

PORTRAITS
&
PERSONALITIES

A Teachers' Guide to Selected Works from
Whistler, Sargent, and Steer: Impressionists in London
from Tate Collections

Whistler, Sargent, and Steer: Impressionists in London from Tate Collections

This exhibition, curated exclusively for the Frist Center, serves as a wonderful resource for teachers and students. Not only is it a visual feast that will appeal to visitors of all ages, but it addresses themes and concepts taught across the curriculum.

This exhibition can be used to teach how ideas are absorbed and transmitted across time and cultures. James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, and Philip Wilson Steer all spent their formative years in Paris in the middle to late 19th century. There, they absorbed the exciting, even avant-garde ideas of the Realists and Impressionists, and were inspired by Japanese art that was then becoming popular in the West during this time. Whistler, Sargent, and Steer are often credited with bringing modern art to London at the end of the 19th century.

This Teachers' Guide will prepare teachers and their students to visit this exhibition, and to serve as a follow-up study. Selected works from *Whistler, Sargent, and Steer* have been organized into a unit on portraiture, a subject of great interest to the artists represented.

An introduction to portraiture lists general questions that guide students' perceptions and analyses of portraits. Following are four lessons, each focusing on one or two works of art from the exhibition, and are reproduced in color. Each lesson opens with a series of questions ("Dialogue") designed to encourage students to look closely and to share their initial responses. This activity is followed by information on the artwork ("Narrative") that can be incorporated into discussions or provided as reading assignments for older students, and a concluding activity ("Creative Response"). At the end of the unit is a vocabulary key and suggestions for extended activities adaptable to all ages. In the Appendix are biographies of Whistler, Sargent, and Steer, as well as narratives related to the art historical and cultural contexts of the exhibition.

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Introduction: What is a portrait?

People and their social interactions have been depicted in visual art throughout time, particularly in **portraits**. Before photography, having a portrait painted or sculpted was the only means of capturing a likeness, so much of what we know about people who lived before the 1850s is available to us only through portraits.

Many portraitists, however, are interested in representing more than what someone looks like. They also want to convey what the person is like. As we study a portrait, we may discover a public **persona** as well as a private personality. We may also become aware of the artist and of his/her relationship with the subject, since we are seeing the subject through the artist's eyes.

Although a portrait generally represents a particular person, the **style** varies according to when and where both the subject and the artist lived; why the portrait was created; where the work would hang; and the artist's own particular temperament, background and skills. Each of the three artists featured in *Whistler, Sargent and Steer: Impressionists from Tate Collections* developed a personal style synthesized from the work of the old masters, the Realists and French Impressionists working in the second half of the 19th century, and from Japanese art.

Questions to ask about a portrait

- Who **commissioned** the portrait?
- Why was it painted?
- Where was it going to be displayed?
- Do you think the sitter was pleased with the finished portrait?
- What do the objects in the portrait symbolize? Do they say something about the **sitter**?
- What size is the portrait: life-size, bigger, or smaller? How does this affect your impression of the sitter?
- How is the sitter posed? Is the portrait of the whole body, just the head, or the head and upper body? Why do you think this choice was made?
- Is the portrait a realistic or **idealized** depiction of the person?

Visual clues in a portrait

In studying a portrait, the sitter's identity is key. Viewers often must decode the image to learn all they can. Portraits generally hold visual clues that can be found by looking closely at:

- Costume – What do the clothes say about the sitter's position in society and the time when the portrait was painted? Who do you think chose the costume—the artist or the sitter?
- Body language and facial expression – What kind of personality does the sitter or artist want to suggest?
- Background – What does the setting tell you about the sitter?
- Accessories and objects – Do they give explicit or hidden clues to the sitter's personality or status?
- Pose – Is the portrait of the whole body, just the head, or the head and upper body? Why do you think this choice was made?
- Size – How does size and scale affect the viewer's ideas about the sitter?
- Style – How does this affect how the viewer perceives the sitter's identity?

Lesson 1: James McNeill Whistler

James McNeill Whistler was one of the great innovators of 19th century art, and was one of the first artists to declare, “the subject of painting is painting itself.” The use of words like “harmony” and “symphony” in his titles conveys Whistler’s belief that a painting should, like music and poetry, convey a mood through color relationships and graceful forms.



Harmony in Grey and Green: Miss Cicely Alexander, 1872
Oil on canvas. 74.88” x 38.5”. © Tate London, 2002

Dialogue

- How old do you think this girl is?
- What does her facial expression tell us?
- How would you describe the clothes she is wearing?
- How would you describe the colors Whistler has used?
- What geometric shape does the girl’s head and body form?
- What shapes make up the background?

Narrative

Cicely Alexander was eight years old when her father, W. C. Alexander, a wealthy London banker and oriental art collector, commissioned Whistler to paint this portrait. Wanting to

control every detail of the composition, the artist designed Cicely’s dress and hat, and even the carpet on which she stands. Because Whistler made few preliminary drawings for his paintings, he required prolonged poses for these portraits while he composed the picture directly on the canvas. Whistler demanded more than seventy sittings with Cicely, who later recalled that she “often finished the day in tears.”

Whistler was an admirer of the 17th century master Velazquez, court painter to the king of Spain. In both pose and **tonal harmonies** *Cicely Alexander* is reminiscent of the Princess Margarita in Velazquez’s famous painting, *Las Meninas* (below). However, Whistler deliberately shows off his very modern view that a painting is as much an arrangement of lines and paint as it is a portrait.

He arranged his composition according to a precise geometrical design, with Cicely’s head and body forming a triangle, and her hat creating a circular counterpoint. The vertical line to her left divides the simple backdrop into two rectangles. The setting is austere, and made even more so by the severe right angle in the paneled background. The stark color palette is limited to gradations of gray, and is balanced only by the delicate beauty of the playful butterflies, white daisies, and Cicely herself. Even the costume seems constructed; thin, stained underlayers of paint are covered by a quickly-painted upper layer that makes up the pleats and patterns of her dress, each applied with flowing brushstrokes.

Creative Response:

Take turns posing before the class. Have students guess what you are thinking or feeling by your pose and facial expression.



Diego Velázquez, Spanish, 1599-1660.
Las Meninas, 1656. Oil on canvas,
10’5 ¼” x 9’ ¾”. Museo del Prado



Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl, 1864

Oil on canvas. 30.12" x 20.12". © Tate London, 2002

Dialogue

- What is the setting for this portrait?
- Compare the young woman's face with her reflection in the mirror. What differences do you see?
- At what is she gazing? What do you think she is thinking about?
- Which objects tell of Whistler's interest in Japanese art and culture?
- How would you describe the overall mood of this portrait?
- This painting has a two-part title. Why do you think Whistler calls this work a symphony?

Narrative

This picture depicts Joanna Hiffernan, an Irish woman who was Whistler's principal model and muse from 1860 until 1866. Her wistful gaze, long chestnut-colored hair, and prim Victorian dress evoke the style of the **Pre-Raphaelites**. The fan, blue-and-white vase, and spray of pink flowers reflect Whistler's deep admiration for Japanese culture, and also provide color notes that punctuate this tonal composition. Whistler did not intend for this to be a portrait of Jo, but a portrayal of an emotion. An aura of reverie is reinforced by the reflection of Jo's face in the mirror as she stares longingly at her golden wedding band. The painting inspired the contemporary British poet Algernon Swinburne to write a poem entitled "Before the Mirror." Whistler was so pleased with it; he had it printed on gold paper and pasted onto the original frame, hoping to reinforce the poetic mood of his work:

*Glad, but not flushed with gladness,
Since joys go by;
Sad, but not bent with sadness,
Since sorrows die;
Deep in the gleaming glass
She sees all past things pass,
And all sweet life that was lie down and lie.*

Creative Response

Look carefully again at *The Little White Girl*. Write your own poetic response to the painting.

Lesson 2: John Singer Sargent

Portraits are intended to show a likeness of a person, but often tell much more. John Singer Sargent was considered one of the great portrait painters of the 19th century; his portraits were famous for their composition, brushwork, and psychological insight into the character of the sitter.

Very large portraits of sisters were fashionable in London around 1900, and Sargent produced a number of these **group portraits**. He enjoyed contrasting different personalities within members of a single family.



The Misses Hunter, 1902, Oil on canvas, 90 ¼” x 90 ½”. ©Tate London, 2002

Dialogue

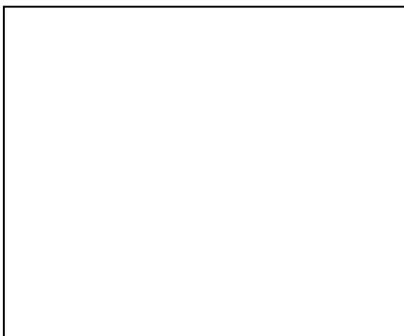
- Two of the sisters are looking out at us, while the third sister looks in another direction. In what other ways are they different from their sister? What might Sargent have been telling us about the relationship between the three sisters?
- Which parts of the portrait show the most detailed brushwork? Which parts show the least?
- Can you guess the fabric from which their gowns are made?
- Where does it appear Sargent was standing when he painted this portrait?
- Why do you think the dog was included in the portrait?

Narrative

This portrait shows why Sargent’s was considered to be the leading society portrait painter of the time, whose work contributed to the image of wealth in Edwardian society. Sargent was commissioned to paint Kathleen, Cary Phyllis, and Sylvia Hunter by their mother, Mary, who was a leading Edwardian society hostess and a close friend of Sargent. His innovative composition arranges the sisters around a “confidante” or circular sofa in front of a Japanese screen. The central figure holds a fan, which mimics the semi-circular shape of the young women’s full skirts. Her hand, linked with that of her sister, leads your eye down to their dog Crack, lying center-stage on her skirt. Even though the sisters are seated in relaxed positions, the painting has been given vivacity by the quick vertical and diagonal brushstrokes Sargent used to describe the ornate clothing.

Creative Response

Misses Hunter is a very large painting, 7 ½ feet square! Can you think of another placement for three figures in a square **format** that would make an interesting composition? Sketch them in the square below.





Ena and Betty, Daughters of Mr. And Mrs. Asher Wertheimer, 1901. Oil on canvas. 73'' x 51 ½''. © Tate London, 2002

Dialogue

- Discuss the personality of each of these sisters. In what ways are they different? How does Sargent show this?
- Where do you think they are standing?
- Name the objects in the painting and what they may tell us about the social status of the sisters.
- For what occasion do you think they are dressed?
- Do you think the girls' parents might have been pleased with their portrait? Why?

Narrative

Asher Wertheimer was a successful British art dealer. Over a period of several years he commissioned Sargent to paint twelve portraits of himself and his family. Three years after painting the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Wertheimer, Sargent began painting their four sons and six daughters. This portrait shows the two eldest daughters, Elizabeth ("Betty"), aged twenty-four and Helena ("Ena"), aged twenty-seven, in the luxurious interior of their father's drawing room in London. They appear as if they have just swept in, dressed to the nines, to be admired by the party.

Sargent was attracted to the charming Wertheimer family, in particular to the vivacity of Ena, which he successfully conveys here with her uplifted head and parted lips. He positioned the young women in motion, with Ena clasping one arm around her younger sister, while also capturing the differences in the fabric of the dresses, contrasting the rich velvet with the shine of the white damask.

Creative Response

Compare the portrait of Ena above with the one Sargent made of her four years later. Has your impression of Ena changed? What more has the artist told you about her?



John Singer Sargent. *Portrait of Ena Wertheimer: A Vele Gonfie, 1905.* Oil on canvas. 64.17'' x 42.52''. ©Tate London, 2002

Lesson 3: Philip Wilson Steer



Mrs. Cyprian Williams and Her Two Little Girls, 1891
Oil on canvas. 30" x 40 1/4". © Tate London, 2002 and
The Estate of Wilson Steer

Dialogue

- Look closely at Mrs. Williams' facial expression. What is her mood? Give reasons for your opinion.
- How has the artist divided the picture in half? What effect does that have on the people in this portrait?
- Where was the artist standing in relationship to the people in this portrait? What effect does this have on the painting?
- Do you think her portrait flattered Mrs. Williams? Why or why not?

Narrative

Mrs. Cyprian Williams was an artist who exhibited with Steer and Sargent at the New English Art Club. The portrait was commissioned by Francis James, an artist friend of Steer's, rather than by the sitter or her husband. This gave Steer more freedom in creating his composition since he was not trying to please Mrs. Williams.

Steer cleverly reveals the character of Mrs. Williams. She was notorious for her distinctive features and volatile temperament, traits captured by Steer in her sharp profile, severe gaze, and taut extended fingers. Like Sargent, Steer favored unusual compositions in his portraits. The striking overhead perspective created by Steer's looking down on Mrs. Williams reflects not only the artist's awareness of compositions by the French artist Edgar Degas (below), but gives an additional edge to Mrs. Williams' personality.

The two girls are on a bench that divides the picture diagonally, a device that separates them emotionally from their mother. The children are dressed in austere black, rather than the frilly pastel dresses of the time. Their Japanese dolls, as well as the printed fabric on the armchair, allude to Steer's and perhaps Mrs. Williams' interest in Japanese art.

Creative Response

Think about Steer's arrangement of figures. Make a drawing in which you show two or more people emotionally distanced from each other.



Edgar Degas. *The Ballet Class*. c. 1878-1880.
Oil on canvas. 32 1/8" x 30 1/8".
Philadelphia Museum of Art. W. P. Wiltach
Collection.

Lesson 4: Portraits or Landscapes?



John Singer Sargent
Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of a Wood,
 ca. 1885. Oil on canvas. 21 ¼" x 25 ½".
 © Tate London, 2002

Dialogue

- Look at the artist Monet and the equipment he is using. What does this tell us about how Sargent and Monet painted?
- Describe the way Sargent has put paint onto his canvas.
- How could you describe the style of the painting? For example, is it detailed like a photograph or more like a sketch?
- What mood does Sargent create in this painting? What **visual elements** contribute to this mood?
- At what time of year do you think this was painted? How do you know?
- What is the light source? Can you see the sky or the sun?
- Think about the colors Sargent used. Does he use many different colors and do they look realistic? What is the predominant color of the woman's dress? Why does Sargent add other bold strokes of color to her garment – blue, greys, and russets? What are these varicolored brush marks suppose to describe?

Narrative

This is a landscape painting depicting a man who is painting a landscape! The picture shows the French Impressionist Claude Monet before his easel, and was made when Sargent visited him during the summer of 1885, near his home in Giverny in northern France. This picture tells us two important things: that these artists were friends, and that they chose to work outdoors (*en plein-air*) and directly in front of the subject.

Sargent met the French Impressionist Claude Monet in 1876. This casual sketch of Monet and a young woman, possibly his stepdaughter Suzanne Hoschede, is quite different from Sargent's more formal, posed portraits. The loose brushwork and vivid colors are a conscious study and utilization of the Impressionist style. By documenting Monet's mode of painting, the work serves both as a depiction and example of out-of-doors painting, which Sargent greatly admired. The painting on which Monet is working, *Meadows with Haystacks at Giverny*, is now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Creative Response

On a sunny day, go outdoors to draw the same landscape at noon and early evening. Focus on **value** patterns created by sunlight and shadow. How do your two drawings differ?



Philip Wilson Steer

Girls Running, Walberswick Pier, 1888-94

Oil on canvas. 24 ¾ x 36 ½ in. ©Tate London, 2002 and the Estate of Wilson Steer

Dialogue

- Who are the main characters in this painting?
- Describe the setting and time of day depicted.
- What is the general mood of this painting?
- What effect do the shadows have on the painting?
- How do the colors and brushwork of this painting compare to Sargent's painting of *Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of a Wood*?
- Notice the texture of this painting and describe how the paint might have been applied.
- Is this a portrait or a landscape? If neither, how would you classify it?

Narrative

Steer took Impressionism to the English seaside. Almost every year from 1884 to 1891, he returned to the little port of Walberswick in Suffolk on Britain's east coast. Unlike Sargent, who knew the people he painted, the children and adults in Steer's landscapes and portraits often turn their backs to the viewer.

Girls Running, Walberswick Pier is one of Steer's best-known paintings and one of his largest Impressionist paintings. In it, he captures both the atmosphere of Walberswick and the vivacity of young girls as they run toward the artist and viewer. Their orange faces have only a suggestion of features, and their awkwardly synchronized motion, coupled with the fact that, although they are not holding hands, their shadows are, lends to the painting a dreamlike quality. The energetic brushwork and vivacious coloring evoke an outwardly cheerful, lighthearted mood, but there are some ambiguous undertones in Steer's composition.

In the far right hand corner are the shadows of three unseen figures. One of them might be that of the artist himself, who would have stood in this location to sketch the scene. The thick paint is an indication that the composition was heavily reworked, and that at least one element—the three figures in the background—was adapted from an earlier painting, *The Beach at Walberswick*. Unlike a portrait, this painting does not present these girls as individuals; rather, they are anonymous figures in a landscape.

Creative Response

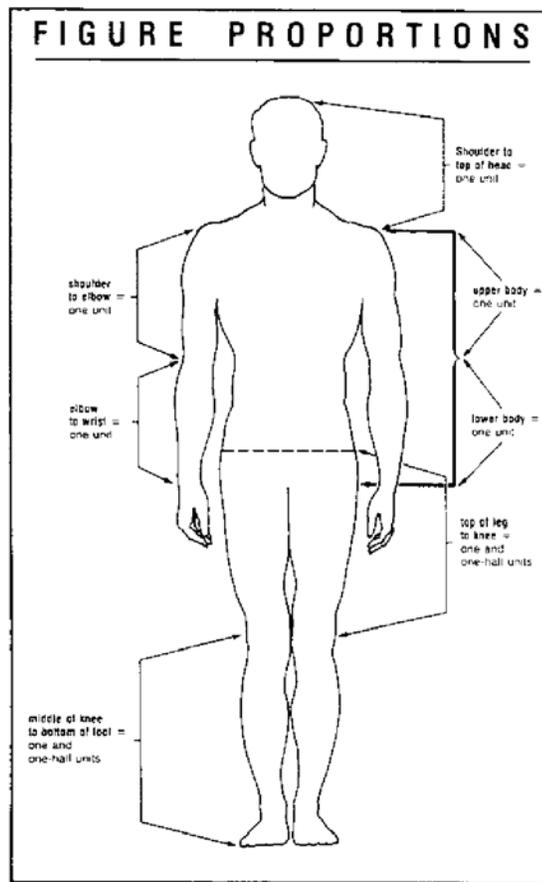
Working from a photograph of a person, re-create the figure using only dabs and dashes of paint to suggest the **form** of the person.

VOCABULARY

- **Commission:** a work of art requested and paid for by an individual
- **Form:** an identifiable shape or mass
- **Format:** the shape of a canvas
- **Group portrait:** a portrait of several people together.
- **Idealized:** in a portrait, the portrayal of someone with a greater degree of perfection than would ordinarily be found in any particular person.
- **Persona:** Latin name for masks worn by actors; an individual's social façade for the public.
- **Portrait:** a likeness of a person or group, made either from a posed sitting or a photograph
- **Pre-Raphaelites:** artists of 1850s and 60s who rejected the traditional subjects of the Royal Academy, and turned instead to those which addressed moral and ethical issues, or struck a poetic chord. Biblical texts, poetry, and contemporary social problems were frequent sources of inspiration.
- **Sitter:** the subject of the portrait
- **Style:** how an artist chooses to create the likenesses
- **Tonal harmonies:** the synchronized relationship of darks and lights.
- **Value:** the range of darks and lights in a work of art
- **Visual elements:** line, shape, texture, light, value, color, and space; the fundamentals with which artists construct pictures

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

- With a box and paint or collage materials, create images that represent your public persona and private identity. The images on the outside of the box might represent the “public” person seen by others, those on the inside, the “private.”
- Collect images of people from magazines. Try to decode these images. What do costume and setting convey? What social “types” do these images present? What kind of lifestyle is suggested through specific symbols?
- Think of someone you know well. Is there something that person always wears or carries that seems to express their unique identity? Discuss symbols that are personal, compared to symbols that are associated with a group or community. Give examples.
- Draw or paint a full-length portrait of a model. Observe carefully the shape and proportions of the figure. Consider your subject’s personality and interests in determining the dress, pose, facial expression, setting, and props that tell something about that person.



APPENDIX

Contexts for understanding the work of Whistler, Sargent, and Steer

Artists can be best understood by examining the various circumstances that influence their work. Examining the art historical context illuminates the past and contemporary artists and art movements from which an artist may borrow. Studying an artist's biographical context gives us insight into his or her personal and psychological life, aspects of which may be expressed in the works. Learning about the cultural context provides a broad backdrop against which the work is set.

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

James McNeill Whistler was one of the great innovators of nineteenth-century art. The son of an engineer, he attended the United States Military Academy at West Point for three years, where he illustrated several student publications. Afterward he worked as a surveyor and cartographer for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, where he was introduced to the basics of printmaking.

His formal training as an artist took place between 1855 and 1859 in Paris, where he studied art in the studio of the academic painter Marc-Gabriel Charles Gleyre. Whistler absorbed contemporary and historical influences ranging from the tonally controlled paintings of seventeenth-century Spanish painter Diego Velázquez and lyrical beauty of the Pre-Raphaelites to the bold paintings of Realists artists. In Paris, he became friends with Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet, with whom he shared a preference for broad and freshly applied brushstrokes and beautiful, yet subtle, color harmonies.

In 1859 he moved to London, where he created thirty-one *Nocturnes*, conveying the barest of impressions of London's Thames River at twilight or night. One of the series, *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket* (ca. 1875) offended the art critic John Ruskin, who asked how the artist could charge "two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, and after a highly public trial was awarded only one farthing (worth a quarter of a penny!) in damages.

He was particularly receptive to the art of Japan, which by the 1860s was being exhibited frequently in the West. With their emphasis on color harmonies, decorative patterns, asymmetry, flattened perspective, and expressive lines, Japanese paintings, pottery, and prints showed the way for Whistler to escape the confines of Realism and invent a new language of expressive color and form. Whistler's synthesis of artistic achievements across times and cultures, and the sophistication with which he explored the beauty and expressive possibilities of controlled color and tone, influenced artists from France, Britain, and the United States long into the twentieth century.

JOHN SINGER SARGENT

John Singer Sargent was born in Florence to an American couple, Dr. Fitzwilliam Sargent and Mary Newbold Singer. Dr. Sargent was a surgeon who retired from a lucrative practice in Philadelphia and brought his family to Italy in 1856. By the mid-nineteenth century many affluent Americans were making their way across the Atlantic to Europe, in search of culture and new experiences.

Customarily, a "Grand Tour" of Europe might last up to five years and was considered an essential educational experience for a young person of means. For Mary and Fitzwilliam Sargent the tour became a journey, which lasted for the rest of their lives. The Sargent family traveled from city to city, never settling in one place for more than a year.

As a boy, Sargent was adept at drawing and frequently sketched the sites encountered during the family's travels. Sargent's parents thought his interest in art was a childhood enthusiasm that would disappear over time. Fitzwilliam Sargent hoped young John would follow the family tradition and pursue a career in the Navy. He learned later that his only son had no such ambition.

Sargent's mother supported his artistic pursuits since she herself was accomplished in painting and drawing. On the days she went out to sketch she encouraged him to join her. She always insisted he select one drawing and finish it regardless of how many others he started that day. She stated, "One did not learn by hasty improvisation and it was not well to allow children to feel that something so difficult could simply be abandoned."

At eighteen, Sargent settled in Paris to study art. He spoke French fluently and adopted the French culture as his own. Clearly Sargent was the most advanced pupil in his class. A classmate described him as being "one of the most talented fellows I have ever come across, his drawings are like the old masters, and his color is equally fine."

Sargent in Paris

In the 1860s Paris was fast becoming the art capital of the world, attracting many young painters and sculptors seeking to break new ground. One of the major struggles unfolding in that decade was between the youthful, avant-garde artists, and the conservative French Academy, which dominated training and exhibition opportunities.

The most celebrated challenge posed to the authority of the French academy took place in 1863, when a large number of artists rejected from the annual Paris Salon exhibition successfully lobbied for an alternative display space, labeled the "Salon des Refuses." It was at this exhibition that Manet's radical *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) created a scandal, as did Whistler's equally revolutionary *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862).

By the time Sargent arrived in Paris to begin studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1874, exhibition and training opportunities were expanding. He made drawings after antique statuary and emulated the painting techniques of the old masters, in accordance with the school's more conservative methods. At the same time he was taking classes at the studio of the relatively progressive Emile Carolus-Duran, whose portrait he painted in 1879. Here Sargent learned to admire the fluidity and drama of Velazquez's brush strokes and his ability to represent realistic space and time. Carolus-Duran also championed the importance of painting "alla prima"

(painting directly onto a canvas with no underpainting). These lessons ultimately led Sargent to develop the confident, bravura style of painting for which he is now celebrated.

During these years Sargent was influenced by contemporary artists such as Edouard Manet (1832-83). He also became familiar with the work of Claude Monet (1840-1926) and other avant-garde artists who were subsequently to be known as the Impressionists. In their paintings, they portrayed the world with quick, vibrant brush strokes, dissolving subjects into light and color to capture the very essence of a moment in time. Disregarding the time-honored painting traditions of the French Academy, these independent artists rejected classical motifs, dramatic moments in history, and religious or moral narratives. Instead they chose to paint subjects that they felt reflected their own time, but with a new technique that took advantage of developments in color theory and the availability of collapsible tubes of brightly colored oil paints.

During these years, Sargent tried his hand at different subjects and exhibited a number of canvases at the official Salon, winning praise and a few awards. However, his provocative full-length portrait *Madame X* created such a scandal at the Salon of 1884 that Sargent began to lose commissions. Two years later, still suffering the scandal's aftermath, Sargent relocated in London.

PHILIP WILSON STEER

Philip Wilson Steer is regarded as the most thoroughly Impressionist of all British artists. Born in Birkenhead, England in 1860, he was the son of a painter and studied art in England before moving to Paris in 1882 where he continued his studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1883 and 1885 and at the Paris Salon in 1884. It wasn't until after his return to England in the summer of 1884 that he adopted the style of Impression that he had seen in France.

Like many artists of his generation, he greatly admired Whistler, whose influence is especially apparent in such early works as *The Bridge* (1887-88), with its smooth surface, glowing atmosphere, lack of detail, and depiction of boats at anchor. Contemporary critics also noted Steer's debt to Claude Monet, whose paintings he had probably seen in an 1883 exhibition of French Impressionism in London. His figurative work recalls Degas' compositional effects.

By the beginning of the 1890s, Steer was the leading follower of French Impressionism in England. Steer's brand of Impressionism featured a summary sketching of a scene, with dabs and strokes of paint often barely defining people and the landscape. A favorite subject was the port of Walberswick in Suffolk, which Steer visited nearly every year from 1884 to 1891. Steer's views of the beach have a shimmering quality of light, arising from his use of intense colors, drawn on with a brush to suggest the sunlight playing across the varied surfaces of figures, water, boats, and sand.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s Steer was active in establishing alternative exhibitions in London. In 1886 he became a founding member of the New English Art Club where he exhibited his paintings alongside works by Sargent. From about 1895, Steer's style underwent a radical change as he began to consciously emulate the works of the British Romantic painters Joseph Turner and John Constable. In the early 1890s he began to paint in watercolor and experimented with gouache, although he always regarded oil as his primary medium.

AMERICANS ABROAD

We tend to think of the great tide of European immigrants who made their way to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and to be less aware of the flow of prosperous Americans traveling in the opposite direction. John Singer Sargent's parents were part of that exodus.

Many Americans owed their wealth to real estate, oil, railroads, and steel enterprises, which allowed them a leisurely life traveling between the spas, resorts, and cultural centers of old Europe. A romantic fascination for classical ruins meant that by 1866 over 2,000 Americans were living in Rome.

By the mid-nineteenth century the allure of Paris was heightened by its reputation for artistic experimentation and libertinism. Henri Murger wrote Scenes from Bohemian Life, glamorizing the penniless artist living in an attic having passionate affairs with women from all walks of life. The book was an international best seller, forming the basis of the opera La Boheme. It was a powerful dream for Americans well into the twentieth century.

Sargent's compatriots, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), rejected the provincialism of nineteenth-century American art and were drawn into the more avant-garde artistic circles in France and England. Whistler, like Sargent after him, shuttled restlessly between London, Paris, and Venice; while Cassatt, daughter of a Philadelphia banker, settled in France becoming a major Impressionist painter.

Among the American writers who lived in Europe were Edith Wharton (1862-1937) and Henry James (1843-1916) who, like Sargent, had spent their early years abroad and returned to live there as adults. As a young man, James journeyed to Paris and in later life settled in England; a lifelong theme of his writing was the confrontation between unsophisticated but enthusiastic American innocents and their worldly European counterparts.

If the example of Whistler and Cassatt motivated Sargent to study art in Paris, it was Henry James who beckoned him to England. In London, James introduced Sargent to the local art community and threw a lavish party to present him to English society.

Over the years, many of Sargent's clients were Americans with a passion for all things European. Edward Darley Boit, for example, was a wealthy lawyer who gave up his practice to study art, first in Rome, then Paris, where Sargent painted his four daughters.

At the outbreak of the First World War when the United States initially declined to join the Allied side, both Sargent and James found themselves for the first time questioning their American identity. James revoked his American citizenship and became a British citizen while Sargent became an official British war artist.

VICTORIAN and EDWARDIAN ENGLAND

The world that Whistler encountered, as also for Sargent and Steer, was one balanced between the Victorian period of apparent stability and settled values and the onset of a new century of war and industrial and social strife. These three painters encapsulated this particular moment — people and places at a time of great change—in ways that now seem peculiarly timeless.

—Sandy Nairne, Preface to catalogue, *Whistler, Sargent, and Steer: Impressionists in London from Tate Collections*

Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901, presiding over a vast empire at a time when every aspect of British life was being transformed by industrialization and its attendant bounty of mass-produced consumer goods. A source of national pride, Britain's material achievements were triumphantly showcased to the world at the Crystal Palace erected in Hyde Park in 1851.

Although political storms swept across Europe and America, Britain largely avoided internal unrest; yet there were dramatic inequalities in society. The landed gentry and those made rich by industrial investments built mock classical, Tudor, or Gothic mansions in the countryside. The middle classes, swelled by a growing number of new professions in engineering, science, and industry, occupied comfortable town houses or villas in the suburbs. The working classes lived in small terraced houses with outside toilets, while the poor were crowded into dank and disease-ridden tenements, their plight recognized in the writings of England's most popular author, Charles Dickens.

Divisions of class rigidly stratified Victorian life, particularly in the cities. High society was organized around "the Season," a glittering succession of fancy-dress balls, receptions, dinner parties, and nights at the opera and ballet. Sporting events included shooting parties that would last for weeks at vast country estates, and horse racing at Ascot, where men and women paraded the latest fashions. When not engaged in such glamorous social activities, the aristocracy, gentry, and newly rich engaged in leisure pursuits on the home front, working only in the sense of supervising the large staffs required to run their households.

In the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods, the middle classes in England and America were rapidly expanding. As their wealth increased, they emulated the taste of the European aristocracy, employing furniture makers, architects, masons, and artists to provide them with the trappings of wealth that history had denied them. Aristocratic landowners, meanwhile, were finding their position in society to be much more unstable since the industrial revolution was diminishing their wealth and power. Many began selling valuable heirlooms such as grand manner eighteenth century portraits. Paradoxically, the newly rich were buying up these old master art collections, in many an overnight effort to establish taste, pedigree, and social position.

The power balance of society was shifting. People were relinquishing the idea that position in society could only be determined by birth and family lineage, and acknowledging that wealth, however it was acquired, could bring a certain social status. Sargent painted many of the newly rich and in the process elevated them to a level previously enjoyed only by the aristocracy.

ARTISTIC WORLD IN BRITAIN

Portraiture was undoubtedly the most popular and lucrative form of painting in Britain toward the end of the nineteenth century up to the First World War. The Royal Academy, like the Paris Salon, was the main public showcase for art. The judgment of the reigning academicians who juried these shows, and the critics who reviewed them, could advance or destroy an artist's career.

Before the portraiture "renaissance" had reached full swing, the 1850s and 1860s bore witness to the minutely detailed images of the Pre-Raphaelites, led by John Everett Millais (1829-96), William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82). Adopting the name "Pre-Raphaelites" out of admiration for the Italian art that preceded the Renaissance master Raphael, this high-minded group of artists rejected the traditional subjects of the Royal Academy as trivial and irrelevant, and turned instead to those which addressed moral and ethical issues, or struck a poetic chord. Biblical texts, poetry, and contemporary social problems were frequent sources of inspiration.

The importance of subject matter came under attack in 1870s and 1880s by the adherents of the Aesthetic Movement. Beauty in art was touted as a legitimate end in itself, and "art for art's sake" became the credo of many aesthetes, especially James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). An American expatriate who trained in Paris, Whistler settled in London in 1863. He had been greatly influenced by the French avant-garde and shared their appreciation of Japanese prints. Whistler adopted the flat, decorative elements of Japanese prints, integrating them into his own style of painting whose harmonies of color, form, and pattern he likened to the abstractions of musical composition.

Although Oscar Wilde supported Whistler's experimental approach and carried the message of the Aesthetic movement to America, the great British art critic, John Ruskin, rejected Whistler's paintings, accusing him of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face," a comment which led to an infamous law suit.

Britain was rather slow to absorb the new ideas from Paris. The effects of Impressionism and Cubism filtered through gradually with Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942) and Philip Wilson Steer (1860-1942) coming to embrace impressionism as had Sargent before.

When Sargent arrived in England he was, in fact, seen as a radical. Until he established his reputation as a portraitist, he experimented with different genres and absorbed lessons in technique from a variety of painters in the modernist camp.

Why was portraiture so important?

Although portraiture had always been a mainstay of British art, it assumed a new prominence internationally as the newly rich sought to secure their position in the upper echelons of society. A portrait produced by a reputable painter was viewed as the ultimate status symbol. Transcending barriers of language, it could visually communicate prestige and position.

Conventions of formal portraiture

Eighteenth century grand manner portraiture offered both precedent and inspiration for Sargent's society portraits. The canvases of Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough were particularly admired, and set the standard for Sargent's generation.

Typically a grand manner portrait conveyed the wealth of the sitter through fashionable clothing and their placement in a spacious landscape or imposing architectural setting. The privilege of travel and education might be suggested by painted references to the classical world. Sheer size was also calculated to impress, and life-size, full-length formats were the norm. Even point of view could be manipulated to the sitter's advantage. Many artists adopted a low perspective on their sitter, or a "worm's eye" view, forcing the observer to look up at their client (both literally and metaphorically). Flattery was commonplace, with the artist often making sitters look more beautiful, grand, or self-assured than they were actually.

To this formula Sargent added his own innovations, often depicting subjects in unusual poses, which many of their contemporaries found outrageous. The passages of free brushwork, resulting from his encounter with impressionism, made his portrait unmistakably modern.