

The Musicality of John Singer Sargent

BY RICHARD HALSTEAD



Considering how much has been written about the paintings of John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), it is surprising how few attempts have been made to explain them. Even artists who emulate Sargent tend to see the paintings as the creations of a transcendent mind that can never be understood through analysis. Spontaneity seems to be the very essence of that mind, so the common wisdom among his contemporary successors is to avoid thinking while painting, lest it interfere with the spontaneity of one's process.

To be sure, Sargent did fill his paintings with spontaneous passages, and, after a brief early phase, he seems to have begun painting directly on the canvas without significant compositional studies. Nonetheless, behind those spontaneous flashes of genius was a conscious mind, judging, selecting, and organizing them into a cohesive whole. Sargent is said to have frequently scraped down, rubbed out, and reworked various areas to achieve his desired effects. This combination of letting things fall as they may, and of editing those moments, is what transformed his paintings into great works of art.

Among Sargent's many advantages over other artists was his ability to think with extraordinary speed. An artist who works in a "direct" manner must make important decisions within the limited time before the paint dries — just as a musician's mind must work at the tempo of the piece he is performing. Sargent had an agile mind that could think critically throughout that drying time, always moving toward his final, and complete, orchestration.

To reach even a basic understanding of Sargent's creative process, we first need to recognize that he was not consumed by interest in the subject's character, and thus was not distracted by it. While painting a portrait of the publisher Joseph Pulitzer, Sargent admitted, "Sometimes I get a good likeness — so much the better for both of us. Sometimes I don't — so much the worse for the subject, but I make no attempt to represent anything but what the outward appearance of a man or woman indicates."¹



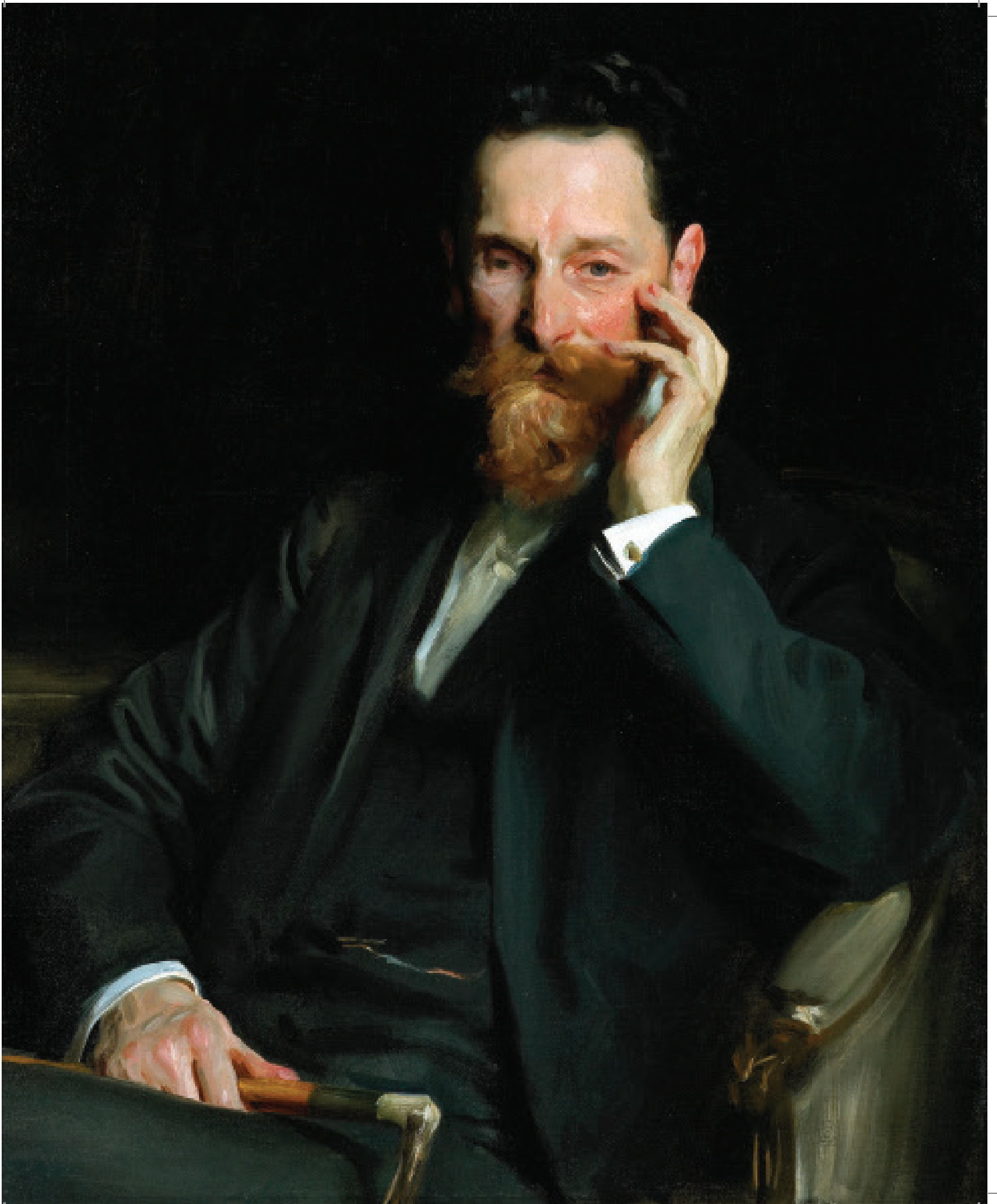
An Out-of-Doors Study
(*Paul Helleu Sketching with His Wife*)
1889, Oil on canvas, 25 15/16 x 31 3/4 in.
Brooklyn Museum

Joseph Pulitzer
1905, Oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 28 in.
Private collection
Photo: Jean Paul Torno

In fact, Sargent was more interested in the ballet of figures moving about in the illusionary worlds he created, and in the visual music of his compositions and brushwork. Essentially, he was consumed by the creation of beauty, and he seems to have felt no need to "say" anything beyond that. His clients must have sensed this situation, even if they didn't understand it. In their day, his portraits were recognized as elegantly modern images in which the sitter wanted his or her likeness placed, even if that likeness was vague.

LOOKING ANEW

I believe, then, that the best way to understand Sargent's work is to highlight how it parallels music. Music is a timeline form of art (art that moves in time); if they are used at all, lyrics are carried along by the rhythm, melody, and spacing of time. Though painting is technically a static art form, we actually view it in a timeline manner, according to the order in which our attention lands on the composition's different parts. In a well-made painting, our attention is guided by principles very much like the rhythm, melody, and spacing of music. All successful



representational paintings incorporate these elements, which are usually described as “design” or “composition,” or (more interestingly) as an “underlying abstraction.”

A good painting’s “realism” can be equated to the lyrics in a song because both refer to ideas (“meaning”). In both art and music, there should always be a balance between references to meaning and the “abstract” design that carries that meaning. Generally, however, one side of the equation is more dominant than the other.

In Sargent’s paintings, the realism is of an extremely high order, yet it is the design (shapes, texture, color, brushwork, form, movement) that predominates and carries the realism along with it. Music lovers enjoy being swept away by a piece of music, and that is just what happens to those who love a Sargent picture: its design moves them with the conspicuous excitement and grace of execution, and with its unique pattern. The picture’s realism is strengthened by the design, which only enhances the scene’s feeling of life and the liveliness of the figures. The latter are grounded in traditional realism, as dancers in a performance are grounded by the stage beneath them, reminding us that they are real people. Sargent’s paintings are firmly planted in the here-and-now, but the sheer beauty of his performance, as in ballet and opera, is what elevates our viewing experience into a higher realm.

For all these reasons, we should not be surprised that Sargent was an accomplished musician. Indeed, Percy Grainger and Gabriel Fauré — both famous musicians and close friends of Sargent — said that his musical ability rivaled his painting skills. It seems, therefore, that music had a profound influence on the way he painted (and on the way he thought about painting), or that music and painting were for him just two aspects of the same thing. I’m inclined to believe the latter.

The French-horn player Lisa Taylor recently described Sargent’s paintings as possessing “a richness, joy, lyricism, and mastery of rapturous melodic line and harmony.” She compared them with compositions by the musical impressionists Fauré, Ravel, and Debussy, and with Schubert, Dvořák, Mozart, and Brahms, who made “sound tapestries of different textures and colors, created by composers who brought out the best in each instrument.”



**The Wyndham Sisters:
Lady Elcho, Mrs. Adeane,
and Mrs. Tennant**
1899, Oil on canvas,
115 x 84 1/8 in.
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York City

Others have compared Sargent with jazz greats. The artist Gerald Lazare, an honorary member of the Duke Ellington Society of Canada, sees parallels with Ellington’s compositions, which combine improvisation and formality. Specifically, Lazare compares Sargent’s dramatic range of extreme lights to extreme darks with Ellington’s diversity of sounds, from the highest clarinet to the lowest baritone sax.

People often compare Sargent with the 17th-century masters Velázquez and Hals because their powerful brushwork shared a certain looseness and verve. Yet neither of these masters offers the flowing musicality seen in

Sargent’s paintings, which I associate more with late Renaissance and Baroque Italy, especially Venice, which was once known as the Republic of Music. The paintings of Veronese, for example, are composed as if rolling with elegant song and celebration; Guardi’s brushstrokes are like clear, decisive rings from brass and reed; Tiepolo’s paintings are grand opera at its best; and Tintoretto’s have the energy and intensity of a Romantic symphony.

To discern the musicality in Sargent’s paintings is to expand our experience of them, and thus to understand ourselves better. When we first encounter a Sargent masterwork, most of us feel awe — a vicarious thrill in his prowess. Then the music reaches us, independent of performer or composer, and another door opens, this one leading to exaltation. We become aware of both classical order and pure joy.

I once read an apt description of the Venetian composer Vivaldi: “Entirely serious in his joyfulness.” Could there possibly be a better summation of the creative life of John Singer Sargent? ■

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Endnote

1. Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent, Complete Paintings, Vol. III: The Later Portraits* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003) 248-9.