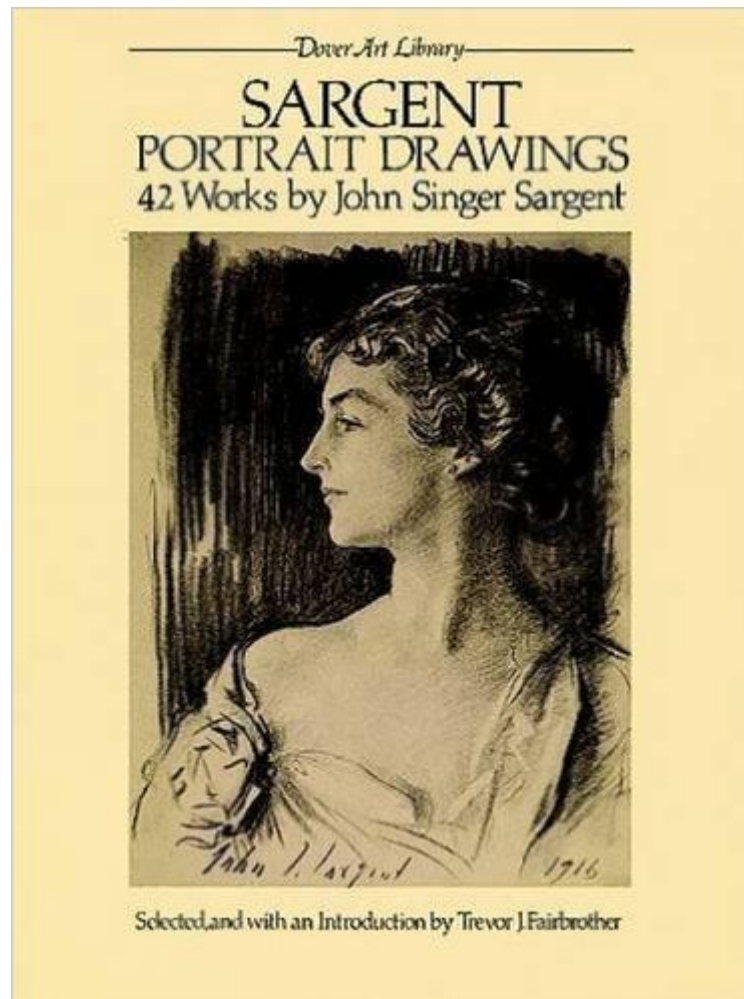


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Sargent Portrait Drawings: 42 Works By John Singer Sargent (Dover Art Library)



Synopsis

Portraiture is a demanding art requiring the artist to capture a likeness and render it revealing some hint of the personality behind the image. A two-pronged task, it requires great technical skill and an intuitive eye. In both these respects, John Singer Sargent stands out as a portrait artist of major stature. Born in 1856 in Florence of American parents, Sargent showed artistic aptitude at an early age and was enrolled at the Academia delle Belle Arti in that city. Later he studied with Parisian artist Carolus Duran, acquiring the loose, painterly style for which he is renowned. International acclaim as a portrait artist came early in his life and followed him throughout his career. Sargent's portraits done in oil are well known; they appear in major museums throughout the world. A lesser-known but no less respected aspect of his oeuvre, his portrait drawings are the focus of this collection. Included here are early works in pencil and pastels, and later renderings in charcoal, a medium Sargent favored after 1910. They have been selected from both public and private collections by art historian Trevor J. Fairbrother and attest to Sargent's technical skill, versatility, and dexterity in three different mediums. In addition, these works reveal Sargent's ability to treat a diverse group of subjects; he handles the languorous beauties of the Edwardian age, members of the aristocracy, and the great literary and artistic figures of his day with equal virtuosity, capturing their characteristic mood and style. This collection includes portraits of Lord and Lady Spencer, Henry James, William Butler Yeats, Vaslav Nijinsky, Tamara Karsavina, Dame Ethel Smyth, and Jascha Heifetz. Artists, students, historians, and lovers of portraiture will appreciate this selection of drawings by Sargent. Anyone interested in trying his hand at portraiture will find this volume both instructional and inspirational.

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Customer Reviews

The page-listing for this volume is somewhat misleading - there ARE two pages of text (Selector Trevor J. Fairbrother's brief, insightful introduction), but there are also 42 pages of (paper) plates. Often dismissed as a mere society portrait painter, the real poignancy of John Singer Sargent's work lay in the truth that the society he recorded was on the point of vanishing with the Great War. This sense is heightened by the form of the works reproduced here - drawings composed in pencil and charcoal. Their Cheshire-Cat-grin sketchiness, the way faces seem to materialise or dematerialise bodiless or skeletal on the page, gives them an overwhelmingly ghostly feel. The most moving pictures here are of the now-forgotten heiresses, young wives, fresh-faced soldiers, and indulgent or austere parents, refugees from the fiction of Henry James, Edith Wharton and Proust, denied the immortality conferred on Singer's more famous subjects, such as Nijinsky, Myra Hess, Faure or Kenneth Grahame. Singer may not be as remorselessly analytical as his literary peers, but he has a wit, satiric sense and emotional empathy all of his own, burrowing out the melancholy behind the glittering facades. Singer seems particularly inspired by long, swan-like necks, as if their owners' beauty already sang their death. The notorious hostess Mme. Pierre Gautreau reclines on a sofa, bored and miserable as a beached mermaid; Nellie Huxley stares at us with sad, tired eyes. Conversely, the portraits of imperious grandes dames, such as the Myrna Loy-like Mme. Eugenia Huici Errazuriz, are surprisingly sexy; while the Duchess of Marlborough flirts with gamine charm. Portraits of friends, such as the eccentric composer Dame Ethel Smyth, are more informal and playful.

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