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The Spanish Sargent

by Karen Wilkin

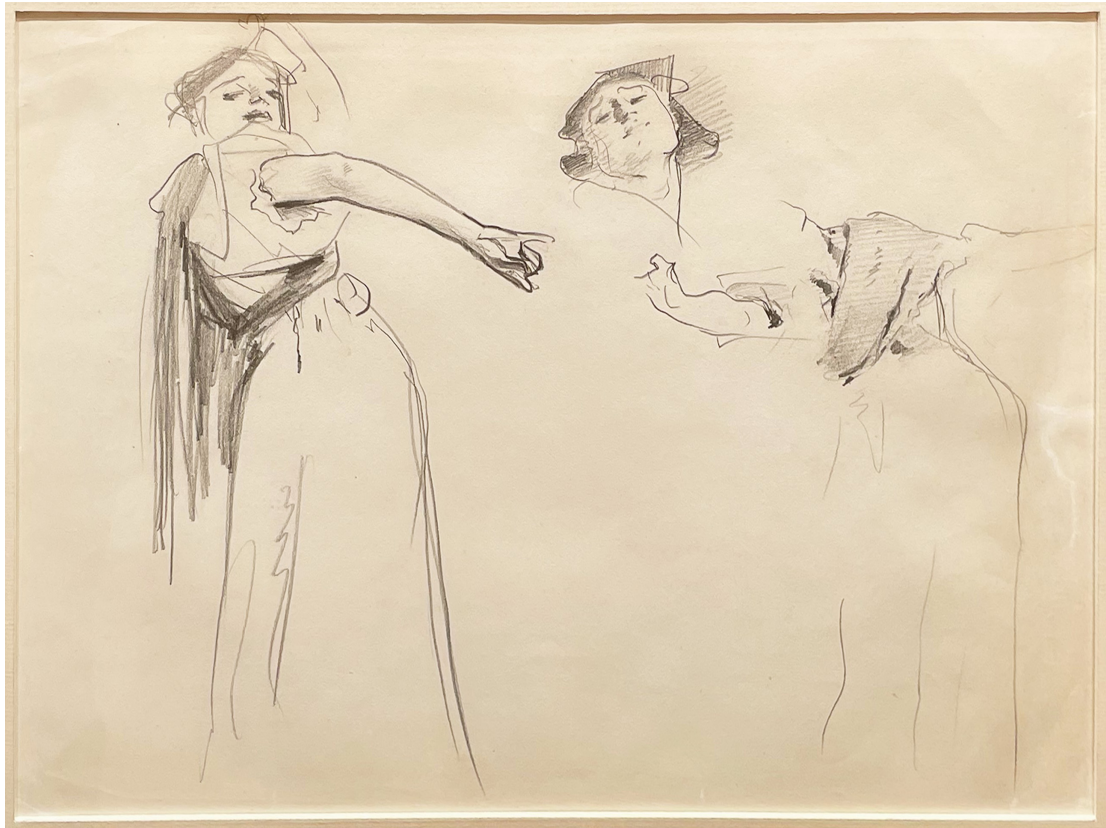
On “Sargent and Spain” at the National Gallery of Art.

In 1879, the twenty-three-year-old John Singer Sargent, having recently completed his studies at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, made his first trip to Spain as an adult; he had last been there when he was twelve, on a family trip. (Born in Florence in 1856 to expatriate American parents, he died in London in 1925). Sargent returned to Spain six more times before 1912, crossing the country from the Pyrenees to Gibraltar, from Santiago de Compostela to Majorca, and spending extended time in Madrid, Barcelona, and Granada. He studied the work of Diego Velázquez, Francisco Goya, and El Greco and paid close attention, as well, to Moorish architecture, Flamenco dancers, ruined mansions, monuments, gardens, the landscape, and the occasional pig herder, reveling in all things Iberian. He recorded his responses with pencil sketches, fluid watercolors, and oils, done on the spot, exploiting his virtuosity to make works at once apparently casual and faultlessly evocative of both his chosen subjects and the play of intense light. Like any tourist in the era before cellphones, he acquired postcard images and photographs of places and works of art that he found particularly compelling, taking some photos himself and eventually amassing an archive of about six hundred pictures.



John Singer Sargent, Sierra Nevada, 1912, Oil on canvas, National Museum of Wales.

Sargent's teachers in Paris, Carolus-Duran and Léon Bonnat, had been passionate admirers of Velázquez and recommended close study of his work. Their phenomenally gifted former student enthusiastically followed their advice, but his enduring connection with the country was deeper than his interest in a single painter and manifested itself in different ways. In 1879, the eager, newly fledged artist copied specific Spanish masterworks in the Prado, as if hoping to unlock and emulate their virtues. In 1890, his reputation firmly established, he relied upon his experience of Spanish devotional works and his photographs and drawings of Spanish art as sources for imagery when he was commissioned to paint murals for the Special Collection Hall of the Boston Public Library. (He chose the theme "The Triumph of Religion.") Now "Sargent and Spain" at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., celebrates the painter's long fascination with the art, architecture, landscape, and people of Iberia.¹ Organized by Sarah Cash, the museum's associate curator of American and British paintings, with Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, both authorities on the artist and authors of the Sargent catalogue raisonné, the exhibition assembles paintings, watercolors, drawings, and selections from the artist's hoard of photographs, including some of his own.



John Singer Sargent, Studies of a Spanish Dancer, ca. 1880–81, Graphite on paper, Jan and Warren Adelson, Courtesy of Adelson Galleries, New York.

Divided into sections titled “Studying the Masters,” “Spanish Dance and La Carmencita,” “Architecture and Gardens,” “The Land and Its People,” “Majorca,” and “Spirituality and Religion,” the show traces the artist’s evolving relationship with the country and its culture, mainly thematically rather than chronologically, though it begins with the studies he made in the Prado on that first trip. The young Sargent painted closely observed details from Velázquez’s *The Forge of Vulcan* and *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*, as well as the head of his full-length *Aesop*. In a small version of Velázquez’s magnificent *Las Meninas*, Sargent paid scrupulous attention to the fall of light, the individual characteristics of each figure, and the subtle orchestration of subdued tones, but he blurred the face of the little infanta in the center of the painting. He captured the essential character of the pictures he studied with rapid, broad touches of paint, deliberately, it seems, ignoring the miraculously disembodied surfaces that make Velázquez’s earlier work so astonishing. Sargent appears to have relied on his own considerable facility to translate Velázquez’s excellences into a distinctive, personal idiom unquestionably of his own time, already exploiting the bravura brushwork that later distinguished his portraits—the gorgeous paint-handling that often makes the clothing of his wealthy sitters far more interesting than their likenesses. Sargent responded similarly to Goya’s ceiling paintings in San Antonio de la Florida, ignoring the crisp images of people peering down into the church from the crossing to make, instead, a diaphanous study of the angels on the ceiling of a transept.

Two of Sargent's later portraits are included among these early copies, evidence, we are told, of the persistence of the lessons of Spanish painting in his work. In one, from about 1888, a young boy stands in front of a red drape; in another, made in 1904–05 to commemorate the hundredth birthday of a celebrated Spanish singer, the immensely

dignified subject sits in profile against an indeterminate dark expanse. The poses, the fall of light, and the neutrality of the backgrounds, we learn, are echoes of Velázquez's portraits. But Sargent's most overt homage to the Spanish master, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), is not in the show, represented only by a small reproduction on a label. Painted a few years after Sargent returned from his initial trip to Spain, the shadowy image of four young girls in white pinafores resonates with his study of *Las Meninas*. The geometry and the sensuous light and shade of Velázquez's masterpiece haunt Sargent's image of his painter friend's family in their Paris apartment. Reflections in a mirror, upper right, correspond to the backlighting of a figure in a doorway in *Las Meninas*, while the pose and placement of the youngest child, seated on the floor in the foreground, in a pool of light, reprise the triangular shape and horizontal spread of the massive dog front and center in *Las Meninas*. It may be Sargent's best painting.

Sargent translated Velázquez's excellences into a distinctive, personal idiom unquestionably of his own time.



John Singer Sargent, La Carmencita Dancing, 1890, Oil on canvas, Private collection.

The next gallery, devoted to Sargent's engagement with Spanish dance and music, includes multiple drawn and painted studies for the dramatic scene of Flamenco dancing *El Jaleo* (1882), which, like *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, is represented only by a small

comparative image. El Jaleo remains in its theatrical setting in the eponymous museum of Sargent's friend Isabella Stewart Gardner. Nominally about the feverish intensity of a dance performance, the painting is equally about the voluptuous pool of darkness enveloping dancers and black-clad musicians set against a pale wall. Some slightly earlier paintings of dancing couples, curved together back-to-back, as off-kilter as the main figure in El Jaleo, are similarly enveloped in brushy darkness, punctuated with flickering lights. We learn that Sargent's exposure to Flamenco, an improvised art form practiced by the Roma people, was through staged performances, rather than from events held in the places where the dancers lived. This information is accompanied by an apology: "Portrayals of Roma as beguiling performers have enabled their othering." Elsewhere in the installation, there are generous, generally approving comments by contemporary Roma scholars and activists on Sargent's representations of what one writer calls gitanos, "gypsies," including a scene of Roma life in whitewashed caves in the hillside above Granada. (A footnote informs us that some Spanish Roma, including the author of the text, have reclaimed the word gitanos, should anyone take offense.)

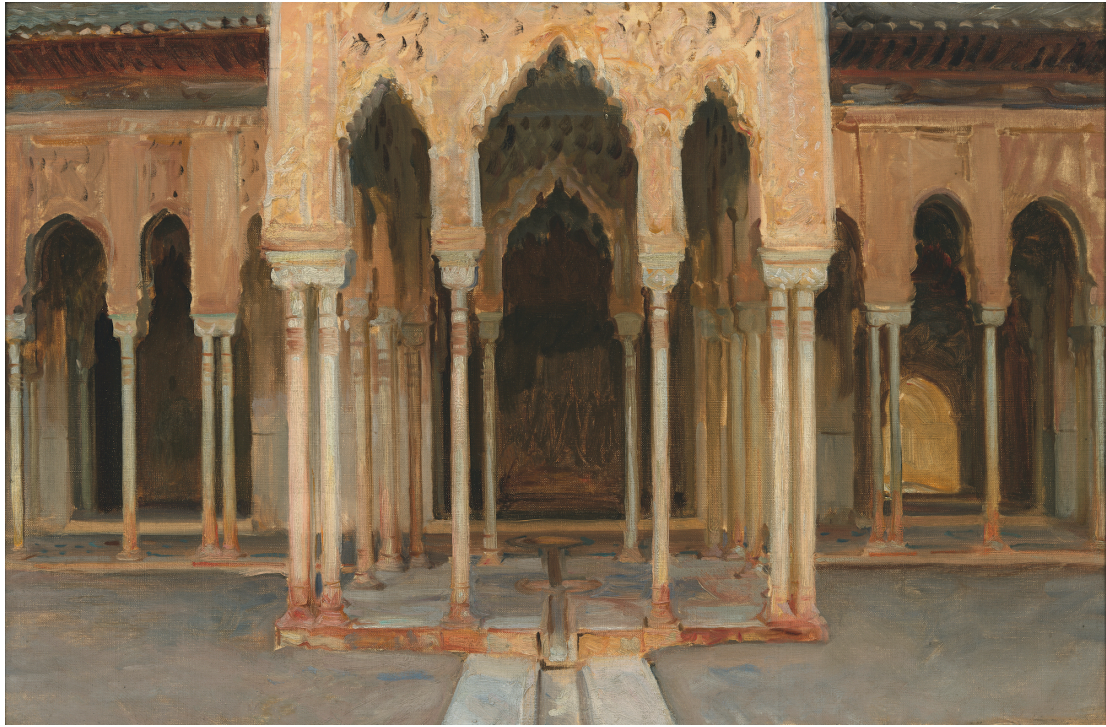
The dance and music gallery is dominated by large portraits executed in 1890 of the celebrated La Carmencita, who performed in Europe and the United States. In one, she is upright and imperious, clothed in yellow silk stiff with embroidery, with a wide, rigid skirt, like a Velázquez infanta. In another, La Carmencita, in white, becomes an explosion of fringe and ruffles against a warm ground. Only an outstretched arm and angled profile suggest the dancer within the flurry of brushstrokes, evoking sinuous movement more vividly than a nearby film clip from Edison Studios, showing the dancer executing a spiraling bend. Other works depict musicians, a special interest of Sargent's, an accomplished pianist himself.

He continued, though, to probe the secrets of Spanish painting.

Sargent's drawings and portraits of La Carmencita mark the end of his interest in Spanish dancers. On subsequent trips to Spain, he seems to have concentrated on architecture, the landscape, and its

inhabitants. He continued, though, to probe the secrets of Spanish painting, if we are to judge from a study after an El Greco dated 1895. A photograph made on that trip shows Sargent at work in the Court of the Lions, Alhambra, standing at his easel in shirtsleeves, coat neatly draped over one of the lions that give the arcaded space its name, a straw boater shading his eyes. The symmetrical, meticulous painting of the court's delicate columns that resulted is installed nearby. More engaging are apparently rapid, broadly painted images in oil on panel or watercolor, mostly made on Sargent's last trip to Spain in 1912: a sun-drenched street in Santiago de Compostela, a marble fountain in dappled light, against shady trees, or the decaying courtyard of a sixteenth-century mansion in Granada, its rough paving suggested by staccato strokes of off-pink; elaborate capitals, now crumbling, and pack mules resting in the space confirm the derelict state of the once-splendid building. Works like these and related studies of buildings and garden monuments are notably fresh and direct, seemingly so definitive that it comes as a surprise to learn that Sargent also

photographed some of his motifs, as if testing viewpoints. Three slightly different views of a fountain in the courtyard of a Granada hospital accompany a luminous watercolor of the elaborately carved structure, painted from a closer, lower point of view than that of any of the photos.



John Singer Sargent, Alhambra, Patio de los Leones (Court of the Lions), 1895, Oil on canvas, Private collection.

The following section, “The Land and Its People,” includes works made on almost all of Sargent’s trips, from first to last. An urgent oil from about 1903 of a stable crowded with pack mules all but dissolves into vigorous ribbons and swipes of paint, disciplined by a firm circular structure of overlapping animal bodies radiating around a large patch of tawny shadow. More problematic are what might be called genre scenes, all painted in 1912: figures crowded on a sunny loggia in a Granada hospital whose Renaissance art and architecture made it a recommended tourist destination; a stony expanse populated by women at work; a “Spanish Roma dwelling,” with women and children of all ages seated outside and a man, cropped by the edge of the canvas, inspecting the teeth of a mule. Sargent builds these images with repetitive, fairly uniform touches of pigment, as if wanting, on some level, to translate the scene into an allusive, all-over tapestry of light and color. But his ability to replicate the visible is so powerful that the space and details of the chosen location, along with the specifics of each person included, remain stubbornly literal, tugging at that fabric of patchy light and dark. In these and in the landscapes made about the same time, Sargent relies on local color, slightly simplified to accentuate mauves and burnt sienna lightened with white. It becomes predictable.

The next galleries, devoted to works made on two trips to Majorca in 1908, suggest that Sargent could be somewhat more adventurous about color and more interested in broad planes, at least

when confronted by the dazzling blue water and light reflected on hulls of white ships or the lush foliage and glowing fruits of pomegranate trees. But as soon as he addressed Majorca's dry hillsides with their rows of olive trees, the patchiness and the mauve/burnt-sienna palette returned. It may be Sargent's sheer facility that makes these paintings so difficult—his ability to achieve (or insistence on achieving) a startling degree of verisimilitude even when a figure is reduced to a few strokes. I'm not sure why I'm so resistant to this kind of technical excellence, but it often feels too clever by half. The most engaging of the paintings done in Majorca is *Mosquito Nets* (1908, Detroit Institute of Arts), a tightly cropped image of Sargent's sister and her friend, who joined him on his second trip to the island. The two women, decorously dressed in black, are absorbed in their reading, protected by nets supported by an extraordinary system of hoops over their heads and shoulders. Red upholstery and a pale wall set off the expanse of the black dresses, while the mood of indolence, concentration, and complete obliviousness to the absurdity of the anti-insect contraptions makes this surprising composition irresistible.



John Singer Sargent, Mosquito Nets, 1908, Oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase.

The last gallery, titled "Spirituality and Religion," includes drawings and watercolors of religious architecture and devotional sculpture, made with Sargent's customary virtuosity and apparent speed, mainly during the years when he was working on the "Triumph of Religion" murals for the Boston Public Library. Yet an economical, carefully observed watercolor of a Spanish crucifix with an emaciated Christ, made about 1879, seems to inform a drawing of a bony, strained torso, made after 1903 in connection with the mural project and its bronze relief of the

Crucifixion, suggesting that Sargent mined his collection of Spanish images (among other things) as source material. Large photographs of sections of the murals particularly relevant to the watercolors on view help us to understand the effect of the studies on the completed project. Elsewhere, everything we have been looking at is contextualized by enlarged versions of the only known photographs of Sargent in Spain, along with views of his studios, including some of his copies of Spanish paintings on the wall. A panoramic view of the installation at the Prado at the time Sargent visited the Madrid museum shows works he copied, further helping to bring his travels to life.

The handsome, copiously illustrated catalogue, with essays by the curators and other scholars, explores, in some depth, such fascinating topics as Sargent's interest in the work of both Velázquez and the Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla, whom he got to know fairly well, among other Spanish moderns, in addition to probing the challenges of portraying Spanish dance. Some works, such as the patchy ones I was troubled by, look better in reproduction, but the physicality of Sargent's brushwork makes seeing the real thing essential. No one who visits the show will ever again think of him only as the painter of the glittering society portraits that established and sustained his reputation.

1. "Sargent and Spain" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., on October 2, 2022, and remains on view through January 2, 2023.

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