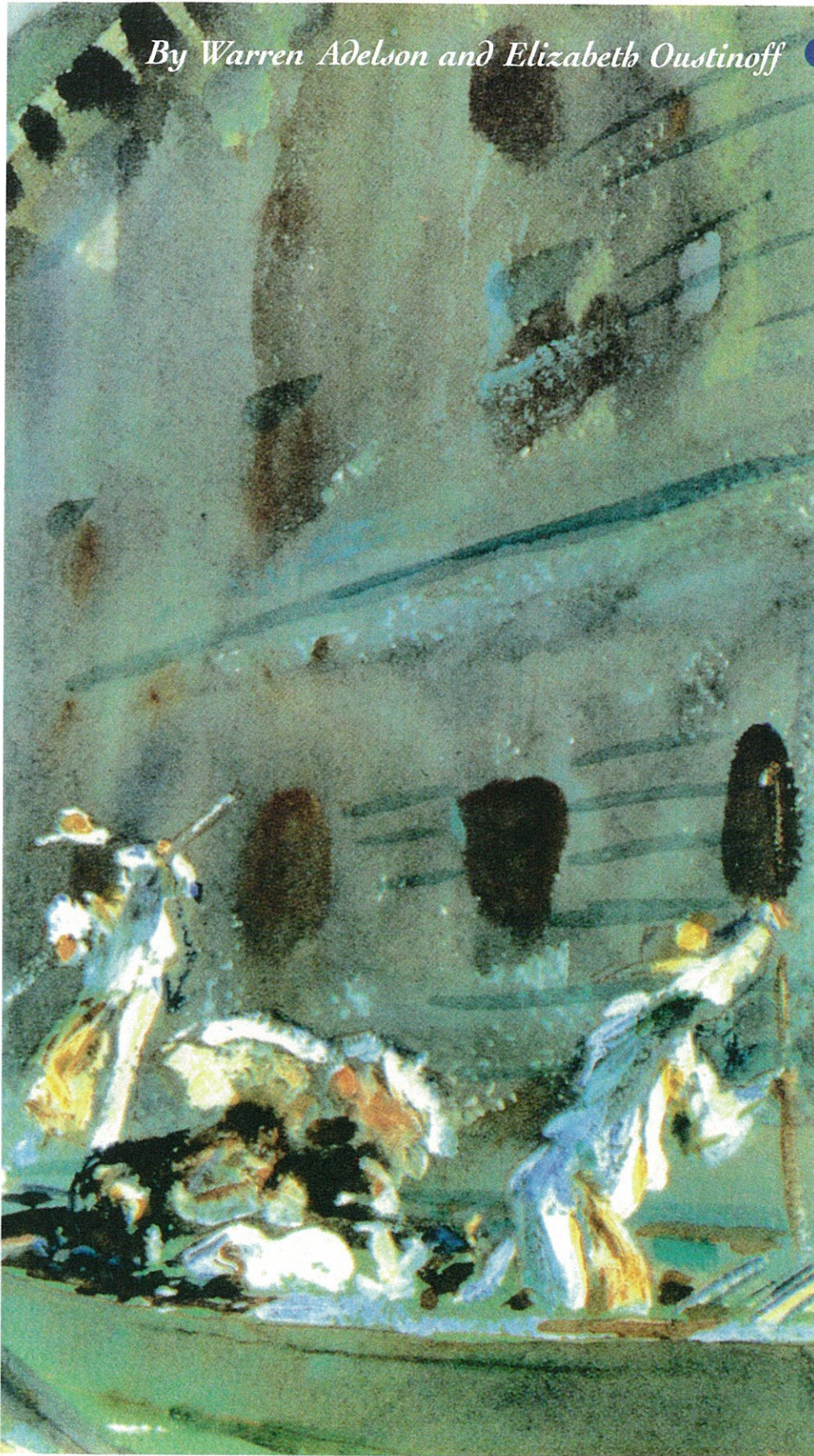


JOHN
SINGER
SARGENT'S
VENICE:
ON THE
CANALS



By Warren Adelson and Elizabeth Oustinoff



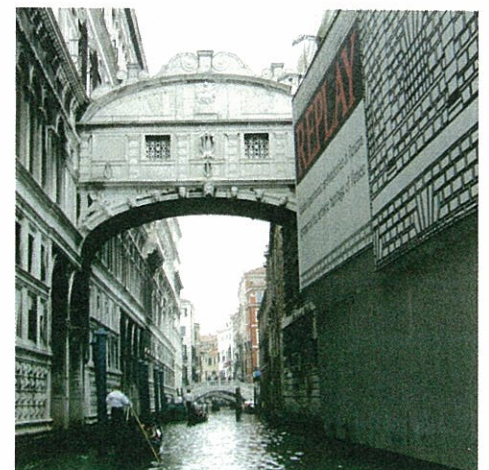
Mary Newbold Singer Sargent (1826–1906) required that her

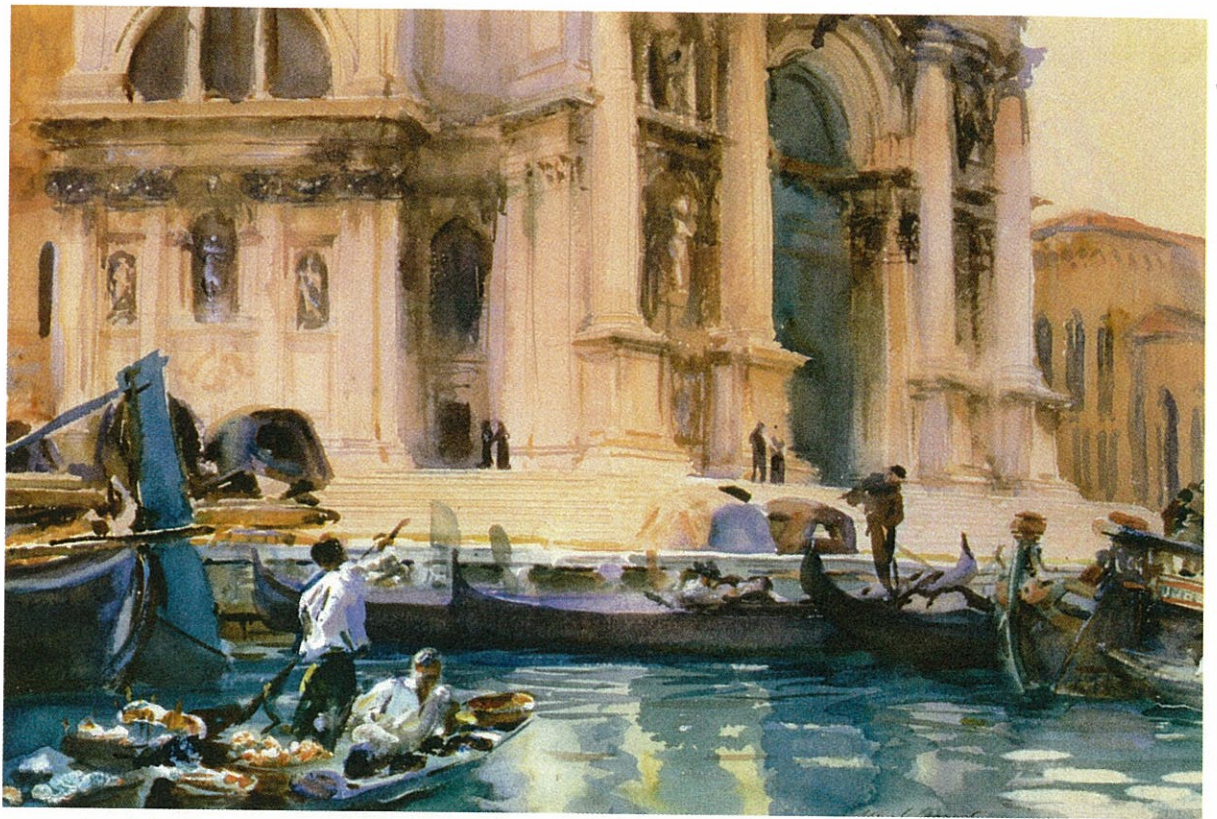
young son John complete one drawing every day as he accompanied her on their morning outings. She and her husband, Fitzwilliam (1820–1889), had decided to homeschool their children, and, aside from the three Rs, Mary insisted that art training was essential, so it was only natural that John work with her while she recorded in watercolor the places they visited. “She ruled that no matter how many sketches were begun each day one must be finished,” Sargent’s cousin Mary Hale wrote in her memoir of the artist.¹ Mary Sargent’s passion for travel and habit of painting watercolors of the surrounding countryside proved to be her greatest gift to her son. This legacy provided him not only with the foundation for a rewarding and profitable career as a portrait artist but also with a means for private escape as a landscape painter.

Few artists were as widely traveled as Sargent, but of the many European cities he knew

Fig. 1. *The Bridge of Sighs*, by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), c. 1902–1904. Watercolor on paper with touches of gouache over preliminary graphite and pen-and-ink drawing, 10 by 14 inches. Brooklyn Museum, New York City.

Fig. 2. Bridge of Sighs in 2005.





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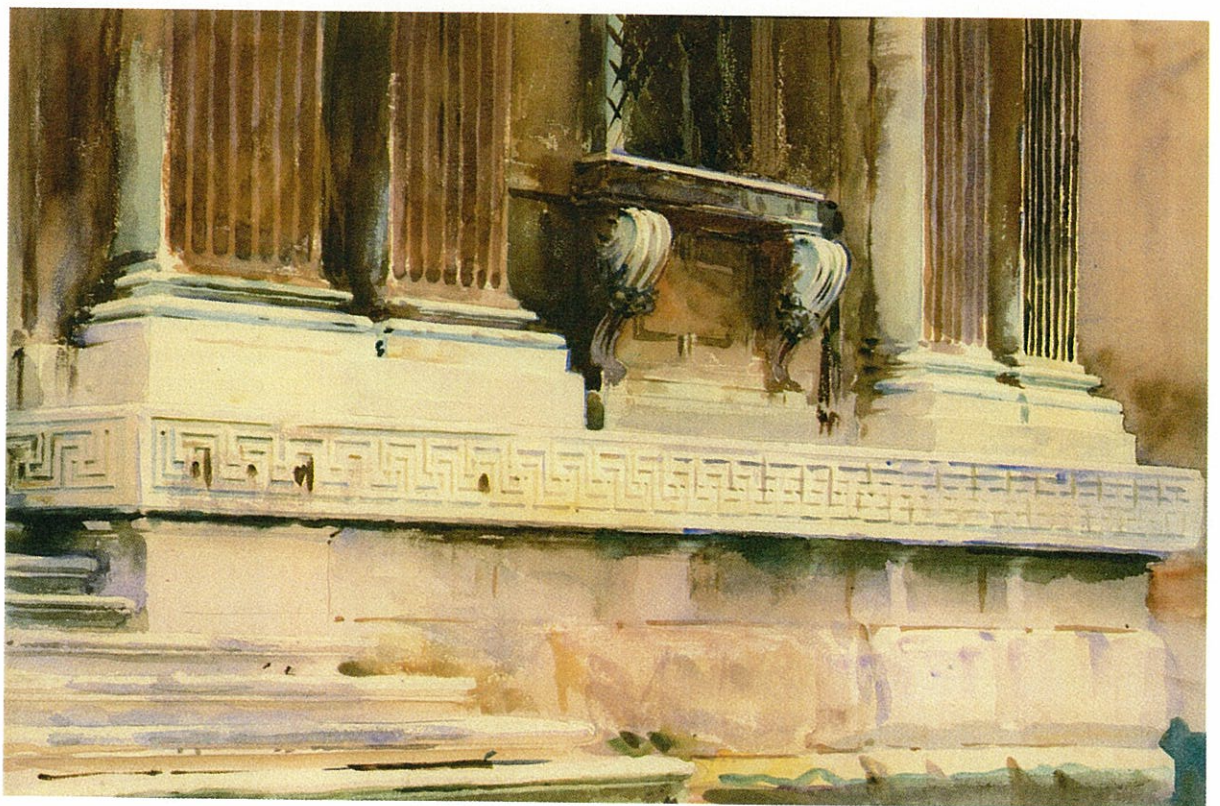
Fig. 3. *On the Steps of the Salute*, by Sargent, c. 1904. Signed "John S. Sargent" at lower right. Watercolor on paper over preliminary graphite drawing, 14 by 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. *Private collection.*

Fig. 4. *Palazzo Grimani*, by Sargent, c. 1904. Watercolor on paper over preliminary graphite drawing, 14 by 21 inches. *Private collection.*

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Fig. 5. *Santa Maria della Salute* in 2005.

Fig. 6. *Palazzo Grimani* (a San Luca) in 2005.

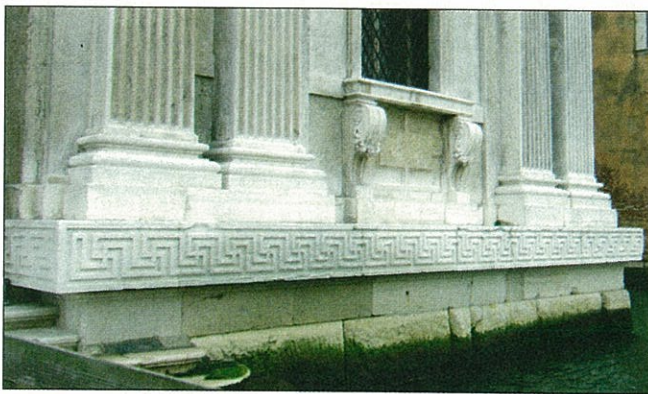


well, it was to Venice that he returned again and again. The large body of work he produced there, primarily in the early years of the twentieth century, greatly intrigued us in our role as the authors of the John Singer Sargent catalogue raisonné and led us on a glorious adventure, following his footsteps—or rather his gondola—as he recorded this magical and mysterious city in watercolors and oils.

Mary and Fitzwilliam Sargent decided to leave Philadelphia in 1854 following the death of their first child, and they chose southern Europe as their new home. Mary had persuaded her husband to leave his successful medical practice, and he acquiesced to her need to shift their lifestyle as a way to recover from their tragic loss. They left the confining routine of antebellum Philadelphia for what would become a never-ending European tour. John was born in Florence on January 12, 1856, and his sister Emily followed just over a year later, on January 29, 1857, in Rome. The two remained close throughout their lives. The “baby,” Violet, was born in Florence on February 9, 1870, and, while the extensive age gap precluded childhood relationships, Violet became one of Sargent’s cherished models on summer holidays. The family’s modest annual income allowed them to live a coach-class existence, and that was perfectly fine for Mary who loved adventure far more than luxury. They owned no homes; apartments were rented, as was the furniture, and their few possessions traveled with them. The Sargent family itinerary followed the climate: winters in southern France or Italy and summers in the Alps, with weeks of rail and road travel in between. So it was that John Singer Sargent never had a conventional home.

This peripatetic existence continued until 1874 when Sargent moved to Paris to study fine art. His parents recognized that he had an exceptional talent and reasoned that, if he were to be a professional artist, the only secure means of making a living would be as a portrait painter. He was accepted into the atelier of Carolus-Duran (1837–1917), a stylish and affluent portrait painter whose students were predominantly foreigners (non-French), and there Sargent met many American students with whom he developed lasting friendships. He had completed his formal training by 1877 but remained in Paris until 1885 when he was persuaded by friends,

notably Henry James, to move to London. The hostile French press that railed against his Salon entry of 1884, *Madame X* (*Madame Gautreau*) (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), had dampened his spirits and diminished his prospects for portrait commissions in Paris.² With his student days behind him, Sargent set up a studio in London and embarked on a professional career that escalated rapidly. By the 1890s requests for his portraits were overwhelming. And in 1893 he accepted a commission to create a large mural for the Boston Public Library, a project that necessitated lengthy stays in the United States, forging a pattern of transatlantic travel that continued for the rest of his life.

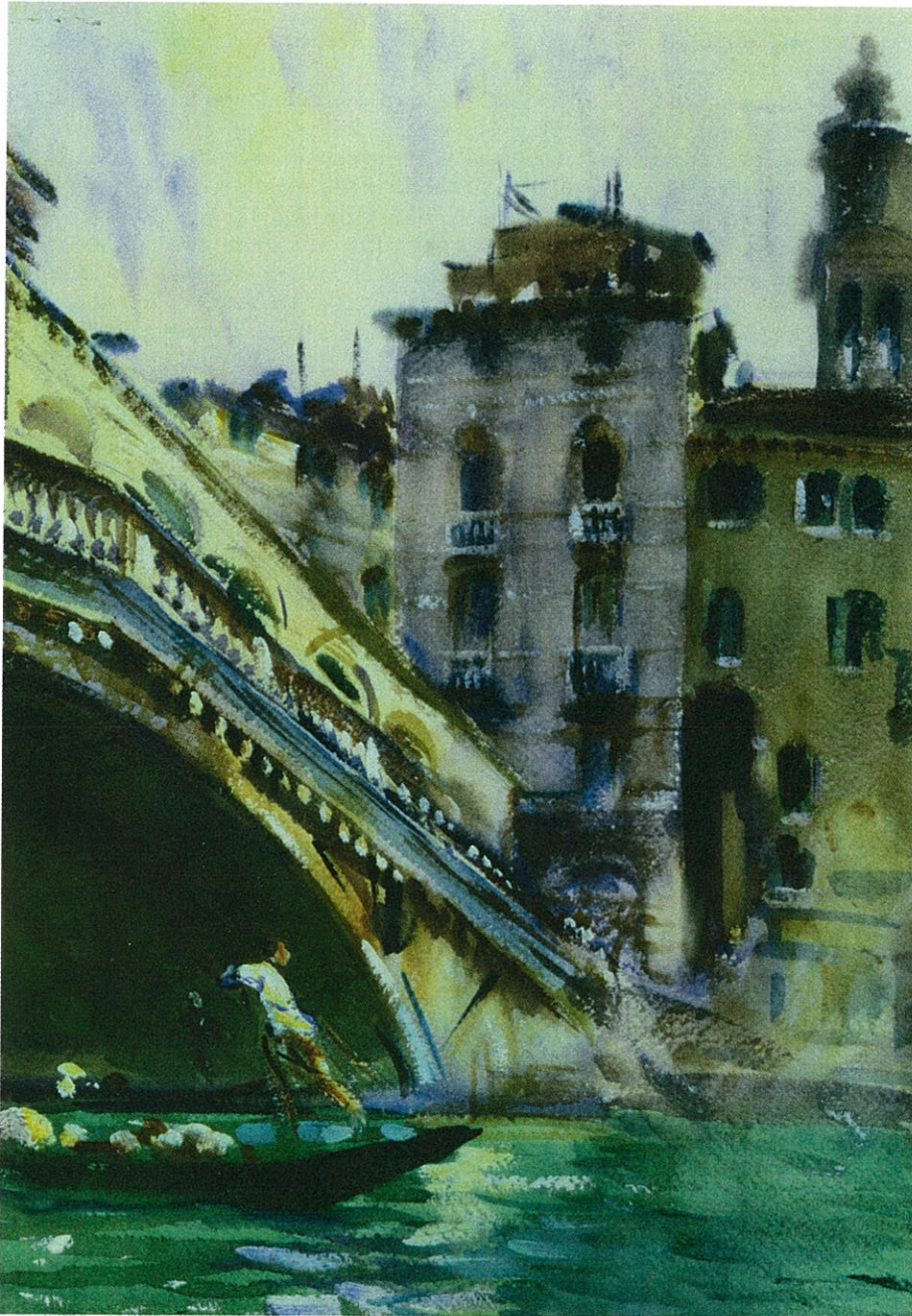


Sargent’s artistic relationship with Venice began in two protracted visits; six months in 1880 and 1881 and three months in 1882.³ He went there to gather ideas for a Salon-sized canvas and concentrated on oils depicting scenes from modern life. During these visits to Venice he painted activities away from the canals, focusing chiefly on men and women playing out their lives in the backstreets and darkened hallways. Sargent used young and seductive models and posed them in theatrical compositions with ambiguous and sometimes suggestive narrative content. Whether indoors or outside, his subjects were enclosed in rectangular boxes of space with

controlled light. The palette was primarily earth tones with accents of red or pink. The light, too, was theatrical and raked in dramatic angular bolts. He produced a number of evocative and sophisticated paintings, but none of them resulted in a Salon entry. Sargent was in Venice briefly in 1892, when he wrote to his sister Violet that he planned to stay for two or three weeks at the Palazzo Barbaro, owned by his cousin Daniel Curtis (1825–1908) and his wife Ariana (1833–1922), and he was there in 1898, when he stayed again with the Curtises.⁴ But it was not until after 1900 that he returned with regularity. Between 1902 and 1913 he made at least eight visits to the city and produced well over one hundred watercolors and about a dozen oils.

By this time, Venice was no longer part of Sargent’s career-building strategy. His motivation was strictly personal, his medium had shifted to watercolor; his palette had lightened, and his interest had gravitated to the activity and architecture along the canals. Very few of the paintings he produced were exhibited or sold in his lifetime; he kept them for himself or occasionally gave them as gifts to friends. Sargent had returned to a daily routine of painting outdoors, just as he had done with his mother decades earlier.

Establishing a chronology of the paintings Sargent produced in Venice presented us with a challenge because very few of them are dated. More daunting, however, was the challenge of understanding his choice of subject matter. Much of the conundrum of his Venetian work has to do with grasping his physical point of view, specifically, where he was standing when he painted and why he chose those places. Sargent’s compositions are often unexpected; he never produced complete renderings of famous views or prominent buildings. Contrary to the contemptuous opinion of Roger Fry (1866–1934), a modernist critic of the day, Sargent was not the mere illustrator of tourist attractions Fry acerbically declared him to be.⁵ His vision was far more complex. Sargent presented Venice both as he saw it and as he imagined it, as a magnificent playground of grand architecture and moving water. His sight line was not parallel to the ground; in fact, most of the time he was not on the ground at all, but quietly floating around the city in a gondola, which became his studio. From this vantage point he viewed the city in fragments. Buildings were chopped into



It was a tall order, but on September 27 we boarded Cia Cia's boat at the dock of the Bauer Hotel, laden with books, piles of reproductions of Sargent's paintings, and a variety of cameras. For three days we visited sites; many were well-known churches and palaces on the Grand Canal, some were off the tourist route, and there were a few on the Giudecca we could not find. There were offbeat places that would have been impossible to locate had it not been for Cia Cia who recognized and deftly maneuvered through the narrowest of canals to reach the location. With remarkable skill he docked the boat in awkward and unlikely places amidst roaring traffic or along isolated *rios* while we bent and twisted to photograph the correct angle, often asking him to move back a foot or up a yard. We were blessed with good weather, and the occasional cloud or haze created a magical half-light. Colors intensified in this weather, and we felt that we were touring with Sargent. For this article we have selected a spectrum of these sites, ranging from the obvious to the arcane, in order to share what we discovered.

The Doges' Palace is the cornerstone monument on Saint Mark's Square, the heart of Venice, and adjoins the prison to the east. The buildings are connected by the legendary Bridge of Sighs, a covered walkway built by Antonio Contino (1566–1600) and completed in 1605 after his death. Sargent positioned his gondola heading north from the Grand Canal on the Rio di Palazzo when

Fig. 7. *The Rialto, Venice*, by Sargent, c. 1902–1904. Watercolor on paper with touches of gouache, 19 ½ by 13 ½ inches. Private collection.

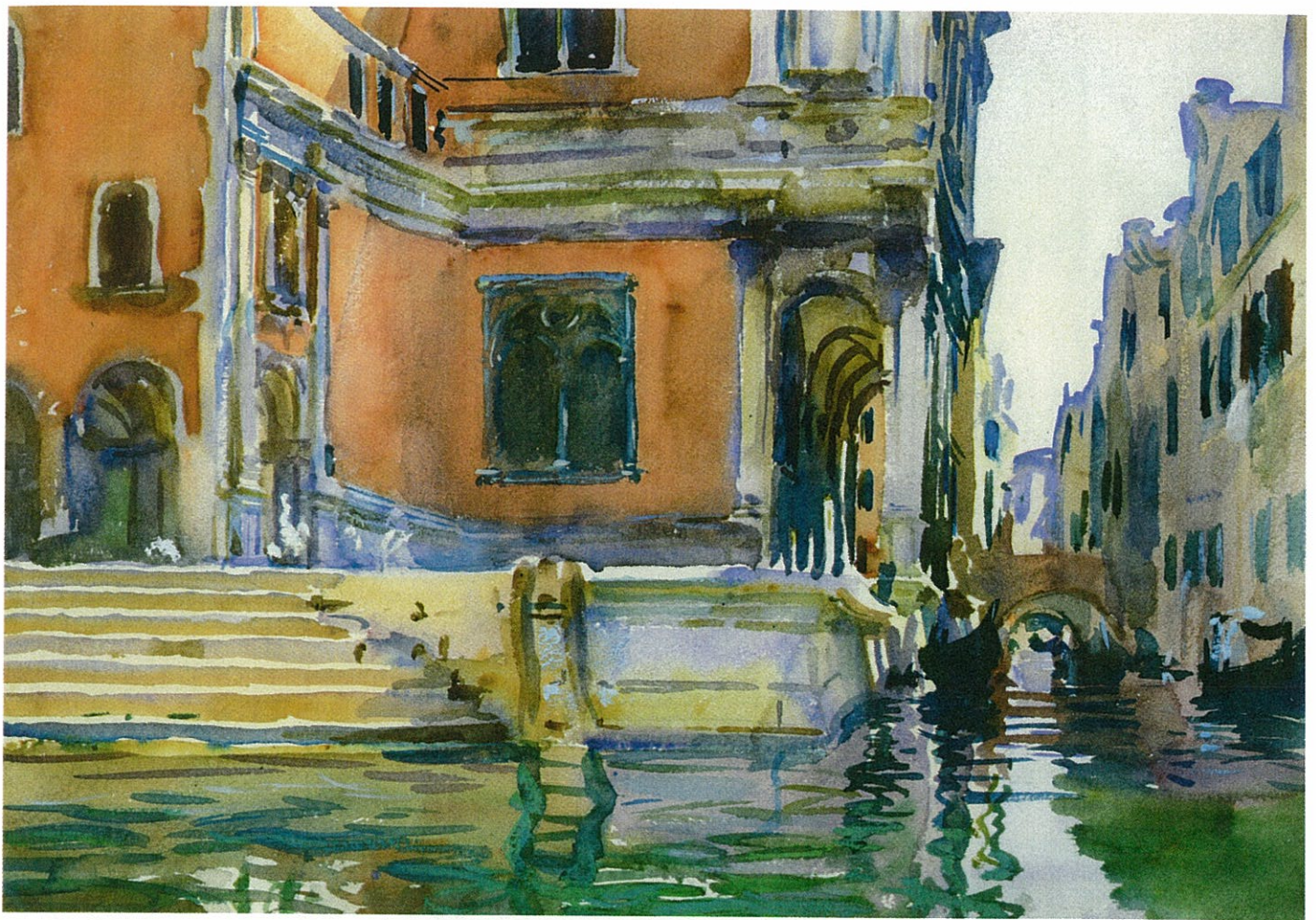
Fig. 8. Rialto Bridge in 2005.



angular pieces and fractured into partial views, but whatever the subject it was always evocative of the dynamic spirit of Venice.

In late September 2005, the Sargent committee, which, in addition to ourselves, included Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, met in Venice. We decided that the most direct approach to understanding Sargent's vision would be to photograph all the sites that he had painted, and that doing so would help to explain his choices and motivations. This type of trip required an experienced boatman who knew Venice and its intricate network of canals. On the recommen-

dation of our friends Patricia and Carlo Viganò (whose relatives Daniel and Ariana Curtis were the patrons with whom Sargent stayed so many times at the Palazzo Barbaro) we met Paolo Matinuzzi. Known to all as "Cia Cia" (pronounced Cha Cha, a name that describes his nature and his dancing skills), our new friend agreed to spend several days with us and help us retrace Sargent's routes on the water. The plan was to look at images of every work of art Sargent had painted in Venice after 1900 and to go to that place and photograph the site from roughly the same angle and perspective as in the artwork.



he painted *The Bridge of Sighs* (Fig. 1). Broad washes create liquid shadows on the walls of the prison and are contrasted with the bright sunlight on the bridge. A gliding gondola being vigorously rowed toward the viewer is passing the artist's boat, the prow of which juts into the foreground letting us know that he is there. Sargent applied generous dabs of Chinese white gouache to the figures, enlivening the surface and balancing the bright sunlight in the upper left of the sheet. The space seems vital and alive, a sensibility that is not apparent in the photograph (Fig. 2) of the normally active canal.



Moving up the Grand Canal, we stopped at the magnificent church of Santa Maria della Salute, which dominates the entrance to the Grand Canal on the south bank (Fig. 5). Sargent was mesmerized by the domed, octagonal structure and painted different views of it in more than a dozen oils and watercolors.⁶ He seems never to have tired of the play of light and color on its baroque facade. He was posi-

tioned on the Grand Canal, probably in heavily congested traffic when he painted *On the Steps of the Salute* (Fig. 3), reveling in the play of the working boats and gondolas churning in the water before the magnificent backdrop of the church.

Further up the Grand Canal, the imposing edifice of the sixteenth-century Palazzo Grimani (a San Luca; Fig. 6) caught Sargent's eye. The three massive divisions of the facade rise from

the elegant and rhythmic Greek key motif that circumscribes the base. This articulated detail clearly appealed to Sargent's aesthetic: *Palazzo Grimani* (Fig. 4) is one of two meticulous renderings he painted from his gondola while moored at the entrance of the impressive palazzo. The other rendering of the Palazzo Grimani was a gift to his friend Elena Rathbone (1878–1964), to whom he observed that he had painted the pattern to show “what a damned conscientious fellow I am!”⁷ He infused the white Istrian marble of the building with pinks and lavenders, disregarding local color.

The Rialto Bridge is another iconic Venetian landmark painted by Sargent (Fig. 7). The two buildings to the right of the bridge have remained remarkably unchanged with only minor altera-

Fig. 9. *Scuola di San Rocco*, by Sargent, c. 1902–1904. Signed “John S. Sargent” at lower left. Watercolor on paper with touches of gouache, 14 by 20 inches. Private collection.

Fig. 10. *Scuola Grande di San Rocco* in 2005.



tions to the shapes of the windows and the colors of their facades (Fig. 8). Sargent's liberal use of lavender for the structure on the left suggests that he was painting in the late afternoon. His surfaces, enlivened by vigorous brushwork and staccato dashes of white, create a sense of movement and vitality impossible to capture in a photograph.

West of the Rialto is the sixteenth-century Scuola di San Rocco, which houses the magnificent cycle of the life of Christ painted from 1565 to 1567 by Tintoretto. Once again, Sargent painted a view from his gondola, *Scuola di San Rocco* (Fig. 9), which features the building's portico with a long view down the side canal. We visited this site at a moment when the water was at the same level it had been when Sargent was positioned at the same spot more than one hundred years earlier: there are eight stairs visible in both our photograph (Fig. 10) and Sargent's watercolor. From so far below the ground level, the structure loomed above us. It may have been the remarkable salmon color of the walls that inspired Sargent to choose this location, and his color harmonies with lavender highlights for the white marble colonnade, architrave, and steps create a far more memorable effect



than do the stark rose and white contrasts of the photograph.

We had worked our way through narrow waterways as *Cia Cia* crossed the Grand Canal and maneuvered through back waters to the site of *Rio dell'Angelo* (Fig. 11). The prosaic subject of the watercolor is as mysterious as the photograph of the actual location, which has changed very little (Fig. 12). It is, in fact, a water garage, today at the back of a restaurant, and is still used as a delivery area and a mooring space for gondolas. Of the many places we visited, this was the most whimsical. Why Sargent

chose this mundane corner of a canal as a subject remains his secret. Nonetheless, the watercolor is as beautiful and mysterious as the site is ordinary.

Traveling north through the canals, we located the seemingly lonely site of the Campo dei Gesuiti not far from the lagoon on the north side of the city (Fig. 13), one of the few spots where Sargent stepped out of his gondola to paint on solid ground (Fig. 14). Except for the growth of trees on the right, the place has remained largely unchanged. Sargent capitalized on the broad space of this large sparsely populated piazza,

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Fig. 11. *Rio dell'Angelo*, by Sargent, c. 1902–1904. Watercolor on paper, 10 by 14 inches. Collection of Michael and Jean Antonello.

Fig. 12. *Rio dell'Angelo* in 2005.

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Fig. 13. *Campo dei Gesuiti* in 2005.

Fig. 14. *Campo dei Gesuiti*, by Sargent, c. 1902–1904. Signed "John S. Sargent" at lower right. Watercolor on paper, 13 ¾ by 19 ¾ inches. Private collection.

capturing the angular light and activity of the morning, with three Venetians clustered in conversation near a doorway as others head toward the bridge in the distance. The flat reality of the photograph stands in stark contrast to the artist's harmonious blending of color that brings the *campo* to life and testifies to Sargent's heightened vision and spiritual connection to this special place.

Our Venetian tour inspired the publication of *Sargent's Venice* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006) and served as the catalyst for the exhibition of the same name to be held at Adelson Galleries in New York City, January 18 to March 3, 2007, and at the Museo Correr, Venice, March 23 to July 22, 2007. To our delight, it will be John Singer Sargent's first solo exhibition in Venice.

¹ Mary Newbold Patterson Hale, "The Sargent I Knew," *World Today*, vol. 55 (November 1927), p. 566.

² Deborah Davis and Elizabeth Oustinoff, "Madame X speaks," *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, vol. 164, no. 5 (November 2003), pp. 116–125.

³ Sargent's lengthy visits to Venice in 1880–1881 and 1882 are discussed in detail in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes, 1874–1882, Complete Paintings: Volume IV* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006), pp. 307–385.

⁴ John Singer Sargent to Violet Sargent, September 14,

1892, private collection. In 1898 Sargent wrote to Ariana Wormeley Curtis that he expected to arrive "around May 6" (Sargent letters to Curtis family, Manuscripts Collection, Boston Athenaeum).

⁵ Roger Fry, *Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1926), pp. 125–135.

⁶ These works will be catalogued and illustrated in volume 6 (forthcoming) of the John Singer Sargent catalogue raisonné, published by Yale University Press.

⁷ Quoted in *Exhibition of Works by John Singer Sargent R.A., 1856–1925* (City of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, 1964) p. 26, No. 67. The version he gave to Rathbone is in a private collection. See *Sargent and Italy*, ed. Bruce Robertson (Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 84.



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