



Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X

Deborah Davis

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The story behind the legendary John Singer Sargent painting that propelled the artist to international renown but condemned his subject to a life of public ridicule.

John Singer Sargent's *Madame X* is one of the world's best-known portraits. As the Metropolitan's most frequently requested painting for loans, it travels to museums around the globe. The image of "Madame X" decorates book and magazine covers, greeting cards and screen savers. She's even been immortalized as a Madame Alexander doll.

Few people, though, know the fascinating story behind the painting. "Madame X" was actually a twenty-three-year-old New Orleans Creole, Virginie Gautreau, who moved to Paris and quickly became the "it girl" of her day. All the leading artists wanted to paint her, but it was Sargent, a relative nobody, who won the commission. Gautreau and Sargent must have recognized in each other a like-minded hunger for fame.

Unveiled at the 1884 Paris Salon, Gautreau's portrait did generate the attention she craved-but it led to infamy rather than stardom. Sargent had painted one strap of Gautreau's dress dangling from her shoulder, suggesting, to outraged Parisian viewers, either the prelude or the aftermath of sex. Her reputation irreparably damaged, Gautreau retired from public life, destroying all the mirrors in her home so she would never have to look at herself again.

Why had Sargent chosen to portray her in such a provocative manner? Was the painting, with the scandal it generated, the machination of a sexually conflicted man who desired a woman and a lifestyle he could never possess? Drawing on documents from private collections and other previously unexamined materials and featuring a cast of characters including Oscar Wilde and Richard Wagner, *Strapless* is an enthralling tale of art and celebrity, obsession and betrayal.

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