THE ENIGMA OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER: A REFLECTION OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN JOHN SINGER SARGENT’S IMAGE OF AN AMERICAN SOCIALITE

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By

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ABSTRACT

All portraits have something to tell us about the essence that best make a particular identity decipherable. While portraits purport to allow us the close observation of a single, localized individual, we discern meaning in it to the extent that it appears to reveal something about general human traits and social relationships. In this regard, portraits fall between two extremes. At one extreme is the portrait that gives such a fixed and rigid notion of its human subject that the subject becomes a mere object—something to stare at, to scrutinize, and then quickly forget. At the other extreme is the portrait that prevents us from treating the portrayed individual as a casual object. It instead, compels us to recognize in others, a unique character and identity formulated through individual interpretation. These are the portraits that draw us in through some unique quality that compels us to want to know more about the individual represented.

The goal of this thesis is to examine and interpret John Singer Sargent’s ambiguous Portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner within the context of nineteenth-century social and cultural identity. Since portraits reflect reputation, personal, and social identity, examination of cultural and societal values is key to understanding how Gardner’s portrait evolved and what her image as created by Sargent said about her. The first chapter
presents an overview of nineteenth-century portraiture from both a European and American perspective. Particular attention to is paid to portraits of female sitters who were members of the upper classes in Europe and America. The second chapter is devoted to John Singer Sargent. As the preeminent portrait artist of the nineteenth-century, he enjoyed international fame in Europe and America—yet he wasn’t without controversy. His training, acute observation skills, and keen attention to detail were all factors that contributed to his success. The third chapter is centered on Isabella Stewart Gardner and her portrait. As a controversial figure in her own right, she was an enigmatic woman who was unlike other women of the wealthy elite in Boston.

Very limited documentation exists on Gardner’s portrait. The uniqueness of Sargent’s depiction compels us to dig deeper. The hope is that through this examination, we can go beyond viewing Gardner’s portrait as more than a mere object and delve into the very characteristics that identify who she really was.
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INTRODUCTION

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.¹

Henry James (1843-1916) wrote 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’ article appeared around the time when Sargent was arriving to work in America for the first time. James’ words captured the very essence of Sargent’s style that made him one of the most sought after portrait artists of the nineteenth-century. It was this very style that caught the attention of American socialite, art collector, and social maverick, Isabella Stewart Gardner when she saw Sargent’s *Madame X* portrait in 1886. Sargent’s 1888 portrait of Gardner created a sensation amongst Boston’s social elite, which contributed in part to increasing public awareness of Sargent and establishing him as a portrait artist of American high society. It further achieved to inveterate Gardner’s unconventional reputation. Members of the American elite such as the Fairchild, Forbes, and Sears’s families, established a firm professional foundation for Sargent on American soil. Sargent’s first commission in America, was from prominent American philanthropist and banker, Henry Gurdon Marquand (1819-1902). Marquand wanted a portrait of his wife and was willing to pay Sargent whatever price he named. Gardner was not pleased to learn that she would not be the first American painted by Sargent outside of Europe—in fact, she was Sargent’s third

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¹ Henry James, "John Singer Sargent," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, October 1887, 34.
commission! Gardner ensued in an intense letter writing campaign to Sargent with pointed hints suggesting that he call on her should he ever find himself in Boston.

Gardner’s first meeting with Sargent in 1886 took place in his London studio and was arranged through a mutual acquaintance, Henry James. As an avid art collector, Gardner made a point whenever possible, to meet personally with the artists of the works she was collecting. Sargent’s sensationally renowned portrait of *Madame X* had piqued Gardner’s interest and as someone who frequently found herself in the spotlight, she wanted to meet the man responsible for causing such a public and notorious scandal. Gardner’s goal in meeting Sargent was initially to see *Madame X*. It was after this visit that Gardner decided to commission an equally “sensational” portrait for herself. Her interest in Sargent was additionally spurned by his reputation of imbuing a keen frankness in his portraits. Sargent painted what he saw and never attempted to create a portrait that did not reflect his subject the way he observed them. He was known for analyzing and creating every aspect and nuance of each portrait he painted. He worked consistently to strike an accurate likeness of his subjects in a painterly fashion by experimenting and combining the mood of the subject and the setting of the portrait. Gardner had earned the reputation of going against the grain of what was expected of her as a member of the upper class and may have sought to perpetuate her unconventional reputation by associating with an equally unconventional artist.

What, exactly, constitutes a portrait? Many types of works have fallen into this category, which has grown somewhat more exclusive over time. First, it is worth noting that the word *portraiture* generally refers to a genre in both the literary and visual realms, and to an object, a material form. In addition, that which we now refer to by the name of
portrait was never exclusively allied throughout history to painting or to a particular medium, but included pictures, seals, statues, effigies, and masks. Portraits are distinct from other genres or art categories by the very nature of what they represent and how they function as objects of display. We know that in terms of production, portraits nearly always require the presence of a specific person, or at the very least, an image of that person. An important factor of all portraiture centers not just on likeness, but works of art that engage us with ideas of identity. They are perceived, represented, and understood in different times and places, both from a cultural context and one that is formed from societal norms and traditions. These viewpoints are first established by the artist through his own perception and from within his own cultural background and identity. The sitter or whoever commissioned the portrait establishes an additional viewpoint. In each instance, the end result boils down to capturing and preserving identity.

Identity encompasses the character, personality, social standing, relationships, and gender of the portrait subject. The oscillation between art object and “human subject”, represented so personally, is what gives portraits their extraordinary “grasp on our imagination.”\(^2\) One critical factor in our observation is the incorporation of us, the viewer. Through our individual analysis, we form a relationship with the portrait subject by attempting to interpret what characteristics provide us with essential constituents of a person’s identity. The subject is a presentation of the “self” in the real world and its analogue in the world of art. Although the meaning of the term portraiture may appear to be self-evident, there is often a fine distinction between objects that could be considered portraits and those that may be classified differently.

There are many things about the Gardner portrait that are ambiguous within the context of what most would consider a portrait of a socialite. Gardner’s provocative pose, dress, comportment, and the background, contribute a sense of mystery to the portrait. Sargent presents this social icon as an idol, tightly clad in black—a color not commonly used unless for a specific purpose (e.g., to indicate mourning). American fashion trends during the 1880s followed a strict set of rules. Most women followed these trends by reading ‘authorities’ on the subject such as the monthly publication of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, which stressed the proper way young women should present themselves. Sargent rarely chose black for his female subjects, but when he did, it was used as a method effective in setting off specific features. Further, he went against his own protocol by allowing Gardner to choose her gown and to collaborate with him on her portrait. Sargent was however, known for his ability to present an image of the sitter that adhered to the social standards of the time. In fact, most of his portraits accentuated the regal beauty and feminine dress of what we would expect to see of women during this time period.

By the end of the nineteenth-century, black was sometimes viewed as a sign of daring sexuality and indecency when worn out in public—this was especially the case with Sargent’s 1884 portrait of *Madame X*. Black typically was reserved for funerals and mourning. Portraits that caused a sensation like *Madame X* were considered to be sexually provocative and generated lewd comments about the sitter when exhibited to the public. Sargent’s entrée into American society was critical to his international status and success. A close relationship with someone of Gardner’s reputation and stature would likely have been necessary in securing his reputation as an internationally renowned painter. Painting a “sensational” portrait would further ensure notoriety. Did Gardner’s
portrait achieve his desired status amongst the American upper class and raise Sargent’s echelon on an international scale? Was Sargent’s intention to both flatter and satirize Gardner by depicting her in a sexually provocative way?

The background design of the Gardner portrait raises interest in the way Gardner is positioned in front of it. The detail of the design simultaneously forms a crown and halo on top of and over Gardner’s head. This may allude to her role as the “Queen” of Boston society and suggest in an overt manner, her not so demure and unconventional behavior in the form of a pun as depicted by the halo. How did Sargent’s decision to portray Gardner in this manner effect the depiction of Gardner? Was it a commentary on cultural and societal values at the time?

This thesis will utilize three major analytical and investigative procedures. First, a close examination of portraiture—both general and within the context of the nineteenth-century—will be done in tandem of examining other portraits painted by both Sargent and his contemporaries such as James McNeill Whistler and William Merritt Chase. Portraiture and the painted image of figures during the Gilded Age of America (1865-1901) will also be examined within the context of contemporary visual culture. This was an era of America’s elitist society, a civilization created by this country’s first millionaire society. It was considered a distinct stratum within the broader cross-section of the population that demanded recognition, idolization, and immortalization of their images via the great artists of the day. Particular attention will be paid to portraits of female sitters who were socialites and members of the upper classes in Europe and America during the nineteenth-century. Since portraits conveyed reputation, personal, and social identity in which both the artist and the subject are enmeshed in the cultural
value system of their society, identifying and analyzing what role these factors, if any, played in Sargent’s portrait of Gardner will be examined. Portraits are a commentary in perspective of the human original and will be analyzed not only as works of art, but also as a commentary of culture, society, and societal values. Were the social and artistic conventions of nineteenth-century portraiture an accurate reflection of societal values?

Second, the analysis of Sargent, his career, and his relationship to Gardner is relevant. Sargent spent the early part of his career honing his skills as a painter and cultivating his relationship with society in Europe. While Sargent was well known in Europe and to a degree by distant reputation in America, he was ultimately thought of as an expatriate not close to his American roots professionally or personally. Sargent was influenced by the Old Masters such as Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) and Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660) and this influence was reflected in his portrait of Gardner. How he planned his work and his relationship with his clients contributed to what he was trying to achieve professionally. Finally, the primary focus of this thesis centers on Sargent’s portrait of Gardner, it is important to examine multiple facets of Gardner’s personal life. There is a lot of research on Gardner’s reputation as an art collector and on the museum she created in her name. However, it is necessary to delve deeply into her personal life to better understand the woman that Sargent called an “enigma.” With the exception of three biographies on Gardner, very little information of her private and personal life has been studied or written about. Information on Gardner as a public figure, art collector, and socialite is both abundant and frequently anecdotal but does provide a wide variety of insight into her character and personality. Material and commentary on Sargent’s portrait of Gardner is all but non-existent. Gardner’s personal
and public life appear to have melded into a persona that she both created and controlled. She was an astute manipulator of the press and knew when and how to create a sensation at her discretion. Her reputation as a collector of beautiful objects and art, and her ‘devil-may-care’ attitude, are all relevant aspects of her character, her relationship with Sargent, her husband, family, and the public who loved to hate her. All of these factors may give us some clues in interpreting what Gardner’s portrait really did say about her.
CHAPTER 1

NINETEENTH-CENTURY PORTRAITURE: EUROPE AND AMERICA

John Singer Sargent’s, *Portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner* (Figure 1), is at first glance, an ambiguous portrait that on the surface doesn’t reveal the identity of the woman behind the façade of her image. In fact, without knowing anything about her, one could argue that it is an ordinary portrait, lacking significance, and containing no real message about the sitter. We can appreciate the work by admiring the beauty of Sargent’s technique, translating the nuances of her character through his brushstrokes. It is only when we examine the portrait from within a different framework that we begin to understand distinctive features that may give us clues to its interpretation. Without the benefit of delving into Gardner’s motives for commissioning the portrait or learning about her identity within nineteenth-century Boston society, the portrait initially assumes a banal insignificance towards anonymity. In order to understand this portrait and the identity of the sitter, it is important to examine nineteenth-century portraiture in general within the context of the female subject. It is central to this examination to ask or discern why Gardner sat for her portrait with Sargent. How did Gardner picture herself and how do we perceive her today as a result of her visual representation in art? In tandem with this examination are the portraits of other women painted by Sargent and his contemporaries. It is through these viewpoints that we can begin to decipher in detail, what Gardner’s portrait intended to say about a woman who was the subject of intense gossip and speculation from the moment she married Jack Gardner and set foot in Boston in April, 1860.
The traditions of portraiture can be traced back as far as ancient Greece and Rome where lifelike depictions of primarily distinguished men and women appeared in
sculpture and on coinage. After many centuries in which generic portrait representation had been the norm, distinctive portrait likenesses began to appear in fifteenth-century Europe. During the early Renaissance, portraits were not paintings in their own right but rather, were important inclusions in pictures of Christian subjects. In medieval art, donors were frequently portrayed in the altarpieces or wall paintings that they commissioned. In these instances, fifteenth-century painters began to depict donors with distinctive features presumably studied from life. This lead to a desire to improve upon reality, and a gradual but steady move to adhere to principles of proportion and beauty learned from the study of classical sculpture. One of the hallmarks of European portraiture for example, is a sense of reality. There is a consistent intention by the artist to depict the unique appearance of a particular person. Each portrait is meant to express, elude, and reveal, individual identity. Art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) asserted that in portraiture, the portrait seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity. This is a relatable point that assumes observer interaction with a portrait based on an individual identity perspective. We relate to what we observe within the realm and context of our cultural and societal reality.

Man, as part of human society, developed its own ideas about the character of human beings. In ancient culture, studies of prehistoric and primitive cultures illustrate that portraiture has two roots reaching far back into the past: the face [mask] which imposes an arbitrary identity from the outside, and the human skull, which forms the bony structure on which flesh forms the framework and foundation for the characteristics of the face. Another way to approach these roots is to examine facial features, or the representation of identity through the “masked” face of a portrait subject. What we see
on the surface is the persona that either the subject intends for us to see or a persona the artist worked towards conveying. To look beyond the “mask” to the real identity, personality, and character of the individual subject—the ‘inner self’—requires the observer to look beyond the surface. While physical likeness when depicted thousands of years ago was different for each culture that employed portraiture techniques, portraiture for its modern incarnation, requires a specific history and cultural environment to evolve in the way that it has and how it manifested itself throughout time. For example, among the first incidences of representative art in human history (or prehistory) is the cave paintings found on the walls of the Lascaux caves and grottoes in France. As humans are not central to the content of these paintings, prehistoric times are not considered to be the birthplace of portrait artistry in the modern sense. They do however, depict the notion of leaving behind a visual record of one’s own life for the purposes of posterity. This is an important point because leaving something behind for posterity assumes identity through the depiction of a visual record—whether it is of an individual or group of individuals. When we as viewers observe a portrait, we are engaging with it on a personal and individual level unique to our own cultural perspectives that connect to our own identity. We attempt through our observations, to place an identity upon the subject of a portrait in order to center our own understanding of who they were, why they are important, and what the portrait is trying to convey about the subject. Although portraits are usually intended as interpretations of a single individual, we regard them as significant to the extent that they widen our understanding of man in general. A portrait allows us the close observation of a single, localized individual and we discern meaning to the degree that it
appears to “reveal something about general human traits and social relationships.”

Human beings and their relationship with the rest of humanity is what portrait representations persist in conveying to us. While they may be reminders of another time and place, they show us something of ourselves, and our present situation. In this regard, portraits from any period in history are timeless.

Portrait painting is humanity’s eternal effort to capture the essence of its identity. Striving to accomplish in representation what many artists strive for in abstraction, the portraitist embodies the struggle of all art to define the meaning of self. Throughout the history of art and of portraiture, we have seen humans portrayed as “omens and sacred fetishes, divine beings and historical personages, and icons of self.” While there has never been a finite definition of portraiture per se, its foundational core is an art that immortalizes by remembering a person at their most manifest moment and relating their story to the world. The world we live in today is one that is surrounded by faces flowing from television and movie screens, billboards, the Internet, and the glossy pages of magazines. With these competing and ever evolving modern images, we have difficulty imagining a world devoid of visual representations of the familiar features of people. When we observe these images, we do so under the auspices of what is going on culturally and socially in the present—a world that in the twenty-first century marks the identity of our culture as it is represented today, on demand, and in essentially a real-time narrative. Future generations may view our twenty-first century ideals in these images

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differently in much the same way we observe portrait images created in another time and era.

In portrait art we are frequently confronted with the stark contrast of the face. The artistic goal of representing the subject is to hold a mirror up to nature—in essence a cross between truth and art, revealing to the observer, a glimpse into the subject’s identity. On a basic level, the portrait artist’s task through his creation is to preserve the subject’s face for posterity, gratifying to an extent, the ego that resides behind it. The face serves as an emblem of our identity and for the sitter, insurance against anonymity for future generations and societies who view their image. More importantly, it serves as a calling card to society. In this sense, the ego becomes an intrinsic part of the depiction from both the perspective of the artist and the subject—each desiring to preserve reputation and social standing in perpetuity. The face presents an unusual challenge because there is no other structure like the human face that merges with such a great variety of shapes and surfaces into an absolute unity of meaning. The face conveys a multitude of emotion from fear, sadness, and joy, to daring, confidence, and haughtiness. The emotion of the sitter, combined in tandem with the overall setting of the portrait, sets one tone for how the viewer will respond to and interpret the work. For the artist there is the added problem in attempting to unite a multiplicity of disparate elements in order to produce an interaction between these elements that reveal the sitter to the public. Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) believed that art must create an emotional link between an artist and his audience. He believed that real art required the capacity to unite people through communication with a clearness and genuineness that provided society with a backdrop and foundation of values. Within this definition, portraits create not only a link between
the artist and his audience, but to society and other public observers. There is the added relationship between the artist and the subject in which we as observers must engage and interact to formulate our own emotional link to the work.

Art historian Wilhelm Waetzoldt (1880-1945) observed that portraits give rise to three distinct psychological responses: 1) one stimulated by the actual appearance of the human original, 2) its artistic treatment and, 3) the attitude of a viewer. These responses provide us with a means of achieving through depiction and analysis, the essence of character that which best makes that particular identity decipherable. They further bring into play that three different “identities” are co-mingled together—that of the subject as portrayed by the artist and observed by the viewer. All three persona’s—three different “identities”—contribute to how we interpret portraiture. Waetzoldt’s observations are applicable to Gardner’s portrait in that Sargent was successful in achieving Gardner’s appearance as she was at the age of forty-seven (Figure 2). Sargent’s artistic treatment and rendering of the overall portrait, contribute to the viewer’s experience of the painting. Most importantly, these factors complement a fourth response elicited by Gardner herself by her collaboration with Sargent.

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5 Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 31-2.
Portraits of a single individual are significant to the extent that they widen or give us the sensation of having broadened our understanding of the subject. Even though a portrait purports to allow us the close observation of a single individual, we discern meaning in it to the extent that it appears to reveal something about general human traits—obedience, passivity, inscrutability, and social relationships—female to female, object to subject, etc. These factors contribute to how the artist chose to portray the subject. Portraiture challenges the transient or irrelevancy of human existence and the
portrait artist must respond to the demands formulated by the individuals “wish to endure.” The portrait aims to capture a sense of time in order to represent its subject as extended in time.

In addition, portraiture is distinguished from other art categories such as landscape and still life by its relationship with likeness. When we see ‘another’ represented in a portrait, we tend to see our own social context, our own history, and ourselves. Art historian Joanne Woodall’s view on portraiture as a relationship between “likeness” and “character” asserts that there are nuances of likeness—the image and representation of the sitter and the concepts used by the artist to represent the ideas or attributes visibly to a viewing audience. Through character we can view the qualities, features, and attributes that distinguish the sitter through “described” or “depicted attributes and traits.”

Woodall’s assertion creates a sense of dualism that defines personal identity as an opposition between subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity. This is fundamental to the interpretation of portraiture because knowledge of what someone is like ‘internally’ (the sitter as subject) is supposed to be guaranteed by a faithful likeness of that person’s external appearance (the sitter as object). Subjectivity becomes identity in representation.

Gardner’s portrait was painted during the Gilded Age (1865-1918) of America in an era of not only rapid economic and population growth in the United States, but during a period of great and newly acquired wealth and opulence—some may argue that it was a

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6 Ibid., 33.

7 Joanna Woodall, "Facing the Subject," in Portraiture: Facing the Subject, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 5-6.

8 Ibid.
time of brazen gaudiness in which “swankiness prevailed over grandeur.” This Gilding referred to a portion of society that pertained to that part of American civilization created by this country’s first millionaire society—a unique and discrete sector, readily discernible from other contemporary American social and economic strata. The leaders of this rich society demanded into existence icons and images by requiring them of artists, architects, and artisans as “symbols of their own dynamic bravado.” Within the arts, a broad diversity replaced the general unity of style and form that had prevailed in America prior to the Civil War. Artists would paint images reflective of this society’s goals, values, and ambitions which they chronicled as they observed it. It is important to note however, that while Sargent was aware of societal conventions, he did not subscribe to them per se. Sargent was a demanding artist in the sense that he took full artistic control of how he would portray an individual. His decisions were unilateral and he did not collaborate with anyone. This is an important point because the only exception he may have made to this rule was with Gardner. Over the course of this period, artists maintained close ties to European portraiture and looked toward French, Italian, and Spanish influences to imbue their works. The wealthy elite viewed Europe as a place where the highest standards of culture, cosmopolitanism, worldliness, and the romance of life were centered—things that did not exist in America. The American nouveaux riches had a constant and burning desire to associate with Europe in every way and this included

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being depicted through portraiture as the new aristocracy of their era. Two such examples include Charles Émile-Auguste Carolus-Duran’s painting, *Mrs. William Astor* (Figure 3) and Alexandre Cabanel’s portrait of *Catharine Lorillard Wolfe* (Figure 4). Both portraits depict women from wealthy American families who each commissioned and sat for their portraits in Paris. Carolus-Duran’s portrayal of *Mrs. William Astor* was painted at the height of his success as a society portraitist. Coincidentally, her pose, dress, and the color of the background bear a striking resemblance to Sargent’s Gardner portrait. It is clear however, that Carolus-Duran was suggesting the influence and admiration of Valázquez that frequently permeated his work through the use of pose, lighting, and a warm, darker, and richer palette. Cabanel’s portrait is interesting because his subject was purported to be the richest unmarried woman in the United States at the time of her death in 1887—just one year before Sargent completed Gardner’s portrait. Wolfe was the first female benefactor of the Metropolitan Museum and collected an immense number of works from many ateliers across Paris. Wolfe’s portrait is an excellent example of a powerful female figure partaking in the increased desire towards “ostentatious self-advertisement.” Society was a close circle of privileged persons to which one either belonged or did not belong. Artists like Sargent, who painted in the Paris studio of Carolus-Duran in the mid-1870’s, rendered “unabashed the sheen of what money could buy.” As talented as Sargent was, he jumped on the bandwagon of the rich elite and painted portrait after portrait because it allowed him financial freedom and increased access to wealthy patrons. This was the norm for most portrait artists. Those

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12 Ibid., 28.
that succeeded made an extremely good living. During the nineteenth-century, several American artists contributed to the genre of portraiture and have given us much to consider while viewing the images of people who came from every walk of life. What made portraiture so appealing to patrons in the United States applies to the genre as a whole. Whatever their formal impetus or merit, portraits secure or make social position, endorse fame, chronicle genealogical distinctions, and “rehearse personal memory.”¹³

¹³ Ibid., 37.
Figure 3. Charles Émile-Auguste Carolus-Duran, Mrs. William Astor (Caroline Webster Schermerhorn), (1890: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
The Western tradition of the portrait tells us a lot about the artist, the period when, the place where he or she is working, the patron who commissioned the portrait, and about the sitter represented. From the mid to late nineteenth-century, there was an evident transition in the types of portraits being made. European artists depicted members of the nobility and upper echelons of the wealthiest aristocratic societies throughout Europe. They further honed their talent on the more mundane members of
society—the working class and figures in the world of theatre and music. Most portraits of women commissioned by European and American patrons were modeled after royal portraits that were produced during this time. We can see one example of this in Franz Winterhalter’s portrait of *The Empress Elizabeth of Austro-Hungary* (Figure 5) in comparison to Sargent’s portrait, *Mrs. George Swinton* (Figure 6). Both portraits exude an air of wealth and privilege but additionally highlight the subject in a way that signifies their importance through dress, comportment, and surroundings. The richness in the details of fabric, jewels, and elegantly adorned hairstyle, all resonate to someone of a higher echelon of wealth. Further, portraiture served to establish the social class of the sitter as it does most preeminently in two works by Sargent and Van Gogh respectively, *Lady Agnew* (Figure 7) and *La Berceuse (La Mere Roulin)* (Figure 8). These works constitute iconic models for identifying “the aristocratic” versus the “working-class” woman. Sargent stirred up a rich pictorial vision, taken from ingredients drawn from the European tradition of aristocratic and high bourgeois portraiture of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. He was offering wealthy clients up-to-date esthetic value for their money as well as their likeness. In the case of *Lady Agnew*, the physicality of the body of the sitter is almost dissolved by pale, diaphanous and silky fabrics. The delicate amethyst jewel of the large but simple pendant around the sitter’s throat is repeated in the mauve-violet sash around her waist and the bows on her sleeves; this pale simplicity is enlivened by the printed silk fabric of the chair she sits in as well as the exotic pale blue Chinese hanging which marks the background of the portrait. The sitter’s class position is signified through the sheer physical grace of her being as well as by her elegant, feminine dress and décor. Everything about the sitter is perfection, feminine, and refinement of the
highest degree. Her pose is at once dignified yet relaxed and the overall depiction bespeaks wealth and breeding—a true portrait of a lady. In direct contrast, Van Gogh establishes the working-class imagery of La Berceuse by emphasizing the proletarian, almost ugly maternal stockiness of her body, the plain, utilitarian garments of the subject, and the angularity and awkwardness of both her pose and the crude opposition of the color relationships which aggravate the senses visually and emotionally. There is at once a tension and a coarseness surrounding this portrait that is the extreme opposite in emotional and visual response to Lady Agnew. There is no grace, femininity, or elegance in this portrait and the combination of color and texture create a jarring effect.

Most portraits exhibit a formal stillness, a heightened degree of self-composure that responds to the “formality of the portrait-making situation.”14 There is an immense variety in the number of other styles chosen to represent women. Take for example Georges Clairin’s, Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt (Figure 9) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s, Jane Avril Dancing (Figure 10). Bernhardt’s portrait is one of theatrical elegance and lends a certain charm to her character that comes through in her pose and facial expression. Clairin’s image of the legendary actress is from his viewpoint as her lover. Bernhardt was an international sensation that enjoyed fame on both sides of the Atlantic. The actress is shown in a plush, comfortable, yet slightly bohemian setting. She is very nonchalant in her pose and is gazing directly forward as she lounges languidly. The elegance of her white gown is in contrast to her surroundings. It’s as though she is attempting, ever the actress, at portraying herself as something she is not despite her success. The portrait was displayed in the Salon of 1876 where it was met with mixed

14 Brilliant, Portraiture, 102.
reviews—Bernhardt was revered and scoffed at for her beauty and talent. Here the commentary centered on the subject vice the artist. The overall treatment of the portrait is done in painterly fashion and is in homage to a talented woman who was not only a performer, but also a writer, painter, and sculptor. Bernhardt was a modern, liberated women considered to be one of the “most brilliant women of her age.”\textsuperscript{15} In direct contrast is Toulouse-Lautrec’s portrait of \textit{Jane Avril}. Avril came from much lower class beginnings than Bernhardt and had no formal training of any kind. She was raised under impoverished conditions and escaped from a life of living with an alcoholic mother and absent father. Responsible for herself from the age of sixteen, Avril made a home for herself in the Parisian Latin Quarter where the city’s artistic crowd became her family. Her portrait by Toulouse-Lautrec evokes a coarseness that evokes Avril’s background and is visually unappealing and melancholic at the same time. Avril’s expression is dour, even depressed, and lacking in emotion. The grayness of the color palette mimics the grayness of her mood. The overall composition is uncomfortable to look at and is not as beautifully rendered as Clairin’s depiction of Bernhardt. Her dancing is in contrast to how she is portrayed and we are left with a perplexed and empty emotional response to her. In each of these portraits, we are stimulated in some way by the appearance of the subject. This individual view contributes to how we interpret the identities of these portrayals despite who these women are.

\textsuperscript{15} Gabriel Badea-Päun, \textit{The Society Portrait: From David to Warhol} (New York: The Vendome Press, 2007), 115.
Figure 5. Franz Xaver Winterhalter, *The Empress Elizabeth of Austro-Hungary*, (1865: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).
Figure 6. John Singer Sargent, *Mrs. George Swinton (Elizabeth Ebsworth)*, (1897: The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago).
Figure 7. John Singer Sargent, *Lady Agnew*, (ca.1892-93: National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh).
Figure 8. Vincent van Gogh, *La Berceuse (La Mere Roulin)*, (1889: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).
Figure 9. Georges Clairin, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*, (1876: Musée du Petit-Palais, Paris).
Figure 10. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril Dancing*, (1887: Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

We know from a historical stance that artists looked to antiquity and the classics for inspiration and used those references as a standard to measure and depict the ‘ideal.’ Whether this ideal was a representation of the female form, this homage to the past served
as a basis and foundation for artists consistently throughout the history of art. There is a
distinct transition within the history of the figure in art—especially with defining identity
and the representation of the subject. Behind many portraits there is nearly always an
assumption of a biography, a known story. Portraits of men through the centuries have
been depicted as heroes in battle, kings and leaders, and are shown in visages of
achievement and potential. They are immortalized symbols of success, fame, and fortune.
Women’s lives and faces did not tell the same story in terms of representation because it
was beauty and gracefulness of youth and loss of beauty when old that was depicted.
Qualities of the female figure were extremely important and women were represented in
roles of goddesses, historical or religious figures, or allegorical embodiments. There was
a consistent tugging between the portrayal of women and an “embodiment of
abstractions”\textsuperscript{16} that has been interpreted as denying women the kind of character and
public roles emphasized so often in portraits of men.

As one of the oldest forms of artistic and visual representation of individuals,
portraits by definition lend themselves to conveying traits that would be impossible to
convey in words. When we meet someone, the first thing we do is look at the face—the
same applies when we look at paintings of people, in both portraits and narrative scenes.
The portrayal of people can tell us something about the sitters, their status and interests,
the aims, influences and perhaps the preoccupations of the artists who painted them. A

\textsuperscript{16} Hanfmann. \textit{Personality and Portraiture}, 111.
portrait artist’s implicit purpose is the revelation and interpretation of a “specific, delimited human identity.”\(^\text{17}\)

Artists of the nineteenth-century brought forth a period in which they gained reputation and fortune primarily through the practice of painting portraits. Artists, as well as sitters, recognized the publicity value of showing portraits at public exhibitions and knew that further notoriety could be gained from portraits that were stylistically daring, or grandiose. A portrait gained a higher level of repute if a popular or renowned artist painted it. It also succeeded in garnering longevity and interest amongst society. American artists like Sargent, were among many artists during the nineteenth-century whose exhibited portraits evinced striking qualities and even dared to push the envelope of what was considered proper or appropriate. As portraiture became more of a professional specialized practice, the range of sitters became more diverse, and by the end of the nineteenth-century, portrait painters began experimenting more frequently with new ways of evoking the personality, status, or profession of a subject. Whether a portrait veers towards likeness or type, all portraits engage in some way with the identity of the sitter represented.

The concept of identity has a complex history. Our notion in the twenty-first century covers aspects pertaining to character and gender—all unique to an individual. The idea of ‘the self’ was explored philosophically from the seventeenth-century onward but identity is seen to be rooted in those external attributes that are conveyed through the body, face, and deportment—qualities or characteristics that distinguish one individual from another. The idea that portraits should communicate something about the sitter’s

\(^{17}\) Luben, *Art of Portrayal*, 91.
psychological state or personality is a concept that evolved gradually. The notion of reconciling the ‘inner’ life of a subject with the outer appearance is a common theme.

Women as portrait subjects in the nineteenth-century are placed in positions of beautified ‘objects,’ possessing no subjectivity to be understood or explored in contrast to their male [subject] counterparts. To be portrayed is in itself a social act in making a visible statement about the sitter’s worthiness. It is further the challenge of the portraitist to give female subjects individual distinction. What is considered beautiful or what would be classified as a beautiful object is subjective. Beauty is a morally ambivalent word that can be used to refer to virtue and inner beauty, or visual, sensual beauty. The significance of beauty in portraits saw a gradual transition towards the end of the century when beauty lost its moral connotations by becoming not a function of the character or the appearance of actual women, but an aesthetic quality. Female beauty became the central trope of artistic practice understood as a testament to the professional skills of the artist, rather than the appearance of the sitter. In essence, it was the artist’s responsibility to create and project the beauty of a woman on canvas.

As far as how women were actually depicted, they were frequently painted indoors, behind curtains, and as a diminutive part of the painting. For example in Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s painting, *Christine Lerolle Embroidering* (Figure 11), the artist has captured the division between the idealized status of women and the social vitality of men. The woman is properly dressed and seated, concentrating on a domestic task. In the background are men, standing casually with hands in their pockets, staring at paintings on the wall. The scene is a social setting much like a gallery or Salon, however, the men are discussing art with each other while the woman sits diminutively in the
foreground relegated to a domesticated function and role. The image gives the impression that the woman is not intellectual enough to engage in cultural conversation and is limited to engaging in the domestic arts and nothing more. She is viewed as just another object in the room. The concept of separate spheres, of a division of society into a private, domestic, female domain, and an active, public male world are primary characteristics of the nineteenth-century. The implications and the extent of this ideology in the organization of social and cultural norms and the impact it had on the lives of women from different classes and locations is a critical point worth examining. Feminist historical analysis has been particularly concerned with examining this division, emphasizing how any seclusion of women into the ‘private’ was different for different classes, and was considered symbolic rather than actual. In direct contrast, being portrayed in voyeuristic nature through nudity, sensual or sexual representations objectified women. A good example of this is Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (Figure 12). When this painting was shown at the Salon of 1865, it created a critical and vehement sensation. *Olympia’s* confrontational gaze, with the knowledge of her background as a prostitute along with her unorthodox pose outraged the puritan sensibilities of viewers. The public viewed *Olympia* as an ‘unmanageable’ woman—a woman who, although a prostitute, didn’t have the decorum to place herself in the perceived, traditional role of women. In this regard, *Olympia* defiantly questions that role. The essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in quite a different way from men, not because the feminine is different, but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.
Figure 11. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Christine Lerolle Embroidering*, (1897: Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus).
In contrast, sexualization through fashion is an important factor to consider in portraiture in large part because the subject’s clothing can indicate their social class and standing while simultaneously emphasizing a woman’s physical attributes. The nineteenth-century saw significant changes in how Americans defined themselves through fashion, and how fashion was derived. Global events, civil war, the mechanization of the garment industry, and the subsequent creation of manufactured clothing all impacted and influenced clothing styles. For women’s fashion, the cut of a gown, embroidery, undergarments, and garment profiles all were intended to accentuate the female figure. From a nineteenth-century perspective, ornamentation and adornment of female subjects in portraiture lends an added dimension in our analysis of a particular portrait. Women’s fashion during this time fluctuated and ranged in influencing styles.
acquired from a variety of sources. From 1800 to 1825, the revolutionary spirit that swept across the United States and France during the end of the eighteenth-century inspired interpretations of Greek and Roman columnar dress styles inspired by Napoleon’s new French Empire. High waistlines tucked under the bust line recalled the graceful drapery and folds of Greek and Roman statuary. In 1825, Romanticism embraced the emotional and sentimental with inspiration derived by the Romantic poetry of Shelley and Byron. Dresses reflected a historic influence with medieval motifs and neck ruffs. Waistlines were lowered, bodices were corseted, and sleeves and skirts grew fuller. In the 1850’s, the Civil War affected all aspects of civilian life, including dress. It spurred the mechanized textile industry with a demand for uniforms and ready-to-wear clothing making it easier for women to have access to a variety of fashion and style options on a more frequent basis. Women’s fashions were highly influenced by military styling, including faux epaulets, stripes, braiding and buttons. During the latter part of the century beginning in 1875, the fashion industry in American saw rapid changes. American manufacturing prospered and mass produced clothing was readily available more so than it had been twenty years earlier. It was during this timeframe that the haute couture designers of Paris, namely designer Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895), caught the attention of American women by his reinventing of fashion. Worth ended the crinoline craze by introducing dresses that were flat in the front and gathered in the back—a new look that completely changed the female silhouette. The expansion of American industry gave rise to newly rich business magnates and their spouses who launched their European tours wearing clothing hand tailored in opulent fabrics. This distinguished them from the more commonly dressed masses of the ready-to-wear craze.
As one of the preeminent portrait painters of the nineteenth-century, Sargent’s portraits of the female subject were effective in communicating the complex changes and paradoxes in feminine identity. His work clearly demonstrated his keen interest in exotic or interesting women little known or understood by his viewing audience, and his visual assertion of the importance of mystery in the definition of femininity.
CHAPTER 2
JOHN SINGER SARGENT

The way in which Sargent chose to portray Gardner is in stark contrast to his other ‘American Socialite’ portraits. Generally, when we think of socialite portraits, the image of a young debutante beauty dressed in a frothy concoction of silk and organza may come to mind. This is not the case with Gardner’s portrait, which is an antithesis of the typical socialite image. Sargent’s representation of Gardner is uniquely different and we are left with a puzzling and rather quirky portrait. Sargent was prone to incorporating stylistic qualities reminiscent of Velázquez and Bronzino in his work, and has alluded to the Old Master’s in his treatment of Gardner’s figure. Within the entire repertoire of portraits created by Sargent, no other portrayal of a sitter comes close to Gardner’s portrait. Her portrait is eclectic, somewhat bohemian, strikingly elegant, and yet eerily familiar at the same time. There are two major areas essential to the examination of Sargent’s representation of Gardner. First, it is important to understand the process of Sargent’s journey up to the point of creating Gardner’s portrait. His training, influences, primarily with French painter Charles Auguste Émile Durand (1837-1917), also known as Carolus-Duran, and commissions in Europe and America are critical elements of Sargent’s journey. Second, Sargent wanted to make his mark in America for the purpose of staking claim as an internationally renowned artist. For this to occur, he most likely needed to create a sensation—something he could not do with just any portrait. Sargent perhaps may have attempted, consciously or not, to recreate a similar reaction in America that he created with the scandalous Madame X portrait.
Sargent is considered to be the foremost and undisputed master of late nineteenth-century portraiture. He created portraits that were on the cutting edge of the art genre. While he did not subscribe to a specific style per se, Sargent’s work is infused with qualities that reference the Old Masters—especially those whom he admired. Sargent firmly believed that portraits should be painted without the guise of illusion and that the sitter should be portrayed as she is. In this regard, Sargent was truly ahead of his time because he consistently challenged himself, working against the grain of what was expected from a portrait artist. He was a lifelong expatriate who was immersed in European art and culture from the time of his birth in Florence in 1856. For the first eighteen years of his life, the Sargent family moved from one roost to another across Europe. His artistic inclinations were cultivated and encouraged by his mother, Mary Singer Sargent. Mrs. Sargent insisted that all her children be exposed to European history, culture, and leisure—things she believed were only attainable abroad. Research portrays Mrs. Sargent as a strong and willful woman who considered American culture crude and boorish. Interestingly, Sargent’s experience with a headstrong mother served him well throughout his career in dealing with strong-willed and temperament female personalities—including Gardner! Sargent’s early childhood was spent in what can only be described as a nomadic lifestyle. Mrs. Sargent adamantly thrust this way of life upon the Sargent family for the sole purpose of exposing her children to an education of learning through travel. Her husband, Dr. Fitzwilliam Sargent was not keen on abandoning his medical career to live the life of a wanderer across Europe. He acquiesced to this lifestyle in large part because Mrs. Sargent’s inheritance was funding
their entire way of life. She believed that the wider world of Europe offered the glamorous lifestyle and social ambitions she craved.

Sargent’s artistic development began in Paris where he had the opportunity to advance his skills through formal education and where his stylistic qualities flourished under the watchful eye of Carolus-Duran. Paris was a place where young artists from around the world gathered to hone their technical skills. In 1874, the École des Beaux-Arts方形 represented the nexus of academic training for budding artists. Sargent attended the École and opted to work with Carolus-Duran. He received well-rounded instruction via the conventional process of drawing from casts at the École and drawing from life at the atelier. Carolus-Duran had recently established his atelier in Paris and Sargent was attracted to its small size, more ‘gentlemanly’ student body. The atelier had a diverse student body that appealed to Sargent and he was further attracted to the high level of personal attention that Carolus-Duran bestowed on his pupils. The French artist’s flamboyant, theatrical, and passionate character were qualities that were imparted into his lessons and teaching style. He cultivated a romantic persona that was infectious and inspiring. It was through Carolus-Duran’s tutelage that Sargent learned how to refine the development of his observation skills. He learned to observe subjects in a way that allowed him to capture the essence of their character, personality, and physical attributes. This was attributed to his tutor’s non-traditional academic approach to painting. Carolus-

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The École des Beaux-Arts taught students mastery of the human form. Most students enrolled at the Ecole for drawing and study with a master affiliated to the school. Additionally, many students opted to study at one of the independent private ateliers where they would benefit of individual and practical tutorials and experience of the realities of life as a working artist.
Duran was a proponent of the ‘pittura alla prima’

2 method of painting. This method instilled the technique of completing a painting in one sitting rather than during several sessions. The idea was to capture one’s observations in the moment—something that is apparent in a majority of Sargent’s work. Carolus-Duran advised his students to paint what they saw, as it appeared, and to educate their eyes in order to “see correctly.”

3 He said of the subject that painting is not an art of imitation but an art of interpretation. This doctrine forced a keen focus on those qualities that give works both personality and distinctiveness. Most importantly, saying the most about a subject with the least possible effort was key. Additionally, Carolus-Duran repeatedly demanded that his pupils ceaselessly study Velázquez. His own work was highly influenced by Velázquez in many of his first “grand portraits.”

4 An example is his painting of the wife (Figure 13) of novelist Ernest Feydeau and the mother of playwright Georges Feydeau. The portrait is a large painting—over seven feet tall and nearly five feet in width—reminiscent of

2 The term 'pittura all prima' was introduced in the sixteenth century in contrast with 'disegno all prima', which means primary or initial design. 'Disegno' refers to a preliminary drawing used as the basis of painting and are executed in charcoal, pencil or pen and sometimes copied from paper to a canvas, or wall on which pain was then applied. Pittura refers to direct painting that is not based upon such preliminary drawing. Disegno refers not only to drawing but to designing, design, plan, blueprint, composition, conception or idea. It was a central term in Renaissance discourse which highlighted 'arti di designo'--the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture. 'Pittura all prima' incorporates a much wider technical sphere. Throughout the history of art, the phrase 'pittura alla prima' has frequently been shortened and referred to as 'alla prima' and is recognized by bold spontaneous brush strokes.


Velázquez’s works in the “grand manner.” What makes this portrait unique is the attention to the body language, gesture, and facial expression of Mme. Feydeau. Carolus-Duran believed that gesture and expression were the makers of character and identity. Another example is the painting, *Lady with a Glove* (Figure 14). Here we can appreciate the sensitivity and care Carolus-Duran took with the diffusion of light. The subject, his wife, is portrayed within an airy space. Her face and hands are accentuated with light and are in contrast to her black dress and the muted grayish green of the background. The focus on specific features are typical hallmarks of Velázquez. Carolus-Duran takes his representation one step further by focusing attention on three interrelated elements that catch the eye: the young woman’s face and fashionable hairstyle, her hands, one of which is removing a grey glove, and the glove on the ground. These elements bring a modern nuance and freshness to the overall quality of the depiction, but they also produce a feeling of intimacy and close familiarity. These ‘gestures’ reveal a keen sense of Carolus-Duran’s attention to detail because they give the feeling of an act captured in the moment.

\[5\] Ibid., 72.
Figure 13. Charles Émile-Auguste Carolus-Duran, *Portrait of Mme. Ernest Feydeau*, (1870: Palais des Beaux Arts de Lille, Lille).
Figure 14. Charles Émile-Auguste Carolus-Duran, Lady with a Glove, (1869: Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

The advantage of Carolus-Duran’s methods was that they built a sound approach to painting, permitting the student to tackle any subject so long as he looked at it
carefully. Because it was a method of approach, individual techniques of the artist could be incorporated which highly appealed to Sargent. This teaching method was uniquely Carolus-Duran’s. Compared to the rigid teaching methods of the time, his instruction was extraordinarily flexible, and allowed the artist’s instincts to flow into their work. This teaching method in tandem with the study of Velázquez’s work, contributed to the development of three major stylistic traits in Sargent’s work. The first was a consummate skill in rendering objects and people bathed in low light. The second was his straightforwardness in making a gesture count by economizing his brush strokes. Finally, Sargent’s practiced and skilled ability to observe his subjects was remarkable. Sargent reaches inward with his subjects to flesh out the qualities that bring his canvases to life and reveal his subjects. The results that Sargent achieved were stunning. All three traits can be seen in a majority of Sargent’s work, including Gardner’s portrait. Most of his works during this period highlight the subtle placement of light and dark values. Facial features of his subjects were mostly defined by variations of black, gray, umber, and pink. Always attempting to capture the fleeting impression of his sitters and their moods, Sargent worked with swift, fluid brushstrokes, varying the amount of medium he added to achieve greater transparency or opacity. This resulted in light, ethereal, and painterly effects. In Sargent’s painting, Rosina Ferrara (Figure 15), the subject’s seemingly uninhibited demeanor is captured. Through his spontaneous brush strokes, Sargent achieved an immediate visual impression of the young, vivacious Rosina. The painting exudes a warmth created by soft glowing light that focuses the eye on the shifts and accents of color. In Rosina, we can clearly see Velázquez’s influence when compared to Woman as a Sibyl (Figure 16) and the Study for the Head of Apollo (Figure
In both these works, the similarities to Sargent’s *Rosina* are striking. Each of the figures depicts the contrast of light and dark shadows. The light source adds to the mood and tone of the picture. The gestures of the figures—from the curvature of the neck to the position of each face—allow the viewer to appreciate the feelings emitted from the figures. In Velázquez’s pictures this is more evident than in *Rosina*. Sargent allows the viewer to see *Rosina* as a true spontaneous spirit. As observers, we can relate to her on a personal level because we are more drawn into her depiction than in *Apollo* or *Woman as Sibyl*. The similarities in particular between *Rosina* and *Woman as Sibyl* are evident. We can witness the way Sargent emulates the treatment of fabric through his brushstrokes to evoke texture as well as the interplay of shadows between the folds and creases of the garment in both pictures. In *Carmela Bertagna* (Figure 18), Sargent utilizes the same spontaneity with his brushwork as he did with *Rosina Ferrara*. In this portrayal, he utilizes short, vigorous, controlled brushstrokes that emphasize the young girl’s sullen expression, framed by disheveled curly hair and dangling earrings. Upon closer examination of *Carmela* (Figure 19), we can see Sargent’s precision through his restraint in the placement of both his brush strokes and color. The two to three strokes of coral pinks used to depict *Carmela’s* lips highlight her sultriness while the daubs of white glistening near her cheeks provide a glinting hint of jewelry. While her facial features have been quickly rendered, each stroke of Sargent’s brush gives us a sense of the subject. The daubs and strokes of paint add to her character.
Figure 16. Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, *Woman as a Sibyl*, (ca. 1644-48: Southern Methodist University, Dallas).
Figure 17. Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, *Study for the Head of Apollo*, (1630: Private Collection).
Figure 18. John Singer Sargent, *Carmela Bertagna*, (ca. 1879: Columbus Museum of Fine Art, Columbus).
Several of Sargent’s portraits take on characteristics of what Carolus-Duran’s teachings on observation emphasized, particularly with the influence of Velázquez. One
such example is Sargent’s portrait of *Madame Escudier* (Figure 20). Louise Lefevre Escudier was the wife of a prominent Parisian lawyer and politician. On the surface, her social position made her a likely portrait client for Sargent. This half-length portrait is informal and casual, yet chic. The pale complexion and contrast of the subject’s dark costume highlight her individual characterizations by drawing attention to her expression and spectacular bow. *Madame Escudier* looks at the viewer with a mischievous smile that is captured as if she had been caught during an unexpected moment, playfully chiding the viewer for catching her unawares. Through Sargent’s depiction of *Madame Escudier*’s bow, he successfully conveys a playful, jaunty, spirited character of a fashionable, yet sophisticated woman. Another example is Sargent’s portrait of *Mrs. Daniel Sargent Curtis* (Figure 21). This half-length portrait is both informal and subtly modest. Mrs. Curtis’ husband was a cousin of Sargent’s father and her son was Sargent’s friend Ralph. The Curtis’ spent most of their time in Venice at the Palazzo Barbaro. The Palazzo became the nexus of expatriate Anglo-American literary and artistic life. People like Henry James, Robert Browning, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler were frequent guests. The Curtis’ were also close friends with Jack and Isabella Gardner. Mrs. Curtis came from extreme wealth and lived in one of the most magnificently ornate fifteenth-century homes in Venice. Despite her background, Sargent chose to depict her as a formidable matron with lips that are firmly pressed together. The overall impression of the subject comes across as aloof. Her pearls, lace collar, and cap are in contrast with an all black background and clothing but they indicate her wealth and refinement. The focus of both *Madame Escudier* and *Mrs. Daniel Sargent Curtis* are centered on the face and
through their individual expressions, we can witness the essence of personality and identity in each portrait.

Figure 20. John Singer Sargent, *Madame Escudier*, (ca. 1883: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williams College, Williamstown).
If we were to examine works of Sargent’s contemporaries, we would see not only stark contrasts in depiction and style of the subject, but some similarities as well. For example, in Berth Morisot’s painting, *Le Corsage Noir* (Figure 22), Morisot used daubs of subtly varied color to create a scene devoid of life, passion, or intimacy. We do not get a sense of the subject’s identity. Morisot utilizes a rapid execution reminiscent of Sargent that suggests the details on the bodice of the sitter’s dress. The model is contained in a shallow, repressing enclosed space, devoid of light. This emits a compressed and lifeless feeling to the overall tone of the picture. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s painting, *Portrait of Christina Rossetti* (Figure 23), the artist portrays his sister.\(^6\) The portrait depicts Rossetti in relation to the prevailing sadness of her poetry, which harps on themes of loss and death. The portrait is hazy, gray, and projects a depressing quality. In each of these portraits we are challenged with the identity of the sitter. We are given an impression of who the sitter is through the artist’s individual technique, but we are not given any insight as to who they really are. In this regard, Sargent’s portraits are unique because he allows us to view his subjects through his eyes. Sargent does not merely affix an image to canvas. He delves into what makes his subjects tick. In this regard, Sargent observes them as he sees them—not how they [subject] think they should be portrayed.

\(^6\) Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was an English poet who wrote a variety of romantic, devotional, and children's poems. She led an unhappy life that was centered on her ill-health and settling into a life of spinsterhood to care for and devote herself to her mother and brother.
Figure 22. Berthe Morisot, *Le Corsage Noir*, (1878: National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin).
While most of his fellow colleagues from the École and atelier returned home to begin their careers, Sargent remained in Paris to begin establishing his career. By the early 1880s, Sargent was well integrated into French society, mixing amongst the literary and artistic world. During the years Sargent spent in Paris, he lived a very social and sometimes bohemian lifestyle. On one hand, he was reserved and contemplative but in social settings, he enjoyed having fun and frequently mixed with a variety of personalities. Sargent counted among his friends, Claude Monet and other members of
the Impressionist group and members of the literary circle including Robert Louis Stevenson. In addition, Sargent moved easily among various aristocratic circles that included European and French aristocrats, as well as South American socialites and wealthy American’s who traveled to Paris. Sargent cultivated these relationships on a professional level in what would prove to be a calculated and wise move for his future. Sargent's climb and success in the art world depended on the commissions he received and his achievement through submission of his work to the Salon. Sargent instinctively knew how to portray his subjects in a way that the observer could relate personally and individually with the subject through their own interpretation.

Sargent earned praise for his portraits of women and in general was viewed as someone whose perception was seen and felt in a “refreshingly natural way.” The women that Sargent surrounded himself with, or met during his travels, inspired him to create vibrant canvases that revealed their qualities and complexities. During the era of his greatest fame, Sargent attracted subjects from among the very wealthy who paid him extremely high commissions. In return, Sargent portrayed his subject’s “best self.” Sargent’s goal was to provide beautiful portrayals that extended to his female subjects dignity, grace, and individuality. Many of his renderings reveal a tender manner and expression that expose elegance through gesture. One example is his portrait of Mrs. Henry White (Figure 24). Daisy White was the wife of an influential diplomat and prominent member of the American community in Paris. Prior to his portrait of Mrs. Henry White

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8 Mount, John Singer Sargent, 455.

Henry White, most of his sitters had been old family friends or members of aristocratic French society. The Whites were among the earliest of Sargent’s patrons in the upper echelons of American society. Shortly after this portrait was completed, Henry White became Secretary to the American Legation in London. His wife’s portrait hung in the dining room of the Whites’ home where it was seen by prominent, rich, and influential guests. Some believe that the portrait of Mrs. Henry White contributed significantly to the establishment of Sargent’s burgeoning international career. Mrs. White is depicted as stately and reserved. Contemporary criticism of the portrait focused on the ‘élan’ of the characterization and the ‘sketchiness’ of execution. This description was not complimentary because Sargent’s stylistic technique was being questioned rather than being appreciated for what it was—immediate and spontaneous. Sargent was very skillful in his treatment of those parts of the picture, which he wished to make important.

In his portrait of Lady Playfair (Figure 25), Sargent depicts the daughter of a prominent Boston family. She became the third wife of Englishman, Baron Lyon Playfair, who was a distinguished scientist and politician. The Whites introduced Sargent to the Playfairs. When Lady Playfair was exhibited during the 1887 exhibition of the Royal Academy, it was deemed one of Sargent’s most successful portraits and local press accounts made comparisons to Velázquez. Much of the commentary articulated Lady Playfair’s “vivacious head” and noted how the “blood seems to circulate in her veins.” Critical review noted that Lady Playfair was the standard to which Sargent should strive and maintain, further noting that he should never paint with less taste and culture.

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Sargent was not above the acidic and scathing criticism of the press or the public. On occasion, Sargent chose to paint alluring and exotic women of mystery. In one particularly infamous occurrence, the mysterious woman in question nearly derailed his career. In 1880, Sargent painted the provocative portrait of Virginie Avegno Gautreau, known as Madame X (Figure 26), a woman from New Orleans who moved in high French society. Sargent’s interpretation of this socialite caused a tremendous scandal when it
was exhibited in 1884 during the Paris Salon. Positive public commentary was limited. Praise did come from various sources including art critic and writer Louis de Fourcaud who wrote that this “was a portrait with a strange refinement, a stunning work of distinction and rare interest.”

Many of Sargent’s personal friends wrote personal letters of admiration and encouragement, congratulating Sargent on his ‘masterpiece.’ Carolus-Duran personally wrote to Sargent and commended him on his excellent mastery and refinement of technique. The original version of the portrait depicted Gautreau’s right shoulder strap slipped off the shoulder, making the portrait seem wanton and sexually provocative. Society deemed the portrait indecent and the preceding uproar temporarily derailed Gautreau’s reputation. While Sargent took the assault on the portrait personally, the stir it caused heightened his reputation. After the exhibition, Sargent looked to England as a way to take solace away from the gossiping society of Paris and an opportunity to broaden his list of clientele. While his reputation did not suffer nearly as much as Gautreau’s, Sargent felt the financial pinch from a Parisian society that became weary of the artists keen observations. After all, if Sargent viewed Gautreau as an object of exotic sensuality, others did not want to be placed in the same vicarious position.

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Mount, *John Singer Sargent*, 64.
Figure 26. John Singer Sargent, *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, (1883-84; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
In 1886, British novelist Henry James, a mutual friend of Sargent and Gardner’s, facilitated their first meeting. Sargent assumed that Gardner was paying a visit to commission a portrait. Gardner was fascinated by the daring sexuality of the portrayal of *Madame X* and its “atmosphere of evil.”\(^{12}\) She visited Sargent originally on the premise of meeting the artist, but more importantly, to view the notorious portrait. *Madame X* made such an impression on Gardner that she commissioned a portrait from Sargent on the spot. The arrangement was for one year later during Gardner’s next trip to Europe until she learned of Sargent's impending visit to America two years later in 1887. It was not until Sargent stepped foot on American soil in Newport, Rhode Island, that Gardner began an aggressive campaign to Sargent for him to make good on his commitment.

The offer of work in America came at an excellent point in Sargent’s career. He came with distinct advantages through the name he had made for himself in Paris. This factor alone enhanced his standing in a “provincial society starry-eyed about French art and culture.”\(^{13}\) While there has been some contradictory opinion on the nature of Sargent’s public persona, he was very much a social individual keenly aware of his public persona. He knew how to build up his reputation through his connections, associates, and numerous social contacts cultivated throughout his life and career. Sargent brought with him the latest fashion in portraiture and his paintings looked at home in the sophisticated European interiors created by American architects. Above all, he endowed his sitters with an aura of panache and sophistication that none of his rivals could match. Sargent’s


success in America relied on careful management and an active network of friends and contacts.”

The catalyst for his entry into American society came from an unlikely source—American banker, philanthropist and collector, Henry Marquand. Marquand wrote Sargent, asking him to name his price to travel to Newport and paint a portrait of his wife, Elizabeth (Figure 27).

Sargent’s style underwent a subtle process of adjustment once he arrived in America. His portraits of American matrons are more severe and directly realistic than his paintings of French or English sitters. Sargent was disappointed with his first American portrait subject. He described Mrs. Marquand as a “drear woman, drear in wardrobe, drear in expression.”15 “If he could not have a beauty, he preferred someone at least of a more “cultivated appearance for his first work in a new land.”16 Sargent’s strained efforts to do his best with this portrait are evident. Marquand is dressed unfashionably and sits placidly in a chair. The palpable mature dignity and benign appearance of Marquand is clear in the overall mood of the painting. Sargent made no attempt to make her appear other than what she was. This severity and directness is further emphasized in the portrait of Mrs. Adrian Iselin (Figure 28). We can see references to one of Sargent’s contemporaries, James Abbott McNeill Whistler through which Sargent may have channeled inspiration from Whistler’s, Arrangement in Grey and Black #1: The Artists Mother (Figure 29). Marquand was a dignified woman who Sargent chose to portray as a noble old lady. However, one cannot help but to draw on comparisons between the two portraits. Both female subjects convey a somber pose, expression, and coloring. The treatment in the attention to the details of the face, lace work, and hands are done sensitively in comparison to the rest of the painting. The similarities end there. While Whistler includes bold shapes through the addition of objects on the wall, the curtain, and patterned rug, Sargent’s portrait focuses on the sitter.


Through the gracious expression on Marquand’s face, the viewer is drawn to her pleasant and kind demeanor. We are engaged with her on a human level instead of being distracted by the addition of other objects that are present in Whistler’s picture. In addition to being highly influenced by Velázquez’s style, Sargent was profoundly effected by the work of sixteenth-century Florentine painter Agnolo di Cosimo di Mariano, called Bronzino. During a brief trip to London in 1882, Sargent saw Bronzino’s painting, *Venus Disarming Cupid* (Figure 30). From this work, Sargent was highly inspired by Bronzino’s handling of the arms, hands, and torso of the impeccably captured frozen sensuality of Venus. The stylistic qualities imparted by Bronzino in this work and others, including his portrait, *Lucretia Panciatichi* (Figure 31), were emulated and repeated by Sargent in many of his portraits including those of Marquand and Gardner. The use of these references in Sargent’s work not only pay homage to those great artists before him, but infuse his work with the inspired creation of beautiful lines, shapes, forms, and textures.
Figure 29. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black #1: The Artist's Mother*, (1874: Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
Not all of Sargent’s American portraits are so severe. When painting fashionable American beauties of the day for example, Sargent referred to a more conscious and stylized format reminiscent of his years in Europe. The mannerisms of his French impressionist style creep back into his portraits. Take for example, his portrait of Mrs.
Elliott Shepard (Figure 32). Here, the features of the subject are contrasted with her taut, erect figure in relation to a single piece of furniture and a luxurious white fur rug. Sargent treated this work with an infusion of luminous and diffused light, softening the shapes and outlines of individual objects, and bathing everything in a warm glow. Regardless of how he portrayed his subject’s, one thing was very clear—Sargent knew how to accentuate his sitter’s attributes through the depiction of femininity, regal beauty, haughty stance, or subtle sensuality.

Sargent apparently never engaged in collaborative efforts with his client’s with the exception of Gardner. Because a majority of his clients desired to have a portrait by Sargent, they most likely would have allowed him full control without question. In one documented instance, one of Sargent’s clients arrived for her first session with her personal maid and elegant evening gown in tow. Fully expecting to be allowed time to prepare for her sitting, Sargent abruptly told her to pose as is. The client was Mrs. Adrian Iselin and she is depicted (fig. 28) in her travel frock. While miffed, she did not question Sargent’s motives. Gardner was the opposite and took an authoritative role from the beginning of their sessions together. When she insisted on wearing her famous pearls and rubies, Sargent compromised and instructed her to arrange the longest strand around her waist. When Gardner wanted her finest features accentuated, Sargent tied a black shawl tightly around her hips to accentuate her figure. He showcased her neck and arms by depicting them in an elegant and elongated manner. Gardner even selected the textile pattern to be used for the background of her portrait—which coincidentally, was the same one that Sargent had also chosen. Through this give and take, they did collaborate to a
certain degree. For Sargent especially, this notion of giving his client any control at all went against his professional protocol.

While the main staple of his career was filled with commissions from members of the elite societies of Europe and America, Sargent fervently maintained his stance to paint the way he sought fit. He did not subscribe to societal expectations and most definitely marched to the tune of his own drum, determined to have success on his terms or not at all. Further, his work is imbued with a quality that is highlighted through the use of color, technique, and more critically, astute observation. These characteristics were trademarks in his work all throughout his career. In comparison to other portraiture of the nineteenth-century, Sargent’s work is positioned exclusively alone in large part because he knew how to draw the observer toward his subjects. As observers of Sargent’s work, viewers are enticed by his figures in a way that demand attention and the desire to learn more about them as individuals. Each of his portraits give the viewer a glimpse into the unique and distinct personality or character of the sitter through their expression, pose, the direction of their gaze, clothing and background. When we look at any Sargent portrait, we get a sense of the subject and based on individual observation, draw a conclusion on the sitter’s identity. This occurs in large part because of Sargent’s ability to capture the essence of his subject through his finely honed sense of observation. His portraits are far from static and possess a quality that pulls the viewer in by emphasizing those qualities of the sitter that he wished to be highlighted at first glance. It is only when studying his portraits do we begin to notice nuances, and smaller details that when combined inclusively, give us an integrated picture of the subjects true identity.
CHAPTER 3
ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER

When Isabella Stewart Gardner’s portrait was unveiled at the St. Botolph Club in 1889, “Woman—an enigma” was suggested as a title for it.¹ This would have been the most apt title for a painting of a woman who was a true enigma and legend in her own right. Gardner was complex, passionate, gutsy, demanding, unconventional, bright, and very much her own woman. Sargent’s portrait of her on the surface bespeaks of a mysterious woman, yet is she really a mystery? Gardner’s portrait at first glance is deceiving because taken into context on its own, it doesn’t reveal much information to the casual observer. There is limited documentation about Sargent’s portrait of Gardner. Other than a few bits of brief commentary in various academic sources, a thorough examination of the portrait does not exist. Gardner’s portrait was publicly displayed in Boston for a short period of time during Sargent’s one-man show at the St. Botolph Club in 1889. The painting was sequestered thereafter in the private rooms of Gardner’s home after her husband became enraged at the lewd comments that ensued after the portraits unveiling. The portrait was not revealed to the public again until well after Gardner’s death in 1925 when the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum was re-opened. The portrait will be examined on two fronts. First, the depiction of Gardner is initially presented in tame contrast to her public persona. The portrait by nineteenth century standards was considered too sexy and racy for its time. Second, since she collaborated with Sargent,

¹ Manuscript notes by Morris Carter, October 30, 1939, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Archives, Boston.
Gardner must have wanted to convey something very specific about what her portrait would say about her.

Gardner upbringing had every advantage possible but she differed from her peers in that she was never discouraged from showing interest in areas that were considered ‘non-feminine.’ From the time of her birth in New York on April 14, 1840, Gardner was treated with great affection and raised by a firm and strict mother and doting father. Unlike many of her female peers, Gardner’s parents believed in educating all their children equally and instilled the importance of learning beyond the scope of needlework and managing a household. As was the fashion of wealthy young American women, Gardner received a short formal education in private schools in New York and in Paris, France, where her family lived for two years. During this time, her parents took her to Italy to explore its many cultural treasures and included other culturally enriched visits throughout Europe. During these travels, Gardner was greatly impressed by private museums. One of the private art collections Gardner visited in Milan had a profoundly deep influence on her. She wrote to one of her friends about her dream of one day owning a house with an art collection like the one she had seen in Italy. In Paris, Gardner became close friends with one of her classmates, Julia Gardner, whose family was from Boston, Massachusetts. Julia would later introduce Gardner to her brother Jack, Gardner’s future husband. Gardner’s father, David Stewart, was responsible for encouraging his daughter’s independence and ensured that ‘his’ Isabella was not only given every advantage, but encouragement to pursue her interests. The Stewarts were part of New York’s social elite where Mr. Stewart amassed his wealth through the import

of linen cloth and iron. Signs of Gardner’s independent and unconventional nature surfaced early in her childhood. She was an avid runner, enjoyed sports, and did not like to be defeated at anything. While the conventionally male sport of gymnastics was just one of Gardner’s favorite pastimes, she enjoyed opera, painting, and dancing. Music, art and literature were the three areas in which she was repeatedly drawn to throughout her life. From an early age, she engaged in conversation not usual for proper young ladies. For example, it surprised her father that his daughter expressed delight in conversing about the discovery of gold in California with the same excitement a boy might display. Gardner enjoyed intellectual conversation and debate on a variety of subjects to include business and politics. As a child, she preferred to befriend boys more so than girls primarily because she thought the games that boys played were far more entertaining than sitting around learning needlework or playing with dolls.

After her marriage to John [Jack] Gardner in 1860, Gardner began to emerge as a flamboyant figure in Boston society. She was referred to as the “Queen” of Boston’s Back Bay. As a young woman from New York City, Gardner had come from a place that in many ways was the most influential city in America at that time. New York was already a melting pot of divergent cultures, views, opinions, and politics in 1860. Gardner felt like an intruder within this new society because while she came from wealth, her family was considered “new money.” She was very much seen as an outsider on two fronts—too cosmopolitan and liberal for staid Boston society and lacking an historical pedigree. Further, she faced a good deal of envy and resentment because so many Boston

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women had their own eye on Jack Gardner. The first two years of her marriage were a strain on Gardner in large part because she and Jack lived with her in-laws. This living arrangement was temporary while the newly married couple awaited the construction of their home on Beacon Street, a wedding gift from David Stewart. Gardner was described as “much of an invalid” during this time because under the watchful and old-fashioned eye of the elder Gardner’s, she was expected to prescribe to the traditional roles society had dictated for women. Managing a household, attending and hosting garden parties, and domestic activities were not Gardner’s cup of tea. This went very much against Gardner’s nature and frustrated her to the point of totally incapacitating her from functioning on a daily basis. As a result, Gardner sought every opportunity to visit her family in New York, staying until her husband came to fetch her back to Boston. This was not typical behavior of ‘proper’ married women. One year after moving into their new home, Gardner gave birth to her son Jack “Jackie” Jr. Jackie was the light and joy of Gardner’s life and the two years that he lived before tragically succumbing to pneumonia, were the happiest of Gardner’s life. The doting maternal instincts and feelings that she had developed with Jackie became a conduit theme of remembrance throughout her life. Her art collection is reflective of a maternal longing and nurturing that was mostly left unfulfilled. Gardner’s grief knew no bounds and once again, she was incapacitated from functioning daily but for different reasons. Jack Gardner, who was devoted to his ‘Belle’, became concerned for his wife’s health and her gradual spiral towards depression. Upon the recommendation of her doctor, Jack took his wife abroad on a whirlwind tour of


5 Ibid., 15.
Germany, Scandinavia, Russia, Austria, and an extended stay in Paris. The desired effect was to change her mood, her surroundings, and to fill Gardner’s days with travel and culture to nourish her soul in a way that would lessen her grief. This trip would be the start of many trips the couple would take together all throughout their married life.

Gardner’s return to Boston after several months spent in Europe was a transformation that was described as one of the most “conspicuous of Boston society.”6 “Effervescent, exuberant, reckless, it was as if Belle Gardner had been reborn.”7 After a second pregnancy that ended in miscarriage, Gardner abandoned hope of motherhood altogether, tucked away her grief, and discarded and notion of all conventions imposed on women of her class. From that point forward, she lived exactly as she pleased and very publicly.

Gardner most definitely did not behave like most women of her time. As one of Boston’s most exciting figures, she was known in the society papers as “Mrs. Jack.” While she was liked by a few of the more progressive, cosmopolitan younger generation, she was disdained by formal Boston society for most of her life. She was extremely outspoken, flirtatious, highly demanding, and very independent. Gardner was not afraid to express her thoughts and opinions and spoke with startling frankness. Her forward behavior and blunt forthright attitude was met with much objection from society. In as much as she was criticized for her behavior, much of it most likely was related to her being completely misunderstood. Gardner enjoyed life with the bright-eyed naiveté of a child and made no apologies to anyone. There may have been a sense of jealously as well from other women who envied Gardner’s free spirit, quick wit, and wicked sense of

6 Ibid., 19-20.

7 Ibid., 28.
humor that made her the idol of men and envy of women. She took great interest in the community activities of Boston. Gardner loved to attend Red Sox baseball games as well as other sports at nearby Harvard University. She even mastered the sport of jiu jitsu. She gave financial support to organizations that supported animal rights and the planting of city gardens. She smoked cigarettes and hosted grand parties typical of wealthy Boston families. Gardner’s gatherings were notorious around town in large part to her eclectic guest list that encompassed members of society, academics, musicians, artists, and writers—all at the same time! In fact, it was well known that while the Gardner’s entertained regularly, it was Jack Gardner who made the arrangements for the staff, selected the menu, and organized the logistics of their soirées. Gardner focused on the guest list and ensured a wide array of personalities to make for a lively evening of conversation and entertainment. Gardner became a legendary figure in Boston society and one could argue that she was viewed in ways that American art tended to portray women in the nineteenth-century as Madonna, muse, and seductress. Gardner was all three. As she matured and grew into her own skin, Gardner became increasingly more bohemian. Her free spirited values reflected the fact that she was really coming into a much fuller kind of self-understanding. Gardner perhaps viewed these roles differently than that of society. She very much enjoyed being the muse as was evidenced by the numerous portraits of her by well-known artists and writers of the day. As a mentor, Gardner had a keen interest in the fledgling career of artists, writers, and musicians and encouraged their development and careers by using her influence. As a patron, she commissioned works of art outside of collecting, organized special concerts featuring the exclusive works of such composers as Charles Martin Loeffler and others. These roles as
muse, mentor, and patron were not unilateral events that occurred sporadically in Gardner’s life, but were consistent efforts that she made to encourage not only the aspirations of these artists, but to educate the public and spread more awareness of the arts. She wasn’t shuffling these roles but making use of them increasingly as a creator of her own right and ostensibly, as a creative artist herself by taking charge to craft and build her own individual identity. Her every movement was documented by the press and local gossip with some stories about Gardner so outrageous that it was hard to discern fact from fiction. Gardner, ever the mysterious woman, never acknowledged or felt the need to explain her life or actions to anyone. She just let people believe what they wanted to believe and may have secretly enjoyed being at the center of so much attention. Gardner often said, “don’t spoil a good story by telling the truth.”

Interestingly, conservative [female] members of society adamantly kept Gardner at a distance and did not allow her to join the centerpiece of female society in Boston like the Sewing Circle. Curiously, in as much as they shunned Gardner from their inner sanctum, she was very likely the hottest topic of discussion amongst the group.

At one time, Gardner was embroiled in a scenario that had “finally given the Back Bay” what it had long felt cheated of by Gardner. Many well-known bachelors were frequent callers at the Gardner’s residence. One was Henry James who treated Gardner as his muse for inspiration in many of his novels such The Portrait of a Lady. The central

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8 Ibid., 147.

9 A group of women who met regularly for the purpose of sewing for charitable causes and socializing.

10 Shand-Tucci, The Art of Scandal, 43.
figure in James’ novel is Isabel Archer, a young American girl of a free and independent nature and spirit who becomes an heiress. The character of Isabel possesses very close parallels to Gardner. James drew on inspiration from Gardner’s life frequently in many of his other novels. In his novella, *The Spoils of Poynton*, the acquisitive Mrs. Gareth is a disguised Mrs. Gardner. Gardner at midlife inspired the portrait of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* where she wears Gardner’s trademark pearls in the same style as Gardner and lives in Gardner’s rooms at the Palazzo Barbaro in Venice. In *The Golden Bowl*, Charlotte Stant possesses the young Gardner’s beautiful waistline (as painted by Sargent). Another guest, American writer Francis Marion Crawford was a frequent caller on Gardner as well. In Crawford’s case, the argument could be made that since he was the nephew of Gardner’s close friend Julia Ward Howe, it was natural for Crawford to spend so much time with Gardner. Both Crawford and Gardner were passionate about Dante and spent many hours reading, analyzing, and discussing *The Divine Comedy* in Italian and French—languages in which Gardner was fluent. Crawford frequently made annotations in the margins of Gardner’s copy of Dante, noting those passages that had particular meaning to Gardner and that they shared together. Crawford even took one of his own rare editions of Dante and had it bound in soft olive green leather with silver decorations designed by him and executed by Tiffany.\(^\text{11}\) There was a rumored affair between Gardner and Crawford and other then the open affection they had with one another, there is no substantial proof of a dalliance between the two. Gardner’s husband was well aware of Crawford’s visits not only to his wife but also as a welcome guest to

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numerous gatherings at the Gardner’s home. There is no evidence to suggest that Jack
Gardner felt any affront from Crawford and the relationship between his wife and the
writer was in fact purely platonic. Although Crawford made no attempt to hide his
infatuation with Gardner, the tongues of gossip just speculated and drew their own
conclusions. In addition, Gardner’s coterie during the late 1880’s included art historian
Bernard Berenson, American-Spanish philosopher and poet George Santayana, author
Logan Pearsall Smith, and art historian Charles Loeser. Not only did she entertain these
men in the private quarters of her home, all of them came with their own social stigmas.
Berenson and Loeser were Jewish, Smith a Quaker, and Santayana half Spanish and
Roman Catholic. All but Berenson were homosexual. Gardner’s “socially progressive
attitude” allowed her to welcome artists and intellectuals “shunned by other Boston
hostesses”¹² during a time when associating with these types of individuals were
bracketed together as social deviants. Gardner’s oldest nephew, Joe Junior, committed
suicide at the age of twenty-five over the unrequited love for another man. Her
attachments and friendships with these men coupled with her own personal family
tragedy, made her more tolerant and accepting—an outlook unusual among Boston’s
wealthy elite. The garrulous and sociable portrait that these associations would have
invariably been made about her would have offended Gardner, but she never felt the
necessity of explaining her relationships. Further, while she cherished her friendships
with these individuals, she also was figuratively thumbing her nose at the rest of Boston’s
elite.

It was Gardner’s rule to select and acquire the best. If she were attending a polo match, she would be escorted to her seat by the best player of the day, the best tenor of the opera, the best painter, the best art critic—each for a special purpose, were her friends. With her return from Europe, Gardner brought with her the latest in chic fashions from Paris. Her infamous gowns from French designer Charles Frederick Worth along with jewels from the finest jewelers in Europe such as Boucheron, were intended to make statements. Some of her infamous Parisian gowns were considered too risqué. In one infamous story, a man tried to insult Gardner by greeting her with the query, “Pray, who undressed you?” to which she replied “Worth.” It is important to note here that Gardner’s husband was amused by all the attention his wife received. He knew how spirited his wife was and he never attempted to or had any inclination to tame her or reign in her behavior. He allowed her to be her own person and as a result, their relationship was one of true love and affection because Gardner was accepted for who she was. There were no false pretenses in her marriage and her husband did not expect his wife to be like other society women.

Gardner began collecting gowns and jewels long before she began collecting art and significantly stood out in vivid contrast to other society women. Gardner’s collection of Worth gowns featured lavish textiles and ornamental embroidery created in metallic thread and glass or crystal beads (Figure 36). Significant design details, such as beaded stars at the hemline of a dress and the asymmetry of the skirt drapery, differentiated

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Worth gowns from other designers of the period. Gardner looked at Worth’s designs as art and since she was an admirer and collector of textiles, these fashions were highly appealing to her. As such, the uniqueness and lavish details of Gardner’s dresses made her stand out conspicuously during social gatherings. Gardner’s jewelry was another topic of great interest. Two jewels in her collection were much talked about. Gardner had a pair of large diamonds (one of which was over twenty-five carats) mounted on springs and wore them, like antennae in her hair (Figure 34). On one hand this was both a quirky and ostentatious display of her wealth, the jewels jiggling and twinkling with every movement of her head, drawing attention to her. One newspaper account described these stones as being the size of walnuts, mounted on the end of six inch coiled spring gold wires, branching from above “the lady’s forehead like the antennae of a butterfly.”

Most of what is documented about Gardner in news accounts all relate to her unusual and lavish sense of fashion or some odd mode of accessorizing. Her diamond antennae and another “headgear” were even sketched out in the local paper (Figure 35) for the benefit of those who did not have the privilege to see her in person.

Figure 33. Charles Frederick Worth, Evening Dresses, (ca. 1887: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
Gardner is seated second from the right, her famous diamond antennae shown as two white dots on top of her head. This is the only known photograph of the diamonds.
Another facet of Gardner’s personality was her interest in a variety of subjects including art and literature. She firmly believed that one of the best things to have in life was “intellectual ability.” In 1878, she began studying art through a series of lectures with Harvard’s Italian Studies department under the tutelage of Art History Professor Charles Eliot Norton. This factor was highly unusual. Setting her sights on the superior intellectual opportunities of Harvard University, Gardner was considerably pushing out “the boat for the whole question of women’s education at Harvard” which was highly

\[17\] Shand-Tucci, *The Art of Scandal*, 37-8

\[18\] Ibid.
controversial. Interestingly, the year that Gardner enrolled in the lecture series was the year a women’s college at Harvard was first seriously considered. In this regard, Gardner played an important role in advancing the cause of women. She supported classmate and personal friend, the American feminist leader Julia Ward Howe’s suffrage movement in New England; she aided in the founding of Radcliffe College with her friend Elizabeth Cary Agassiz. She mentored future female leaders like Maude Howe Elliott, who in 1916 would share the first Pulitzer Prize in biography given to a woman, and Elsie De Wolfe, who pioneered the field of interior decoration. In addition, Gardner was a member of the New England Women’s Club whose causes included election of women to local school committees, admission of women to higher learning (MIT in particular), and the establishment of college preparatory schools. Gardner was ahead of her time and saw a need to support and encourage intellectual pursuits for woman.

Travel shaped Gardner’s taste and personality in significant ways. In 1883 to 1884, the Gardner’s traveled around the world. Her experiences in Japan, China, Cambodia, India, and the Near East encouraged a deep fascination with other cultures and religions. Thereafter Gardner and her husband traveled to Europe every other year, usually “settling in for an extended sojourn in her beloved Venice.”19 Venice eventually became the cornerstone of Gardner’s inspiration for realizing her life dream of creating a museum in her name. Until the mid-1890s, Gardner did not buy anything more than a few souvenirs and trinkets on her journeys. Instead she collected photographs—commercially produced tourist images of art and architecture—which she annotated and

carefully pasted into albums. These albums frequently contained her own watercolors and drawings rendered by her own hand and which documented a voracious curiosity about art. This is a critical point in Gardner’s history because her vision of how her life would be arranged was premeditated and carefully calculated every step of the way. Gardner never left anything to chance and plans for her legacy were firmly established during her trips abroad where everything was carefully documented with a keen attention to detail. Her first serious interest as a collector was for books. Encouraged by Charles Eliot Norton, in the 1880s she purchased many rare books and manuscripts, including several early editions of Dante. At about this same time, she met writers like Henry James and painters such as James McNeill Whistler. During her many travels, Gardner visited art galleries and frequently consulted with art experts. She wanted to be fully educated about the art collection she was starting to build and while she collected the work of the great ancient painters, she worked hard to support modern artists beginning their careers—this was true of writers and musicians too.

In as much as Gardner was in the glare of the public eye, she did not like to be photographed and few photographic images of her actually exist today. Gardner did however, subscribe to the American idea of being immortalized through a painted portrait rendered by the famous artists of the day. In this regard, not any artist would suffice and it was important for Gardner to find just the right painter that would capture her in the way she deemed appropriate. The scandal caused by the Madame X portrait was an international event. The exploits of Virginie Avegno Gautreau had made the rounds in gossip circles and the American and foreign press circuits. The artist gutsy enough to be so bold in his representation of an explicitly wanton Gautreau intrigued Gardner. Gardner
was shrewd enough to understand that while there had been an uproar over the portrait, Sargent had generally come away unscathed from the scandal and even lauded for his ability to capture his subject in a way that captured the essence of who she was. Gardner knew as well that while Gautreau’s reputation suffered for a brief period after the unveiling of her portrait, she became even more famous later on and was invited to every social event across Europe. *Madame X* had made a very loud public statement and Gardner was intrigued by the daring bold sexuality of the portrayal. In Gardner’s own way, she most likely wanted to elicit the same results for herself. During their first meeting in 1886, Gardner commissioned her portrait from Sargent for the following year upon her return to Europe. It did not sit well with her when she discovered that American Philanthropist, Henry Marquand had made an offer to Sargent that would preempt her portrait from being painted first. The fact that Marquand’s portrait would be Sargent’s first in America aggravated Gardner even more. In Gardner’s mind, her request in person to Sargent should probably have trumped any other requests. At this point it appears that both Gardner and Sargent were engaged in a sort of cat and mouse game through a series of correspondence. Sargent played on his stature as a painter of some repute and Gardner as the doyenne of Boston society—neither wanted to give the impression of desperation so each played at being coquette about pursuing the other. No firm commitments were made one way or the other for commissioning a portrait from either party. Sargent’s arrival in America was in itself a sensation. His reputation was known and as a result, he was pursued by visitor’s, invitations to social gatherings, and hounded by the press. Adding to his impending arrival, Henry James wrote an introduction of Sargent that appeared in the October 1887 issue of *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, further inciting
the American publics anticipation. James wrote that the “language of painting is the
tongue in which, exclusively, Mr. Sargent expresses himself…” and that Sargent painted
with extraordinary breadth and freedom, so that surface and texture are interpreted by
“the lightest hand, it glows with life, character, and distinction, and strikes us as the most complete…” Sargent’s portrait of Mrs. Henry Marquand was the catalyst that led him to gain introduction to other wealthy clientele from American families like the Fairchild’s and Astor’s. After the Marquand portrait, Sargent traveled from Newport to Boston to begin his second commission of General Lucius Fairchild. It was during this period that he received his third commission for a full-length portrait from “the strange little woman” whom Henry James had once brought to his studio in London to see Madame X. The woman with the “odd tight little mouth and exaggerated clothes, who seemed so overpowering and full of chatter was Mrs. Gardner.” It was Gardner who had finally reached out to Sargent while he was in Newport by writing and pointedly asking him to come visit her in Boston, the result of which had been her portrait.

Gardner is depicted in a full-length frontal portrait, she is shown in a long, simple black velvet gown that is cinched unnaturally at the waist. Her slim waist is further emphasized by a string of pearls accented with pigeon blood Burmese ruby pendants. Pearls and rubies are repeated around her throat. Ruby clips decorate the top of her shoes and are barely visible beneath the hem of her dress. Draped around her hips is a black shawl, knotted in the front just above her knees. The dress is snug and accentuates every


curve of Gardner’s body, highlighting a plunging neckline and bare arms clasped in the front of her body. Gardner’s stance is slightly awkward in that it appears that she is leaning forward. This could be intentional to indicate both the bustled fashion in women’s clothing of the period which resulted in thrusting a woman’s bosom forward and her buttocks backward, forming an “S” curve silhouette for the purpose of highlighting specific feminine attributes. Gardner’s gaze is direct, lips parted, her skin luminous and bright. The background of the portrait is intricately detailed and is positioned to both give the impression and illusion of a crown and halo appearing simultaneously above Gardner’s head. The lighting in the portrait moves gradually from dark to light from the bottom upward with focused illumination centered on Gardner’s upper body. No other objects are present in the portrait and the setting or location of where Gardner is situated is unclear. The overall portrayal makes Gardner’s image seem to emerge as if suspended in time. In order to understand the portrait and unravel its ambiguity, it is critical to examine the portrait in three distinct parts. First, Gardner’s mode of dress compared to the fashion of the day is important. Why was such a simple gown selected from among a vast wardrobe at her disposal? Second, her gaze and pose are different from typical socialite portraits of the same period. From this viewpoint, her depiction is forthright and direct. Finally, the background is extremely unique and examining the pattern and possible reasons why such an unusual design was selected may be important in understanding the overall scheme of the portrait. A further point of consideration is the final resting place of the portrait. Since Gardner never left anything to chance, how she eventually chose to have it displayed in her home—in what is now the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum—is a point worth exploring. All of these points play
an important role in attempting to decipher this enigmatic woman. Her portrait is filled with imagery that gives us clues to her identity and complex character. In addition, her collaboration with Sargent factors considerably. Because Sargent did not collaborate with his clients, being told by “an eccentric woman”\textsuperscript{22} how to paint her portrait is an element of consideration in examining this portrait.

From the beginning of their professional relationship, Gardner irritated Sargent. She was an impossible sitter, impatient, and did not like to hold her pose as Sargent had instructed her. Gardner was fidgety and was easily distracted, refusing to hold a pose long enough for Sargent to capture it. Sargent was known to “dress” his subject’s and had very specific ideas about how they should look, how they would be posed, and how he would ultimately portray them. In her first sitting with the artist, Gardner appeared wearing a dress “open to reveal a narrow slice of flat white chest between her breasts” as though she “believed herself to be some sort of Venus.”\textsuperscript{23} Gardner repeatedly stated to Sargent that she wanted an extraordinary picture, possibly implying that she meant something shocking. While Gardner’s personality would warrant the acceptance of her wanting something spectacular, the way in which she came dressed to her session with Sargent was interesting. This was a woman who wore the most expensive high fashion gowns money could buy in Europe. The gowns she purchased from Worth were so low cut that they left Boston in shock and her sense of fashion suggests an openly revealing sexual display of the more risqué evening gowns in her collection. Perhaps Gardner was attempting to channel a recurrence of the \textit{Madame X} portrait through the “sexiness” she

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 132.
attempted with Sargent? There is the possibility however, that Gardner may have been trying to send a bold message to society in a tongue-in-cheek manner. If society had characterized her persona in a certain way based on gossip, what better way to fling it back then to give them more to talk about? This wicked sense of humor was characteristic of Gardner and could provide a plausible explanation for her behavior.

It is interesting that Gardner would choose to be portrayed in such a plain gown when she had a wealth of luxurious Worth gowns at her disposal. The actual dress was a point of contention between Gardner and Sargent. Gardner was the one who made the final selection of the black gown—not Sargent. Although there is no documentation to indicate any specific mention Sargent may have made about the actual garment, it is clear that the gown was Gardner’s specific choice after Sargent rejected her first ‘Venus’ like attempt. Sargent toned down the fullness of it by draping and knotting the shawl around her hips that succeeds in accentuating Gardner’s figure. The plainness of Gardner’s dress is telling on multiple counts and it is another factor that speaks volumes about her. The choice of such a simple frock may have intended to focus the attention on Gardner as an individual rather than on what she is wearing. In contrast, it is possible that inasmuch as the gown was simple, Gardner would have wanted feminine qualities included as part of the portrait. Further, the timeless style of the gown suspends Gardner as an individual in time. More importantly, why black? The color itself could be a metaphor for mourning, bringing forth a reference to Gardner’s son Jackie. A more sound explanation could simply be that Sargent acquiesced to the gown as an opportunity to set off other features in order to highlight and focus attention solely on Gardner. Velázquez for example, used black frequently to emphasize the features of his subjects so the use in Gardner’s portrait
could also be a reference to the Spanish painter. In agreeing to the dark color of Gardner’s dress, Sargent achieved two things. First, there is a pronounced emphasis on Gardner’s plunging neckline. The direction of the neckline leads the eye to a second point that focuses on Gardner’s pearl necklace entwined around her waist. The black background highlights the beauty and length of the pearls. The dress itself followed European influenced fashions in America. Fashion during this time placed an emphasis on a full, curvy silhouette with gradually widening shoulders, which is evident in Gardner’s portrait. Emphasis was made on the back of the skirt, with fullness gradually rising from behind the knees to just below the waist. The fullness over the buttocks was balanced by a fuller, lower bosom, achieved by rigid corseting, creating an S-shaped silhouette. Skirts were looped, draped, or tied up in various ways similarly to what Sargent did to Gardner’s gown. Evening gowns were sleeveless and low-necked and were worn with long over the elbow or shoulder length gloves (Figure 36). Even though Gardner’s dress followed the fashion of the time, the portrait is risqué because her arms are bare, revealing too much skin in combination with her décolleté making the depiction indecent by nineteenth-century standards.

The only display of wealth in Gardner’s portrait are the strands of pearls at her throat and waist. Gardner’s pearls were infamous and are of sentimental value. The pearls were a Gardner trademark of sorts since she was frequently seen wearing them for all types of occasions. It was Sargent’s suggestion that Gardner place the pearls around her waist. We can conclude that their presence in the portrait signal her marriage to and love for Jack Gardner because of the nontraditional and intimate placement of the strand around Gardner’s waist. It is a gesture that Henry James evokes in his novel, “The Wings
of the Dove”, when he describes Gardner’s pearls, … “that long priceless chain, wound twice around the neck, hung, heavy and pure, down the front of the wearer’s breast.”  

The pearls were collected by the Gardner’s to mark every European visit, a total of nine strands that were all eventually added together to make one long strand. The true length of the pearls can be seen in Anders Zorn’s portrait, Isabella Steward Gardner in Venice (Figure 37). Further, pearls have a two-fold significance in meaning. On one hand, they are valued as a beautiful material created extraordinarily by nature and their attractiveness celebrates their spiritual value as a “mysterious object of curiosity.”

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**Figure 36. Unknown, Fashions from La Mode Illustée, (1888: Paris, France).**

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25 Silvia Malaguzzi, *The Pearl* (New York: Rizzoli, 2001), 86.
Gardner’s face reveals a direct gaze that commands attention but does not reveal any specific emotion. She is smiling ever so slightly but there is no pretension emanating from her. From this viewpoint, she makes direct contact with the viewer with her lips slightly parted as if she wants to engage in conversation. It’s as if she is challenging the observer to connect with her so that they can discover who she is as an individual. This
point is an important aspect of our understanding of the portrait. Gardner was not one to leave anything to chance and organized her life meticulously. Viewing Gardner’s portrait can be accomplished the same way Gardner created and designed the display of each item in her museum collections. Every painting, chair, sculpture, tapestry, and book had its own assigned spot handpicked by Gardner. When walking through the rooms of the museum, her presence throughout is palpable and extremely personal. Each room contains objects that generate connections built upon each other in order for the visitor to make their own discoveries and produce their own conclusions and understanding of their experience. Further, none of the objects in the museum are labeled. This forces the viewer to define their own interpretive meaning behind what they see—not what someone else defines for them. Gardner’s directness in the portrait is a challenge to the viewer in this regard by commanding that we define our meaning of her through our individual observation. Gardner’s directness creates an awareness from the observer’s perspective that Gardner is being portrayed as an object on display. This would be characteristic of how she was the ‘object’ of public scrutiny. Her existence in the eyes of society was non-existent except when she was the topic of gossip. In this regard, the public is objectifying Gardner. However, objectification of the female figure when viewing art becomes an argument when we are discussing the relationship between the viewer and viewed, gazer and gazed. With Gardner’s portrait, we are examining her image through the male gaze. From the time period of when the portrait was painted and eventually unveiled to the public, women were not viewed as symbols of power in the way men were. Here we have a very formidable woman who was very much a powerhouse in her own right. She had created foundations, traveled the world, and organized charities. She shockingly
spent her own money and that of her husbands without having to explain or obtain permission for each purchase. Through her gaze she is in essence, assuming the male gazer role by objectifying others by gazing at them like a man through a visage of power. Further, we can interpret this from another perspective, one from a power relationship stance. Gardner is directing her gaze to members of her gender, for asexual reasons and for the purpose of indicating the comparison of the gazer’s own body image, clothing, social position, etc., to Gardner. The direct gaze of Gardner does create a tension between the viewer and her image when viewed. In that regard, Sargent succeeded in creating a tug of war between Gardner and ‘society’ that further emphasizes that there is more to her than meets the eye. The directness of Gardner’s gaze is reminiscent of two Bronzino portraits, *Portrait of Lady in Red with a Lapdog* (Figure 38) and *Portrait of a Lady with a Lute* (Figure 39). These portraits reflect images of what appear to be women from within their own elite societies. Their gaze to the viewer is direct in large similarity to Gardner’s, but where they differ is that in both *Lady in Red* and *Lady with a Lute*, the female subject is engaged in a setting of domesticity. These are portraits of ladies at leisure. The images don’t command us to understand who they are or engage with us in any way that compels us to seek out their identity. They are merely pretty pictures. There are some similarities to Velázquez in Sargent’s depiction of Gardner’s face. Take for example Velázquez’s paintings, *Infanta Maria Teresa of Spain in White* (Figure 40) and the *Portrait of Queen Isabella of Bourbon Standing* (Figure 41). Both these portraits depict a similar direct gaze to Gardner’s and reveal little to the viewer emotionally. In Gardner’s portrait, as the viewer locks eyes with Gardner, their viewpoint is centered at the illuminated nexus of the portrait. In that regard, we can perhaps view this as a
repeated attempt to direct the focus of attention to Gardner as an intellectual, an individual with a desire to learn and be spiritual, but having the desire to be seen as a woman who had a lot to share and say to the world. Further, Gardner is shown with her arms in front of her body, her hands clasped together. There are two similar examples of this positioning from Lucas the Elder Cranach. In Cranach’s paintings, *Portrait of a Lady* (Figure 42) and *Portrait of a Woman* (Figure 43) there are a few distinct qualities that are reminiscent in Gardner’s portrait. The clasping of hands is nearly identical to Gardner’s and combined with the direct gaze of each of the subjects in Cranach’s portrait’s, bear an interesting resemblance to Gardner. The pose combined with the position of the figure lends a sense of awkwardness because in Cranach’s depiction and Sargent’s portrait, it’s as if both the subject and the artist don’t know what to do with the hands. One explanation would be that Gardner comes across as being guarded as if putting a wall between her and the viewer.
Figure 39. Agnolo Bronzino, Portrait of a Lady with a Lute, (ND: Dorotheum, Vienna).
Figure 40. Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, *Infanta Maria Teresa of Spain in White*, (1652-3: Kunst Historisches Museum, Frankfurt).
Figure 41. Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, Portrait of Queen Isabella of Bourbon Standing (1631-2: Private Collection).
Figure 42. Lucas the Elder Cranach, *Portrait of a Lady*, (ca. 1500-33: Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen).
Figure 43. Lucas the Elder Cranach, *Portrait of a Woman*, (1526: Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg).
The background of the portrait is unusual and bohemian-like. Sargent created the pattern behind Gardner based off of a textile (Figure 44) from her vast collection of fabrics and textiles from around the world. It was rumored that both Sargent and Gardner had selected the fabric unilaterally and did not discover the other’s choice until they met for Gardner’s first sitting. Gardner would have likely wanted something in the portrait that referenced her father’s profession as a linen cloth importer, which also cultivated her own love of fine textiles. Sargent’s representation of the design included an enlarged version of the fabric design. Both the fabric and painted background design contain nine different and distinct patterns that form the main spherical design of the overall pattern. The variegated leafy vine archetype is enlarged in the painting along with the size of the spheres that are bathed with a luminous and glowing light at the upper center region of the portrait (Figure 45). Sargent made eight attempts at Gardner’s portrait. The final and ninth attempt is the portrait that was the result of much angst on Sargent’s part. Gardner had been enjoying the time spent with the artist and prolonged the sittings as much as possible. Gardner told Sargent “as nine was Dante’s mystic number, they must make the ninth try a success.”

This is the only comment regarding Dante in reference to the portrait, but is also an interesting one. Unlike most of the other legendary stories surrounding Gardner, this story was true. Given Gardner’s passion for Dante the facts

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27 The story of Gardner’s experience with Sargent during the making of the portrait was relayed by Gardner to Morris Carter, former assistant director of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (MFAB), and then as the assistant director of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (1919). Gardner was acquainted with Carter during his tenure at the MFAB and they eventually shared both a close professional relationship and friendship.
associated with this happened stance are purely coincidental but it also lends an additional layer of mystery to the portrait. Dante’s writing, in particular The Divine Comedy, was surrounded by a sense of mystery. If these were qualities that intrigued Gardner, then it is highly plausible that she would be delighted with the notion of capturing these same qualities in her portrait. Take for example, Dante’s Convivio.  

Dante writes that “the literal sense must come first, for it is the one in whose meaning the others are enclosed and without which it would be impossible and irrational to interpret the others.” Dante was writing about the senses being used to determine the understanding of something. To convey an understanding of an object, one must look to four senses—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical, to reveal this understanding. The first sense is an understanding of the literal, defining meaning that requires individuals to look at the surface of an object. The second sense is allegorical—searching for truth hidden beneath the surface and beyond a “beautiful fiction.” Dante’s third sense is moral, a sense that encourages seeking discovery through internal examination and discovery “throughout the scriptures.” The fourth and final sense is anagogical, a mystical interpretation that

Carter wrote one of only two biographies written about Gardner and his notes for the biography reveal an admiration for Gardner. Gardner revealed many personal aspects of her life to Carter and his biography is the only source that accurately reveals fact from fiction.

28 The Convivio (The Banquet) is a work by Dante that contains details of his growing interest in philosophy.


30 Ibid., 101.

31 Ibid.
eludes to heaven or the afterlife. Dante’s words would have had significance to Gardner in how she may have wanted to be understood—wanting others to understand her inner qualities rather than solely focusing on what is seen on the surface. The outside in Gardner’s world is a foundation both figuratively and literally—both individually and for the legacy she left behind with her museum.  

From the public stance, all that was interpreted of Gardner was what was seen externally on the surface.

The brightest point of the picture is at Gardner’s head where most of the illumination is focused. What looks like a halo around her head can be interpreted as a reference to her intellect, or an angelic reference, as well as to Dante’s nine spheres. This reference to Dante is unsubstantiated and no evidence exists to suggest that any reference to Dante has any significance or bearing in Gardner’s portrait. It is merely a speculative interpretation as one aspect of her representation and in trying to understand her from a more personal standpoint. If it was a plausible association, then it would have been a way for Gardner to pay homage to Dante based on her strong interest in his writing. She did indulge her passion for the writer by becoming an active member of the Dante Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Charles Eliot Norton, her professor from Harvard, was one

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32 Gardner commissioned the plans for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1898 from architect Willard T. Sears. Construction on her home at "Fenway Court" began in 1900. The plans for building a museum were in the making by Gardner several years before Sargent's portrait was commissioned. The 'existence' of the museum was a very solid reality figuratively at the time the portrait was painted so it is factored into the overall representation of Gardner's portrait. Gardner had begun collecting art and decorative object's for her museum beginning in 1875.

33 The purpose of the Dante Society was to promote the study of the Italian language and culture throughout the world that was independent of political ideologies, national or ethnic origins or religious beliefs.
of the founding members of the society in America in 1881. Since he was influential in her collection of Dante, he would have equally encouraged her membership to the society. Second, Gardner was well educated, an excellent conversationalist, and was cultured in the arts and exceedingly liberal in her thinking. While these qualities made her come across as an aggressive, unfeminine, and ballsy woman, she was ‘enlightened.’ The spheres in the portrait design do project a halo above Gardner’s head. The aim here may have been to portray her as a spiritual person, one who embraced all cultures and all religions outside her own Episcopalian roots. There is very limited documentation to reveal the extent of Gardner’s religious upbringing. However, spirituality and religion were important to Gardner as further evidenced by the fact that she was drawn to religious art and had a profound appreciation of art works possessed of deep religious expression. She was fascinated by religions of the East, Catholicism, and mysticism, and collected symbols and themes of religion in both art and decorative object’s. Images of this nature range in representations of Christ and the Virgin Mary and Gardner’s intellectual curiosity drove her to learn and develop a keen interest in others belief systems. Within the rooms of the Gardner museum, Gardner created personal devotional spaces for meditation and spiritual reflection and included religious images like Simone Martini’s, Virgin and Child (Figure 46) and Giovanni Bellini’s, Christ Carrying the Cross (Figure 47) to inspire and provide a nucleus of spiritual focus. Further, there are many ancient esoteric traditions and cosmogonic images that come together in the image of Christ—two of which are the halo and the crown. Both of these symbols are not only prominent in much of the works collected by Gardner, but are prominently seen in the Gardner portrait. A halo in its depiction is represented as a source and circle of light.
around beings endowed with great spirituality. “Its purpose is to highlight the noblest part of man—the head, seat of the intellect and vehicle of spiritual elevation.”

34 Hanfmann, Personality and Portraiture, 91.
Figure 44. Unknown, *Italian Furnishing and Garment Fabric*, (1475-1525: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston).
Figure 45. John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner* (Detail), (1888: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston).
Figure 46. Simone Martini, *Virgin and Child*, (ca. 1325: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston).
The background design is also reminiscent of a Madonna-like figure depicted within an enclosed garden. For example, in Martin Schongauer’s painting, *Madonna of the Rose Garden* (Figure 48), we can see some similarities between Gardner’s portrait and the *Rose Garden* Madonna, namely the crown image above both Gardner’s and the Madonna’s head. More striking is the resemblance or metaphor for a garden in Gardner’s portrait via
the enlarged variegated vine design. In iconography, the garden is represented as an enclosed area containing the flowers that symbolize Mary and the plants and flowers of heaven. The garden represents both a sacred spot protected by walls and a space designed for the elevation of the soul. In reference to Gardner however, we can only make an assumption to her spirituality in this regard with the particular connection she had to images of the Virgin. In this regard, it is possible that Gardner perhaps desired to be remembered as a maternal figure through a reference to Mary. Many of the earlier works she collected centered on this theme and nearly all the works in her collection representing the Virgin and baby Jesus are reserved for and displayed in the private areas of her home that were not open to the public or visiting guests. Interestingly, the Gardner museum’s central focus outside the art collection is a garden that can be viewed from every room and is the nucleus of the entire museum—everything about the architectural design is centered on and around it.

Other portraits painted by Sargent’s contemporaries during this same timeframe are very different in comparison to the Gardner portrait. For example, in Thomas Eakins portrait of Letitia Wilson Jordan (Figure 49), we are confronted with the sister of one of Eakins students, David Wilson Jordan. The Jordan’s were part of prominent Philadelphia society. Letitia is portrayed in a gauzy black gown, gloves that cover her hands and forearms. Her shawl is draped casually over her right arm and the fan in her hand looks poised as if she is getting ready to fan herself. There is a stark garish quality to this work that leaves us cold and uncomfortable. Letitia’s facial expression is lifeless and lacking in emotion. The overall tone of the picture is one of melancholy. The red of the ribbon bow around her neck, highlighted by the bright red lipstick she is wearing, are vivid
contrasts against the overall darkness of the painting. Another example from Whistler, is his painting, *Harmony in Pink and Grey* (Figure 50). Whistler’s subject is Valerie Meux, a woman of humble origins who married into wealth. We can gauge a hesitant defiance in the subject’s mood through her expression that is in contrast to her frothy and feminine ‘society’ gown. The only thing that we take away from our understanding of each of these portraits, is the emotional mood of each portrait making the identity of the sitter ambiguous and unimportant to the viewer. There is no aspect or significant aspect about either portrait that compels us to want to know these women as individuals.

*Figure 48. Martin Schongauer, Madonna of the Rose Garden,* (1473: St. Martins Church, Colmar, Germany).
Figure 49. Thomas Eakins, *Letitia Wilson Jordan*, (1888: Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn).
Figure 50. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Pink and Grey*, (1882: The Frick Collection, New York).
In 1888, Sargent exhibited the Gardner portrait along with twenty-one other paintings at his one-man show at Boston’s St. Botolph Club. Gardner was pleased with the portrait and claimed that it was the finest work Sargent had ever produced—a comment that is both self-indulgent and complimentary to herself! Gardner’s portrait was met with mixed reviews. The gossip about Gardner’s depiction was a hot topic of discussion and the ensuing joke about Sargent having “painted her all the way down to Crawford’s Notch.”35 This was a double entendre referring to both Gardner’s alleged affair with Marion Crawford and the well-known geographic feature of a resort in the New Hampshire White Mountains frequented by wealthy Bostonians. Another visitor commented that Gardner had herself “painted as if she were a medieval saint,” while another added, “leave off the ‘medi’ and you will describe it.” While initially pleased with the portrait of his wife, Jack Gardner was so enraged at the insult made in public to his wife that he forbade the painting to be publicly exhibited again as long as he lived. The portrait was never seen by anyone else after the St. Botolph exhibition. During Gardner’s lifetime the Gothic Room, in which the portrait now stands, was not open to the public. The Gothic Room is a very private space and it contains some of the most spiritual objects and paintings in Gardner’s collection—each with significant and intimate meaning to her.

Gardner’s portrait will likely continue to remind us how complex and multifaceted a person she was. Inasmuch as Gardner was shrouded in mystery for much of her

life through public perception, Sargent’s portrait removes the guise from Gardner and reveals her in splendid plainness. What we see is Gardner’s true identity openly in plain view and without artifice. If there is a mystery it is one that was created purely on speculation by the public and our assumption as observers. Perhaps the uniqueness of the portrait was intended to stand apart from other Sargent portraits because Gardner was unlike any other socialite typical of the time. Yes, she was a true cultural maverick and famed eccentric, but Gardner was on a quest for all things beautiful. She had a constant need to hone and satisfy her intellectual curiosity that propelled her to be way ahead of her time. She was successful beyond measure and every move she made was done with calculated precision. Through her portrait and the expectant parting of her lips, she invites us all to converse with her in a way that Boston society never did or bothered to do. It is possible that in the end, Gardner’s intent may have been to simply preserve her lasting legacy in the way she wanted to be remembered the most by ensuring that we look at her and be compelled to want to know who she is.
CONCLUSION

Nearly all portraits have something to tell us about the time and place during which they were created. More importantly, they frequently convey something to us about the individual or individuals represented. It is this ‘something’ that compels us to dig deeper, to go beyond the surface of what we see, in order to understand the essence of an individual portrait. Those factors that drive us to want to know more about an individual represented on canvas are culminated by how the artist interprets his subject and how he chose to portray them through his skillful brushwork. Not every artist can achieve success in a way that drives the passive observer to care about a particular painting much less, about a particular subject. However, it takes a special artist to observe and understand the very nuance that makes his sitter worthy of being noticed. John Singer Sargent was such an artist.

We may never know everything there is to know about Isabella Stewart Gardner because she remains as much a mystery today as when she was alive. Her portrait forces us to do something she espoused in the creation of the museum that bears her name—that is, to look at something from beyond the definition of what society or culture defines for us. We are responsible within our own parameters of individuality to interpret from within our own context, society, and cultural identity.

The ultimate purpose of my thesis was to examine Gardner’s portrait within the framework of nineteenth-century portraiture in relation to John Singer Sargent’s work, and to determine if there was a way in which to definitively decipher and interpret the identity of this enigmatic woman. On its own, the portrait is unique and stands apart from any other portrait painted by Sargent. When observed in its current location within the
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the portrait takes on another dimension for interpretation. Gardner could have placed the portrait in any room but she chose to place it in an area closed off to the public and surrounded it with objects that had the most personal significance to her. When we view the portrait from this physical context, it brings forth a new level of understanding to her identity. In this regard, we are observing the very essence and multi-faceted nature of her personality. In the end, that nature of complexity becomes a compelling factor in our analysis of her portrait.

This thesis was researched based on my individual interpretation of Gardner gathered from the reading of personal correspondence, academic and biographical research, and a visit to the museum—all these factors contributed to this interpretation. It is only one viewpoint amongst the many others possibly still waiting to be discovered and deciphered. Ultimately, this is perhaps exactly what Belle Gardner would have wanted and intended when she first set out to have her portrait created. In that regard, she most definitely succeeded.
APPENDIX

Site Visits

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
280 Fenway
Boston, MA 02115

Museum of Fine Arts Boston
465 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115

The Massachusetts Historical Society
1154 Boylston Street
Boston, MA 02215

Harvard Art Museums
32 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Fenimore Art Museum
Exhibition: *John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Praise of Women*
Lake Road
Cooperstown, NY 13326
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______. *Mr. Sargent’s Exhibition*: Boston: St. Botolph Club and the Copley Society, 1888. List of paintings created in conjunction with the exhibition of Sargent’s one-man show at the St. Botolph Club.

