

Redefining Childhood

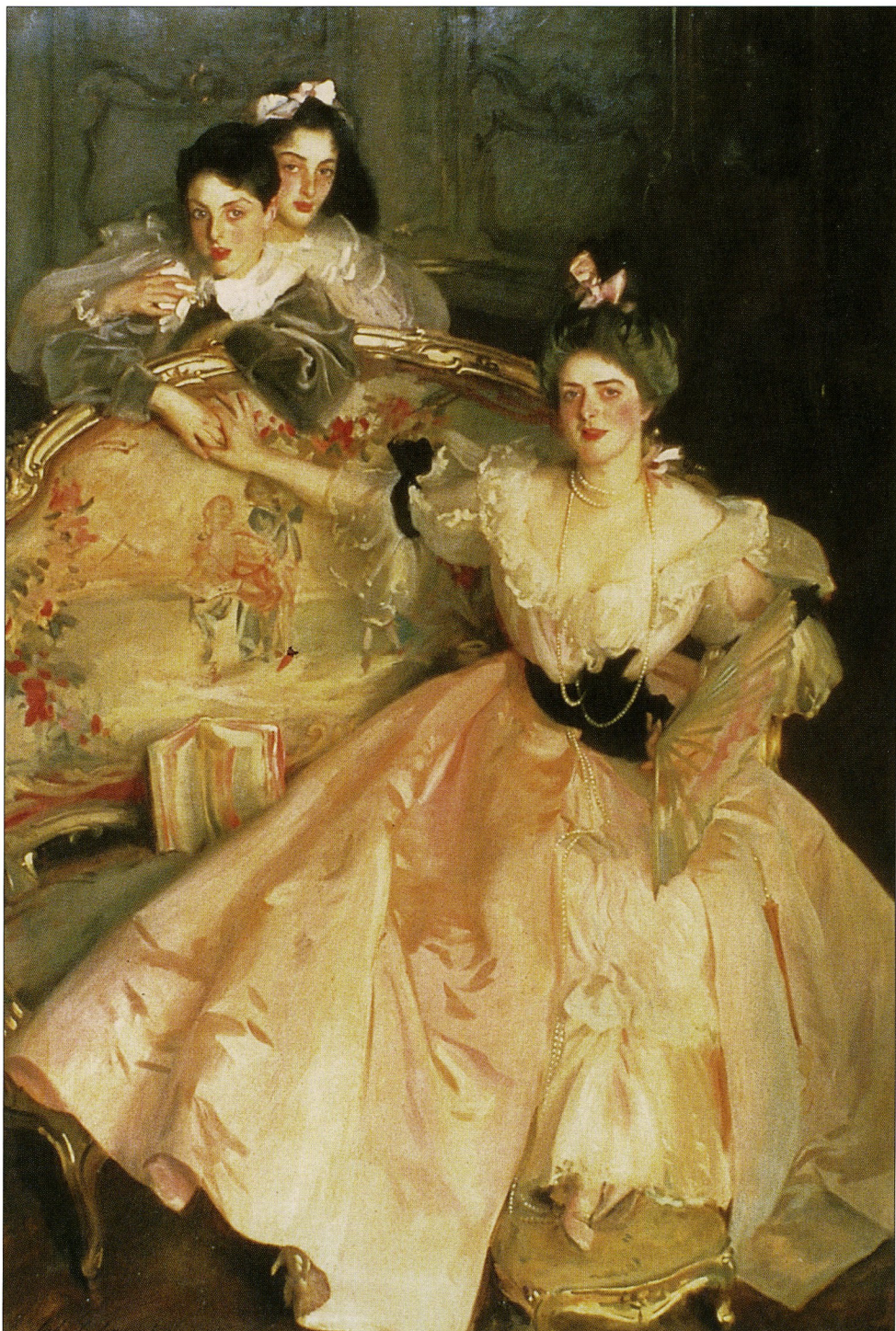
JOHN SINGER SARGENT PAINTING CHILDREN

by Gail Leggio

The nineteenth century saw a series of revolutions in attitudes toward childhood. For the Romantics, the child was a symbol of innocence and unlimited potential. We are born, Wordsworth wrote in “Ode, Intimations of Immortality,” “trailing clouds of glory.” There was also a growing recognition of childhood consciousness, the subjective experiences that lay the foundation for adulthood: “The child is father to the man,” to quote Wordsworth again (“My heart leaps up”). By mid-century Charles Dickens, among others, was calling attention to the plight of children victimized by the cataclysmic changes wrought by industry and urbanization. But childhood could also be seen as a special world, an autonomous realm. First-rate fantasists—Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald, Walter Crane and Arthur Rackham—created illustrated books for children that remain unsurpassed to this day. The exaltation of childhood frequently descended into sentimentality and sometimes verged on fetishism.

American writers and artists were staking out their own territory in the depiction of childhood. Mark Twain created a juvenile *Candide*, a small-town satirist and a new myth of boyhood in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The visual equivalent lies in the sturdy boys Winslow Homer (1836–1910) depicted in *Breezing Up* and *Cracking the Whip*. In contrast, the expatriate American Henry James explored how children became enmeshed in the moral ambiguities of adult society (preparing the way for Freud’s bombshell speculation that children were not exempt from sexual urges). James’s friend John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), the preeminent chronicler of the cosmopolitan set of Americans living abroad, had his own take on childhood. Forty-three of his paintings are on view this fall at the Brooklyn Museum in a fascinating exhibition, “Great Expectations: John Singer Sargent Painting Children.” The accompanying catalogue,¹ by curator Barbara Dayer Gallati, lays out the heady mix of cultural cross-currents behind these remarkably fresh images.

The exhibition and catalogue confront two issues: what do Sargent’s paintings reveal about fin-de-siècle attitudes toward children, and what role do these portraits and genre scenes play in the artist’s development? Most of the child models in Sargent’s portraits came from his own milieu. Born in Florence to a prosperous Philadelphia family living abroad, Sargent spent a peripatetic youth in a series of apartments and hotels; he was used to adult society. From 1874 to 1879 he trained with the Parisian Carolus-Duran (1837–1917) and set out to conquer the French Salon. The scandal around his painting *Madame X*



John Singer Sargent, *Mrs. Carl Meyer and Her Children*, 1896 PRIVATE COLLECTION

(1883–84, Metropolitan Museum of Art) prompted a retreat to London and the English countryside. His paintings of children were well received and helped remove the stigma of the racy *Madame X*. Sargent never had a permanent residence in the United States, but he considered himself an American and cultivated a reputation there through commissions and exhibitions. His friend the writer Vernon Lee described him affectionately as “a sort of completely accentless mongrel,”² and one biographer remarks: “His deepest allegiance was to that borderless realm of refinement where he and his friend Henry James were leading citizens.”³



John Singer
Sargent,
*Garden Study of
the Vickers Children*,
1884 FLINT
INSTITUTE OF ARTS,
FLINT, MICHIGAN

Sargent seems to have found special opportunities in painting children. He could be more spontaneous and informal than in his portraits of adults, who expected their accomplishments as well as their attractiveness to be noted. He could be more experimental in his brushwork and compositions. Children's portraits could serve as audition pieces or tokens of friendships; Sargent's circle of patrons included fellow artists as well as bankers and aristocrats. What makes these images most engaging, however, is Sargent's alertness to the individual personality, what Richard Ormond refers to as his "candor and refreshing lack of condescension."⁴ This is evident even in his portraits of toddlers, often during this period tricked out as angels or urchins. *Dorothy* (1900, Dallas Museum of Art) is a good example. The strong personality of the two-year-old comes through, her autonomy signaled by her direct gaze, regal pose and the vivid red Sargent selected for the brushy background. Even the extravagant froth of white bonnet complements rather than overwhelms her personality. *Ruth Sears Bacon* (1887, Wadsworth Atheneum) depicts another toddler with a different attitude, slouching in an overstuffed chair with her doll. The lively expression of the face and her relaxed position are complicated by the restless dark legs and brown boots. Sargent changed the composition when he saw Ruth coming in from a walk. Those dark legs, in contrast to the lacy whites and blues of the rest of the composition, seem a premonition of Schiele, while the doll's over-rouged face suggests Ensor.

Sargent has more to work with, of course, with older children. The six-year-old subject of *Caspar Goodrich* (c. 1887, Collection of C. Michael Kojaian), shown seated, half-length, folds his arms and confronts us with a formidable gaze. His sailor suit is no mere fancy dress; he would follow his father, a rear admiral, into the U.S. Navy. Sargent was staying with the family in Newport, Rhode Island, and the portrait was probably a gift, but the artist thought enough of it to exhibit it alongside more formal work, despite its sketchiness. The boy is seated on a mass of wheat and red brushstrokes with a scruffy brown backdrop, an avant-garde setting for a more detailed face. The black of the sailor suit—Velázquez called black the queen of colors—testifies to Sargent's admiration for the Spanish master. Sargent's clearest homage to Velázquez is *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882, Museum of Fine Art, Boston), as some salon critics quickly recognized.⁵ *Las Meninas* (1656, Museo del Prado) was one of the Velázquez works Sargent had copied during an 1879 trip to Madrid. The four Boit daughters, ranging in age from four to fourteen, are deployed across the cavernous space of their parents' Parisian apartment. This is portraiture raised to the monumental scale of history painting. The sitters were originally unidentified; the work was shown at the Salon of 1883 as *Portrait d'enfants*. Luxury is hinted at by the enormous blue-and-white Asian urns, but most of the space is indistinct. Gallati points out the psychological complexity implicit in the composition: "By sheer coincidence their ages automatically impose the structure of a growth narrative . . . symbolically under-

scored by the transitional nature of the hall and the placement of the two older girls at the threshold of a room whose interior, like the future, is understood to exist but remains indecipherable.”⁶

Another dynamic image of siblings is even more emotionally fraught. *Édouard and Marie-Louise Pailleron* (1881, Des Moines Art Center) depicts the children of another friend, a Parisian essayist and playwright, sitting on an oriental-rug-draped couch against a dramatic scarlet-wine background. The sixteen-year-old boy, sitting sideways and looking at us from the corner of his eye, cuts a dashing figure in Van Dyke-style black and white. But his eleven-year-old sister dominates the composition, facing front, hieratically symmetrical and staring us down. Consulting the biographical index, we are not surprised to learn Marie-Louise had a long, distinguished career as a writer and critic.

Sargent, unlike many other artists and writers of the period, did not make a fetish out of childhood or equate adolescence with the Expulsion from the Garden. But he did accept gardens as appropriate settings for children. The Pailleron and Boit children belonged to a worldly Parisian milieu. When Sargent—ever the chameleon, sensitive to a shift in the cultural climate—relocated to England, he tapped into a more Romantic archetype, without sacrificing avant-garde technique or Continental sophistication. The triumph of this period was *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885–86, Tate), shown at the Royal Academy’s 1887 annual exhibition and probably the closest thing Sargent ever did to a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Sargent’s taste was eclectic. He had a close friendship with Claude Monet but admired Dante Gabriel Rossetti, visited Edward Burne-Jones’s studio to see the *Briar Rose* cycle and once owned Ford Madox Brown’s *Take Your Son, Sir* (c. 1857, Tate). In *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* two little girls in white dresses light Japanese lanterns amid flowers. Painted en plein air, the scene is thoroughly stage-managed: Sargent switched models part way through the process and had to tie artificial flowers to dry stems as the season changed. He focuses on light effects, the juxtaposition of lantern glow and the low light of dusk. Like twentieth-century cinematographers, he discovered that the so-called golden hour actually gave him only about twenty minutes of what he wanted. The image seems drenched in symbolism. The paint handling, however, remains loose, more in the style of the Continental avant-garde than the Pre-Raphaelites.

One of the most striking pictures in the Brooklyn exhibition is a prelude to *Carnation*, the more daring *Garden Study of the Vickers Children* (1884, Flint Institute of Arts). Billy and Dorothy Vickers, children of Sargent patrons in Worcestershire, are shown watering lilies, but the space is so flattened out that they could be figures in an Aesthetic Movement tapestry. The lack of horizon and scratchy green paint give the work a radical, modernist edge. The way four small hands manage the oversized watering can is convincingly realistic, and the characterization of the children nicely observed: the girl remains intent on



John Singer Sargent, *Caspar Goodrich*, c. 1887 COLLECTION OF C. MICHAEL KOJAN

her task, the boy is distracted by the interruption of an out-of-frame adult, accounting for the elevated point of view. Sargent keeps a neat balance between flat canvas and phenomenal illusion.

Sargent's attitude toward the most revered visual trope of childhood, the Madonna and Child, was even less conventional than his take on the child-in-nature. Here it may be useful to compare Sargent to two contemporary

American artists, Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) and Abbot H. Thayer (1849–1921). Cassatt, a friend of Degas, specialized in secularized bourgeois versions of Madonna and Child, keeping sentimentality at bay through avant-garde compositional strategies derived from the Japanese print. Thayer painted young women and children, recruiting family members as models, in the guise of angels and Virgins. The way he combined loose, intuitive brushwork with simplified Renaissance altarpiece configurations seems fresh and individualistic, without laying any claim to modernism.

In approaching children, Sargent seems more interested in individual personalities than either Cassatt, who uses the nursery-and-playtime set as fodder for formal experimentation, or Thayer, who surrounds his dramatis personae with an aura of sacred melancholy. Sargent's allusions to the sacred tradition in depicting children and adolescents tend to be sly and complex. *Miss Elsie Palmer* (1889–90, Colorado Springs Fine Art Center), which Gallati compares to Edvard Munch's *Puberty* (1894–95) as well as Thayer's *Virgin Enthroned* (1891),⁷ hovers between traditional iconography for the Virgin Mary and the new interest in the psychology of adolescence. Elsie, in virginal white, is seated before an expanse of medieval-style linenfold wood paneling. Her hieratic symmetry and hypnotic stare give her the presence of a neophyte priestess, but she is an individual with a strong personality rather than a symbol or an abstract quality in personification. Her loose auburn hair is a clue that Sargent is once again riffing on contemporary styles. Elsie can be seen as part of a sisterhood that includes Whistler's *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1862) and its variations, stretching back to Rossetti's Annunciation picture *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1850).

One of Sargent's most touching versions of the mother-and-child theme is *Mrs. Edward L. Davis and Her Son Livingston Davis* (1890, Los Angeles County Museum of Art), which is also one of his most American-looking portraits and was well received at the National Academy of Design in New York. There is nothing showy about the handsome, solid woman in black and her eight-year-old son, emerging from a plain black background. She stands erect, while the boy—in a sailor suit and a hat that gives the effect of a halo, a remarkably subtle allusion to the sacred tradition—leans comfortably against her hip. Their hands are affectionately linked, with her arm around his shoulder. The linking of arms and hands is used again in a very different image of mother and children, *Mrs. Carl Meyer and Her Children* (1896, Private collection), in which the near-adolescent offspring have resolutely entered the drawing room, an unmistakably worldly space of Continental-style luxury. *Mrs. Carl Meyer*, acknowledged as a masterpiece at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1897, is a compositional tour de force that prompted a *Punch* cartoon entitled "The Perils of Steep Perspective."⁸ The comely Mrs. Meyer, viewed from above, seems to be sliding down the Rococo brocade sofa, her descent checked by her son and daughter, who reach over to catch her hand; the cartoonist gives them the look

of absurdly chic glacier-climbers. The actual painting does have an extraordinary sense of movement, but it also conveys genuine affection. The mother reaches back to touch the boy's hand, the girl wraps her arm around her brother, and the gold arc of the sofa frame unites the group formally. The ambience is luxurious. Adèle Meyer, the wife of the chairman of the De Beers diamond concern, a vivacious hostess and arts patron, wears peach and cream satin with touches of white lace and black velvet. The boy wears grey velvet, the girl, white organza; both are dark-haired and intelligent looking. Adèle's elegantly foreshortened fan and an open book—upright, pages ruffled—tossed on the sofa add to the sense of spontaneity. This family looks as undisturbed—by gravity or other mundane problems—as a party of deities lounging on clouds in a Tiepolo painting.

Recently, critics have focused on Sargent's images of Jewish families such as the Meyers and the Wertheimers, notably in the Jewish Museum's 1999 exhibition "John Singer Sargent: Portraits of the Wertheimer Family."⁹ Contemporary commentators emphasized the exotic quality of *Essie, Ruby and Ferdinand, Children of Asber Wertheimer* (1902, Tate). "They lie about among cushions like odalisques in a harem," one wrote.¹⁰ The twelve portraits in the Jewish Museum show revealed how much the artist enjoyed working with the family, who were game participants in his theatrical compositions. In fact, far from an exercise in Orientalist cliché, this group portrait of the vivacious siblings relaxing with a trio of pets seems invitingly natural and unforced. The swagger of red touches enlivens the overall palette of greys and taupes.

In his own smooth, cosmopolitan way, Sargent could be quite dictatorial with his sitters. Patrons amenable to playing along usually found the results admirable, both in the formal quality of the finished work and in the aura of glamour that enveloped them. As Carter Ratcliff remarks, "Sargent encourages in us the sense that selves are fictions to be refined, perhaps reinvented by art."¹¹ Some sitters seem fully complicit in the scenarios Sargent creates for them; other wind up with a striking picture almost in spite of themselves. *Sir George Sitwell, Lady Ida Sitwell and Family* (1900, Private collection) is a curious gloss on the eighteenth-century conversation picture. The artist, encountering some resistance, impishly gave the pater familias a bent nose, while straightening the nose of young Edith. In her bold red dress the gawky future poet manages to project her innate eccentricity, all the same. Sargent's tampering with inherited portrait formulas helped keep the work fresh, but the pressure of commissions could be wearying.

You can see the artist cutting loose in his oil studies and watercolors all through his career. Children appear in a number of these bravura sketches. Two little girls are lower-corner accents, daringly cropped, in *Gathering Blossoms, Valdemosa* (1908, Private collection). Children also appear in the early *Ricordi di Capri* (1878, Private collection). Both compositions are bold. In *Gathering Blossoms* spontaneous brushstrokes read as petals and leaves. Half the

diagonally bisected *Ricordi* is taken up by a painterly white plaster wall. Two toddlers and two slightly older boys are the subject of *Neapolitan Children Bathing* (1879, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute). Naked on a beach in blinding sunlight, they seem completely at ease in a high-summer idyll. The critics were impressed by the picture's anecdotal charm and luminosity. Yet it was a daring choice for Sargent's debut at the conservative National Academy of Design, a picture more in the avant-garde French style than would be expected from a young American.

The excellent catalogue accompanying the exhibition reconstructs Sargent's career narrative, including his own unconventional upbringing and cannily promiscuous sampling of historical and contemporary styles. The children in these paintings wear the trappings of a specific era of social history, but their personalities seem so vivid they could be our contemporaries. "Great Expectations: John Singer Sargent Painting Children" remains at the Brooklyn Museum through January 16, 2005. It travels to the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, February 25–May 22, 2005, and the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, June 18–September 11, 2005. Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11238. Telephone (718) 638-5000. On the Web at www.brooklynmuseum.org

NOTES

1. Barbara Dayer Gallati, with Erica E. Hirshler and Richard Ormond, *Great Expectations: John Singer Sargent Painting Children* (Brooklyn Museum, in association with Bulfinch Press, 2004), 256 pp., 100 black-and-white and 94 color illustrations. A biographical index of child sitters is included.
2. Cited, Carter Ratcliff, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), p. 65.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
4. Richard Ormond, "Sargent's Childhood," in Gallati, p. 55.
5. *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* is not in the Brooklyn exhibition but was featured in "Manet/Velázquez" (2003) at the Metropolitan Museum.
6. Gallati, p. 83.
7. Gallati, pp. 126–27.
8. Reproduced in Gallati, p. 127.
9. Norman L. Kleeblatt, editor, *John Singer Sargent: Portraits of the Wertheimer Family* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1999).
10. Gallati, cited, p. 130.
11. Ratcliff, p. 19.