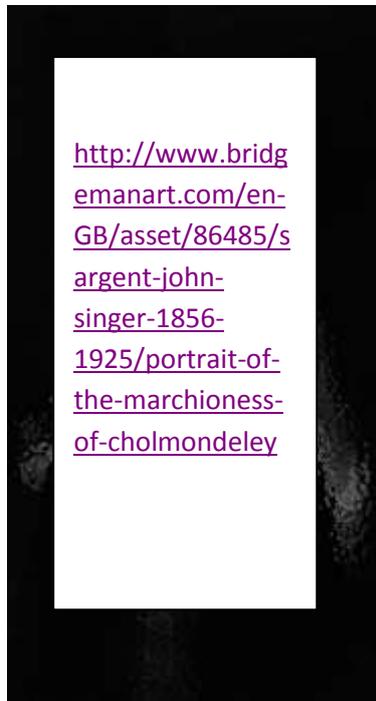


Portrait of the Marchioness of Cholmondeley – John Singer Sargent



Oil on canvas, 160x89cms, painted 1922, private collection

Description

This is an almost full length portrait of an elegantly dressed woman. Her body is not quite straight on to the viewer but facing slightly to her right. She looks to her left, into the distance to the side of the viewer.

The subject has a very firm and confident look to her face. The flesh tones have been rendered very naturally. The long, slender neck is accentuated by the V-shape of the gown and the high collar.

The subject holds her hands down by her side. The fingers of her left hand are touching, and are partially hidden by, the gown, making the fingers look very slim. The right arm is held by her side, but turned away at the wrist as the woman very delicately holds a single cyclamen. The flower is held by its long, thin stem, perhaps a symbol for the beauty of the holder.

The face and hands of the woman and the pearls of the first strand of the necklace are painted in detail, but the brocade of the gown and the other pearls are painted in a very impressionistic way with little detail shown. The folds of the gown are well shown, despite the material being black, by using different tones to achieve the effect. Brush strokes are evident to the lining of the cape and the gown and are used to emphasise the folds of the cloth.

Brush strokes are very clear in the background which has a reddish tinge. This enhances the reds of the gown and the flesh tones of the subject. Brush strokes are also quite evident to the hands and face when inspected close-up, but from a normal viewing distance are barely noticeable.

The outline of the cyclamen is formed from darker toned brush strokes and the background just behind it is painted in a darker tone too so that the flower stands out more. The cyclamen also echoes what appears to be a flower hair ornament.

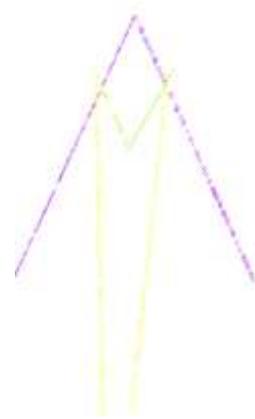
The lighting for the portrait seems to come from the left (when viewing the painting), there are tiny catch lights in the eyes on this side and highlights have been painted to the hair ornament. The right sleeve is painted a slightly lighter shade than the left.



There is a very dark background to the portrait –similar in tone to the gown itself but slightly redder. The black cape of the gown merges into the background.

A subtly lighter tone has been used for the background to one side of the subjects head (shown left); this has the effect of making the outline of the hair stand out.

The overall composition of this painting gives a very strong, triangular shape and the V-shapes formed by the gown and brocade draw attention to the face and its confident expression. This is enhanced by the positioning of the arms and hands. The almost 2 to 1 ratio of height to width of the painting also contributes to the effect. The width of the frame is almost filled at the base by the subject's gown.



The overall impression conveyed by this portrait is of a very poised, self-assured, beautiful woman. Sargent has achieved this by the way he has painted the expression on the subject's face, the pose she has adopted and the composition of the picture.

Interpretation

John Singer Sargent is described by Chilvers (2009 p565) as “the outstanding society portraitist of his age” and his portraits are described on the ‘Artble’ website as examples of Realism “an art movement devoted to reflecting what the artist saw rather than a romanticised truth”.

Rodgers in Oxford Art Online states that Sargent trained in Paris “under Carolus-Duran who introduced him to direct painting on the canvas, *plein air* painting, and the art of Velazquez”.

This painting is of Sybil Sassoon (Countess Rocksavage, later Marchioness of Cholmondley). I saw it at the ‘*Masterpieces: Art and East Anglia*’ exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts. The notes alongside the painting describe it as “One of Sargent’s last oil portraits, this grand likeness of Sybil Rocksavage shows the subject modelling as a Velazquez duchess in a splendid Spanish 17th Century style gown. The dress was specially designed for the portrait by Parisian couturier Jean-Charles Worth”.

What was particularly interesting is that the portrait was displayed alongside the dress that was worn in the painting. This gave a great opportunity to see how Sargent had painted the gown which was made of silk, voile and black velvet:

- The velvet of the dress is pure black but in the portrait Sargent has painted some of it with a reddish tinge
- The original dress has intricate piping on the sleeves but Sargent has not painted any of this, presenting the sleeves as plain
- The dark edge of the voile is very skilfully painted as the finest of dark lines

Crawley (2013 p200) states that this painting shows Sargent's "astonishing skills as a painter, particularly of black fabric".

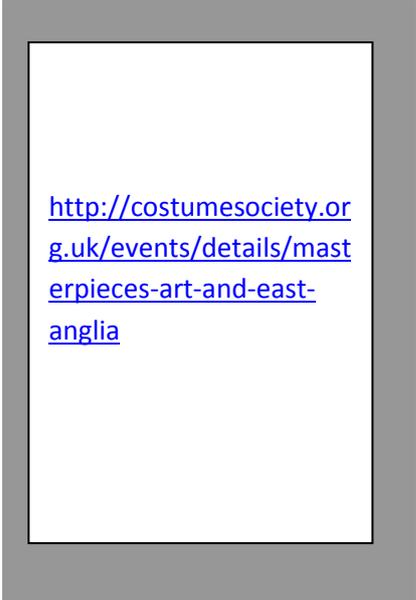
In 1907 Sargent announced that he was to give up painting portraits, Adelson (1997 p9) states "He came to virtually renounce all commissioned portraiture, producing instead oils and watercolours of the places and people that pleased him most". He also painted murals for the Public Library and Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, USA. After this time he would only consider portraits of very close friends or occasionally very well-known people. Sybil Sassoon was a friend of Sargent as evidenced by her ability to persuade him to paint this portrait in 1922.

Sargent's portraits were hugely popular at the time and his work was in great demand, but his work has not always received critical acclaim, Fairbrother (1994 p139) quotes Lewis Mumford as saying "Sargent remained to the end an illustrator ... The most adroit appearance of workmanship, the most dashing eye for effect, cannot conceal the essential emptiness of Sargent's mind or the contemptuous and cynical superficiality of a certain part of his execution".

Stewart & Cutten (1988 p408) quote Osbert Sitwell as saying that Sargent "Holds up a mirror to the rich so that, looking at his portraits, they understood at last how rich they really were".

More recently Sargent's reputation has been somewhat restored. Fairbrother (1994 p145) quotes Robert Hughes as saying "Sargent was the unrivalled recorder of male power and female beauty in a day that, like ours, paid excessive court to both ...".

Ridge & Townsend (1998) perhaps best sum up the situation by stating "Looking at the later portraits of Sargent, the viewer is overwhelmed by an impression of effortless virtuosity. Indeed, the observation has been used both to laud and criticise his ability".



<http://costumesociety.org.uk/events/details/masterpieces-art-and-east-anglia>

Evaluation



John Singer Sargent painted Sybil Sassoon twice and made three drawings of her. He painted her in 1913 (shown left) as a gift on her marriage and again in 1922 (main painting) which was commissioned by her brother Philip.

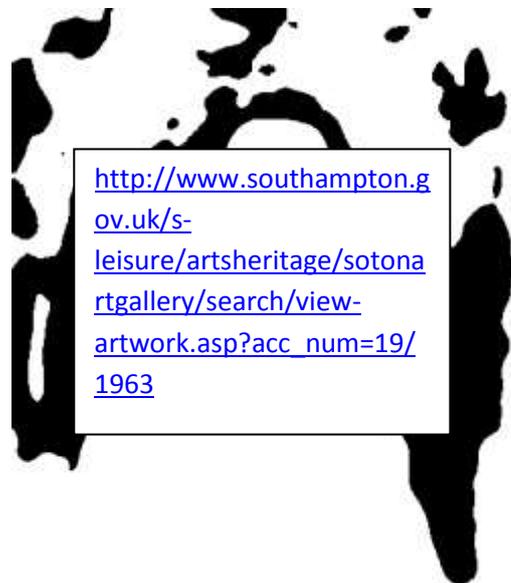
The expression on the faces in the two paintings is very similar with the subject looking out of the painting to her left. The pose of the later painting – standing, holding the cyclamen – seems to give her a grander, haughtier and altogether more confident aura compared to the sitting pose of the earlier portrait; perhaps the standing pose helps this.

The dress is also different in the two paintings, golden in the first and mainly black velvet in the second where the

Spanish style of the dress adds to the Velazquez like feel to the painting.

The background of the two paintings is very similar, mainly dark but lightened with colours picked out from the subject's dress – gold from the earlier portrait and the red picked out from the black velvet gown.

These are both very different paintings to one by Sir John Lavery (shown right) also painted in 1922. According to Chilvers (2012 p346) Lavery “had an immensely successful career as a fashionable portraitist (particularly of women), painting in a dashing and fluid, if rather facile, style”.



http://www.southampton.gov.uk/s-leisure/artsh heritage/sotona rtgallery/search/view-artwork.asp?acc_num=19/1963

Around the same time Charles Sims produced the study shown on the left of her and her son. According to the Tate Gallery website Sims produced many society portraits.



<http://www.philipmould.com/gallery/modern/4209>

I can only find a copy of the final version of this painting (shown below) but the Philip Mould Gallery website states that the original was “Exhibited at the Spring exhibition of 1922, the finished portrait was incredibly well received, the *American Art News* narrowing down the contest for ‘Picture

of the Year' to just Sims' portrait and Sargent's of the same sitter".

Personally the portrait by Sargent is my favourite and to me demonstrates how, according to Kilmurray & Ormond (1998 p23) he "sought to portray objects and people under faithfully recorded conditions of light and atmosphere as they exist in reality".

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<http://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/P814747/The-Countess-of-Rocksavage-and-her-Son?img=3&search=Charles+Sims&bool=phrase>

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