying “skillful,” “marvelous sketch,” and “lively painting,” words and phrases that later become the backbone of formalist criticism of the early twentieth century.²⁹ Finally, de Lostalot delights in the tricky composition by referring to the participation of the viewer in its completion. This time the biographical details are omitted, but the linguistic exuberance is certainly present in de Lostalot’s response to the painting.

By the time the de Lostalot review appeared, Sargent had already retreated to England, narrowly averting the complete collapse of his career before it had barely begun.³⁰ After some time had passed, the critics in England became receptive to his ebullient canvases. One excerpt from a London *Times* review of an 1886 Royal Academy exhibition follows a formula similar to the earlier French reviews, but also reveals the critic’s conflict with the active brushwork. The unsigned article provides an overview of the exhibition highlighting its successes and pinpointing its weaknesses. A lengthy section is devoted to a discussion of Sargent and his work.

Here, for example, is the clever young Parisian-American Portrait painter, Mr. Sargent, who, when called upon to paint a group of young ladies, produces the strange performance which occupies a place of honor in the eighth room. Three young ladies, painted in a thin and almost ghostly fashion, gaze straight out of the picture at you. They seem as unsubstantial as beings of another world; these faces, indicated rather than painted, these cloudy dresses, these unsubstantial chairs and tables - are they portraits or are they mere suggestions for portraits!³¹

²⁹ De Lostalot, 531.

³⁰ Olson, 105. Again, the word “retreat” is used because Sargent appears to have felt himself under attack in a very real sense.

³¹ “The Royal Academy (Third Article),” *The Times* (May 22, 1886): p.8, column 2.

Similar to the *Madame X*, and the de Lostalot reviews, this critic opens with some brief biographical details about Sargent, although partially inaccurate,³² briefly describes the subject, and continues with a description of style, ultimately revealing a certain distaste for the expressive brushwork which foreshadows a trend that will become ubiquitous in later criticism of Sargent's style alluding to the perceived vapidness of his style.³³

Like other reviews of its time, a sense of poetic enthusiasm is present in the language. As the review unfolds, it becomes clear that the author, although put off by what is described as an "audacious experiment," actually commends Sargent for

³² The fact that this reviewer called Sargent "Parisian-American" is not entirely unfounded, for he was trained by Carolus-Duran in Paris, and did come to London from that city. The mistake further points to the oft-argued "question of Sargent's nationality." In his essay entitled: "On the Question of Sargent's Nationality," Stanley Olson provides an excellent analysis of this issue in the 1986 Whitney catalogue, pp., 13-25.

³³ The idea that Sargent's style lacked substance, and that he could only paint a visage, not a personality, is a recurring theme in criticism on the artist. It is vaguely referenced in the 1885 de Lostalot review. One year later, a London Times critic wrote "...are they portraits or are they mere suggestions for portraits!" "The Royal Academy (Third Article)," *The Times* (London) (May 22, 1886): p.8, column 2. The painting to which the reviewer refers is *The Misses Vickers*, 1884 (fig. 6). In mid-twentieth century America, when much of the focus in the art world was upon Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, and criticism had a dominantly formalist vocabulary, the exhibition catalogues accompanying Sargent, or group shows including the artist, make note of the fact that critics in the past thought his work vapid. For example, in the 1954 exhibition catalogue for *Sargent, Whistler and Mary Cassatt*, Frederick Sweet states: "Sargent was called a superficial flatterer." Sweet, 8. Richard Ormond argues against this sentiment stating: "The early portraits in Paris will surely give lie to the frequently expressed view that Sargent lacked psychological insight." Lomax and Ormond, 8. The same notion is repeatedly found in popular reviews of the 1986 Whitney exhibition. For instance, on page 123-4, Stretch refers to the fact that "...his portraits and even his plein air oils and watercolors were condemned as the decorative froth of an obsolete world." Bonnie Barrett Stretch, "Fragments of a Lost World," *Artnews* 8 (January 1987): 122-9. On page 682, Arthur Danto suggests Sargent became in England "...a rather superficial artist, the maker of dazzling portraits and dubious Impressionist studies." Arthur C. Danto, "John Singer Sargent," *The Nation* 243 (December 13, 1986): 679-83. In his review of the Whitney retrospective, John Updike states on page 34: "It was a frequent criticism of Sargent, even as his triumphs and fees mounted, that his portraits lacked psychological depth-not a quality, perhaps, that the sitters were paying for." John Updike, "Something Missing," *The New Republic* 195 (November 17, 1986): 33-7; Louis Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era: Profile of a Gilded Age* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 126.

the aesthetic beauty of the overall effect.³⁴ Indicating the reviewer's penchant for Sargent's talents, the bulk of the article is dedicated to a discussion of his work, even though the exhibition contained works by many other artists.

Nearly two decades passed before Sargent was given a one-man show in 1903 for which no exhibition catalogue was produced.³⁵ Next, there was a retrospective in 1924, and a proliferation of exhibitions and critical essays. In addition, two biographies were published, one in 1925 and the other in 1927.³⁶ Aside from the de Lostalot article, *A Dinner Table at Night* appears briefly in the press after its showing at The Marlborough Gallery, and critics responded to it variously as "Impressionist,"³⁷ "admirable," and as one states: "For qualities of brilliancy, verve of execution, subtlety of colour, and truth of aspect, we prefer others; as, for

³⁴ Downes, 23. Also, William Howe Downes mentions how "...Sargent, as we have seen, was regarded by English critics in the eighties as a young man of reprehensible audacity." In *John S. Sargent: His Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1925), 23.

³⁵ *A Loan Exhibition of Sketches and Studies by J.S. Sargent R.A.* [Royal Academy], London, Carfax & Co. This is documented in a chronology of Sargent's travels in: *Sargent Abroad: Figures and Landscapes*, 240.

³⁶ The four exhibition catalogues are: *Retrospective Exhibition of Important Works of John Singer Sargent* exh. cat., (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1924), *Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition of the Late John Singer Sargent* exh. cat., with a foreword by J. Templeman Coolidge (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1925), *Exhibition of Works by the Late John S. Sargent, R.A.* [Royal Academy] exh. cat., (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1926), *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of the Late John Singer Sargent* exh. cat., with an introduction by Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1926). The two biographies are: William Howe Downes, *John S. Sargent: His Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1925), and Evan Chateris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927). A monograph with a brief essay was also published in 1924: Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, *John Singer Sargent* from the Distinguished American Artists series, with an introduction by Lee Woodward Zeigler (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1924).

³⁷ During the 1880s in France, England, and America, critics used the term Impressionism to describe any style that did not fit easily into a specific category. Marc Simpson, with Richard Ormond and H. Barbara Weinberg, *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent*, exh. cat., (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., 1997), 50.

instance, Mr. Sargent's lamplight "Study."³⁸

Although the criticism of Sargent's contemporaries is varied in terms of where and when it was written, there are common characteristics. Like the French salon/academy system and its academic counterpart in London, The Royal Academy, institutions which dictated the success or demise of artists for at least three quarters of the nineteenth century, these characteristics can be arranged hierarchically. The subject of the picture and biographical details about the artist were focal to most critiques, then technique, and finally, aesthetic value. This formula can easily be applied to a discussion of *A Dinner Table at Night*, a painting rarely afforded more than a sentence or two in the reviews and exhibition catalogues written by Sargent's contemporaries.

³⁸ From a reprint of various reviews appearing in: Marc Simpson, with Richard Ormond and H. Barbara Weinberg, *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent*, exh. cat., (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., 1997), 146. "The Marlborough Gallery," *Times* (London), 12 April 1886, 4, "Minor Exhibitions," *Saturday Review* 61, no. 1590 (17 April 1886): 541, "The Chronicle of Art: Art in May," *Magazine of Art* (London) 9 (May 1886): xxx.

LE VERRE
DE PORTO!

The painting depicts Albert and Mrs. Vickers relaxing after their dinner with a glass of port in a fashionable dining room glowing intimately with rose-shaded candlelight. Central to the composition is a proper lady clad in a “simple dinner dress,” an appropriate fashion for an informal evening.³⁹ An image of elegance with one delicate hand grasping her glass, she gazes pleasantly out at the viewer. But although direct, her glance is not the defiant challenge of Manet’s *Olympia*, but rather a subdued invitation to join in polite after-dinner conversation accompanied by some moderate libations. Mrs. Vickers is the embodiment of understated femininity. Mr. Vickers, although barely visible at the picture’s edge, is everything one might expect in an English society gentleman.

Sargent painted a series of portraits and genre scenes like this one while visiting the Vickers family in Sussex in 1884, just shortly following the ill-reception of his scandalous portrait of Madame Gautreau at the Paris salon of the same year. The Vickers provided the artist’s first major commissions in England and helped

³⁹ Edith Wharton *The Age of Innocence* 1920, reprint with an introduction by R.W.B. Lewis (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968) On page 105 of the story, Wharton writes: “It was usual for ladies who received in the evening to wear what were called “simple dinner dresses”: a close-fitting armor of whale-boned silk, slightly open in the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band.” While this doesn’t exactly describe the manner in which Mrs. Vickers is dressed, there is indeed a close similarity.

him to obtain more, initially within another branch of their own tribe.⁴⁰ That such a prominent family would place their immortality in the hands of an artist who employs such unconventional devices may be attributed to some of his early successes at the Paris salons, such as the honorable mention awarded the portrait of his master Carolus-Duran in 1879.⁴¹

The stylistic elements in that painting are not unlike some of the innovative flourishes Sargent employs in *A Dinner Table at Night*. Although closer to traditional portraiture, Sargent portrays the figure of Carolus-Duran in a strangely contrived manner, simultaneously at ease and tense. Mrs. Vickers is painted in rather a similar fashion, her pose at once relaxed and strained. It is a sketchy production, with bits of primed canvas revealed where the already thinly painted surface is left entirely bare. One would like to see Mr. Sargent finish his pictures before submitting them to public scrutiny, but even incomplete, his strange genius is glimpsed in this charming sketch.⁴²

This is precisely the sort of review that accompanied much of Sargent's work during his long and successful career, although the painting did not attract as much attention as some of his other works. When *A Dinner Table at Night* was first exhibited, Sargent was still establishing himself as a professional artist, and because

⁴⁰ Most accounts of Sargent's move to England point to the Vickers family as his first major patrons in that country. One of the earliest references to the Vickers' as "transitional" patrons exists in: Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 68-9.

⁴¹ *Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition of the Works of the Late John Singer Sargent* with a foreword by J. Templeman Coolidge (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1925), viii. Coolidge, having been present at the Salon of 1877, describes Carolus-Duran's bittersweet reaction to Sargent's success.

⁴² As illustrated in chapter one, some nineteenth century critics saw *A Dinner Table at Night* as a study rather than as a finished painting. "The Royal Academy (Third Article)," *The Times* (May 22, 1886): p.8, column 2.

of the reception of *Madame X* in Paris, he changed his course to pursue portrait commissions in England. Society portraits provided most of his income throughout his career, but represent only one aspect, albeit a significant one, of his entire oeuvre. Toward the end of his life, it is clear that he was fully instated as a success judging from exhibitions, accompanying catalogues, reviews, and articles written between the years 1923-1927. Although none of the exhibition catalogues written during the 1920s contain much text, their existence proves that Sargent eventually won respect and adulation from art communities in London, New York, and Boston. The words of John Van Dyke perhaps best capture this idea: "Genius alone can account for the remarkable content of his work."⁴³ But the idea of genius as applied to artists has carried a variety of meanings throughout the history of art.

The stage was set for a new brand of genius - a cowboy flinging paint rather than wrangling cattle; Jackson Pollock embodied the image modernist/formalist critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried were selling during the 1940s and 50s in America. With his society portraits, John Singer Sargent was the antithesis of what Greenberg, Abstract Expressionism, and 1940s America were focused upon, and therefore his art went out of vogue for a period of approximately sixty years.

⁴³ John Van Dyke, "American Painting and its Traditions," 1919, reprint in *Retrospective Exhibition of Important Works of John Singer Sargent* exh. cat. (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1924), 12.

SARGENT IN A MODERNIST CLIMATE

That [Sargent's reputation] should have taken a nosedive right after his death in 1925 is surely attributable, at least in part, to the distastefulness of his subject matter to liberal minds. What could have seemed more trivial, more archaic, more socially irresponsible, even more vicious, in the grim years of depression and world war, than those strutting peers and peeresses, those lavishly dressed Yankee millionairesses, those belaced and beribboned children, those yapping lap dogs, those gleaming parlors and stately parks? Roger Fry summed up the attitude of the opposition: "That Sargent was taken for an artist will perhaps seem shocking to the rising generation."⁴⁴

As many have already noted, John Singer Sargent was all but forgotten for about sixty years following his death in 1925.⁴⁵ A number of reasons have been cited, but one catalogue accompanying a 1954 exhibition featuring Sargent, James

⁴⁴ Louis Auchincloss *The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 123.

⁴⁵ In the introduction of an exhibition catalogue from a show featuring Sargent and Boldini, Thomas Carr Howe says that "both men, who enjoyed extravagant popularity in their own lifetimes, to some extent, suffered partial eclipse immediately after their deaths." *Sargent and Boldini*, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1959). Also, many other articles, books and exhibition catalogues make references to the same event such as: Robert Rosenblum, "Sargent Major," *Artforum* 37 (September 1998): 52-3, Bonnie Barrett Stretch, "Fragments of a Lost World," *Artnews* 86 (January 1987): 122, Trevor Fairbrother, *John Singer Sargent*, The Library of American Art, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 7, and James Lomax and Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent and the Edwardian Age*, exh. cat., (London: Leeds Art Galleries, National Portrait Gallery and Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1979), 8. They are too numerous to name them all here, indeed, it would perhaps be easier to list those sources that do not, at some point, address the issue of Sargent's disappearance as a result of the dominant force of modernism, and consequent resurgence.

Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Mary Cassatt, perhaps best encapsulates the event in the following passage.

With Sargent the situation is somewhat different. Up to now, the public has continued to be apathetic. As better than a quarter century has elapsed since Sargent's death and a whole generation has grown up it seems appropriate to examine his case once again. His early admirers are dead, his scoffers of the twenties are now middle-aged and perhaps a bit nostalgic, the younger generation simply never bothered to find out whether Sargent had any merit or not. They did not know the age of damask, pink shaded candlesticks and claret but they were sure it was an artificial period, therefore Sargent the portrayer par excellence of the late Victorians and the Edwardians must also be artificial.⁴⁶

Sweet's words speak directly to the issue of Sargent's lack of popularity without actually citing modernism as the culprit, although the formalist vocabulary was dominant in the art world when the exhibition was held, a fact which may help to explain the vehemence with which Sweet argues the necessity of revisiting Sargent's work. He also makes a reference to *A Dinner Table at Night* by describing "pink-shaded candlesticks and claret," ironic in that the work was not included in the show.

If the modernists paid no attention to Sargent, how can one examine what they said about him? Logically, we cannot. This calls for a qualification. Although modernism was the dominant methodological force in art historical writing for at least thirty-five years, it did not enjoy a complete monopoly. The existence of

⁴⁶ Frederick A. Sweet, *Sargent, Whistler and Mary Cassatt*, exh. cat., (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1954), 9.

Sweet's exhibition catalogue, as well as a selection of others, proves this point.⁴⁷

What we might do instead is look at what criticism does exist during this period, and how the artist and his work are handled within those contexts.

Although difficult to pinpoint the exact time frame for Sargent's lack of popularity as a subject for critical writing and museum exhibitions, one can approximate its occurrence between 1926 and 1986. Since Sargent did enjoy great success during his lifetime, and his death came in 1925, there were naturally a series of retrospectives held both just prior to, and shortly after, his life ended. The first Sargent biography by Evan Charteris was published in 1927, but little else was produced until the second account of the artist's life written by Charles Merrill Mount in 1955. With the publication of the second biography came a trickle of subsequent interest in the artist in the form of minor exhibitions and accompanying catalogues. There was also, of course, the 1954 exhibition organized through the Art Institute of Chicago for which Frederick Sweet produced a small but scholarly catalogue.⁴⁸

The next significant exhibition, focusing on Sargent's work in Boston, was in 1956 at that city's Museum of Fine Arts, which was mounted ostensibly because

⁴⁷ The exhibition catalogues published during this period which are not "modernist" in scope are: *Sargent and Boldini*, exh. cat. San Francisco: California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1959, David McKibbin, *Sargent's Boston*, exh. cat., Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1956, and *John S. Sargent*, with an introduction by Yvon Bizarde, Directeur Honoraire des Beaux-Arts de Paris, exh. cat. Paris: Centre Culturel Américain, 1963 (Français). The fact that the material focuses on Sargent at all is an indication that they do not follow the formalist/modernist model. There was also one monograph published sixteen years before the Whitney show written by Richard Ormond, entitled: *John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., and New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970).

⁴⁸ The underlying thread that binds the three artists together within the same exhibition is that they were all contemporaries, knew one another, and were all expatriates. Sweet, 7.

enough time had passed since the artist's death to warrant a re-visitation of his work with a fresh perspective.⁴⁹ The show yielded a small catalogue.⁵⁰ As a scholar of library science, the essay by McKibbin is mostly biographical, providing a context for Sargent's connection with the city of Boston, and featuring a comprehensive list of Sargent's portraits.⁵¹ But unlike the exhibition catalogues from the 1920s, McKibbin presents the information about the lives of Sargent and his sitters in an almost empirical fashion, more historical than critical in nature.

If formalist critics and art historians ignored Sargent due to a belief that his style lacked substance,⁵² those who wrote about him while he was considered an unpopular subject consistently refer to his fall from grace in the art world. In his introduction to a 1959 Sargent and Boldini exhibition catalogue, then director Thomas Carr Howe refers to a "partial eclipse" of Sargent's reputation occurring just after his death.⁵³ Similarly, in the introduction to *John Singer Sargent and the Edwardian Age*, a catalogue co-written by James Lomax and Richard Ormond, Ormond cites modernism as the cause of Sargent's reduced popularity.

⁴⁹ David McKibbin *Sargent's Boston* exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1956).

⁵⁰ In the foreword, Perry T. Rathbone, then Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston writes: "To Mr. David McKibbin, long a student of Sargent's career, we extend our gratitude for his invaluable help in selecting the paintings, for his engaging and authoritative essay and for the privilege of publishing his complete check list of Sargent's portraits." Apparently, McKibbin was allowed a sabbatical from the Boston Athenaeum to participate in preparations for the exhibition.

⁵¹ Rathbone, 14.

⁵² Roger Fry was a contemporary of Sargent's, and one of the pioneers of formalist criticism who had a well-documented disdain for Sargent's lack of support for his new crusade to promote the Post-Impressionists. Stanley Olson relays the tale in his 1986 biography on Sargent. Olson, 234-6.

⁵³ *Sargent and Boldini* exh. cat. (San Francisco: California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1959). The only text in this catalogue is in the introduction, and to identify the images.

Society portraiture as recent as that of the Edwardian age still arouses hostility. Sargent's portraits are too often seen in terms of aesthetics and social preconceptions. We are still dogged by the repercussions of the modernist debate with its labels and categories. A portraitist in the grand manner is *per se* suspect as an artist, whatever the quality of his work.⁵⁴

Even though formalists turned neither attention nor language to a discussion of Sargent's work, understanding the key points of formalist analysis, one can certainly re-evaluate *A Dinner Table at Night* based upon the criteria determined by that methodology. The next chapter re-creates what a formalist critic might have said about *A Dinner Table at Night*.

⁵⁴ Lomax and Ormond, 8.

A DINNER TABLE AT NIGHT . . .
. . . FORMALLY SPEAKING

In 1999, it is rare to find art criticism employing an approach that is strictly formal. Instead, scholars and critics are more apt to use a range of analytical tools, and to borrow concepts and methods from other academic disciplines in order to create more holistic perceptions of their subjects. But breaking a work of art down to its most fundamental formal components is an illuminating exercise precisely because of its limitations. With the current focus so closely trained upon content, “flexing one’s Greenbergian muscle,” is vital for maintaining the importance of images, since art history and criticism are, after all, primarily concerned with “visual” culture.

In keeping with a formalist approach, it is possible to read John Singer Sargent’s *A Dinner Table at Night* in terms of the visual information communicated through color, line, composition, shape, and brushstroke, intentionally avoiding the subject. Here, content is not important since the formalist’s aim is to understand the work on the basis of its primary *physical* characteristics. Greenberg contended that “. . . purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. . .” begging the question: what of the limitations of

the formalist vocabulary?⁵⁵ Ironically, even while focusing solely upon form, evidence pointing to the objectification of bourgeois women in late nineteenth century Euro-American culture emerges, another reason formal analysis helps to complete our understanding of visual images. A formalist critic would purposely downplay those elements, while a critic, scholar, or art historian today would be more likely to use a formal analysis to bolster a discussion of content.

Sargent's composition is fairly intricate through the use of photographic cropping, a device made famous by the Impressionists.⁵⁶ The table juts out of the bottom and side of the canvas, receding back into the somewhat atmospheric space of the room. Similarly, the figure occupying the right side of the canvas barely inhabits the space, but helps to balance the composition by the line of his gaze and the somber darks of his suit counteracting the dark void on the left side of the picture. But Mr. Vickers is not the focus. Instead, Sargent's use of shape, line, and color reinforce Mrs. Vickers' centrality in the picture plane.

Mr. Vickers' erect torso reinforces the sharp verticals of the picture frames behind him, the lamps on the table, and the edges of the wall. His knee creates an oblique angle that is copied again in a series of triangles beginning with the figure of Mrs. Vickers; in the triangle formed by the lampshade behind her, and by the light it

⁵⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in *Art in Theory, 1900 - 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* reprint, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1992; reprint, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1994, 1995, 1996), 558. (citation is to the reprint edition).

⁵⁶ Roger Fry, the critic most often associated with the beginnings of formalist criticism, was also one of the first critics to attempt to define Impressionism. Roger Eliot Fry, "The Philosophy of Impressionism," in *A Roger Fry Reader* edited and with an introductory essay by Christopher Reed (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 12-20. As Reed indicates on page 12, "[the] unpublished article was originally written for the *Fortnightly Review*, 1894 . . ."

casts; in the larger triangle that transfixes her, formed by the positioning of the three lamps; in the slightly more rounded edge of the table; in the shadow cast by the decanter to the left of the central figure. These triangular shapes occupy the canvas harmoniously, rather than haphazardly, to create both visual unity and a sense that the eye should rest, initially and finally, upon Mrs. Vickers. She forms a triangle, a shape that is repeated many times throughout the composition. The triangle she forms is also an origin for a series of lines both visible and implied, which radiate from her.

The line created by the outer edge of Mr. Vickers' knee leads the eye, via its connection with the lampshade, directly into the central figure. His gaze creates an implied line that hits the side of her face⁵⁷. Mrs. Vickers outward glance beyond the picture plane forms another implied line, inviting our own look back into the pictorial space. The mantle behind her creates a line whose destination, were it completed, would terminate at her mouth.

Color works with line and shape to make Mrs. Vickers the most prominent "object" in the composition. Her black dress against the pallor of her skin, and the shadows behind her encroaching on the light-colored table cloth provide sharp contrasts of dark and light, drawing the eye to the center of the canvas.

Surrounding Mrs. Vickers are myriad glimmering bits of light reflected in shiny surfaces such as the diamonds about her slender neck and in her hair, the cordial in

⁵⁷ This phrase is used in the image by feminist artist Barbara Kruger: *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)*, 1985-7.

her hand, and the many glass and silver objects on the table, rendered in short impasto brushstrokes, again making her the focus.

Although a strict application of a formalist vocabulary clarifies Edith Vickers' centrality in the painting, it does not allow a deeper analysis of how she functioned as an object for display. Looking back at the critical methodology Greenberg and many others espoused, it is with the clarity of vision that accompanies hindsight.⁵⁸ But however stultifying formalism appears today, there is no question that it is a valuable tool for understanding one aspect of an artist's language. If Sargent employed all of those formal elements to continually reinforce Mrs. Vickers' centrality, what might this have meant within the context of late nineteenth-century bourgeois culture? How do the gender and the class of the artist come into play? What about the genders and class of the sitters? What is communicated about the nature of the relationship between patrons and artist? What might this mean if a whole range of similarly contextual questions are asked in tandem? With both formal and contextual aspects critically applied in concert, much can be gleaned about the roles of bourgeois women in late nineteenth century English society.

⁵⁸ Greenberg was certainly not the only modernist formalist critic. Some others include Michael Fried, Harold Rosenberg in New York, and Herbert Read in London.

**NOT SIMPLY A WELL
DRESSED DINNER TABLE**

During the sixty year period when Sargent was “out of fashion,” the history of art criticism saw a major metamorphosis. During the 1960s in America with the increased focus on civil and women’s rights, the forum for art discourses eventually opened to include the opinions of those individuals who were previously unheard due to racism and sexism. Many scholars and critics with a feminist agenda set out to change the ways in which people had previously perceived art and art history. Women like Griselda Pollock, and Roszika Parker in Great Britain; Judy Chicago, Linda Nochlin, and Mary Kelly in America; or Julia Kristeva, in Paris, were challenging the misogyny that had previously been so pervasive in the art world. Although some critics and scholars from the aforementioned group wrote about the work of male artists from a feminist perspective, the subject of Sargent was avoided in this climate of foment. Even so, just as it was possible to apply formalist theory to a discussion of Sargent’s work, one can use structuralist theory with a feminist agenda to re-evaluate *A Dinner Table at Night*.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Most emerging feminist scholars in the 1960s used an amalgam of methodological approaches. Some of them were semiotics or structuralist theory, psychoanalysis, and Marxism.

Born of the study of linguistics and literary theory in France, at its inception in the 1950s, structuralism was primarily used to study written texts. But as structuralist theory became absorbed into other disciplines, art historians saw that the term *text* could apply to visual images as well.⁶⁰ To put it simply, structuralism is an approach that functions across disciplinary boundaries, and is mainly used to discern *how* texts operate within various settings. Through its many possible applications, scholars answer a set of questions about the production of meaning formed by the amalgamation of image, context, and viewer, while simultaneously downplaying the elements of form.

Two pioneering structuralist thinkers, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, suggested that after a text was exposed to an audience, the author of the text was no longer solely responsible for the production of meaning(s) surrounding the work.⁶¹ With this in mind, John Singer Sargent may or may not have known about a whole range of meanings conveyed by his painting, *A Dinner Table at Night*, but, according to semiotic analysis, they exist nonetheless. Part of what makes a painting unique lies in its intertextual⁶² nature; a work of art can exist across temporal boundaries, therefore making the establishment of context an essential component in

⁶⁰ Semiotics is not, by its very nature, discipline specific.

⁶¹ Both scholars' contributions to structuralist theory have been widely documented. For the texts pertaining to the role of the author, refer to Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* edited and with an introduction by Josue V. Harari, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141-60.

⁶² Structuralist (and feminist) thinker Julia Kristeva is credited for creating the term intertextuality as stated by Judith Still and Michael Worton in a book they co-edited entitled *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 1.

understanding how meaning is produced. *A Dinner Table at Night* has communicated a series of meanings over time, depending upon *when* it was seen, and exactly *who* was doing the looking. But since few reviews of the painting exist, a picture of possible viewers throughout its history must be reconstructed from what is known about where it was exhibited at various points in time.

Although finished in 1884, the painting was first exhibited in Paris in the 1885 *Exposition Internationale* at the Galerie Georges-Petit.⁶³ As such, one component of its matrix of meanings has to be situated within a late nineteenth-century European framework. We can reconstruct how the image functioned as a sign within late nineteenth-century French culture by piecing together various facts about the period relating to the painting or to the meanings it could have produced for different viewers in terms of who the viewing public would have been in 1885.

Paris was already Haussmannized by this time, and was a burgeoning urban and cultural epicenter.⁶⁴ Class lines demarcating proletariat from bourgeoisie from aristocracy had become somewhat blurred as a result of a growing middle class, mass-produced fashions, and wide-spread entrepreneurial successes. Numbers of museum patrons had increased significantly, and as a group they were more demographically diverse than ever before.⁶⁵

⁶³ "Exhibition History," The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco American Paintings Department Object Record, begun when the painting was acquired in 1959. Center for American Art Studies, San Francisco, California. Photocopy.

⁶⁴ Baron George Haussmann was responsible for major renovations in the urban plan of the city of Paris during the mid-nineteenth century.

⁶⁵ There is a wealth of scholarship available on changes in social and economic structure in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, but a particularly elucidating social history of art comes from T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, (New York: Knopf, 1985).

When perused by a woman of the grand bourgeoisie, the painting could be seen as a sign of familiarity, signifying a space with which she identified and felt comfortable. For the French woman doing the looking, the English Mrs. Vickers is a signifier for her own position in society reflected back to her, re-affirming her entitlement to occupy that same well-appointed space.

One might also imagine a different viewer, a woman of nouveau riche status, looking at the painting in this setting. She might, in contrast to the petite bourgeois lady, feel uncomfortable when faced with the image. For this viewer, the painting can be read as a sign for old money, status that cannot be purchased, and the tenuous nature of her position in that same society as one with money, but without the validation of a reputable family name.⁶⁶

Although both women are essentially “bourgeois,” the newness of wealth in the second example alters the context. Having grown up in a privileged environment with an honorable ancestry, the first woman feels at ease with the symbols of wealth conveyed by the image. New to money, the second woman would not have been inculcated from a young age to move comfortably through the space inhabited by Mrs. Vickers, therefore reading the image as a symbol for her own alienation from the clique of respectable society.

⁶⁶ Albert Boime points to “. . . the ‘rather fashionable’ tendency of English aristocrats to marry American heiresses.” This practice was common during the late nineteenth century, and was a symbiotic exchange because the English aristocrats were out of money and the American heiresses wanted the prestige of a title. Albert Boime, “Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray,” in Patricia Hills, *John Singer Sargent*, exh. cat., (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), 78. Henry James alludes to this fairly common late nineteenth century practice in *Portrait of A Lady*, where American ex-patriot Mr. Touchett remarks: “[Isabel] hasn’t come [to England] for a husband, I hope; so many young ladies are doing that, as if there were no good ones at home.” By “home” he means America.

Viewing the painting in 1998 in the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum equipped with the tools of feminist methodology, one detects meanings Sargent did not likely intend, and meanings neither nineteenth century female viewer would have gleaned. While Mrs. Vickers' pose has a casual aspect, it is simultaneously studied and contrived, suggesting a level of artifice one might associate with objects on display. She is prominently situated on the canvas among various symbols of wealth, and therefore becomes conflated with the various objects on the table as yet another material item. Teetering on the edge of the picture plane, Mr. Vickers looks at her proprietarily, while she gazes vacantly out at the viewer. She is a signifier for her husband's wealth, his accomplishments, his very masculinity. The refinement of her manner and veneer conveys to the world the level of her husband's success. Mr. Vickers' gaze is also a signifier for ownership, male dominance, and power, particularly because of its elevated position. Barely perceptible is the imaginary line leading from his eyes to where they alight on Mrs. Vickers' head, occupying a slightly higher spatial plane than her own, reinforcing the power differential between the couple. In terms of the sitters' respective positions within the picture plane, the idea of space itself becomes a springboard for an entirely new set of semiotic relationships.

As Griselda Pollock points out in "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," the public sphere was the domain of men, while the private, domestic space was

inhabited by women in late nineteenth century Parisian culture.⁶⁷ And although the Vickers were British, it is possible to interpret the painting as a representation of spatial divisions similar to those Pollock applies to late nineteenth century Impressionist works. Mrs. Vickers fully inhabits the private, interior space as its central feature within the composition, while Mr. Vickers teeters on the edge, signifying the fluidity of his movement through the spaces outside of the domestic realm, which are easily available to him. Therefore, the very placement of each figure, respectively, becomes a series of signifiers for the demarcation of spaces within nineteenth century bourgeois culture. Furthermore, Mrs. Vickers' elegantly relaxed pose signifies the ease with which she inhabits the domestic interior, her "proper" sphere. In contrast, Mr. Vickers' protruding knee is infused with potential energy, suggesting his ability to leap to a standing position and leave the room at any given moment, ostensibly to go out into the wider world.

The discussion of interstitial nuances in *A Dinner Table at Night* illustrates some of the structuralists ideas about authorship when compared to the range of meanings two nineteenth century female viewers of different social backgrounds might have brought to bear upon it. There exists today a network of meanings for the painting outside of those existing when it was produced in 1884 simply due to the passing of time, the unfolding of history, the changing of ideas. The painting

⁶⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art, (London: Routledge, 1988), 50-90. There is not adequate time nor space here to elaborate on Pollock's discussion of the division of spaces. But it should be noted that she divides spaces along gender and class lines, and defines space on a variety of levels and within a number of contexts in terms of Impressionist paintings. Furthermore, although Pollock's essay focuses on late 19th century Parisian bourgeois culture, its principles are just as easily applied to the same class and period in England.

functions as a polyvalent text which, because of time, and people and the continual flow of their ideas, will convey meanings well into the future that we cannot presently guess. Like possible readings of the image in 1998, and those in the past, future meanings will become inextricably intertwined with the life of the painting, and in a way, part of the work of art itself.⁶⁸

Since the painting is a fixed entity, it can “exist” in multiple temporal settings. Indeed, one of the functions of the art historian is to try to re-create these various moments in time so that we might read all of its meanings, adding to the life of the painting. But structural analysis is in danger of losing sight of the image and all of its formal qualities, as we can see from its application here, because of the strict focus upon content. Ideally, a whole range of methodologies should be combined to form a more holistic understanding of the painting, the artist, and the development of art history itself.

For example, a combined approach would go a step further. There is another aspect of the space worth mentioning. Mrs. Vickers’ pose, while somewhat contrived and mannerist, conveys a certain degree of ease. But there is also a claustrophobic quality to her placement in the room. She is pinned against the virtually flat background by three lamps, contained both by the room and the objects within it. Conversely, Mr. Vickers sits outside of the small triangle she

⁶⁸ This paper was begun in 1998 when *A Dinner Table at Night* had not yet left the de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco to travel to the Tate Gallery in London. It is currently on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. until May 1999, and will travel to The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA in June of 1999 where it will remain until September of the same year. The exhibition was jointly organized through the three aforementioned museums, and the catalogue was written by Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond. Kilmurray and Ormond, copyright page.

inhabits, again emphasizing his freedom while she is ensnared in a network of inanimate objects, more object than human. In fact, she forms a triangle of her own with her arms slightly akimbo, mimicking the shape that circumscribes her. In the last chapter, formal and contextual analyses of *A Dinner Table at Night* are combined with a discussion of women's roles in the literature of Edith Wharton and Henry James.

THE IMPACT OF THE WHITNEY SHOW

The 1986 Sargent retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art should not receive all of the credit for the renewed interest in his work at that time. But it was precisely this year and event that mark the re-instatement of his reputation.⁶⁹ Perhaps the economic and political climate in America during the 1980s made it possible for an artist who painted portraits of the rich and famous to come back into vogue.

By 1986 Ronald Reagan's drastic tax reforms had contributed to major changes in the shape of America's economy as well as the country's demographics. The gap between the rich and the poor was widening at a staggering rate. The cold war was raging, and Reagan's jingoistic foreign policy behavior led to many American blunders on the international stage.⁷⁰

Although there probably is not a direct relationship between the perceived readiness of the museum-going public to embrace Sargent in New York and

⁶⁹ Before the 1986 Whitney show, the only book published on Sargent was a monograph by Carter Ratcliff entitled, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, and Cross River Press, 1982).

⁷⁰ Irwin and Debi Unger *Twentieth Century America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 474-512. On page 492, Unger and Unger refer to his "... naïve but spontaneous belligerent foreign policy mood," and how "... his record of action was strangely mixed."

Chicago,⁷¹ and the effects of Reagan's two-term presidency on American mores, economics, and politics, it is possible that the new affluence of the "yuppie" demographic, combined with the strong anti-Marxist sentiments of the cold war, may have warmed the climate for the painter's reception in 1986.

The Whitney exhibition was large and ambitious, and its detractors suggested it was "...difficult to see Sargent's work as a whole [because of the emphasis on] lesser-known aspects of [the artist's] career. . ." such as the genre scenes, watercolors, landscapes and oil sketches.⁷² Many popular magazines published substantial articles by well-known writers and critics responding to the show.⁷³

The Whitney produced a scholarly catalogue to accompany the exhibition with essays contributed by seven scholars, each focusing upon a different aspect of Sargent's career. In the foreword, Whitney director Tom Armstrong mentions curator Patricia Hills' aim "...to reveal new aspects of Sargent's life and art by presenting them from a variety of viewpoints."⁷⁴ The catalogue and the exhibition, although criticized by some for being too ambitious, did challenge the usual treatment of Sargent as a portrait painter of people in high society, by focusing equally on the various aspects of his oeuvre, many of which were previously ignored.⁷⁵

⁷¹ The 1986 Sargent retrospective was organized by The Whitney Museum of American Art and The Art Institute of Chicago served as a second venue from February 7 through April 19, 1987. Hills, copyright page.

⁷² Bonnie Barrett Stretch, "Fragments of a Lost World," *Artnews* 8 (January 1987): 122-9.

⁷³ Stretch, 122-9, and Arthur C. Danto, "John Singer Sargent," *The Nation* 243 (December 13, 1986): 679-83; John Updike, "Something Missing: John Singer Sargent at the Whitney," *The New Republic* 195 (November 17, 1986): 33-7; Robert Hughes, "Tourist First Class; in New York, a Major Show of John Singer Sargent," *Time* 128 (October 27, 1986): 104-5.

⁷⁴ Foreword to Patricia Hills, 8.

⁷⁵ Stretch, 123, and Updike, 33-4.

Tracing the development of Sargent's style in her essay, Hills seems less concerned with the formal aspects of his work and more interested in the learning and critical environments that gave rise to its success. Inherently biographical, Stanley Olson's essay tackles the issue of Sargent's nationality. He was an appropriate choice since he also published a biography on the artist during the same year the exhibition opened.⁷⁶ In another chapter, Albert Boime argues that Sargent's style of painting and style of living actually represented what the adherents of the Aesthetic Movement were attempting to do in art and in life. Boime created an intricately layered essay relating Sargent's life, art, and social connections with the world of the French literati and the British Aesthetes.⁷⁷ This was something that no one had written about Sargent before. Taken as a whole, in 1986, the Whitney catalogue was the most comprehensive tome ever compiled on John Singer Sargent. The style of subsequent exhibitions and their catalogues, as well as the ongoing interest in Sargent after the Whitney show, is further evidence supporting its role in galvanizing his reputation's return to glory.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Stanley Olson *John Singer Sargent, His Portrait* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

⁷⁷ Albert Boime "Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray," in *John Singer Sargent* edited by Patricia Hills (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), 75-109.

⁷⁸ Stanley Olson Warren Adelson, and Richard Ormond, *Sargent at Broadway. The Impressionist Years*, (New York: Universe and Coe Kerr Gallery, and London: John Murray, 1986). This exhibition catalogue broadened the scope for understanding Sargent's work by focusing solely on his so-called "Impressionist paintings," unlike the Whitney show which attempted to deal with his entire oeuvre. Also, since the Whitney exhibition, a growing trend in looking beyond Sargent's portraits is evident in such catalogues as those by: Kilmurray and Ormond, and Simpson.

THE NINETEEN-NINETIES

The most current and identifiable trend in the scholarly writing of many academic disciplines today is the practice of culling and synthesizing information from a vast array of sources and disciplines.⁷⁹ Much recent art historical scholarship builds on theories from the field of literary criticism and looks to period literature to re-create a more holistic picture of historic cultures. Where contextual analyses threatened to lose sight of the image, and formal criticism spoke to nothing but the physicality of the image, some critics and art historians now effectively combine the two approaches. With an increased focus upon “the history of art history” this specific academic discipline is also more inward-looking than ever before.⁸⁰

A prime example of inward-looking scholarship pertaining to Sargent is the 1997 exhibition catalogue *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John*

⁷⁹ One example of a book that crosses disciplinary boundaries but is not art historical in scope is Maureen E. Montgomery *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁸⁰ Donald Preziosi's book illustrates the recent trend of looking within one's own academic discipline. The quote is from Preziosi, xi; Another example is Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, eds. *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Singer Sargent.⁸¹ The focus of the exhibit is on the early years of Sargent's career as it developed in Paris and London. As the title of the catalogue suggests, the analysis of critical responses to his early work is one underlying theme.

Since the Whitney show in 1986, two major monographs have been published and two ambitious museum exhibitions on Sargent have been mounted. The earliest of the monographs is Trevor Fairbrother's *John Singer Sargent* published in 1994, a book which reiterates much of what has already been stated about the artist and his work. Fairbrother's treatment is primarily biographical and chronological. He highlights the same climactic details about the *Madame X* scandal, the artist's flirtations with an array of styles, and his great success as a portrait painter.

Demonstrating some of the most current scholarship, Fairbrother dedicates a chapter to a discussion of Sargent's critics and the nature of that criticism within a late nineteenth century context. Furthermore, the proceeding chapter combines a discussion of form and content. These last two chapters stand apart from the others as more overtly critical and theoretical than chronological or biographical in focus.⁸² But taken as a whole, the book does not *consistently* follow a current art historical methodology.

Another monograph from this period, *Sargent Abroad, Figures and Landscapes* published in 1997, contains a series of essays by a group of Sargent

⁸¹ Marc Simpson, with Richard Ormond and H. Barbara Weinberg *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1997).

⁸² Trevor J. Fairbrother *John Singer Sargent* The Library of American Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1994). See chapter 7, pp. 117-137, and chapter 8, pp. 138-145.

scholars. Most of the essays follow a formula combining a discussion of Sargent's life with the formal concerns of his work. Like the Whitney show and catalogue, and *Sargent at Broadway: The Impressionist Years*, the focus is not upon Sargent's portraits, but his "holiday paintings," a portion of his oeuvre historically marginalized. And although none cross over into other academic disciplines, they do exhibit a more balanced treatment of form and content.

The most current exhibition catalogue written by Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, accompanies a retrospective of Sargent's work now on view at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. In it, Ormond re-establishes his earlier assertion that Sargent "...belonged temperamentally to the modernist camp, to those seeking a new way of recording the world that expressed present-day realities and complexities."⁸³

The book successfully combines a discussion of content with one of form by providing miniature essays for each painting in the exhibition. A short essay on the painting *A Dinner Table at Night* is included. But, although the analysis combines formal and contextual concerns, one can be expanded by including period literature and literary theory.

⁸³ Kilmurray and Ormond, 25. Again, this issue is very tricky. One could argue that Sargent was absolutely not a modernist, backing the statement up with material from the same exhibition catalogue. On page 23, Ormond writes about Sargent's training in the atelier of Carolus-Duran. He points to the fact that Sargent, trained in the tradition of Velazquez, was instructed to try to make the "...picture space look like an extension of real space, without one being aware of the dividing line between art and reality. Art generally characterized as "modernist" does the exact opposite, instead making the viewer aware that they are, in fact, dealing with *art* rather than with an extension of reality.

A WORLD OF DINNER TABLES

Throughout their respective histories, art and literature have converged often, sometimes with brilliant results. The history of European art is rife with examples of artists borrowing from literature. David and Delacroix borrowed from classical and “exotic” literature; William Blake is equally known for his poetry as for his fantastic images. The Pre-Raphaelites exemplified the flow between literature and visual arts both by using literary themes and, as was the case with Christina Rossetti and her brother Dante Gabriel, writing their own prose.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the marriage between painting and literature was stronger than ever.⁸⁴ Some writers represented living artists as literary figures. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced among the adherents to the aesthetic movement. One of its proponents Henry James, wrote art

⁸⁴ Oscar Wilde gave commissions to Aubrey Beardsley to illustrate many of his plays and other literary works; William Morris was hired by the Kelmscott Press to illustrate *Le Morte D'Arthur*; Pamela Gerrish Nunn discusses the use of literary themes in paintings by Victorian women artists in “Between Strong-Mindedness and Sentimentality: Women’s Literary Painting,” special issue; “Word and Image” *Victorian Poetry* 33 (Autumn-Winter 1995): 425-47.

criticism as well as a roman à clé about his friend John Singer Sargent.⁸⁵

One school of late nineteenth century literature focused on the bourgeoisie of both Europe and America, most likely because it was disintegrating in the wake of industrialization. In their books, writers like Henry James and Edith Wharton both romanticized and subtly criticized the opulence and insularity of rule-bound bourgeois culture. John Singer Sargent, the premier portrait painter of the beau monde, had had a cultured, but bohemian upbringing, becoming wealthy through his success as a painter. Wharton was born into the aristocracy of New York, and James, too, was rather well-born. All three were intercontinental Americans; all three were essentially part of the world of high society that they captured either in words or in paint. They knew each other socially and were good friends. In a comparative study of a work by each author, dealing with roughly the same period, the line dividing art from literature becomes blurred.

The painting *A Dinner Table at Night* encapsulates many of the cultural values of the world to which Wharton, James, and Sargent belonged. The Vickers were comfortably upper-middle class - not quite landed aristocracy, but certainly wealthy and well respected. They are of the same class as the Newland Archers in Wharton's *Age of Innocence* or the Daniel Touchettes in James' *The Portrait of a*

⁸⁵ The reference is to "The Pupil," in Henry James, *The Short Stories of Henry James*, 1889, reprinted, selected, edited, and with an introduction by Clifton Fadiman (New York: Random House, 1945). While not an exact replica of John Singer Sargent's upbringing, "The Pupil" captures what James surely perceived (from the tone of the story) as the most unsavory aspects of Sargent's semi-nomadic childhood. Charles Merrill Mount refers to it in his 1955 biography on the artist. (Charles Merrill Mount, *John Singer Sargent, A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1955), 10.) Also see Henry James "John S. Sargent," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 74 (October 1887): 683-91.

Lady.⁸⁶ They are at their leisure, of which there was a surplus for such people, in a spare but properly decorated room. The dining room is one that Edith Wharton would have likely commended for its subtlety and lack of clutter.⁸⁷

But like the imagery in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, Sargent's painted image also hints at trouble lingering below the surface. The most immediate and unsettling aspect of the painting is crystallized in Mrs. Vickers' vacant stare. She embodies the ennui of hundreds of thousands of women of her class who, in their lives of sequestered leisure, and restrictive rules of decorum, were unable to form *real* identities. Edith Vickers has a robotic, lifeless quality, similar to the character May Welland as described by Wharton at a formal dinner: "Now, across the Skuytercliff carnations and the massive plate, she struck [Newland] as pale and languid . . ."⁸⁸ A still darker description of May aligns more closely the fictional character with the actual historic person represented in the painting in the following passage.

⁸⁶ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 1920 reprint, with an introduction by R.W.B. Lewis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970); Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*. 2 vols. 2d. ed. The Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1909). A thorough description of the Vickers' social standing can be found in; James Hamilton, *The Misses Vickers: The Centenary of the Painting by John Singer Sargent* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Arts Department, 1984), 23-30.

⁸⁷ Maureen Montgomery addresses, at some length, both Wharton's and James' feelings about the drastic changes in interior space instigated by the advent of such architectural innovations as Organic Modernism in the hands of Frank Lloyd Wright, and what that meant for the privacy of polite society. She also looks at how the interior space was used as another signifier in the serious business of "impression management," and how Wharton was known to differentiate between the genuine good taste of true society and the vulgar ostentation of the Nouveaux riches. Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 62-81.

⁸⁸ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 318.

It would presently be [Newland's] task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of women who had one to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out *blankly* at blankness?⁸⁹ (emphasis mine)

To be fair, unlike May Welland, Edith Vickers indeed had a personality. She was an amateur artist, played and laughed with her children, and traveled extensively throughout Europe.⁹⁰ One cannot automatically assume she is vapid because of the way Sargent painted her. But there is no question that he did paint her that way. Does this mean that John Singer Sargent found her to be a shallow woman? There is less historical evidence to indicate that Sargent degraded women and more to suggest that he had a genuine respect for them. One of his closest friends was a woman, the writer Vernon Lee.⁹¹

The truth is we cannot know why Sargent chose to paint Edith Vickers gazing vacantly out of the canvas through "blank" eyes. But this type of image was fairly ubiquitous during the 1880s in both in England and on the continent and was considered a respectable convention for images of proper ladies.⁹² It further fits into a range of photographs, paintings, novels, short stories, popular magazines, and

⁸⁹ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 83.

⁹⁰ Hamilton.

⁹¹ Vernon Lee was a pen name for Violet Paget. Patricia Hills, "The Formation of a Style and sensibility," in *John Singer Sargent*, Patricia Hills, ed., exh. cat., (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), 35.

⁹² Boime in Hills, ed., 91.

etiquette books that either depicted women as insipid or suggested they aspire to such behavior.⁹³

Although quite different from the society tales of James and Wharton, Charlotte Perkins-Gilman deals with the issue of the idle woman encouraged to stagnate, illustrating a truly grim conclusion in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In this riveting novella, the reader follows the unnamed protagonist on her descent into madness as she is prevented from performing any activity that gives her joy. With nothing to do, this aspiring writer envisions a strange world trapped in the mass of wretched, moldering wallpaper that becomes, in the end, quite real to her. She imagines the design is comprised of actual bars that imprisons myriad women inside and says:

I think that woman gets out in the daytime! And I'll tell you why-privately-I've seen her! I can see her out of every one of my windows! It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.⁹⁴

While an extreme example of the lack of power women possessed within the structure of middle and upper class European and American culture, Sargent's depiction of Mrs. Vickers as a shell of a person may have been an unconscious

⁹³ One example of a popular women's magazine that reinforced proper etiquette and feminine behavior during the late nineteenth century is *Godey's Lady's Book*.

⁹⁴ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* with an afterword by Elaine R. Hedges, reprint of the 1899 edition (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), 30. This novella is semi-autobiographical.

manifestation of what was becoming a more widely recognized social issue in the 1880s.

Furthermore, there are close parallels between aspects of *The Age of Innocence* and John Singer Sargent's own life. In many ways, Sargent was the male equivalent of Madame Olenska with her strange upbringing in which "her parents had been continental wanderers. . ." ⁹⁵ There is also an aspect of the exotic in Wharton's description of Ellen Olenska as a result of her meandering childhood, a quality recognized in Sargent for similar reasons.

The matrix of meanings formed by the combination of the lives of Sargent, Wharton, James, the works they produced, the art world of the late 1800s, gender roles, the social stature of the Vickers, and the physical reality of the way their images were captured in paint, is staggeringly complicated. It is a fitting end to a discussion of the varied and seemingly disparate elements that comprise the body of criticism, scholarship, and literature on John Singer Sargent, and a potential model for future scholarship on the artist.

⁹⁵ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 59.

CONCLUSION

There is no way of knowing what form future criticism and scholarship on John Singer Sargent will assume. At the present time, the most thorough approach involves some combination of formal and contextual analysis. Formal analysis is crucial for a discussion of visual images. Contextual analysis is vital for expanding the discourse beyond the picture plane.

Art and culture are not mutually exclusive; they give rise to one another. Artists do not make images in a vacuum. Late nineteenth century European and American artistic culture is characterized by a complex network of inter-relationships between art forms, and one can glean more about a work of art created by an artist of that era by studying pertinent arts. We understand John Singer Sargent's art better when we examine it within the context of the artist's environment.

Personal relationships among artists may also be of vital importance, and in Sargent's case, the authors he knew socially and the characters from their novels must not be overlooked. Just as Sargent's life and art provided fodder for Henry James' stories, the tales of high society woven by James and Wharton help to establish an historical context for the lifestyle all three actually enjoyed.

Although the most recently published books on John Singer Sargent do not reflect *all* of the current methodological concerns of the discipline of art history, it is important to acknowledge that this is due to the fact that most are museum exhibition catalogues. Catalogues, like the large traveling exhibitions they accompany, are many years in the making. Museum exhibitions are also intended for popular audiences in order to boost attendance, and to encourage visitors to become members. On average, a major international multiple venue exhibition like the one currently at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and organized by the Tate Gallery in London, takes many years to organize. Likewise, monographs may reflect what was most current in the discipline four or five years ago, again because of the publishing process, the time it takes to conduct research, synthesize those findings, and actually write the book.⁹⁶

Aside from exhibition catalogues, articles on Sargent can be found primarily in popular magazines, more evidence that he is fully reinstated as a popular topic of conversation.⁹⁷ The February issue of *The New Yorker* features an eight-paged article on Sargent. He appears again in a nine and one half paged story on "the *Madame X Scandal*" in the January 1999 issue of *Vogue* magazine.⁹⁸ Of course such

⁹⁶ Most of this information was gained first-hand as an intern for various curators at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

⁹⁷ Aside from the catalogues by Kilmurray and Ormond, and Simpson, et., al., the most recent articles (written within the last five years) on Sargent have not been in scholarly art history journals, and instead appear in popular magazines, for example: Hamish Bowles, "The Madame X Files," *Vogue* (January 1999), 174-181; Adam Gopnik, "Sargent's Pearls, the Artist Who Makes the Perfect Case for Wasted Talent," *The New Yorker* 124 (February 15, 1999), 64-71.

⁹⁸ Bowles, 205. Like the 1986 retrospective at the Whitney, The most recent exhibition has generated interest in the popular press.

articles lend little support to Sargent as a scholarly subject. What they do measure, at least in part, is his merit as a subject worthy for public consumption.

Beginning with the Whitney show in 1986, new aspects of Sargent's career are coming into focus. He was much more than a painter of society portraits, and in the most recent exhibition catalogue, Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond consider many previously marginalized facets of his career. But just as there is little chance of guessing what kinds of scholarship and criticism on Sargent will be written in the future, we cannot know how long his latest wave of popularity will last. A paradigm shift occurred in the history of art history, due in part to major shifts in the wider world. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, burgeoning industrialism, World War I, photography, the Armory Show, and modernism all contributed to a change in attitude toward the artist. However his reputation may fare in the future, a survey of one hundred twenty years of Sargent criticism, literature, popular press, museum exhibitions, and scholarship certainly proves that he has held our interest.

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Figure 1. *Carolus-Duran, 1879*
oil on canvas, 46 x 37^{13/16} in.
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute,
Williamstown, Massachusetts

Figure 2. *Madame X*, 1883-4
(*Madame Pierre Gautreau*)
oil on canvas, 82 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York;
A.H. Hearn Fund, 1916.

Figure 3. *A Dinner Table at Night (The Glass of Claret)*, 1884.
oil on canvas, 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 26 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
Gift of the Atholl McBean Foundation, 73.12
© The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Figure 4. *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, 1882.
oil on canvas, 87 x 87 in.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston;
Gift of Mary Louisa Boit, Florence D. Boit, Jane Hubbard Boit,
and Julia Overing Boit, in memory of their father.

Figure 5. *The Breakfast Table*, 1884.
oil on canvas, 21³/₄ x 18¹/₄ in.
Fogg Art Museum,
Harvard University Art Museums,
Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop

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e-mail: masher@clark.williams.edu
March 23, 1999

Ms. Jennifer Lynn Friedman
724 Laurel Avenue #609
San Mateo, California 94401

Dear Ms. Friedman:

Confirming our telephone conversation, this will give you permission to make a color Xerox of Sargent's *Portrait of Carolus-Duran* for use with your thesis on the artist.

My e-mail is still not accessible, so I will put this into regular mail to you.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Martha Asher
Registrar

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Slide Lib.
+3262

Jennifer Lynn Friedman

Home Phone 650-645-1221
Email: jbfried@ix.netcom.com

724 Laurel Avenue #609
San Mateo, California 94401

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
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Priscilla F. Farah
Librarian, Photo and Slide Library
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March 22, 1999

Dear Ms. Friedman:

You have the permission of the
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color xerox copies of Madame X
to be used in your thesis for graduate
school. This type of educational use is
fine. If you plan on having the thesis
published as a book, you will need to
contact this department to obtain proper
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Sincerely,

Julie Zeftel
Assoc. Museum
Librarian

March 19, 1999

Dear Ms. Farah:

I am a graduate student completing a thesis on John Singer Sargent. As such, I would like to obtain permission to use a color xerox of a painting from your permanent collection; Madame X. Please send written permission either by regular or electronic mail - you will find my particulars listed above. Since I am under a strict deadline, I would greatly appreciate your prompt response to my letter.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Friedman

Jennifer Lynn Friedman

MAR 19 1999

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To: 'Jennifer Lynn Friedman' <jbfrito@ix.netcom.com>
Date: Monday, March 22, 1999 8:40 AM
Subject: The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit

March 22, 1999

Jennifer Lynn Friedman
724 Laurel Avenue, #609
San Mateo, CA 94401

Dear Ms. Friedman:

Thank you for your fax of March 19, 1999. You have the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's permission to make a color xerox of "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit" to use in your thesis.

If there is anything else I can do for you, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely yours,

Mary L. Sluskonis
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From: Elizabeth Gombosi <gombosi@fas.harvard.edu>
To: Bob and Jennifer Friedman <jbfrito@ix.netcom.com>
Date: Thursday, February 18, 1999 8:18 AM
Subject: Re: John Singer Sargent

Dear Jennifer,

Please feel free to xerox the image for your master's thesis.

We do have a slide of *The Breakfast Table*. If you send us a check for \$5.00 or e-mail me a Mastercard or Visa number, we will send it right out to you.

> Dear Elizabeth: I am a graduate student completing a master's thesis on John Singer Sargent. As such, I am requesting permission to xerox/reproduce an image from your permanent collection. The painting is *The Breakfast Table*, 1884. The specific book from which I would like to xerox the image is: Fairbrother, Trevor J. *John Singer Sargent*. The Library of American Art. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., In Association with The National Museum of American Art. Smithsonian Institution, 1994. I initially looked to Harry N. Abrams publishers to garner permission, but was directed to you instead. In addition, I would like to obtain a slide of the painting, and of any details of the image if at all possible because I am presenting a related paper at a symposium on March 6. If you could let me know, I would greatly appreciate it. Below you will find all of my particulars so that you may contact me in whatever mode is convenient for you. Sincerely, Jennifer Lynn Friedman 724 Laurel Ave. #609 San Mateo, CA 94401 650-685-1221 jbfrito@ix.netcom.com

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