



## Teacher's Guide

### STUDY/DISCUSSION GUIDE: INTRODUCTION

John Singer Sargent's "Portrait of Madame X" currently hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (<http://www.metmuseum.org/>). This iconic image by the best-known portrait painter of his time was sold by the artist himself to the Met in 1916. Painted to be exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1884, the image became the centerpiece in a scandal that dominated the exhibition and Sargent's life and subsequent career. It remains his most recognizable creation and was listed as one of the top 10 portraits of all time in a recent issue of Artist Magazine. But the painting that hangs in the Met is not the painting the artist originally created to be the dramatic pronouncement of his independence as a painter. After the scandal of the Salon, Sargent re-painted a portion of the work, obliterating a single fallen dress strap – re-painting it in a more acceptable configuration.

John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X is 40 minutes of intense, energetic theatre that merges historical figure, artist, performer and audience. The play, written and performed by artist Bob Diven, was directed for the stage by Tony-Award winning playwright Mark Medoff.

For more than 25 years, Bob Diven ([www.bobdiven.com](http://www.bobdiven.com)) has been a professional painter, musician, actor and writer. He has used all his experience and talent as an artist to create an evening of theatre that movingly reveals the complex life and breath-taking talent of another artist. His play takes place in Sargent's London studio on the day the painter decides to sell the portrait he has kept hidden for more than 30 years. At first annoyed by having his work interrupted (by the audience), Sargent soon is enchanting his visitors with his drawing, singing and piano- and banjo-playing as he gradually reveals the internal truth of an event that injured him deeply.

Following the play, Diven leads a discussion that gives each audience member a unique opportunity to ask questions of and express feelings to the artist who is the performer who is also the playwright.

### BEFORE VIEWING THE PLAY

Students may benefit from some exposure to John Sargent's paintings as well as those of his contemporaries (this was also the time of the Impressionists). Other areas worth exploration include Paris in the 1880's, clothing and fashion from the time, and cultural and political relations between France, Germany, England and the United States from 1880 to the beginning of World War One.

## **VOCABULARY for “John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X”**

**Atelier:** In this case a teaching studio run by an individual artist.

**Beaugereau:** William Adolph Beaugereau, the president of the Ecole de Beaux Artes, and a noted painter and teacher.

**Bodice:** An article of womens clothing, sometimes resembling a vest or an integral part of a dress that covers the torso.

**Carolus Duran:** August Carolus Duran, an avant-garde artist, and one of the few who would accept non-French students into his atelier.

**Crescent of Diana:** Refers to a head ornament worn by Diana, goddess of the hunt and moon.

**Commission:** A paid assignment to create a work for a specific client or purpose.

**Ecole de Beaux Artes:** The French government-sponsored school for training artists and architects in Paris.

**Emily:** Emily Sargent, John Sargent's older sister who never married, became her brother's house manager and life-long companion.

**Gustave Courtois:** A French portrait painter.

**Henry James:** A famous writer, born in America, who lived in England.

**Kaiser:** Germany's ruler.

**Mural:** A painting created on, or to be attached to architecture.

**Panama Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, 1916:** Held in celebration of the completion of the Panama Canal.

**Salon:** In this use, an annual, juried art competition in Paris sponsored by the French government.

**Studio:** An artist's work place.

**Summer home/Country home:** Many wealthy city dwellers kept elegant residences in the “country,” allowing them to escape the heat and crowding of the city during the warm Summer months.

**The Metropolitan:** The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: A major museum with which Sargent had an ongoing relationship.

**Varnish:** A final finishing coat of resin dissolved in solvent placed upon an oil painting, generally applied 6 months to a year after the painting is completed.

*Major collections of Sargent's work can be found at: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY; The Isabella Stewart Gardner Musuem, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; and The Tate Gallery, London, England.*

**SYNOPSIS/PRESENTATION OUTLINE for “John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X”**

The play opens with the famed Victorian painter, John Singer Sargent, seated at the piano. He is in a sort of reverie as his right hand picks out the notes of Gabriel Faure’s “Après un Reve.” He becomes aware of the audience – a presence in his studio – and, both slightly startled and annoyed, speaks to them. He rises, instinctively, and attempts to return to the mural sketches he has tacked up on a large easel. He stops, however, concerned that the visitor to his studio (the audience, whom he addresses throughout the play) might have scheduled an appointment which the painter failed to remember. He moves to his appointment book on a table downstage and, once assured that there was no appointment, makes doubly sure that the visitor did not come with the intention of squeezing one more portrait out of the painter. Sargent then launches into a mild tirade about “paughtraits” and his distaste for doing them.

There are some small sketches tacked up around the margins of his larger mural “cartoons.” One of them is an old drawing of Virginie Gautreau, the model for his most famous (and notorious) painting “Portrait of Madame X.” His eyes fall upon her face, and the course of his conversation is re-directed in a more personal vein. He has begun the telling of a very private story, and over the course of the play it will come out of him in increasing detail, for this is no ordinary day in the life of Sargent.

As the painter recalls events in his career, he recreates them for the audience: His first meeting with, and his determination to paint the “curious beauty” of Virginie Gautreau; her first visit to his studio; his failed attempts to capture the “right” pose; grabbing a banjo to play and sing a tune to cajole and charm his reluctant sitter; the final breakthrough and completion of the painting and its disastrous exhibition in the Paris Salon of 1884; his desperate attempt to re-paint the portrait in the face of criticism; his personal and professional downward spiral; the move to London and the re-making of his reputation. Throughout, Sargent is sketching, nibbling on a grape, peeling an apple, munching on some nuts, sipping a bit of sherry, sketching again – ever the active artist.

At last, we are brought up to the present, as Sargent faces the choices he has made and makes peace with his past. He has decided to release his most sought-after painting, his “Portrait of Madame X”, after keeping it out of public view for 20 years. To his friend, Edward Robinson, Director of the Metropolitan Museum he writes: “If the museum is still interested in purchasing the portrait, I will sell it. It is, perhaps, my best work”. Only then do we discover that the model for the painting, Virginie Gautreau, has died, the news having reached Sargent this very day.

As a last word, Sargent allows the audience to see the woman as he saw her, as he painted her for the Salon, by revealing THE PAINTING itself. The story now told, Sargent returns to the piano, playing again the Faure tune as the lights go down.

Lights come up on the performer who now leads a discussion with the audience.

**The THEMES of “John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X”**

“John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X” is first and foremost a play – a drama created to move an audience. It can, however, be a most useful and powerful teaching tool as well. The performance presents a wide range of teaching opportunities as it touches upon a full spectrum of human and artistic experience. Some subjects present themselves more obviously than others, such as ART and HISTORY. But the story touches upon other issues that are also worthy of investigation, including WOMEN'S STUDIES, POLITICS, PSYCHOLOGY, HUMAN SEXUALITY and THE HUMANITIES.

Below are some suggested ideas and concepts for your students to watch for as they view the performance. Following are some discussion points and suggested questions to aid in the discussion.

**ART/ ART HISTORY/ART CRITICISM:** Like all artists, John Sargent was a man of his time and culture, as well as a participant in the evolution of human artistic expression. Therefore his work and life can be examined both for his artistic product, and his place amidst the artistic mood of his times. For example: Impressionism was reaching its zenith during his early success, and there was some pressure on Sargent to take a stand as one who sympathized with, or stood opposed to, this artistic movement. In his time he was variously criticized for both his boldness and his conservatism as his working life spanned several art “movements”. This provides a useful window into the meeting of “artistic movement” and individual artist. Sargent’s career bridges a dramatic era in both the visual arts and the history of western Europe and America.

**HISTORY/POLITICS/SOCIAL STUDIES:** Sargent’s status as an American living in France was an active element in his working life. There were political and social tensions, as well as bonds, between the United States and France at this time (as there are today). Later, when Sargent moved to England, the English reacted to what they perceived as the French influence in his work. These were public perceptions that had to be faced and overcome in some manner in order to succeed as an artist. These same sorts of issues are very much a part of our time as well, and serve well to give the student a sense of that which history can teach us about both our consistency as human beings and our ability to adjust our attitudes in response to a greater knowledge and understanding of others.

**HUMAN SEXUALITY/WOMEN’S STUDIES:** Virginie Avegno Gautreau, the model for the famous “Portrait of Madame X” was called a “professional beauty” in her time. She was both ridiculed and obsessively observed in Paris. She made a marriage of convenience, it seems, to an older banker when she was young, yet was reputed to have taken lovers. A focus of the criticism levied against her was her overt sexuality – her flaunting of convention. In some ways, she was very much a woman of her time and yet we can find in her the prototype of the modern figure who is “famous for being famous”. Emily Sargent, on the other hand, is a woman who, for personal reasons, chose not to pursue marriage and remained with her family. In John Sargent we find a man who (like his sister) never married and yet was linked by rumour to several women, of whom Gautreau was one. Despite some modern writers claim that Sargent was a closeted homosexual, there is no anecdotal or positive evidence that he ever expressed himself sexually with either gender. This was during the time of the famous trial of Oscar Wilde, which resulted in the writer’s imprisonment for his homosexual activities. So there is room for debate on this question, and on the effect that social norms of a particular time have on perception of such questions. For instance, in word and action men have, at different times in history, expressed their affection more openly toward other men in common life. Again, the student has an opportunity to see where his or her own cultural milieu fits within the larger historical context.

**THE HUMANITIES:** Sargent also exists as a product of his time, culture and society. His philosophy of life, art and love are expressions of his own integration within his time and place. This gives the student opportunity to examine the philosophical and cultural trends of Sargent’s time.

**MUSIC:** Sargent plays the banjo, a particularly American instrument, and sings a popular American song “Camptown Races”. On the piano, he plays a bit of music by his friend Gabriel Faure’. He states that he is on his way to the opera. Students can watch for the presence and influence of music in Sargent’s life, and consider the relationship between musical and visual artists.

**THEATER:** Lastly, this is a theatrical performance: a play. The fact that it is being presented and performed by the playwright gives students of theater a unique opportunity to explore the creative process with the creator and performer of the show. Many topics can be discussed: the direction, structure, pacing, staging, use of props, and the challenges of a one-man presentation. Discuss the particular challenges apparent in this performance. Is it possible for any other actor to play this part? Should it be possible? Could this piece work on film? Consider the work as a bridge between “permanent” and performed art.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for “John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X”**

1) John Sargent was an “expatriate”, born in Italy of American parents. By law he had to set foot in the United States by the age of 21 to secure his citizenship. This was his first visit to the U.S. Sargent was raised in Europe, and spoke fluent Italian, French, and some German and Spanish. He was basically home-schooled by his mother. Yet in spite of his lack of experience of his home county he remained, officially, an American. Sargent eventually settled in England – even though he did much work in the U.S. He was a member of the Royal Academy of Art and taught there for many years. Yet he refused a knighthood because he would have had to renounce his American citizenship.

**QUESTIONS:** Can you name some other famous American “expatriates”? What is common? What is different? How would you feel if you were born into the same situation as John Sargent? What does his refusal to relinquish his citizenship say about both Sargent and citizenship?

2) Paris, France in the 1880's was considered the art capital of the western world. Many American artists went to Paris to study painting. But there was more to this trend than simply gaining skill from qualified teachers. The U.S. was just over 100 years old and still looked to Europe as being the more sophisticated and cultured society.

**QUESTIONS:** Can you point out ways in which we, as Americans, still view Europe in this way? Can you point out ways in which we do just the opposite? Is it possible to reconcile these views?

3) Part of the scandal at the exhibition of Sargent's “Portrait of Madame X” had to do with the fact that both Sargent and his subject – Madame Gautreau – were American by birth. But both had spent so little time in America (Gautreau, of French lineage, had left the south as a child after the American Civil War), both spoke French and were very much a part of Parisian society.

**QUESTIONS:** What reasons could you cite for Sargent and Gautreau being regarded so definitively as foreigners? Can you see examples of the same phenomena in American culture toward “outsiders”? Can you think of an example of this from your own life/school/town?

4) The French regarded Sargent as “too American”, yet the English critics thought him “bestly French”. American clients found Sargent appealingly “European”.

**QUESTIONS:** What does this tell you about the different viewpoints of each culture? How much does your own culture influence how you decide what is “good” and what is “bad” from other cultures? What personal qualities allow one to move through a different culture?

6) Modern viewers might find it difficult to imagine why Sargent's “Portrait of Madame X” created such a scandal. But it was attacked upon its debut by both the public and the critics and was lampooned in editorial cartoons. Eventually, however, it became Sargent's most famous, and most requested painting. Even today it remains one of the most recognizable portraits of all time.

**QUESTIONS:** What do you think upset people so much about the painting? Sometimes two people can do or say the same thing but get a completely different reaction -- how much difference does a person's attitude and social standing make in how people regard what they do and say? Can you think of examples where someone famous has been publicly criticized in the press for something that seems unworthy of such attention? Why do you think that happens?

7) A painted portrait is, to this day, considered a luxury item. Sargent painted portraits for the wealthy, powerful and famous, and became celebrated and sought after himself in turn. But today we rarely read articles about, or see much attention paid to the painters who create portraits.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for “John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X”**

**QUESTIONS:** Who would be the modern equivalent of the famous portrait artist John S. Sargent? Can you name a famous photographer or artist? Why is a portrait a luxury item? Why would it be so important to a wealthy person to have his or her portrait painted by the most famous portrait painter of his or her time? What is the equivalent of such a portrait today?

8) Sargent was close to his family (particularly his sister Emily, who managed his affairs for most of his adult life), yet he never married and made a family of his own. Although Sargent was notoriously shy, especially around women, he was known to his friends as a tremendously entertaining and lively friend whose company as a dinner guest was highly sought after in high society. There is speculation that he was a homosexual who, because of the social restrictions of his time, never acted on those impulses. He was also linked by rumour, in his time, with several of the women he painted. Yet no evidence or testimony has ever come out to show he had any sort of physically intimate relationship.

**QUESTIONS:** Does Sargent's life-long bachelorhood prove that he was homosexual? What other explanations can you imagine for his single-ness? Do you think he had affairs? Can you imagine any other reasons that Sargent would choose to remain single? How much does your own experience limit what you can imagine in another's life experience? Is it possible that Sargent felt completely fulfilled in his life? If yes, then why? If not, then why not?

9) Artist's lives are often depicted in film, television and stories in a certain way. There is a mythology about art and the people who make it. Like all mythology, these depictions can be a mixture of truth and imagination. Sargent was very successful as an artist, and was able to care for his mother and sister and make a home for all of them. He enjoyed the opera, fine cigars and good food. He dressed in the fashion of the time in tailored suits, and seems to have lived a life quite ordinary for his class and times.

**QUESTIONS:** When you think: artist, what first comes to your mind? Do you first imagine a tortured, troubled person living in poverty for the love of his art? Or do you imagine a successful business person? Where do you think the mythology of the tortured artist comes from? Can you point to a particular artist, writer or musician who fits the myth? Can you think of one from your lifetime? Do you think that some people are drawn to the arts to live out the myth more than to make art? Why would someone do this? Can you think of hobbies or career that you're attracted to in which some of your attraction is based upon an idea of lifestyle?

10) By the time of Sargent's death, artistic tastes had changed (at least among the critics), and Sargent was considered old and out of style. Yet his work remained popular with the public.

**QUESTIONS:** Have you noticed any similar changes in popular taste in your lifetime? How long do fame and popularity last? Can you also think of things that seem to transcend popular social trends – people or things that come to be regarded as “classic”?

11) Some sitters were nervous to pose for Sargent. He had a reputation of revealing the hidden traits of a person. It was said that when you sat for Sargent, you “took your face into your hands” (a play on the cautionary phrase “take your life in your hands”).

**QUESTIONS:** What could cause this fear – why would a sitter be afraid? How would you feel to be painted – to be stared at and studied for hours and days? Would you feel comfortable? Excited? Bored? Do you have a memory of being drawn by a friend, or sitting for a photograph that might give you a comparison? Is the relationship between artist and subject always intimate?

12) Sargent is known for saying that “a portrait is a picture of a person with something wrong with the mouth”. He felt that his sitters always found something wrong in their depiction, and that this fact had more to do with the personality of the sitter than the quality of the painting itself.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for "John Singer Sargent: Painting Madame X"**

**QUESTIONS:** What makes a painting different from a photograph? Is there more to a painting of a person than capturing an actual detailed likeness of the facial features? Can a painting show aspects of a person that a photograph cannot?

13) At the peak of his success, Sargent gave up portrait painting. His clients were shocked and refused to accept his decision, so that for the rest of his life, Sargent had to fend off requests for portraits. There were times he could not refuse, either because of friendship or a sense of duty, but even then he did them reluctantly. Sargent claimed that portrait painting was the domain of younger artists, who "could more easily afford the exactions of a personal nature that portrait painting requires".

**QUESTIONS:** Why did Sargent give up portrait painting? Can you imagine the pressure of painting a person's portrait for which they are paying you thousands of dollars? What do you think would be the "exactions of a personal nature" that portrait painting required?

**EXERCISE:** Sit for a portrait. Pair off students to draw each other in turn. Usually the focus is on the finished drawing. This time focus on how the sitter felt. Have the sitter describe the experience, both of being drawn and to the drawing itself.

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COMMENTS, reviews and suggestions from educators and students regarding the presentation and this discussion guide are always welcome. You may submit them to: <mailto:feedback@PaintingMadameX.com>. Thank you.