

NOBLENES FROM HIS BRUSH: JOHN SINGER SARGENT'S PORTRAITS OF THREE
VANDERBILT WOMEN

by

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There is no greater work of art than a great portrait – a truth to be constantly taken to heart by a painter holding in his hands the weapon that Mr. Sargent wields. The gift that he possesses he possesses completely – the immediate perception of the end and of the means.

–Henry James, “John S. Sargent”

Henry James (1843-1916) penned these words about the expatriate artist John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) for an essay in the October 1887 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. James's article appeared within a few weeks after Sargent had, with some reluctance, arrived to work in America for the first time. Three years earlier in Paris, the artist's reputation was beginning to surge when a professional setback that made securing commissions in Europe difficult left him feeling uncertain about his career. Keenly aware of these circumstances, in the fall of 1887 Henry James arranged to have his essay published in America. The author mustered a strategically timed campaign hoping that he might persuade his fellow citizens to appreciate Sargent's artistry, and convince some of them to commission paintings from their native son.

During Sargent's eight-month American stay, he completed approximately thirty works, enjoyed his first solo exhibition, and earned more money than he had in the previous five years. His aristocratic patrons summered in “cottages” at Newport, Rhode Island, and resided in their large colonial homes in Boston, Massachusetts, or grand New York City mansions. Although the Vanderbilts were among the wealthiest people living along Fifth Avenue, they had not firmly established their ties to society. In the early weeks of 1888, Sargent executed portraits of three women from that family. Each artwork demonstrates its master's abilities praised by Henry James. While his essay detailed the brilliant effects of Sargent's past works, the opportunity to paint the Vanderbilt women's portraits boosted the artist's professional ambitions and the well-to-do family's social capital. The artist's brush was the silent weapon that reinvigorated his faltering career.

Born in Florence, Italy on January 12, 1856, John Singer was the eldest child of the Americans expatriates Dr. Fitzwilliam and Mary Newbold (née Singer) Sargent. John and his two younger sisters led a nomadic childhood. The family's peripatetic nature meant that their son received an erratic formal education in many of Europe's largest cities. On the other hand, the Continent's cathedrals and museums were his childhood playgrounds.

In these places, the aspiring artist sketched from Old Master works by Diego Velázquez, El Greco, Rembrandt and Frans Hals that would have an enduring influence on his mature style. Sargent's formal training began at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Florence. Later, in 1874, the eighteen-year-old young man moved to Paris where he attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and studied with Charles-Émile Auguste Carolus-Durand (1838-1917).¹ The well-respected artist and teacher was one of the Third Republic's most successful high society portraitists. His innovative approach based on his study of Velázquez attracted students to his atelier. The Frenchman encouraged his protégés to paint accurately without reworking, a technique he called *au premier coup*. Sargent adopted the bold, thick brushwork that later became his stylistic hallmark. In Paris, the American met author Henry James (1843-1916) and architect Stanford White (1853-1906). Both men admired Sargent's work, and in the late 1880s they each helped boost the painter's flagging career.

Shortly after settling into the French capitol, Sargent cultivated a clientele comprised of wealthy Parisians and members of the city's large expatriate community. Winning a Second Prize medal at the 1881 Salon earned him the privilege of bypassing the jury's scrutiny in the future. Thus, the artist felt freer to exhibit his more avant-garde works at the annual show.

Madame X (fig. 1), one painting that he submitted to the 1884 Salon, was an innovative portrait

¹ Trevor J. Fairbrother, "John Singer Sargent and America" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1981), 24.

of Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau who was the young American wife of French banker Pierre-Louis Gautreau. Sargent was optimistic about the Salon piece, but responses to it ran awry from his expectations. Critics objected to the severity of Mme. Gautreau's silhouette, contorted right arm, bluish skin tone and plunging décolletage. The most shocking aspect was the garment's right shoulder strap that had "slipped" from its place. It dangled on her upper arm leaving only the slender strap on the left shoulder to hold the black evening gown in position. Responding to these protests, the artist eventually "restored" the strap to Virginie's shoulder, but he could not repair the damage caused to his reputation and future prospects.

High-society Parisian patrons were leery that Sargent would depict their wives, daughters and mothers in an eccentric vein similar to Mme. Gautreau. Having few prospective clients in France, he moved to England where there existed a portraiture tradition steeped in grand paintings by the artists Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) and Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) who had enjoyed successful careers a century earlier portraying their country's genteel aristocracy. However, the English, to Sargent's chagrin, found his work "beastly French [sic]," which further stalled the American's professional recovery.²

Throughout the late 1870s and early 1880s Sargent had sent a few paintings to the annual exhibitions in the United States where positive reviews recognized the "fine certainty," "breadth of strokes" and "expression of character" in his works.³ One prescient critic suggested that when the famous paintings of the day become Old Masters, Sargent would represent America with *Miss Burkhardt*, *Mrs. Vickers* and *The Misses Vickers*.⁴ Despite these accolades, he did not

² Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Complete Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1:130.

³ Editorial, *New York Times*, April 16, 1880, 8.

⁴ *Art Amateur*, 16 (March 1887): 74.

consider his native country the place to cultivate prospective patrons.⁵ Convinced he should be in England, the artist signed a three-year lease on a studio in London's Chelsea neighborhood, in June 1887.

After settling into his new accommodations at 31 Tite Street, he received an invitation from Henry Gurdon Marquand (1819-1902), a wealthy New York banker who desired a portrait of his wife Elizabeth and wanted the artist to travel to America to paint it. Marquand, a Trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, probably kept abreast of the artist's activities from contemporary articles in popular journals such as *Art Amateur* and *The Athenaeum*. He was also an acquaintance of Henry James and a patron of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, both who may have mentioned Sargent to the well-healed capitalist.⁶ Sargent considered declining Marquand's offer, fearing that he might miss opportunities in England, even if he were only away a short time. He quoted a price three times his customary rate thinking that Marquand would reject a \$3,000 fee; but the financier accepted. Thus, on September 17, 1887, Sargent set sail for his homeland unaware that he was about to re-launch his career.

In America, while commissions came his way at a pace far quicker than he had anticipated, he was not satisfied from a business prospective because most of his patrons were distant relatives or old family friends. By late January 1888, Stanford White had returned to New York and hosted a dinner that introduced Sargent to many of the city's affluent citizens. One guest at the soiree may have been White's client Colonel Elliot Fitch Shepard (1833-1893), whose wife was the granddaughter of Cornelius "The Commodore" Vanderbilt (1794-1877).⁷

⁵ Carter Ratcliff, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), 101.

⁶ Stanley Olsen, *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 136.

⁷ Duveneck, Josephine W., *Frank Duveneck: Painter-Teacher* (San Francisco: John Howell Books, 1970), 143. The American artist Frank Duveneck claims the British artist Sir John Everett Millais referred the "elder Vanderbilt" (probably Cornelius II) to Sargent.

During the Gilded Age, wealthy *parvenus*, such as the Vanderbilts and Shepards, believed that owning great art displayed their elite status, and sitting for a cosmopolitan painter could help elevate one's standing.⁸ In New York, where business and culture intertwined, Sargent's portraits were visual assets with the power to advance the upstart Vanderbilt's ambitions to gain full acceptance within the city's social circles that the well-to-do referred to as The Four Hundred.⁹

Since they were not one of the city's founding Dutch families, the Vanderbilts, who were *nouveau riche*, perhaps approached Sargent because they envied his pedigree. On his father's side, the artist traced his heritage back to colonial Boston, while his mother was from a respected Philadelphia family. Sargent was born in Florence, trained in Paris and lived in London, thus owing one of his artworks gave provincial Americans cachet. If the Vanderbilt's did not possess a respected ancestry, they could create one by displaying works by the brush of the cultivated artist who "might easily be mistaken for a Frenchman."¹⁰ Paintings by well-known artists were visual credentials of the owner's refinement. The ability to live in the same grand manner as those listed on the Social Register as well as in the gracious fashion of old-world European aristocrats was valuable cultural currency in the elite halls of power. Owning portraits of their finely dressed attractive women not only demonstrated the upstart Vanderbilt's desired place in society, but also their good taste.

Soon after the Vanderbilt's patronage boosted the painter's fortunes, it caught the attention of his fellow artist James Carroll Beckwith (1852-1917) who noted in his diary in early

⁸ H. Barbara Weinberg, "Late-Nineteenth-Century American Painting: Cosmopolitan Concerns and Critical Controversies," *Archives of American Art* 24 (1983): 19-26.

⁹ The social register purportedly earned its name because Mrs. Astor's ballroom could comfortably accommodate four hundred people.

¹⁰ Henry James, "John S. Sargent," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 75 (October 1887): 683.

April 1888 that Sargent was “about town being entertained very much and painting Mrs. Vanderbilt and others.”¹¹ Likewise, Dennis Miller Bunker (1861-1890) wrote to a friend that “Sargent is still in New York, I hear of his princely life occasionally. Il mène une existence de roi-c’est un homme étonnant.”¹² Quickly, the expatriate had become an American celebrity.

A short article in the October 12, 1887 *New York Times* mentioned Sargent as a guest in the Marquand’s Newport home.¹³ This report may have influenced the Vanderbilts to think that by emulating the elite New York banker’s choices they could elevate their status. That Henry James extolled Sargent’s good fortune to paint more women than men, as well as “the portrait of a lady of a certain age,” may have convinced George Washington Vanderbilt (1862-1914) that the artist possessed the requisite skills to portray his widowed mother Maria Louisa (née Kissam) Vanderbilt (1821-1896).¹⁴

Her three million dollar home consumed the entire block of Fifth Avenue between 51st and 52nd Streets. Replicas of the bronze doors that Ghiberti designed for the Florence baptistry led visitors into the “Triple Mansion,” where William Henry Vanderbilt’s widow lived with their youngest son George.¹⁵ The building earned its name because glass atriums connected to the two adjacent residences, where daughters Margaret and Emily lived with their respective families. Inside was a greenhouse, a two-story art gallery, private libraries and several parlors.

Sometime before the fall of 1887, Sargent received an inquiry from George Vanderbilt about a picture of his mother (fig. 2). On November 18, 1887, Sargent informed George that he

¹¹ Mount, 136.

¹² Mount, 136.

¹³ “Breakfast Table,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1887.

¹⁴ Sargent painted portraits of Mrs. Vanderbilt’s brother Benjamin P. Kissam and his wife Lucy in 1890 and 1888 respectively.

¹⁵ The doors were a gift to William Henry Vanderbilt from his son-in-law Colonel Elliott Fitch Shepard who purchased them for \$20,000 at the San Donato sale.

would be in New York in six weeks, at which time he could paint the matriarch's portrait in either her home or his rented studio. Sargent also mentioned that, depending upon the size of the canvas, his prices ranged from one thousand to three thousand dollars. On November 22, Sargent acknowledged Mrs. Vanderbilt's wish to pose at home, and asked that her son find her a suitable black dress. Shortly after visiting the widow in her residence on January 20, 1888, Sargent began the portrait. That the artist needed to postpone two sessions with Mrs. Vanderbilt to accommodate another client attests to his high demand.¹⁶ Despite these delays, by March 10, 1888 Maria Louisa's portrait was complete. In an undated letter, Sargent thanked George Vanderbilt for his "kind words and that he was delighted to have succeeded to his satisfaction."¹⁷ The client's approval was such that he sat for Sargent in 1890.

Despite Mrs. Vanderbilt's picture pleasing her son, he never lent it to any public exhibition, rather it functioned in their home as a private display of wealth and taste. Society matrons and other visitors might admire the work and the Vanderbilt's patronage of fine art. Others could envy the matriarch's celebrity status by reading about the work in *The Critic*, an art journal that praised it as "one of Mr. Sargent's greatest successes in portraiture."¹⁸ The following week, the periodical clearly deemed the painting successful when it expressed regret that the picture would not be part of the Academy of Design's spring show.

Visitors could have seen Mrs. Vanderbilt portrayed as enthroned on a deep purple upholstered chair and admired her simple, but elegant, black dress with its bit of off-white lace embellishment on the bodice. The widow's dignified posture conveys her gentility. She rests

¹⁶ Based upon other portraits the artist executed near the time, that client may have been Mrs. Edward Darley Boit, Mrs. Adrian Iselin or Isabella Stewart Gardner.

¹⁷ John Singer Sargent to George Washington Vanderbilt, The Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina.

¹⁸ "The Fine Arts," *The Critic: A Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts*, (March 10, 1888): 119.

her feet on a plumb green pillow, while her hands lay on her lap. She holds a pair of light tan gloves that signal elevated social position.¹⁹ Gloves also imply that she ventures outside her home. They may indicate the official end of mourning for her husband and that she is ready to go outside again, perhaps to take a drive in the park, which was an activity that she was fond of doing with her daughters.²⁰ Sargent may have included the accessories as a subtle tribute to his mentor Carolus-Duran, whose work *Lady with a Glove (La Dame au Gant)* (Musée d'Orsay, 1869) had earned great notoriety. Compositionally, Mrs. Vanderbilt's portrait is also similar to the one of Mrs. Marquand that had recently earned Sargent accolades in the American press. Both are full-length images of matronly women sitting at slight angles and gazing toward the viewer. The figures appear at comparable distances from the picture plane, although Mrs. Marquand holds a fan, as a symbol of social rank. Sargent possibly relied on this successful format, hoping that Mrs. Vanderbilt's picture might likewise generate beneficial publicity.

Based on the responses in *The Critic*, if that was Sargent's plan, he was successful. However, where the artist placed Mrs. Marquand in an unrecognizable background, he posed Mrs. Vanderbilt in her home surrounded by its luxurious furniture and decorative elements. Sargent portrayed his subject in a regal manner whereas in 1867 the artist George Augustus Baker (1821-1880) rendered Mrs. Vanderbilt in a straightforward portrait bust (fig. 3). Baker presented an ordinary woman, while Sargent depicted an aristocratic lady inside her mansion. Yet Sargent's dark palette masks several of the dwelling's gaudy interior elements that only a contemporary photograph exposes (fig. 4). In the foreground of the black and white photograph is a tassel-trimmed chair that could be the one in which Mrs. Vanderbilt posed for Sargent. He also incorporated decorative objects from the room into his composition such as the brass framed

¹⁹ Shearer West. *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

²⁰ Croffut, 180.

screen and Oriental carpet. The artist selected colors that gave his subject a regal sensibility, while his fluid brushwork interpreted fabrics and furniture to exude the sitter's wealth and good taste. Rendering Mrs. Vanderbilt's belongings with thick, broad brushwork calls attention to his painterly skill and the family's material affluence. Rather than accurately depicting the home's furnishings, he expresses an impression of opulence. Sargent's brush elevated the family's social capital because elite rivals often connected one's residence with their place in society.

While Sargent posed Mrs. Vanderbilt majestically sitting alone in her home, fifteen years earlier, Joseph Seymour Guy (1824-1875) portrayed Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt, their children and their spouses before they ventured out for the evening. In his 1873 work *Going to the Opera* (fig. 5), Guy depicts the entire clan gathered in the parlor of the family's previous abode at Fifth Avenue and Fortieth Street.²¹ One year later, people crowded into the 1874 National Academy of Design exhibition curious to see Guy's rendition of the prominent family and their home interior. While critics valued Guy's artistry, they simultaneously ridiculed the Vanderbilt's lifestyle.²² Writing for *The Nation*, a columnist attacked the room's "complete want of individuality in furniture, the expressionlessness of every inch of background, and the machine-made look of the carvings."²³ Another reviewer deemed that "the figures are dressed up in spic-and-span new clothes, and introduced much after the manner of a fashion-plate they become doubly offensive."²⁴ After the response to the group portrait, William Henry never lent it again and began collecting works by the French artists Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier (1815-1891),

²¹ Maureen Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 28. The opera was central to the formation of New York society.

²² Croffut, 164.

²³ "Fine Arts: The National Academy of Exhibition," *The Nation*, 462 (May 7, 1874): 304.

²⁴ "Our Feuilleton. The Academy Exhibition," *New York Evening Express*, April 3, 1880.

Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899) and Jean-François Millet (1814-1875).²⁵ Upon her death, Mrs. Vanderbilt bequeathed most of the collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whereas her son George inherited the works by Baker, Guy and Sargent. He eventually moved them to Biltmore his estate in Asheville, North Carolina.

In the center of *Going to the Opera*, Mrs. Vanderbilt's eldest daughter Margaret Louise (1845-1924) appears in profile standing beside her husband Elliott Fitch Shepard (1833-1893). Guy depicted Mrs. Shepard, who was known more for her money than her beauty, wearing a pale blue gown, while Sargent in his 1888 portraiture, placed her beside an Empire-style table wearing a brilliant red tea-dress with a gold band nestled in her upswept hair (fig. 6). He applied tones of red, ruby, crimson, scarlet and maroon with a large sweeping brush to render Mrs. Shepard's voluminous bustle and train. Swaths of brown and mahogany paint form the fabric's deep folds thus building volume and depth. Sargent's expressive touch creates an overall impression that the society matron's dress is of the most extraordinary fabric available, while its burgundy color and long train convey a regal aura. A delicate gold floral embellishment coursing down the costume's front seam adds to her an aristocratic air. Selecting from a range of peach, pink, green, white and alabaster hues, Sargent modeled his subject's face and hands by applying a series of short thin lines from a small narrow brush, and long thick strokes to style her chestnut hair. Mrs. Shepard's slender pale face appears serene against her dark coiffure that she adorned with a dainty gold laurel leaf band. Showing the variety of his skill, Sargent used a vigorous brush filled with various shades of white to fashion the rug under his client's slipped feet. The artist demonstrates the full measure of his command of the brush in the luxurious fabrics, flawless skin and dignified pose that bestow the gentle lady with refined simplicity.

²⁵ Croffut, 164.

In Mrs. Shepard's tentative smile and nervous hands, Sargent accurately records his impression of his somewhat shy client. His sitter's diffidence may partially account for the numerous sessions required to complete the work. Another factor may be Sargent's desire to evoke memories of pictures that earned him success during his early days in Paris.²⁶ For instance, his subject's ruby-colored dress resembles the dressing robe worn by the Frenchman *Dr. Pozzi* (1881) while her tiara and the adjacent table recall the small crescent and table in the portrait of *Madame X*.

Although Mrs. Shepard does not possess Madame Gautreau's cinched waist, she does appear to have tiny feet, an angular face as well as unnaturally alert and apprehensive temperament that often characterized upper-class women. Anxiety was a badge worn by those condemned to a life of leisure.²⁷ Mrs. Shepard's nervous hands are particularly noticeable in this regard. Rather than depicting them realistically, the artist swiftly applied a mixture of white, pale pink and peach paint in a somewhat circular motion to telegraph the society matron's countenance.

Posed with stately formality, she wears a fashionable tea-dress and stands by the expensive looking mahogany table as if she is about to welcome other members of The Four Hundred into her home for afternoon tea. In the 1880s, women carried the burden of social duties such as entertaining and calling on friends. Portraits intentionally displayed class, refinement and gentility, and a woman portrayed wearing her expensive clothing was currency that bought prestige. Sargent may have been aware of the Vanderbilt's social aspirations and selected tropes that hint of Diana images, a motif that the era's peerage identified with elegant,

²⁶ Barbara Dayer Gallati and Ortrud Westheider, *High Society: American Portraits of the Gilded Age* (London: Merrell Publishers, 2008), 98.

²⁷ Montgomery, 45-46.

aristocratic beauty.²⁸ Most people believed that Sargent flattered his subject, whereas her husband objected to it because his wife appeared in a dress that she did not own and with a hairstyle she never wore. To Colonel Shepard's complaints the artist replied, "...as if, he should not pay extra to be shown how the good lady could most becomingly array herself."²⁹ Sargent's retort suggests that he endeavored to depict Mrs. Shepard attractively, which might also account for his difficulty executing the canvas.

The artist admitted that finishing the project required more time than he anticipated whereas his friends recalled that the charm of completing her daughter Alice's portrait "had an instantaneous effect [on Sargent] and soon her mother's portrait was making progress too."³⁰ Biographer Charles Merrill Mount avers that the long sessions working on the portrait of Mrs. Shepard allowed Sargent to find a "greater broadness than he had ever had before essayed. It illustrates that this quality in his work was by no means the product of lack of effort. Quite the contrary, it frequently indicated a painstaking simplification through many sittings."³¹ The protracted commission resulted in a brilliant picture of the shy affluent woman.

While the portrait exemplified the family's wealth and status, it also conspicuously demonstrated their ability to consume. The important social practice of portraying women elegantly dressed was a delicate motif to balance, because in the late nineteenth century such displays could easily link them to prostitution.³² Artists needed to ensure that their female clients appeared regal and virtuous, not a demimondaine. This notion, coupled with the passionate suggestions made by the color of Mrs. Shepard's dress, may have fueled her

²⁸ Patricia Hills, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.), 75.

²⁹ Joseph Henry Harper, *The House of Harper: A Century of Publishing in Franklin Square* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1912), 466.

³⁰ Mount, 135.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Montgomery, 128.

husband's consternation. Critics however, praised the artwork asserting that Sargent painted it with merit, with one columnist writing for *The Boston Advertiser* noting that it would add to his already high reputation.³³ Displayed at the 1889 Paris Salon, the portrait's "distinctive color and technique" garnered accolades, as "one of the finest works" in the gallery.³⁴ Such statements about the portrait at a highly publicized international exhibition certainly improved Sargent's reputation and added to the wealthy family's social currency.

Colonel Shepard and his brother-in-law George Vanderbilt could have commissioned another American artist, and it is sensible to ponder their reasoning for selecting Sargent. An alternative was the cosmopolitan James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), but he was notorious for not completing his work. William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) might have been an attractive option, but was in Germany. Philadelphians Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) was cantankerous and difficult, while Cecilia Beaux (1855-1942), who painted in a style similar to Sargent's, had just set sail for France. Although the Vanderbilts routinely traveled abroad, the United States levied a tax on imported artworks that was extraordinarily lofty even by the wealthy family's standards.³⁵ On the other hand, Sargent's European breeding and French training mitigated the concerns of a family wanting to supplement their social image. The Vanderbilts and Shepards may have been enticed by James' description of the benefits gained by owning a portrait possessing Sargent's visually appealing techniques. James' observation that "Mr. Sargent handles these [feminine elements] with a special feeling for them, and they borrow

³³ Editorial, "John S. Sargent Had No Early Difficulty in his Art," *The Boston Advertiser*, May 31, 1894.

³⁴ Annette Blaugrund, *Paris 1889: American Artists and the Universal Exposition* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 206.

³⁵ F.W. Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States*, 8th ed. (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons), 145. The tax ranged between thirty-five and forty percent.

something of nobleness from his brush” could have convinced the nouveau riche family that the artist was the best choice to invest them with an aristocratic air.³⁶

The Shepard family divided their time between the Triple Mansion, their summer cottage in Bar Harbor, Maine, and Woodlea their estate in Scarborough-on-the-Hudson designed by Stanford White’s architectural firm.³⁷ The English Renaissance style manor had seventy-four rooms, a ballroom, Tiffany stained-glass windows, high patterned ceilings and formal gardens with sweeping views of the Hudson Valley. After her husband’s death, Mrs. Shepard sold the properties and moved into an apartment at 998 Fifth Avenue.³⁸ An 1899 photograph (fig. 7) captured Margaret sitting at her desk with a floral slipper chair nearby and a portrait of her spouse on the wall. She wears a fashionable daytime dress in a room with a carpet similar to the one in Sargent’s image of her mother. Flocked wallpaper and a patterned curtain serve as decorative backdrops. The photograph provides a glimpse inside the rich widow’s turn-of-the-century dwelling. Although she owned Sargent’s painting at the time, the picture does reveal where it hung in her home.³⁹

Sargent painted the portrait of Mrs. Shepard’s daughter Alice (1874-1950) (fig. 8) at his rented studio in Washington Square. Alice was a charming, accomplished and talented girl devoted to religious and charitable matters.⁴⁰ The American girl captivated the cosmopolitan

³⁶ James, 291.

³⁷ The Shepard’s had five children: Maria Louisa (1870-1948), Edith (1872-1954), Alice (1874-1950), Marguerite (1880-1895) and Elliott, Jr. (1876-1927).

³⁸ Later she honored her husband by constructing Shepard Memorial Chapel in Scarborough, which was the venue for the marriage of Marie Louise Shepard to William Jay Schieffelin and Edith Shepard to Ernesto G. Fabbri. The building is currently the principle sanctuary for Scarborough Presbyterian Church.

³⁹ Ormond and Kilmurray, 1:261.

⁴⁰ Julia S. Falk, *Women, Language and Linguistics: Three American Stories from the First half of the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2002), 36.

gentleman by reciting poetry and conversing with him in French.⁴¹ As they spoke, the artist may have told her about his youngest sister Violet because he recognized that the two girls, who were close in age, possessed similar interests and temperaments. On the other hand, Alice may have reminded the artist of his eldest sister Emily, as both of them suffered from back problems that required wearing braces.⁴² Alice's infirmity meant that she could not pose for a long duration, which is why Mrs. Shepard declined Sargent's numerous requests to paint her daughter's portrait. He finally obtained permission after agreeing to complete the work in a few brief sittings and without receiving compensation.⁴³

Mrs. Shepard's time restrictions may account for the relatively compact arrangement, in which Sargent placed Alice at the center, close to the picture plane. The half-length portrait ends a few inches below her waist, with the left side of her body turned only slightly from the viewer. Alice's medical condition may partially account for her stiff position.⁴⁴ A small teal pillow, made of expensive-looking fabric is emblematic of her family's wealth and provides her back additional comfort. Her hands do not appear in the composition, but the position of her arms suggests that they rest on her lap. Placed against an umber background, gazing introspectively toward the viewer, Alice Vanderbilt Shepard wears a stylish dark-colored jacket over a delicate white shirt, an outfit that signifies her social status. Ornamental lace on each lapel complements the long ruffled jabot that softly cascades down the front of her blouse. The fabric's gentle

⁴¹ Mount, 135.

⁴² Emily Sargent's condition was congenital, whereas Alice Shepard injured her back in a fall.

⁴³ Mount, 135.

⁴⁴ Louis Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), 66. According to family legend, Alice's father was not sympathetic to his daughter's disability. A devout Sabbatarian and strict disciplinarian, he reportedly told Alice that her back problems were part of the Almighty's provident will.

undulations and decorative lace give the poised young woman a refined elegance. Her outfit illustrates how fine clothing worn by attractive children could leverage one's cultural capital.

Fashion was a not-so-subtle display of conspicuous consumption that measured one's taste and affluence, therefore it was an essential facet in the family's pursuit and enactment of elite status. Alice's smart, age-appropriate costume visually laid claim to the Vanderbilt's rightful place among society's upper echelon. Sheer diaphanous fabrics, which at the time were popular materials for women's garments, suited Sargent's loose free brushwork that masterfully translated their gauzy delicate nature onto the canvas. Young Miss Shepard's walking suit was the proper outfit to wear when going out for a stroll. The modish suits of the day had jackets that did not fasten in the front, but were open with large ornamental buttons and buttonholes on the revers.⁴⁵ During the fall of 1887, military-style outfits featuring upstanding epaulettes, collars and cuffs were in vogue. These motifs were popular with parents believing that dressing their children androgynously extended adolescence by preventing the awareness of sexual differences.⁴⁶ The practice often continued until children were ten to twelve years of age. However, designers often incorporated military themes worn by war heroes into their styles for women of all ages if the translated look was comfortable and blended easily with current trends.

The most sophisticated ensembles often gained an added feminine touch with matching decorative silk elements. Walking suits worn by females of all ages were similar, except that girls' skirts were a few inches shorter than women's. Alice's costume resembles the ones described in popular women's periodicals. The September 1887 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* recommended a slightly longer hemline for young ladies remarking that "the

⁴⁵ Revers are the parts of a garment turned back to show a decorative lining or facing.

⁴⁶ Karin Lee Fishbeck, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood 1600-1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press), 109.

skirts are all a little shorter than is wise in our northern climate.”⁴⁷ A sketch accompanying the article depicts a girl wearing a somewhat longer skirt paired with a jacket resembling the one Alice sports (fig. 9).

Advertisements in *Harper's Bazaar* advised that the most stylish suits were black, gray, forest green or a dark crimson. A 1880s fashion book informed women that “the material for a walking suit may be either rich or plain to suit the taste and means of the wearer. It should always be well made and never appear shabby. Bright colors appear best only as trimmings. Black has generally been adopted for street dresses as the most becoming. The walking or promenade dress is always made short enough to clear the ground.”⁴⁸ Tightly buttoned dark leather boots and black cotton stockings were standard accessories for these garments that typically had three components: a skirt, jacket and vest. Sometimes, as in Alice's case, the outfit included a decorative silk blouse that coordinated with the ornaments on the jacket lapels. Highly regarded New York stores sold these popular outfits. However, a girl of Miss Shepard's stature may not have purchased a readymade outfit, but would have had one custom-made by a tailor. Accomplished dressmakers often did not have the skills required to sew the ensembles, thus a woman or girl wanting a new walking suit would employ an expert at making men's garments to make this chic attire.⁴⁹

When tailors made these suits they had to keep in mind that a bustle completed the look. The apparatus, which was in vogue during the 1880s, was a construction of steel hoops that caused the back of the skirt to project out as much as two feet from just below the waist. The

⁴⁷ “Illustrated Designs for the Month,” *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* 115 (September 1887): 232.

⁴⁸ John H. Young, *Our Deportment or the Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society* (Detroit: F.B. Dickerson & Co., 1880), 324.

⁴⁹ Penelope Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion* (London: B.T. Batsford Limited, 1992), 81.

most comfortable American type, which used braided wire, caused less stress and collapsed when the wearer sat down. Overall, this design would have provided relief to Alice's weakened back.

Although the portrait does not reveal whether or not Miss Shepard wore a bustle under her skirt, photographic evidence proves that she did. Louis Alman, a photographer who worked in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island, took her picture in 1888 while she wore the same fashionable three-piece walking suit (figs. 10, 11). These images capture the outfit's details, including the jabot, revel ornamentations and bustle; they also confirm Sargent's preference that his subjects pose wearing garments from their wardrobe.⁵⁰ The photographs indicate how the artist attended to every detail from accurately depicting his subject's costume to faithfully communicating her essence.

Sargent rendered the decorative elements of Alice's blouse and jacket lapels with broad quick strokes. In his image of Alice, his painterly style drew attention to her expensive, chic and modern clothes that signaled her family's financial capabilities. Sargent's brush expressed the young girl's charm and, in turn, enhanced the Vanderbilt's social prestige, power and glamour. His acclaimed ability to render fabric with a "fine touch" and a bit of "French that remains in his brush" conveyed their highbrow lifestyle and solidified their social aspirations to gain cultural capital.⁵¹

Alice Shepard's beauty, taste and elegance are apparent in her portrait. This small masterpiece shows many characteristics of Carolus-Duran's *au premier coup* method that brought Sargent acclaim during his first years in Paris. While working in New York on this portrait he called upon his teacher's lessons to restore his reputation. This technique relied on

⁵⁰ Ormond and Kilmurray, 1:xxiii-xxiv.

⁵¹ James, 689.

color more than line to add volume and definition to his subject's face, garment and the small pillow. Shades of black, white and brown initially appear to be the only colors in the composition, yet, to produce Alice's plush velvet jacket, he mixed subdued hues of deep purple, dark crimson and gold with black, then he applied the color with a wide brush in long smooth strokes. The artwork exemplifies Sargent's philosophy that when handling pigment to "always use a full brush and a larger one than necessary" and to apply "paint with long sweeps."⁵² Alabaster, peach, gray, pink, blue and violet shades handled with the same technique form the ruffles that delicately spill down the front of her blouse. Likewise, similar colors appear in the lace collar and lapels. He utilized mahogany and chocolate shades to render Alice's hair, which pulls gently away from her face and twists into a long French braid beginning at the nape of her neck. A tiny highlight appears in her hair just above her forehead. The wide-ranging palette that Sargent selected to create her face, clothes and hair adds dimension and realism to the portrait. Dark somber hues in the jacket establish an elegant contrast with the light delicateness of her fashionable blouse.

The realistic visage of a wealthy, introspective nineteenth-century teenage girl looks out from the picture. At a distance, her skin appears like smooth white porcelain, but up close shades of peach, pink, and green become visible. Sargent painted her forehead, cheeks, nose and chin with thin short brushstrokes applied at various angles to create volume. Her nose, mouth, and ears are in proportion to her head and each other. Her left eye is round and her right one is almond shape, with her left iris being bigger than the right. The effect is somewhat unsettling, which, when coupled with her slightly averted glance, results in an uncertainty of where she is looking. Overall, the artist used his medium to portray a healthy young adolescent, which was

⁵² Olson, 130. John Singer Sargent to amateur artist Frederick Sumner Platt.

another key to enhancing his client's position in society by demonstrating their ability to raise a marriageable, beautiful and well-mannered daughter.

Sargent did not abandon line all together. Alice exhibits what James described as the artist's ability to produce a "singular beauty of line" that gives his figures a "pulse of life as strongly as the brush can give it."⁵³ The sharp line that appears along the side of her face between the jaw and left eye distinguishes the figure from the background. Thin implied lines of various colors model her mouth, eyes, brows, ear, and chin. To form the lace trim of her jacket lapels, blouse collar and cuffs, Sargent applied thick paint quickly and loosely. The brushstrokes form indefinite lines that leave the exact details of her garment's intricate decorations up to the beholder's imagination. They demonstrate why critics soon admired Sargent's fluid brushwork calling it "bold," and "full of bravura."⁵⁴ His energetic method, which combined color and line to render his subject's expensive clothing, matched perfectly with the lifestyle of the nouveaux riches Vanderbilts, thus imbuing the subject and her family with nobility that one can customarily only claim by birthright. Miss Shepard's portrait, with its limited palette and painterly qualities feels the influence of Velázquez, whom the artist and Alice's family admired. Displaying Sargent's portrayal of Alice as though she was "some demure princess who might have sat for Velázquez" would have suggested that they lived in the grand manner of titled European aristocrats.⁵⁵

Alice's portrait received accolades at the 1890 Society of American Artists exhibition, where one critic remarked that she was a "very pleasant little girl, with inky hair and a fresh

⁵³ James, 691.

⁵⁴ Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 39.

⁵⁵ James, 686.

childish skin.”⁵⁶ Reports of the show appearing in the New Orleans paper, *The Daily Picayune* deemed it as “very fine” and “one of great distinction [that] reflects the highest credit upon Mr. John S. Sargent.”⁵⁷ A *New York Times* critic wrote, “Mr. Sargent also shows the portraits of a gentleman, a lady and a little girl, all of them masterly,” then added that “the portrait of the little girl might hang, unconcerned for its credentials, in a picked gallery of Dutch and Flemish masters.”⁵⁸ This praise illustrates the expert’s admiration for the painting’s limited palette as well as its mixture of light and dark tonality associated with the style of the Dutch masters whose manner of placing single figures dressed in dark clothes against an even darker background the American artist translated into his own unique style.

While compositionally akin to the work by a Dutch Master such as Frans Hals, Sargent arranged the image in a fashion also recalling some of his own portraits from earlier in the decade. In these, he used a similarly sized canvas and placed single figures in an ambiguous space without any elaborate costumes or distracting accoutrements. While this format may appear formulaic or masculine, critics generally responded favorably to it. Sargent often reserved this arrangement to depict his family, good friends or others whom he admired for their character, spirit, intelligence or wit. One example is the 1886 image of *Lady Playfair*, née Edith Russell (fig. 12) who was the daughter of one of his long-time acquaintances. Selecting a canvas a bit larger than the one he used to portray Alice, Sargent positioned his friend slightly more toward the viewer in a three-quarter-length pose against a generic dark background. British

⁵⁶ “The Society of American Artists Exhibition,” *The Art Amateur* 23 (June 1890): 3.

⁵⁷ “Gotham Gossip,” *The Daily Picayune*, May 12, 1890.

⁵⁸ “Society of American Artists,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1890.

critics praised the portrait as “superb,” “masterly,” and his “best and most painter-like work of the year.”⁵⁹

Lady Playfair was thirty-eight years old when she sat for Sargent, while Mrs. Charles Fairchild (fig. 13) was just few years older when the artist executed her portrait. Elizabeth Nelson Fairchild (1845-1924) and her banker husband Charles (1838-1910) shared Sargent’s passion for art, literature and music. Mr. Fairchild was the painter’s financial advisor, and the artist was their frequent houseguest.⁶⁰ Mrs. Fairchild was a poet who became a professional literary hostess after her marriage.⁶¹ Late in the fall of 1887, Sargent stayed in their Boston home where Elizabeth sat for him. The composition shares several formal traits with the portrait of Alice Shepard that the artist would complete early the following year.

Each subject occupies a similar nonspecific space, maintains the same thoughtful gaze, possess flawless alabaster skin and have pulled their mahogany hair back from their forehead in a like manner. Although facing in opposite directions, the figures pose at comparable angles. In each portrait, Sargent avoided overly decorative costumes, props or a broad range of colors; rather, he relied upon a pared down composition to focus on each sitter’s personality and character. Concluding that the struggling artist depicted people with an appealing character in a small composition because it was easy and affordable seems logical, but the format appears to be one Sargent preferred because, by isolating the figure, he could best express their admired traits.

Throughout the decade, Sargent employed this arrangement to produce images for his own enjoyment of those whom he prized or respected. Some others he depicted in this manner were his father Fitzwilliam (c. 1880), mother Mary (c. 1880), the English poet Edmund Gosse

⁵⁹ Ormond and Kilmurray, 1:147.

⁶⁰ Ormond and Kilmurray, 1:205.

⁶¹ Olson, 139.

(1886), musician Sir George Henschel (1889) and family friend Olivia Richardson (1883) (fig. 14). Completed in only two or three mornings, this last work possesses compositional elements similar to Alice's portrait. Sixteen-year-old Olivia lived with her parents in the American expatriate community near Nice, France. Although she was three years older than the artist's sister Violet, the two girls were good friends. When Sargent spent a fortnight in Nice with his family in May 1886, he executed a picture of Violet (1870-1955) (fig. 15) that clearly anticipates the portrait of Alice Vanderbilt Shepard he will paint two years later.

Biographer Stanley Olson describes Violet as having “a strong yet unobtrusive intelligence, and a powerful sensitivity. To these she added lively spontaneity, quick humour, and a capacity for intimacy.”⁶² John adored his sisters, particularly the youngest, Violet. The two siblings shared interests in travel, art, music, literature and poetry. He admired her confidence and outgoing nature because he was acutely aware that he lacked those traits. That Violet frequently modeled for her brother, is one gauge of their close ties, while another measure of their mutual affection is in the 1886 portrait.

In the depiction, sixteen-year-old Violet wears a simple gray dress. Her hair ribbon matches the mauve hue of the delicate flower affixed to her dress bodice, while a small diamond brooch fastens the front of its stand-up collar. Other than these few touches of color, the painting is a symphony of black, gray and brown. Sargent situated his sister in the center of the canvas against a non-descript umber background. The picture is close in size to the others of this genre. Violet posed turning the left side of her body slightly away from the beholder. Following his custom in these special images, the half-length portrait ends a few inches below the sitter's waist, the hands are not in view, but by the position of her arms, they implicitly rest comfortably by her

⁶² Olson, 160.

side or on her lap. Her bustle may offer a clue to whether she is sitting or standing, but that part of her garment blends with the surrounding space making it impossible to establish.

What the artist did endeavor to make apparent was his sister's personality. Violet Sargent looks out from the canvas, her expression reflects the intelligence and sensitivity noted by biographer Olson. There is also a hint of empathy in her gaze, as she surely felt compassion for her brother since it was near this period that his career was floundering. Her sibling employed the pared down format to highlight the aspects of his sister's character that he most admired. To help make these qualities evident the painter introduced a muted light source from the left side of the canvas. He bathed one side of his sister's face in a warm golden hue while leaving the other in the shadows. The soft diffused glow focuses on her auburn hair and luminous peach-toned skin. As with his portraits of Elizabeth Fairchild and Olivia Richardson, no compositional devices distract the viewer, Sargent relied upon his brush, a limited palette, neutral colored garments and subtle lighting that allow the sitter's character to be seen directly. Richard Ormond (b.1939), Violet's grandson and Sargent's grandnephew, praised the rendering of her physical beauty and spirit by commending the artist's illumination his sister's character, warmth and sensitivity.⁶³

Although the portraits of Violet Sargent, Olivia Richardson and Alice Vanderbilt Shepard share similar traits, each one also shows the artist's wish to express each girl's European or American character. One of the most noticeable variations is hairstyle. While Alice fashioned her long mahogany hair into a graceful braid, Olivia and Violet swept their hair up into a more sophisticated do. Protocol mandated that a thirteen-year-old girl should wear her hair down in a less grown-up manner. Nevertheless, Alice's braid possesses a refined modernity that is typical

⁶³ Ormond and Kilmurray, 1:175.

of an American style. Bathed in black, Violet and Olivia possess an aloof air. An understated sophistication characterizes their demeanors, worldliness in their gazes and unpretentious reserve in their monochrome garments. Equally poised, Alice wears a fashionable outfit that is brighter, cheerful and more feminine than those her expatriate sisters wear. The thirteen-year old American girl appears self-assured, confident and modern. (Her upright posture contributes to this demeanor, although it may relate to her injured back as much as to her outlook.) Alice's traits epitomize those attributed to the ideal nineteenth-century American girl by cultural commentators, and are unlike the European characteristics found in the expatriates Olivia and Violet.

While some may take issue with these observations, one only needs to consider Sargent's image of thirteen-year-old *Mademoiselle Suzanne Poirson* (1871-1926) (fig. 16). Her art-loving parents were the painter's Parisian friends and landlords. In her portrait, Suzanne, who also had an interest in the arts, wears her hair up, a chic striped blouse, a fur coat, lipstick and perhaps a bit of rouge. Her sophisticated appearance is distinctly European compared to the refined confidence apparent in the painting of Alice who symbolizes American class and beauty. Alice's fashionable walking suit paired with its pristine white silk blouse clearly situates her in society's upper echelon. Her rosy cheeks, luminous skin, thoughtful eyes and tied-back hair convey a wholesome quality. Alice's pose reveals her charm, elegance, reserved confidence and innocence that were regarded as quintessentially American traits.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the "American Girl" was a national symbol. Although the exact qualities are often difficult to pin down, the young women were generally

thought to be clever, optimistic, sensible, sweet and, above all, pure.⁶⁴ Conventional wisdom held that the ideal American girl replaced European sophistication with individuality, energy and healthy vigor. Alice's portrait and photographs exude her modesty, naturalness and charm; they also project a self-image that equaled the Vanderbilt's high standards and social aspirations. Her wholesomeness expresses her spirit while also confirming that Mrs. Shepard was a good mother who raised a proper daughter. By expertly handling his brush, Sargent presents the classic American type. That Alice's portrait hung at Chicago's 1893 World Columbian Exposition in the American Room devoted to the artist speaks to the national traits represented by the artwork. Oscar Wilde recognized Alice's Americanness, according to a family legend, when the poet and author once declared only three things were worth seeing in America: Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, and Alice Shepard.⁶⁵

Alice was an intelligent refined girl who understood the importance of grace and propriety. Setting her in the pared down compositional format reserved for those with whom he felt a strong bond, Sargent relied on his skillful touch to reveal his client's character, affluence, nationality, individuality and charming spirit. In keeping with nineteenth-century decorum, he depicts the well-bred Alice with her eyes averted. One can detect, perhaps, a trace of concern in her expression, for not only did she have a strict Sabbatarian father to please, she also had school and philanthropic duties to fulfill that related to her family's social stature and ambitions.

From the middle of the nineteenth century onward, the Vanderbilts were among the country's wealthiest people. The era, coined The Gilded Age by the 1878 eponymous book by Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain, was a time of opulence, political corruption, high

⁶⁴ Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 192.

⁶⁵ Kilmurray and Ormond, 136.

living, excessive materialism and plutocracy. Twenty years after the end of the Civil War, the American economy was thriving. Robber Barons, such as Alice's grandfather, William Henry Vanderbilt, wielded their entrepreneurial power in the new steel, oil and railroads industries to amass unprecedented amounts of money. With this newfound wealth, they formed, some would say bought their way into, a new American aristocracy. It was a time rife with social hierarchy, distinct class divisions and privilege; Alice Shepard lived within its stratified social structure.

Her stylish clothes exemplify the Vanderbilt's exclusive circle. She sits politely, isolated from the hardships that other less fortunate girls faced. Many young orphaned children her age earned a few cents a day working on the streets selling newspapers or shining shoes and spent their nights sleeping in hovels or tenements. Diphtheria, tuberculosis and other diseases were at epidemic proportions in the 1880s and 1890s, whereas the reserved Alice Shepard lived cloistered away from the threats of poverty or other contagious illnesses. Her upper-class family dwelt in a Fifth Avenue mansion designed by John Butler Snook (1815-1901) and Charles Atwood (1848-1895), with an interior decorated by the equally well-known Herter Brothers.

Women from her family occupied their days entertaining callers, fulfilling charitable duties, going to teas and planning fancy-dress balls. In the meantime, young girls passed their days taking music lessons, going to church or accompanying their mothers while they fulfilled various social obligations. Conventional wisdom held that females were incapable of benefiting from much formal instruction, therefore many girls received limited teaching that allowed them to be merely witty, charming and articulate.⁶⁶ However, a more formal education was important

⁶⁶ Ortrud Westheider and Michael Philipp, *High Society: American Portraits of the Gilded Age* (London: Merrell, 2009), 80.

to the Shepards who hired Miss Clara B. Spence to privately tutor Alice and her sisters in their home.⁶⁷

Alice's portrait dates to the end of the early stage of Sargent's career, which Ormond places at 1890. After that point, the artist's palette broadened and brightened, while full-length figures posed at unusual angles and arranged in complex compositions became common. Charles Merrill Mount notes a greater broadness in Alice's portrait that is not evident in earlier works. Thus, he believes the artist's restored confidence marked a turning point toward new stylistic trends characterized by increasingly dramatic brushwork, a more colorful palette and fabrics rendered in a pseudo-impressionistic manner. Portraits from the early 1890s illustrating an expanded color and sheen that Sargent gained by applying paint more freely support this astute observation. Works in this manner include *Mrs. Hamilton McKown Twombly* (1890, Columbia University), *Miss Helen Dunham* (1892, Private Collection) and *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* (1892-93, National Gallery of Scotland). That Mrs. Twombly was Alice's aunt speaks to the family's ongoing confidence in the social benefits acquired from Sargent's painterly touch.

John Singer Sargent's portraits of Alice, her mother Margaret and grandmother Maria Louisa would have been treasured family possessions and status symbols. They spoke to the patrician beholder that the refined Sargent appreciated and celebrated the Vanderbilt women's inherent beauty and elegance. The image of Alice undertaken at the request of the refined French-trained American expatriate artist, functioned in her parent's home as visual proof of their deserved social status. Alice's portrait reinforces James' discerning observation that Sargent best understood "the beauty that resides in exceeding fineness."⁶⁸ Together or apart, the

⁶⁷ Miss Clara B. Spence later founded The Spence School, a private academy for girls that has been popular with elite families since it opened in 1892.

⁶⁸ James, 690.

three works illustrated to the Four Hundred that the family was a worthy member of high society. Guests could delight in the painting of the Shepard's attractive daughter as the epitome of the young American girl. Her averted gaze and refined beauty personified the feminine ideal that every well-to-do family desired.

The image of the well-mannered, affluent Alice offers insight into the new status of children in late nineteenth-century America. Her clothing and decorum provide an opportunity to observe how girls with breeding, social standing and money dressed. The image of a beautiful young girl, who lived in an opulent manner, is more than a cherished family heirloom; it offers information about her prosperous family and the value it placed on its future generation.

Socially aware, the Vanderbilts likely approached Sargent because displaying pictures by the well-trained artist in their fashionable home signified that they were members of the leisure class. The artworks were conspicuous symbols of their ability to consume. Whether displayed at a public exhibition or in one of the Vanderbilt's private homes, portraits by the cosmopolitan painter acclaimed for his images of women were tokens of power and prestige. For New York's wealthiest people, who were unable to trace their lineage back to the city's esteemed first settlers, Sargent's portraits provided the family with a visual pedigree. Before the 1870s, birthright rather than money was the key to social prominence, therefore, old-line families distained the Vanderbilts as parvenus. In an age where old money and family heritage determined one's elite standing, the arriviste Vanderbilt clan appeared to be vulgar upstarts. Written in 1880, an ostensibly fictive novel called *The Vanderdorps*, mocked their excessive lifestyle by alleging that the family's "charms came mostly from their gilding."⁶⁹ Well into the

⁶⁹ Clarice Stasz, *The Vanderbilt Women: Dynasty of Wealth, Glamour and Tragedy*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 74.

decade, society regarded some first, second and third generation rich families *déclassé*, especially the Vanderbilts.⁷⁰

To promote their cultural status, the Vanderbilts needed the portraits. Sargent depicted them wearing fashionable Parisian clothing surrounded by their possessions in homes modeled after princely European chateaux and manors. A degree of *cachet* accrued for the owner who conspicuously displayed works by the European-trained American. Each painting proclaimed to the elite beholder that the portrait's subject and owner were also part of the privileged class. The sophisticated painter enhanced the Vanderbilt's standing by displaying their affluent lifestyle. In other words, Sargent's brushstrokes could perfectly depict their "ability to afford a life of idleness."⁷¹

Given the prestige associated with owning a work with such power, it is not surprising that for the next two decades patrons lined up outside the artist's London studio. To the rich, Sargent's portraits displayed their economic prowess and refined taste. By the turn of the century, he was one of the most sought after painters on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Before making his first professional visit to America in 1887, he longed for a profitable career, therefore it is hard to comprehend why he stopped accepting commissions for portraits, or "paughtraits," as he called them. The acerbic reference suggests the drudgery Sargent eventually encountered by attempting to please scores of society matrons wanting him to depict them wearing their tiaras.

The three Vanderbilt women do not wear crowns and the works probably never hung side-by-side, yet each one illustrates the legendary family's opulent lifestyle. The works earned

⁷⁰ Frederic Cople Jaher, *The Rich, The Well Born, and the Powerful: Elites and Upper Classes in History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 267.

⁷¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, ed. Martha Banta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

Sargent high accolades, functioned as currency to boost his reputation and enhanced the sitters' social capital. Images of the gracious women adorned in their finery signaled that they belonged within society's upper echelons. During the Gilded Age, a time that valued the spectacle of flaunted wealth, the Vanderbilts displayed the portraits of these three elegantly dressed women in their homes and lent two of them to well-attended international exhibitions. Framed within the context of their grand mansions or a museum gallery the viewer could greatly admire the portrayed and portrayer. To secure their place among society, it was not sufficient that the Vanderbilts had affluence and power, ennobling it through art was a sanctioned pathway to secure their social standing among the Four Hundred. The bold bravura style of Sargent's brush depicted the Vanderbilts privileged lifestyle thereby endowing each woman with nobility. Public and private display of portraits by the cosmopolitan artist with a pedigree facilitated the aspiring family's acquisition of capital and secured their footing in New York's high-society.

The occasion to paint the three Vanderbilt portraits came at an opportune time for Sargent. Completing them benefited his financial position and professional reputation while he was in America and continued to do so after he returned to England in May, 1888. During 1889 galleries in New York and London exhibited his works, while he also contributed six pictures to the International Exposition in Paris, half of which he had painted during his first professional trip to America. Among them was his image of Margaret Louise Vanderbilt Shepard dressed in her imperial red tea gown. The Vanderbilts gained international credibility when the Salon rewarded Sargent's efforts with the Medal of Honor, and soon afterward, his French career reached its pinnacle when that country made him a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur.⁷² With his European reputation restored, in December 1889 Sargent returned to America for eleven

⁷² Fairbrother, 142.

months. He traveled frequently between Boston and New York to complete approximately forty portraits.⁷³ That four of these works were of other Vanderbilts speaks to the family's continuing appreciation of the artist's skill and family's ongoing desire to augment its social standing.

Of the three Vanderbilt women Sargent painted on his earlier American sojourn, only the portrait of Alice Vanderbilt Shepard was undertaken at the artist's insistence. The resulting image visually affirms Henry James' declaration that "the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates" each individual.⁷⁴ Clearly, Sargent also took great pleasure in painting this American girl.

⁷³ Fairbrother, 143.

⁷⁴ James, 691.



Figure 1.
John Singer Sargent
Photograph of *Madame Gautreau* showing the original position
of the shoulder strap, 1883-1884
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings, Volume I*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 113.



Figure 2.
John Singer Sargent
Mrs. William H. Vanderbilt (née Maria Louisa Kissam), 1888
The Biltmore Company, Asheville, North Carolina
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings, Volume I*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 214.



Figure 3.
George Augustus Hall
Mrs. William H. Vanderbilt (née Maria Louisa Kissam), 1867
The Biltmore Company, Asheville, North Carolina



Figure 4.
The Library in Triple Mansion, home of Mr. and Mrs. William Henry Vanderbilt.
Reproduced in Arthur T. Vanderbilt, II, *Fortune's Children*
(New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 277.



Figure 5
Seymour Joseph Guy
Going to the Opera, 1873
The Biltmore Company, Asheville, North Carolina
Reproduced in Jerry E. Patterson, *The Vanderbilts*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), 108.



Detail of Margaret Louise Vanderbilt Shepard



Figure 6.
John Singer Sargent
Mrs. Elliott Fitch Shepard (née Margaret Louise Vanderbilt), 1888.
San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings*, Volume I
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 211.



Figure 7.
Photographer unknown
Photograph of Margaret Louise Vanderbilt Shepard, 1898.
New York Historical Society
New York, New York



Figure 8.
John Singer Sargent
Alice Vanderbilt Shepard, 1888
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings*, Volume I
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 212.



Figure 9.
"Girl's Dress"
Reproduced from Mary E. Lambert, "New Materials for Autumn Wear," *Godey's
Lady's Book and Magazine* 115 (September 1887): 228



Figure 10.
L. Alman
Photograph of Alice Vanderbilt Shepard, 1888
The Biltmore Company, Asheville, North Carolina



Figure 11.
L. Alman
Photograph of Alice Vanderbilt Shepard, 1888
The Biltmore Company, Asheville, North Carolina
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings, Volume I*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 212.

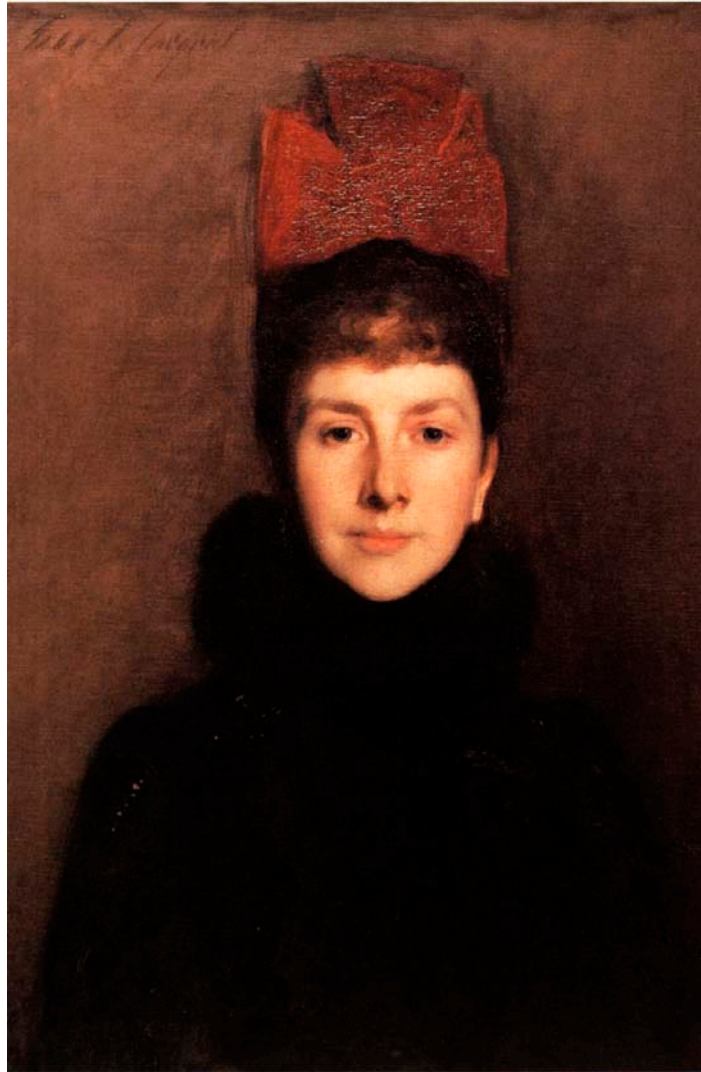


Figure 12.
John Singer Sargent
Lady Playfair, 1886
Private Collection
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings*, Volume I
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 147.



Figure 13.
John Singer Sargent
Mrs. Charles Fairchild, 1887
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings, Volume I*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 205.



Figure 14.
John Singer Sargent
Olivia Richardson, 1886
Private Collection
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings*, Volume I
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 109.



Figure 15.
John Singer Sargent
Violet Sargent, 1886
Private Collection
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings*, Volume I
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 175.

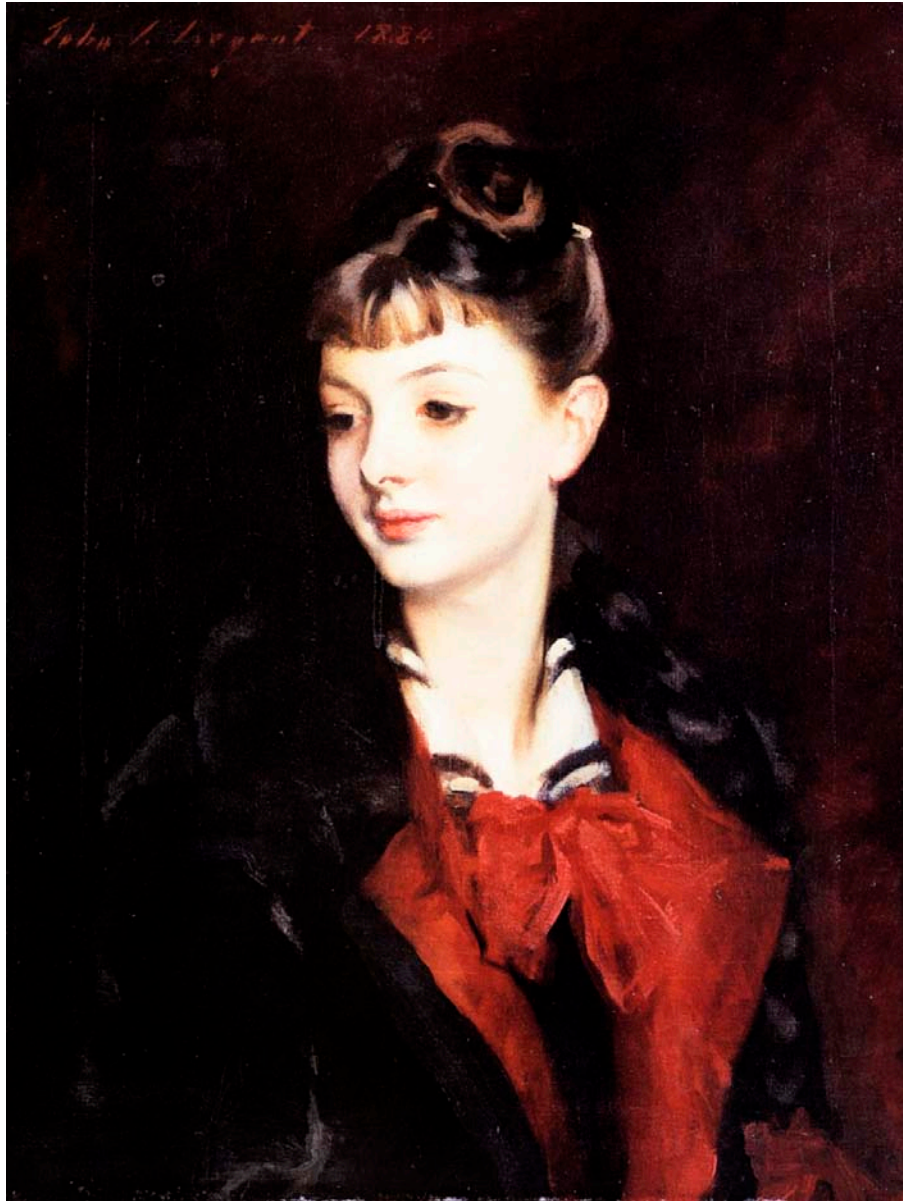
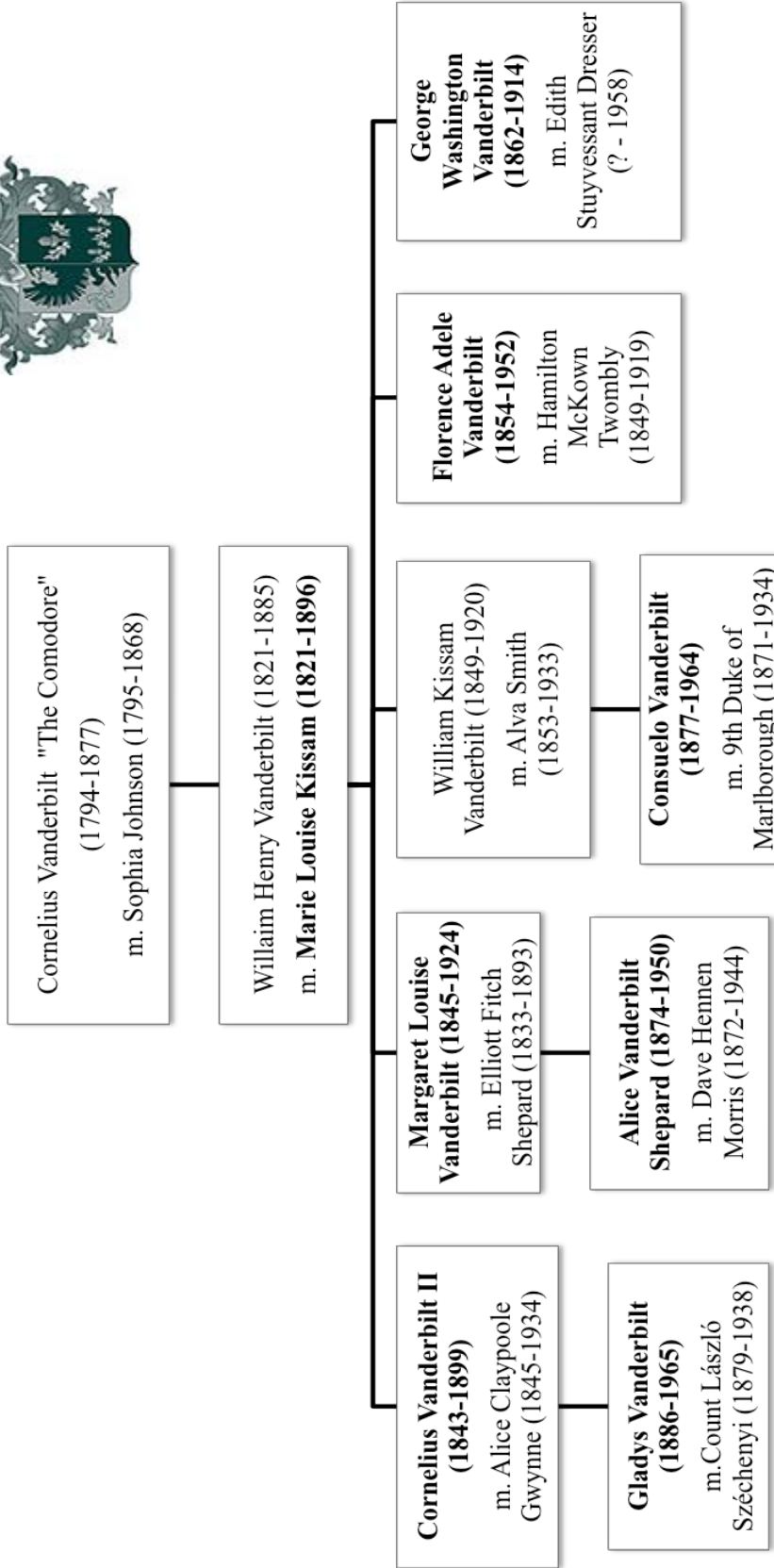


Figure 16.
John Singer Sargent
Mademoiselle Suzanne Poirson, 1884
Private Collection
Reproduced in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent
The Early Portraits: Complete Paintings*, Volume I
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 121.

Appendix
Vanderbilt Genealogy



Sargent also painted portraits of Cornelius Vanderbilt II, Florence Adele Vanderbilt Twombly, George Washington Vanderbilt, Consuelo Vanderbilt and Gladys Vanderbilt. Mr. and Mrs. William Henry Vanderbilt had three other children; they were Emily Thorn Vanderbilt (1852-1946), Frederick William Vanderbilt (1858-1938) and Eliza Osgood Vanderbilt (1860-1936). Names in bold print denote other family members who sat for Sargent between 1890 and 1906.

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VITA

Martha Jean MacLeod was born August 10, 1954, in Quincy, Massachusetts and grew up in the nearby town of Hingham. She is the daughter of the late Dr. Kenneth Gordon MacLeod and Jean Day Colegrove MacLeod. A 1972 graduate of Hingham High School, Martha earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1976 from Randolph-Macon Woman's College where she majored in Sociology/Anthropology.

After graduating, Martha entered the financial services industry and worked for banks in Washington D.C. and Dallas, Texas. Martha taught Advanced Placement Art History and Art Appreciation at The Cambridge School of Dallas, where she also served as Assistant to the Head Master and Director of Admissions.

In September 2008, Martha enrolled in the Art History graduate studies program at Texas Christian University. While working on her Masters in Art History, she served as a curatorial assistant to Rebecca Lawton at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth where she researched the history of the museum's collection of antique and period frames. At TCU, Martha worked in the Visual Resources Library and served as a research assistant to Dr. Babette Bohn and Dr. Frances Colpitt.

Martha received Graduate Student Tuition Scholarships and Kimbell Fellowships while working toward her degree. She received a Graduate Travel Grant from TCU and three from the Sunkel Travel Endowment. These funds allowed her to conduct research in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, San Antonio, Texas and attend an Art Law Class in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Martha hopes to secure a position that will couple her business acumen and teaching experience with her Art History expertise.

ABSTRACT

John Singer Sargent was optimistic about his career until a setback at the 1884 Paris Salon that made securing potential commissions in Europe difficult left him feeling uncertain about his future. Three years later in the fall of 1887, with his career still flagging, Sargent made his first professional trip to America. In Boston, Massachusetts, he executed portraits of wealthy friends and family, while in New York City his most affluent patrons were the Vanderbilts. The opportunity to paint portraits of three women from that family boosted Sargent's professional ambitions and advanced the well-to-do family's social capital.