

John Singer Sargent

1856–1925

by Emily Cottrill



Many refer to John Singer Sargent as an American painter, and you will find his works hanging in art museums next to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American art. He was, however, born in Europe, and he lived there the majority of his life. His parents went abroad before John was born and traveled a great deal while he was growing up. Educated by his father and mother, he demonstrated an inclination toward art at an early age. Because the family moved frequently, they never enrolled Sargent in an art school for formal training. Nevertheless, when he was eighteen, he was accepted at the prestigious French academy L'École des Beaux-Arts where he excelled.

Early in his career, Sargent decided to focus on portrait painting, and this niche suited him well. His particular gift was painting group portraits, and few artists in history have executed them as well as he did. Sargent painted portraits from life without much pre-drawing or underpainting on his canvases, enabling us to see how talented he was. He laid down all of his color and lines with precision, though some brushstrokes are loose in an impressionist style. These loose strokes describe the surface quality and structure of his subjects perfectly. His ability to portray the texture and sheen of fabrics is especially noteworthy.

Almost from the first, wealthy patrons sought after Sargent to paint their portraits—socialites of Paris and London, Theodore Roosevelt, and Robert Louis Stevenson among them. He brilliantly composed his subjects to describe their personality and character, often placing them in interiors that seem just as important as the people who occupy them. Later in life, Sargent traveled extensively, spending much time in the United States. On his travels, he painted landscapes, especially in watercolor. His ability to paint directly on his canvas made these landscapes fresh and full of life. Though he will always be remembered for his portraits, his watercolors are beautiful, and modern viewers will appreciate seeing the places this world traveler shares with us.



Self-Portrait, 1906
John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas
Uffizi Gallery, Florence

The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit, 1882

John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas
Museum of Fine Art, Boston



Resources

Check your library for these resources.

A Child's History of Art by V.M. Hillyer (D. Appleton–Century Co., 1933). This is a treasure to own and is worth a search for it. There are newer versions that break art periods into several volumes as well.

John Singer Sargent by Claire Gibson (Barnes & Noble, 1997)

Sargent by Carter Ratcliff (Abbeville, 1982)

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose: The Story of a Painting by Hugh Brewster (Kids Can Press, 2007)

Picture Study

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose

AT RIGHT
Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose
1885–86
John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas
Tate Museum, London

- ❧ What time of day is it in this picture?
- ❧ What are the girls doing?
- ❧ John Singer Sargent tried to capture the exact light in this picture. What are the two different types of light in this picture?
- ❧ Can you identify any of the flowers in this painting?

Gondoliers' Siesta, 1904
John Singer Sargent
Watercolor
Private Collection







The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale, 1878
John Singer Sargent
Oil on Canvas
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Lady Agnew of Lochnaw, 1892–93
John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh



Gondoliers' Siesta, 1906
John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy



Emily Cottrill has a B.A. in Studio Art from Wheaton College. A private art teacher for homeschooled students of all ages, she believes art history is a vital part of art education. She has a passion for diminishing the number of "I-can-draw-stick-figures-only" adults in the world.