

Expanded Vision: John Singer Sargent and his Italian Context

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John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) exemplifies the reception American artists received in the artistic centers of Europe in the late Nineteenth Century. All critical acclaim—especially as related to the development of stylistic narrative—arose from European ties rather than a sense of American identity. Born in Italy to American parents, yet with little connection to America, Sargent is discussed by scholars in terms of his European influences and similarities, which are most often French. The lack of national identity that defines Sargent's career is a significant indicator of the narrowness of the Nineteenth Century historical narrative, which focuses on the high points of European artistic achievement and most specifically the movements Realism, Impressionism, and Aestheticism. Although the artists affiliated with each of these approaches were colleagues and exchanged influences with Sargent, the expansion of the field of examination to non-French sources results in an enhanced complexity, at times clarity, and a far greater stylistic breadth.

In particular, the proximity of Sargent to Italian artistic forces throughout his life begs the question of why this stylistic exchange has been largely neglected until now. In part, this is due to the consistently defined narrative in the North, which is easily identified. No credit is paid to Italy because no defined event or consistent narrative exists outside of independent regions. This persistent regionalist focus, rather than a pan-peninsular artistic language, has locked Italy out of any transitional or Modernist historical identity. *Ottocento* art—art of the Nineteenth Century and the era of unification known as the Risorgimento—is linked almost exclusively to an artist's closest urban center. North of the Alps, however, artistic production is presented in the art historical narrative as a broader cultural dialogue, centered in France with counterparts in other provincial centers.

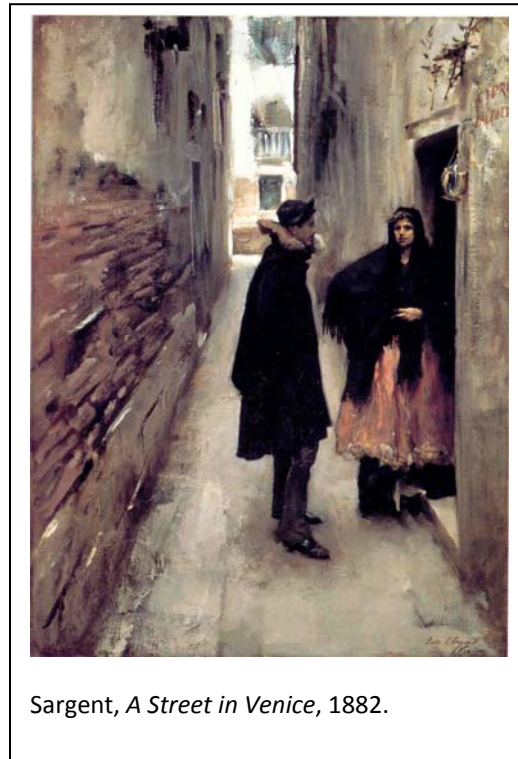
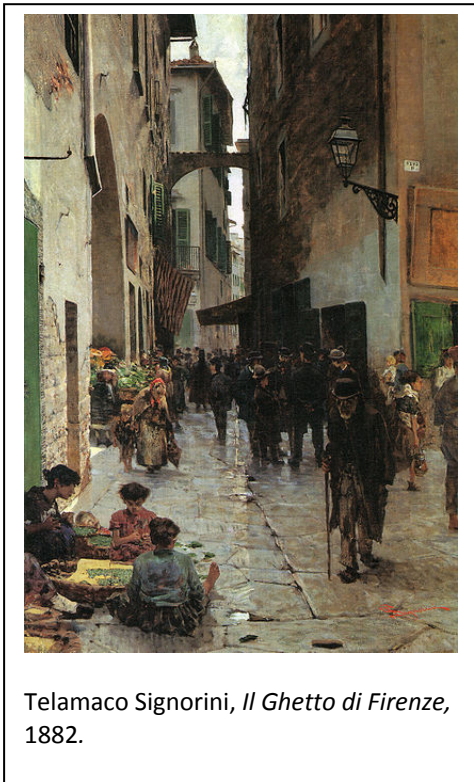
The result colors our perception of Sargent. Little critical distinction is made between his work and his English and French contemporaries. Stylistically, he's discussed in terms of

concurrent French artistic periods, almost as if by default. Studies that do focus on the Italian influence of Sargent diverge from a stylistic discussion and rely more on the atmospheric over the aesthetic, the site over the style. The parallel movements in Italy, including the style of the Macchiaioli in Tuscany, the aestheticism of the contemporary Scapigliatura movement in Northern Italy, and even the Realism in the South of Italy, receive only a scant mention. Two exceptions are the Neapolitan Antonio Mancini and Giovanni Boldini. The latter, Italian born, was a French resident. Mancini receives a passing mention as a friend with whom Sargent exchanged works. The stylistic result of this exchange, alas, goes unexplored.ⁱ Sargent's exhibition record in Paris at the Salon, and then in London at the Royal Academy, is most often the point of comparative analysis, rather than his sojourns among the Italian studios and salons.

Aiming to rectify this critical omission, the 2003 exhibition *Sargent and Italy* examines the many influences appearing in Sargent's work, including the Venetian misty vistas and the faithful depiction of costumes and setting. The question still remains, however. Did Sargent derive anything else from his Italian sojourns beyond the exotic setting? Does his work suggest a stylistic dialogue with Italian artists as well as those French artists?

Italy, in the Nineteenth Century, was a favorite destination for many American artists and writers. Rather than migrating to Italy at the beginning of his artist education as was common, Sargent was born in Florence to American parents. The Sargents spent their time traveling Europe, never settling in a permanent location. At times, Sargent set up studios in England and France, but would repeatedly return to Italy, most often to Venice. This diverse background allowed him to approach Italy in a manner altogether different from the majority of American artists. Bruce Robertson described Sargent's situation by writing, "Sargent was an American who was also an Italian."ⁱⁱ In many ways, he was able to act as an Italian native, and avoid the views and subjects that were the mainstay of artistic tourists. Because of this fairly unique position, Sargent was able to immerse himself in the environment and aesthetics of the country, at a time when many artists were painting images derivative of an already explored tradition. As opposed to the painted illustrations of famous buildings and landmarks, Sargent depicted the dark alleys of Venice, the backstreets of Italian neighborhoods, and fragmented studies of building façades.

It is likely Sargent was influenced by some of the many Italian painters he met during these frequent stays in Italy. In particular, the Macchiaioli stand out as a probable influence. Sargent's paintings of narrow, dimly lit claustrophobic streets are strikingly similar to works by Telemaco Signorini, one of the leading artists of this movement. Signorini's *Il Ghetto di Firenze* quite resembles Sargent's *A Street in Venice*. Both paintings were completed around 1882, and depict a darkened Italian street in the same perspective, with light hitting the buildings in the distance while foreground figures are cloaked in shadows.



It is this stylistic similarity that points to a significant artistic exchange between Sargent and the Macchiaioli. The name Macchiaioli is the name given to a group of artists centered around the patron and art critic Diego Martelli after the 1848 War of Independence. At first an informal gathering of artists, most of which were from Tuscany—with significant exceptions made for the Venetian Giuseppe Abbati and the Neapolitan Saverio Altamura—the group began to define their common aesthetic interests in order to suggest a nationalist school for the 1861 National Exposition. The locus for their artistic germination in the mid 1850s was the Caffè

Michelangiolo (sic.) in the Via Larga, Florence, half way between the Duomo and the Academy against which they rebelled. In the back room of the Caffè, these artists discussed their radical, liberal leanings in a variety of contexts.

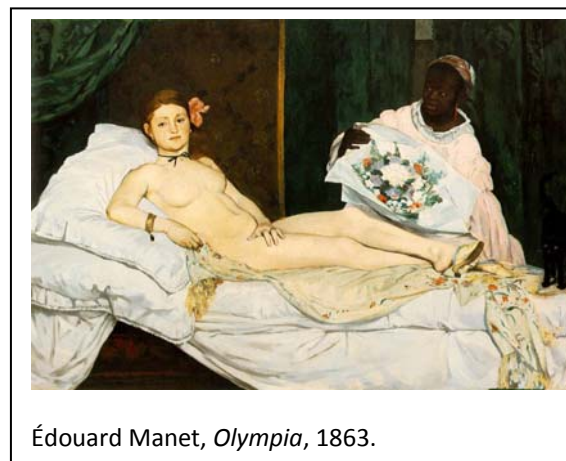
Artistically, their avant-gardism was based on natural light effects through plein-air painting. Their name derives from the word “macchia” or patch, and suggests the loose patches of color used to designate light and shadow, which is particularly apparent in one of Cabianca’s *Florentine Fortune-Teller*, 1860. Other suggestions for the significance of their name, one which they accepted by 1861, are political in nature, and refer to the land of the overgrown brush in the Maremma outside Florence (the *macchia*) where peasants worked as sharecroppers. Macchiaioli subjects, in turn, often focused on contemporary peasantry over historical allusion, and depicted the recognizable countryside and landmarks of Florence. Sargent’s own rejection of the conventional Italian scene stemming from *vedutista* painters indicates an overlap in content as well. Sargent likewise located his Italian characters in actual experience rather than a constructed image. His figures reflect contemporary local color instead of overused reference to an artistic past.

Current scholarship does not acknowledge the stylistic and narrative connections between Sargent and the Macchiaioli, and instead focuses on these characteristics as evidence of a response to Impressionism. Although a number of his works appear Impressionistic, and indeed share many similar aspects, Sargent was never an Impressionist painter. The main point of distinction was Sargent’s insistence on including black on his palette. He relied heavily on black in his paintings to create form through value, whereas Impressionist painters employed light and color for the same effect. In the summer of 1889, Sargent and Claude Monet reportedly painted together at Giverny. During this visit, according to Monet, Sargent was surprised and a bit frustrated with the Impressionist approach, especially since Monet did not have any black paint to lend him.ⁱⁱⁱ The black was incredibly important to Sargent’s style of painting, and he insisted on its use to define weight and form.

In contrast, the Macchiaioli frequently employed black in order to simplify tones in large compositional zones. The practice stemmed from their use of the blackened mirror and *camera lucida*, both of which were devices that aided in the reproduction of actual sites by simplifying

the value scale. The deep shadows that create the underlying structure of Macchiaioli paintings are most often completed with black, which are allowed to dominate the composition and create a pronounced rhythm. Compared to the frequent “all-over” approach of the Impressionists, where pigment is consistent in value across the surface, Sargent is stylistically far more aligned with the Macchiaioli.

In both cases, Sargent and the Macchiaioli, the bold exploration of value contrast may be a result from the study of photography and its occasional implementation as a tool. Impressionists were not resistant to the use of photography either, and points of comparison certainly exist between Sargent’s work and the Proto-Impressionist Édouard Manet. Reflections of Manet’s stark lights and darks are not far from those found in paintings like Sargent’s *El Jaleo*, but Sargent does not use photography to sacrifice modeling, and instead strives for a more naturalistic effect. In *El Jaleo*, tones blend together, and lights and darks still highlight the female figure and create a very dynamic scene. In contrast, Manet’s *Olympia*, or his *A Bar at the Folies-Bergères* employs starker contrasts, and a commanding presence of lights over darks. The nude figure and white drapery of the *Olympia* suggests an overexposed photograph; the female figure appears illuminated almost from within. In Sargent’s figure, however, there is a more subtle, moody shift of value that speaks to optical experience. His figure blends into the background, occasionally disappearing into the darks, while Manet’s *Olympia* and bartender exhibit a lack of modeling.



Despite these differences, Sargent's work is compared with Impressionist works first and foremost. Both tend to have bright, vibrant canvases, but as discussed, the technique employed is far different. Sargent's is often achieved through layers of rich glazes, which make the shadows come alive, while the Impressionists typically juxtapose brushstrokes of pure, unmediated colors in order to produce the effect of optical blending. In this aspect, Sargent also shifts dramatically from Macchiaioli practice, which conceived of the painted surface as interlocking planes of color and value, or "macchie." Due to his layered glazing, Sargent was able to achieve the same life and energy as Impressionism and still incorporate many darkened passages. His later watercolors are much brighter, with a wider range of hues, than his more famous oil paintings, and in some ways these paintings appear closer to Impressionism than anything else. Even then, however, he still placed a heavy emphasis on form over light and atmosphere. As Ratcliff describes, "Even the brightest of the watercolors Sargent painted in the last two decades of his life show a richness of color and sensitivity to the play of light that raises the question of an Impressionist allegiance while simultaneously denying it."^{iv}

Sargent's *Paul Helleu Sketching with His Wife* is often cited as an example of "American Impressionism."^v Loose brushwork, especially in the grass, multiple colors and the lightness of Sargent's palette all seem to suggest Impressionist tendencies, and deny Macchiaioli ones. The painting appears to adopt the spontaneous, sketchy quality of many Impressionist works, quickly capturing the moment. In the *Helleu*, Sargent provides both a modern subject and a



Sargent, *Paul Helleu Sketching with his Wife*,

passing moment, a contemporary painter caught in the act of painting. Nothing about the painting suggests a perfectly planned and plotted arrangement. It appears to simply illustrate an unstructured, casual afternoon rather than a carefully composed scene, as present in Macchiaioli works and the more formal society portraits that made Sargent a household name.

The figures in the *Helleu* portrait are surrounded by a sea of brushy grass. Details of the canoe are indicated by a few simple marks of color, and the paint brushes in the artist's hand are treated in a similar manner to the textured landscape. The pasty complexion on Helleu's wife is even similar to the starkness of Manet's frequent model, Victorine. Even in these Impressionistic paintings, however, Sargent's forms are still fully defined and volumetric, and the emphasis of the painting is still the form over the light that defines its surface. French Impressionist works tend towards a slight obscurity, where forms are not always clearly defined, even by the extraordinary draftsmanship of Degas. It is this concern for structure over surface, of definition over ambiguity that links Sargent to the works of Cabianca and his Macchiaioli compatriots.

The identification of Sargent with the Impressionists is due in no small part to the current popularity and critical recognition of that movement, but the earlier French movement of Realism is arguably a more justifiable comparison, even considering the similarities with the Macchiaioli artists. The stylistic similarity in the straightforward depiction of the world, both in carefully designed tonal structures and the accurate representation of social experience, appears in the works of Sargent, his French contemporaries Gustave Courbet and Rosa Bonheur, and the artists for which they provided inspiration, namely Manet and the Impressionists. Once again, though, the Italian Realist style that centered in the city of Naples provides both a stylistic, but also atmospheric and narrative prototype for Sargent's own approach.

Sargent had a strong background in the Realist aesthetic. As a young painter, he studied under the French artist Emile Carolus-Duran, who in turn studied with the founder of the movement in France, Gustave Courbet. After leaving Courbet's studio, Carolus-Duran travelled to Spain, where he was strongly influenced by Diego Velázquez, leading him to combine the two

approaches to develop a style of realism that was not quite as heavy as Courbet's work, but more contemporary than Velazquez's.^{vi}

Within a few years of study, Sargent had mastered Carolus-Duran's techniques and approach, and was able to incorporate it into his own investigations, moving directly from Manet to Velazquez.^{vii} In addition, Sargent's brand of Realism during the mid to late 19th century was dependent less on the socio-political aims of France, and more on the concentration of value discussed above. Many of his paintings combine elements of Realism into a wider stylistic vocabulary, as discussed above in relation to Impressionism. In some ways, he was a few steps removed from the actual Realist movement; he was chronologically separated from its height in France, and his mentor Carolus-Duran only borrowed in part from Courbet's approach. Carolus-Duran often urged his students to "express the maximum by means of the minimum," which in and of itself does not fully support the literalism of a Realist approach.^{viii} The particular Realist version of Sargent has more in keeping with the Realist schools in Italy, especially the strong Neapolitan Realist current present in the work of Antonio Mancini (1852-1930), a friend of Sargent's while both were studying in Paris. Mancini, returned to Italy in 1883, settling in Rome, while Sargent spent the intervening years travelling between Italy, the U.S. and Paris.

Mancini's paintings, of which Sargent owned five, represents the Realist current in Naples from the point of view of the street, an experiential and direct approach that is more pronounced than the more distant, stylistic and sometimes philosophical solutions of the North. Take for example Mancini's representation of the lively street performances from Naples in his *Saltimbanco after the Performance* from the early 1870s, now in the Sheldon and Irma Giglore Collection in Naples, Florida. The vertical format of the painting combines with a lushly painted surface that extends to a darkened, ambiguous background. The looseness of the brush work in the cloth barrier and the costume of the street performer do not dominate as much as the contrast between the illusionism of the trompe l'oeil coin at its surface and the face just beyond it. Mancini creates a highly active and energized surface through this push and



Antonio Mancini, *Saltimbanco after the Performance* (det.), 1877-78.

pull, but he did not sacrifice a Realist focus on fabric and experience associated with the Neapolitan school from which he came.

Naples, where Sargent spent summers during the 1870s, was known for a brand of realism that presented the world not simply for the artist's direct view, but instead for how the artist experienced it. Mancini's oeuvre is rife with figures off the street, revealing a descriptiveness that goes beyond the surface to include a shared experience. Mancini, like his compatriot Vincenzo Gemito (1852-1929), had first-hand knowledge of the street-life in Naples, a city less developed economically at the time of Unification in 1861. Once a jewel in the Bourbon crown, the city suffered a decline in economic and political power throughout the Nineteenth Century, and was most sharply felt after Unification and the expulsion of the Bourbon Monarchy. Its rich past gave way to poverty rates higher than the rest of Europe, and the continued corruption of the *camorra*, founded in 1820. As a result, the optimistic outlook that cloaked the Northern peninsula and the area North of the Alps during the second half of the twentieth century was absent South of Rome. Artists of this period reflected this in their depiction of street scenes, claustrophobic spaces, and abject poverty. As the art historian Nicola Spinosa suggests, Neapolitan artists like Mancini had an "intimate solidarity with the condition of the struggling peasant class."^{ix}

An example of experience over the pictorialism of the Impressionist or *vedutista* painters is found in Sargent's *Rialto Bridge, Venice* from 1883. The American Impressionistic artist Childe Hassam painted his *Rialto Bridge, Venice* in 1883, in his colorful and romanticized

view of Venice, represents the common practice among American painters of the time. Sargent's work, instead, breaks from the decorative to represent a style akin to Velázquez or Frans Hals. The dirt and grittiness Sargent shows us in his Rialto compositions, one from 1909 and one from 1911, literally shows the underside of the bridge, and the *gondolieri* at work. Earlier examples include his *Venice Interior* or *Street in Venice*, both of 1880-82.

Given Sargent's firsthand knowledge of Mancini and his work, the *Saltimbanco* also compares favorably with Sargent's own theatrical treatment of a full-length figure, *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth* of 1889. At first glance, Sargent's *Lady Macbeth* seems to stem from the



Sargent, *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*, 1889.

interest in theatricality and artificiality of his time, most notably represented by Oscar Wilde and James Abbot McNeill Whistler. Although Sargent understood this viewpoint, this was by no means the operating interpretation of this painting or similar ones. It is true that Sargent was,

as Carter Ratcliff describes, “always aware that art is artifice, whatever else it might be.”^x It is also well-known that Sargent made a career by depicting the pretensions and artifice of upper society. In this painting, however, Sargent presents the character of Lady Macbeth through the actress, Ellen Terry. Most painters who illustrate historical or literary scenes present the painting by event or fictional character. The Pre-Raphaelites, also active during the second half of the Nineteenth Century, were particularly fond of painting a vision of Ophelia or the Virgin Mary. In this work, however, Sargent paints the scene and titles it to call attention to the actual rather than the fictional. The viewer can easily recognize the stage make-up on the actress’s face, props and the stage of this particular production.^{xi}

The overtones of Aestheticism found in Sargent’s *Ellen Terry* portrait, point to Northern artists who, like Sargent, were compelled by the visual possibilities presented by Venice. Both Sargent and Whistler fell in love with similar scenes and atmospheres, ignoring the more traditional, tourist-minded images of their contemporaries. They were both intrigued by artifice, especially when presented by themes of transformation and transcending natural boundaries.^{xii} This, in turn, defined their relationship to Aestheticism, where subject was driven by artistic interests exclusively. Whistler describes the purpose of entitling his works ‘nocturnes,’ ‘arrangements’ and ‘harmonies’ by saying he wished to “...indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the pictures of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it... The picture is throughout a problem that I attempt to solve.”^{xiii} These tendencies are manifest in Sargent as his career proceeds, leading to a lighter touch, and a greater focus on the coloristic surface.

Whistler was not Sargent’s only point of reference for this Aestheticist focus. In Italy, during the end of the Nineteenth Century, the literary and artistic movement known as the Scapigliatura provided a liberated poetry style, best represented by Giosu  Carducci, and in painting the “unraveled” brushstrokes of painters like Pietro Troubetzkoy, Tranquillo Cremona, and Fillipo Carcano, and the activated surfaces of the sculptor Medardo Rosso. Centered primarily in Milan during the last two decades of the century, the interconnectedness of the arts became a primary motivation, as it had in England with Whistler, and in Germany with Richard Wagner.

During the latter Nineteenth, and early Twentieth Centuries, Sargent was moved by the shift towards a visually liberated and aesthetically inspired pictorial investigation. His society portraits became increasingly loose in brushstroke, volume dissipates, and the decorative manifests itself on the surface. In two works Sargent completed in the 1880s, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* of 1885-86, and *Garden Study of the Vickers Children* of 1884, the naturalism of the



Sargent, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885-86.

children's forms competes with the highly decorative treatment of the gardens. The comparison to Whistler is immediate, especially works like his *Symphony in White*, of 1862. Here, the floral carpet competes with the central figure within the delicately balanced surface. Similar treatments abound in the Scapigliatura movement, and one needs only to look at Tranquillo Cremona's *The Ivy* of 1878 or Luigi Conconi's *Female Head*, of 1885, to recognize a similar interest in surface over substance, and an aesthetic focus over a descriptive one.

Although it is clear that Sargent was dramatically affected by Northern European stylistic investigations, from Courbet to Whistler, the Italian presence is equally undeniable in his work. This presence goes far beyond the choice of scenic subject matter to encompass an approach, both in technique and overall vision. Without this full understanding of the effect that his many sojourns, beginning in infancy, to his artistic vocabulary, only half of Sargent's

story is being told. With a greater attention to the immediate influences of the Italian exhibition salons and private studios, Sargent becomes not an artist traced from one particular lineage, but an individual interpreter of a particular artistic experience.

ⁱ J. Dini et al. *Sargent and Italy*, 2003, pp. 172-73.

ⁱⁱ B. Robertson, "Introduction" from *Sargent and Italy*, p. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ C. Ratcliff, *John Singer Sargent*, 2001, p. 122.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 97.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 121, and Broude, *World Impressionism*, 1994.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 37.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 38.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 39.

^{ix} Gioacchino Toma, *Ricordi di Orfano*, p. 51.

^x Ratcliff, 119.

^{xi} The tradition of actor portraits was not unknown at this time. In Italy, Francesco Hayez painted portraits of Giovanni David from the play *The Arabs in Galilee*, and the ballerina Carlotta Chabert as Venus both from 1830. The same artist's portrait of Carlo Prayer as Alp from *The Siege of Corinth* (1832) is the subject of a previous study by one of the present authors. Sommer, "Shifting Identities: Politics, Poetry and Passion in Italian Nineteenth-Century Portraiture," *Visual Resources* (Fall, 2007).

^{xii} Ratcliff, 156.

^{xiii} Steiner, 29.

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