BEYOND THE PAINTED DIARY: LOVE, LOSS AND MODERNITY
IN THE LANDSCAPES OF JOHN SINGER SARGENT

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Master of Arts

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. BEGINNINGS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE FIGURE SET IN LANDSCAPE</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. LATE LANDSCAPES AND OTHER WORKS</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Matterhorn, Zermatt, 1870</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Matterhorn, 1870</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Madame Edouard Pailleron, 1879</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Daisy Leiter, 1898</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The Honorable Pauline Astor, 1898-9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Frederick Law Olmsted, 1895</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Landscape with Women in the Foreground, 1883</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Group with Parasols (Siesta), 1904</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Charles Deering, 1917</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>On His Holidays, 1901</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale, 1878</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Carrara: Workmen, 1911</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Simplon Pass: Reading, 1911</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Pertud, Bed of a Glacier Torrent, 1904</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>The Mountains of Moab, 1905</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>A Torrent in Norway, 1901</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>In Norway, 1901</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Rushing Water, 1901-7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Matterhorn, 1902</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Mount Cervin: Alps (Matterhorn), 1905</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Stream over Rocks, 1907</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Mountain Torrent, 1910</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Mountain Waterfall, 1909-10</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Hübschlorn Mountain, Simplon Pass, 1909-11</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Tyrolese Interior, 1915</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
26. Tyrolese Crucifix, 1914.................................................................34
27. Graveyard in the Tyrol, 1914.........................................................35
28. Lake O’Hara, 1916........................................................................36
29. Palmettos, 1917...........................................................................37
30. Gassed, 1918................................................................................39
31. Ruined Cathedral, Arras, 1918.......................................................41
32. On the Veranda (Ironbound Island, Maine), 1922..........................42
33. Sand Beach, Schooner Head, Maine, 1921....................................43
CHAPTER 1
BEGINNINGS

I should have liked to add that, besides significance, Sargent extracted and made visible the actual beauty of the world; and never so much as in the innumerable oil sketches and watercolours which make him one of the greatest landscape painters.

-Vernon Lee, 1925

Introduction

American expatriate artist John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) is best known for his extraordinary output of portraiture which captures the very essence of its subject in a seemingly effortless manner. His extensive oeuvre and enigmatic approach to portraiture remain in our consciousness still today and have influenced scores of artists since the beginning of his professional career. Although portrait commissions dominated the first half of his career, it is his late work that is the truest expression of his artistic vision. The landscapes and genre scenes produced during the latter half of his life, highlight his personal interest in not only art but also in the world around him. These late works, though rarely examined and considered by many scholars to be lesser works, deserve no less attention than his grand portraits. These numerous landscapes include images of the most important people in Sargent’s very private life, served as cathartic exercises after the loss of his beloved mother and many are so avant-garde in their approach that they at first glance appear more like abstract works than mountain streams or tranquil pastoral scenes. In these pictures, Sargent paints his intimate feelings and perfects his craft. His devotion to not only his family but also art and painting is evident in the thousands of works produced from 1900 until his death in 1925.

Born on January 12, 1856 in Florence, Italy to American expatriates, Fitzwilliam Sargent and Mary Newbold Sargent, John Singer Sargent lived a nomadic existence with his parents and sisters. The family moved across Europe between climates as the weather changed, never settling in one place for
more than a few months. This wandering way of life meant much of Sargent’s education was informal and sporadic, on a few occasions he attended a proper school but was for the most part educated by his parents. His father assumed the responsibility of subjects such as literature and language while his mother took on the role of exposing her son to the arts and culture. She taught him how to look at the world and encouraged him to observe the details of his surroundings. Mary Sargent, an amateur artist herself, fostered her son’s artistic inclinations, instructing him to finish at least one of the sketches he began each day. As a young child learning from his mother, Sargent worked primarily in watercolor and painted countless landscapes, most of which were mountains and waterfalls. In his early sketchbooks he reproduced architectural details noted on his travels with his parents and indicated a preference for minutiae. He was drawn to the smallest of details, his interest in a microscopic view of the world would resurface in his later work when he returned to landscapes almost exclusively in the early twentieth century.

**Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-Century Europe**

The association of Sargent and landscape is a complex issue, his involvement with landscape painting is frequently underestimated in scholarly literature yet it accounts for approximately twenty five years of his career and constitutes the bulk of the artwork created during the first eighteen years of his life. It is necessary to look at the genre of landscape painting in terms of academic standards as well as its development in European painting. Sargent arrived in Paris in 1874, just before the deaths of Corot, Millet and Courbet, whose artistic output and radical approach to landscapes revolutionized the genre, and around the same time as the first Impressionist exhibition. Since the mid-seventeenth century, in Paris specifically, landscape painters and paintings had risen and fallen from favor numerous times. As the form of government and social systems underwent changes so did the attitudes toward the landscape genre.
In 1648, the founding charter of the Académie des beaux-arts described history painting “as an art of high ethical purpose”\(^1\) that required a knowledge of both poetry and the liberal arts. History painting was understood to be a genre of the intellectually superior. Landscape painting was classified in a similar manner, requiring intellect, an understanding of classical literature and considered a genre of “informed gentleman.”\(^2\) The French Revolution sparked changes in long-standing societal structures allowing for upward mobility not previously possible. Those once considered uneducated and of a lower social class were now able to move into the upper levels of society; although they now had the means to purchase artworks most still lacked the education and intellect thought necessary to appreciate them. Because landscape works can be understood and appreciated on their surface even if one lacks the intelligence to grasp their deeper significance this genre came to be associated with the new middle class and thus less prestigious than most other genres. History painting, portraiture, and genre painting preceded landscapes, while still life was regarded the lowest of genres in the academic ranking system. These five painting categories reflect the notion that a message of real substance, a portrayal of a scene with an uplifting theme of moral force could be expressed far more readily through history painting. Furthermore, a portrait of an elegant woman or a heroic individual could garner public interest in an exhibition; even genre painting with its scenes of daily activities by local citizens held a higher ranking than landscape or still life. Landscapes, it appeared, could not promote any kind of edifying or lofty ideals. Landscape painting only served to depict views as seen in hills, mountains, trees, forests, and bodies of water, no matter how grand or quiet the scene; it was to provide an aesthetic experience that delighted viewer visually and emotionally.

In the mid-nineteenth century a group of artists retreated from Paris to the village of Barbizon, approximately thirty-five miles outside Paris, located on the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau. Among them were Theodore Rousseau, Jean-Francois Millet and Camille Corot, they were all in search of the

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\(^{1}\) Steven Adams, “The fault of being purely French”: The Practice and Theory of Landscape Painting in Post-Revolutionary France, pg. 741

\(^{2}\) Steven Adams, “The fault of being purely French”: The Practice and Theory of Landscape Painting in Post-Revolutionary France, pg.741
same thing—pure nature. Weary of the contrived scenes of nature that combined ancient ruins and allegorical scenes in unidentifiable landscapes, the Barbizon painters wished for something more true the actual appearance of nature. Nils Büttner classifies the technique used by this group as, “generally uneven in texture and restricted to earthly brown and green tones that lend their modest subjects to a wholly unpretentious naturalness.” The decision by these artists to seek pure nature was a direct reaction to the social and political changes of the time. Napoleon Bonaparte had proclaimed himself Emperor Napoleon III and under his rule Paris was undergoing a transformation from an aging medieval city to an industrialized capital. Although their work became well-known it was not equally well received, some artists like Rousseau, returned to realism while others, such as Millet, remained in Barbizon and devoted the remainder of their careers to the pursuit of nature.

The Sargents chose Paris for their son because, by the 1870s it had become the center of the European art world. It is doubtful then, that during his time there, Sargent did not know of or encounter work by the Barbizon painters or the Impressionists. In fact, throughout the whole of his adult life Sargent expressed a deep admiration for both Monet and Manet. If Sargent knew of these painters then he likely also knew of their status in and reception by the art establishments of not only Paris but Europe in general. Stories like that of Millet having never held a $100.00 bill before because his paintings sold so cheaply remained in popular culture for quite some time and likely circulated around Paris. Theirs was not an existence he wished to imitate. From the age of thirteen, Sargent had set his mind to pursuing art as a successful career- not a pastime or pursuit of a passion which did not also provide a substantial income.

**Early Training and Education**

Sargent’s formal education was sparse and intermittent, on a few occasions he attended a local school for the time the Sargents remained in an area, but for most of his childhood his parents served as his primary teachers. His lack of formal education in no way left him deficient, he was well versed in

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4 Laura Meixner, *An International Episode: Millet, Monet and their North American Counterparts*, pp. 16-17
books—both classical and contemporary literature—he played the piano and was at least proficient in English, German, French and Italian. In addition to literature and language, Sargent also had a broad knowledge of architecture and fine arts. His mother encouraged his interest and development in the arts; both of his parents acknowledged and cultivated his artistic talents from a young age. His earliest training was from his mother, but as he grew older and his talents developed, it became obvious to his parents that he had outgrown what they could offer and would require the instruction of someone more accomplished.

There are several varying accounts of Sargent’s interactions with the German-American landscape painter Carl Welsch (1828-1904) but one can gather from these accounts that Sargent spent at least some time with him when he was about 12 years old while the family was in Rome. Sargent worked in the artist’s studio and produced watercolor copies. A few years later he joined the artist again in the summer for a sketching trip in the Tyrol.

In addition to his work with Carl Welsch, Sargent also attended the Accademia delle Belle Arti from October 1873 to April 1874 with a break from December to March when the school was closed for reorganization. Although he described this place as, “the most unsatisfactory institution imaginable,” there is noticeable development in his work after his time spent there and in a letter to his cousin, Mrs. Austin he states that while he is displeased with the school he does not yet think himself good enough to enter an atelier without another year at the academy. At the Accademia he worked with English and American artists such as Edward Clifford, Heath Wilson, Walter Launt Palmer, Edwin White and Frank Fowler. The Sargent home became a frequent gathering place for these artists and recognizing that his son had exhausted all the art training Florence had to offer, Fitzwilliam Sargent took the opportunity to inquire of these men where he should place his son next to further develop his skills. At this time, Paris

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5 Richard Ormond identifies the artist as possibly Theodore Charles Welsch born in either New York or Frankfurt. Most accounts of Sargent's time with Welsch are based in part on a letter from Fitzwilliam Sargent to his father, Winthrop Sargent, where he states, “A friend of ours, a Germanico-American Artist of reputation, has invited him to spend the summer with him in the Tyrol and the neighboring highlands where they will sketch together.” May 20 1871 Archives of American Art, roll D 317, frame 252.
6 Richard Ormond, John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes, 1874-1882, pg. 11
7 Evan Charteris, John Sargent, pg. 19
8 Evan Charteris, John Sargent, pg. 19
had become the center of the art world with its sophisticated system of ateliers and academies and state sponsored salons. After considering both Paris and London, the Sargents settled on Paris and in May made their way there to find the proper place for their son to continue his art education. By this time, Sargent had already committed to pursuing art as a profession and devoted all his energies to that pursuit.

The Sargents decided on the atelier of Charles Auguste Emile Durand, known as Carolus-Duran, who was at the time the foremost portrait painter in Paris. After passage of the matriculation exam, Sargent began work with Carolus-Duran in October 1874. Though by the time Sargent entered his atelier, Carolus-Duran had achieved great fame and wealth the beginnings of his career were less prestigious. He was trained under the painter, Souchon, who had studied under David. When he was 21, he left his hometown of Lille for Paris where he studied in the Academie Suisse with Fantin Latour. Despite great promise he had little success and was unable to support himself as an artist. Struggling in Paris, he returned to Lille. He had a small break when he won the Wicar prize but continued to struggle until 1866 when he produced L'assassiné. This painting sold for 5000 francs and marked a defining moment in his career. Three years later, in 1869 he painted a portrait of Madame Duran which established him as a portrait painter. He continued to paint portraits and quickly became not only the most sought after portraitist in Paris but also the wealthiest. The parallels between the career of Sargent and that of his teacher are notable in that they may provide some context for Sargent’s decision to pursue portraits, rather than landscapes, as a professional artist.

The instruction provided by Carolus-Duran and an enduring admiration for his teacher are evident in Sargent’s work throughout his career. Carolus-Duran encouraged wet-in-wet painting and sketching directly on the canvas, he was not an academic in his approach to method. He taught his students not only to admire the work of Diego Velazquez but also to emulate his style.

Sargent remained in the atelier until 1878 when he began his independent professional work, though by this time he had already entered numerous pictures in the Salon and been recognized for them over and over again. Unlike Carolus-Duran, and many other artists, Sargent was already well known in Paris when he began his professional career. In the opinion of many of his contemporaries, in the case of
Sargent and Carolus-Duran, the student had surpassed his master. It has been said of Sargent that from the moment he began his career he had nothing left to learn.

**Sketchbooks**

The earliest surviving works from Sargent are in sketchbooks which he used to record not only visual information about the places he visited with his family but also, at times, written details as well. These sketchbooks function like pictorial diaries; and also give us a glimpse into the mind of the young John Sargent. It is evident from the information contained in these books that Sargent was a child who constantly studied his surroundings and documented what he saw. Evidence of his ever inquisitive and observant nature survives in his sketchbooks as well as in his correspondence. In a letter to his friend, Ben del Castillo, he wrote,

> In crossing the Landes from Cette to Toulouse, and between Bordeaux and Pau, we saw many sheep, and the shepherds were sometimes walking on stilts, very high, so that they may see further over the Landes while their sheep are feeding. Near Cette we saw a lot of storks on the shore of the sea which runs up into the country, and there was one very large lake with several towns on its banks. 

In this and several other letters to the same friend, an eleven year old Sargent succinctly communicates the information he found most interesting. He recounted his experience, providing all that is necessary to convey the event without erroneous details. Sargent’s artwork follows a similar pattern; his biographer, Evan Charteris stated that Sargent was focused on the reality of his surroundings, painting only what he saw. Although Charteris intended his observation as an admiration of Sargent, this was, and for some continues to be, a chief complaint against the artist. Sargent’s manner of documenting reality evolved

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9 Evan Charteris, *John Sargent*, pp. 6-7
over the course of his career, although he remained interested in the same events, views and locations often painting the same subjects repeatedly.

The great majority of Sargent’s early training in watercolor came from his mother who, perhaps learned from her own parents or popular instruction manuals. Mary Sargent’s watercolors and drawings show moderate skill and are comprised mainly of mountains, temples and harbor scenes. Her compositions are stiff and formulaic betraying the limited nature of her training. Sargent’s early works possess many of the same qualities, his portraits and figure studies show an understanding of anatomy and form far beyond someone of twelve or thirteen years old, but for all their correctness they lack energy, rendering them static. His landscapes from this time are no exception; they are, as Charteris observed, the result of Sargent’s careful recording of exactly what he saw.

Sketchbooks held in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Fogg Art Museum contain reproductions of The Matterhorn, a distinct peak in the Alps mountain range. Sargent visited these mountains with his family on several occasions and made numerous sketches and watercolors of many views of the range, including the Matterhorn. Matterhorn, Zermatt, 1870 (Figure 1) is a pencil drawing of the peak; Sargent has included no surrounding mountains or foreground, the sole focus is the peak itself. This drawing is likely a preparatory sketch for The Matterhorn, 1870 (Figure 2) but indicates Sargent’s already advanced draftsmanship skills. The version of the Matterhorn located at the Fogg Art Museum is a watercolor painting of the peak composed in three distinct zones, fore, middle and background. In tight, controlled brushstrokes and a naturalistic palette, Sargent recreates the scene in front of him. This painting is accurate and precise; Sargent takes no liberties with color or perspective, his point of view is wide and open, creating more of a vista than a focused scene. This landscape stands in contrast to what would become his signature style in his later works. This is, as Evan Charteris described, a reproduction of reality; Sargent provides the viewer with a comprehensive view, not focused on any one detail of the mountain. While Sargent always recorded what he saw, his later landscapes become the artist’s personal version of reality and were no longer as universal as these early works.
CHAPTER 2
THE FIGURE SET IN LANDSCAPE

In the vast majority of Sargent’s formal portraits, the figure occupies an undefined, ambiguous space, often with a single-color, austere background. A few of his portraits trade a flat background for an exotic patterned textile, likely acquired on one of his many excursions abroad. Fewer still place the sitter in a landscape setting. In these rare portraits, the landscape depicted in the background almost always held significance for the patron and its inclusion functioned like an attribute for a saint or an allegory about the life of the subject. In this context, Sargent’s approach to landscape is markedly different than his works which focus solely on landscape or where figure and landscape are balanced. In fact, his approach to landscape in the context of a portrait is varied whereas his pure landscape paintings are carried out with a consistent approach. His earliest attempt to combine portraiture and landscape falls flat when compared to later works in which Sargent creates lush greenery, believable space, and a harmonious combination of figure and foliage.

The pairing of portrait and landscape can be traced back to at least the fifteenth century in such works as Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, 1503-06 or Piero della Francesca’s double portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza, 1465-66, where the figure is placed in front of the landscape rather than being a part of it. In Piero’s diptych, the landscape details the story of the subjects and identifies their wealth and position. Sargent, as will be discussed, uses landscape in a similar manner in the context of his formal portraits. Later artists like Peter Paul Rubens combined portraiture and landscape as in *The Honeysuckle Bower*, 1609-1610 by placing the figure or, in this work, figures within the landscape rather than simply using it as a background. Rubens’s approach was adopted by contemporary
artists like Frans Hals and later artists such as Thomas Gainsborough both of whom served as influences for Sargent’s work.\textsuperscript{10}

**Landslapes in Portraits**

In 1879 Sargent received a portrait commission from the playwright Édouard Pailleron. The three-quarter-length portrait which won an honorable mention at the Salon that year was reminiscent of the painterly style of his celebrated teacher, Carolus-Duran, who was a leading portraitist in Paris in the 1860s. He urged his students to preserve the freshness of the sketch rather than make many studies. From this portrait came a commission to paint Pailleron’s wife, Marie, later that same year. The Paillertons moved in literary and artistic circles and they allowed Sargent to experiment with the established notions of portraiture. Of the two portraits from this commission, *Madame Edouard Pailleron* is by far the more unconventional. Sargent exhibited this work at the 1880 Salon where it was hailed as “more modern than the Impressionists” and read as a reference to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire in its use of autumn crocuses.\textsuperscript{11}

*Madame Edouard Pailleron*, 1879, (Figure 3) marks the artist’s earliest efforts at both full-length portraiture and the combination of a portrait with landscape. Here, Sargent uses a high horizon line to nearly fill the entire background with the landscape, leaving only a small glimpse of architecture in the upper left corner, a building on the Pailleron’s country estate. Dashes of color represent crocus flowers—an allusion to Baudelaire’s poetry—and falling leaves, while the grass appears as a green mist surrounding Mme. Pailleron and lightens as it recedes into the space. The rich black of her dress and the clean white ruffle of her petticoats contrast with the high key palette of the background ensuring she stands out as the main focus of the work.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{10} For example, Frans Hals, *Marriage Portrait of Isaac Massa and Beatrix van der Laen*, 1622 and Thomas Gainsborough, *Portrait of Countess Howe*, 1760.

\textsuperscript{11} Richard Ormond, *Portraits of Artists and Friends*, pg. 49 Sargent may have included this as a reference to Edouard Pailleron’s own background as a writer.
In tipping up the picture plane in this portrait, Sargent flattens the space and creates the effect of merely a background rather than a setting. Mme. Pailleron is placed in the extreme foreground of the image and does not believably occupy the space behind her but exists in front of it. This early effort by Sargent at combining the two genres is more closely related to the portraits by Leonardo da Vinci and Piero della Francesca where the landscape feature functions more like an accessory, a backdrop, than as a cohesive part of the work. His later efforts would evolve into deep, rich scenes that envelope the figure in a believable space.

Sargent made a preliminary study for his portrait of Marie Pailleron, which seems to illustrate what Patricia Hills refers to as his method (adopted from Carolus-Duran), whereby he begins with the planning of the composition “and then carries it through stages to completion [.]” This method is then followed by technique, the handling of the paint with the brush; Sargent credits the development of his technique not only to his instructor but also to Frans Hals, whose work is an obvious inspiration for the inclusion of landscape in Sargent’s formal works.

You must classify the values. If you begin with the middle-tone and work up from it towards the darks—so that you deal last with your highest lights and darkest darks—you avoid false accents. That’s what Carolus taught me. And Franz [sic] Hals—it’s hard to find anyone who knew more about oil-paint than Franz [sic] Hals—and that was his procedure.13

In 1896 Sargent visited Tring Park, the home of First Baron Rothschild, to study Thomas Gainsborough’s double portrait of Mr. and Mrs. William Hallett, *The Morning Walk*, 1785.14 His visit produced a watercolor copy of Gainsborough’s work and marked a turning point in the use of landscape in his English society portraits.

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12 Patricia Hills, *The Formation of a Style and Sensibility*, John Singer Sargent, pg. 28
13 Patricia Hills, *The Formation of a Style and Sensibility*, John Singer Sargent, pg. 28
14 Ormond and Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes 1883-1899*, pg. 267
His 1898 portraits, *Daisy Leiter*, 1898, (Figure 4) and *The Honorable Pauline Astor*, 1898-9, (Figure 5), both show the direct influence of Thomas Gainsborough and more indirectly the influence of both Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Hals who Sargent outspokenly admired. In these large-scale, full-length portraits, the figures seem to emerge from the background as if Sargent stumbled upon them while walking through the countryside. What sets these apart from his earlier portrait of Mme. Pailleron is Sargent’s use of a low horizon line and a more uniform tonality. In these works, the figures and the landscapes behind them appear as a cohesive unit rather than separate parts occupying the same space. Here, Sargent almost entirely abandons his initial modernity and instead looks to more established art historical sources as inspiration for these society portraits.

*Daisy Leiter*, 1898 is stunning in its neutral, nearly monochromatic palette; the landscape here is suggested more than defined in Sargent’s use of unmodulated areas of color to indicate a tree or swirling, painterly strokes which comprise the cloud scape filling the upper left corner of the frame. As in his earlier portrait of Mme. Pailleron, Sargent ensures that Ms. Leiter is the main focus of the work by making her appear much larger than the scene behind her and by dressing her in a gown as ostentatious and spectacular as the family from which she came. The billowing sash that encircles her body adds drama and movement to the painting while the shapes created by it comfortably blend among the clouds behind her.

The portrait of Pauline Astor stands out in comparison to that of Daisy Leiter in both its use of color and the devices Sargent employed to create a convincing landscape. The hanging branches that balance the right side of the frame and the overlapping planes that recede into the background form the curve of the River Thames behind her. These elements create a depth in the landscape not seen before in Sargent’s work. The exposed toe of her shoe places her firmly in the setting while the white and lilac of her gown stand out against the fall foliage behind her. The setting of this work is likely on the grounds of the family estate at Cliveden, whose topography is similar to that depicted by Sargent.

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15 Ormond and Kilmurry, *John Singer Sargent: Portraits of the 1890s*, pg. 142
In these last two works, as in his earlier portrait-landscape combination, Sargent treats the natural element as secondary, and in doing so, strips it of the careful consideration and treatment afforded his other landscape works. When created in the context of portraiture, Sargent’s landscapes become little more than filler. As will be discussed, the dynamism evident in his pure landscape pictures ceases to exist when the same forms are created for the purpose of a commission rather than as a leisurely activity for the artist. Sargent’s strict professionalism and disengagement with the subjects of his portraits likely contributes to the formal tone in these works. His approach is aligned more closely with the tradition of Victorian portraiture; in all three of the aforementioned works, Sargent quotes not only Thomas Gainsborough but also Frederic Leighton.\(^\text{16}\)

In 1895 Sargent travelled from New York City to Asheville, North Carolina to paint portraits of the designers of the Biltmore house and gardens, Richard Morris Hunt and Frederick Law Olmsted.\(^\text{17}\) The latter of these is a full-length, life-size work, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 1895 (Figure 6). Frederick Law Olmsted, known as the father of landscape architecture, is credited with designing some of the most famous parks in the United States, such as Central Park and Prospect Park, both located in New York City.

Sargent places Olmsted in a lush wooded area on the grounds of the Biltmore estate, the plants included in the landscape—rhododendron, mountain laurel and dogwood—are all native to the mountains of North Carolina. The landscape here is not only an extension of the narrative of the Biltmore story but also functions like an attribute for Olmsted. Not only had he designed the gardens at Biltmore but he had spent his life outdoors among plants. Furthermore, Olmsted’s earliest work in the area of landscape design and architecture includes a book written after a tour of England, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* (1852).\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^{16}\) Frederic Leighton, *May Sartoris*, c. 1860, Kimbell Art Museum Fort Worth, Texas

\(^{17}\) Ormond and Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Portraits of the 1890s*, pg.101-104

\(^{18}\) Ormond and Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Portraits of the 1890s*, pg.101-104
This portrait is indicative of the luminosity and limited palette that characterize Sargent’s mature portrait style. The formal quality of Daisy Leiter and the high key of Ms. Édouard Pailleron are not present in this work. Rather, Sargent takes a more casual tone and represents Olmsted in a dignified manner that is a faithful likeness but also hides his declining health. Although Sargent’s approach here is quite informal when compared to earlier works, this portrait still stands in stark contrast to the pure landscape works Sargent produced around the same time. Indeed, one would naturally expect the artist to take a different approach to portraiture and landscape but what is remarkable about the difference in Sargent’s approach is that it almost appears to be the work of two different artists.

The landscape element of Olmsted’s portrait is calculated, rigid, and academic when compared to such works as Landscape with Women in the Foreground, 1883 (Figure 7) or Group with Parasols (Siesta), 1904 (Figure 8). These works span a twenty-year period that includes the portrait of Olmsted, yet their handling of a similar subject is quite different. The wooded landscape of Olmsted’s portrait includes clearly delineated forms, where nearly every leaf is visible, the trees and shrubs envelope the figure and fill the frame except for a small hint of the sky in the upper right corner. Landscape with Women..., by contrast, is a wide, open space where the grass is suggested by the green field at the bottom of the frame and the colors of the flowers growing in it are represented in quick strokes of faint color, the overall texture of this landscape is soft and smooth in comparison to the detailed and careful delineation of Olmsted’s portrait.

In Group with Parasols... Sargent places the figures up front and close to the picture plane but again only suggests the landscape in an almost abstract manner. The figures appear to meld into one another in what amounts to a study of color and light while the plant forms that surround them are reduced to little more than dabs and squiggles of paint. Although Sargent’s portrait of Frederick Law Olmsted stands out among those of Mme. Pailleron, Daisy Leiter and Pauline Astor, it still retains the formal tone characteristic of his early portraits, yet it hints at the coming evolution of not only Sargent’s technique but also his choice of subject matter.
From 1916 to 1918 Sargent travelled throughout North America painting landscape scenes, primarily in watercolor but he also worked in oils occasionally. This expedition followed his official retirement from portrait painting, announced in 1907 when he was just 51 years old by which time he had amassed a fortune which allowed him to travel and work at his leisure. Toward the end of his two-year North American expedition he travelled to Florida to paint a portrait of John D. Rockefeller, and later to the Miami home of the Deering brothers, Villa Vizcaya. Sargent had painted a portrait of Charles Deering nearly fifty years before and two of his wife, Annie Case, whose parents moved in the same expatriate circles as Sargent’s own family.

Perhaps Sargent agreed to paint Deering’s portrait because of the long history between the two families, or perhaps the opportunity to explore the Floridian flora and fauna and escape from his Boston mural project was enticement enough for the artist. In either case, the product of this late commission is a stunning study of light and white; Deering is dressed in an all-white suit, seated in a white wicker chair amongst palmettos along the edge of a river estuary.

The style of Charles Deering, 1917 (Figure 9) is reminiscent of the landscape works Sargent created during his time spent in the Western United States and Canada—bold brushwork, forms simplified nearly to the point of abstraction and explorations of light. The influence of his watercolor work is evident here in this oil painting; Charles Deering’s form has not been rendered with the same crisp delineation seen in the portrait of Olmsted. The landscape in the background does not completely surround the figure but rather opens up to reveal boats in a marina, perhaps a reference to Deering’s own career in the Navy. Sargent’s affinity for landscape and the substantial time spent working in landscape since his retirement ten years before this painting are evident in the extreme stylistic differences between this work and those previously examined from the late 1870s and 1890s.

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20 Sargent was constantly preoccupied with mural paintings for the Boston Public Library, Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University, for which he received a series of commissions beginning in 1890.

21 Richard Ormond, Portraits of Artists and Friends, pg. 201
Portraits and Figures in Landscapes

In 1901 Sargent accompanied Austrian mine-owner George McCullough and his son Alexander to Norway on a salmon fishing expedition. While on this trip, Sargent painted a portrait of Alexander reclining on an outcropping of rocks next to the river where they had been fishing; this portrait anticipates the figure works Sargent would produce in the years to follow on his Alpine holidays. *On His Holidays, 1901* (Figure 10) is larger and more formal than any of the pictures of Sargent’s family and friends. It follows more closely the long-standing English tradition of portraits within landscape a setting. However, Sargent pays more attention to the landscape than we have seen previously in his combination of the two, or what was common in English portraiture. The brushwork in this painting is more like that of his formal portraits, broad and loose but also polished and refined. These qualities give the entire scene a softness not present in his later holiday pictures. Sargent uses varying degrees of painterly strokes with a wet-in-wet application of paint to create the choppy surface of the water. His careful rendering contrasts the water with the boy’s clothing and the surface of the rock. Furthermore, the sharp, rocky texture of the river and rocks is tempered by the soft curve of the boy and the fish. Alexander’s youth, underscored by his school boy clothing, is juxtaposed with the dead salmon lying on the rock next to him. In this portrait, figure and landscape exist as two separate but equal parts of the painting—each stands on its own, without one melding into or overpowering the other. Although this piece was intended as a portrait Sargent does not show Alexander visually addressing the viewer as he does in other portraits; rather he allows him to be lost in his own thoughts. Such depictions of relaxing figures will dominate Sargent’s oeuvre in the years that follow. They will be painted in a more informal style that will continually evolve until reaching near abstraction.

Sargent has been described by some as a *plein air* painter, though not in the same sense as the Impressionists. In the case of Sargent we are not seeing an interpretation of light but rather the artist’s understanding and feeling of light. The influence of the Impressionists on his early outdoor scenes is

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22 Carl Little, *The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent*, pg. 9
evident, but his approach is certainly different. In *The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale*, 1878 (Figure 11), for example, painted while on holiday in Brittany, Sargent is focused more on the natural effects in the scene rather than the figures themselves. Edmund Gosse, a friend of Sargent, explained the artist’s theory to his (Sargent’s) biographer, Evan Charteris:

One of Sargent’s theories…was that modern painters made a mistake in showing that they know too much about the substances they paint…Sargent…thought that the artist ought to know nothing whatsoever about the nature of the object before him, but should concentrate all his powers on a representation of its appearance. The picture was to be a consistent vision, a reproduction of the area filled by the eye. Hence, in a very curious way, the aspect of substance became much more real to him than the substance itself.23

While contemporary artists like James McNeil Whistler decried the use of the camera in the context of fine art, Sargent embraced it as a means of capturing and reproducing “the area filled by the eye.” The genre scene depicted in *Oyster Gatherers* is not new but Sargent’s approach to the “aspect of substance” is new. He concentrates on the way light is reflected in the shallow pools on the beach. The warm color temperature of the scene suggests early evening but avoids the harsh light of the sun, the land and sky meet in an almost imperceptible horizon line. The details of this work emphasize the experience of the artist or viewer rather than that of the figures contained in it.

Warren Adelson describes Sargent as an artist-observer, quickly capturing people in their natural surroundings much like a camera would do.24 The subject matter is certainly influenced by early nineteenth century artists such as Courbet and Millet but lacks the same characteristics of those works.

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23 Patricia Hills, *The Formation of a Style and Sensibility*, *John Singer Sargent*, pg. 39
24 Warren Adelson, *In the Modernist Camp*, *Sargent Abroad*, pg. 9-53
Sargent’s goal here is not a “moralizing character” but rather the personal observations of a tourist on vacation.  

Sargent’s approach in this early painting would be carried through the remainder of his career and although there is some variation in his technique the interpretation of his scenes through “curious perspectives, angled viewpoints, abbreviated compositions, […] occasional photographic aids”  

and, in the case of those closest to him, a magnification of the subject remains consistent.  

Each year beginning in the summer months and extending into the fall, Sargent travelled with his family and a select group of friends to destinations across Europe. Usually beginning in Switzerland and making their way south as the weather changed, eventually ending up in Italy, on occasion these trips took them as far south as Northern Africa. This type of seasonal travel was not new to Sargent. In fact, this was the manner in which he spent his entire childhood until settling in Paris to begin his formal art training in the atelier of Carolus-Duran and at the École des Beaux Arts. Sargent spent almost the entirety of his time on holiday painting landscapes and figure scenes; this was his break from portraiture and his time to explore a new subject matter, to take on new challenges in art, and to develop his technique in both oils and watercolors.

Patricia Hills regards the works produced on these trips as little more than “painted diaries” of his “holiday, aestheticized world.” However, when examined in the context of the entirety of his career—early training to the end of this life—these works represent an intimacy reserved for the small group of people with whom Sargent shared a close relationship. Furthermore, the importance of Sargent’s landscapes as more than mementoes is underscored by the knowledge that until the death of his mother in 1906 Sargent had painted these scenes only while on holiday, and returned to portraits for the remainder of the year. However, in 1907, following the death of his mother, Sargent formally announced his

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25 Patricia Hills, *The Formation of a Style and Sensibility*, John Singer Sargent, pg. 32  
26 Warren Adelson, *In the Modernist Camp*, Sargent Abroad, pg. 9-53  
27 There is a theme throughout Sargent’s work wherein he paints those with whom he has a close relationship in a more up close manner. For example, compare the portrait of Vernon Lee, his lifelong friend, with of any of the portraits examined in the first half of this chapter.  
28 Patricia Hills, “Painted Diaries”: Sargent’s Late Subject Pictures, John Singer Sargent, pg. 203
retirement from portrait work and spent the next two decades travelling and painting hundreds of landscape pictures. Sargent was away from his mother at the time of her death and was unable to return for her funeral or burial. The loss of his mother deeply affected him, so it is not a surprise—and likely not a coincidence—that his retirement from portraiture and return to landscapes immediately followed her death. Sargent’s mother was his first teacher, who encouraged him to develop his skill, and exposed him to new places and experiences throughout his childhood; she not only taught him how to paint but also how to look at the world.

John Singer Sargent has been described as a private, reserved man who understood the diplomacy required of someone in his position and functioned well in that role but preferred quiet interactions with a close-knit, exclusive group of friends and family. This group travelled with him every year like an entourage; they populate the landscapes created during these trips and are the recipients of the hundreds of letters written during his lifetime. Though Sargent claimed a close relationship with those who travelled with him, there was one member of the group with whom he was particularly close, Rose-Marie Ormond, daughter of his sister, Violet. Following the death of his mother, Sargent took on the role of head of the family and organized regular holidays with his sister, nieces and nephews; their persistent presence on these holidays is evident in Sargent’s many pictures produced during those times.

Although his vacation works were problem-solving expeditions, set up to be difficult and challenging scenes aimed at a mastery of different types of light, color and texture, Sargent maintained a consistent approach in these works where the figure was secondary to the problem. The focus of the entire painting was an investigation into the effects of nature in a variety of settings. In most of these works, the facial features of the figures are barely discernible and often melt into the landscape as the entire composition is composed of a limited palette; often, the figure and landscape seem to be one as in Carrara: Workmen, 1911 (Figure 12), where the color of the men’s clothing echoes that of the rocks, in effect camouflaging the figures in the landscape.

The exception to his rule of representation of figure in landscape is his niece, Rose-Marie; when he uses her as a model, she looks directly at the viewer, her features are defined, she is recognizable
and her inclusion in the scene functions more like a portrait than a model. The special attention paid to
Rose-Marie’s likeness in these works is likely due to the close nature of the relationship between Sargent
and his niece; Corsano and Williman describe her as his muse.29 Rose-Marie’s mother, Violet, was the
youngest of the Sargent children, fourteen years John’s junior. He had been more like a caretaker and
somewhat of a father figure to his younger sister as a result of the great age difference between them.
Even through his frequent absence from his mother and sisters after the death of his father, Sargent was
involved in the life of his younger sister, taking it upon himself to have a concerned but plain-spoken
exchange with Francis Ormond when he and Violet became engaged.30 Rose-Marie, the second child born
to Violet and Francis lived with her paternal grandmother just as her other siblings did; their parents had
chosen the same nomadic existence Violet grew up in and Francis’s money provided an income able to
support such a lifestyle. Sargent adored his niece, painting her portrait several times throughout her life,
making a bronze cast of her hands which he admired for their elegance, and exhibiting a constant concern
for her well-being in the absence of her parents. He saw in her an old soul, someone wise and refined
much beyond her age but who also maintained a childlike innocence and liveliness; Sargent described his
niece as, “the most charming girl who ever lived.”31

Sargent, along with this regular group of family and friends, generally began their summer
vacation in the Alps; the earliest records of his painted studies done in the Alps date from August 1902.38
In the first few years following the death of this mother, Sargent and his group travelled to Purtud, a small
village in the Italian region of the mountain range; it was here that Sargent painted his scenes of reclining
and sleeping figures. In the summer of 1909, Sargent travelled to the Simplon Pass, a location with which
he was certainly familiar and had visited on earlier Swiss excursions. The Simplon, the pass linking
Switzerland and Italy, offered him wide open spaces and impressive mountain views, though many of his

29 Corsano and Williman, John Singer Sargent and His Muse: Painting Love and Loss,
30 Corsano and Williman, John Singer Sargent and His Muse: Painting Love and Loss, pg.39-44
31 Janet Chen, Alpine Summers, John Singer Sargent Watercolors, pg. 128
38 Richard Ormond, In the Alps, Sargent Abroad, pp. 63-64
figure pictures done during the summers spent here do not show the vastness of the landscape but rather focus on the figures in an almost microscopic manner.

During Sargent’s stays at Simplon, he painted several figure pictures, mostly of pairs or groupings of three women. In these scenes they are dressed in large, white or pale colored, billowing gowns which fill large portions of the picture space. Sargent referred to these works as “intertwingles” because he often exchanged one woman for another to continue working on or complete a picture. In many of these works, the face of the figure is unimportant, therefore capturing an exact likeness of the model was not necessary. Janet Chen describes Sargent’s “deemphasizing [of] the women’s distinctive features” as a way of allowing “viewers to add their own anecdotal associations and narrative to the scene.”\(^{39}\) These pictures differ from his earlier summer figure scenes in a number of ways; the first, and perhaps most obvious, is the use of multiple figures as opposed to the single figure works produced in Purtud for example. The Simplon pictures also do not feature sleeping figures, unaware of the artist—here the ladies are awake, engaged in a variety of activities and at times look directly out at the viewer or perhaps the artist himself. What is consistent is Sargent’s artist-observer approach.\(^{40}\) Just as he had done for so many years prior, these pictures give the viewer the feeling of being a passing onlooker. Sargent captures the scene in an abbreviated composition of quick strokes giving the impression of a fleeting view, as if trying to record the women in a moment in time, unaware of their observer.

Rose-Marie Ormond was the exception to Sargent’s practice of non-distinct female figures in his summer scenes—she is, in many cases, the only identifiable figure in the picture—in part because the other figures were in actuality made of up multiple women and also due to the way Sargent depicted her. For Sargent, Rose-Marie represented all the positive qualities of the women in his family while at the same time still retaining a uniqueness about her. Her vivacious, lively nature captivated him and he captured it perfectly in his depictions of her, especially in these holiday scenes. In his watercolor Simplon Pass: Reading, 1911 (Figure 13) she lounges next to an older female figure who is reading under the

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\(^{39}\) Janet Chen, *Alpine Summers, John Singer Sargent Watercolors*, pg. 128

\(^{40}\) The term Warren Adelson applies to Sargent’s approach.
cover of a green parasol, her gaze is captivating and inviting. She seems to beckon us to join her; she is like a Siren luring us not with her song but with her gaze.

The deliberate nature of Sargent’s representation of Rose-Marie as well as his own artistry is illustrated by a photograph taken of the two women in Reading—Dorothy Barnard is seated next to a reclining Rose-Marie who looks up at her in a way that closes off the interaction of the two women, from the viewer. The photograph shows a private, intimate moment between two women whereas Sargent’s painted version of the same scene manipulates its features to create a composition dominated by the strong triangular form of the older woman’s white dress whose folds and draping appear like a rocky mountain side. Here, the figures of the women seem to be one with the landscape behind them, indicated only by fields of green, brown and yellow ochre—they are not set apart from it as in Sargent’s formal portraits which also include landscape. Sargent’s handling of the watercolor medium creates pools of color that run into one another punctuated by thick dabs of paint applied directly from the tube (cracking of the paint is now visible in some areas, such as the white skirt of the older female figure), emphasizing the harmony between figure and landscape.
CHAPTER 3
LATE LANDSCAPES AND OTHER WORKS

As noted in chapter one, Sargent’s earliest painting and drawing efforts were comprised mainly of landscape scenes; his attraction to landscapes continued throughout the entirety of his life though during the height of his career the opportunity to paint such scenes was limited by a seemingly endless stream of portrait commissions. Sargent’s choice to pursue portraits professionally seems to have been born from the realization that to earn a substantial income as an artist one must work in those genres which were in high demand; the landscape genre did not fall into that category. From about 1890 to 1900, Sargent painted comparatively few landscape scenes and exhibited even fewer. The majority of his landscape works created between the late 1870s and 1900 also included a figurative element; these were the only type of landscapes Sargent chose to exhibit. In 1901 he travelled to Norway with George McCullough and his son, Alexander, for a commissioned portrait, this marks the beginning of many subsequent summer vacations in mountain regions. His family had followed a similar pattern during his youth and Sargent returned to many of the same places as an adult.

By 1901, he had already achieved fame across Europe and the United States as a portrait painter, and had begun to grow weary of the demands of his fame; his disdain for portraits is clearly expressed in a letter to Lady Lewis written in 1906, “I have now a bombproof shelter into which I retire when I sniff the coming portrait or its trajectory.”41 These same feelings are expressed in another letter to Ralph Curtis, dated March 27, 1907.

It does not bore me to write that I can’t paint a pawtreet [sic], on the contrary it is the greatest joy in life—but I prefer writing to you than the lady [Mrs. Lowther], if you will be good enough to tell her that I have retired from the business. Tell her that I now paint landscapes and religious decorations, that I am a waltzer [sic] to delirium tremens or

41 Hilliard Goldfarb, Sargent In Pursuit of Landscapes, In His Own Words:..., pg. 97
whatever you think may make her congratulate herself on her refusal. I really am shutting up shop in the portrait line.\textsuperscript{42}

Compounding the unhappiness Sargent felt with portrait work was the death of this mother in 1906, the loss of such a significant figure in his life no doubt magnified his discontent with other aspects of it and ultimately led to his official retirement from portraiture in 1907. Prior to his official retirement, \textit{American Art News} published a brief segment announcing Sargent would no longer be accepting commissions “because he has taken all now that he can possibly complete in his lifetime.”\textsuperscript{43} Though he made every attempt to permanently separate himself from portraiture for the last 25 years of his life, the occasional commission was presented and accepted; these late portraits are mainly modest-sized charcoal drawings with a few exceptions like that of Charles Deering, discussed in Chapter two, and a portrait of Woodrow Wilson to raise money for the Red Cross during World War I.

Sargent’s earliest art training was in the watercolor medium; there is an account from the American artist Walter Launt Palmer, a fellow student in Florence, about Sargent as a teenager that comments on his lack of experience in oil at that time, “He is but 17 & had done a most remarkable amount of work very little oil.”\textsuperscript{44} Since his formal training prior to Paris is not well documented\textsuperscript{45} and all early accounts of his artistic efforts mention only watercolor and drawing one, can assume that Sargent’s first training in oil began in the atelier of Carolus-Duran.\textsuperscript{46} While his portrait work shows the unmistakable influence of not only his teacher but also the Old Masters whom he outwardly admired and whose medium was also oil paint, Sargent’s landscape works appear to combine techniques from both oil and watercolor generally assumed to be mutually exclusive. Judith C. Walsh analyzed Sargent’s watercolor scenes at great length and notes that the effortless quality of his works was actually achieved

\textsuperscript{42} Hilliard Goldfarb, \textit{Sargent In Pursuit of Landscapes, In His Own Words:...}, pg. 97
\textsuperscript{43} American Art News Vol 3 No 67 Feb 18 1905
\textsuperscript{44} Ormond and Kilmurray, \textit{John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes, 1874-1882} pg. 12
\textsuperscript{45} I found only two mentions of Sargent attending an art school in Florence prior to entering the atelier of Carolus-Duran. The source for both accounts was an early biography of the artist by Evan Charteris.
\textsuperscript{46} Despite working in a new medium, student anecdotes portray Sargent as a brilliant, talented and skilled artist from the beginning of his study with Carolus-Duran.
through careful planning and included preliminary sketches in both watercolor and pencil. In order to maintain “the integrity of the surface” he chose to “stop out” areas of the sheet rather than scrape them after the application of pigment; furthermore, Sargent experimented with varying thicknesses of paint, sometimes squeezing it directly from the tube, to achieve varied effects.

One aspect of Sargent’s work that sets it apart from other artists also working in watercolor is his use of several techniques which can be observed throughout his career. Walsh categorizes his varied approaches as: “variations in wet-and-dry washing, the combination of opaque and transparent paints, calculated reserving of the existing color or the blank paper from later washes, and the adulteration of the paint by additives, as well as the [use of] subtractive [and additive methods].” Despite the effortless, fleeting nature of his landscape works it is evident that Sargent approached these compositions in a carefully planned and calculated manner.

**A Return to Landscapes: 1901-1917**

By 1885 Sargent was well acquainted with the Impressionist painters, including Monet, with whom he maintained a close relationship. Despite their connection, Sargent chose not to exhibit his landscape paintings with this group, opting instead to send them to the Salon. The Salon, being a more public and also more prestigious exhibition, gave artists the opportunity to have their work seen by the public and in some cases recognized by the State. From the beginning of his career Sargent understood well the business of being an artist, he carefully strategized what and where he would show in order to reap maximum professional benefit. It is remarkable to note that until at least 1899 Sargent had not publicly exhibited any stand-alone landscape works and the first exhibition seems to have been only a

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47 This same approach or end result was stressed by Carolus-Duran and can be observed in Sargent’s portrait works.
48 A technique generally reserved for oil paint and difficult to preserve in watercolor works. The long term effect of undiluted watercolor is noted in chapter two in the discussion of *Simplan Pass: Reading*.
49 Judith C. Walsh, *Observations on the Watercolor Technique of Homer and Sargent*, pg. 46
50 Judith C. Walsh, *Observations on the Watercolor Technique of Homer and Sargent*, pg. 57
51 Meaning works which were not studies for larger compositions or in some way tied to a more major work.
In 1905 Sargent exhibited the watercolor work, *Purtud, Bed of a Glacier Torrent*, 1904 (Figure 14) at the Royal Society of Painters in Water-Colours; the next year he showed the oil painting *The Mountains of Moab*, 1905 (Figure 15) at the Royal Academy—these two works mark his first publicly exhibited, pure landscape works.

Sargent’s visit to Norway in August 1901 renewed a long-standing family practice of traveling to cooler climates each summer. Although the purpose of this trip was to paint a portrait of Alexander McCullough, Sargent took the opportunity to paint several pictures of the Sunndal River, mainly in watercolor, but also at least one work in oil. The oil painting, *A Torrent in Norway*, 1901 (Figure 16), shares many formal qualities with the landscape elements in some of Sargent’s formal portraits while also pointing to the bravura brushstrokes that would come to characterize his late landscapes. The river, rocks, and banks are all clearly defined and although rendered in quick, painterly strokes, the forms remain recognizable. The definition of the wet, craggy surface of the rocks is magnificently captured through the use of impasto which also recreates the visual texture of the white-capped river rapids.

Painted during the same visit, the watercolor painting *In Norway*, 1901 (Figure 17), also depicts the Sunndal River but in a strikingly different way. Here, rather than the wide view of the river in *A Torrent*..., the scene is more narrow and focused—the entire focus of the work is the water itself. Rather than the thick, impasto application of white paint seen in the previous painting, Sargent uses the technique described by Judith Walsh to “stop out” and reserve areas of pure white for the white froth created by the water traveling over the rocks. He adds texture to these areas by the subsequent application of thin layers of squiggles and dashes in green, lavender, and pink. The upper third of the frame illustrates the river before the rocky rapids while the lower third shows the water after the journey over those rocks although in both areas Sargent conveys the behavior of the water in individual brushstrokes, the nature of those marks perfectly communicates the changing character of the water.

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52 Erica Hirshler, “*Huge Skies Do Not Tempt Me*”: *John Singer Sargent and Landscape Painting*, pg. 55 Hirshler notes that the 1899 date marks a solo exhibition in Boston and the records of this exact work are not clear.
The flow of the river in the upper portion of the frame is shown in long, green strokes layered over a blue-green wash with a handful of white highlights applied over them. The airy nature of the white paint was achieved by the artist vigorously mixing the undiluted paint until it began to froth, then applying this frothy paint to the paper—the air bubbles burst as it dried, leaving passages of broken color which mimic the true appearance of the water. Though Sargent’s unique approach to both landscape and watercolor is certainly evident in his earlier works, it is in this series from Norway that the evolution of his mature landscape style begins to emerge. He never aligned himself with an avant-garde group but, at times, his early twentieth-century landscapes have more in common with the works related to those movements than with the traditional, academic painters with whom he is so often associated.

*Rushing Water*, 1901-7 (Figure 18) is an arresting example of the artist’s tendency toward abstraction. This work has been connected to both his Norway visit and visits to Purtud. Indeed, it shares the same subject matter as the previous two works but communicates that scene in an entirely new way. Sargent has again chosen a narrow focus point—a practice that will continue, especially in his mountain landscapes—but rather than showing only rocks and water he includes a small rocky section of the far bank in the upper left corner and the grassy near bank on the right side of the frame. Sargent renders the grassy bank in layered washes of green and brown but includes no defining brushwork, thereby complicating perspective in this area of the painting. It is not clear whether the bank is falling away from the river or moving down towards it; the assumption based on the nature of rivers would be a rising bank, however, Sargent has not included enough information to confirm that interpretation. He again uses dashes, dabs, strokes and squiggles to convey the turbulence of the river as it moves over its rocky bed.

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53 Karen Sherry, *Approaching the Modern*, pg. 182
54 The Met Museum’s 2000 publication of Sargent’s drawings and watercolors acknowledges that the majority of the artist’s river scenes come from Purtud but groups this with this Norway pictures for several reasons including the fact that the paper used is from the same stock as those pictures painted in Norway. However, Volume VIII (published 2012) of the artist’s most recent catalogue raisonne recognizes the possibility that it may have been painted in Purtud and not Norway. The back of the picture is inscribed “37/ Purtud/ by J.S. Sargent/V.O.”
Just as with *In Norway*, the larger areas of pure white have been achieved by blocking out those sections then further defining them by thin washes of pink and purple. The rocks and plant life in the upper right corner have been rendered in broad, flat strokes and, like the rest of the scene, are only suggestions rather than a faithful recreation of the landscape. They are formed of large swathes of color whose only distinction from one another are tonal shifts from blue, plum and brown to various shades of green with brown highlighting. The near total abstraction of forms seen here will continue in Sargent’s landscapes—mainly in watercolor, but also in a more subdued way in his oil works until about 1917.

As a child, Sargent made many Alpine trips with his parents, the sites of which are well documented in his early sketchbooks. When he resumed the practice of summer travel, he chose to return to many of the same places he had visited nearly thirty years earlier with his family. Views of the high peaks of the Alps range, between Italy and Switzerland, are among his earliest watercolors after his return to landscape, and also make up a substantial number of the early watercolor works of his sketchbooks. *Matterhorn*, 1902 (Figure 19) and *Mount Cervin: Alps (Matterhorn)*, 1905 (Figure 20) echo two works found in Sargent’s childhood sketchbooks in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard to which he assigned whimsical names such as *Splendid Mountain Watercolors*.

His efforts in these early works show restraint and control, they are academic in style, following the traditional approach to the watercolor medium. Furthermore, they represent a much wider view of the landscape than the latter two whose focus is narrow and limited. The color palette between the sketchbook works and those made on his later trips is also strikingly different. Whereas the early landscapes appear to approach color in a more naturalistic manner, the later works are more liberal in their interpretation of the scene, including mauves, blues, greens, browns and gray—a stark contrast to the relatively limited palette of the Fogg Museum sketchbook work. Moreover, *Matterhorn* and *Mont Cervin*... both display the virtuoso, wet-in-wet technique characteristic of Sargent’s oil works and learned during his time with Carolus-Duran, which is not present in the sketchbook watercolors.
The comparison of these four works, while illustrative of the evolution of the artist’s skill, technique, and style also represent something more significant—that although he had by the time of the 1902 and 1905 works already amassed a great wealth and international fame as a portrait artist, he had not forgotten nor had he lost a taste for the scenery of his childhood. As has already been discussed, by 1904, his complaints about portraiture were steadily increasing, fueling his desire to end his career as a portraitist. Perhaps he found solace in the familiar scenery of the Swiss and Italian Alps, a place to return to his earliest and purest love of art and painting, without the responsibility and weight of international recognition.

In the time leading up to and after his retirement from portrait painting, Sargent travelled almost constantly—with his family and friends or in search of inspiration for the Boston Public Library murals. Though his sister Emily was a frequent companion on these holidays, Violet’s presence was more sporadic. However, after their mother Mary Sargent died in 1906, Sargent travelled with Emily, Violet, her children and a group of close friends to Purtud, Val d’Aosta, Italy the following year. During his one-month stay, he produced several paintings—both figure studies and pure landscape works. The themes of these works are typical of his summertime pictures—reclining figures, costumed women, mountains, rocks, and forests—in this series however, Sargent’s handling of paint appears more loose and fluid, washes of color flow into one another, at times rendering the intended forms indecipherable. As is typical of his work, the figure studies are composed of more clearly delineated forms while the landscape works are abstracted and challenging to read.

In addition to a loosening of his painting style, there is also a notable shift in Sargent’s color palette which seems to begin following the death of his mother. His mountain holiday in the summer following Mary Sargent’s death is not well documented and appears to have produced more figure works than landscape. However, the following year he returned to the same location and the record of his

55 Karen Corsano and Daniel William note a darkening of Sargent’s color palette (accompanied by a difference in subject matter) in 1914 but my observations have led me to conclude that a similar shift also occurred much earlier.
summer output from this visit is more complete. The majority of the landscape works from this holiday were views of streams and river beds—a favorite subject of the artist. What is notable about this series is the evolution of not only technique but also color choice. Stream over Rocks, 1907 (Figure 21) though similar in many ways to those pictures of the same subject made in Norway in 1901, also possesses many unique features which set it apart from those earlier works. The overall tone of this watercolor is particularly more calm than previous mountain streams and rendered in a more subdued and limited palette. Rather than the multi-colored, layered dashes of paint to represent the texture of the water as it moves over its rocky bed, he has instead chosen to place washes of transparent color over one another in sometimes large areas of the page and to highlight those washes with strokes of individual color. Both his brushstrokes and color lack the virtuoso characteristic of his earlier landscape works. In Stream over Rocks it is the absence of the blues and greens that makes this work stand out from those earlier works of the same subject.

This noticeable change in Sargent’s work can also be seen in Mountain Torrent, 1910 (Figure 22) and Mountain Waterfall, 1909-10 (Figure 23)—both painted in the Simplon Pass, another favorite Alpine location. Mountain Torrent is likely connected to an oil work (A Waterfall, 1910 Philadelphia Museum of Art) as it depicts what appears to be the same waterfall and uses the same limited range of color. In the watercolor version, the majority of the scene is composed in varying tones of brown with transparent areas of gray and lavender as added surface definition, and the water rushing down the mountain is made up of reserved areas of white paper. The brushwork is sketchy and loose, omitting any surface detail, instead offering only suggestions of the scene. Emily Sargent and Wilfrid de Glehn, a close friend and companion on this holiday, were also on this same painting expedition and rendered their own versions of the same vista—a comparison of the three versions of the scenes serves to highlight the extreme choices made by Sargent in his depiction of the waterfall. Wilfrid de Glehn, whose painting style was generally similar to that of Sargent, created a version of the same waterfall that is a more clearly defined rendering of the landscape using a wide range of colors. He, like Sargent, omits most of the sky but those small
portions which are visible through the dips in the mountain tops are executed in a rich blue rather than the grey tone chosen by Sargent. Furthermore, his more precise brushwork paired with his variation of color results in forms which are more easily identifiable.

Emily’s version of the same waterfall is more closely related to Sargent’s but also contains important differences. She too allows the mountains to fill all but a small area at the top of the page; in her version the sky is rendered in a light blue wash and the mountain tops defined by a striking magenta line which, in a more transparent state, continues down the central mountain forming its ridge. Though many of the same variations of brown are also seen in her work, the ravine running down the center of the frame is classified in a more high-key palette, creating a depth not present in Sargent’s version.

In addition to the stream and waterfall scenes painted during his time in the Simplon Pass, Sargent also produced many mountain views including several works in oil. Hübschlorn Mountain, Simplon Pass, 1909-11 (Figure 24) is one of the more striking examples of the oil paintings made during his time spent in the Simplon. A photograph included in the artist’s latest catalogue raisonné,56 shows Hübschlorn Mountain as a rocky peak whose leading slope is a grassy area populated with evergreens, yet Sargent’s depiction shows no trees and is, like the previous work, made up almost entirely of varying shades of brown. The colors of the scene seem to progress in bands beginning with a gold triangular shape, interspersed with touches of tan and brown filling the bottom of the frame. The middle portion of the frame is two overlapping round forms suggesting topographical variations in the valley leading up the slope of the mountain. In the extreme right of this area, the quick brushwork implies a rocky surface sprinkled with areas of grass while the left side of the central zone is depicted in long, smooth strokes of a richer shade of brown. Sargent represents the peak of the mountain in swathes of taupe and varying tonalities of brown highlighted by strokes of gray and opaque black. The sky, which only accounts for the

56 Ormond and Kilmurray, John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes, 1908-1913, pg. 172
extreme upper portion of the picture space, is rendered in varying shades of white that modulate into a
pale pink at the right side of the frame.

While the subjects of Sargent’s pictures remain constant from 1901 through 1916, his approach to
those subjects immediately following the death of his mother should be read as more than a mere
coincidence; it is also worth noting that the change in color palette is not seen in his figure works from
this same time, the majority of which feature his nieces, namely Rose-Marie, as models. What is
consistent in those works however, is the change in his painting style—the increasing abstraction of forms
whether landscape, architectural, or the human figure.

World War I

In August 1913 Rose-Marie Ormond married Robert André-Michele, a scholar and son of a
longtime friend of Sargent. That was not the only connection between the two families; Rose-Marie and
Robert were cousins by marriage and had likely known each other for some time.57 Only a year after they
were married, Robert, a reservist, was called to serve in the military. On August 7, 1914, the first
anniversary of their marriage, Robert reported for duty to the 169th Regiment at Montargis and was killed
in battle only a few short months later on October 13.58 During Robert’s deployment, Rose-Marie
remained in Paris but also joined the war efforts by volunteering as a nurse with the Red Cross, caring for
wounded soldiers. By the time Robert left for the war, Sargent had already begun his annual summer
holiday, this time to Austria. Despite the signs that war was imminent he continued with his plans,
arriving in Austria on July 24th; Austria declared war on Serbia four days later. Because he was an
American, in a foreign country, without a passport, Sargent would be trapped there until November.
During this time he and his traveling party stayed at a hotel in Kolfuschg and Sargent did what he knew

57 Corsano and Williman, John Singer Sargent and His Muse: Painting Love and Loss, pp. 66-76
58 Corsano and Williman, John Singer Sargent and His Muse: Painting Love and Loss, pp. 100-124
best, he painted. He was famously oblivious to politics, believing that artists and politics were two things that should never go together. Evan Charteris described him as indifferent “to the administration of the world’s affairs,” continuing on to say that “he read no newspapers [and] he had the sketchiest knowledge of current movements outside art[.]”  

The contrast between Sargent’s response to American neutrality in the early days of the war and that of fellow expatriate, Henry James, is an excellent illustration of the way in which Sargent separated himself from the political events of the world. Richard Ormond tells us:

The war itself did not rouse in Sargent the passionate indignation and despair experienced by his friend, Henry James, who gave up his American nationality in protest against American neutrality; Sargent’s only gesture of the same kind was to return to a Prussian order of merit. Indeed Sargent’s aloofness and detachment led to a temporary coolness with James. It was not that Sargent was lacking in sympathy and heart, but rather that his imagination was incapable of comprehending the enormity of the catastrophe. He failed to appreciate its wider significance, and he was slow to relate it to himself.

Although he thought of the war as little more than an inconvenience, making it difficult to travel and communicate with his family, the reality of war became quickly and painfully obvious when he learned of Robert’s death. His paintings from this mountain visit are not the usual streams, high peaks, chateaus and lounging figures but are instead filled with scenes which point to death and mourning. Richard Ormond notes that while Sargent’s pictures from this time are not obviously emotional, the recurrence of objects such as crosses and graveyards indicates that the artist was in a melancholy state. In addition to the difference in subject matter, there is also a noted change in the range of colors which make up these

59 Evan Charteris, *John Sargent*, pg. 202
60 Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors*, pg. 77
61 Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors*, pg. 77
works. Much like those painted after the death of his mother, Sargent’s 1914 works from the Tyrol are overwhelmingly executed in a limited palette dominated by browns and earth tones.  

Tyrolese Interior, 1915 (Figure 25) is one of the few oil works produced during his Tyrol visit and was given to the Met along with a group of other watercolors from this and previous holidays. The scene here is a dark interior of a peasant home, the composition seems to take cues from Caravaggio’s The Calling of Saint Matthew, 1600 in its use of tenebrism and strong diagonals. The crucifix in the background and its two flanking figures are shrouded in shadow, while the light from the window bathes the figures gathered around the table. Although the crucifix and its accompanying figures are hidden in the darkness and not easily read, they occupy the entire top half of the frame, indicating both their importance and the intention of the artist to make them a major focal point of the composition. This work is a departure from the usual scenes Sargent painted while on holiday. Since his return to landscape and his increased production of stand-alone watercolors, Sargent rarely produced a figural work which did not feature a family member or close friend. His correspondence from this time is filled with expressions of concern for his family due to both the outbreak of war and the sudden death of Robert. Perhaps the family gathered here reminded Sargent of his own, or perhaps he identified with their plight.

Sargent executed two other watercolor works whose focus is also a crucifix, both titled Tyrolese Crucifix, 1914 (Figure 26) one in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (hereafter Met Crucifix) and the other in a private collection. The Met Crucifix is painted from a low angle perspective which serves to distort the size of the figure, the tree trunk behind it acts as reference for the scale of the cross. In contrast to earlier holiday works, this scene is tightly painted, with controlled, precise, blended brushwork. The entirety of the figure and the other details of the scene are clearly delineated and easily read. The execution of this painting is reminiscent of works produced a decade earlier and does not reflect Sargent’s gradual move toward fragmentation of forms observed in previously discussed works. The

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62 This is the only period where Corsano and Williman note a change in Sargent’s work.
63 Meaning works which were not studies for larger compositions or in some way tied to a more major work.
dominating hues here are browns, greens, and tans, with a thin wash of blue to indicate the sky. What is lacking here is the energy created through the robust brushwork and high-key palette which characterizes his mountain holiday works. That energy and light has been replaced with a melancholy darkness and focus on a more grave subject matter. The body of Christ is ghostly pale, composed of pure white (likely the white of the page), greys and hints of yellow. A diluted red is used to indicate the stigmata as well as blood dripping from other wounds on the body and the overall eeriness of the form is accentuated by long, spindly limbs stretched over the cross.

Among the watercolor works produced during his 1914 Tyrol visit, *Graveyard in the Tyrol*, 1914 (Figure 27) is the most closely related to those works executed in the years immediately preceding and following this holiday. The space is flattened with no real sense of scale and the row of iron cruciform grave markers nearly fills the entirety of the frame. Their varying heights and tilted forms create a rhythm that sets them apart from the static crucifix works and relates them more closely to his brook-and-stream scenes. The space ends abruptly in a brick wall rendered in light washes of gray and ochre, with the borders of the bricks created through the use of a resist technique, while the grass is represented in successive layers of cerulean, green, and brown like that seen in *Rushing Water*. Sargent’s fixation with the imagery of death and mourning coupled with the change in his palette are certainly indicators of a shift in his psyche, even if temporary, and highlight the deep connection between his family, his work, and his own emotions.

There exists very little landscape work that can be precisely dated to 1915. During this time Sargent was working on mural commissions and actively showing his landscape, figure, and subject works from previous excursions. In early 1916, he travelled to Boston to oversee the installation of portions of his Boston Public Library mural works. That summer, rather than making the dangerous trans-Atlantic voyage back to Europe for his annual Alpine holiday he instead ventured into the American West, making his way up the Rocky Mountain Range. This marks the first time he visited this area of North America and also the last time he would paint mountain scenes.
An American tradition of painting mountain scenes as grand vistas bathed in the golden light of the heavens had been established by the Hudson River School artists long before Sargent’s visit to the Rockies, and paintings such as those by Albert Bierstadt were considered the standard for panoramic landscapes of the United States. Sargent was likely familiar with the work of these artists—especially that of Bierstadt, but, quite characteristically, he chose a different approach when painting his mountain pictures. Works such as *Lake O’Hara*, 1916 (Figure 28) seem to pay homage to the painters of the American sublime while also maintaining an approach that was typical of Sargent’s earlier mountain works.

Although this is a comparatively grand perspective, there is an abrupt cropping of the scene which eliminates the magnificence evident in Frederick Edwin Church’s *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860, for example. In *Lake O’Hara* there is no visible sky and the viewer is positioned at the bottom of the mountain looking upward rather than the bold downward view from an elevated perspective. Erica E. Hirshler describes Sargent’s approach by saying, “…it is the hand of the artist, not the hand of God, which takes precedence.” The cropping of the space and the low-angle perspective are confining, in effect trapping the viewer in the artist’s point of view—this element of control illustrates clearly Hirshler’s observation.

The artist has composed a scene which, while presenting a somewhat wide-angle view of the lake and mountains behind, also keeps the viewer firmly in the bottom foreground completely engulfed in the viewpoint of the artist. Just as in earlier mountain works, Sargent renders the forms in fragmented brushstrokes, reducing the cliff sides to geometric patterning; the angularity of the forms in this work is typical of his landscapes painted in oil. The pairing of the restricted view and the abstraction of forms in a subject matter so deeply tied to tradition again highlights Sargent’s tendency toward the modern while at the same time maintaining an air of the conventional.

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64 Erica E. Hirshler, *Huge Skies Do Not Tempt Me*, pg. 64
65 See *Valley of Mar Saba, Palestine*, 1905-1906 (Private collection) for another example of his landscapes in oil.
Sargent returned to Boston in September 1916 to continue the supervision of the installation of portions of the Boston Library murals; this phase of the murals was unveiled later the same year and the mural cycle was completed in its entirety by 1919. In November 1916, Sargent accepted another mural commission, this time from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for their rotunda, which he immediately began work on. In the spring of 1917 he travelled to Florida to paint the first of two portraits of John D. Rockefeller at his home in Ormond Beach; upon completion of his time there he journeyed further south to Miami at the invitation of his friends, the Deering brothers. He spent the winter of 1917 at their home, the Villa Vizcaya, which, for him, combined all the best aspects of Italy (where he had wintered for so many years). The combination of bright sunlight, warmth, and an entirely new array of plants and animals presented countless opportunities to paint scenes of light and color as he had done on so many of his European mountain holidays. His time spent in Florida proved much more productive than the summer spent in the Rockies the year before. He painted approximately seventeen watercolors of the flora and fauna of south Florida as well as the portrait of Charles Deering discussed in chapter two.

Sargent’s pictures from his Floridian winter consist mainly of palms, alligators, and figure studies as explorations in the way light disintegrates not only local color but also solidity of forms. In *Palmettos*, 1917 (Figure 29) the scene is narrowly focused on a group of overlapping cabbage palmettos presented from a low-angle perspective. The effect is similar to that of *Lake O’Hara* in its sense of confinement and enclosure of the landscape. *Palmettos* is also wholly modern in the way it requires distance between itself and the viewer to be fully understood. At close range, it is little more than crisscrossing fields of green and brown, a chaotic scene with no basis in reality. However, as the distance between it and the viewer increases, the clarity of the picture is improved and the subject matter becomes apparent. The limited color palette in *Palmettos* as well as the absence of any background elements or horizon line camouflages the inspiration for the work and abstracts the scene in such a way that it seems to hover between watercolor works like those made by Winslow Homer, for example, and the avant-garde artists of the early twentieth-century. A reading of any of Sargent’s works as modern is curious when considered in the
context of an exchange between the artist and the art critic Roger Frye. In the December 24, 1910 issue of *Nation*, Frye wrote a response to a critique of a Post-Impressionist exhibit and mentioned Sargent’s name as a supporter in an effort to bolster his argument. Prior to the publication of his article, Frye wrote to Sargent asking for an endorsement of the exhibition. Sargent declined, citing his unfamiliarity with some of the artists. When he was made aware of Frye’s article, Sargent sent a response to the *Nation* which was published in the January 7, 1911 issue. In his response, Sargent expresses his displeasure with the use of his name and the resulting connection made between himself and the Post-Impressionists. Furthermore, he disputes Frye’s classification of Cézanne as part of this group and reasserts his admiration for the artist’s work. Many scholars cite Sargent’s response as evidence of his disapproval of the avant-garde, though it seems to suggest not a disapproval but rather a lack of understanding. This lack of understanding makes the modern tendencies of his later works extraordinary, as it suggests Sargent arrived at this point in his work independently of other artistic movements.

Sargent returned to England in the spring of 1918 despite the very real danger of submarine attacks. Just before his departure from the United States he learned of the death of his niece, Rose-Marie. She had been killed in the bombing of a church while attending an Easter concert there. Though his letters indicate a stoicism, more concerned with the grief of his sisters, nieces, and nephews, there is no doubt he himself greatly mourned the loss of his niece who he had long considered one of his favorite people. Almost immediately after his return, he was approached by the War Artists Committee and asked to paint a picture which illustrated the collaborative efforts of English and American troops. He was slow to accept the commission and did so only after learning that his friend and fellow artist, Henry Tonks, had also been asked to participate. Among other things, Henry Tonks was known for medical drawings, and his commission was to highlight that aspect of the war. Sargent arrived at his station in July 1918, dressed in a military uniform but completely unaware of the inner workings of combat. Henry Tonks recounted to Evan Charteris, Sargent’s first biographer, a conversation between Sargent and General Fielding, leader of the division to which he had been assigned where he remarks, “I suppose there is no fighting on
Sundays.” He travelled with various regiments throughout France until October, when he returned to England to execute the final work of the commission, *Gassed*, 1918 (Figure 30).

During his time in France he produced a great number of sketches, the majority of which were studies for *Gassed*, and also a significant number of watercolor works. He struggled to find a scene that he felt accurately addressed the requirements of his commission and wrote to Evan Charteris about this experience,

How can there be anything flagrant enough for a picture when Mars and Venus are miles apart whether in camps or front trenches. And the farther forward one goes the more scattered and meagre everything is. The nearer to danger the fewer and the more hidden the men—the more dramatic the situation the more it becomes an empty landscape. […]

Excepting at night I have only seen three fine subjects with masses of men—one a harrowing sight, a field full of gassed and blindfolded men—another a train of trucks packed with a ‘chair à cannon’—and another frequent sight a big road encumbered with troops and traffic.67

The muted palette seen in the works immediately following the death of his mother and Robert Andre-Michele, Rose-Marie’s husband, is again evident in these works, and many of Sargent’s chosen subjects share a connection to his niece, her role in the war or the conditions of her death, which serves to underscore the fact that while Sargent’s letters to family and friends may not indicate great grief and mourning, his artwork does, serving once more as an outlet for expressing both love and loss.

Sargent and Henry Tonks were on a sketching trip when they observed a group of soldiers who had been gassed being led in a line—hands to shoulders—by Red Cross nurses where they would be

66 Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors*, pg. 78
67 Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors*, pg. 86-87
treated in the medical tent. He was so struck by this scene that he stopped and began to sketch what he saw. Henry Tonks recounted the incident, “He immediately began making sketches and a little later asked me if I would mind his making this essentially medical subject his, and I told him I did not in the least mind. [...] It is a good representation of what we saw as it gives a sense of the surrounding peace.”

The outcome of this experience was *Gassed*, the seminal work from the commission of the War Artists Committee. *Gassed* does not feature any American troops, indeed no portion of this painting speaks to the collaborative efforts of the two nations, but it does speak to the very real conditions of war and no doubt impacted Sargent so deeply because of its connection with Rose-Marie. She served as a Red Cross nurse, working with gassed soldiers after the deployment of her husband Robert, and was still working in that capacity when she was killed. Sargent had long admired her for her kindness and compassion; there can be no doubt that the sight of these gassed, blinded and now helpless soldiers being led across the road by a group of medics spoke to his own grief and mourning of the loss of Rose-Marie. In his London studio, he transformed his encounter into *Gassed*, a large-scale oil work executed in a limited palette which shows two groups of gassed soldiers being led away by medics. They cling to each other for safety and guidance, experiencing blindness for the first time; some take large, awkward steps while others lean into their comrades. These groups of men pass through piles of other gassed and wounded soldiers that lay on the ground lining the path. Their twisted forms make it difficult to determine whether they are dead or alive. In the background of this work, barely visible in the spaces between the soldiers, Sargent has included a military camp and a group of men playing soccer, creating a juxtaposition between the few occasions of leisurely enjoyment and the horrific realities of warfare. The figures in the background also represent an optimism; a hope that the war would soon be over and these men would be able to return to their normal lives, but all in the context of the devastating loss suffered by not only the soldiers and their families but also those not as closely connected to the war, like Sargent and his family. Rarely is so much of the sky left untouched in Sargent’s work, but here the stark white seems the perfect

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68 Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors*, pg.87
balance for the heaviness of mood and the large-scale figures filling the frame in rhythmic rows. Though the result of the War Artists Committee commission was not the same subject outlined in the original agreement, Sargent captured a scene that not only spoke to the realities of war in a painfully poetic way but also represented his own feelings of loss.

Among the many other paintings produced during his time with the military was Ruined Cathedral, Arras, 1918 (Figure 31). A large number of the works painted during this time are the scenes of destruction that littered France along with many other European nations; though they point to war, the reference is oblique and veiled. This work is particularly interesting as it is likely very similar to the site of the bombed church where Rose-Marie was killed. Rather than the dark, muted tones used in other images, here Sargent returns to the scorching whites, grays, and blues that dominated many of the pictures of Rose-Marie painted a decade earlier. The contrast between this picture and the others painted in the same location is striking in its dramatic color shift. We know from the evidence present in his sketchbooks that Sargent was interested in architecture, but the choice of subject here was likely not inspired by the architecture of the church but rather the story of its destruction. In a letter to Violet Ormond written just before returning from the United States in 1918, he expresses his desire to know what happened to his niece but also seems to fear the details of her death.69 Ruined Cathedral... reads like a visual expression of that desire, of the sorrow felt at the loss of Rose-Marie and the questions that would go unanswered because he had not been with her when she died. The works produced during the months spent with the military, July through October 1918, as well as those painted during his 1914 Tyrol visit are some of the most visually arresting pieces in his oeuvre. Their colors, tone, and mood are haunting, depicting in paint what he could not express in words.

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69 In a letter dated April 14·1918 in the Archives of American Art, Sargent states, “I wonder whether you have heard the details of dear Rose-Marie’s death in Paris—whether it was in that church or where—I hope it was instantaneous.”
After the War

Following the completion of *Gassed* Sargent accepted, with some hesitation, another commission from the War Artists Committee to paint a portrait of a group of high-ranking British officers. Upon completion of that commission, the remaining five years of his life were spent focused on the completion of his murals and travelling extensively between the United States and England. His travel was limited to those two countries and his output of work decreased dramatically. During the summers of 1921 and 1922 Sargent visited Ironbound Island Maine as the guest of Dwight Blaney and in 1924 he went to the Mount Desert region of Maine to stay with his cousin Mary Hale, and as always spent much of his time outdoors, painting. These are the last groups of watercolor works he produced. By this time he was in his late sixties and grossly overweight, though his pictures indicate no loss of skill or enthusiasm. The subjects of these works are in some ways very much like those produced earlier in the century and in some ways quite different.

*On the Veranda (Ironbound Island, Maine)*, 1922 (Figure 32) is a group portrait of Dwight Blaney and his family. Blaney was himself an artist and had over the years hosted many fellow artists at his summer home, including Childe Hassam and Ross Sterling Turner. Blaney, considered an American Impressionist, painted in a style which was more defined and clearly influenced by the early Impressionists like Monet. He worked in a high key palette with detailed forms, quite different than Sargent’s watercolors. *On The Verandah…*, whether intentionally or not, seems to take influence from or pay homage to the work of Blaney. In this scene, Sargent makes frequent use of pencil outline, detailed forms and tight brushwork; the result is an informal portrait of a family spending a quiet summer evening on the porch. Though group portraits were not new to him, those painted previously were much more formal in tone and approach; even his earlier subject pictures that included his nieces and sisters were not as sharply delineated as this one. Here, the faces of the figures are clear, they occupy an identifiable space.

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70 Carl Little, *The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent*. Pg. 15
71 Carl Little, *The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent*. Pg. 15
defined by a row of columns on one side and the house on the other. What remains constant though is the confinement of space to create a narrow field of vision, again trapping the viewer in the artist’s point of view- limiting the focus of the work to only that which is important to the artist.

During his stay in Maine with his cousin, Mary Hale, Sargent painted *Sand Beach, Schooner Head, Maine*, 1921 (Figure 33), a small beach area of Mt. Desert Island which is now part of Acadia National Park. As in his countless other images of sun, sand, foliage, and light, Sargent renders this scene in a limited palette that highlights the manner in which light changes forms. He uses long, quick strokes of browns and plums to indicate the shadows cast by the trees on the bank while rendering the harsh light on the flat surface of the sand in successive washes of tan. In a manner similar to that seen in his mountain stream works of the early twentieth century, the trees are depicted in swaths of color with details of their form created through the use of both additive and subtractive watercolor techniques. Though approaching the end of his life, his sharpness of both sight and skill has not been diminished. The paintings created during his Maine holidays are no less visually acute than those produced during the height of his watercolor output.

Sargent was a lifelong artist, in perpetual pursuit of challenges and growth. He spent nearly his entire life perfecting and honing his skill. Though always a tourist, he rarely rested; while his travelling companions spent their afternoons reading in the grass under parasols, he ventured out into nature in search of the perfect view. Just before he was scheduled to return to American to oversee the installation of the final phase of his Boston Museum murals, John Singer Sargent died in his sleep on April 14, 1925. He was found with an open copy of Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire Philosophique* on his bedside table still wearing his glasses.\(^\text{72}\) His oeuvre is filled with expressions of deep love, loss, and his endless experimentations with paint, light and form.

\(^{72}\) Carl Little, *The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent*, pg. 16 and Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors* pg. 88
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

In retrospective assessment, Sargent approached and used landscape in a complex way. In his portraits he included it in a manner that would enhance the painting; it functioned as a testament of ownership for the wealthy elite like Pauline Astor who is pictured on the grounds of her family estate. Sargent used landscape as an extension of identity, for Marie Pailleron, the landscape behind her not only alludes to her husband but also her national identity in its Impressionistic overtones. Daisy Leiter and Pauline Astor were the daughters of American expatriates who assimilated themselves into English society, marrying into the British upper class. Their portraits reflect the heavy influence of Thomas Gainsborough, considered by some to be the most important artist in English history and a well-known painter of the wealthy. The portraits of Charles Deering and Frederick Law Olmsted show them as undeniably American and include a plethora of details pointing to their professions, heritage and accomplishments.

Because he was committed to supporting himself through his artwork, Sargent chose portraiture but continued to paint landscapes while on holiday throughout most of his career as a portraitist. He did not use landscapes in portraits as a vehicle for artistic exploration, but rather looked to convention and with few exceptions did not venture far from it. However, outside of the context of portraiture, his landscapes took on an entirely new meaning for the artist. Sargent has been described as reserved, soft-spoken, and timid in unfamiliar social situations; he preferred a relatively small, close-knit group of friends and family. This is not surprising when one remembers that he was raised with only his father, mother, and sisters, isolated from the rest of his family. His letters are generally short, polite and direct; he does not waste time on beautiful words or poetic expressions, but his paintings of family and friends are quite different. They record his emotional state during some of the most significant events of his life. The emotions not expressed in his letters are clear in his paintings of those close to him. This is evident through one detail in particular, the nature of his relationship with a figure in a painting can be
gauged by the closeness of that figure to the viewer. Previous examinations of Sargent’s landscapes focus only on their artistic qualities and neglect their significance as vehicles of expression. His scenes of mountain peaks, Alpine summers, graveyards and bombed out churches along with frequent repetition of colors are all profoundly connected to his life story.

His pure landscape paintings composed on holiday or research trips show an appreciation for nature not in the sense that he viewed nature as a paradise, but rather that he thought of nature as an ever evolving challenge. New locations, different light, and varied landscapes all presented new tests for the artist. He did not prefer one time of day or season; when he could paint, he did paint. His traveling companions describe him as always dedicated to his work. He rose in the morning, ate breakfast, and set out to paint; he returned in the afternoon for lunch and set out once again to paint, staying out until dinner. When there was light to be painted, Sargent at least attempted to paint it. In the latter half of his career, his European travel mostly included the mountain regions of Switzerland, Austria and Italy. He made research trips to Northern Africa and the Middle East, where he was so captivated by the landscape and people that he produced a great number of watercolor paintings of what he saw. Though seen by many as a traditionalist, dedicated to the ways of Gainsborough, Leighton and Hals, Sargent’s landscapes reflect the changing ideals present in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century of what are should be or could be. The paradox between his writings concerning the avant-garde movements of the time and the scenes he painted show a man caught in the middle of two distinctly different views of the future of art and its purpose.

For Sargent, the issue of landscape was not one of pure aesthetics or a deep appreciation of nature alone but rather an expression of the ever inquisitive and observant nature expressed in his letter to Ben del Castillo when Sargent was just eleven years old and reflected on the pages of his numerous sketchbooks. Landscape and the study of nature in particular provided an outlet for both the expression of intimate feelings and the development of his approach to painting, the interpretation of light and a record of his reality.
FIGURES

Figure 1

*Matterhorn, Zermatt, 1870*\(^{73}\)
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 2

*The Matterhorn, 1870*\(^{74}\)
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge


Figure 3

Madame Edouard Pailleron, 1879
Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC

Figure 4

Daisy Leiter, 1898
The Iveagh Bequest

Figure 5

The Honorable Pauline Astor, 1898-9
Private collection

Figure 6

Frederick Law Olmsted, 1895
Biltmore House, Asheville


Figure 7

Landscape with Women in the Foreground, 1883
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Figure 8

Group with Parasols (Siesta), 1904
Private collection


Figure 9

Charles Deering, 1917
Private collection

Figure 10

On His Holidays, 1901
Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool

Figure 11

The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale, 1878
Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C.

Figure 12

Carrara: Workmen, 1911
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 13

Simplon Pass: Reading, 1911
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 14

Purtud, Bed of a Glacier Torrent, 1904
The Diploma Collection of the Royal Watercolour Society, London

Figure 15

The Mountains of Moab, 1905
Tate Gallery, London

Figure 16

A Torrent in Norway, 1901
Private Collection

In Norway, 1901\textsuperscript{89}  
Private Collection

Rushing Water, 1901-7\textsuperscript{90}  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York


Figure 19

Matterhorn, 1902
Private collection

Figure 20

Mount Cervin: Alps (Matterhorn), 1905
Private collection

Figure 21

*Stream over Rocks, 1907*93
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 22

*Mountain Torrent, 1910*94
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 23

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Mountain Waterfall, 1909-1095
Private Collection

Figure 24

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Hübschlorn Mountain, Simplon Pass, 1909-1196
Private collection

Figure 25

*Tyrolese Interior, 1915*\textsuperscript{97}
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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Figure 26

*Tyrolese Crucifix, 1914*\textsuperscript{98}
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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Figure 27

Graveyard in the Tyrol, 1914
Trustees of the British Museum, London

Figure 28

Lake O’Hara, 1916
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge

Figure 29

*Palmettos, 1917*

Private Collection

Figure 30

*Gassed, 1918*

Imperial War Museum, London

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101 Hirshler, Erica. E. 1999. ""Huge Skies Do Not Tempt Me": John Singer Sargent and Landscape Painting." In *Sargent: The Late Landscapes*

Figure 31

Ruined Cathedral, Arras, 1918

The Marchioness of Cholmondeley

Figure 32

On the Veranda (Ironbound Island, Maine), 1922

Private collection


Figure 33

Sand Beach, Schooner Head, Maine, 1921

Private collection

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


