

Thomas Crisp
Professor Moland
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Sargent in Capri: An Employment of Dewey's Aesthetics

John Singer Sargent's painting *Rosina* depicts a young Caprese woman named Rosina Ferrara who was introduced to Sargent by fellow painter Frank Hyde during his visit to the island in 1878. Sargent was American by birth, and conducted most of his business in England, so whilst his stay was relatively short, Sargent took full advantage of the time he spent with Rosina, producing a variety of works in oil as well as a number of sketches. Richard Ormond, a Sargent scholar, recounts in his essay, *Sargent's Venice*, the feelings that Ferrara aroused in Sargent: "Sargent discerned in her something wild and elemental, proud and independent, sensual and passionate" (Ormond 52). The attention that Sargent paid to the exotic (and erotic) side of his subject is focalized in this essay, and it is clear that *Rosina* represents Sargent's own personality to a far greater degree than much of his other work, making the interpretation of this work quite significant in so far as it reveals a great deal of both Sargent's own personality, as well as his staggering brilliance as a painter. **Viewed through the lense of Dewey's philosophy of art, *Rosina* epitomizes Sargent's aesthetic experiences as they relate to his birthplace, Italy, by evincing the painter's remarkable capability to express his fascination with the exotic, despite the decorous conduct that was required of him in England as a renowned portraitist. Further, in so far as expressive originality is central to Dewey's philosophy, John Singer Sargent's virtuosic style is further enhanced by his unique ability to express the erotic intensity that he perceived in his Caprese subject.** As follows, in the context of Terry Barrett's discussion of art criticism, this paper will defend this claim while answering a

variety of questions as they pertain to the concerned artwork, including a discussion of the object itself, what the object aims to express, what it means to its maker, and which needs were relieved by creating it.

It would be beneficial, before I commence with my interpretation of *Rosina*, to explain Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience which is so integral to understanding the brilliance of Sargent's work. Dewey asserts: "The word aesthetic refers, as we have already noted, to experience as appreciating, perceiving, and enjoying. It denotes the consumer's rather than the producer's standpoint" (Dewey 207). Dewey further remarks: "To be truly artistic, a work must also be [a]esthetic—that is, framed for enjoyed receptive perception" (Dewey 207). For Dewey, the aesthetic experience is the basis of artistic appreciation, and allows the artist to communicate with the viewer through the struggle to express the artist's own emotions. What is most fundamental to Dewey's aesthetic philosophy, however, is the importance of art as a vehicle for saying that which language cannot: "each art speaks an idiom that conveys what cannot be said in another language and yet remains the same" (Dewey 211). Dewey contends that this particular feature of art is what allows it to be so expressive, and that originality of self-expression is the true measure of a good artwork. "It is also clear that if there be *no* self-expression, no free play of individuality, the product will of necessity be but an instance of a species; it will lack the freshness and originality found only in things that are individual on their own account" (Dewey 210). The original self-expression that Dewey purports to be the defining principle of artwork can be readily identified in *Rosina*, though it would be impossible to understand what it is that Sargent is attempting to express without first exploring the relationship that the painter had with Italy.

Sargent's aesthetic experiences of Italy are essential to understanding the nature of his self-expression in *Rosina*. For Sargent, Italy represented all that he found wrong with British society. Instead of spending his time painting the British upper-class, which meant nothing if not rigidity (in both his lifestyle and his subjects), Sargent was allowed to experience the vast landscapes and exotic beauty of his birthplace. Bruce Robertson, author of *Sargent and Italy*, contends that "Italy, as it did for most Americans, allowed Sargent to release the tight hold he kept on himself" (Robertson 14). The liberating nature of Sargent's relationship with his birthplace was further intensified by the fact that Italy represented a personal escape for the artist. Robertson notes, "Sargent was always aware of what lay waiting for him back in London and America" (Robertson 14). Of course, Sargent was hardly the first to recognize the natural beauty of the Italian countryside, nor was he the first to recognize its women: "The image of the Neapolitan/Capri girl has a long history in nineteenth-century art, and indeed in the literature of the period, evoking the artless beauty and *dolce far niente* of the South" (Ormond 51).

Naturally, Capri, as well as 19th century Italy as a whole, possessed a magnetism for artists and writers alike, promising an escape from the fast paced life of urban England. Henry James, a writer and contemporary of Sargent's, felt that Italy "was always a mixture of darkness and light, where there existed the possibility of Americans turning into something they were not, the hazard of becoming unmoored from their history and character" (Robertson 12). What is more, Italy presented not only an opportunity to escape the relentless noise and commotion of urban life, but also a challenge to artists to comprehend and articulate the overwhelming disparity between their own lives and those of the people of Italy: "the dilemma posed by Italy was how to convey a sense of its staggering cultural greatness (mostly in the past, as far as they

could tell) within the boundaries of one's own domestic experience" (Robertson 12). This inability to aesthetically express the experiences that these artists had was not so much of an issue for Sargent: "Sargent never had this problem: he could play the native, and in that sense his experience is virtually unique among American artists" (Robertson 12). Sargent's comfort and familiarity with Italy as a whole derives from his family's itinerant travels around Europe during Sargent's youth. The painter's capacity to get along in just about any place with just about any person may well have been a function of his personality, but Italy was especially intriguing to the relatively young Sargent when he returned following completion of his training in France (Fairbrother 18). Sargent, like many aesthetes of the time, also travelled to Venice "in search of the exotic, perverse, and dangerous and were entranced by what they found" (Adelson 16). With this pursuit of the exotic having been established as a part of Sargent's artistic trajectory, we can now turn to the specific component of this love for exoticism that so encaptured Sargent's imagination as it pertained to Italy as a whole: For Sargent, the true source of Italy's allure came from its exemplification of a unity of opposites; the juxtaposition of the old and the new, especially as he perceived it in Venice, was fundamental to Sargent's infatuation.

In the words of Henry James, the allure of Venice "resides simply in its being the most beautiful of tombs" (James 2). Indeed, this amalgam of the ancient and the enlightened perfectly embodied the best stylistic attributes of Sargent's painting: "It was this exciting combination of clashing elements of beauty and degradation that prompted Sargent's interest: he always pushed the limits of propriety" (Robertson 13). This disregard for the standards by which he was expected to perform his craft is communicated by Sargent's propensity to view his sitter as more than a superficial model. As Robertson attests, "[Sargent's] views of Venetian women differ so

greatly from those of his contemporaries. The latter fit women into pictorial molds. Sargent saw them freshly, as subjects of erotic intensity” (Robertson 13). Trevor Fairbrother, another Sargent scholar, references this discerning nature of Sargent’s in his book *Sargent: The Sensualist*: “In 1985, a British critic wrote admiringly about ‘Sargent’s power of dragging the truth out of a man’s superficial personality’” (Fairbrother 18). Sargent’s innate tendency to discern and subvert the traditional roles (as he did with Venetian women) that were so significant at the time can be detected in artworks that predate his professional career, such as *Two Nude Boys and a Woman in a Studio Interior*. Painted during Sargent’s training, this piece depicts a young model breaking his prescribed pose and assuming another that is “calculated” yet “casual”. Sargent obviously reacted to this, recognizing the hidden beauty in the non traditional pose.

Of course, Sargent did not restrict this evocative practice to his non-commissioned works. Indeed, *Madame X*, the artist’s magnum opus, caused scandal due to its suggestive implications, where Sargent was forced to repaint the subject’s dress so as to make her appear more felicitous. Of course, the dress strap that fell below her shoulder (which Sargent was forced to repaint due to the controversy) was hardly an aesthetic issue. Indeed, it was the subject’s rather infamous reputation as an adulterer that so exacerbated the problem. Sargent always held that his job was “not to judge, but to chronicle” and so it would seem that the painter simply could not help himself but to create the implication that was so glaringly expressed in his most famous piece (Fairbrother 18). Though the scandal surrounding *Madame X* did force Sargent to move his portraiture business to England, it hardly diminished the painter’s reputation. In fact, Sargent’s elegant depiction of Madame Pierre Gautreau (*Madame X*), despite its controversial reception, only further contributed to Sargent’s reputation as one of the best portraitists in England.

Notwithstanding the attention that Sargent's work received with his submission of *Madame X* to the Paris Salon in 1884, Sargent's style became renowned in the artworld, and his expressive (and at times radical) departure from the formal methods, inspired by his teacher Carlos Duran, allowed Sargent to explore new styles whilst still depicting traditional subject matter (Fairbrother 23). The loose and at times untidy, though certainly never careless technique that Sargent developed allowed for a less imitative and more expressive form of representation. This turned out to be a winning combination for Sargent, and by 1890, his success as a painter was speaking for itself (Fairbrother 29). As Robertson affirms, "The nature of both his success and his genius may be said to consist of a delicate balance between advanced painting and traditional subject, a balancing act he carried on in most aspects of his life" (Ormond 9).

In my view, *Rosina* demonstrates this skilled yet casual technique that allowed Sargent's portraits to radiate a feeling of exactness whilst still displaying a hypnagogic, pleasant, yet casually haphazard appearance. It is precisely this quality that Ormond is describing when he explains in his essay *Modern Life Subjects* that Sargent "represented an alternative avant-garde to Impressionism, painting modern life subjects that were radical in style but more acceptable to contemporary taste" (Ormond 51). The representation of this 'alternative avant-garde', as Ormond so deftly characterizes it, is evidenced largely in Sargent's ability to de-contextualize his own viewpoint and prepare his viewer to appreciate the important qualities, physical or otherwise, of his model.

In this context, we can grasp the genius of Sargent's expressive depiction of his subject in *Rosina*. Sargent, who, by all accounts, is described as a wonderfully amiable person, clearly developed strong emotions for Ferrara, and though no substantial evidence of a romantic

relationship with Rosina exists, Sargent's reputation for Venetian philandering certainly implies otherwise: "The French artist Jacques-Émile Blanche, one of Sargent's early sitters, said after Sargent's death that the painter's sex life "was notorious in Paris, and in Venice, positively scandalous" (Failing para 3) In letters to his sister, Sargent described Rosina as "a magnificent type, about seventeen years of age, her complexion a rich nut brown, with a mass of blue-black hair, very beautiful, and of an Arab type" (Ormond 52). Surely, Sargent detected the same intensity in Ferrara as he found in the Venetian women, and can at once be witnessed in the ingenious use of color for which Sargent is famed. Rosina's 'mess of blue and black hair' is amplified by the indistinct and subtly bold background, whilst still boasting realistic form through Sargent's skillful yet limited brushstrokes. *Rosina's* indistinct background supports the natural beauty that Sargent saw in his subject whilst simultaneously de-contextualizing Ferrara from her surroundings and quite literally presenting her in a whole new 'light'. This "re-introduction", as Dewey would brand it, affords a feeling of familiarity and warmth for the viewer, juxtaposed with Ferrara's 'exotic' beauty. This is precisely the feeling that Sargent wished to disclose, as it represented all that he found enjoyable with Italy.

Further evidence of Sargent's masterful expression of his own emotions towards Rosina can further be detected in Sargent's use of color, seen in the gradient which envelops Rosina: a transition from dark to light allows us to witness the 'elemental' side of Ferrara. Despite her rural upbringing and modest trappings, Sargent manages to express the gravitas of Ferrara's personality in a fashion that can hardly be found in his portraits of English and French aristocrats. What might be a string of onions, draped over Ferrara's shoulder, further the bucolic beauty of his subject, as does the burlap sack around her waist. Surely, Sargent's love for the

Italian countryside manifests in this simple yet striking feature. The subject's shoulders are draped in light, with her chest provocatively withheld from the viewer. Her hand on her hip invites the viewer's gaze; her posture conveys a sense of knowing flirtatiousness despite her innocent demeanor. Certainly, Sargent was successful in presenting Ferrara with the same erotic intensity with which he perceived her.

Whilst details can readily be assigned as metaphorical or literal manifestations of Sargent's experience in Italy, Sargent's style, and indeed Sargent himself, attempted to prevent this sort of dubious association. In regards to the former, Sargent's deft brushstrokes form striking impressions of what would usually be more carefully illustrated details. Sargent's carefree (though certainly not careless) style allows the viewer to do the heavy lifting when it came to representation-based interpretations. As for the latter, Sargent himself explicitly tried to prevent this practice of over interpreting his paintings, worried that people would take his subtle artistic commentaries to be overt judgements. Fairbrother reports that Sargent explained this worry to one of his sitters in 1905: "I paint what I see... I don't dig beneath the surface for things that don't appear before my eyes" (Fairbrother 18). Whilst it may seem inconsistent to claim that Dewey's philosophy (which relies on the personal expression of original insights to create meaning and value in art) can bring out the aesthetic richness of Sargent's work despite the painter's assertion that he does not turn implicit judgements into explicit depiction, it is important to recognize that the implicit divulgence of personal details in Sargent's painting do not require the painter to work in details that, as Sargent himself claims, appear before one's very eyes. As Ormond reports, Sargent "had always been attracted to dark-skinned women of the south, responding to their frankness, physicality, and haunting sense of otherness," and so

perhaps it is precisely this frankness that Ferrara displayed that allowed Sargent to express so much with so few brushstrokes (Ormond 52).

Physicality, for instance, a characteristic that Sargent almost certainly witnessed in his time spent with Rosina, most likely formed a large part of the aesthetic experience that occurred between the painter and his sitter. This physicality (and frankness) is represented in *Rosina*, where the subject's non-traditional pose speaks to her exotic and playful character. Sargent traditionally painted aristocrats and English nobles in rigid and intransigent poses, so as to demonstrate the control and authority that their likeness should command. Ferrara afforded Sargent a unique opportunity to display his subject in a natural and dynamic pose, expressing the fresh vitality that he found in his Caprese sitter. What is most significant about the portrait, however, is Rosina's smile. Compared to just about every other portrait that the painter completed in his lifetime, *Rosina* possesses a unique characteristic: a candid, smiling sitter. Whilst it could be said that a smile hardly constitutes original self-expression, an examination of the rest of the artworks depicting Ferrara that Sargent completed whilst living in Capri (as well as of the somewhat larger collection of artworks depicting Rosina that were painted by other artists such as Frank Hyde and George Barse) reveals no other portrayals of Ferrara that depict her smiling. Surely, Ferrara's inviting smile expresses the enchantment and instinctive pleasure that Sargent felt concerning his subject. What is more, Rosina's head is encompassed by a mess of hair, obscuring this smile to make it less obvious, though no certainly less inviting. Perhaps Sargent meant to convey the hidden side of Italy that only he could see among his contemporaries, portraying Ferrara in an intimate and characteristically exposed state, an opportunity that was perhaps afforded solely to Sargent.

Whilst the unique relationship between Sargent and his subject allowed him to express the erotic intensity as well as the exotic that he perceived in his sitter, further evidence of the painter's capacity to understand and express what he experienced in his subjects can be found by turning to other artworks. As Patricia Failing notes in an article for Art News entitled *The Hidden Sargent*, the sexuality of Sargent's work has historically been repressed in order not to "mar celebrations of him as a recorder and defender of upper-class privilege" (Failing para 11). However, with the help of recent research into this subject, we can detect this attention that Sargent paid to his sitters in his famous paintings of the Wertheimer family. Failing argues that "The Wertheimer portraits are also being recognized as compositions in which all the players—painter and clients—actively engaged issues of sexual exoticism." (Failing para 12). As has been demonstrated, this ability to depict the sexual intensity of his subjects, as well as their exotic natures, is what makes Sargent's *Rosina* such an aesthetically valuable piece of art. Further, this demonstration has also expounded the wholly original and artistically brilliant self-expression found in Sargent's *Rosina*.

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