

Out of Hours Art

TO THE LIFE

Sargent:

Portraits of Artists and Friends

*National Portrait Gallery, London,
12 February 2015—25 May 2015*

There is something of the St Jerome about John Singer Sargent's mesmerising portrait of Auguste Rodin, just on the left as you enter this wonderful exhibition, but little that is ascetic or penitential thereafter. Sargent's bravura portraits capture the essence, confidence, allure, and eccentricity of an age, his life, and art criss-crossing continents, from New England to Paris, New York to London, the Cotswolds and Sicily, to Syria and Palestine. He was part of the *beau monde* of the late 19th century, and seemed to know *tout le monde*. He was a handsome and private man, who never married, and whose sexuality, probably ambiguous, has always been the subject of speculation and conjecture.

Born in Florence in 1856 to an itinerant, expatriate American surgeon and the

daughter of a prosperous Philadelphia businessman, Sargent trained there for a year in 1873 before moving to Paris and joining the atelier of Carolus-Duran. 1874 was the year of the first Impressionist Exhibition, and it shows in much of his work. His first picture, of Fanny Watts, was exhibited in the Paris Salon in 1877. He worked in Venice at the same time as Whistler, returning to Paris



Robert Louis Stevenson by John Singer Sargent, 1887. © Courtesy of the Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Carolus-Duran by John Singer Sargent, 1879. © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, US (photo by Michael Agee).



in 1883 to work on a portrait of Madame

Pierre Gautreau, later known as Madame X. When this picture was shown in the Salon the following year it created a scandal for the painter and his sitter, and Sargent returned to England, where he painted two wonderful studies of Robert Louis Stevenson.

His first solo exhibition, in Boston, Massachusetts, US, in 1888, was a huge success, and his fame and fortune on both sides of the Atlantic were assured. By 1898 he was charging 1000 guineas for a full-length

portrait. He continued travelling and working, to and fro across Europe and the Middle East, often in the company of Henry James, producing a series of unforgettable portraits. In London he kept a studio in Tite Street, Chelsea, across the road from Oscar Wilde, but shortly after the turn of the century found commissioned portrait painting increasingly tiresome. He went to the Western Front in July 1918 as an official war artist, where he painted the widely known picture *Gassed*, and in the same year declined the presidency of the Royal Academy. Most of his final creative years were spent in producing murals and panels for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and for Harvard University. He died in his sleep in Tite Street at the age of 69.

There are so many gems on show at the National Portrait Gallery, but I found the magnificent full-length portrait of Edwin Booth, the New York actor, (whose brother assassinated Abraham Lincoln), the wonderful charcoal study of WB Yeats, in his pomp in 1908, and the lovely sketch of Monet with his easel, painting by the edge of a wood, particularly affecting. There's still time to enjoy this terrific show.

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DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X685009