

GASSED! Max Kozloff on John Singer Sargent's Great War Masterpiece

Max Kozloff

“Gassed” by John Singer Sargent: A Centennial View

In 1919, John Singer Sargent's monumental canvas, Gassed, went on view in London's Imperial War Museum. The painting was lent to the exhibition, World War One and American Art, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2016, while “Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends” was seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art a year earlier. After seeing Gassed in London recently, MAX KOZLOFF felt moved to dwell on the theme of Sargent and tragedy. The accompanying photos of hands in Sargent's paintings were taken by DENNIS KARDON at the Met exhibition.



John Singer Sargent, *Gassed*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 91 × 240½ inches. Imperial War Museum, London

Background

The phrase “La Belle Epoque” rivals “The Gilded Age” as a salute to an historical period, from the “naughty nineties” to the outbreak of World War One, supposedly a fun time. But these two terms also seem bouncy when compared with the more substantial record inferred by *Fin-de-Siecle*, with its shifting cultural paradigms, some that sprouted, others that subsided. Of course, game changers among the early modernists outmatched the routines of fading traditionalists. Still, in this unstable moment a few conservative portrait artists briefly flourished by attracting clientele from an upscale social class. Their servitude to the vanity of their patrons earned them monetary benefits, but left little impression in the history of art. Who today celebrates the names Giovanni Boldini, William Merritt Chase, Emile Carolus-Duran, or Mariano Fortuny? In contrast, one of similar vintage, John Singer Sargent, still stands out and is much admired—for good reasons.



Dennis Kardon, *Hands by Sargent: A Photo Essay*, 2016. Detail of *Madame Ramón Subercaseaux*, c. 1880-1

The cordial address of this American expatriate (1856-1925) was so resourceful that it exceeded any formulaic, professional obligation. He was hyper qualified in keenness of eye, and so confident in his skills as a performer, as to make them look exhibitionist, glib and tossed off. Actual entertainers, like gypsy musicians doing a number, were known as part of his repertoire. Sargent was well disposed toward overt role-playing, as demonstrated with splendor in his *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*. He found or created countless examples of it, treating their artifice of transparent self-consciousness as a decorous norm of his genre, transmitted through body language as well as facial expression.

What made him highly popular among his patrons was the compliment his flippant virtuosity paid to their self-esteem. Sargent could position them in stances reminiscent of Gainsborough and Reynolds, while letting it be known that he was a friend of Claude Monet. He was a rhapsodist of satin and chiffon, which billowed out in coils affected by the weight and posture of the female figure. Seductive, young ladies could expect to being treated as a little dangerous if identified with their portrait by Sargent. As for his palette, he subdued its range in drawing rooms, while outdoors he splashed his sitters with the shadows, reflections and leafy twirls of nearby plants. Sargent added to these broad energies of warm and cool the much smaller attractions and motivations of hands, as they flutter, twist or press against supporting surfaces. He was a master in portraying the nervous behavior of women's fingers. Had neon lighting existed, he might have used a likeness of its shimmer to decorate the folds of gowns.

All this genteel restlessness was intended to declare that his act of seeing was as much on the move as the action he depicted. People are often visualized as doing something, not just sitting still. Robert Louis Stevenson was walking by (close action) when seemingly caught by Sargent's brush (as if by thoughtless snapshot). In more formal portraiture, people appear to look out, first at their observer, and then, by implication at their unseen or unknown future viewers. One of the most common scenes in Sargent's watercolors represents friends or colleagues sketching outdoors, scrutinizing nature, brush in hand. They are in the midst of carrying on the kind of work that he has already concluded on his own. This note of the instantaneous moment lends an aura of disheveled, vivacious texturing to images that are often diaristic in character. Where he went and whatever he saw, this traveling artist (again, with watercolor) acted like a gondolier paddling through canals of opulent sensation. He provided vignettes of them— as tourists would for their circuits back home. His take on the monuments of Venice is liquefied by the multiple appeals of their kind, competing for the attention of viewers on a distracted schedule.

When Sargent accepted public commissions to paint murals for the Boston Public Library (1895-1919) and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, (1916-1925) his emphasis on ephemeral glimpses needed to be broadened. These two institutions were storehouses of historic knowledge, thought, and imagination. To honor the educational legacies of the human mind, their walls had to be decorated in sweeping, allegorical mode. An allegory is a didactic framework populated by figures acting as symbols of conditions like truth, justice, heaven and hell. In short, symbolism replaces narrative as a means of visual communication. One also senses a reluctance—in fact a distinct aversion—to be informative about place or time. Many characters don't even obey gravity. Employing a worldly Salon artist to tackle these generalized types and schemes was to ask of him quite a lot. The more oracular or legendary the status of certain characters, the allegorical mode permitted them to wear fewer clothes. It is ironic that an artist who catered to a small, entitled social class could arouse criticism if he depicted a bodice hung too low but when he worked for the community at large, he could disrobe his figures at will, as mostly they happened to be gods. Nudity based on Hellenist models was in accord with public taste.



Dennis Kardon, Hands by Sargent: A Photo Essay, 2016. Detail of Dr. Pozzi at Home, 1881

Sargent adjusted to these circumstances with good grace. His figures became vaguely statuesque, though still based on his life drawings, elaborated with academic finish. For research on the History of Religions panel in Boston, he traveled to the Middle East to study the faces of Bedouins. He drew heavy, unnatural outlines to feature the bodies of those selected for ascent out of their plasma to the beatitude of heaven. Yet he knew how to inject the earthy witness of his materialism

into range of the idealism purveyed by his clients. His accent on leisure and theirs on virtue, or at least rectitude, mingled together to form an interesting tension. But it was even then too late to rescue Victorian allegories from their inevitable datedness, as modernity rolled in.



Detail of Singer Sargent's Gassed. Imperial War Museum, London

Achievement

London's Imperial War Museum is filled with belligerent, sinister, and horrific artifacts. Their erstwhile use and subsequent display registered the fact that during the slaughter of 1914–1918, the *époque* was not belle. As commissioned by the British government to act as an official war artist, sent to the front in the summer of 1918, Sargent conducted himself dutifully. He chose to focus his powers on one dismal scene that he witnessed: an aftermath of the poisoning of British troops by German mustard gas. In the museum, this work would naturally fit in or even compete with brutal company. But encountering this great painting, arguably the peak of Sargent's career, installed in appropriate quarters, I was struck by *Gassed's* difference, some element more broadly conceived to stir emotion than national pride in a military context.

Did Sargent misunderstand the treatment proper to his choice of category or genre? Well, it was unlikely that he would devote an epic work measuring around nine feet by 21 merely to documentary reportage. And this scroll-like grandeur of scale rules out any portrait emphasis, even if the soldiers' eyes weren't bandaged. Furthermore, a propaganda motive, while possible in theory, would have needed more upbeat content to support a creation whose subject is a military disaster. *Gassed* shows that British dressing stations were overwhelmed by drooping and fallen casualties, the targets of an onslaught of mass destruction. We see nameless victims of that attack, everywhere, promiscuously disabled.

However, a group of Tommies, in single file, crosses laterally from left to right. They, the artist's protagonists, cannot be said to be merely passing through – a zone of recumbent bodies. Rather, they're shuffling or slogging by at an uncoordinated pace, barely assisted by medical orderlies. They have all the momentum of a bas-relief, an effect caused by the work's side view of their progress and their awkward stumble. Their heads are variously bowed, their arms grope for immediate support, and their legs are hesitant and intimidated. Mustard gas menaces the eyes before it ravages internal organs. Sargent thus gives us a spectacle of fresh affliction, still vertical when compared with the suffering troops lying everywhere around.

Slumped at the bottom margin, the bodies of the maimed are in more than ample supply. In fact, their presence continues far behind and beyond the miserable progress of the blinded subjects in the foreground. Sargent elevated these figures so that our vantage is approximately at the level of their feet. Urged by the artist, I begin to regard them as monuments of calamity, in disordered, vulnerable gait, profiled with their darker khaki uniforms against the radiant light of the setting sun. With its lime greens and roseate tones, nuanced with pale yellows, this light is gorgeous. It floods my sense of what these soldiers have lost—their precious eyesight. No wonder that Sargent exults the world we do see, one he created in homage to the visibility of life. If this intention comes through, as I think it does, it is more an existential than a patriotic statement. How mindful is this grateful recognition and heartbreaking sorrow, which a visual work of art can make evident.

For those curious to learn more about the artist and his career, I recommend a most informative book— John Singer Sargent by Carter Ratcliff, Abbeville Press, 1982



Dennis Kardon, *Hands by Sargent: A Photo Essay*, 2016. Detail of Joseph Jefferson as Dr. Pangloss, 1890