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Exhibition note

by *Mario Naves*

On "John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal" at the Morgan Library & Museum.

Charcoal is among the most generous and frustrating of drawing mediums. Generous in that it lends itself to ready manipulation and, as such, is forgiving in its malleability; each mark and erasure increases the depth and tactility of both the image and the sheet of paper itself. Frustrating because its material consistency makes for dirt, and lots of it. Ingraining itself into the nooks and crannies of the hand, charcoal will also leave a halo of black dust on the area surrounding the drawing surface. Anyone who has even briefly experimented with charcoal quickly realizes its potential as well as its liabilities. You either love or hate the stuff. Having said that, bets are that folks on either side of this split will exit "John Singer Sargent: Portraits in Charcoal" energized, amazed, and delighted. Sargent had a singular gift for oils and watercolor; we all know that. But charcoal? That comes as a surprise, though less for Sargent's deftness of touch than for his delving into the medium at all.

The Morgan show is, in fact, the first time a museum has dedicated itself exclusively to Sargent's efforts in charcoal. Organized by Richard Ormond—the coauthor of the Sargent catalogue raisonné, former director of London's National Portrait Gallery, and grand-nephew of the artist—along with Laurel Peterson, the Moore Curatorial Fellow in the Morgan's Department of Drawings and Prints, "Portraits in Charcoal" is an exhibition whose aesthetic reach goes beyond its modest scale. The fifty some drawings on display have been installed with a gentility that befits the era and milieu in which they were created—that is to say, Victorian, aristocratic, and artistic. Should there be a hue and cry from the politically correct among us regarding the 1 percent for whom Sargent plied his trade, well, they can stand in line behind the artist himself. At the age of fifty-one, the much sought-after portraitist declared there would be "no more paughtraits . . . I abhor and abjure them and hope never to do another especially of the Upper Classe."

John Singer Sargent, Gertrude Kingston, ca. *1909, Charcoal on paper, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, U.K.*

This distaste didn't prevent Sargent from allowing himself some wiggle room. He was, after all, wise to the status and possibility afforded by hobnobbing with the social elite. While Sargent gave up portraiture in oils, he continued doing "a lot of mugs in coke and charcoal." A "lot"? Think seven hundred and fifty. For the cultured classes, a Sargent charcoal portrait was *de rigueur*. Writing in the catalogue, Ormond wryly notes that "How do you like your Sargent drawing?" became a query that peppered London dinner parties, practically guaranteeing responses from all and sundry. Not that Sargent's clients were always pleased by the drawings. Lady Cynthia

Asquith summarily dismissed Sargent's portrayal of her as being "the foulest woman I have ever seen." The son of Bishop William Lawrence donated a portrait of his father to Washington's National Gallery, stating that "we would be glad to have it a thousand miles from home." Sargent was not uncritical of his own work. Writing to Edith Wharton about a charcoal portrait of their mutual friend Henry James, Sargent predicted that "I shall not be surprised if you pronounce it a failure."

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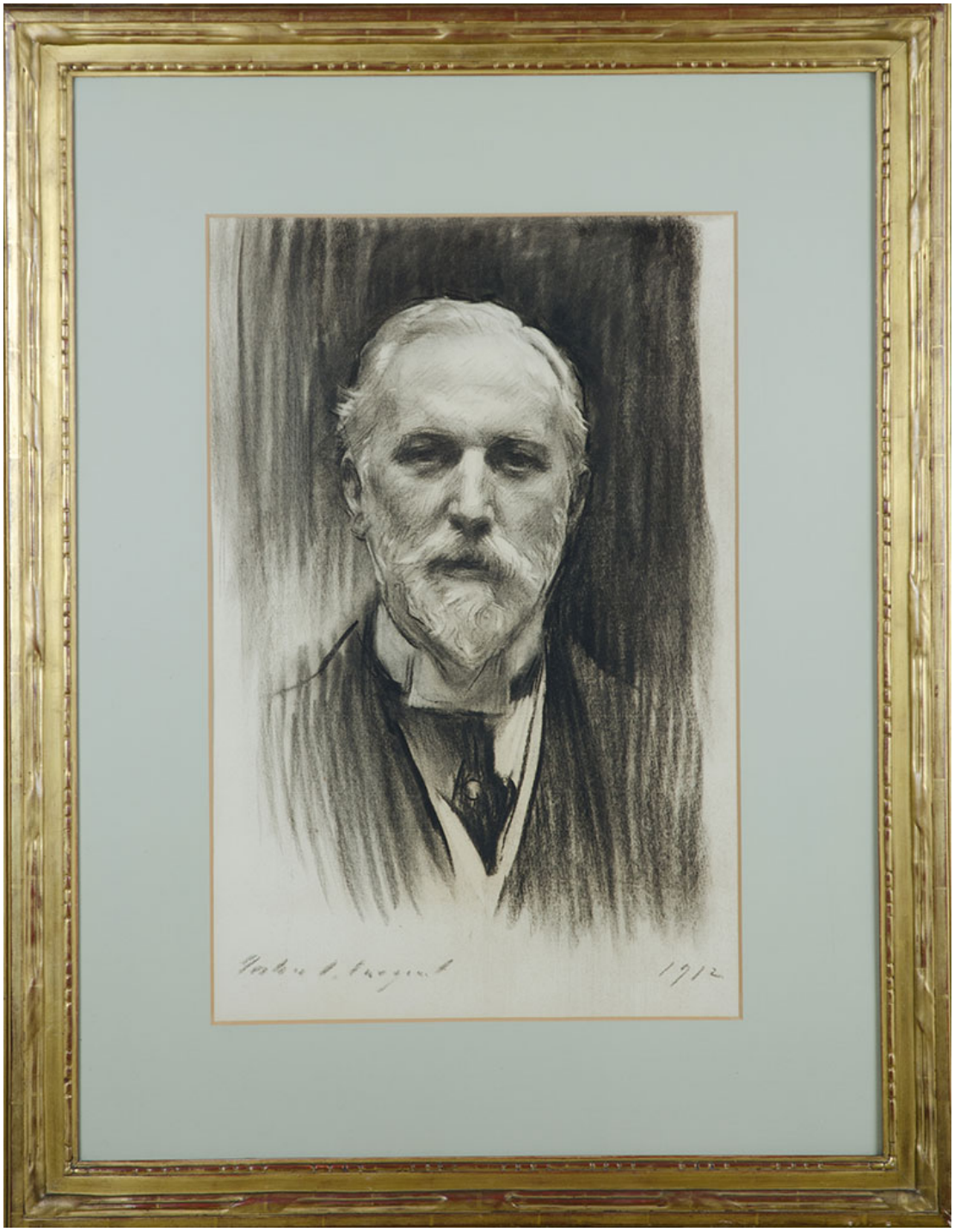
The typical viewer has the advantage of not being personally or professionally invested. We are at a welcome remove, here, in the twenty-first century, even when the portraits are figures whose import still resonates. The aforementioned drawing of Henry James is included in "Portraits in Charcoal"—looking not at all a failure, by the way—as are portraits of the poet William Butler Yeats, a twenty-three-year-old Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (later Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother), the actress Ethel Barrymore, and Winston Churchill—who, though somewhat put off by Sargent's picture, thought one "must not look a gift portrait in the mouth." A double self-portrait from 1902 opens the show, and it is the stiffest thing on display. Pictured as serious and somewhat cherubic, Sargent doesn't do much more than skim the shallows of representation. Ormond needn't remind us of the artist's reticence while taking in the drawing; it's there to scan. Virtuosity was wasted on self-portraiture—a point made abundantly clear by *Lady Evelyn Charteris Vesey, Viscountess de Vesci* (1910), a drawing placed in close vicinity to the *Double Self-Portrait*.



John Singer Sargent, Robert Henry Benson*, 1912, Charcoal on paper, Property of Mr. Robin Benson.*

Talk about a lack of reticence! Lady de Vesci is a woman to be reckoned with—elegant, to be sure, and possessed of an intellect as keen as it is unforgiving. We tread lightly lest we incur her displeasure. And so it goes: one drawing after another, wiped, smeared, and dabbed at until an uncanny sense of personhood emerges from the gritty depths of the medium. Portrait commissions tend toward flattery, and Sargent wasn't averse to confirming youth, beauty, status, and dignity when the occasion called for it. But portraiture, at its finest, discloses and elaborates upon the human spirit—its depths and sorrows, convictions and contradictions. The greatest portraits are put into motion with empathy, acuity, and, on the part of the artist anyway, necessary

understatement. Whatever the backstory to the lives of Rabbi Charles Fleischer, Major Henry Lee Higginson, Eugenia Huici Errázuriz, or Ellen Peabody Endicott, you will know them in significant measure after encountering them through Sargent's hands. Congratulations to all concerned at the Morgan. "Portraits in Charcoal" is an astonishing exhibition.

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