

# Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

*John Singer Sargent Watercolors*

April 5–July 28, 2013



## About the Artist

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) was born in Florence, Italy, to expatriate American parents. He had a nomadic childhood, spending winters in Florence, Rome, or Nice and summers in the Alps or other cooler locations. Sargent decided to become an artist at an early age. His ambition was supported by his mother, Mary Newbold Sargent, who was herself an accomplished amateur watercolorist. Sargent and his mother carried sketchbooks throughout their extensive travels across Europe, and he developed a quick eye and fast reflexes for recording his impressions of the landscape. Sargent's earliest recorded watercolors date from 1868, when he was twelve. At the age of eighteen, he went to study in the Paris studio of the portrait painter Carolus-Duran, who encouraged him to paint directly onto the canvas, without any preparatory drawing, and to study the Old Masters.

Although Sargent painted and exhibited both landscapes and portraits to much acclaim, his reputation as a portrait painter quickly soared, making him the leading society portraitist on both sides of the Atlantic by 1900. Sargent grew restless at the height of his career, however, and sought escape from the constraints of the studio and the demands of his patrons. Outdoor sketching provided an antidote to portraiture: he could travel to remote spots, choose his own subjects, and paint without distraction. Watercolor, a medium he loved and had practiced since childhood, allowed him to paint rapidly and with minimal preparation of materials. After 1900 Sargent spent his summers traveling throughout Europe, painting both oil paintings and watercolors.

## About the Exhibition

*John Singer Sargent Watercolors* is the first expansive exhibition of Sargent watercolors in twenty years. A joint project of the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the exhibition features ninety-three watercolors created by Sargent between 1901 and 1911, as well as nine of the artist's oil paintings. The exhibition is based on a yearlong focused study of the Sargent watercolors by a core team of three curators and two conservators who were investigating the question, what makes a watercolor a Sargent watercolor? The team was determined to learn how Sargent created his watercolors and to understand the significance of these paintings, which have often been dismissed as “vacation paintings” in relation to his larger body of work.







## Sargent's Materials and Process

Sargent was active as a watercolorist throughout his life, simultaneously developing his skills in this medium and in oil painting. His watercolor practice flourished after 1902, when he decided to devote several months each year to the medium. Sargent was quick and prolific with his watercolors. Over the course of three seasons, he painted about 230 works, averaging about one each day.

For working outdoors, Sargent used special supplies: sketching umbrellas for protection against the wind and the sun's glare, a low stool and bench, a portable easel, and commercially prepared portable paint sets. The paints themselves came in both tubes and pans. Additional materials included prestretched paper, graphite pencils for under- and overdrawing, sponges and scrapers for applying and removing paint, containers for water, a palette, and a variety of watercolor brushes.

Sargent thought strategically about the selection of the scene, the effects of light and color, and the formal elements of each composition. Once these elements of the painting were in place, his process flowed smoothly. For some works he used underdrawing, while in others he painted directly onto the paper without a preparatory sketch.

Sargent called watercolor painting "making the best of an emergency," perhaps referring to the unforgiving qualities of the medium, which dries quickly and leaves little room for mistakes.<sup>1</sup> He was well prepared for these "emergencies," possessing a dazzling array of watercolor techniques that allowed him to improvise as he went along. In a single painting, he might apply wet washes with a brush or sponge, leave areas of white paper exposed to impart a sense of brilliant light, brush paint over a wax resist to create texture and luminosity, scratch the surface with a knife or the other end of the brush to carve out details, add overdrawing with a graphite pencil, and produce highlights with impasto and/or bright white paint.

The conservation team for the exhibition employed advanced technology to analyze Sargent's masterful watercolor technique. Ultraviolet and microscopic examination was used to distinguish the order in which Sargent applied the media and to determine colors and types of paint he used, and infrared reflectography revealed underdrawings that are invisible to the naked eye.

## Glossary

Composition	The plan, placement, or arrangement of visual elements in an artwork.
Drybrush	Dragging a brush loaded with paint (and not much water) over completely dry paper, creating a skipping brushstroke.
En plein air	French for “in the open air,” used mainly to describe paintings that have been executed outdoors, rather than in the studio.
Glazing	Applying a thin layer of paint over a dry wash or area of impasto in order to adjust the color and tone of the underlying paint.
Lifting off	Removing paint by rewetting it with a brush and clean water, and then blotting it away with a tissue or sponge.
Impasto	A very thick application of paint that creates a raised surface.
Wash	A broad, uniform covering of diluted, translucent watercolor, applied with a continuous movement of the brush.
Wax resist	A clear wax material used in areas to prevent the surface from receiving paint, thereby creating highlights.
Wet into wet	Applying paint to a wet area of the paper or allowing wet colors to bleed and blend into one another. Color applied in this way usually dries without a hard edge, creating atmospheric effects.
Underdrawing	A preliminary sketch made on a surface prior to painting.

## About the Artwork



The bow of a gondola in the foreground of *The Bridge of Sighs* places the viewer in the center of a narrow Venetian canal. Beneath a pale blue wash of sky, the arched bridge and the columns and windows of the building at the left are illuminated by the sun. Another gondola passes on the right, with two gondoliers sweeping their poles through the water and passengers shading themselves under umbrellas. Sunlight casts reflections on the water, while the buildings at the right lie in deep blue shadow.

Sargent employed a wide range of painting techniques in *The Bridge of Sighs*. For the figures, he used a very high white impasto, which he then glazed with color. He achieved the effect of the sun's rays on the limestone bridge by allowing the white of the paper to show through, adding just a tint of color. To add highlights, Sargent outlined the gondola, gondoliers, passengers, and poles with a red-pigmented material.

*The Bridge of Sighs* is one of at least eighty canal scenes that Sargent painted in Venice between 1902 and 1904. He spoke fluent Italian and felt at home in Venice, a city he referred to as “a sort of fountain of youth.”<sup>2</sup> The artist and his gondolier would travel the canals, searching for ideal places to stop and paint. The Bridge of Sighs would have been an evocative subject: it was once connected to a prison, and its name comes from the idea that prisoners would sigh at their final views of Venice through the window before being taken down to their cells. A local legend says that lovers will be granted eternal bliss if they kiss on a gondola at sunset under the bridge.

## About the Artwork



*Mountain Fire* captures the smoke and haze of a fire as it envelops a mountainside. The mountain's jagged peaks are visible at the top of the painting, while toward the bottom, patches of green and brown, created with lifting and scraping techniques, suggest a forest. Specks of thick vermilion are dotted throughout the foreground, indicating the flames of the fire. To create the atmospheric look of smoke as it billows over the mountain, Sargent used washes of color mixed with zinc white. Watery blue washes throughout the painting contribute to the sense of haziness. This watercolor is one of Sargent's most abstract images. Rather than create a clear foreground and background, he compressed the distance in the painting, rendering the space and the viewer's perspective ambiguous.

## Questions for Viewing *The Bridge of Sighs* and *Mountain Fire*

What do you notice about each painting's composition? What is the viewer's vantage point?

Imagine that you are the artist, painting these two scenes outdoors. What might be challenging about painting each place? Why do you think Sargent chose to paint these particular views?

How do you think Sargent began each painting? What did he paint first? Last? Compare the two paintings in terms of their subject matter and style. What similarities and differences can you find?

What kinds of brushstrokes did Sargent make to create each painting? Using a pencil or brush, re-create some of the brushstrokes that you find in the paintings.

What do you notice about Sargent's use of light? Which watercolor techniques do you think he used?

Which landscape would you like to visit? Why?



## Activities

### ART-MAKING: HOW DID HE DO IT?

Fold a paper in half three times in order to make eight horizontal rows. Watercolor paper works best, but you can also use heavy white construction paper. In each box, practice one of the watercolor techniques listed in the glossary. (Crayons work well as a wax resist.)

Once you have practiced each of these techniques, try to find examples of each in the two paintings. Can you find any other ways that Sargent used watercolor paint? Once you have investigated the techniques in both paintings, create a watercolor painting that uses all of them.

For those more advanced with watercolor paint: Print a color copy of one of the two paintings and cut it into several sections. Using one section at a time, try to reproduce the effects that Sargent achieved with watercolor paint. Keep notes on your process, identifying each technique that you use.

### ART AND SCIENCE: BE A CONSERVATOR

An art conservator is a person who preserves and sometimes repairs works of art. Conservators do valuable research on works of art—looking at them very carefully and using science and technology to make discoveries about them—that helps us to understand the object and the artist's process. Try your hand at conservation by analyzing a painting. Create a watercolor painting (see above) and, once it is dry, trade with a partner. Use a magnifying glass to take a close look at your partner's painting. What do you notice about the artist's process? See if you can determine which colors, materials (type of brushes, paper, and tools for adding and removing paint), and techniques were used. Was there an underdrawing? What sequence of techniques did your partner use to achieve the finished work? Create a report that outlines your hypotheses and present it to your partner. Discuss the accuracy of your findings.

## LANGUAGE ARTS

### Sensory Poetry

Sargent expressed the atmosphere of a specific place through paint. Use poetry to do the same. Look closely at one of these paintings and imagine what you would smell, taste, see, feel, and hear if you were to step inside it. Write a sensory poem, using descriptive language for each of the five senses. Share your poem with a friend and see what connections he or she can find between your words and Sargent's painting.

### Travel Writing

Imagine that you are the artist and write a postcard to a friend, telling him or her about your travels and the painting you created today. Describe your artistic process, the challenges and successes you faced, how you feel about this place, and why you chose to paint it. If you wish, create your own postcard image in watercolor.

## Resources

Hirshler, Erica E., and Teresa A. Carbone. *John Singer Sargent Watercolors*. Introduction by Richard Ormond. Technical essays by Annette Manick and Antoinette Owen. Contributions by Karen A. Sherry, Janet Chen, and Connie H. Choi. Exh. cat. Boston: MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2013.

The fully illustrated catalogue to the exhibition *John Singer Sargent Watercolors* was co-authored by the collaborative exhibition team and copublished by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Brooklyn Museum.

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sarg/hd\\_sarg.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sarg/hd_sarg.htm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History has a feature on John Singer Sargent, including images from their collection and essays on his life and work.

<http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/Learn/schoolteacher/pdf/teacherlessonpdf/Sargent.pdf>

This extensive teacher resource from the Seattle Art Museum focuses on the major themes of Sargent's work, with lots of lesson ideas.

This text was written by Senior Museum Educator Nicola Giardina, with assistance from School Programs Manager Alexa Fairchild, Senior Paper Conservator Antoinette Owen, and Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art Teresa Carbone.

*John Singer Sargent Watercolors* is organized by the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The exhibition is co-curated by Teresa A. Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, and Erica E. Hirshler, Croll Senior Curator of American Paintings, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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## Notes

1. Quoted in John Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 95, quoted in Erica E. Hirshler and Teresa A. Carbone, *John Singer Sargent Watercolors*, exh. cat. (Boston: MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2013), 228n54.

2. Sargent to Ariana Curtis, [May] 27, [1898], Sargent Papers, Boston Athenaeum, box 1, folder 11, quoted in Hirshler and Carbone, *John Singer Sargent Watercolors*, 229n1.

**Cover (detail), pages 5, 8: John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925). *Mountain Fire*, circa 1906–7. Opaque and translucent watercolor. Brooklyn Museum, Purchased by Special Subscription, 09.831**

**Page 2: Sarah Choate Sears (American, 1858–1935). John Singer Sargent, circa 1903. Photograph. © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston**

**Page 3: Sargent sketching in the Simplon Pass, circa 1909–11. Photograph. Private collection**

**Pages 4, 9: John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925). *The Bridge of Sighs*, circa 1903–4. Translucent and opaque watercolor with graphite and red-pigmented underdrawing. Brooklyn Museum, Purchased by Special Subscription, 09.819**

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