



## Sargent's Women

By Warren Adelson

In the summer of 2002, we purchased a collection of letters at auction in London. They were written by John Singer Sargent to Madame Allouard-Jouan whose portrait he had painted in about 1882 (Musée du Petit-Palais, Paris). Until these letters surfaced, little was known about the life of Madame Allouard-Jouan or her relationship with the artist. The mystery was compounded by a sheet from one of the letters (Fig. 1), reproduced in the auction catalogue. It was written in a neat, girlish handwriting, describing a portrait as a “chef d’oeuvre,” or masterpiece, and signed “Amélie Gautreau.” Other references to the Gautreaus were scattered throughout the correspondence. The letters – with the one exception of Amélie Gautreau’s note – were written in French in Sargent’s hand. His penmanship in any of the several languages in which he wrote is decipherable only to the highly initiated, and we realized that if we wanted to understand the letters, we would have to buy them. When the packet arrived in New York, we were very excited. The immediate question in our minds was: Who was Amélie Gautreau? We knew that the name of the sitter of *Madame X* (1883-1884, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) was Virginie Gautreau.

It was at this time that my colleague Elizabeth Oustinoff met Deborah Davis, who was working on *Strapless*, a recently published biography of Madame Gautreau. Deborah has unearthed remarkable information on Sargent’s sitter and immediately recognized the identity of Amélie as that of the infamous “Madame X.” She explained that the lady’s complete name was Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau; but since Madame Gautreau’s mother and grandmother had both been given the same name, Virginie, she distinguished herself from them by calling herself Amélie. We had possession of a document written by the infamous Madame X herself in which she called her portrait a masterpiece. In terms of Sargent scholarship, this seemingly casual remark was astonishing. This statement, in her hand, contradicted a hundred years of folklore claiming that she and her family hated the painting. To compound our excitement, on the other side of the

same letter were two paragraphs in Sargent's hand: both painter and sitter had written to a mutual friend on one sheet of paper.

The John Singer Sargent catalogue raisonné project was initiated in 1980, springing in inspiration from my first exhibition, *John Singer Sargent –his Own Work*, at Coe Kerr Gallery. It was in that year that Richard Ormond and I decided to go ahead with the enormous undertaking of organizing the body of Sargent's work. We knew that there were thousands of oil paintings and watercolors that had to be listed chronologically, photographed, and researched. Provenances, bibliographical references, and exhibition histories needed to be determined for each work of art, and authenticity had to be determined. Since then, Richard and Elaine Kilmurray, along with Elizabeth Oustinoff, I, and others, have worked steadily on this project. Along the way, we have been involved with many Sargent exhibitions: *Sargent at Broadway* (Coe Kerr Gallery, New York, 1986) and *Sargent Abroad* (Adelson Galleries, New York, 1997); Richard and Elaine have curated *John Singer Sargent* (Tate Gallery, London, 1998) and *Sargent and Italy* (Ferrara, 2002). The first two portrait volumes of the catalogue raisonné have been published by the Yale University Press, and the third volume is to be released as of this writing. In these almost two and a half decades, we have seen thousands of paintings by this artist. Despite this broad exposure and deep familiarity with Sargent's work, the artist himself has remained illusive. His personal life was always guarded. The majority of his personal correspondence was destroyed by his sisters on his death, and almost nothing written by his hand that remains reveals much about his inner-self. Even his life-long friend Evan Charteris shed little light on the artist's love life when he wrote the first Sargent biography in 1927, two years after the artist's death. Since then, there have been two other biographies (by Charles M. Mount and by Stanley Olson) and a great deal of speculation about Sargent's sexuality by other scholars, including much insightful work by our friend and colleague Trevor Fairbrother.

The letter by Amélie Gautreau triggered this exhibition. It brought home as never before the realization that Sargent was surrounded by beautiful and remarkable women when he was a young man. He was closely involved with them, and he sought their company and chose them as friends and models. These women included not just fashionable society types and women from the arts and letters, but earthier women from less elevated social strata. His models in Capri,

Spain, Tangier, Venice, and Paris were uniformly young and exotic, and this was not by chance. They excited him. His serial depictions of Rosina in Capri in 1878, his near-wanton dancers in Spain, the draped temptress inhaling incense in Tangier, and Gigia Vianni and the alluring demimondaines on the backstreets of Venice are all from a world that animated the young painter. His fascination with these unadorned lower-class women reveal as much about his identity as does his attraction to the more complicated likes of Amélie Gautreau, Judith Gautier, and Lily Millet. Our thought was to gather as many paintings of these women as we could borrow for this occasion. We wanted to see them in one place and discover what they looked like together. Having them together in a room for the first time, we thought that we might be able to gain further understanding about what these women meant to Sargent, why he chose them, and what, if anything, they had in common. At the very least, we knew that these paintings would be striking works of art.

We are grateful to the many lenders who have made this event possible. The Ormond family has been wonderful and generous, as always. Descendants of Sargent's friends have remained constant in their friendship to us, and we are grateful for the presence of their remarkable ancestors in our show. Raymond and Margaret Horowitz and Rita Fraad have been our staunch allies once again, and it is much appreciated. And, of course, there are many collectors who remain anonymous, but we are no less grateful to them. We have had breathtaking support from our museum friends and are grateful for their generosity: Nanette Maciejunes, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; H. Barbara Weinberg and Peter Keny, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Malcolm Rogers, Erica Hirschler, and Carol Troyen, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Earl Powell, III, D. Dodge Thompson, Andrew Robison, and Franklin Kelly, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kathleen A. Foster, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Peter Morin, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.

We are pleased to include essays by our colleagues Richard Ormond and Eliane Kilmurray, as well as Deborah Davis, who in many ways was the catalyst for this event. Elizabeth Oustinoff has worked with us to curate the exhibition and to make the event possible. Cynthia Bird continues her great work to gather information and photography on Sargent, along with Rick Finnegan, our very own Sargent cryptographer. Thanks to Jay Cantor and Susan Mason for their

participation, as well as to Chris Blyth and Tom Burr, our preparators, and to Hubbard Toombs, who assisted with registrarial details. Thanks also go to Carol Flechner for her editorial work and to Marcus Ratliff and Amy Pyle for this wonderful catalogue that accompanies this extraordinary exhibition.

*This essay appeared in the catalogue published on the occasion of Sargent's Women, November 12<sup>th</sup> through December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2003.*