The Lure of the Exotic: An Examination of John Singer Sargent's Orientalist Mode

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33797270">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33797270</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Lure of the Exotic:
An Examination of John Singer Sargent’s Orientalist Mode

Jennifer TumSuden

A Thesis in the Field of History of Art and Architecture
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University
March 2016
Abstract

This paper investigates John Singer Sargent’s Orientalist paintings, branding them as a new mode of the pictorial genre. From a peripatetic upbringing emerged an artist with a penchant for the exotic. A painter-traveller above all else, Sargent sought to record his visible delight with the world. Not content to replicate the successes of men before him, Sargent set out on an artistic course to discover his own aesthetic and announce it to the world. His first Orientalist painting exhibited at the Salon, *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* (1880), was notable for its tonal virtuosity. In preparation for a grand mural scheme for the new Boston Public Library, Sargent embarked on a thorough investigation of the Near East. Although Sargent believed that the *Triumph of Religion* murals (1890-1919) would be the culmination of his training and background, it is his unique preparatory paintings and watercolors that fulfill this hope. They reveal the most about his interests, instincts, and artistic development, and serve as a springboard towards modernism. In the watercolors of Bedouins (c. 1891-1906), the Javanese dancer studies (1889), the costume play paintings from Purtud (1907), and the “Cashmere series” (c. 1908-11), Sargent utilizes vibrant color, impressionistic brushwork, and the technical devices of foreshortening and cropping to repackaging Orientalism for the twentieth century. By looking closely at John Singer Sargent’s Orientalist course, a context is given for his non-commissioned work. Sargent’s paintings completed abroad are an underlying attribute in his creative force.
Orientalism was not a fleeting diversion for Sargent; it fueled his evolution as an artist.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband. Although this work was begun before we met, I would have never finished it without his support and encouragement. From the first time I laid my eyes on *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* I knew I wanted to tell its story. Nearly a decade later, my words are finally written, printed, and bound. Thank you Nick for pushing me to write, for patiently listening to me read each chapter aloud, for serving as my human thesaurus, and for giving me the space to do this work. I am so grateful for your love.
Table of Contents

Dedication ........................................................................................................ v

I. Introduction ..................................................................................................... 1

II. The Curious Prodigy ........................................................... 4

III. The Incantation ......................................................................................... 10

IV. The Painter-Travelers ................................................................. 23

   Orientalism ....................................................................................................... 24

   Gérôme ........................................................................................................... 28

   Lewis .............................................................................................................. 32

   Bridgman ....................................................................................................... 36

V. Outliers and Experiments ............................................................... 42

VI. Wanderlust .......................................................................................... 51

   Bedouins ....................................................................................................... 56

   Costume Play ............................................................................................... 59

Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 65

Appendix I: List of Figures ................................................................. 69

Appendix II: Images .................................................................................. 72

Notes .............................................................................................................. 97

Bibliography ................................................................................................. 99
Chapter 1

Introduction

“Was he a composer? Emphatically so, where he wishes to be, and he could find or
invent most delightful movements which he sometimes used as a part of his
classification . . .” (Blashfield 649)

From the beginning of his career, John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) maintained a
balance between commissioned portraits and genre paintings that he often produced
independently. Portraiture was Sargent’s greatest source of income and notoriety, but the
works he created for himself were his passion. Sargent created nearly 1,600 genre
paintings. *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* (1880, see Appendix Figure 1) was his first large
independent genre painting. It proved to be a strategic success, both as a technical tour de
force and as a demonstration of his ability to portray the exotic. What may have begun as
an attempt to find an audience became a lifelong fascination and the development of a
new visual language.

The June 1853 issue of *Knickerbocker Magazine* referred to Orientalism as a
“mode of speech” (Edwards 18). Many decades later this continued to be true for Sargent.
He never specifically identified himself as an Orientalist, or a member of any other
school, but a pervasive exoticism shows in nearly all of his works. Nomadic in his bones,
Sargent did not just paint while traveling; he went abroad specifically to paint (Adelson et
al., *Sargent Abroad* 6). His first painting exhibition led him east and for the next forty
years, he returned to Oriental themes again and again, culminating in what he hoped
would be his masterpiece, the Boston Public Library mural cycle, *Triumph of Religion*
(1890-1919). Sargent created over 150 Orientalist paintings—roughly 10% of his output (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol. I-VII). These varied works include composed genre scenes of the Near East, anonymous plein air portraits of Arabs and impressionistic landscapes of Eastern cities and deserts, as well as Eastern peoples on display at the international fairs and Europeans playfully posed in Orientalist costumes.

Sargent’s impulse towards Orientalism was not unique of course. For nearly a hundred years before him, European artists depicted Oriental peoples, customs, and landscapes and popularized them at grand exhibitions. Sargent’s enchantment with Orientalism did separate him from some of his progressive peers, but the images he created separated him from most Orientalists. His works avoid narrative, categorization, and cliché. None of his compositions follow traditional sensual Orientalist themes—the harem, bathhouse, and odalisque are notably absent from Sargent’s canvases. Within the well-established pictorial genre of Orientalism, Sargent distinguished himself by presenting a restrained image of the Orient, supplanting sexual and mystical innuendo with painterly virtuosity and visual delight. His genre scenes are so lacking in narrative or symbolism that they rely solely on the viewer’s experience of them (Ackerman, American Orientalists 180-181). In his first major Orientalist canvas, Fumee d’Ambre Gris, Sargent created an exquisite tone poem, but one that was also easily marketable for Salon audiences. Once his reputation was more established, Sargent painted Orientalist images less for the buyer and more for himself. He began to combine dazzling light and shadow with modern painting techniques and mediums, cropped compositions, and playful poses—effectively bringing the genre into the twentieth century (Kilmurray, qtd. in Fairbrother 47).
A member of the American Cathedral, Sargent straddled two worlds—the expatriate community and a sophisticated French circle of artists and writers—affording him the experience to become a changeable experimenter (Fairbrother 17). Art historian Mary Roberts has characterized Sargent as an “intimate outsider,” an individual whose “unique social position and cultural interests provide scope for a more nuanced interpretation of Orientalist visual culture” (153). Some artists sought greater understanding of Eastern indigenous cultures, while for others the Orient was simply a passing interest or an exotic metaphor. For Sargent the lure of the exotic took hold and forever imprinted and influenced the course of his artistic career.

Although Sargent created a large and varied group of non-portrait paintings, his artistic reputation remains firmly attached to numerous memorable images he created of the political and social elite (Adelson et al., Sargent Abroad 217). Warren Adelson led the charge in presenting the exhibition, John Singer Sargent: His Own Work, focusing on Sargent’s personal or non-commissioned paintings. Other scholars like Teresa Carbone, Elaine Kilmurray, and Richard Ormond have helped elevate Sargent’s reputation beyond that of a society painter and brought greater attention to his genre paintings and watercolors, but a focused study of his Orientalist works has not yet been undertaken. In both his techniques and choice of subject, Sargent created a distinct mode of Orientalism. These lesser-studied paintings collectively reveal the most about Sargent, personally and artistically, and represent his most modern images. Orientalism was not merely a fleeting diversion for John Singer Sargent—it was a course of artistic discovery, from which we can map his evolution as an artist.
Chapter II

The Curious Prodigy

“... Mozart, who never appealed to him, because lacking the exotic, far-fetched quality which always attracted John Sargent in music, literature, and, for many years, in persons... The words “strange, weird, fantastic” were already on his lips—and that adjective curious... That word curious was to me, at least, his dominant word for many years...” (Vernon Lee, qtd. in Charteris 248-9)

John Singer Sargent’s approach to painting and his attraction to the exotic were functions of his rich personal history. As the child of wealthy and well-educated expatriates, who were on a never-ending holiday, Sargent was exposed to Europe’s greatest cities and landscapes. His family led a nomadic existence and exchanged residences with the seasons (Esten 13). From an early age, Sargent had a preoccupation with the visible world. Blessed with the skills of draughtsmanship and observation, his parents took care to nurture his talents. Dr. Sargent helped young John with the art of looking by comparing real animals and objects to those found in books, and Mrs. Sargent, an amateur watercolorist, took him sketching (Fairbrother, Sensualist 44). As a child, Sargent’s drawings were only of things he had seen, “as if [the world’s] primary purpose was to supply copy for his sketch book” (Charteris 7, 13).

Sargent did not draw mythical creatures or imaginary lands like many young children—he did not need to. Extraordinary people filled his real world with distinct places and dazzling things to capture. In October of 1865, nine-year old John wrote to friend, Ben del Castillo, about his family’s trip to London. He noted that the zoological gardens at the Crystal Palace were of the most interest to him, and that he rode a camel
and an elephant and “made several drawings of the animals there” (Charteris 9). Sargent would continue to focus his art on the visible, tangible world for almost his entire career.²

“... [He] thought that the artist ought to know nothing whatever about the nature of an object before him, but he should concentrate all his powers on a representation of its appearance” (Charteris 78). Childhood friend and writer Vernon Lee remembered,

. . . never did John Sargent participate in my pictorial self-expression or show any interest therein: to him paints were not for the telling of stories. There were illustrated books and papers lying about, and a stretch of Mediterranean and perspective houses and coastlines looked in at the windows, and to the reproduction of all these did John Sargent apply himself. And with miraculous intuition and dexterity. (Charteris 239)

Although not interested in the portraying the abstract or fictional, from these quotes we should not infer that Sargent was in pursuit of austere naturalism or what we now refer to as photo-realism. In 1905 he told a sitter, “I paint what I see . . . I don’t dig beneath the surface for things that don’t appear before my eyes” (B. Purvis in Fairbrother 18). And Sargent was purported to remark, “I do not judge, I only chronicle” (Charteris 107). These statements require careful extrapolation. Sargent was not in the habit of quickly observing a scene or sitter and representing it or him or her in paint.³ John Singer Sargent was a composer (Blashfield 649). Fleeting movements were observed over time and fused together in paint to create his vision. He integrated precisely slight pursings of the lips or glimmers of light into his canvases. As Vernon Lee remarked, “His faithfulness was to selected details of reality, not to reality as a promiscuous whole ...” (Charteris 251). All images are partial and contrived as there is no such thing as an innocent eye or objective lens (MacKenzie 53). Sargent did paint what he observed, but his exacting vision and penchant for the world’s curiosities led him to a very particular aesthetic ethos.
Paris was irresistible to artists in the nineteenth century (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg 5). And indeed it was Paris, as an artistic, cultural, and intellectual center, that served as Sargent’s first home and helped to refine his aesthetic values. Paris provided him with an important network of personal and professional relationships that inspired and guided him in his early career. So immersed was Sargent in the French system and its ideologies that he was often identified as a French artist, despite his American citizenship.

In Paris, Sargent set upon a carefully considered path—he studied drawing at the École des Beaux-Arts under Adolphe Yvon, but studied painting with Carolus-Duran in his atelier. The choice of Carolus-Duran is most significant. His atelier was small, independent and, in comparison with those run by academic painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, quite progressive. The artistic environment Sargent entered was unique in that an established hierarchy of art persisted, but that modernism was gaining in popularity. Even at eighteen years old, Sargent understood that navigation between tradition and innovation was imperative for his success (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 20). In 1874, Sargent categorized Carolus as “a young and rising artist whose reputation is continuously increasing.” His “very broad, powerful, and realistic style” impressed him (Fairbrother 46). In contrast, he described Gérôme’s work as disappointing. “[His canvases] are so smoothly painted, with such softened edges and such a dowdy appearance as to look as if they were painted on ivory or China. Their colouring is not very fine either” (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg 7). Sargent was looking forward—he was not interested in eulogizing the past. To the masses, Gérôme was a magician, but to Sargent—a boy who had played on the sparkling beaches of Nice,
inhaled the crisp air of the Alps, and experienced the majesty of Rome—his work fell flat. One would expect that most things would.

Although Carolus-Duran had just a handful of pupils, he presented an attractive alternative to the Beaux Arts (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg 8). A fashionable-genre painter, he emphasized the art of painting—careful placement of lights and darks to define form and painting as spontaneously and rapidly as possible to convey a sense of immediacy—*au premier coup*. Carolus also emphasized accuracy of vision—which no doubt, resonated deeply with Sargent (Adelson et al., *Sargent Abroad* 11). The *alla prima* approach of Carolus’ studio freed Sargent and enabled his bravura painting style to develop (Fairbrother 46). The working procedure Sargent adopted as Carolus’ student he would maintain for the rest of his life (Adelson et al., *Sargent Abroad* 11).

John Singer Sargent quickly became noticed in Paris. In 1874, classmate Julian Alden Weir wrote to his mother,

> I met this last week a young Mr. Sargent, about eighteen years old and one of the most talented fellows I have ever come across; his drawings are like the Old Masters, and his color is equally fine. He was born abroad and has not yet seen his country. He speaks as well in French, German, [and] Italian as he does English, [and] has a fine ear for music. . . . Such men wake one up, and as his principles are equal to his talents, I hope to have his friendship. (Fairbrother 15)

These remarks are all the more favorable when one takes into context that Weir was the son of an accomplished Hudson River School painter and Yale University professor. And yet he describes Sargent as a wonder, a sophisticate, a prodigy. Edwin Blashfield remarked that John Sargent was the envy of the whole studio “and perhaps a bit the envy of Carolus . . .” (Blashfield 641). After Sargent’s death, Vernon Lee wrote, “. . . I confess that my axiomatic belief that John Sargent was going to be *the* great painter of the future,
a belief whose realization was later to surprise me as a wonderful coincidence. . .” (Vernon Lee, qtd. in Charteris 247).

Henry James would later remark that Sargent had an “‘uncanny’ spectacle of talent, which on the very threshold of its career has nothing more to learn” (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg VII). John Singer Sargent seemed to be the embodiment of the new American culture envisioned by James. In 1867 James wrote, “we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc) claim our property wherever we find it” (James 1; Fairbrother, qtd. in Adelson, Sargent Abroad 13). Sargent’s early pictures reveal deference to the technical approach of masters like Velázquez, but also display a naturalist perspective or impressionistic tendency in line with the French Realist movement. Eclecticism like this was not unusual—for young artists in the 1870s and 1880s it was the “rule of the day” (Adelson, Sargent Abroad 11-13). It was never Sargent’s persona to be an inventor. He instead was setting upon a course of innovation (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol VI 27-28).

John Singer Sargent was well aware that his first steps as a professional painter needed to boldly announce his talent. In the 1800s, there was no better stage to do so than the Salon. The Salon was his professional battleground—he exhibited each year, beginning in 1877, until 1886. His early submissions—Carolus-Duran, Fumée d’Ambre Gris, El Jaleo, The Daughters of Edward D. Boit were carefully crafted for public consumption. Each canvas offered something different. Sargent clearly did not want to be typecast as a specialist of any one genre (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol I 12). He was experimenting in the technical sense as well as testing the art market.
His pictures represent a daring strategy for winning public taste rather than a means of securing a commission (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol I* 17). Wisely straddling the line of modernism, he filled the gap between the painters from the Academy and the Impressionists and offered intriguing canvases with creative compositions, avant-garde tendencies, and academic finish (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg VII, 1). Sargent well understood the competitive environment and his position as a foreigner (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg 1). This outsider status was smartly harnessed as a strength. Since the Paris Exhibition of 1867, France embraced difference dressed up as exoticism. Drawing on the depth of his life experiences, he chose to portray subjects that would enchant Salon audiences. If Sargent’s canvases were enough to satisfy his curiosities and hold his artistic interest, surely they could impress others. And they did. Critical accolades and awards from the Salon juries followed.

As Weinberg succinctly described the phenomenon of a young artist on such firm aesthetic foundation, “[Sargent] was not a painter in search of an identity” (1). By his early twenties his painting was distinctive, his output constant (Charteris 43). He was continuing a course began in childhood. His attention was captured by his surroundings, not simply by people and their ordinary mode of life. “Painting was more than an art to Sargent, it held the exhilaration of a sport as well; his quarry was a suitable subject, his trophy the creation of a thing of beauty” (Charteris 46).
Chapter III
The Incantation

“This Oriental woman who perfumes herself and awakens passion (they do say, such is the quality of ambergris, that the adventurer Casanova took it as a powder in his chocolate) is a figure that is bizarre and original in effect.” (A. Genevay, ‘Salon de 1880’ in Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 302-303)

It should be of no surprise that after finishing his studies in the atelier of France’s leading hispagnoliste, Sargent would head to Spain for his first painting expedition (McConkey 11). In 1879 he traveled to Madrid to copy the works of the great Velázquez, and painted a series of architectural studies in oil and watercolor at the Alhambra, as well as a few genre scenes. Southern Spain was a natural stepping off point for North Africa, both in terms of geographic location and as a primer for the exotic. Consequently, when Sargent tired of the rain in Spain, he traveled to Morocco. In January of 1880, he took a house in Tangier with an artist friend, either Charles-Edmond Daux⁶ or Armand-Eugene Bach (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 281). Upon arriving, Sargent wrote to friend Ben del Castillo,

Now the weather is beautiful and the temperature is just what it ought to be. We have rented a little Moorish house (which we don’t yet know from any other house in the town, the little white tortuous streets are so exactly alike) and we expect to enjoy a month or two in it very much. The patio open to the sky affords a studio light, and has the horseshoe arches, arabesques, tiles and other traditional Moorish ornaments. The roof is a white terrace, one of the thousand that form this odd town, sloping down to the sea. (Esten 19)

According to letters, Sargent planned on traveling in North Africa for some time, but there is no evidence to suggest that he had contact with any locals or that he
concerned himself with politics or religion. We do know that Sargent was quite pleased with the aesthetics of the place. He wrote in the same letter to Ben del Castillo, “the place is striking, the costumes grand and the Arabs often magnificent.” At the time Sargent visited Morocco, the market for Orientalist art had never been stronger. In traveling to Morocco and conceiving a major work there, Sargent was certainly extremely conscious of the marketability of Orientalist canvases (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 283). What better way to differentiate himself from portrait-master Carolus-Duran than to present an Orientalist painting to the Salon?

During his time in Morocco, Sargent sketched frequently and painted several small-scale oil studies of local architecture and landscapes. *Moorish Buildings in Sunlight* and *Entrance to a Mosque* (Figure 2, 1879-80) are two such paintings. These are bold sketches, painted out-of-doors on thin mahogany panels, and reflect a great interest in the qualities of North African light and the area’s distinct architecture. These works continue a theme that Sargent had first explored in Capri. In *Staircase in Capri* (Figure 3, 1878) Sargent investigated a formal preoccupation with the geometry of architecture and with the effects of light and shade on white, reflective surfaces. In its tonal radiance and compositional elegance, the picture clearly anticipates his work in North Africa. The bright simplicity of the works from Capri and Morocco are very different from the richly decorated surfaces and palette of the Alhambra studies painted only a month or so earlier. This suggests that Sargent was not merely following a haphazard course of artistic discovery, but rather deliberately setting himself on a course of study in formal composition and chiaroscuro (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 178, 284-285).
In addition to the aforementioned Moroccan oil sketches, there are two surviving architectural studies in pencil, a drawing of a building, perhaps a mosque (1880, Figure 4), and a detail of a horseshoe arch (1880, Figure 5), as well as a few drawings of figures, *Woman with the Covered Head* (1880, Figure 6) and *Two Sketches of Moroccan Figures* (1880, Figure 7). Sargent also collected photographs of Moroccans and local scenery, as well as rugs and a variety of trinkets (Simpson, Ormond, and Weinberg 79). These curated images, detailed drawings, and objects can be seen as preparatory for a large-scale work to be developed in Tangier. With the architectural studies informing a setting, figural drawings exploring possible compositions, and images of indigenous people offering a variety of dress and props, Sargent was clearly focused on conceiving a major work (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 285).

_Fumée d’Ambre Gris* (Figure 1), a painting of a veiled woman perfuming herself with the smoke of ambergris in an interior courtyard, is Sargent’s only finished subject painting from this trip to Morocco. In the canvas, Sargent integrated his interest in local architecture with figural concerns, placing an exotic model in an architectural niche in the open courtyard of a building that appears to date from the eleventh or twelfth century (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 299). To the untrained eye the scenery might suggest a mosque, but a mosque (as well any bourgeois home) would have been much more decorated, with richly patterned tile scaling the walls, rugs littering the floor, and ornate lanterns hanging from the ceiling. The architecture depicted in *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* is instead likely to be the patio space of the Tetuán house Sargent had rented; as such is plainly stated in a letter from sister Emily Sargent to Vernon Lee (Fairbrother 53 and Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 300).
Sargent’s first Orientalist canvas displays formidable skill and is notable for its neutral palette. Oriental artifice was stripped down, and Sargent effectively shifted emphasis away from the choice of objects and subject to the process of showing them (Simpson, Ormond, and Weinberg, *Uncanny Spectacle*, 79-80). His refusal to provide any narrative and his preoccupation with colour and design was quite a modern departure from the glitz and gloss of the canvases of Gérôme and other notable Orientalist painters (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 283).

As the title indicates, the smoke in the painting is produced by ambergris, a rare wax-like pathological growth found in the stomach and intestines of the sperm whale. Although fresh ambergris has an unpleasant odor, when exposed to air and sun it produces a sweet, earthy, musky scent. Ambergris was first used by the Arabs in medicine, cookery, and as a perfume, and referred to as anbar. In Middle French this became ambre gris to distinguish it from yellow amber (Dannenfeldt 382). Ambergris was prized for its aphrodisiac and medicinal properties; even Casanova was rumored to rely on the substance for his powers of seduction. As ambergris was rare (it had to be exhumed from a sperm whale), it cost more than a hundred dollars a pound in the late nineteenth century (Edwards 135). Even to the well-traveled and wealthy in the Salon audience, amber gris would connote exotic. After all, continents were crossed and fortunes spent in the name of perfume (Thornton, *Women as Portrayed* 86).

In *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*, Sargent renders the significance of the ritual and the identity of the figure as ambiguous. Ambergris was used in inhalation and fumigation rituals in North African Muslim and Judaic traditions. A fear of evil spirits is deeply embedded in Moroccan cultures, and these rites were performed to ward off demonic
spirits and were primarily associated with significant events, such as marriage and childbirth and with specific conditions, such as infertility. The ceremony of ambergris in Sargent’s picture is most likely less charged, as perfuming clothes with ambergris was also a feature of the culture—and we have no evidence to suggest that Sargent was familiar with a deeper understanding of the substance (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 284). We do not know if the ritual depicted is reminiscent of something Sargent had seen or heard of, or if it reflects an imaginative response to his experiences in Tangier. Most likely, Sargent was entranced by the picturesque and otherworldly qualities and didn’t much care how his audience would interpret the scene. In fact, the ambiguity would have been attractive to him. The viewer is able to interpret the subject as they wish—an important feature of marketability. The ambiguity is a large part of the picture’s power, and is a common feature of Orientalist canvases.

Given Sargent’s artistic credo to focus on representation only, it was most important to him that the painting was visually appealing. From the careful depiction of the bleached-out traditional turquoise floor tiles to the draping and tautness of the haik, Sargent was clearly more concerned with aesthetics and effect than actual meaning. The white-on-white concept posed considerable technical challenges, and the clarity with which the figure stands apart from the architectural background required a subtle shifting of tones and tints and a precision in recording surface and texture. In seemingly effortless brushwork, Sargent created impeccably precise passages alongside others that were loosely sketched and impressionistic (Fairbrother 54).

Sargent’s model is supposed to have been a local Jewish woman. There was a large Jewish population in Tangier, and as life for Muslim women was more
circumscribed at this time, it seems more likely Sargent convinced a Jewish woman to pose for his demanding sessions. The model, who looks similar to the woman depicted in *Woman with the Covered Head*, is posed just right of center beside a round column that supports an arch decorated with distinctive Moorish scrollwork. She stands on a small step on top of a long, narrow city rug (probably from Rabat) of orange, yellow, and black, in which zigzag shapes form geometric patterns (Njoku 60). The rug lies on top of traditional turquoise floor tiling, which appears bleached from the harsh sun—as the tile becomes a richer turquoise as the patio recedes into shade. The model infuses and perfumes herself with grey smoke, which floats upwards from an ornate, pierced-silver censer that glistens directly in the center foreground (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 299).

The ivory robe worn by the figure in *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* is consistent with the traditional, generic Moroccan dress worn by men and women, Jews and Muslims, in North Africa and Spain since the eleventh century. There are numerous variants in regard to material, colour, decoration, and style of draping (according to local custom and social class). The garment is constructed from a single length of fabric, known as a haik (from the Arabic hak; to weave). The cloth can be woolen or cotton, plain or striped, and may be worn belted. And sometimes a separate sheet is used to form the hood. The material would wrap around the figure twice, draping, rather than following one’s form. It is brought over the shoulder and fastened at the front on either side by pins or a fibula. The costume in Sargent’s painting is close to that worn by the Hlot people, an Arabic tribe living south of Tangier (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 299). What is notable about the haik in *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* is that it is quite long and forms a sort
of train that puddles in front of the figure. In examining albumen prints from Tangier in the nineteenth century, one notices that all haiks are much shorter than this. 9 Another common outer garment, the burnoose, is also typically of knee or ankle length (Njoku 87). This, of course, makes great sense, as one did have to have their feet free in order to walk. Sargent’s model certainly did not come off the street dressed in this elaborate manner; instead it is clear that she was robed in place according to Sargent’s preferences.

Another artistic invention is the elegant way in which the fabric is looped over the model’s head, creating a canopy to trap the smoke fumes. Sargent, a well-known perfectionist, must have agonized about getting the draping and tautness of the fabric just right. As a focal point of the painting, it was important to have the hood reflect the desired amount of light, create a pleasing shape above the figure’s head, enable the fringe at the end to hang straight, and expose the perfect angle of the figure’s face. We know that Sargent also paid a great deal of attention to the expressive gestures of the figure’s hands. We have two drawing sheets of sketches with slight changes to the angle of the wrist and placement of the fingers (1880, Figure 8) (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 300). Fairbrother has noted that throughout Sargent’s life, “[he] was intrigued by the gestures of hands, fingers, and wrists, and he relishes the technical demands of depicting their profiles, shadows, and foreshortened forms” (Fairbrother 54).

In addition to the haik and hood, Sargent’s model also wears a loose, white undergarment and billowing elbow length sleeves edged with orange. A wimple, veil, or litham of similar material, designed as protection against wind and as a modest veil to hide the face, is pulled down to reveal her face and cover only her neck and jaw (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 299). The veil is an item of clothing
dramatically overburdened with symbolism. For the West, long obsessed with seeing behind the veil, the veil evokes a sexual energy and demarcates the line between public and private space (Bailey and Tawadros qtd. in Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 22-33). The veil functions as a personal, cultural, religious, and political emblem. It is an ideological object shrouded in fantasy and mystery. (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 58 and 70). The veil in Sargent’s painting functions on many levels. First, the absence of the veil on the face gives further credence to the suggestion that Sargent’s model was a Jew. It also creates ambiguity about the ritual being performed. The woman is indeed exposing her clothing to the scent of ambergris, but as there is no veil to cover her nose, she is also inhaling it. Which is the intended part of the ritual and which is the defacto is unknown. As an educated and well-traveled man, Sargent would not have been ignorant to the power of the veil. Although he had never set foot in a Muslim country before, his knowledge of Orientalist literature and art provided an understanding. While the ritual of ambergris is aesthetically interesting and mysterious, he of course knew that the duality of a robed woman with a partial veil would intrigue.

The figure’s jewelry consists of two large, silver, triangular brooches or tisernas, refined in design and linked by a chain or sisala, which together act as fibulae pinning the haik. A preparatory drawing of the fibula exists, and from this we know that it was an object that was at one time in Sargent’s possession (Figure 9). The triangular shapes of the brooches are Berber in style and other examples from the period bear resemblance (Figure 10). The model also wears a delicate ring on the small finger of her right hand. Sargent’s choice of so little and such stylized jewelry is striking, as most local women
would have worn several heavy pieces to adorn their neck and upper body. Sargent was acting as stylist. Perhaps he did not want to detract from the elaborate censer in the foreground or from the white symphony of tones. Whatever the reason, the choice was purposeful. The censor is distinctly elegant and urban (vessels in local communities would have been made of clay), and as it creates the smoke for which the painting is named, it is right that it hold a place of visual importance. The model’s face also serves as ornamentation—she is elaborately and exotically made up. Lips, nails, and eyebrows are all stained with henna. Her eyelids are enhanced with kohl and the eyebrows accentuated and extended to form one dramatic line (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV, 299).

Sargent was clearly most deliberate and selective in choosing the elements of dress and decoration that comprise *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*. In Tangier he had a wide array of material to pick and choose from, as Morocco was a strategically located North African country and a melting pot of many different civilizations. The country’s elaborate traditional practices, customs, and people were prime fodder for his artistic aspirations (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV, 299). Everything about *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* is sophisticated and tailored to Sargent’s taste. In this picture, he effectively transformed popular Orientalist imagery and “alchemized it through his own hyper refined Parisian artistic sensibility” (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV 300). Sargent’s artistic process and development of the canvas can be partially traced through the small body of preliminary work he left behind. The overall design and tonal white-on-white arrangement of the composition was carefully worked out in a small oil sketch, while other aspects of the finished canvas are left undeveloped in the work.
Notably absent from the sketch is the silver incense burner and no separate study of this object is known. The other strategic details of the composition: the arch, fibula, and gestured hands are all worked out in detail in the aforementioned pencil studies (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 300).

Although *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* was executed in Morocco, it was finished in a studio in Paris. Sargent’s sister Emily wrote to Vernon Lee on March 16, 1880, “John returned to Paris about a month ago leaving Tangier in haste as the rains had begun, & he could not continue his picture of an Arab woman.” As Sargent was famously a collector of objects and souvenirs, he no doubt brought back to Paris some of the accessories he needed to complete the canvas. Sargent also returned to Paris with a rich scrapbook of images, none of which correspond to the elements in *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*. They were not aids, but instead visual notes to which Sargent could fix his own fleeting impressions (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 285).

*Fumée d’Ambre Gris* was a huge success at the Salon and sold to a French man, (probably the artist, Paul Borel) for 3,000 francs (approximately $575) before the exhibition even closed (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 14). The painting received many favorable reviews from critics, notable among them that of A. Genevay and Henry James. Genevay wrote,

> his *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* is one of the pictures in the Salon that most intrigues those members of the public who are unfamiliar with the refinements of social pleasure. If Theo (Gautier) were still alive, what an inspiration this canvas would have been to his writing. This Oriental woman who perfumes herself and awakens passion (they do say, such is the quality of ambergris, that the adventurer Casanova took it as a powder in his chocolate) is a figure that is bizarre and original in effect.

Henry James wrote,
I know not who this stately Mohammedan may be, nor in what mysterious domestic or religious rite she may be engaged; her in her muffled contemplation and her pearl-coloured robe, under her plastered arcade, which shines in the Eastern light, she is beautiful and memorable. The picture is exquisite, a radiant effect of white upon white, of similar but discriminating tones. (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 302-303).

In a letter dated July of 1880, Sargent wrote to Vernon Lee, “I shall send you a photograph of a little picture I perpetrated in Tangiers. It is very unsatisfactory because the only interest of the thing is the colour, but still it will you a general idea of what your “twin” is about” (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 286). Sargent was known to be modest and was also not typically forthcoming in his opinions, but as he chose to send *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* to the Salon he knew it was a great painting. We can instead take his comment to mean that his greatest preoccupation was with the color. This statement is certainly corroborated by his well-worked oil sketch and of course, in the resulting finished work. *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* is enigmatic, poetic, and theatrical, rather than literal and descriptive (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol IV* 299-230).

Critics in both France and America responded warmly to the painting. Even before the Salon opened *L’Illustration* indicated it would include an engraving of the painting in its pages. In spite of repeated notices in the press that *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* was being sent to America for exhibition, the French owner seems to have spurned all Sargent’s efforts to show the work. After the Salon of 1880, the painting was lost to public view for 30 years (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg 80).

Although Sargent clearly subscribed to the notion of art for art’s sake, the subject was of more importance than he admitted to. He purposefully chose a subject related to the Orientalist art of his contemporaries in order to expand his repertoire (and perhaps
also to fetch a high price for the painting). From the beginning of his career, Sargent maintained a balance between commissioned portraits and genre paintings produced independently. Portraiture was his greatest source of income, but he wanted the public to know that he was capable of other types of subjects as well. Sargent never wanted to be classified as simply a portraitist—a view he held for his entire life. In 1901, J.B. Manson, an art student, wrote to Sargent for career advice. His reply,

You say you are studying painting to become a portrait painter. I think you would be making a great mistake if you kept that in view during the time you intend to work in a life class . . . The conventionalities of portrait painting are only tolerable in one who is a good painter—if he is only a good portrait-painter he is nobody . . . (Charteris 189)

*Fumée d’Ambre Gris* demonstrated to the Parisian audience that Sargent was capable of transforming Orientalism (Volk 26). The canvas introduced a new kind of Orientalist painting; one that depicted the ephemeral qualities of the place, but that restrained the Orientalist aesthetic. Sargent’s refined artistic sensibility did not align with the glitz, gore, and raw sexuality that often occupied Orientalist canvases. Instead, he saw a land awash in bright light and a quiet sensuality. His enlightened vision represented a new way to depict the Oriental woman, while still offering his European audience an image shrouded in mystery and fantasy. Sargent effectively balanced Salon expectations, while also forging ahead with his own artistic agenda. His commitment to the modernist ideal of art for art’s sake enabled him to resist the romantic and hyper sexualized, and focus on the transient effects of light, smoke, and quiet beauty. In this exercise of restraint Sargent created an unparalleled ‘Oriental’ masterpiece.

*Fumée d’Ambre Gris* was Sargent’s first complete essay on the exotic. His first emotive canvas and first foray into becoming a “painter-traveler.” After his signature,
Sargent inscribed “Tangier” in the right corner of the canvas. This is notable, as it is not a common feature. Inscriptions beyond his name were typically reserved for paintings and sketches given as gifts. Sargent clearly wanted the audience to know he that he traveled to Tangier to create this canvas. He wasn’t merely recreating an image from a story or imagining a scene. *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* was observed and composed abroad. The painting proved to be a strategic success, both as a technical *tour de force* and as a demonstration of Sargent’s ability to portray the exotic. Although, Paris was not an exotic locale, upon returning there, Sargent found a sense of theatre in all he portrayed with his brush (Fairbrother 51-56). And, given Sargent’s inherited wanderlust, not even Paris could contain him for long. A few months later, in the summer of 1880, he traveled to the Netherlands, the following year brought him to England, and the summer after that Venice beckoned.
Chapter IV

The Painter-Travelers

“The only pleasure of coming back to one’s own house is the pleasure of unpacking the bibelots one has got elsewhere—good wholesome sentiment.”

John Singer Sargent, 1906 (Charteris 173)

For the affluent and educated, like John Singer Sargent, foreign peoples, places, and customs were fairly accessible. The Grand Tour was a rite of passage for the upper classes since the seventeenth century, and aspects of Chinese, Turkish, and Egyptian cultures were in vogue with the elite throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A particular conjunction of political events and artistic concerns resulted in a rapid expansion of the West’s contact with the Near East, and by the late nineteenth century the masses were finally exposed to the world beyond (Stevens 16). Improvements to rail networks and steamships dramatically reduced distance and cost and, in turn, revolutionized tourism. Advances in print production ensured widespread circulation of newspapers, guidebooks, travelogues, and other literature that provided images and information about now not-so-far-away lands (Lemke 27; Levell 11). At the same time, International Exhibitions became commonplace and were billed as showcases for the wonders of the world (Lemke 46). The fairs were the perfect platform for colonial aspirations—encounters of the East were marketed and popularized to the public (Lemke 50). The “Streets of Cairo” display made regular appearances at the fairs for thirty years, beginning with the 1851 London Exhibition that Sargent visited as a child. From 1855 through 1900, the fairs featured Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, and later, Iran and
Morocco. The viewing of foreign people, places, and customs was now available to anyone for the low cost of fair admission (Lemke 69).

The international pavilions at the fairs promised access to the East, but in reality were selective and reductive, like all tourist kitsch. They produced a subjective, fictionalized, and fetishized version of the Near East. A separation and differentiation resulted—imagery predicated on the contrast of self from other, familiar from exotic, civilized from barbaric (Levell 11). The Orient, in practice and in nomenclature¹⁰, was a staged construct—a product of fin de siècle imagination and European perception (Lemke 10). Within an environment of empire and innovation, wealth and war, this ‘Orient’ took hold of many in the nineteenth century. Disenchanted with the banalities of modern European life, many in the upper classes looked to the East for an escape (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol IV, 27). A mythical ‘Oriental’ world was created, influenced by political ideologies, social constructs, and fantasy, and expressed through European scholarship, literature, and visual art. Like a mirage, this Orient was powerful and yet famously illusive. This Orient was not a real location that one could pinpoint on a map, but rather an imagined set of boundaries that reduced the disparate lands of the East to a single cultural designation, and differentiated them from the rest of the world (Said 39).

Orientalism

The imagining and reimagining of the ‘other’ found visual expression in la peinture orientaliste. “The popularity of orientalist paintings demonstrated Europe’s continuing love affair with the East as somewhere far away, alien, exotic, sensual, primitive, barbaric and infinitely strange” (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings
Vol IV, 27 and 281). In the nineteenth century, Europeans whose work concerned North African and Middle Eastern subjects were deemed Orientalists and their work constituted Orientalism. In the twentieth century, Edward Said reinterpreted the term as biased visions of the East designed to further European imperialism exclusively. Assigning the once loosely descriptive term with a particular value judgment (Said 3). According to Said and Saidists such as Linda Nochlin, the visual imagery of Orientalist art created a propagandistic discourse laced with notions of European power and superiority (Nochlin 35, 41, 51). Nochlin argues that Orientalist art is overly picturesque and serves to certify that the East is “irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior . . .” to the West (Nochlin 35-39, 51-53). John MacKenzie presents an alternative argument, “far from offering an artistic programme for imperialism, they [Orientalist artists] were finding in the East ancient verities lost in their own civilization” (MacKenzie 67). The ephemeral qualities of the picturesque are indeed sentimental and nostalgic, but Nochlin’s assertion simplifies and mistakes the intent of the picturesque. Mackenzie’s argument is expanded to offer a more nuanced interpretation—Orientalist images (like most images) are indeed partial and contrived—none are truly accurate. Art is never pure or completely ethnographic for the eye is not innocent (Mackenzie 53). Even Orientalist works committed to an ideal of cultural accuracy fail in the documentary sense because they betray the limited knowledge and understanding of nineteenth-century European artists, which was not necessarily due to a deep bias. Neither Nochlin nor MacKenzie allow for dispassionate aesthetic expression or a belief in art for art’s sake—major drivers for art making in the late nineteenth century. Also, as Roger Benjamin reminds us, Orientalist canvases were not often painted for a discriminating Eastern
audience but for the European exhibition halls and galleries that enforced standards of finish and set commission by subject matter (Benjamin 7, 38). In the 1870s and 1880s, the zenith of Orientalism as a painting genre, Oriental imagery largely served as a visual record of European artistic exploration and tourism, rather than a legitimate source of ethnographic information (Edwards 25).

While Orientalism clearly has varied meanings in disparate ideologies, it is most generally understood in the art historical context as simply a genre of painting—a genre that developed in the early nineteenth century by European artists and features predominantly Middle Eastern and North African subjects. Orientalism does not relate to a school, but instead a theme in which that some artists dabbled, others explored, and few specialized (Lemke 31 and MacKenzie xiii, 43-44). Spanning a period of more than a century and a number of varied aesthetic movements—its artists and motifs are extremely diverse (Gill 7).

John MacKenzie describes Orientalism’s trajectory in five principle phases. The first phase of Orientalism was imagined images of Oriental peoples created in the eighteenth century by artists who seldom, if ever, saw the real thing. These paintings were often, and essentially, illustrations of fantastical stories and envisioned historical events. The second phase concerned topographical and ethnographic “realism,” but was actually more concerned with atmospheric results and provocation than accuracy. In the third phase, realism was indicated by the addition of detailed minutiae. Romantic flourishes signaled that the focus was not purely on accuracy, but instead emotive results. In the nineteenth century, the fourth phase introduced the influence of impressionism, along with new thematic concerns and a greater range of subjects and moods. In the fifth phase, Eastern
goods become less stage props and more a reflection on their influence on western crafts and design. Painters become influenced by Eastern art itself, particularly the abstract and geometric forms from the Far East (MacKenzie 48-50).

In the nineteenth century, nearly every French artist (and a number of British, and fewer American) dabbled in Orientalism. These artists were formally trained, mostly by the École des Beaux-Arts, and spanned the spectrum in both their talent and ideologies. The attraction to the Orient was most likely just as varied: perhaps they were entranced by Eastern light and the potential for chromatic experiments, influenced by wild tales of adventure and the opportunity for a variety of genre scenes, intrigued by the sensuality and sexuality of place and people, or perhaps just encouraged by the promise of a sale. Rather than a movement, Orientalism was an inspiration. Masterpieces were produced, along with lots of kitsch imagery. The popularity of both ensured the buoyancy of Orientalists in art markets (Gill 7).

Few artists actually traveled to the Near East to compose their paintings. Scenes from the fairs, or images from postcards or literature served as their fodder. These so-called “pseudo Orientalists” never visited the East or perhaps made one short trip out of youthful exuberance. These painters might have created a few Orientalist works—but overall the genre was a career blip. There were those who made a trip or two and relied on the memories for the rest of their life and built an identity as a professional Orientalist. And fewer were those who went to various Eastern locales over years and decades, deepening their knowledge and affection (Ackerman, American Orientalists 9). These traveling artists tended to produce pictures that emphasized the most salient features of a particular place (Edwards 25). Visions of naked, sexualized harem girls and tyrannical
despots were thus fewer and farther between for the painters who had experienced the Orient first-hand. Of those that did travel, many returned unchanged—the Orient was simply a passing interest or exotic metaphor. There were others whose work and careers were fundamentally affected by their visits. Artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme, John Frederick Lewis, and Frederick Arthur Bridgman sought a greater understanding of the indigenous cultures to varying degrees and returned again and again to distinctively Orientalist subject matter. Others, like Delacroix, Fromentin, and Matisse had a more nuanced reaction to their Oriental experiences. The influence of the Orient was on their technical development, specifically in their handling of light and color (Stevens 15-16). For a smaller group, the lure of the exotic (in its many forms) took hold and forever imprinted and influenced the course of their artistic careers. John Singer Sargent was of this group (Edwards 25).

Gérôme

An immensely popular French artist of the academic style, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) was first and foremost a genre painter and one of the most influential art teachers of the nineteenth century. An undisputed professional success, crowds flocked to see his works and official recognition followed. Gérôme was awarded one of four medals of honor during the 1867 Exposition Universelle, and in the same year was awarded the Legion d’honneur. In 1899 he was made Grand Officer—a rare distinction. Through the mass marketing of his father in law, international art dealer Adolphe Goupil, Gérôme’s art reached audiences on an unprecedented scale. Replicas of his works sold ten to 1,000 times more than works by Impressionist contemporaries (Allan 1).
Gérôme made at least seven visits to the Middle East (beginning in 1857) and for a period Orientalism consumed his career (MacKenzie 54). His most lucrative years were between 1865 and 1885. 1880 was a record year, the peak of his profits—his painting, *The Serpent Charmer* sold for 75,000 francs (Lafont-Couturier 19). Gérôme was no doubt entranced by the Middle East. He wrote, “My short stay in Constantinople had whetted my appetite, and the Orient was the most frequent of my dreams. Probably some Bohemian slipped in among my ancestors, for I have always had a nomadic disposition and a well-developed bump of locomotion” (Ackerman, *The Life and Work of Jean-Leon Gérôme* 1986). Gérôme’s more than 350 Orientalist paintings should also be understood as mostly created for commercial purposes. Collectors prized Oriental works, and Gérôme was very anxious to sell his canvases, so much so, that he sometimes even altered them to suit the consumer’s desires (Lafont-Couturier 20). In the nineteenth century, Gérôme was not only admired by British and American collectors, but also by Eastern. In a November 18, 1868 letter from the private secretary of the Viceroy of Egypt, he received great praise. “His Highness the Khedive . . . has studied with the keenest interest the reproductions of famous works which have earned you such a well-deserved reputation” (Lafont-Couturier 27).

As avant-garde works gained momentum in the latter half of the nineteenth century and as he had already achieved impossible fame, Gérôme became a punching bag for critics. It was thought he perpetuated the soullessness of French academic painting. His painting style eliminated all traces of the brush, and his formal and often repetitive presentation of subjects seemed out-of-date. Jules-Antoine Castagnary, in his review of the Salon of 1857 wrote, “inferior landscapists . . . go off to search in the Orient, deep in
the desert, for a nature that is extraordinary and lacks any relation to our ideas and our temperament” (Miller, qtd. in Allan 106). Émile Zola offered some of the harshest commentary of the lacquer factory. Zola, of the Universal Exposition of 1867 wrote, “the artist [Gérôme] learned from this painter [Delaroche] the wrong way to paint and color his tiresomely researched and contrived subjects . . . Obviously, Gérôme works for the house of Goupil; he makes a painting in order for the painting to be engraved or reproduced photographically and copies sold by the thousands . . . ” (Lafont-Couturier 40). By the end of the nineteenth century, Gérôme’s reputation had universally declined. He stood apart from the major artistic trends of his time—naturalism and impressionism, and maintained the standards of finish, composition, and subject matter of an antiquated institution (Lafont-Couturier 43).

Despite his downturn of popularity, Gérôme had over 2,000 students at the École Nationale des Beaux Arts from 1864 to 1902 who helped continue his legacy (Lafont-Couturier 21). He was a well-liked teacher, especially in his later years, and taught approximately 150 American students. Frederick Arthur Bridgman is among the best known, and perhaps the student who had most success in following his master’s Orientalist path. Bridgman’s contemporary, John Singer Sargent is one student who chose not to enroll in the atelier of Gérôme: his painterly style and interest in contemporary aesthetics were not a fit for the master teacher. But, certainly the elder’s Orientalist canvases had some influence on Sargent and his first Oriental paintings, if even to just create a perspective of opposition. Sargent was quite outspoken on his disdain for Gérôme’s canvases.
Gérôme’s œuvre often focused on the most profitable and popular types of images—historical, biblical, and classical scenes, as well as sensual Orientalist canvases (Prettlejohn 11). *The Bath* (1885, Figure 11) is one of many bath scenes created by Gérôme. An American critic in 1873 wrote, “Gérôme has the reputation of being one of the most studious and conscientiously accurate painters of our time . . . it is invariably his aim to attain the utmost possible exactness. It is this trait in which some declare an excess that has caused him to be spoken of as a ‘scientific picture maker’” (Nochlin 37). Clearly, in his heyday, Gérôme was thought to be objective and scientific in his depictions, placing him firmly in the second phase of Orientalism. His tight, glassy style, in which all evidence of the brush disappeared, gave the illusion of a photograph. Linda Nochlin has argued that the absence of the artist’s touch served to convince viewers that there was no artifice in his representations of the Orient (Edwards 72).

Stylistically, Sargent’s Orientalist canvases, even his first *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*, are in stark contrast to other Orientalist paintings of the same period, in particular, those of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Gérôme’s *The Bath* is an intimate canvas. As with *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*, the viewer is cast as voyeur, but this time we have been granted a glimpse of a ‘real’ bath in progress. While the figure in *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* is almost completely hidden by her clothing, the figures in *The Bath* are exposed. Nudity in Orientalist paintings had a striking and titillating immediacy when compared with the nudity associated with mythical or classical times (MacKenzie 64). *The Bath* would have instantly attracted many eyes at the Salon, as would have its arresting bright palette.

In *The Bath*, two women populate an ornate bath that gleams with turquoise tiles and features a single band of patterning and Arabic calligraphy. Muqarnas connect the
corner of the room with the ceiling, and effectively draw the eye to a stone basin and small pool that fills the space directly below. These details alone would delineate the space as Oriental and more specifically, Arab to most viewers. The central figure is completely nude and elegantly seated on a wooden crate with her back angled towards the viewer. Her servant is swathed in strategically placed colorful fabric and robust jewelry. The dark skin and exoticness of the servant contrasts with the seated figure and enables the nude to pop off the canvas. The playful details of the tousled, non-matching towels on the wall rack and robe strewn on the floor furthers a sense of authenticity. In reality, Gérôme, like Sargent, carefully composed his canvas. They were both deliberate and selective in choosing the elements of dress and decoration, but differed in subject, palette, handling of paint, and in almost every aesthetic choice.

Lewis

Like Jean-Léon Gérôme, John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876) was a central figure in Orientalist painting. His works spanned nearly all phases of Orientalism; his canvases were seen as ethnographic and offering intrigue, insight, as well as sensory overload. While Gérôme traveled to the Middle East often, Lewis became a resident. The British painter first explored Spain and Morocco in the early 1830s, and went on to reside in Cairo for a full decade (Tromans 10). The Maghreb (Northern-west Muslim Africa, including Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) was largely considered French artistic territory due to the country’s political and military dominance. The Middle East at this time, with the exception of the Nile Valley, was visited only by European soldiers and explorers. And as travel was defined by the realities of transportation, art and tourism flourished in
places only easily accessible by boat. Thus, British Orientalist painters depicted a limited territory. Most artists gathered material in Cairo or Morocco and then headed back to London as soon as possible to start turning a profit. As a resident, Lewis could venture further into Muslim lands and the Arab experience (Tromans 10-11).

Lewis specialized in male-only genre subjects, as well as harem pictures. The gender separation inherent in Muslim society caused pictorial problems, but he learned to create a new focus from the challenge (Tromans 17). In most of Lewis’ harem images, the presence of a dominant male is implied and integral to picture’s interpretation. It is understood that the women featured are making compromises for privilege (Weeks, qtd. in Tromans 31).

Lewis’ works are skillfully rendered, but repetitious. The art critics of London ran out of things to say about his paintings—and the artist himself never said much. His work was “beautiful, it was almost unbelievably intricate in execution, its colours and textures oozed preciousness” (Tromans 19). The incidental details in his canvases are delightful surprises, visually appealing and ultimately distracting. Edward Lear remarked in 1874, “There never have been, & there never will be, any works depicting Oriental life – more truly beautiful & excellent – perhaps I must say – so beautiful & excellent. For, besides the exquisite & conscientious workmanship, the subjects painted by J.F. Lewis were perfect as representations of real scenes & people” (Weeks, qtd. in Tromans 26).

Unlike Gérôme and other academic painters, Lewis was not concerned with creating a polished surface. His paintings would never be mistaken for a photograph—the artist’s hand is seen. The complexity of his canvases’ surfaces and the ambiguity of the focus in
his paintings were representative of the “highly fraught nature of Orientalist art in general” (Weeks, qtd. in Tromans 22-23).

Many of Lewis’ compositions center on the dramatic gendering of spaces, and feature a harem (Tromans 82). The harem was the defining symbol of the Orient for Westerners, and is still considered a definitive category of Orientalist imagery today (Tromans 128). Victorian society in England was often similarly segregated and delineation between women’s spaces and men’s spaces common. In Lewis’ harem scenes, the women have a distinctly ‘un-Oriental’ appearance and were often ladies of status and luxuriously dressed (Tromans 132). If Gérôme represented Orientalism in pornographic mode, then Lewis represented it Victorian mode (Tromans 136). Lewis’ women are essentially just Victorian women artfully dressed and displayed. Both men and women could view his pictures in public and adorn them on their walls. He was creating objects of delight, not desire (Williams 235).

While living in Cairo, Lewis produced an enormous amount of drawings; and from these he would derive his paintings for the rest of his life. Deft in both oil and watercolors, Lewis often made two versions of his paintings (Tromans 80-1). The artist created 35 or so major paintings, and the scenes, settings, models, and costumes are often repeated (Williams 229). *An Intercepted Correspondence, Cairo* (1869, Figure 12) and *The Hhareem* (1849, Figure 13) share the same setting and many of the same characters, despite being created 20 years apart. The left side of the canvas also shares a nearly identical composition.

*An Intercepted Correspondence, Cairo* is a virtual summary of Lewis’ harem paintings (Williams 231). It is an exquisitely detailed painting, portraying a distinctly
Arab space with latticed windows, intricate carved ceilings, and ornate tiles. It is a peek into domestic life and presents a narrative that would have been clear to his Victorian audience. Likely missed upon first glance today, central to the painting is an illicit love message in the form of a bouquet. The language of flowers was well understood in Lewis’ day and the symbolism of each flower was known. Pansy, think of the giver; anemone, the giver feels forsaken; roses, love (Thornton 129-130 and Williams 235). A bey sits cross-legged on a divan (said to resemble the artist, but lighter in skin tone) and the only other male is a black eunuch who is inspecting a new concubine. He provided vignettes in a bright palette. There are over a dozen people in the scene dressed in a variety of sumptuous fabrics. The setting is luxurious—fruits, rugs, and other decorative elements are prevalent. According to Williams, “the physical and symbolic relationships between furnishings and social practices in Egypt were of the utmost importance at the time, particularly with regard to those concerning women and the home. Lewis was highly conscious of this, and used his cultural knowledge to enhance the sense of respectability already conveyed by the formal geometry of the scene” (231).

The technical mastery of light and shadow is impressive, as is the scientific precision of each element (Williams 232-233). There is an inscription above the reclining ladies and below the alcove from the Quran 3:16 that reads; “Those who say: Our Lord! Lo! We believe. So forgive us our sins.” A steady hand, fine brush, and intimate knowledge with the region are needed for such an inscription. This part of the painting was surely intended to impress scholars or natives of the East. The British viewer would not understand Islamic writing, nor would they know the difference between an authentic phrase or gibberish (Williams 237). Lewis’ remarkable intimacy with the region enabled
him to be ahead of his time. He advanced into the later phases of Orientalism, to which other artists only came decades later (Weeks in Tromans 24-25).

Lewis devoted more energy to the decorative aspects of the composition rather than the principal subject (Weeks in Tromans 31). In some ways, Lewis’ work can be seen as a precursor of the aesthetic movement. He was a creator of quiet paintings—the Orient was a place seen but not heard (Tromans 20). There are many similarities between Lewis’ canvases and aestheticist painters, from integration of figure and background, prominence of the effects of light and color, authentic Asiatic influence, decorative mood, and reduction of narrative in favor of focus on detail (Roberts 47). In Lewis’ work there is a shift from the ethnographic elements of a harem to its aesthetics. He was not solely focused on the body but also on the pleasures and luxury evoked by the fabrics, textures, and play of light and shadow (Roberts 55). Although more than a generation apart, John Singer Sargent’s Orientalist works share some of these attributes. Sargent took the aesthetic ideas even further and created canvases oozing in sensuality and theater.

Bridgman

Obsession with the East crossed the Atlantic and American painter Frederick Arthur Bridgman (1847-1928) fell under its spell (Fort 9; Weinberg 49). Bridgman’s paintings of North African subjects made him one of the first American artists to have an international reputation post Civil War (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 1). Nicknamed the “American Gérôme,” he spent several years of intermittent study in Gérôme’s atelier and is considered his one of his finest disciples (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 3).
Bridgman benefitted learning from Gérôme in his best teaching years (Fort, *Frederick Arthur Bridgman* 29). Although there are similarities with his teacher, particularly in his earlier works, there is a distinctly American quality to Bridgman’s canvases (Fort, *Frederick Arthur Bridgman* 9).

In the winter of 1872-73, Bridgman crossed from Spain to North Africa, and later into Algeria. In a letter to his dealer Chittenden he wrote of Tangiers, “picturesque to any degree but a wretched place to live except in fine weather, the streets very narrow and dirty and the town walled in but splendidly picturesque” (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 22). In the winter of 1873-74 he traveled to Egypt and recorded his observations constantly. He returned to Paris with over 300 sketches and studies, and many accessories and bric-a-brac (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 26). John Singer Sargent later declared Bridgman’s studio to be one of the two things a tourist must see in Paris, the Eiffel Tower being the other (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 32). Bridgman’s travels to the East continued throughout the decade, and Oriental types dominated his paintings for the rest of his career.

Bridgman so resembled his teacher in his early professional years that some French critics remarked his paintings could have been signed by Gérôme himself. *The Burial of a Mummy on the Nile* (1877, Figure 14) is one example of Bridgman’s realist archaeological paintings (Weinberg 49). The painting received a third class medal at the 1877 Salon (his first Salon prize) and was also successful at the Exposition Universelle. It was sold to an American collector for $5,000 (Patterson 35). While Bridgman’s paintings do owe a debt to Gérôme in providing an artistic foundation, they are freer, atmospheric, and more painterly in style (Simpson, Ormond, Weinberg 50). *The Burial of a Mummy on*
The Nile offers genuine romance with its Turner-esque lighting, which many American and English critics praised instead of the accuracy of the archeological details. The pupil took from his master but applied contemporary aesthetic concerns (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 144). Fort succinctly argues, “Bridgman cast the East in light of his own heritage.” His is Orientalism in American mode. Less than a decade after adopting Gérôme’s subject matter, he rebuked his teacher’s meticulous painting style, heavy varnish, and artificial studio lighting, in favor of a more naturalistic approach. The combination of sunlight and loose, impressionistic brushstrokes enabled Bridgman to develop his own personal style (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 4).

Among Bridgman’s Orientalist influences was Frederick Lewis. His many interiors and domestic scenes have an affinity to Lewis’—precise handling, lots of details, wealth of exotic context, and a similar palette (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 199). Bridgman also delved into the weighty archaeological genre (Ackerman, American Orientalists 26). He was fascinated with Egypt past and present, although he ignored many of the most famous monuments (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 120-121). Gérôme’s and Lewis’ most famous motifs, the bath and harem, were also of little interest to Bridgman (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 207-211, 224). His interest instead lay in the activities of the Orient, the everyday scenes of life and leisure (Fort, Frederick Arthur Bridgman 227).

The Card Players (unknown, Figure 15) is one of Bridgman’s many scenes of common docile activities. Four elegant women have gathered out of doors for a game of cards. Their setting is lush and accompanied by blankets and a fine tea set. The women are handsomely appointed. Absent are heavy niqabs and even hijabs: these women have
exposed necks and their head scarves are adorned with fabulous jewelry. The everyday scene is straightforward and pleasing, and a stylistic departure from *The Burial of a Mummy on the Nile* and other early works. *The Card Players* demonstrates an influence of Impressionism and of the other avant-garde contemporary artists alongside whom he painted in Pont-Aven. Like Sargent, Bridgman had a fascination with women, especially of the exotic, picturesque type (Fort, *Frederick Arthur Bridgman* 217). Holly Edwards remarked that Bridgman “invoked the Orient to describe a desirable world in which women are proper, beautiful, and reticent” (14). His women were strong and confident. Bridgman focused on the human side of the Orient—not the alien (Patterson 28).

As it had for Gérôme, the early 1880s reflected a period of success for Bridgman. As the two were master and student and a generation apart, this speaks to the strength of the Orientalist art market at this time. In 1881, Bridgman had a show of over three hundred works at the American Art Gallery in New York. The majority were sketches—a novelty at that time (but they were not for sale). The critics were unanimous in their praise, “an extraordinary mastery of natural effects . . . their frankness, their fidelity, their freshness, their beauty.” From the show Bridgman sold $14,000 worth of paintings and had orders for $8,000 more in France (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 30). The 1890s remained a period of sustained fame and fortune. Bridgman was honored with five works hung at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889 and another large one-man show in New York. While his brushwork was never tight, it became even looser and his color richer throughout his career (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 32). He was finally awarded Legion d’honneur in 1907.
Bridgman’s *North African Market* (1923, Figure 16) is a multi-layered scene that
demonstrates his continued interest in everyday Algerian contemporary life. Like a
Lewis painting, there are so many figures and subplots that the eye is not sure where to
focus. *North African Market* was created after Bridgman settled in Normandy, and is
fairly representative of his last decade of work. Featuring a subdued palette, the painting
depicts a market where men and a few women have gathered to buy and sell goods. There
is a clear interest in depicting realistic light and shadow. The desert heat is sensed from
the bright surfaces and helps add authenticity to the scene. The canvas is based on a
collective memory and is not fully successful in convincing us of its reality. As Bridgman
aged, his paintings became progressively nostalgic, “sugary and unreal” (Thornton, *The
Orientalists: Painter-Travellers* 31). As he tried to reconnect with his past experiences
rather than finding fresh opportunities, his popularity waned.

Bridgman and Sargent were contemporaries and American expatriates. They both
avoided some of the most cliché representations of the Orient and their painterly
brushwork and naturalist aesthetic was part of the spirit of their generation (Fort 4). Both
were intimate outsiders, “individuals whose unique social position and cultural interests
provide scope for a more nuanced interpretation of Orientalist visual culture” (Roberts
153). Nationalistic concerns were not part of their temperament, and this ambivalence
enabled them to develop a sense of cosmopolitanism (Fort 455-456). Their early careers
have similar notes, but Sargent’s canvases remained fresh and dynamic as he went on to
expand his Orientalist oeuvre and explore the exotic across the globe.

In 1864, French critic, Hector de Callias wrote, “French painting owes a great
debt to the passion for the Orient. This passion has given it what until now has been
lacking, light and the sun. What is, in effect, missing from the French gallery at the Louvre? It is neither style in drawing nor the science of composition, nor again for the harmony colour. It is the rays of the sun.” (Edwards et al. 44). The crisis of Classicism, and the failure of the Academy is that it did not supply the youth with a subject (Weinberg 99). The Orient offered academic painting a future, and extended its life (Tromans 20). Orientalist exotic imagery was a subtext of the cult of the picturesque (Edwards et al. 27). Important experimentations with color resulted, but through the decades, Orientalist painting as a genre became frozen in formula (Edwards et al. 44).

Many felt the lure of the exotic, and some were even transformed, but inspiration was not infinite. Jean-Léon Gérôme, John Frederick Lewis, and Frederick Arthur Bridgman all had extraordinary Orientalist careers, but formulaic canvases compromised their legacies. What distinguished Sargent from other Orientalists was his relative disinterest in subject and his early commitment to art for art’s sake (Edwards et al. 135). He continued to seek exotic stimuli and did not restrict himself to common types found in North Africa and the Near East. Upon returning to Paris from his first painting trip in Morocco, he found a sense of theatre in all he portrayed with his brush (Fairbrother, Sensualist 51-6). And, unlike other Orientalists, when Sargent went on another painting expedition to the East a decade later, he did not repeat themes or compositions. He continued to explore the exotic in new ways and expanded the Orientalist genre. The Chess Game (Figure 17, 1907) is a notable example of this new Orientalist mode, where modern aesthetic values and an Alpine setting supplanted any Saidian criticism and let the beauty and the power his canvases endure.
Chapter V
Outliers and Experiments

“Sketch everything and keep your curiosity fresh.”
John Singer Sargent to his students at the Royal Academy (Nygren 11)

The 1880’s marked Sargent’s artistic maturity and the events of the decade are summarized in the works he exhibited at the 1889 Paris fair (Blaugrund 46). Sargent chose to submit six female portraits, all carefully chosen to highlight his diversity within the genre. One of the oldest canvases, Mrs. Henry White had effectively served as Sargent’s calling card in Paris. Daisy White was the wife of the American ambassador and she hung her portrait prominently in the embassy, leading to many commissions for Sargent. One year earlier, Sargent painted the young daughters of expatriates Edward and Louisa Boit in the foyer of their elegant Paris apartment. The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit, first exhibited as the “Portraits d’enfants” at the Galerie Georges Petit, seemed more a genre scene with an unusual arrangement than a likeness of four girls. The composition was based on Velazquez’s Las Meninas and its shadowy effects are reminiscent of several interiors Sargent completed in Venice (Adler 71). The Misses Vickers captures three English sisters. Quite the opposite of the group Boit portrait, the Vickers girls are pushed to the forefront of the canvas and positioned next to one another. Sargent’s other three canvases date from the year before the Exposition. The Portrait of Mrs. Edward D. Boit, the Portrait of Mrs. Elliott Fitch Shepard, and the Portrait of Mrs. Benjamin Kissam were all fine likenesses in varying positions with unique coloring. Sargent’s paintings received favorable reviews at the American exhibition and he was
subsequently awarded a Grand Prix and made Chevalier of the French Legion d’honneur (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol V 19).  

Sargent often went searching for the exotic, but from time to time it came to him. While exploring the 1889 fair, he was transfixed by a Javanese gamelan and dance troupe. Given Sargent’s interest in indigenous music and dance, extravagant costumes, makeup, and theatricality, should have been of no surprise that he spent days sketching the dancers. Sargent was so preoccupied, he turned down a trip to visit Monet, “I would so much like to be able to stop off at Giverny, but the Javanese [dancers] are keeping me here until the very last moment, which by the way has already passed. I should have been in England more than a week ago.” (Ormond and Kilmurray, Complete Paintings Vol V 59).

The major event at the fair for many was Eiffel’s Tower, but the numerous displays of colonized people and lands also took center stage. The Goncourt brothers remarked in May of 1889, “This Fair has no reality: it seems as if one is processing through the practical sets of an Oriental play.” Paris, as a whole, was still in love with Oriental chic—so these displays of far away lands were quite popular. The Javanese village showcased the Dutch colonies in Indochina (Fairbrother 102). Forty men and twenty women were brought to Paris from Java to represent their native traditions and skills. The Javanese tandak (courtly dancers) were recorded as particularly enchanting—the youthfulness of the dancers, their aristocratic breeding, and uniqueness of the dancing and music—elevated the Javanese to mythical status.

The four tandak were kept in a protective environment at the fair. From 10am to 11pm the dancers had performances. Journalists and artists were in competition for their
limited time off-stage, and only a few were granted access. In addition to Sargent, Pissaro, Rodin, and Toulouse-Lautrec made drawings of the dancers, and Debussy and Satie were inspired musically. The Javanese dancers’ stay in Paris extended beyond the fair and for a time they continued to perform throughout the city (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol V* 169-170, 183).

While painting the Javanese, Sargent also worked on two portraits—one of Mrs. Edmond Kelly and the other of Princess Winnaretta Singer Scey-Montbeliard de Polignac. Sargent’s disinterest in high-society portraiture and his inclination towards more exotic types was known among those in his circle (Charteris 155). Childhood friend, Vernon Lee reflected, “As a young man he was, and perhaps remained, especially attracted by the *bizarre* and outlandish: Spanish dancers posed and lit up in enigmatic fashion; Spanish Madonnas like idols, and Javanese dancers scarcely more barbarically improbable; and that *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*, a Moorish woman veiled in incense fumes, which was, I think, his earliest public success. Such were his individual predilections” (Charteris 250-1). The aura of Oriental romance in the Javanese theatre was pervasive and the unique costumes and serpentine movements of the dancers made them appear like idols brought to life—certainly irresistible to an artist like Sargent (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol V* 170).

The Javanese dancers were children between 12 and 18 years of age, but Sargent’s studies make them seem older, emphasizing their exotic costumes, expressive poses, and elegance (Adelson, *Sargent’s Women* 31). He painted three full-length life-size paintings of individual dancers in oil, and one narrow panel possibly completed later\(^8\), as well as a three-quarter oil painting of a dancer readying for performance, two
well-worked watercolor studies, and numerous sketches of gestural figures and details of posed hands, arms, and feet (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol V* 170-1, 182). The output of sketches is reminiscent of that for *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*. Clearly Sargent was focused on portraying the dancers’ physical traits, demeanor, and choreography authentically. The Javanese were dressed in rich embroidered silks and velvets, and adorned with massive gold ornaments and jewels; Sargent did not have to style these figures. He also did not pose the dancers, from what we know, his sketches and paintings authentically represent their beauty routine and dancing style.

It is known that Sargent valued the Javanese works given their exhibition history. He displayed one full-length oil painting at the New English Art Club in 1891, and chose to display one of the oils next to *Madame X* at the Carfax Gallery in London in 1905 (Fairbrother 104 and Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol V* 171). Critic Roger Fry favorably remembered the powerful impact Sargent’s Javanese dancers made on younger artists whey they were exhibited in 1891. Fry remarked that the primitivism in these sketches was more appealing than the skillful polish of Sargent’s “more finished” pictures. As art tastes moved more towards the avant-garde, unfamiliar aesthetic forms, like African and Byzantine Art and formal simplifications from artists like Gauguin and Cezanne were prized (Prettejohn 73-74). While portraits provided steady income, Sargent’s uncommissioned paintings enabled him to seen as a more modern artist than other Salon favorites.

The three-quarter painting, *A Javanese Girl at Her Toilet* (1889, Figure 18) depicts a dancer putting the final touches on her hairline. Sargent created several studies of dancers putting on their stage makeup, but none are precisely from this view. From a
detailed account by journalist, Marcel Édant, we know that the dancers spread a type of starchy powder on their skin and applied a layer of Indian ink to their foreheads and temples with a brush to create a new hairline. The edges of their mouche were then carefully cleaned of smudges. Their eyebrows were also done with particular care and exaggerated, along with their eyelids. Édant wrote that they traced the long arches of the brow twenty times. The last step in makeup application was the placement of a small black beauty mark above the bridge of their nose. From this painting and the aforementioned sketches, it is clear that Sargent gained access backstage, enabling him to catch the dancers in the moments that Édant described. He was fascinated by these young girls becoming characters, and was moved to record the transformation in process.

The dancer is seated, almost slouched, and relaxed in her underdress of teal and burgundy. She holds a small mirror with her left hand and steadily applies ink with a brush with her other. She shows no self-consciousness, even though we are given a glimpse into a private moment. From photographs, we know jewelry, a headpiece, and over garments would come on next, but in this moment her beauty stands apart from adornment in gold and cloth. She wears but two small rings in this painting. The figure takes up much of the picture plane, her knees are below our view and her hair is quite close to the top of the canvas. The background is neutral—the act of applying makeup and the stunning facial features are the picture’s full focus.

The sketchy background of browns, blacks, and greens is similar to background treatments in other figure studies, *Study of a Model* (1879-80), *A Neapolitan Boy* (1878), *Nude Study of an Egyptian Girl* (1891), *Egyptian Woman (Coin Necklace)* 1891, and *Head of a Young Man* (1900). In these paintings the emphasis is also on the anonymous
figure, not their surroundings. Against Orientalist works created by others, it is atypical to have a background designed to blend in and not distract the eye. This is Orientalism in its last phase, reflecting an interest in modernism.

A different, more public moment is portrayed in *A Javanese Dancer* (1889, Figure 19). A stately and elegant full-length frontal pose, this dancer is in performance mode. Her face is not displaying her personality, but her powerful character. Her piercing stare is that of an actor, reminiscent of *Ellen Terry as Lady MacBeth* (also created in 1889). Her intricate costume is represented by impressionistic strokes, and yet its ornateness comes through. She holds out her sash with a flick of right hand, using it as a sort of prop for her dance; her left hand is flexed with her arm held strongly across her chest. There are several preparatory drawings directly linked to this painting’s hands and wrists. Sargent was concerned with faithfully representing the contorted positions. This dancer is fully adorned—golden jewelry every place it could lay—earrings, armbands, necklaces, bracelet, rings, and headdress. Yet again the setting is stripped away to focus on the dancer herself. She is stage lit from below, emphasizing the theatricality of the scene and heightening the deep rich tones and shadows. The dancer’s otherness penetrates the viewer, but it is sensual, not sexual.

Sargent biographer Elaine Kilmurray argues that “the models, dancers, and native people he [Sargent] painted represented for him artistic freedom, an antidote to the civilized world of Parisian salons and London drawing rooms, a balance to the haute bourgeoisie, who featured so prominently in his public life, and perhaps a release form his own puritan heritage” (in Adelson, *Sargent’s Women* 25). As Art Historian Trevor Fairbrother has noted, “Sargent’s love of depicting exotic people—models, dancers, and
anyone else he could enlist—persisted throughout his career.” Sargent created hundreds of remarkable portrayals of people who did not commission him and were outside his social sphere. Like the Javanese works, these paintings have oft been pushed to the periphery of Sargent’s oeuvre. Recent scholarship and exhibitions such as, “Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2015) and “John Singer Sargent Watercolors” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2013) have helped modify perceptions.

Occasionally commissioned works became the basis of a friendship and traditional portraits were able to take on a different tone. The Wertheimers, an affluent British family of German Jewish decent, commissioned 12 portraits from Sargent at the height of his fame (Cohen 163). The patriarch, Asher, was an art dealer and became one of Sargent’s great friends. Many of the Wertheimer portraits were created when Sargent was retreating from such work, so the paintings speak to his great affection for the family. In two portraits of the daughters, Ena and Almina, Sargent was able to costume them just as he did his paid models. Ena is depicted in a military uniform and Almina in Persian dress. The results are less like a paid commission and more like the work he did for himself (Cohen 165). Some have criticized Sargent for emphasizing the family’s “Jewishness”—accusing him of anti-Semitism, but it can be instead seen as another way that Sargent sought out the exotic (Cohen 167). Like most portraits, there is a touch of caricature in the likeness (Cohen 170).

*Almina, Daughter of Asher Wertheimer* (Figure 20, 1908) is the last in the series of formal portraits of the family. A pictorial fantasy, the portrait is comprised of props. Whether Van Dyke, Lewis, or Monet, it was fairly common to dress up clients in
Orientalist costume. It was a way to display their sitter’s cosmopolitanism, but Sargent’s Almina is pure play. She is wearing a man’s jacket from his studio and the instrument she holds is also from his collection and not even held properly (Fairbrother 89-91). These were not Almina’s possessions that she was showing off, but rather a friend allowing Sargent to experiment.

A nearly full-length portrait, *Almina* is in quasi-oriental dress. She wears a long ivory patterned over-jacket on top of a white, gauzy, loose dress and a silk turban with adornments. The jacket was one of Sargent’s favorite studio props. It is a feature in several paintings, as he took it with him on his painting expedition in the Italian Alps in 1905. Almina is seated in an approximation of an Oriental pose—one leg is bent underneath her. She holds across her lap a sarod, an 8-stringed northern Indian instrument. Unlike the Javanese paintings, Almina is placed in a setting—there is an impressionistic background that could represent an Oriental great room. Just enough is rendered to provide context, but not a full understanding of where Almina is. “The pose, costume and accessories are not intended to be accurate; they are an artistic conceit designed to create an atmosphere of exoticism, luxury and sensuality.” Adler goes on to argue that in Sargent’s Jewish portraits he uses extravagant costume and pose—specifically here the persona of the Oriental princess—as a metaphor to explore issues of identity and sexuality (Adler 93-4). We do not know if a larger meaning was intended in this painting, but it is surely a continuation of Sargent’s fascination with exotic types and theatrical display. The portrait is related to Sargent’s late exotic figure studies in that it is all about play-acting, evoking an Orient of the imagination. Perhaps representations like this are why Sargent’s Oriental paintings escaped criticism from Said and his followers.
His brand of Orientalism was not hyper sexualized or about cultural dominance, but instead about an appreciation for new aesthetics, a vehicle form experimenting with lighting, makeup and the quirky effects of foreshortening (Fairbrother 91).

As an instructor at the Royal Academy, Sargent was purported to remark,

cultivate an ever continuous power of observation. Wherever you are, be always ready to make slight notes of postures, groups and incidents. Store up in the mind without ceasing a continuous stream of observations from which to make selections later. Above all things get abroad, see the sunlight, and everything that is to be seen, the power of selection will follow. Be continually making notes, make them again and again, test what you remember by sketches till you have got them fixed. (Charteris 188)

Sargent practiced what he preached.
Chapter VI

Wanderlust

"The consequence of going up the Nile is, as might have been foreseen, that I must do an Old Testament thing for the Boston Library, besides the other one, & I saw things in Egypt that I hope will come in play." (John Singer Sargent in a May 14, 1891 letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner)

In the 1890s Sargent was constantly in demand as a portraitist, and exhaustion from personal commissions soon set in. In a 1907 letter to Ralph Curtis he wrote, “no more paughtraits [sic] whether refreshed or not. I abhor and abjure them and hope never to do another especially of the Upper Classes” (Charteris 155). Travel provided an antidote to overwork, even though Sargent’s output would remain continuous. “Painting was as intrinsic to his behavior as breathing, and he daily produced pictures of varying degree of strength, sometimes several times a day” (Ackerman, American Orientalists 175). A consequence of Sargent’s peripatetic upbringing was that travel was restorative. His paintings created on holiday have a unique character and are focused on the people, places, and aesthetics that pleased him the most (Adelson et al., Sargent Abroad 9).

In December of 1889, Sargent was invited by the partners of architectural firm McKim, Mead, and White to create a decorative program for the long hall on the top floor of the new Boston Public Library. Mural painting was in resurgence in Europe in the late nineteenth century following the rebuilding efforts after the Franco-Prussian War. And at just age thirty-four, Sargent saw the mural project as an opportunity to achieve immortality. Sargent initially planned for the murals to depict a Spanish subject, but soon had doubts. Perhaps he realized Spanish motifs would not suit the classical Beaux-Arts
“palace for the people,” and that his murals would be seen from below, in a dim light, and difficult to discern (Kingsbury 156). After a holiday in Cairo decided that the theme instead would be religion, a subject he had not yet explored in any context (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 178). As William Adelson argues, it is likely the theme had more to do with enabling Sargent to depict exotic elements of Eastern culture, “indulging his own fascination for the costumes and rituals of intriguing characters and places,” than a drive to connect to religion and have his works emit a sense of spirituality (*Sargent Abroad* 24).

In the winter of 1890-91 Sargent went to Egypt with his mother and sisters (his father had died the spring before) for three months, and subsequently went on to Greece and Turkey. He sketched and painted ruins, architecture and decorative motifs, as well as Arab men and women. Sargent’s study of ancient Egyptian art clearly provided the visual vocabulary for the Boston Public Library project, *Triumph of Religion*, and his experience in Egypt sparked his imagination (Ormond & Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol V* 216). His output of work—seven anonymous male studies, three studies of a female model, a highly-finished nude study of an Egyptian girl, and nearly thirty genre scenes and landscapes in oil and watercolor—only relate to the Library project in subject, not in style. For the murals, Sargent adopted a Beaux-Arts approach and incorporated motifs from Byzantine art, as well as early Italian mural painting. The palette is dark, the emphasis is on symbolism, and the effect is flat. Academic formula and studio finish are pervasive in the murals, but are not features of the work Sargent created while abroad.

*Door of a Mosque* (1891, Figure 21) is representative of the types of oil sketches Sargent created *in situ*. The painting is quietly energetic and the numerous veiled figures
relate to one another authentically. This is an observed scene at a real location with real people. The canvas, like others from this painting excursion, differ from most Orientalist art in both this authenticity and the impressionistic, loose handling of paint as well as its restrained, limited palette. Over a dozen women are depicted nearly fully covered in dark abayas and mostly white niqabs. They are exiting the dark doorway of the Green Mosque\textsuperscript{21} and walking towards the viewer on an asymmetrically paved path (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol V* 253). The quick strokes and use of oil enable the figures to possess a quality of otherworldliness. Some robes are nearly translucent, creating a ghostly effect and conveying a sense of movement. Enough details are included to place the location of the scene and yet the details are secondary to the overall atmospheric results of the canvas. Sargent chose to crop out some of the most distinct architectural decorations—the building’s entrance (Figure 22) features an elongated muqarnas and carved details surround the windows. Including the full height and width of the building would have dwarfed the figures. Sargent’s focus was on the overall impression scene: the women leaving the mosque are the focal point. His image is not an illustration suitable for a travelogue, but a snapshot from an artist’s lens.

As a group, the studies of male heads created in Egypt more directly relate to the mural project, specifically the *Frieze of Prophets* (1895) of the east and west wall. *Man with a White Turban* (1891, Figure 23) and *Old Man with a White Turban* (1891, Figure 24) are representative of the lot of anonymous portraits. Each image is a likeness of its model, but also the depiction of a type. *Man with a White Turban* is posed fully frontal, confronting the viewer with his gaze. His bronzed skin and weary eyes tell the story of a hardworking man nearing middle age. He wears a typical Egyptian garment—a white
turban, white shirt with a deep V-neck and dark grey over-garment or cloak. *Old Man with a White Turban* is a three-quarter view with the figure looking away from the viewer, as if caught in a memory or deep thought. He wears similar traditional garb, but with a fuller undershirt. The man’s beard and wrinkles are the most prominent aspects of the painting, expressive of years of hard labor and a traditional way of life. The effect is less like a portrait and more a timeless vignette (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Portraits Vol V* 226-227). The *Frieze of Prophets* (Figure 25), the most naturalistic panels of the entire mural cycle, is clearly influenced by these sketches. The murals share the same dark, earthy background, and share many similar features of dress, yet the figures in the murals are devoid of life. The intensity displayed in the eyes of *Man with a White Turban* is replaced by the prophets’ vacant glances into the distance. Gone is the rich, bronzed skin of the figures in the sketches: the prophets appear Caucasian. While the sketches are vibrant, the resulting panels look as if they were worked from models in the studio.

The first completed mural paintings created a sensation. Sargent was not only one of the most notable artists in the United States, but the fact that he, a “portrait painter,” took on new aesthetic challenges was the talk of the town (Blashfield 650). When the mural’s lunette, *Children of Israel with their Oppressors* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1894, the reviews were not all favorable. Sargent biographer Charteris remarked, “... the Academic public were very puzzled as to what it all meant” (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 179; Charteris 143). Sargent, aware of some of the criticism, wrote to Lady Lewis,

> You seem to me really to like my decoration and not to look upon it as a hopeless conundrum as most people do. I was delighted to find that you got some pleasure
out of it through your eyes and were not fidgeting about the obscurity of those old symbols. What a tiresome thing a perfectly clear symbol would be. (Charteris 144)

The initial panels for the *Triumph of Religion* cycle were installed in 1895, and both artist and public were agreeable enough that it was decided to expand the scope of work. Expansion is perhaps an understatement, as the project occupied Sargent for two and a half decades and overlaid the rest of his career (Adelson, *Sargent Abroad* 25). “For once he was not dealing with the visible and tangible world, but rather a thing so abstract as a movement of thought. The progress of that movement has to be interpreted, symbolized, and legibly translated into painted form” (Charteris 108). Richard Ormond has said that Sargent painted and drew with a snapshot vision and a secular eye (*Sargent Abroad* 25). Perhaps Sargent’s detachment from religion did not enable the murals to fully reach their potential. Sargent was always most successful when his subject was a subject of interest to him and when the subject was observable, not as imperceptible as religion. Translating his powerful visions abroad into a thematic mural cycle within a classical architectural motif proved more difficult than anticipated. For someone as productive as Sargent, the Boston Public Library work seems extraordinarily dilatory. The last panels were not installed until 1919 (Ackerman, *American Orientalists* 178).

In 1895 Sargent had a busy travel calendar. In addition to Boston, he had a short visit to Spain and Tangier, as well as a stay in Scotland and Italy. Sargent continued to paint as he traveled—always noting the most salient characteristics of a place with his brush—bright light against whitewashed stucco in Tangier, opulent religious icons in Italy, the green rolling hills and grey skies of Scotland. By 1904 the pattern of Sargent’s travels had become established. He summered in the Alps, followed up by a stay in
Venice, and then he would go farther afield to Rome, Granada or Corfu in fall. During these travels, his output is that of a landscapist and hundreds of works result. In 1905 there was a break in habit. After Venice, he instead visited Syria and Palestine through the fall and winter in a quest for more material for the Boston Public Library. Sargent wrote, “I am cramming hard for my library” (Ackerman, American Orientalists 178).

Sargent painted more than a dozen oils and forty watercolors before his Arabian adventures were shattered by the death of his mother. Richard Ormond argues, “all the themes that would preoccupy him for the next ten years are explored in these Arabian sketches of 1905, which also demonstrate the enduring appeal for him of exotic scenes and people.” (Sargent Abroad 114)

Bedouins

Sargent’s works from Syria and Palestine reflect a curiosity about the Orient and its customs that had intrigued him from an early age, but his palette and painting technique had changed. Sargent now made exuberant watercolors that were striking in both style and effect. Bedouins (1905, Figure 26) is a fine example of this artistic shift. The viewer is immediately confronted with rich blues and purples, which swaddle the figures’ heads and directly focus the eye on the intense, curious, and shy gaze of the Bedouins. The two men directly engage with the viewer with convincing likeness, despite the sketchy folds and lack of finish of their garments (Fairbrother 119). This vibrant painting evokes a forceful realism that is almost ethnographic in its representation. Sargent did not costume these men. They are not meticulously posed nor directed.

56
Instead, he has given us a glimpse into the Bedouin, although it is important to remember that this view is from his vantage point.

Painting the nomadic Bedouin was not conducive to luxurious travel. The Bedouin lived deep in the desert and were suspicious of strangers: road camps, tents, and escorts were required (Ormond and Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol VII* 145). From Cairo Sargent sailed to Philae and took a guided excursion to El Fayûm on horseback. The Bedouins’ traditional life, untouched by modernity, was an ideal subject for the Boston murals. While clearly the Bedouins provoked a new creative energy for Sargent, their effect on the mural project is less obvious.

Sargent had a special affection for the Bedouin—he admired their tribal loyalty and independence (Ormond & Kilmurray, *Complete Paintings Vol V* 217). Sargent’s rootless upbringing certainly enabled him to understand the nomads on some level. Sargent’s scenes of Bedouin life have a remarkable consistency—it is most likely that he recorded a single tribe at the same location over several days. Clearly he must have won the confidence of the tribe and built a rapport with its people. “Sargent approached the representation of the Bedouin with neither the recording instincts of the anthropologist nor the flights of fancy of an Orientalist” (Ormond and Kilmurray, *The Complete Paintings, Vol VII* 148). Exotic aspects clearly appealed to Sargent, but he felt no need to add gloss or embellish what he was seeing. There are no charging horses or caravans, slave traders or sexualized women: no Orientalist paraphernalia. He chose to paint matter-of-fact scenes of daily life.

*Bedouin Camp* (1905-6, Figure 27) depicts an assembly of seven males near an encampment of tents. From the sun’s setting, it appears to be an evening gathering.
perhaps to discuss the day’s activities and tomorrow’s work. Four men squat alongside three standing men creating a dynamic composition. The cropping of the man in the lower right corner emphasizes just how close Sargent is to his subject. These are people he knew, he befriended. He was not watching from afar. A scene this complicated must have been posed. Sargent needed hours to get the composition on paper.

Some of the Bedouins have blank faces, whereas others are more subscribed. In all the works from this period, some things are left blurred or unfinished—Sargent employed a sort of shorthand. He did not get bogged down in portraying every single thing—like some Orientalists—he made a choice to paint the most salient elements. His focus is on recording the heart of a scene, not on making an exact likeness. In Bedouins Camp, Sargent used many of the same deep blues and purples in the other sketches, but also made heavy use of body color. By outlining the figures in the opaque pigment, the sketch has more the weight of an oil painting than a watercolor. Even though the scene is more suggested than specifically described (Kilmurray and Ormond, The Complete Paintings, Vol VII 195).

By painting the Bedouins up close and forcing us to confront them intimately, Sargent enables us to recognize their individuality, their culture, and their identity, and does not allow us to be distracted by the majesty of the desert or the intensity of the sun. The Bedouins ascribed to an ancient way of life and lived on the periphery. With them, the modern world is banished. Their ancient crafts and culture, ageless costumes and accessories were surely irresistible to Sargent. The Bedouins were a subject he returned to with each of his trips to the Near East (Ormond, Sargent Abroad 150). Sargent in many ways was a traditionalist. There is little trace of the modern world or of a restless spirit of
change in his works. He did not paint automobiles or modern buildings. In some ways, he was following the traditions of the Barbizon School and Naturalists. He embraced a romantic view of rural life—his work out-of-doors borders on dreamy and idyllic (Kilmurray and Ormond, The Complete Paintings, Vol VII 148).

The watercolors from Syria and Palestine display a new liberation for Sargent. They are technical marvels and forceful images. “Never had he used water-colour so freely to create surfaces as sensuous and richly worked, nor emphasized forms with such liberal strokes of gouache, nor exploited so effectively the mysteriousness of fitfully lit figures within dark interior spaces.” (Kilmurray and Ormond, The Complete Paintings, Vol VII 148). Sargent’s work in the Near East was as varied as the places he visited, but his focus on the observed world never fluctuates (Kilmurray and Ormond, The Complete Paintings, Vol VII 146).

Costume Play

Sargent created two types of Orientalist images, those directly inspired by travel and fairs and those created with family and friends. The expatriate Sargent had no nationalistic tie, no single passionately revered place. The bachelor Sargent was a wanderer—a borderless artist. Sargent’s home traveled with him as he visited favored sites with family and friends (Adelson, Sargent Abroad 39). While Sargent did not often write of his process in creating a painting, his subjects did write of their experiences. In August 1907, Sargent’s dear friend, Jane de Glehn wrote to her mother, “Yesterday I spent all day posing in the morning in Turkish costume for Sargent . . . he is doing a harem disporting itself on the banks of the stream. He has stacks of lovely Oriental
clothes and dresses anyone he can get in them” (Ormond, *Sargent Abroad* 84). Mrs. de Glehn was a frequent travel companion and de facto model for Sargent. She writes to her mother of the pictures executed in Purtud, in which she and other members of their travel party were wrapped in veils and shawls and painted languishing riverside or idyllically playing games. This series of images is notable not only for a watercolor-like handling of oil paint in several of the canvases, but also for a new development in the oriental oeuvre.

In *Zuleika* (1906, Figure 28) and *The Chess Game* the traditional characteristics of Orientalist art are present, but are transposed and altered. The mysterious lounging ladies are reminiscent of harem women, but yet they are freed. They are completely out-of-doors. While the models are dressed as Arabs, they are in a location unmistakably alpine and they display a confidence that is purely European or American. Sargent is consciously playing with the weight of Orientalism, but creates a new fantasy—one that is wholly unreal. He presents the genre in a unique and modern way. In these canvases the brushwork is fiercely energetic, figures are dramatically foreshortened, the colors are bold, torsos are twisted to create complex forms, and scenes are cropped unexpectedly (Ormond, *Sargent Abroad* 86).

Sargent’s “combination of ephemeral pose with solid bodily substance might be seen as a compromise between new and old approaches to portraiture.” He is able to convey a sitter’s timelessness, as well as the vividness of the here and now (Prettejohn 15). Marc Simpson has categorized Sargent’s canvases as an “uncanny spectacle.” Henry James too tried to describe the almost magical quality in words writing, “it is as if a painting were pure tact of vision, a simple manner of feeling” (Simpson 31). Sargent, in fact, plotted his canvases at length. He worked hard to make all his effort seem effortless.
The paintings from Purtud may seem spontaneous, but Sargent clearly preplanned the series—carefully transporting costumes and props from London to the Italian Alps.

Among the exotic props Sargent brought to Purtud was a spotted Turkish overcoat, featured in both *Zuleika* and *The Chess Game*, and used again for Almina Wertheimer’s 1908 portrait. Also featured prominently was a collection of cashmere shawls, particularly a cream-colored shawl with deep borders of swirling boteh. He used it in several paintings in the Alps, as well as a prop in five portraits in 1906 and 1907 (Nochlin 170). The continued use of the overcoat and paisley shawl are perhaps one of the few ways Sargent repeated himself. The props were used in such different contexts and compositions that it would have been difficult to notice them unless looking for the similarity.

Sargent employed shawls in compositions that ranged from straightforward representations to highly abstract compositions. The manner of draping the cloth played a crucial role in interpretation. The shawl was closer to the haik then tailored European garments. The haik, a flat, unconstructed garment that gracefully draped over a human body rather than following its form, was admired by Sargent since his first trip to Tangier in 1880 (Fort, *Dressing Up* 348). Robing his female companions, Polly Barnard, Jane de Glehn, and Rose-Marie Ormond, in the shawls inspired Sargent to create a whole series with the paisley shawl. His experiments mature in *Cashmere* (1908, Figure 29), a highly finished oil painting and exercise in formal repetition. The same shawl and model are used seven times in succession, but each figure is depicted in seven different poses and the shawl employed in seven different manners. The intervals between each figure must have been carefully considered: the eye is initially brought to the central void of the flat
neutral background, and then redirected to the two stunning figures that gaze outward. Other faces are represented in silhouette, three-quarter view, or fully covered by the shawl as if it was a niqab. “In contrast to the snapshot character of the watercolors, *Cashmere* is a considered and conscious statement. Here, Impressionist technique is allied to principles of high art” (Ormond, *Sargent Abroad* 90). The seven female figures move across the picture plane in a manner reminiscent of a classical freeze. Sargent also explored this design device in *The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale* (1877), *El Jaleo* (1882), *Gassed* (1919), as well as in several panels of *The Triumph of Religion*. The composition displays an affinity for the neoclassical. Ingres, too, used shawls to create sinuous lines and sensuous textures. In 1905, Sargent painted a succession of Arab women with their heads covered and posed in groups, not unlike those of *Cashmere*. The difference is that they represent the real world and *Cashmere* is an invention (Ormond, *Sargent Abroad* 90).

Sargent did not tire of the shawl and would again use it to drape his travel companions in the Simplon in 1910-11. *Princess Nouronihar* (1910, Figure 30) is a notable example from this excursion. Three nocturnes lay in a grassy knoll. Draped in shawls, they almost blend into the snow-covered mountains in the background. Nearly three-quarters of the picture plane is devoted to sky and mountains. The figures are intertwined and caught in an intimate moment of rest and respite. Richard Ormond refers to them as “dryads,” nymphs of the mountains. A clue into the strange picture is its title, taken from William Beckford’s fantastical and disturbing Oriental tale, *Vathek* (1786), which everyone at the Simplon was enthusiastically reading at the time (Ormond, *Sargent Abroad* 110-111). In *Vathek*, Princess Nouronihar is drugged and hidden in a valley to be
protected from Vathek; she is later seduced and imprisoned in the Palace of Flames.

Sargent is infamous for the lack of narrative in his canvases, and with this title he was surely playing with his audience by drawing from a well-known cultural reference.

For Elizabeth Prettejohn, “the strong sense of mood in Sargent’s late studies, the touches of fantasy and occasional hints of enigmatic narrative, have affinities with the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century artistic projects associated with the term Symbolism, despite their allegiance to a broadly Impressionist method of design” (67).

Whereas Orientalism for many was anti-modernist, a harkening back or a longing for the past, for Sargent his Oriental experiments were a springboard towards modernism.

Sargent believed that The Triumph of Religion murals (1890-1919, Figure 31) would be the culmination of his training and background. After returning from his last scouting trip to the Middle East, he devoted his time only to the murals and freer, more impressionist watercolors. He would on occasion do a portrait, for notables like President Wilson and John D. Rockefeller or very close friends (Wilson 13). Watercolor was still considered a lesser medium, but useful to quickly transcribe ever-fleeting luminous impressions. Sargent had always privately practiced watercolor, and as he aged he gave more reign to his personal tastes. In 1903, 1905, and 1908 Sargent exhibited several preliminary watercolor studies executed in Palestine, along with some painted in Southern Spain and Italy at the Carfax Gallery. The works were on view, but not for sale. The reactions were positive and Sargent was welcomed into the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colour. In the Illustrated London News of June 6, 1908 a review overflowed with praise,

To say that Mr. Sargent’s water-colours at the Carfax Gallery are brilliant water-colours is not adequate, for their brilliance is more than water-colour brilliance.
They are brilliant as life and sunlight. Mr. Sargent has over-stepped the accepted boundaries of the art; he has done what other water-colourists have not realized could be done, or have not cared to do, or, as in most cases, have not been able to do. (Martindale 99)

Although typically reserved with self-praise, in February of 1909 Sargent wrote to Isabella Stewart Gardner, "You must go and see my watercolors that Boit has asked me to send over and that the Brooklyn Museum has gobbled up. They must be on show in Boston now." (Gardner Archives) He knew the watercolors marked a new artistic period for him. The Library murals weren’t the culmination of his career, but they brought about the experimental course that enabled new achievements. Fueled by a passion for the exotic, the almost two and half decades of preparatory work for the library freed Sargent from the studio and sharpened his Orientalist vision. His travels abroad are the underlying attribute in his creative force. Upon succumbing to his individual predilections, his works were once again fresh, innovative, and progressive.
Conclusion

“Apart from the work that filled his life, history will have little to say of John Sargent. And this is what he would have wished.” Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer in the introduction of Sargent’s Memorial Exhibition (xx)

Sargent was raised to be in constant pursuit of the ideal: the perfect season, climate, conditions, or view (Ormond, Sargent Abroad 10). Just as pervasively he sought the exotic. Even as a boy, travels were planned to accommodate his artistic studies and his curiosity led him beyond a traditional course. As an adult he became a consummate painter-traveller and his love affair with the exotic flourished. Sargent’s life can be diagrammed according to his travels, and we can follow his itineraries through the pictures that document all of his holidays (Prettejohn 11). Vernon Lee wrote in Sargent’s memoriam,

More and more it has seemed to me that Sargent's life was absorbed in his painting; and the summing up of a would-be biographer must, I think, be: he painted. To some of us he seemed occasionally to paint to the exclusion of living. In latter years he seemed to be painting from morning till night, an easel, more than metaphorically, in every corner, a picture under way for every effect of changing weather. But looking over the portfolios of sketches, thinking of all the more elaborated landscapes . . . I recognize that his life was not merely in painting, but in the more and the more intimate understanding and enjoying the world around him, and which the work of his incomparable hand enables some of us, also to understand and enjoy, if only in part. (Charteris 254–5)

Sargent did not record strangers in cafés like many Impressionists, nor did he paint imagined scenes of harems like many Orientalists. He hired models, coerced friends and family to pose, and chose his commissions carefully to enable him to record his visible delight with the world (Ormond, Sargent Abroad 33). “Sargent resists simple
classification as either a modernized academic or a toned-down avant-gardist; his art lacks important defining characteristics of both poles” (Prettejohn 11). Strands of Realism, Impressionism, Aestheticism, Symbolism, and the Academic tradition slip visibly in and out of Sargent’s work. He created a signature style from these and various other influences and his longevity perhaps owes to the fact that he was never a stalwart proponent of just one movement. Sargent was a prodigious talent with a sensual eye—his art appealed to the senses both because of its virtuoso technique and its interesting content. Like his master, Carolus-Duran, Sargent always tried to get the greatest visual effect from a minimum of painterly flourishes (Fairbrother 17, 43, 47).

Sargent was probably the most famous American artist at the time of his death (Nygren 11). As Berenson remarked early in the artist’s career, Sargent had a gift for the “sensory revelation of character” (Fairbrother 18). His international reputation was built on opulent portraits that display his dexterity as a colorist and where there seems to be a kinship between sitter and painter (Van Rensselaer XVIII-XX). With success and financial independence came a desire to distance himself from portraiture. Sargent wrote to Mrs. Daniel Curtis in 1907, “I have vowed a vow, not to do any more portraits . . . it is to me positive bliss that I shall soon be a free man” (Olsen 227). Sargent did not want to stop painting—he simply wanted to paint what he wanted. It is easy to see how it would be difficult for the English aristocracy, despite their best efforts, to keep the attention of John Singer Sargent. There were exotic peoples and lands he had yet to discover and he felt an urgency to portray them with his brush. Throughout his career, Sargent exhibited portraits and figure subjects in equal measure. His landscapes and genre paintings were
not auxiliary to his work as a portrait painter: they are a major part of his achievement as an artist (Ormond, *Sargent Abroad* 6).

Notably, Sargent’s career was roused by an Orientalist canvas, *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* and concluded with a mural cycle, *Triumph of Religion*, that depicts the peoples, places, and religions of the Near East. Sargent’s artistic themes cross over individual travel expeditions to create a cohesive artistic vision. His canvases avoid narrative and focus on the visible and tangible. A preoccupation with color and design led to experiments in the visual effects of cropping and foreshortening and with employing both neutral and vibrant palettes. Sargent’s paintings completed abroad are an underlying attribute in his creative force: travel fueled his creativity. As Ormond has argued, Sargent’s vision was not that of a tourist painting what he happened across, but of an explorer in search of new artistic prospects and ideas. (*Sargent Abroad*, 6-7) By looking at John Singer Sargent’s Orientalist course, a context is given for his non-commissioned work. Previous outliers in his oeuvre, like the Javanese dancers, are revealed as a continuation of his explorations of the exotic.

*Fumée d’Ambre Gris* (1880), the “Bedouin watercolors” (c. 1891-1906), the “Purtud series” (1907), and the “Cashmere series” (c. 1908-11), as well as studies for the *Triumph of Religion* murals (1890-1919) are signature Orientalist works that represent an artistic shift, both in the genre and for Sargent. In the “Purtud series” and the “Bedouin watercolors,” Sargent turns the argument of Saidian Orientalism on its head. In his canvases, the Europeans are the ones languishing about, lazily playing games, and napping mid day—they are simply (and obviously) dressed up in Oriental garb. The Europeans are the ones who represent the faux, mythical Orient. When portraying
authentic Arab peoples, like in *Bedouins*, the desert tribe is depicted almost ethnographically. The Bedouins come across as a tight-knit, hard-working community. In *Bedouin Camp* it is clear that the painter has caught the men in a rare moment of stillness. Sargent, consciously or not, recast Orientalism.

Sargent’s extensive scouting trips for the Boston Public Library commission inspired sketches full of life, but the resulting mural panels lack vibrancy. He struggled with the commission. Although there are admirable portions, the cycle is not successful as a whole. As Ackerman succinctly wrote, “No effect of the ensemble can be gained” (*American Orientalists* 178). Critic Royal Cortissoz thought perhaps Sargent was never able to understand the constructional, architectural demands of mural painting (Blashfield 650). Sargent’s murals for Harvard University were also less exciting than their preparatory drawings. An anonymous critic in 1891 wrote, “[Sargent] is cleverest when he aims to represent the visible facts. Perhaps no one ever painted clothes better as to [the] rendering of material. Neither has anyone made them more expressive of the character of the creature underneath” (Fairbrother 93). While Sargent wished for the ambitious mural cycle at the Boston Public Library to solidify his legacy, it is his preparatory works completed abroad that hold our attention today. The Orient inspired Sargent to take risks and extended his artistic legacy. From the authenticity and fervor of the Bedouins watercolors, to the experimentation with cropping and foreshortening, to the stylistic handling of oil paint and watercolor, to the creativity in the pseudo-Orientalist canvases of Purtud, Sargent created a new mode of Orientalism and repackaged the genre for the twentieth century.
Appendix I

List of Figures

Fig. 1  John Singer Sargent, *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 54.75 x 35.68 in. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA………….. 72

Fig. 2  ---, *Moorish Buildings in Sunlight*, 1879-1880. Oil on wood, 10.2 x 13.8 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY……………………………………………….. 73

Fig.3  ---, *Staircase in Capri*, 1878. Oil on canvas. 32 ¼ x 18 ¼ in. Private Collection……………………………………………………………………………… 73

Fig. 4  ---, *Sketch of a Building with Entrance of Three Ogival Arches*, 1880. Graphite on off-white wove paper. 9.81 x 13.5 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass………………………………………………………….. 74

Fig. 5  ---, *Details of an Ogival Arch*, 1880. Graphite on off-white wove paper. 9.81 x 13.5 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass…………………………………………………………………… 74

Fig. 6  ---, *Woman with the Covered Head*, 1880. Graphite on off-white wove paper. 9 ¾ x 13 ½ in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass…………………………………………………………………… 75

Fig. 7  ---, *Two Sketches of Moroccan Figures*, 1880. Graphite on off-white wove paper. 9.81 x 13.5 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass…………………………………………………………………… 75

Fig. 8  ---, *Hand Studies for “Fumee d’Ambre Gris”*, 1880. Pencil on paper. 9 3/16 x 13 3/8 in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. ………………….. 76

Fig. 9  ---, *Sketch of Fibula*, Graphite on Paper, sketchbook size. British Museum, London…………………………………………………………………… 76

Fig.10 Unknown, Fibula & pectoral with enamel work & coins, 18th-20th c. Silver, Enamel, Coins. H. 280mm; L. 200 mm. Place of Production: Ida Ou Semlal, Tiznit, Morocco; Style: Berber. Private Collection…………………………………….. 76

Fig.11 Jean Léon Gérôme, *The Bath*, c. 1880-85. Oil on canvas, 29 x 23 ½ in. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA. ……………………………………….. 77
Fig. 12  John Frederick Lewis, An *Intercepted Correspondence, Cairo*, 1869. Oil on panel, 29 ¼ x 34 3/8 in. Private collection…………………………………………………….. 78

Fig. 13  John Frederick Lewis. *The Hhareem*, 1849. Watercolor, 34.8 x 52.36 in. Private collection…………………………………………………………………….. 79

Fig. 14  Frederick Arthur Bridgman. *The Burial of a Mummy on the Nile*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 32.88 x 62.75 in. Private collection……………………………………………….. 80

Fig. 15  Frederick Arthur Bridgman. *The Card Players*, unknown. Oil on canvas, unknown. Private collection…………………………………………………………… 81

Fig. 16  Frederick Arthur Bridgman. *North African Market*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 27 x 52 in. Private collection……………………………………………………………… 82

Fig. 17, *The Chess Game*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 27.5 x 21.75 in. Harvard Club of NY….…………………………………………………………………………………….. 83

Fig. 18  ---, *A Javanese Girl at her Toilet*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 25.5 x 21 in. Private collection……………………………………………………………………. 84

Fig. 19  ---, *A Javanese Dancer*. 1889. Oil on canvas. 68 x 31.5 in. Private Collection….……………………………………………………………………………….. 85

Fig. 20  ---, *Almina, Daughter of Asher Wertheimer*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 53 x 40 in. Tate, London. ………………………………………………………………………… 86

Fig. 21  ---, *Door of a Mosque*, c. 1891. Oil on canvas, 24.125 x 3.5 in. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA……………………………………………………………… 87

Fig. 22  Contemporary photograph of the Green Mosque………………………………. 87

Fig. 23  John Singer Sargent, *Man with a White Turban*, 1891. Oil on canvas. 31.89 x 19.96 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass…………………………………………………………………… 88

Fig. 24  ---, *Old Man with a White Turban*, 1891. Oil on canvas. 23 ¼ x 19 7/18 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass.…….. 89

Fig. 25  ---, *Frieze of Prophets* (details, east and west walls). 1895. Boston Public Library, Boston, MA……………………………………………………………… 90

Fig. 26  ---, *Bedouins*, 1905. Watercolor on woven paper, 18 x 12 in. Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY………………………………………………………………… 91

Fig. 27  ---, *Bedouin Camp*, 1905-6. Watercolor on paper, 10 x 14.1 in. Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY……………………………………………………………… 92
Fig.28 ---, *Zuleika*, c. 1906. Watercolor on paper, 10 x 13 15/16 in. Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY………………………………………………………………………………………… 93

Fig.29 ---, *Cashmere*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 27.5 x 42.5 in. Private collection………. 94

Fig.30 ---, *Princess Nouronihar*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 22.5 x 28 in. The Tel Aviv Museum, NY……………………………………………………………………………………… 95

Fig.31 ---, *The Triumph of Religion*, 1890-1919. Oil on canvas, enhanced with plaster, paper-mache, metal, and glass. 23 panels of varying sizes. Boston Public Library, MA…………………………………………………………………………………………… 96


Figure 10. Fibula & pectoral with enamel work & coins, 18th-20th c. Private Collection. [http://via.lib.harvard.edu](http://via.lib.harvard.edu), 12 May 2008.

Notes

1 Mural cycles are not included for the purpose of this count.

2 The Boston Public Library mural cycle was Sargent’s notable departure from the visible and tangible. Although the murals represent people and places, it is allegorical and intended as a movement of thought, not reality. Perhaps related, the BPL mural cycle is Sargent’s most highly-criticized work today. See Chapter 7 for more insights.

3 In fact, as a general rule, his portraits required a minimum of seven seatings.

4 Certainly, Gérôme’s popularity had begun to wan, but he was still a respected teacher and considered a national treasure.

5 His second exhibited work, *En Route pour la Pêche*, received “honourable mention” in the Salon of 1878.

6 Daux had painted a number of Orientalist subjects.

7 These photographs and some souvenirs are now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

8 Emily Sargent wrote on March 16, 1880, “[John] could not continue his picture of an Arab woman which he was painting in the Patio of the little house his friend & he hired for a studio. . .”

9 May 6, 2008 visit to the Harvard Semitic Museum Photographic Archive: Harvard Fine Arts Library. Jeff Spurr, Islamic and Middle Eastern Specialist, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture greatly assisted my research by helping me navigate the overwhelming collection.

10 The usage of the terms Orient and Oriental were misnomers, for very rarely did they include India or the Far East.

11 Compare to the 3,000 francs that *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* fetched in the same year.

12 In the painting *Prayer in the Mosque*, for Monsieur Simon, Gérôme added a figure facing the spectator since he was criticized that everyone else was from the back or in profile.
The Ottoman palace itself collected Gérôme—it boasted a range of artworks from visiting European painters, Istanbul’s expatriates, and contemporary Ottoman artists (Roberts 123).

Lewis began to work almost exclusively in watercolor after 1827 (Thornton The Orientalists Painter-Travellers, 31).


A good rebound in Paris, five years after the scandal of Madame X.

Saturday, 18 May 1889 journal entry (Journal: Mémories de la View Littéraire)

Panel commissioned and sized specifically for the “Hall of Panels” in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s London house.

Notable, as Fry was not typically a Sargent fan.

July 29, 2013 visit to Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum archives

Yeşil Cami in Bursa, Turkey

Although he would have had to convince them to stand still! Even Sargent could not paint group scenes in a matter of minutes.

Likely some money exchanged hands also; or Sargent had assistance from local authorities that he had paid.

Mrs. Archibald Langman (1906), Mrs. Edward Deshon Brandegee (1907), Helen Brice (1907), Izme Vickers (1907), Mrs. Huth Jackson (1907); possibly also Rose-Marie Ormond (1912)

Sargent greatly admired Ingres’ Odalisque with Slave and actively tried to get the painting placed in an American museum (Kilmurray and Ormond, Complete Paintings Vol III 204)
Bibliography


