

Painting John Singer Sargent's Lady Agnew of Lochnaw

Earlier this summer I conducted a 20-session workshop featuring John Singer Sargent's *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*, 1892, aka Gertrude Vernon, the quintessential late Victorian party girl, in Manila, Philippines.

Our paintings were the same size as the original: 40 x 50". There is much to gain—a multitude of lessons to be learned—in painting a master work at it's original dimensions.

Gertrude's languorous pose and pallor is attributable to her ill health. She had just recovered from a nasty bout of influenza.

Sargent wrote that he had six sessions with her. The painting was interrupted after the second session due to the flu's encore bout with the fragile Gertrude.



I surmise that it was during this interval between the second and third sittings that Sargent would have worked up the background and spectacularly painted dress. The practice with complex drapery is to mount the dress on a maniken that is set into pose and the primary folds pinned into place.

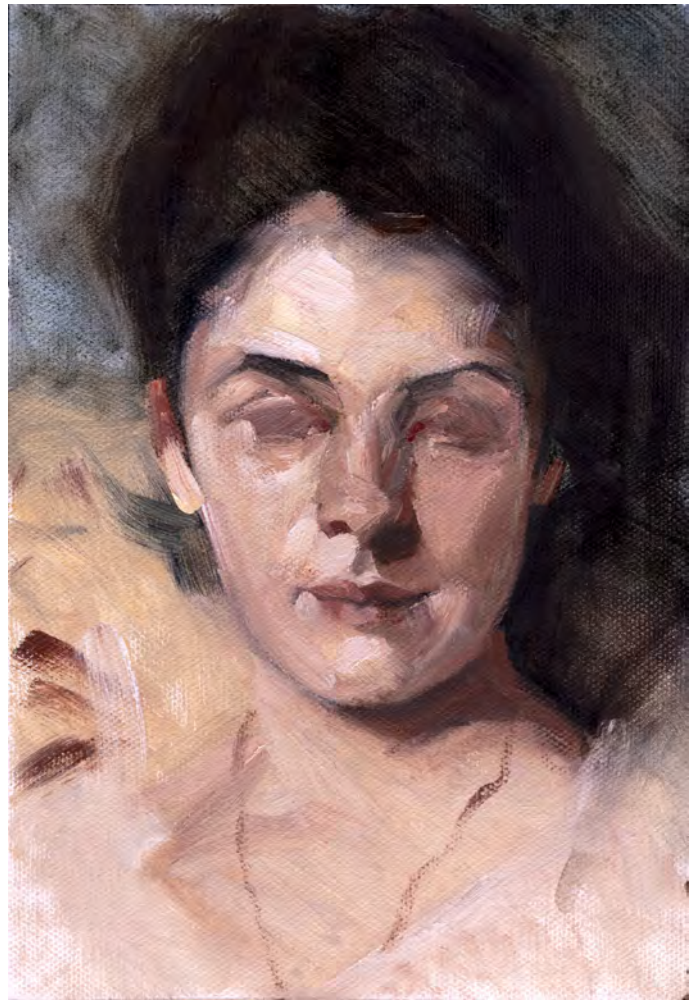
This is a portrait of grand gesture and great subtlety of expression. She is leaning back into a well-stuffed, wing-backed armchair and her head is tilted slightly forward and ever-so-slightly to the right (a 12:02 angle). Her jowl is softened by the vague gathering of the digastric muscles under her jaw. O-boy-o-boy, I anticipate that Gertrude's jowl is going to be trouble. Great subtlety demands razor precision.

A recommended practice is to paint a quick thumbnail sketch, a pochade, before diving into the deep end of your canvas.

Not only does the pochade lend insight to how the painting will look at a distance, not to mention the working out of the color scheme and pictorial divisions, but it also alerts you to troubled waters laying in wait to ambush the impatient painter.

Despite my efforts I could not source any evidence of Sargent executing a pochade, or even a preliminary sketch, of *Gertrude*. Surely he must have and possibly trashed them later or, maybe, just maybe, they are ensconced in a soggy attic in London.

Sargent made numerous studies for *Lady X*, 1884. Nevertheless, take an hour or two to do a pochade. It's a good rehearsal.



An 8 x 10" canvas or panel is a good size. I used a very limited palette of just four colors: white, yellow ochre, indian red and vine black.

Bear in mind that a pochade is not a fully realized painting in miniature. It is a study of structure, color and pictorial divisions.

The curriculum of the course was to both study and follow Sargent's painting practice as is both known and feasible.

Sargent's teaching, first and foremost, stressed establishing the gesture and planar elements. Apparently, according to the literature, Sargent's students never quite grasped the concept of serving up the half-tones in the abstract. Maybe I have better students.

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Our loaded brushes held out with arm extended, our heads cocked back, and our eyes fallen slightly out-of-focus the large masses of the gesture are struck.

There is no pre-measuring. Except for placing the top of the head. We, like Sargent, are working sight-size. Our paintings are slightly below life size. Just as with the original.

Once gesture is struck to the best of our collective ability we then proceed to verify and prosecute with stylus and plump line our initial strike.

That was the locus of the first session: striking, verifying, correcting, blocking in and serving it up in the abstract from whence the expression develops.



That is how you train your eye to see. Striking is an acquired skill, one that Sargent worked at like a half-starved Bangladeshi orphan sewing clothes for our fast fashion.

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Once satisfied that our strike is accurate we gaily blocked in the ground with much diluted paint. Blocking in the ground with a yellow ochre/burnt sienna (an orange) will later serve to pump up the blue of the background drapery. It also provides a reference point for the initial flesh tones. Gertrude's flesh tone appears quite pale. There is a pallor to her. But her flesh tones are not that light! For the sweet sake of all that remains good in our time do not chalk-out! Better to go a bit darker and warmer at this early stage.

To be continued ... the *ébauche*.

