The Morgan Provides a Rare Chance to See John Singer Sargent’s Overlooked Charcoal Portraits

John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal
October 4, 2019 through January 12, 2020

New York, NY (September 19, 2019) – John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) was one of the greatest portrait artists of his time. While he is best known for his powerful paintings, he largely ceased painting portraits in 1907 and turned instead to charcoal drawings to satisfy portrait commissions. These drawn portraits represent a substantial, yet often overlooked, part of his practice, and demonstrate the same sense of immediacy, psychological insight, and mastery of chiaroscuro that animate Sargent’s sitters on canvas. The Morgan Library & Museum is proud to present the first major exhibition to explore these expressive portraits in charcoal, John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal, on view from October 4, 2019, through January 12, 2020.

Recognizing the sheer scale of Sargent’s achievement as a portrait draftsman, this exhibition comprises over fifty drawings, including important international loans, from both public and private collections. The drawings showcase Sargent’s sitters, many of them famous for their roles in politics, society, and the arts. Sargent’s charcoal portraits are remarkable not only for their quantity—they number over 750 in total—but also for their vivid portrayal of the men and women who sat for him. The portraits become telling records of artistic and cultural friendships, as well as the networks of patronage that underpinned Sargent’s practice as a portrait...
draftsman in Edwardian Britain and Progressive Era America. These writers, actors, politicians, musicians, artists, patrons, and friends shaped not only Sargent’s life, but also the social and cultural fabric of the United States and Great Britain in the early twentieth century.

Important portraits in the exhibition include a drawing of Sybil Sassoon, a leading light of London society and a close friend of the artist. Sargent had known Sassoon since she was a girl, and his sensitive drawing portrays her on the threshold of adulthood. Another of Sargent’s sitters and closest friends included in the exhibition is the author Henry James. James had championed the young Sargent’s work, and the two Americans moved in the same transatlantic intellectual and cultural circles. Sargent also sought out sitters who interested him and offered to make their portraits, as with his drawing of Ethel Barrymore. Sargent’s striking charcoal captures the soulful eyes and commanding stage presence for which the American actress was known.

By the time Sargent switched his portraiture practice almost entirely to charcoal, he had developed a consistent format for his portrait drawings. Before he set to work, Sargent seemed to have a clear image in his mind of what he wanted to achieve. He focused on the head and shoulders of each sitter, depicting them a little less than life-size. After establishing key proportions and masses, he would develop the drawing in stages, elaborating details at the end. Often set against a dramatic dark background, these subjects have a powerful presence. Many sitters recounted the speed and confidence with which Sargent worked; he finished most of these charcoals in less than three hours. The artist would often invite friends to drawing sessions to keep the sitters entertained and also to help enliven their features. The finished charcoal portraits are valuable testaments to Sargent’s prodigious skill as an artist and draftsman.
Sargent had little interest in promoting his career as a portrait draftsman, and these charcoal drawings were rarely exhibited. While many of the portraits were commissions, a number were gifts from the artist to his sitters, tokens of Sargent’s admiration and affection for talented performers and valued friends. The portraits often remained in the private collections of the sitters and their descendants. This exhibition is the first in recent times to assemble such a wide selection of Sargent’s drawn portraits, and many of the works have never been publicly exhibited before.

*John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal* was conceived by Richard Ormond, a renowned Sargent scholar and the artist’s grand-nephew. The exhibition was developed in partnership between the Morgan Library & Museum and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery. The Morgan’s presentation is curated by Laurel Peterson, Moore Curatorial Fellow in the Department of Drawings and Prints. Following the New York debut, the exhibition will travel on to Washington, D.C., where it will be on view at the National Portrait Gallery from February 28 through May 31, 2020. The presentation at the National Portrait Gallery will be organized by Robyn Asleson, Curator of Prints and Drawings.

“*John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal* is a long overdue celebration of Sargent’s achievements as a portrait draftsman,” said Colin B. Bailey, Director of the Morgan Library & Museum. “Despite numerous exhibitions and scholarly publications recognizing the artist’s oil portraits, watercolors, landscapes, figure studies, and mural paintings, Sargent’s charcoal portraits have been largely overlooked in the more than ninety years since his death. Yet they are valuable testaments to his skill in sensitively capturing the essence of his subjects. We are delighted to partner with the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery in developing this exhibition and thank the Jerome L. Greene Foundation and Morgan Stanley for their generous support.”

“It seems particularly appropriate that this enchanting exhibition is taking place at the Morgan Library,” said Chris McInerney, President and CEO of the Jerome L. Greene Foundation. “John Singer Sargent was making portraits when Pierpont Morgan was amassing his collection, and now, a century later, the Library is presenting new ways of appreciating Sargent’s oeuvre. We are pleased to once again partner with the Morgan Library.”

Accompanying the exhibition is a catalogue published in association with D Giles Limited, which presents over fifty superb portrait drawings. The catalogue features sitters famous for their roles
in politics, society, and the arts, including W. B. Yeats, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Winston Churchill, Ethel Barrymore, and Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. An introduction and catalogue entries by Richard Ormond explore Sargent’s artistic process and highlight the relationships that influenced Sargent during a period of rich Anglo-American cultural exchange. The volume also includes a foreword by Colin B. Bailey, Director of the Morgan Library & Museum, and Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

**John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal**
October 4, 2019 through January 12, 2020
The Morgan Library & Museum
225 Madison Avenue at 36th Street
New York, NY 10016

For more information about the exhibition, hours, and admission, please visit www.themorgan.org.

**Public Programs**

**LECTURES AND DISCUSSION**

**Sargent’s Portrait Drawings in Charcoal**
To celebrate the opening of *John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal*, Richard Ormond, the curator of the exhibition and co-author of the artist’s catalogue raisonné, presents a new overview of Sargent’s achievements as a draftsman. Although he was best known as a portrait painter in oil, the Anglo-American artist drew more than seven hundred personalities in charcoal during the last two decades of his life. This lecture tells the story of Sargent’s shift from oil to charcoal while highlighting some of the many remarkable women and men he portrayed.

The exhibition *John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal* will be open for program attendees.

**Friday, October 4, 6:30 PM**
**Tickets:** $20; free for Morgan Members and for students with a valid ID

**British Aristocrats and American Plutocrats in the Age of Sargent**
Sir David Cannadine, Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University, President of the British Academy, and Editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, explores the interconnected, transatlantic worlds of the traditional and titled British wealthy elite and the new American multimillionaires—the former on the defensive, the latter on the rise—during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The lecture investigates why, among both groups, and especially those who formed Anglo-American marriage alliances, Sargent was the man they wanted to paint and draw their portraits.

The exhibition *John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal* will be open at 5:30 p.m. for program attendees.
Wednesday, December 11, 6:30 PM
Tickets: $20; $15 for Morgan Members; free for students with a valid ID

Gallery Talk
Tour the exhibition John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal with Laurel Peterson, Moore Curatorial Fellow in the Department of Drawings and Prints.

Friday, October 18, 6 PM
Friday, December 13, 1 PM
Tickets: All gallery talks and tours are free with museum admission; no tickets or reservations necessary

CONCERT
Musical Portraits
Gloriosa Trio
In conjunction with the exhibition John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal, the Gloriosa Trio performs works by composers in Sargent’s circle, from Fauré to Debussy, as well as the contemporary piano suite by Theodore Wiprud entitled Sargent’s Women. This suite was inspired by Sargent’s animated portraits of iconic female figures and will be paired with projections of his paintings to explore the interplay between music and art.

Debussy, “Clair de lune”
Wiprud, Sargent’s Women
Fauré, Piano Trio, Op. 120

The exhibition John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal will be open at 6:30 p.m. for concert attendees.

Wednesday, October 16, 7:30 PM
Tickets: $40; $30 for Morgan Members

FAMILY PROGRAM
Strike a Pose: Family Portraits and John Singer Sargent
Try a different kind of Portrait Mode. Following a lesson by Simon Levenson, National Arts Club drawing instructor, on the basics of working in charcoal, pair off with a family member to sketch each other’s portrait. Period accessories are available for those wanting to get into the spirit of Edwardian Britain and Progressive Era America.

Saturday, October 19, 2019, 11 AM–1 PM
Tickets: $20; $15 for Morgan Members

ADULT WORKSHOP
Charcoal Portrait Drawing
Simon Levenson
John Singer Sargent’s charcoal portraits are remarkable for their immediacy, psychological sensitivity, and mastery of chiaroscuro. Join Simon Levenson, National Arts Club drawing instructor, for a tour of the exhibition John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal, focusing on Sargent’s technique and style. Following the tour, create your own charcoal portrait with a live costumed model.

Friday, November 15, 6–8 PM
Tickets: $45; $35 for Morgan Members. Limited availability; advance registration required.

Organization and Sponsorship


The presentation of the exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum is made possible with lead funding from the Jerome L. Greene Foundation.

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About the Jerome L. Green Foundation
The Jerome L. Greene Foundation supports select programs that make a significant impact on the lives of all New Yorkers. Its more than forty-year history is grounded in the vision of its founder to give back to the city he loved. Today the Foundation honors this commitment by continuing to fund quality programs and by identifying new ways to increase access to the arts. Learn more at www.jlgreene.org.

About the Morgan Library & Museum
A museum and independent research library located in the heart of New York City, the Morgan Library & Museum began as the personal library of financier, collector, and cultural benefactor Pierpont Morgan. The Morgan offers visitors close encounters with great works of human accomplishment in a setting treasured for its intimate scale and historic significance. Its collection of manuscripts, rare books, music, drawings, and works of art comprises a unique and dynamic record of civilization, as well as an incomparable repository of ideas and of the creative process from 4000 BC to the present.

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