Chapter Ten

Beyond Aesthetic Tourism: Travelers and Locals in Sargent's Self-Reflexive Subject Pictures

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John Singer Sargent is a fascinating example of a seemingly paradoxical type: the Cosmopolitan American. Born in Italy to American parents who had become nomadic international wanderers, schooled in a number of cities throughout Europe, speaking multiple languages with native fluency, and traveling incessantly throughout his childhood and then throughout his long professional career as a painter, Sargent seemed to many who met him to epitomize the stance of a whole generation of cosmopolitan expatriates—including James A. M. Whistler, Mary Cassatt, and Sargent's close friend Henry James—who, during this later-nineteenth-century Age of Travel, chose to live lives based upon constant international movement, in semi-permanent exile from their home culture.[1] Indeed, Sargent could strike many who met him as "an accidental American," or, even, as un-American—dangerously lacking the solid ground of attachment to any nation, culture, language, or people. Even a close friend, Vernon Lee, described the multilingual Sargent as an "accentless mongrel."[2] With his strangely hybrid cultural identity reflecting new forms of modern life in an increasingly globalized or even transnational world, Sargent might appear the epitome of a fearful form of emergent cosmopolitanism, leaving him not at home everywhere but, in fact, homeless.

Actually, though, Sargent's international stance places him in a long American tradition, as a key representative figure in a late-nineteenth-century flowering of tendencies that had been developing since the beginning of writing and painting in the new nation. In the literary realm, for example, if we trace one long and important line of American writing as it develops through the long nineteenth century—drawing connections between works of Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving, Herman Melville, and Margaret Fuller as they lead to turn-

of-the-century developments in Edith Wharton, Henry James and, in a different vein, W. E. B. Du Bois—we find we are following an ongoing, evolving, anxious exploration of the powers, possibilities, and limitations seen to be inherent in the distinctive position of the *American artist as a cosmopolitan figure*. If the question is raised, then, "What *is* definitively American about Sargent? What identifies him as an American character?" . . . the answer might be, paradoxically, "his cosmopolitanism."[3]

In this alternative line of American thought, the artist is characteristically seen not as a definer and defender of unicultural coherences but as an intercultural ambassador, speaking not from within a bounded and self-contained "home culture" but more often from a life of constant physical and spiritual movement through a series of homes-away-from-home, thus raising large questions about the location of home or home culture for American artists or writers who typically see themselves, after this move into the realm of the international or inter-cultural, as unable to go home again.

Washington Irving: The American Artist as Bachelor Traveler between Worlds

For aspiring verbal or visual artists in nineteenth-century America, Washington Irving, the nation's first professional author, and *the* central aesthetic model in all the arts until his death in 1859, was the fountainhead and inaugurator of this tradition. In *The Sketch Book* of 1819, Irving identified American art with the oceanic journey, setting the template for the vision of the American artist as a dreamy, idle bachelor traveler at sea, a cosmopolite expatriate always moving between worlds, away from home, and finding his aesthetic sources and full identity through experiences as a cosmopolitan mediator in cross-cultural encounters. With American-based stories like "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," the *Sketch Book* mined the mythic potential in the Catskills and Hudson River area, and so served as a founding work breaking the ground for later literary movements of American regionalism or local color writing (as well as of Hudson River School painting). But one must not overlook the fact that these regional tales are presented within the frame of a book of foreign travel, as the meditations of an author who writes about home while moving away from home, searching for his place and his voice through voyages in other worlds. And those two most celebrated and still-resonant American legends in *The Sketch Book* associate story and story-telling with homeless, traveling figures in exile—Ichabod Crane and Rip Van Winkle—who play out opposed aspects of Irving's own situation as an imaginative writer in postcolonial America.[4]

But the less well-known autobiographical introductory chapters of *The Sketch Book*—"The Author's Account of Himself" and "The Voyage"—also

present hugely influential expressions of Irving's special sense that to write is to embark on an oceanic voyage, and that legend arises not when one is rooted in the soil of one place or of one bounded culture but when one is at sea, alone in that sometimes terrifying gulf between worlds. Establishing an American literature by going abroad, Irving presents the American writer as a hybrid, somewhat "monstrous" and strange figure, a solitary voyager always located at, and speaking from, the threshold between cultures.

Centrally inspired by this vision, several generations of the nation's most popular mid-nineteenth-century authors took up the voice, tone, imagery, and stance of the Irvingesque voyager or aesthetic tourist, each founding his career on travel-based writings following Irving's model. A quick survey of this literary line would include:

Nathaniel Parker Willis, who made himself the most popular writer in his day through a long series of journalistic accounts of his worldwide travels as an idle, dilettantish "*flâneur* of the universe."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the popular poet laureate, who began writing very much on Irving's model with works like *Outre-Mer*, and continued in this vein with later titles like *Tales of a Wayside Inn*.

Bayard Taylor, who earned a huge following as a classic Romantic voyager writing of the exotic in the California Gold Rush, Europe, Egypt, Abyssinia, Turkey, India, China, Central Africa, Greece, Russia, and the Arctic North.

John Lloyd Stephens, more of a throwback to the age of exploration than a purely touristic traveler, who became especially celebrated for his writing from South America and his part in the rediscovery of Mayan civilization.

The dashing *Richard Henry Dana, Jr.*, who left his place among the Cambridge/Harvard elite to go to sea as a common sailor, producing the best-selling *Two Years before the Mast*.

And of course *Herman Melville*, most of whose works center on the dynamics of sea travel and cross-cultural encounters. Melville rose to international fame with his first two travel books—*Typee* and *Omoo*—based on his own experiences as a beachcomber in the South Seas. But Irving's influence is also clearly key in the later novel *Redburn* and in the voice and stance of Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, while that voice and stance then come to be parodied and critiqued in many of Melville's later short writings in the 1850s.

Henry James: Varieties of Cosmopolitan Experience

But perhaps the true flowering of the aesthetic tradition inaugurated by Irving came during the post-Civil War, late-nineteenth-century "Age of Travel," with travel essays and novels by the expatriate Henry James, a close aesthetic colleague and friend of Sargent. (Sargent produced a classic portrait of James in 1913; James returned the favor by developing portraits of Sargent-like artists in a number of his fictions—as he became fascinated by Sargent as the epitome of one possible future for the American artist.) While some historians might represent both James and Sargent as anomalies, deviating from the lineage of American arts, it might be more appropriate to see them as key transitional figures who developed the potential of an earlier national vision (coming out of Irving) while breaking the ground for successive waves of American expatriate writers (Pound and Eliot; and then Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Stein) who would go abroad in the early decades of the twentieth century to put American art and literature at the forefront of international aesthetic developments, defining an international modernism for what was seen as a newly cosmopolitan world.

James, who, like Sargent, spent much of his youth as a hotel child shuttling between European capitals with his own nomadic family, who began his career as an Irvingesque aesthetic tourist and travel writer, and who later became a permanent expatriate living in England, made the International Theme his signature form, playing variations on it throughout his long writing career. The early novella "Daisy Miller" (1878), for example, which brought James his first international prominence, is clearly marked as an expression of the Age of Travel in which it is embedded: it is narrated by an international traveler; it is addressed to a readership assumed to be experienced in international travel; and it develops as a study *of* the newly emerging "traveling culture" of international expatriates. Daisy Miller, the central character, is a member of this American "traveling culture," living life in constant movement from one hotel to another; but she turns out to be a bad traveler—and pays a heavy price for the risks she takes in crossing the strict, insulating boundaries set up by the expat community. The story then turns on the implied meanings of the cryptic refrain repeated by Winterbourne, the point-of-view character who admits he doesn't know how to respond to Daisy: "I was booked to make a mistake. I have lived too long in foreign parts."[5]

So James writes, then, not only as a participant in and celebrator of the late nineteenth-century "traveling culture" but also as one of its most penetrating analysts—a critic from within. And, in fiction after fiction, he reminds us that not all travelers or travel experiences are alike. Surveying the varieties of cosmopolitan experience, he stresses two key distinctions that may be helpful to understanding Sargent's stance.

The first distinction turns on the question of national allegiances. While some American tourists in James remain rooted in a single national or cultural allegiance (so that foreign travel mainly serves to reinforce their attachment to their home culture), others come to the point where they have no allegiances, becoming lone, nomadic wanderers. (This is perhaps the classic vision, associating cosmopolitanism with individualist detachment—and several observers respond to Sargent along these lines.) But finally, in James, a third, small subset of cosmopolitan characters is seen to emerge from international travel having developed multiple national or cultural allegiances. This is perhaps the group that most fascinated James.

A second distinction involves the related question of detachment or engagement in the traveler's stance. Some cosmopolitan travelers in James take up the stance of detached spectatorship as they move through the aesthetic surfaces or theatrically framed "scenes" of a picturesque foreign world. (This would be a tendency that could come out of the mode of aesthetic-touristic travel defined in an earlier age by Irving.) But other travelers in James become emotionally or even politically entangled with what they encounter along the way.

Winterbourne, in "Daisy Miller," provides a clarifying example of a characteristic development along these lines. He enters the tale protected by his mode of externalized and aesthetic spectatorship, as an Irvingesque *flâneur,* a bachelor traveler without allegiances or emotional commitments, living vicariously through attention to the pleasing surfaces of foreign worlds—while always neatly distanced from any deeper involvement with what he sees or meets. But at the story's end he surprises even himself by the discovery that he *has* become engaged, and in fact feels the pull of competing engagements, leaving him painfully torn between emotional involvements, cultural standards, moral demands, and personal responsibilities attaching him to different characters and different home-worlds. By the end of "Daisy Miller," Winterbourne can only repeat again his refrain, "I have lived too long in foreign parts. I was booked to make a mistake."[6] We leave him, then, as a lone, lonely figure, alienated from his own heart's impulses, and condemned to cosmopolitanism as a homeless bachelor wanderer. For Winterbourne, as for many classic James characters, cosmopolitanism becomes less a privilege than a predicament.

John Singer Sargent: Portraits of Expatriate Experience

Keeping these schematic Jamesian tensions and distinctions in mind as we turn to Sargent, we can then ask: What is the specific nature of Sargent's personal experience as a nomadic expatriate traveler, and what stance toward the world does it imply? One dominant critical line sees work

like *En route pour la pêche* (1878) as the product of "an intellectual tourist permanently on holiday," reflecting the stance of a pampered, unaffiliated, aristocratic spectator and aesthete content to appreciate the surfaces of picturesque foreign places and exotic "others" while resolutely "detached from personal, moral involvement with the subjects of his art."[7] But a look at Sargent paintings from his most innovative years—the formative period of 1878–84—suggests an alternative understanding of the workings of his cosmopolitan aestheticism.

Sargent got his major training in Paris (at the ateliers of Carolus-Duran and the École des Beaux-Arts, where he met and befriended Julian Alden Weir); he made his astonishing rise to prominence at the Parisian salons, and he did some of his best, most experimental work in his early years while based in Paris—until the great *scandale* of his 1884 *Madame X* painting sent him off to England where he began to settle in for a long, safer career centered on glittering society portraits. Those portraits open an evocative window into the now-bygone life of Gilded Age aristocrats, but I think Sargent is most intriguing and relevant today for his work in a different vein: his prescient expression of the felt experience of international travel and of the expatriate international traveler—not embedded in a closed, static world but always on the move between worlds—anticipating the new possibilities and also the problems of our own increasingly global, interdependent, international, perhaps even transnational lives.

Certainly, in some of his major portraits of fellow American expatriates, Sargent is not detached from his subjects but identifies with them, making use of the occasion to explore and express his own felt experience as a child and aspiring artist always on the move through foreign worlds. Here Sargent does not celebrate luxury, complacency, insulation, or aristocratic ease but, rather, presents poignant images of isolation, dislocation, and vulnerability within the expansive world of expatriates who have left behind the security of a traditional home to travel the globe in the service of beauty.

In *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (fig. 10–1), the four young girls in beautiful white pinafores are seen at home, but the feel of home space has now changed, perhaps subtly, unsettled as a result of the expatriate family's international travels. A friend of both Sargent and James, Edward Boit was a Bostonian who, when in Rome, had an aesthetic epiphany, gave up the law for painting, and, deciding to devote himself to these aesthetic urges, relocated the family across the Atlantic and then from one European capital to another, again and again. The peripatetic family insisted on taking those six-foot-tall, blue-and-white Oriental vases with them whenever they moved, and so the vases were apparently packed up and transported across the Atlantic sixteen times (suffering repeated damage in the process).[8] And the portrait suggests the way the Boits themselves have been shaped by all of this international aesthetic voyaging as it represents the American family

in a mode full of allusions to European art—framing them by reference perhaps to Degas family portraits like *The Bellelli Family* and certainly to Velázquez's *Las Meninas*.[9] Sargent also here pictures the American Boits in the frame of their Paris apartment, and his unusually large canvas emphasizes the surprisingly large space in this apartment foyer—perhaps suggesting the expanded geographical and cultural horizons inhabited by such global travelers. And that large space is not filled with Victorian clutter. The expansive canvas is, rather, markedly empty or hollow at its center—one contemporary reviewer described the work as "four corners and a void"—and the effect of that central void is subtly to evoke the insecurity, instability, isolation, and vulnerability in a child's experience of expatriate life. (This was an experience Sargent himself knew only too well, having spent most of his childhood being uprooted again and again by his almost pathologically mobile parents.)[10]

Fig. 10–1 John Singer Sargent, American, 1856–1925, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, 1882, oil on canvas, 221.93 x 222.57 cm (87 ⅜ x 87 ⅝ in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mary Louisa Boit, Julia Overing Boit, Jane Hubbard Boit, and Florence D. Boit in memory of their father, Edward Darley Boit, 19.124. Photograph © [2013] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

For the Boit girls, the home space lacks a traditional home feeling; it is not neatly bounded but disquietingly unbounded. Not posed together as a traditional family grouping, the sisters are dispersed around the room,

strangely disconnected from one another, dislocated in this large space. The lack of clear architectural definition in the space, combined with the way the pinafored girls are dwarfed by the huge vases, gives the scene an Alice in Wonderland feel—which may again reflect the disorienting effects of constant travel: What land are we in? What standards and measures apply here? Even in their home these expatriates have few familiar points of reference—except for those vases. And it is intriguing to think of those Oriental vases—symbolizing the family's devotion to far-reaching foreign travel in search of the beautiful—being transported again and again across the seas as the prime carriers of the family's sense of the continuity of its home life. Suggesting analogies between the vases and the Boit girls, Sargent's portrait gives a very Jamesian poignance to this meditation on the fragility of such beautiful figures (the girls, or the vases) in the face of the difficulties of international travel. With each Boit sister seemingly going it alone in a large, undefined world, these vulnerable innocents abroad have only their white pinafores to protect them.

Fig. 10–2 *Madame Gautreau Drinking a Toast*, 1882–83 (oil on panel), Sargent, John Singer (1856–1925) / © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library.

At the same time, though, Sargent also closely followed (and identified with) the career of a remarkable American expatriate woman, Virginie Avegno, who had traveled to Paris from cosmopolitan New Orleans to marry a wealthy banker**,** Pierre Gautreau, and make a name for herself as the most exotic, glamorous "star" in Paris's ultra-sophisticated metropolitan social scene, taking up a role as what was called a "professional beauty," painting

Fig. 10–3 John Singer Sargent, 1856–1925, American, *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1883-84, oil on canvas, 82 ⅛ x 43 ¼ in. (208.6 x 109.9 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916 (16.53), Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

herself with exotic, elaborately-colored makeup to foreground the artifice of her look, making herself a work of art through her everyday public performances of self, and merging fashion and art to ride the risk-filled waves of aesthetic celebrity/notoriety as a leading attraction in the era's frenzied, paparazzi-like press.[11]

Of course the famous Sargent salon portrait of Madame Gautreau that resulted from this seemingly perfect collaboration between artist and subject, now titled *Madame X* (fig. 10–3), caused a major scandal that changed the lives of both painter and subject. But Sargent also captured another side of Madame Gautreau in preparatory sketches made during visits to her seaside villa in Brittany. This sketch (fig. 10–2) is titled *Madame Gautreau Drinking a Toast*. If one image finds Madame Gautreau in her urban armor, a hardened object for display, cold and closed, meant to be looked at, but turning her gaze away from us, the *Toast* sketch shows her opening up, more soft and fluid, passionate, engaged. As Madame X, she is the epitome of elite detachment, but in the gesture of the *Toast* she invites relations, reaching out and paying homage to something outside of herself. The dramatic gesture here—not staying at home in her own bounded table-space but making that exaggerated extension of the arm across the empty center of the canvas—might be seen as an effort at bridging, at mediation, perhaps an emblem of the cross-cultural and transatlantic travel that is the ground of Madame Gautreau's new life in France: an emblem of the expatriate stance. On a small scale, this gesture speaks for the vulnerability of a person in such a position: she is, characteristically, taking a risk, putting herself on the line to try to establish a connection. But what is she reaching toward

here? Probably, most literally, toward an unseen tablemate being addressed in a rush of emotion. (Indeed, perhaps to Sargent himself, her accomplice in the joint project of making this ultimate portrait.) But Sargent's framing of our view accents Madame Gautreau's aloneness at the table. And her arm extends not to touch another person but to enter the space of the dazzling visions of the lamp and flowers on the other side of the canvas. Then perhaps she is also, in a broader sense, to be seen here as a professional beauty, a proto-aesthete, raising her glass in homage to the sources of beauty: light and color. Her glass in fact seems to capture and refract our vision of the lamp's light—making it literally and figuratively a vessel for the communication of beauty—and in this way the gesture of the toast makes Madame Gautreau herself a vessel, or medium, or conduit for our access to those sources of beauty. When her glass reaches that goal, it also seems that she has established a connection to those sources for herself, and we note that her own flesh now incorporates some of the same tones that are seen in the flowers and lamp. But what makes Sargent's vision here especially compelling is the sense that this absorbed ritual of the toast is, for Madame Gautreau, enacting a form of resigned self-sacrifice; daring to expose herself and reach out, she is like a moth flying too close to a mesmerizing source of light. Like James' Daisy Miller or Isabel Archer, then, Madame Gautreau fascinates Sargent as she plays out the risks and vulnerabilities, as well as the new possibilities, for adventurous American women now testing the waters of this new, global "traveling culture."

The Cosmopolitan Traveler in the Underground Workshop of Art

But Sargent did not suddenly become an aloof, aristocratic sightseer or a disengaged aesthetic spectator when he turned his gaze to depiction of the lives of the foreign peoples inhabiting the exotic places through which he traveled. If he identified with the lives and aesthetic projects of fellow American travelers like the Boits or Madame Gautreau, he could also see himself in the local characters depicted in his subject pictures, especially in key works that figure local artisans as workers on the margins of society, sharing his commitment to art. What distinguishes Sargent from many other tourists in the direct line of Irving is this tendency to identification rather than "othering;" he seems to have wanted to identify with the local workers and craftspeople he encountered in these wanderings, studying them as foreign reflections of his own self-image and aesthetic engagements: workers of the world toiling in the underground workshop of art. One key line of Sargent subject pictures made during his international travels can be read programmatically, then, as self-reflexive allegories of the aesthetic

process, in which the portrayed figures seem to enact a story—a story about the making and the viewing of the painting in which they appear.

The traveler Sargent was always especially attracted by Venice—the city of art; the city on the sea. In his *Venetian Glass Workers* (1880–82; fig. 10–4), these ghost-like figures absorbed in the weaving of strands of light might at first glance seem to be female fates—mythic weavers of human destinies. But here, Sargent's enigmatic scene pictures a group of working-class Venetians toiling in Venice's tourist trade. These laborers are making glass beads—multi-hued bits of sparkling glass that were long popular with visitors to this city. They are depicted at an early stage in the process of transforming long, thin glass tubes into individual beads. Here Sargent cannot be said to be ignoring the material realities of labor, or inequalities specific to the economy of tourism. His picture highlights the ironies here: these women who make tourist trinkets are never seen by tourists who buy their beads; and while they produce beautiful, scintillating forms that capture and refract light, these workers toil in darkness. Displaying again his characteristic fascination with marginal peoples, Sargent does not simply take us off the beaten path of the Grand Tour to open up views of a more authentic Venice. More important: his work is *about* the limits of tourism and touristic shows, accenting the dislocation between what tourists see and what the locals experience, taking us "behind the scenes" of Venice's spectacle to get a sense of what sociologist Dean MacCannell, in his studies of tourism, calls the "back story" here—taking us into an underground workshop where we see how the elements of that consumer spectacle are being produced.[12]

Fig. 10–4 John Singer Sargent, American, 1856-1925, *Venetian Glass Workers*, 1880/82, oil on canvas, 56.5 x 84.5 cm (22 ¼ x 33 ¼ in.), Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1217, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

At the same time, Sargent's picture works, characteristically, as a self-reflexive study about light, focusing attention on his own artistic processes and techniques. But what is most fascinating is the suggestion of an identity between these two levels of the painting: the Venetian women work in sad darkness as manipulators of light; and Sargent's canvas develops as a virtuoso experiment in Velázquez-like contrasts of darkness and light. Both Sargent and the glass workers are workers in light.

This analogy between Sargent and these local workers as artist figures comes more fully to the fore when we note that the bundles of light-conducting glass in the hands of each glassworker here are each rendered by a single stroke of Sargent's brush, with visible bristle marks defining the separate glass tubes. So in some sense these women, while making beads as objective vessels for light, are also seen to be absorbed in working on and with the brush strokes that make Sargent's painting. And they don't just look at this light; they are enthralled by it, they strain their bodies and scar their hands in the effort to touch it, cut it, craft it, forge forms out of it. This key painting then bares the machinery behind touristic spectacle, but at the same time bares the machinery behind the making of art.[13]

A much later painting that works very much the same way—with Sargent taking us again on a sort of pilgrimage to the sources of art—is the 1911

Fig. 10–5 John Singer Sargent, 1856–1925, American, *Bringing Down Marble from the Quarries to Carrara*, 1911, oil on canvas, 28 ⅛ x 36 ⅛ in. (71.4 x 91.8 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.97.1), Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Bringing Down Marble from the Quarries to Carrara (fig. 10–5). Not on every tourist's list of must-see sites in Italy, these fabled Carrara stone quarries seem to have attracted Sargent because they were said to be the source of the flawless stone used in some masterworks by Michelangelo. Sargent was also clearly fascinated by this Cezanne-like vision of angular, geometric shapes beginning to emerge out of the quarry mass, and by the delicate peach-tinted afternoon light reflecting off of these cube-like rocks. Like the female glass workers in Venice, these men are seen working in an underground workshop of art, behind the scenes of aesthetic production—using their ropes and bodily force to excavate and forge the colors and forms now latent within these stones, bringing them out for use as raw materials to be further refined by other professional artists working at a later stage in the aesthetic process. Their parallel ropes also strongly dramatize the rear-to-front sightlines and movement of the painting, as they seem physically to drag these newly-mined forms and colors to the fore for viewers—so that we can feel them viscerally as well as see them. These quarrymen, then, stand for Sargent as images of the artist not as leisured dilettante content to reflect on the surfaces of things but as an artisanal worker engaged in a physically straining activity—struggling to mine the depths of nature as aesthetic source.

On a later trip to the Middle East, Sargent focused on another group of local, subaltern male workers in *Egyptians Raising Water from the Nile* (fig. 10–6). This is a study not of marble but of the fluid medium of water; but the Egyptians, workers in this medium, here again are seen to be straining every muscle to mine its potential. In the Egyptian heat, they

Fig. 10–6 John Singer Sargent, 1856–1925, American, *Egyptians Raising Water from the Nile*, 1890–91, oil on canvas, 25 x 21 in. (63.5 x 53.3 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormaond, 1950 (50.130.16), Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

attach a supreme value to this water; they need to gather it in. So they stand in it, feel the heft of it, pour it, taste it, and are reflected in it. In the process of this multi-sensual bodily immersion, and using their artisanal machinery of buckets and leaf-lined troughs, they serve as conduits for water. With the aid of the weird rope-like contraption that descends from on high into the picture frame, they carry water from the back of the picture to the foreground. In this way, their work parallels or enacts the formal workings or self-reflexive formalist "plot" of Sargent's painting: they do what the painting also does. In other words: they might be seen as carriers of that beautiful blue color from its natural source in the background reservoir to that close-up foreground frame or container (perhaps a figure for the picture frame) where we can experience it. Pouring that bucket, it is as if they are at the same time pouring out a can of paint. Within the picture, then, these absorbed workers stand at the threshold, making possible our access to these natural raw materials and serving as models of a full response to them.

Subaltern Relatives of Madame Gautreau

Some of the local figures in Sargent's subject pictures, however, go beyond this function of giving access to or producing the raw materials for art, and are more directly and specifically represented and celebrated as artist/performers—subaltern relatives of Madame Gautreau, the "professional beauty"—making art themselves, using their own bodily movements as expressive vehicles, and so becoming mediators who translate the scene multi-sensually through the dramatic gestures of their personal performances.

In Capri, after a long search, Sargent found such a figure in this beautiful dancer (fig. 10–7), the model Rosina Ferrara, whose movement allows us to hear the percussion that grounds this epiphanic scene—her dramatic visual finger snap synaesthetically gathering the invisible

Fig. 10–7 John Singer Sargent, American, 1856–1925, *Rosina-Capri*, oil on canvas, overall: 127.5 x 164.6 cm (50 3/16 x 64 13/16 in.), An MFA Trustee and Her Spouse, Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photograph © [2013] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

rhythms produced by that background musician and precisely articulating the moment. Like a Madame Gautreau, this passionate folk dancer puts herself on the line as she performs her celebratory rite against the twilight sky, high up on a precarious whitewashed wall, gathering the scene into herself and so representing it.

Fig. 10–8 *El Jaleo*, 1882 (oil on canvas) (see 56294 for study), Sargent, John Singer (1856–1925) / © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library.

The Spanish flamenco dancer conjured in *El Jaleo* (fig. 10–8) similarly immerses herself in the passion of the music, engaged in a sensual, bodily, ritual performance of light, color, line, and rhythm—punctuated by dramatic arm gestures and an expertly manipulated gown—that makes her the expressive center of the scene. Not an elite artist but a popular dancer, probably an itinerant gypsy, she becomes, in this folk ritual, a model of the artist who can crystallize or concentrate for the collectivity the essence of a moment. If Sargent here is a detached observer, himself expertly manipulating lights and darks to capture this epitome of Spanish music and flamenco dance, his painting at the same time reflects a compensatory dream of impassioned engagement, total immersion in a scene, and the lead dancer is responded to not as a foreign other but as a comrade in aesthetic performance.

Fumée d'Ambre Gris (fig. 1–9), a culminating example in this line, pictures a more private, interior moment for a solitary woman; but although she is not performing for any audience, this white-clad lady appears to be preparing herself for a social occasion or a rendezvous. And this preparation

Fig. 10–9 *Fumee d'Ambre Gris*, 1880 (oil on canvas), Sargent, John Singer (1856–1925) / Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library.

involves a classic Sargent vision—a mysterious, evocative rite of meditative absorption or multi-sensual immersion that makes this figure, an elegantly dressed Arab woman performing her toilette, making herself beautiful, like a North African cousin of the cosmopolitan Madame Gautreau in Paris. Like Madame Gautreau's toast, the Moroccan woman's gesture of inviting in the pleasures of the senses—paying homage to the sources of beauty—makes her a charming central figure who compels the attention of the viewer. We become mesmerically absorbed in her private performance, just as she is mesmerically absorbed in the smoke rising from the ritual object before her. And in this way this performer is also herself a model viewer, witnessed as she performs a rite of immersive reception.

Here the immersion in the multiple senses of the scene involves the woman holding her veil over an incense burner, thus gathering in the fragrant

smoke of burning ambergris and opening herself to it—so that the musk-like aroma becomes incorporated into her hair, skin, lungs, and clothing. A product of the sea, ambergris is found in the intestines of sperm whales and was highly valued as an intoxicating perfume and aphrodisiac. By the gesture of opening herself and her senses to this aromatic smoke, the woman makes that subtle, almost invisible, element a part of herself and thus visible to us—just as Sargent's tour de force of painting makes the subtle nuances of sixteen shades of white in this light-filled atmosphere visible to us. Even exquisite modulations of white and cream can bring sensuous pleasures of the eye. (Take that, Whistler!) The *fumée* here is the equivalent of the rhythmic music that is the invisible base note of the scenes in *Rosina-Capri* and *El Jaleo*, and this woman makes herself the expressive vessel for that. While this picture may in some ways present the woman as a classically mysterious and exotic Orientalist subject, then, she also carries lessons for Sargent's Western viewers: standing at the threshold under a Moorish arch, she is opening doors of perception through her immersion in the elements of this exotic scene. We may approach her as visual spectators; she stands, though, as a model of a relation to the world that is not purely visual, detached, or spectatorial but is, on the contrary, emotional, multi-sensual, bodily, even erotic.

In making such picturesque figures central to his self-reflexive works about the making of art, Sargent also puts them forward to his viewers—absorbed in rituals of multi-sensual immersion in their local scene—as idealized models for the full experience of his paintings, and of the rich life experience available to artists, writers, and travelers now venturing beyond their bounded home spheres into engaged encounters in a cosmopolitan world.

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Notes

[1] For a general survey of the aesthetic goals and Bohemian ideals that attracted later-nineteenth-century Americans to the expatriate life in Europe, see Kathleen Adler, Erica E. Hirshler, and H. Barbara Weinberg, eds., *Americans in Paris 1860–1900* (London: National Gallery Company, 2006).

[2] Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) letter of 1881 (*Vernon Lee's Letters*), describing the twenty-five-year-old Sargent as an "accentless mongrel," cited in Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, "Sargent, John Singer (1856–1925)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, Jan. 2010 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35950].

Kilmurray and Ormond note that, while Sargent's American ancestry and identity remained important to him throughout his life, and in later years he sought to protect his reputation and status as an American artist, he was "essentially a cosmopolitan figure with international instincts and allegiances." Biographer Stanley Olson writes, "As 'home' was intensely mobile, national frontiers meant nothing to him. He did not know the impediment of 'foreign' languages." For more on Sargent's "nomadic existence," his family's "shifting expatriate life" and "chronic itinerancy," his "perpetual dislocation," and his contemporaries' fascination with the "enigma" of Sargent's hybrid cultural identity, see Stanley Olson, "The Question of Sargent's Nationality," in *John Singer Sargent*, ed. Patricia Hills (New York: Abrams/Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), 15, 17, 19.

[3] For more on the "cosmopolitan tradition" in American thought and writing, see Peter Gibian, "A 'Traveling Culture': Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature," *Annals of Scholarship* 14 no. 2 (Spring 2002): 5–23.

[4] For more on Irving's cosmopolitan vision, see Peter Gibian, "Writing between Worlds: Washington Irving and the Cosmopolitan Tradition in American Literature and Art," in *Cosmopolitans at Home and Abroad*, eds. William Hewitson and Yvonne Pelletier (forthcoming 2013).

[5] James, "Daisy Miller: A Study," in *Henry James: Major Stories and Essays*, ed. Leon Edel, et al. (New York: Library of America, 1999), 60.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Patricia Hills, "The Formation of a Style and Sensibility," in *John Singer Sargent*, ed. Patricia Hills, 29, 27. Hills argues that Sargent's "disengaged cosmopolitanism" reflected "the aestheticizing tendencies of the later nineteenth century," as seen in the international set of Henry James and Oscar Wilde: 33.

[8] On the history and pictorial effect of the giant Japanese vases in the Boit family portrait, see Erica E. Hirshler, *Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2009), 77–83.

[9] Following the lead of his teacher Carolus-Duran, Sargent had traveled to Spain in 1879 and copied ten works by Velázquez, including *Las Meninas*, in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. See Hirshler, *Sargent's Daughters*, 85.

[10] On the critical comment about "four corners and a void," see Hirshler, *Sargent's Daughters*, 108, 232–33.

[11] For more on Madame Gautreau's position as a "professional beauty," involving a late-nineteenth-century merger of fashion and Decadent art, see Albert Boime, "Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray," in *John Singer Sargent*, ed. Patricia Hills, 88–89. On the critical controversy surrounding the *Madame X* portrait, see Boime, 89–94, and Erica E. Hirshler, "At Home in Paris," in *Americans in Paris 1860–1900*, ed. Kathleen Adler et al., 79–80. For

a more anecdotal study of this scandal and of the life of Madame Gautreau, see Deborah Davis, *Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X* (New York: Penguin/Tarcher, 2004).

[12] Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 91–97.

[13] For detailed readings of *Venetian Glass Workers* and other Sargent works produced during this 1880–82 trip to Venice, see Linda Ayres, "Sargent in Venice," in *John Singer Sargent*, ed. Patricia Hills, 49–73. For an excellent overview of Sargent's work in Venice, see Richard Ormond, "Modern Life Subjects," in *Sargent in Italy*, ed. Bruce Robertson (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), 53–79.