

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.

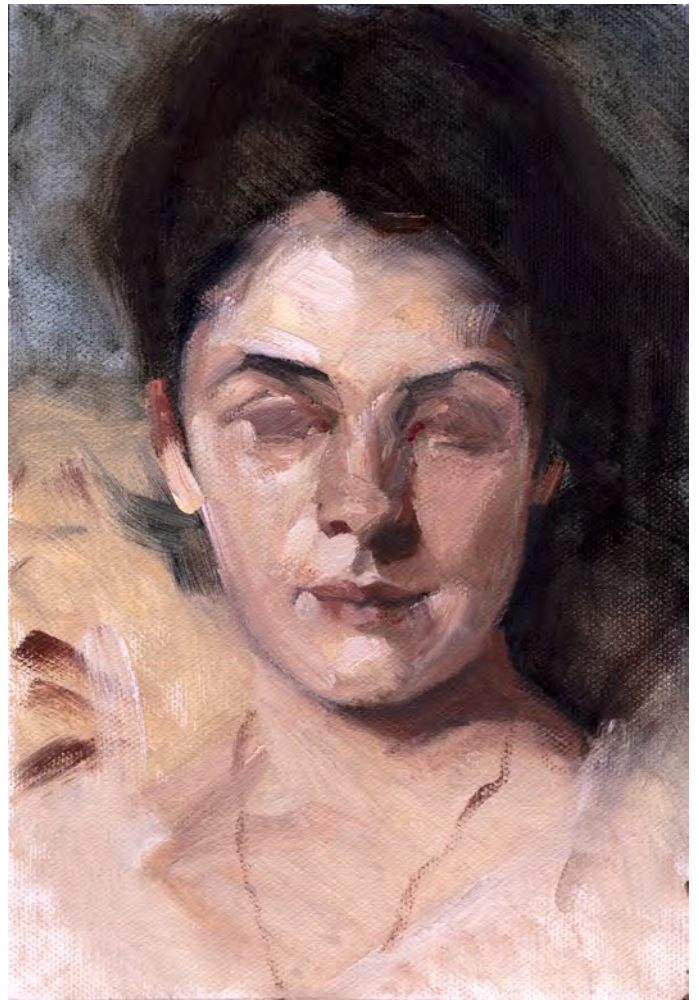
This is a portrait of grand gesture and great subtlety of expression. She is leaning back into a well-stuffed, wing-backed armchair and her head is tilted slightly forward and ever-so-slightly to the right (a 12:02 angle). Her jowl is softened by the vague gathering of the digastric muscles under her 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.



Part 2 : The Ébauche

Serving up the half-tones in the abstract was the core of both John Singer Sargent's painting process and teaching.

What this means is to look past the surface details (namely the features) into the deep structures that define plastic form. Sure, this is an oxymoron—plasticity means giving form to—but it concretizes the idea.

Nuthin' but nuthin' will damn your painting to failure than delving into those perky little eyes and pouty lips at this early stage. Don't go there. Just don't.

Our palette was limited to five colors: titanium-zinc white (flake is much better but four times pricier), yellow ochre, indian red, ivory black and prussian blue.

The beginning artist is well-advised to master this palette with the exception of prussian blue. We used it with indian red plus tint (white) only for the violet hue of Gertrude's sash.

The well-trained advanced artist can render a wide array of flesh tones with this limited palette. Less is always more. It is many times better to invest in a small range of high quality oils (Old Holland, Michael Harding, Rublev) than a vast army of mediocre paints.

In the ébauche render your values a little darker and warmer than the final intent. And use BIG brushes! Either #24 or larger rounds and/or filberts. This effects a richer painting at the end of the day.



Our medium for the ébauche was four parts solvent (I prefer good ole fashion turpentine, but this being a workshop we used Gamsol.) to one part linseed oil.

To our initial half-tones we added calcium carbonate. This is both an extender that bulks up the paint and a siccativ. A siccativ hastens the drying process; a particularly useful additive for workshops.

Shown here is a demonstration painting on panel of Gertrude at the ébauche stage. Admittedly I went further than I should have with the mouth. But the audience egged me on with much enthusiasm. Well, for Tokyo it was a lot of egging. Needless to say I obliged.



Painting before an audience requires a heaping dose of showmanship. William Merritt Chase's live demonstrations in 1890's New York were akin to Netflix stand-up specials. He was a consummate showman and a mighty fine painter to boot.

The essential criteria of the ébauche is patterning. This goes hand-in-hand with serving up the half-tones in the abstract. Patterning is establishing the placements, movements and rhythms of the large shapes.

Acquiring a sensibility to movement and rhythm is done so through copying master paintings and having an understanding of the harmonious divisions of pictorial space.

Once again, and at great risk of being logorrheic, it all comes down to getting those fundamentals under your belt.

To be continued ... the pentimento

