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Fashioned by Sargent

Curated by: Erica E. Hirshler

Exhibition schedule: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 8, 2023–January 15, 2024; *Sargent and Fashion*, Tate, Britain, February 22–July 7, 2024

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Reviewed by: Lea C. Stephenson

Upon entering the galleries to *Fashioned by Sargent* in the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston, visitors were led toward the dramatic pairing of a taffeta opera cloak and its oil-on-canvas companion: the 1907 portrait of Lady Sassoon (Aline de Rothschild) by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925). In this work, Sargent enveloped his sitter in the sumptuous layers of the outer garment. He explored the reflective nature of the taffeta and partnered its pink lining with his subject's hand, intermingling body and fashion. Sargent's celebrated portraits are defined by lush drapery, cascading silks, and vibrant brushwork. The artist has been heralded for capturing both the spirit of the Gilded Age and the interiority of his late nineteenth-century sitters. The exhibition *Fashioned by Sargent*, organized by the MFA and Tate Britain, considers the association between the artist and the fashioning of the elite in portraiture. The cohosting of the show by these two particular museums is understandable, since both London and Boston claim Sargent as their own due to his career split between studios and commissions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Displaying Sargent's formal portraits and late paintings alongside period fashion, this exhibition explores a largely unaddressed topic in the artist's exhibition history. Past monographic shows have explored his early career in Paris, late watercolors, portraits of close friends, and most recently his work in Spain and depiction of Spanish subjects.¹ In this exhibition, the MFA and Tate Britain frame dress as a tool for the artist. Sargent emerges as a painter attuned to the materiality of fashion and textiles—understandably so as an artist lauded for his painterly bravura and surface effects. Overall, the exhibition provides an avenue to explore material culture in conversation with an artist working in oils and queries what we can learn from the dialogue between paint and fabric.

The sections of the exhibition in Boston were organized around varying expressions of identity through fashion and forms of portraiture. The first section, "Studio in Black and White," opened with paintings in which Sargent's sitters don black and white garments. It was intended to evoke the artist's studio, although the gallery itself was simply a cream

room lined with portraits rather than a suggestion of the artist's Tite Street studio in London. The varieties of white gowns, jet-black day dresses, and men's tailored suits suggested how Sargent could showcase his artistic skill while capturing monochromatic surfaces. Yet, the interpretive labels merely described what the sitters wear and their biographies and did not interrogate the portrayals of the monochrome garments or the harmony Sargent finds between assertive pose and expert tailoring. Throughout the exhibition, didactics tended to rehash formal analysis rather than offer new threads of scholarship.

The section "The Art of Dress" explored the connections between the "public armor" of nineteenth-century fashion for elite women and Sargent's own fashion decisions for his portrait sitters. Here gowns by Charles Frederick Worth were paired with the likenesses of elite white Euro-American and European women, underscoring the formality and messages of power tied to the garments. To further incorporate material culture, the exhibition included surviving traces of the fashion materials. The 1892 portrait of Mrs. Hugh Hammersley seated on a settee in her vibrant silk-velvet gown was installed alongside a piece of the fuchsia fabric she saved from the garment as a souvenir, a suggestion of her own deep connection to the likeness and dress.

Highlights included the MFA's collection of 1890s gowns worn by Sarah Choate Sears, a member of Boston society and a photographer who became close friends with Sargent. Her acidic yellow-green evening dress from about 1895 by the House of Worth showcases the Bostonian's preference for rich jewel tones, sharply in contrast to a nearby 1899 Sargent portrait of Sears whitewashed in cream tones (fig. 1). The painting's label ended



Fig. 1. Jean-Philippe Worth and House of Worth, Sarah Choate Sears's evening dress, c. 1895. Displayed alongside John Singer Sargent, *W. Graham Robertson*, 1894, in *Fashioned by Sargent*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 8, 2023–January 15, 2024. Photo by author

with an open-ended question on this juxtaposition, querying who decided what Sears wore for the painting and considering whether Sargent wanted to explore the aesthetic pairing of white on white.

One often-retold piece of Sargent lore recounts the artist's disregard of Mrs. Gretchen Warren's preference for being depicted in her favorite green velvet dress and instead painting her in a pink gown to accentuate her skin and the background of Fenway Court (now known as the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). At times, the didactics suggested how affluent women and their intended sartorial armor could be manipulated and staged by the artist, reflecting perhaps his own method of resisting the constraints of his commissions. However, retelling these apocryphal moments of creation only repeats the one-sided narrative of singular artistic control and aesthetics above all else. Could the 1903 Warren portrait, like others, also have been one of collaboration and dialogue? And how did Sargent through these commissions perhaps question or counteract the power and privilege of his elite female sitters?

In the third section, “Sporting Gender,” the exhibition began delving deeper into the portraits, asking questions about shifting gender roles in the late nineteenth century and the emergence of the “New Woman” (fig. 2). While the majority of labels remained dependent on the sitter’s biographies, this area of the exhibition considered how Sargent incorporated the increasingly blurred features of masculine and feminine attire and perhaps selected clothes for his sitters that underscored the independent, active “New Woman” type. The artist’s response to changing gender roles is seen clearly in his portrait of the art collector Mrs. Charles Thursby (Alice Brisbane) (ca. 1897–98), who appears poised to jump out of the studio chair and is dressed in a tailored two-piece walking dress with colors (green, purple, and white) referencing the women’s suffrage movement. The range of portraits of women in severe, masculine clothing or of men with an interest in dandyism suggest that Sargent was cognizant of and interested in the dramatic shift in gender roles at the time and used his portraits to subvert traditional conventions.



Figs. 2, 3. Left: Gallery wall in “Sporting Gender” section of *Fashioned by Sargent*; right: Detail of Alice Laura Comyns-Carr, “*Beetle Wing Dress*” for *Lady Macbeth*, 1888 (cotton, silk, lace, beetle-wing cases, glass, and metal), and *Cloak for the “Beetle Wing Dress” for Lady Macbeth*, 1888 (velvet, silk damask, cotton, metal, and glass). National Trust Collections, Smallhythe Palace (The Ellen Terry Collection). In *Fashioned by Sargent*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 8, 2023–January 15, 2024. Photos by author.

The section “Portraiture and Performance” examined the theme of performance through the selection of garments and poses, for those acting in theater and those who chose clothing as a form of private entertainment. The show’s curators crafted an excellent introductory narrative about the duality of performance and acknowledged the cultural appropriation of elite white sitters who wear clothing of non-European traditions and cultures in the late nineteenth-century world of tableaux vivants and costume balls. The idea of performing through fashion on the stage is exemplified through the dazzling costumes of two artists—La Carmencita, the Spanish dancer who captivated Sargent and Gilded-Age audiences, and the British actress Ellen Terry in the role of Lady MacBeth. The 1889 painting of Terry is paired alongside the astonishing original theatre costume by Alice

Comyns-Carr that the sitter wears in the portrait, a dress crocheted from green yarn and blue tinsel and lined with the wings of numerous green jewel beetles (fig. 3). The juxtaposition between the original garment and Sargent's portrait of the performer underscores how the painter drew on the theatrical qualities of costume to capture one of Britain's most famous Victorian actors. Yet, this section of the exhibition could have been stronger if it had probed further into the material histories behind these garments. What of the beetles on Terry's costume? How were they sourced? Did the costumes themselves indicate any correlation between performance and the late nineteenth-century world of empire?

Much of the intellectual labor in this section of the show was led by guest scholars in the form of "Another Perspective" labels installed alongside the MFA's own and offered an expansive picture of Sargent's work. One instance refers to the 1908 portrait of Almina Wertheimer, daughter of the London art dealer Asher Wertheimer, who posed in *turquerie* (Turkish fashions adopted by Europeans). Almina's portrait commanded one corner, hung alongside an *entari* (Turkish robe) from the MFA's collection that was meant to resemble the costume used by Sargent. The pairing of the silk brocade coat alongside Almina's depiction offered a new avenue to consider how the artist played with the materiality of a Turkish textile and abstracted a silk brocade pattern. The MFA label for the work suggested how popular culture exoticized Jewish women, like Almina, as part of the "East." The artist himself supposedly owned a collection of costumes and props and engaged with Orientalism and moments of cultural appropriation in the studio. Yet, the critical interpretation of this portrait depends on a guest scholar, Filiz Cicek, who explained the "othering" of people and the exoticism tied to dressing up in non-European garments, one dependent on power dynamics and exploitation. I wish the museum didactics would have applied this level of thoughtful rigor to the labels discussing gender and social status elsewhere in the exhibition.

The section "Fashioning Power" continued to illustrate how fashion communicates position and clout, and it considered the ability of garments to reveal the identities of socialites, aristocrats, or military officers. The shining moments of the exhibition were the pairings of the original garments and the final portraits, revealing how Sargent pulled, wrapped, and altered the fabric in his iteration on the canvas. One installation includes the 1887 portrait of Boston socialite Mrs. Charles Inches (Louise Pomeroy) alongside the sitter's original red velvet gown. The pairing reveals that Sargent removed details of the dress, including one of the bows and its stitching, to instead focus on the tonalities of the velvet. In the past, these garments, if they were not lost, tended to be hidden in archival boxes or attics. Extant clothing from the time is exceedingly rare due to the fragility of the fabrics and their reuse in subsequent decades to meet the demands of everchanging fashions. These vestiges of a bygone era offer a moment to peer into the intimate world of Sargent's sitters, bestowing a lively intimacy to the galleries. While this section contained notable works in the Sargent canon, including the famous 1883–84 *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, the labels repeatedly voice only the surface argument that power can be illustrated through dress. Moreover, they fail to even acknowledge the elephant in the room: how the inherent privilege and power of the white, Euro-American sitters and patrons drove these sartorial choices and portrait commissions.

The last section of the exhibit, "Outside Fashion," considered Sargent's portrayal of garments in the outdoor environment. This gallery emphasized the artist's shift away from

formal portraits and his experimentations with light and shadow upon clothing using impressionistic brushstrokes. The scenes of his family and friends lounging in the Alps or the Italian countryside showcase how Sargent experimented with the materiality of fabric worn by his intimate acquaintances. In the oil of his niece Reine Ormond from around 1908, the artist captures her in a succession of poses and draped in different iterations of a Kashmiri shawl. This particular textile appears repeatedly in his late work and is installed nearby for visitors to compare with the succession of canvases.

Whereas the MFA organized an exhibition around a rich and neglected aspect of Sargent's art, and the gown-filled galleries were unquestionably gorgeous, the scarcity of critical in-depth analysis toward both the portraits and fashions rendered the show lackluster. At points, portraits and costume merely served as a means to examine aesthetics and painterly skill; I regret that some of the larger explorations in the catalogue essays were not incorporated in the labels. With this deficit of critical examination into Sargent's work and sitters, I was left questioning how a blockbuster show can both tackle crucial scholarly questions and draw in audiences. Broad statements in the exhibition labels on Sargent and connections to our own present-day issues about image making and the control of images felt empty when introducing galleries filled with complicated nineteenth-century sitters, narratives, and materials. As the field of American art continues to reconsider canonical Euro-American artists, the exhibition provided few new lines of investigation into Sargent's work.

Furthermore, the dialogues in *Fashioned by Sargent* often conveyed a one-sided narrative, in which painting drew on fashion only as a prop. Instead, fashion could have been underscored as an art form in its own right, a notion investigated in the catalogue essays. Granted, the Sargent exhibition was not intended to explore the history of fashion, yet the garments on display—numbering over one dozen—often seemed consigned to supporting roles devoid of interpretation; they were not treated as being in conversation with the portraits themselves. While the integration of art and material culture hopefully paves the way for more such collaborations, the curators perhaps could have incorporated additional media to strengthen the show, such as textile samples, photographs, or fashion plates.

The Sargent exhibition appears to rest on the definition of portraits as mere expressions of identity and performance rather than delving into the complex undercurrents driving these works. While the interpretive panels were intended to be accessible for all types of visitors and written for a different audience than perhaps the catalogue essays, at times the exhibition reduced Sargent once again to the status of skillful portraitist of affluent sitters. The artist carried the burden of this "society artist" label throughout his career, hindering his standing in the field of American art into the twentieth century. Sargent himself derided this label later in his career, refusing portrait commissions by 1907 and mockingly calling these works "paughtraits."² This exhibition leaves audiences questioning how we can open up future conversations around Sargent and his work, ones that can reveal the complex issues of race, gender, and empire behind his scintillating likenesses.

Lea C. Stephenson is a PhD candidate in art history at the University of Delaware and the Luce Foundation Curatorial Fellow in American Paintings and Works on Paper in Historic Deerfield.

Notes

¹ John Singer Sargent exhibitions include: *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* (Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA, 1997); *John Singer Sargent Watercolors* (Brooklyn Museum, 2013); *Sargent: Portrait of Artists and Friends* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2015); [Sargent, Whistler & Venetian Glass: American Artists and the Magic of Murano](#), Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2021; and *Sargent and Spain* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2022–23).

² John Singer Sargent to Ralph Curtis, 1907, quoted in Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 155.