



Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X

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The subject of John Singer Sargent's most famous painting was twenty-three-year-old New Orleans Creole Virginie Gautreau, who moved to Paris and quickly became the "it girl" of her day. A relative unknown at the time, Sargent won the commission to paint her; the two must have recognized in each other a like-minded hunger for fame.

Unveiled at the 1884 Paris Salon, Gautreau's portrait generated the attention she craved-but it led to infamy rather than stardom. Sargent had painted one strap of Gautreau's dress dangling from her shoulder, suggesting either the prelude to or the aftermath of sex. Her reputation irreparably damaged, Gautreau retired from public life, destroying all the mirrors in her home.

Drawing on documents from private collections and other previously unexamined materials, and featuring a cast of characters including Oscar Wilde and Richard Wagner, Strapless is a tale of art and celebrity, obsession and betrayal.

Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X Details

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From Reader Review Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X for online ebook

Barbara Backus says

The actual title of this fascinating book is "Strapless - John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X." After I purchased it at a museum book store, I noticed the back cover had it listed as a "history," not a "biography." And that is exactly what it is - a history of the 1880s Parisienne lifestyle and its artists and patrons.

There are several books out there about the American painter, one of them historical fiction. I am glad I chose Deborah Davis's book because it is extremely well researched and interesting to read. At the beginning it appears to be a biography of Virginie Amelie Gautreau, a Creole who lived in Louisiana before moving to Paris. But soon the author takes the reader back more than a century ago to the Paris of wealthy patrons and struggling artists.

The story of the painting known as "Madame X" has intrigued art lovers for years. Davis is so adept at incorporating the details into an interesting story of a woman who sought fame and gained notoriety. Sargent, at one time a heralded artist, was castigated by the Paris Salon and the newspapers of the times for his "indecent" portrait of a society woman.

Today "Madame X" hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I've seen it dozens of times but my next visit will be enhanced by this wonderful book. Whether you are an art lover or not, "Strapless" is a story rich in history and detail and the ways in which public opinion can affect a reputation.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

I have recently discovered how much I love the paintings of John Singer Sargent (and also his contemporaries like Whistler and William Merritt Chase). My interest was first peaked when I read a book review of Sargent's Women. Learning the background of the artist's subjects make the works more significant.

I realize now that is why some people are not interested in art. I took a trip to Europe with such a friend. I was so excited to see the architecture and famous works of art that I knew so much about. She found it all a bore. But then she did not have any prior knowledge to what she was looking at and it meant nothing to her.

When I taught music in a grade school I learned that in order for a student to understand what you are trying to teach them, you must find out what they already know and build on that. Once you have built a foundation of prior knowledge you can then add new knowledge.

As a teacher this was my goal. I exposed my students to as much music and literature and art as possible in order to inspire an appetite for the wonderful things of this world.

All that to say, Strapless, like Sargent's Women, has given me the prior knowledge I need to truly enjoy Sargent's work.

While Sargent's Women examined the lives of four of Sargent's portrait subjects, Strapless examines the life

of one. And not only her but the entire backdrop of 19th century Parisian life, and also, to a lesser extent Americans and their reasons for living in Paris.

The book starts in New Orleans where an old aristocratic family had plantations and wealth; Virginie Amelie Avigno was born into privilege and luxury. After the Civil War, her family deserted the South to reconstruct itself and settled in Paris where an American could easily live like royalty at half the cost and also find eligible husbands for beautiful daughters.

Amelie soon became the belle of Paris, acquired a rich husband and with the freedom being a respectable, married woman afforded her, spent her days at balls, horse races, and every other social occasion Paris had to offer a lovely young woman. She created a stir wherever she went.

Considered the most beautiful woman in Paris, her arrival at any destination caused a stir and was recorded in all the newspapers.

Davis describes the glamorous climate of Paris. With the rise of the bourgeois, shops were catering to the cosmetic demands of their new clientele. We see all the different tricks and methods women used to look beautiful. Amelie took to powdering herself with a pale, lavender powder she believed set her skin off to its most alluring.

Also in Paris was a, as yet unknown but aspiring artist, John Singer Sargent. His career had been going well and his work had been accepted into the Salons for the last couple of years. He conceived of making a portrait of the most famous woman in Paris as a calculated business move to project his career to the heights he reached for.

In short, things did not go as planned. The Paris public hated it. They felt the portrait was shocking, especially since the original version had Amelie's strap hanging off her shoulder. Her skin was described as "corpse-like". The newspapers had a field day. The woman who had so recently been worshipped was now despised. It was the end of Amelie's reign over Paris.

But the beginning of Sargent's career. The notoriety helped propel his career to world fame while Amelie sunk into ignoble anonymity.

Davis' account is thorough and fascinating. We learn about Parisian life, about an unknown Sargent, and the sad ending to a promising life.

What is mostly sad to me, is that such a scandal would ruin a woman. Her entire life was centered around being adored. Even without the painting, she would have eventually aged out of the "beautiful young thing" stage. Apparently being the focus of attention was her only "raison d'être". She became a recluse and ultimately died alone, being estranged by that time from even her husband who only served as a financial vehicle at any rate.

I conclude that Amelie was not only vain, but vapid. There are many beautiful young women who, when they aged, still managed to keep a bright social life, largely because they had the intellect to occupy themselves with worthwhile pursuits and good company, even if it wasn't an adoring company of young, besotted men.

In her thirties, Amelie tried to regain her fame. She had several more portraits made of herself, but none that incurred public interest. Her group of admiring men became older and older until she simply stayed home

and out of public life.

That is the greatest tragedy. A person who cannot move out of the past. Youth is so fleeting and Amelie never seemed to realize it. She did not even have the foresight to buy her portrait.

Sargent repainted the strap to a more prim location and kept the painting in his studio for more than thirty years. After Amelie died, he sold it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where it hangs to this day.

I have seen the painting, when I visited the Museum on many occasions, but I was not interested in American portraiture at the time so barely glanced at it. Now that I have built up my own prior knowledge, I would like to return and see the painting that started a one career and ended another.

Agatha says

Another piece of nonfiction by the same author as GUEST OF HONOR (the Booker T. Washington book) above. In this one, author investigates the background, history, and life of the woman who posed for this well-known John Singer Sargent portrait.

You might think, "Oh, so this is kind of like 'Girl with a Pearl Earring'!" (One coworker who I was talking to said this.) I would have to say, "Not really." GWaPE is definitely historical nonfiction but this one is definitely nonfiction and a lot more based in fact, history, etc. I found it much more enjoyable than GWaPE. This book actually dovetails really well with the David McCullough book (THE GREATER JOURNEY: AMERICANS IN PARIS) b/c it talks about the same time period, many of the same characters, and, particularly, on the Americans who were flocking to Paris in the 2nd half of the 19th century. John Singer Sargent was an American (in name; in reality, he grew up as an expat all over Europe) and so was the model of this portrait, Amelie Gautreau, whose family was originally from New Orleans. All in all, if you like history, French, Franco-Prussian War, the Belle Epoque, art history. . or any or all of these. . you may like this one too!

The book is very interdisciplinary and the author will go off on a tangent explaining Wagner, his wife, the castle on the Rhine which inspired a certain song, how John Singer Sargent met Wagner, etc. So I could see this bugging some readers, but I really liked the broad-brush overview of everything and how it ties together a lot of different subjects which are often taught/studied separately (art, history, music, military history) etc and puts them all together so you can see the unifying themes which were all going on at the time and affecting all of these at the same time period in history.

Bo Olsen says

This book just grew and grew into an interesting enjoyment of the lives of the subject, and painter, the damnation of the painting, the down hill slide of Madame X and the rise of John Singer Sargent as America's greatest Artist to date. the story just unfolds so graciously with a cast of every important personality in the field of art on both sides of the Atlantic coming together into the grip of one great work of art that is still

admired today. I did love it!

Susan Weinberg says

Excellent book which explores the life of John Singer Sargent and his model Amelie Gautreau who was the subject of the infamous Madame X portrait. The book captures the flavor of Paris during the time of the Belle Époque. I was very pleasantly surprised by this book and found it both informative and interesting. I read it electronically and found myself frequently searching for images of the paintings they referenced. The black and white poor quality images that accompanied the book certainly didn't do them justice. I had read *The Greater Journey* by David McCullough which gives a good perspective on this period as well as on Sargent, but this book allowed me to focus on a specific band of time more intensively. Sargent remains a bit of a mysterious figure, more defined by his work than his personal life. This one episode was perhaps the only one in his life which deeply challenged his successful veneer and as such it is interesting to see how he responded to it.

Madeline says

I was expecting this book to be historical fiction, and was pleasantly surprised to find it a well-researched, completely factual account of John Singer Sargent, the woman known as Madame X, and the scandal caused by a fallen strap.

In the late 1800s, John Singer Sargent submitted a portrait of Amelie Gautreau, a beautiful Parisian socialite, to the annual Paris Salon, which was a yearly exhibition of art. The painting showed Amelie standing at a table wearing a slinky black dress and looking to her left. The left strap of her dress had fallen off her shoulder, while the right one stayed in place. When the Salon visitors saw this painting, displayed among works of art depicting full-frontal nudity, they went absolutely batshit crazy. And not in a good way. Davis's book explores the personal histories of Amelie, Sargent, and their respective families, as well as Sargent's career and Amelie's rise and fall in Parisian society. All of it is fascinating, although admittedly I could've done without the personal histories of Amelie's grandparents and everyone Sargent painted. That being said, they were all fascinating people and I still liked reading about them, although the book would've been just as good without their stories.

Ari says

This book entered my life on pure chance. I had read *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* last summer (2012) and LOVED it for its in-depth portrayal of Americans in Paris during the Belle Époque (and a little before and after that time as well). One of the most fascinating aspects of the book (for me) was the tidbit about the portrait of Madame X by John Singer Sargeant. McCullough talks about the controversy of the painting but did not go into as much detail as I would have liked but nevertheless I finished the book and assumed that my knowledge of the painting of Madame X would solely be internet-based. Then a few days after I arrived at college, I found this book at the campus book sale. So I naturally had to buy it. I read a chapter here or there periodically (when I had a little free time from schoolwork and extracurriculars) and finally finished it a few months ago. I quite enjoyed *Strapless*. I was actually surprised that Madame

Gautreau was so self-absorbed, I'm not sure how to explain it but before this book I would have thought Sargeant (or any artist for that matter) would want to paint beautiful but also intellectually stimulating people. Or at least people who were actually doing things. And I guess Amelie was doing things, she was the IT Girl in 1880s Paris and as Davis shows it was not an easy job. I liked reading about her ridiculous, looks-obsessed world. And the irony that Gautreau's name is no longer associated with (now) one of the most well-known paintings of all time, she who sought immortality of her beauty, is both sad and funny.

I think this book gives a great introduction to the Belle Epoque and I loved how everything tied back together (meaning the tangents on history and profiles of historical figures). The author explores Amelie and Sargeant's worlds, the other people Sargeant painted, the important figures in Amelie's life, but she never lost sight of the purpose of the book. Everything always came back to *Madame X* by Sargeant. I never mind when history books get off topic because I don't think its ever possible to truly get off topic when its history-related. This was my first foray into the world of art history and I found it both entertaining and engaging so I hope to re-enter that world, I'm open to recommendations.

An absorbing, accessible glimpse into the history behind one of the most famous paintings and eras (the Belle Epoque) of all time.

Jen ????? says

This is the story of John Singer Sargent, his rise to popularity and the controversial work of *Madame X*, which saw his brief decline. The book isn't merely about the painting *Madame X*, but also touches on the life of Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau, the subject of the piece of art. What I found fascinating about the story were the details that created a vivid background of the people that shaped Sargent as an artist. The book also included sketches and images of Sargent's work, bringing more life to the story. My constructive criticism for the book is the way the chapters were organized, especially at the end of the book. The book took a linear approach and I thought the book would benefit from a different approach at the conclusion, one that would feature the minor characters earlier in the conclusion and end with Sargent and the painting.

Jeanette says

This is a fast read and filled with as much gossip and dish as one those Entertainment Tonight or current media celeb track t.v. programs. Our Amelie is Beyoncé and Adele combined to/for the erudite, salon, wealthy socialite "everybody who counts" crowd. The world of the Belle Epoque.

This would be 4 star for all of those readers more interested than I in art history and patterns of social popularity and perception held during this late 19th century European period. For me, 3.5 star at least to be fair, but I just could not round it up. Too much of the associative nuance in many paged listings of lovers and attachments with multiple marriage go rounds to deflate my interest between the bigger spoilers.

What really captured me though were the travel aspects and location variations! Especially Sargent's birth family's story. And their Creole roots gone back to Europe for 33 year long temporary trips. And these were not even the wealthiest of wealthy. Moving huge households season after season- while birthing a new family member or burying another. The entire entitled worldview! And few work at all- majority of the female gender in this salon world do anything that would be described with that word today. Unless you

included getting clothes/fashion changed for appropriate reasons up to 8 times per day a definition of work.

Just the misplaced strap and a swan neck as givens! She absolutely had to be one of the best marketing/ P.R. people of her epoch. Enough that all this time later books being written! It was a better ploy than Michael Jackson's glove. But then he had incredible talent for performance. She seems to have had a gift for pleasing and being noticed. And yet with less attention, then becoming a recluse after an "old" age of 40? And these people were supposedly so smart?

Easy and researched read to an explanation of some paintings that are heralded and famous. The paintings themselves, and the photos were 4 to 5 star. Love that "Gust of Wind". So much of the lives of these painters, socialites, displayers- not as much.

Emma (Miss Print) says

I read this book in August 2008 and have been meaning to review it ever since. For shame.

Most people know John Singer Sargent's infamous painting "Madame X" even if they don't know the name and have never heard of the artist because this painting has quite the sensational story attached to it.

According to surrounding lore, Sargent initially painted "Madame X" with the right strap of her black gown slipping off of her shoulder. When the painting debuted at the 1884 Salon in Paris (the place to have a painting displayed at the time and a good signifier of current or future artistic success) it created an uproar, so scandalous was the pose. Indeed, facing numerous charges of the painting's indecency, Sargent eventually repainted the strap sitting firmly, and properly, on Madame's shoulder.

Pursuing my art history minor in New York City I had the amazing opportunity to see "Madame X" in person at the Metropolitan Museum. The painting has always had a special place in my heart for, if nothing else, the drama associated with its debut. So I was very pleased when a copy of Deborah Davis' book *Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X* (2004) fell into my lap.

Part historical research, part biography, part social commentary, part feminist text, Deborah Davis handles a lot of material in a relatively small volume (320 pages with font of average size and relevant pictures included). One of the reasons Davis decided to research this particular painting and its subject is because so little information remains about Virginie Amelie Gautreau, her life, or how Sargent came to paint her scandalous portrait.

While "Madame X" eventually catapulted Sargent into the artistic canon and toward immortality, the portrait likely led to Gautreau's ruin and her obscurity. In her book, Davis tries to set the record straight, portraying Gautreau as the powerful, savvy woman she was before a bare shoulder changed her social standing forever.

My library system catalogs this book as a biography of John Singer Sargent, which for a lot of reasons is the logical choice. However, really, most of the book is spent looking at the life of Sargent's subject and patron: Madame Gautreau.

The book traces Gautreau's family history, her migration from New Orleans to Paris (where she became a

quasi-celebrity along the lines of Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton virtually overnight at the tender age of twenty-three), and perhaps most interestingly just how much work went into being a beautiful woman in Paris in the 1880s. No details escapes Davis' examination as she looks at the clothing, finances, indeed the very persona Gautreau had to cultivate to live the decadent lifestyle she became accustomed to.

The strong point in *Strapless* is when Davis sticks to such facts: how Gautreau lived, why Sargent would want to paint her, what happened at the Salon when "Madame X" debuted. Davis also expertly outlines the tenuous, and often stressful, patron-artisan relationships that Sargent and artists like him had to cultivate in order to eke out a living with their brush.

The momentum flags when Davis veers into the hypothetical wondering if Sargent might have been in love with Gautreau, torn between her and one of his young proteges. While the theory is interesting, it does remain a theory very akin to the conspiracy theories so often found in research on the Titanic.

That aside, *Strapless* is a remarkably well-done book. The thorough research shows through without dulling the writing. Davis' text is conversational and very accessible--more so, it must be said, than many writings found in the field of art history. An excellent book on art history for enthusiasts and art historians alike.

You can find this review and more on my blog [Miss Print](#)

Louise says

This topical book grabbed my attention because of the famous attention grabbing portrait on the cover. My attention was held as I learned more about John Singer Sargent and the Belle Epoque art world.

The book begins with background on Virginie Amelie Avegno Gautreau, the "Strapless", "Madame X". From their Louisiana plantation, Amelie and her mother went to Paris after the Civil War. Her father had died at Shiloh. Without him and their slaves the fate of the plantation was uncertain. The family had property in Paris, spoke French and was set to find a husband for Amelie away from the turmoil of Reconstruction.

In showing how the match was made, Deborah Davis takes the reader through French society at the dawn of the Third Republic. While there was more than needed on Georges Haussmann's rebuild of the city and what that meant for retail (the rise of the dept. store), the parts on fashion and society were interesting and essential to the narrative.

There are good observations on the freedom from family that marriage bestowed on the teenaged Amelie and Padro who was twice her age. Amelie pushed the limits with her beauty and was perhaps in over her head in extra-marital affairs. She was both scheming and distracted when she chose and sat for the young John Singer Sargent for her portrait.

Sargent seems to be the Annie Liebowitz of his day. In contrast to his peers who are beautifying their subjects, Sargent dressed and posed his to bring out their personalities. Davis says the famous portrait was a collaboration with Amelie's full support and approval.

While the important annual show where it made its debut had nudes, this painting ("edgy" for its day), created a stir. The rising prominence of both the painter and the socialite was curtailed. Davis explores the fallout from both a social and artistic perspective; How Sargent, in the long run, prevailed and Amelie,

eventually, retreated.

I expect that there is more story to be told about Amelie. While the reaction was harsh, there may have been reasons for paybacks for this American upstart in Parisian life. As a teen, new to society, she surely made social blunders, perhaps of the kind that came back to haunt.

Along the way the reader meets great characters such as Dr. Samuel Jean Pozzi and Sargent's parents and encounters Henry James with Isabella Stewart Gardner. Most of the paintings referred to are reproduced either in color or b & w (not usually the case in books like this). The Index worked for everything I checked. At the end you learn where these paintings now reside and how they got there and something on the people encountered in the narrative.

Anyone interested in Sargent or Belle Epoque art and society will want to read this engaging book.

Dorothy says

This was a very enjoyable little book about the mystery woman who is Sargent's Madame X. It is not a great biography but it is a good read. It is particularly resonant as there is much to compare the flamboyance of the Belle Époque to that of today and the ostentation of the 1% and its wannabes. A darker side to the Belle Époque was the fascination with "true spectacle" and the grim underside. In addition to sensational newspaper headlines, a wax museum diorama of the most spectacular headlines from history, the morgue functioned as a museum of sorts. "As many as a million visitors would walk through the viewing rooms each year, horrified or thrilled--or both, but what they saw."

This fascination with "reality" did not pertain to art where classical and virginal nudes were accepted and honored but real "naked" renderings were deplored. "Curiously, anatomical reality in art was apparently a horrifying concept to the same men and women who lined up to see bodies at the morgue."

The real Madame X, Amelie Gautreau may have been the original "It" girl, a "professional beauty", the role model for the Paris Hiltons and Kardashian fame-whores who embarrass our culture today. An individualistic beauty who defied conventions and leveraged alabaster skin, perfect, rounded shoulders with a voluptuous, yet slender carriage "La Belle Gautreau" caused a spectacle and traffic jams when out and about and had a bevy of admirers and followers clamoring to see and be near her. Her creation of herself was her occupation and avocation.

Sargent was the promising new portraitist and star of the Salon.

His painting of her...her arrogance, statuesque pose, pointed nose aloft, the artifice of her, the turn of her arm and dropped strap of her daring dress created a scandal that effectively ended the reign of "La Belle Gautreau." Her efforts to recreate her allure after the scandal failed. And when Madame X earned its place as a remarkable piece of portraiture as social commentary her "physical splendor had totally disappeared" and she retreated into virtual seclusion. "With every exhibition, the portrait was winning new supporters and growing more renowned. Amelie, by contrast, was fading."

The beauty who had once lived for and in front of the mirror to attend to every detail of her carefully crafted appearance had all of her mirrors removed; she could not bear to see herself.

Carolyn says

This book is about the famous painting of Madame Virgnie Amelie Avango Gautreau painted by John Singer Sargent in the 1880's in Paris. She, a beauty of French ethnicity, was deemed to be the epitome of true French beauty in her figure, fashion and her grand style. Madame Gautreau was born in Louissana and lived a spoiled life on the family's plantation. Her father's death changed her financial circumstances and she fled to Paris to make her way in French high society. At nineteen she married wealthy Pierre Gautreau in Paris. John Singer Sargent, the already famous painter and portraitist, was so captivated by her regal beauty, that he finally convinced her to allow him to paint her. When the painting was exhibited at the famous Paris Salon around 1884 it caused an uproar. It was reported to be scandalous and indecent, and ultimately hurt Sargent's reputation and ruined Madame Gautreau's social standing. It is a magnificent painting showing her standing in a very haughty pose with her head turned to the side, her body erect, her long beautiful neck straining to hold her head high. Her skin is white as alabaster and almost looks translucent against the brown background. Her perfect slim figure is tightly wrapped in a shiny black satin evening dress. Her gorgeous decollete is enhanced by one of the thin jewelled straps falling downn off her shoulder. The fallen strap turned this portrait from merely being sensual to being viewed as pornographic. It signalled that sex had taken place. The portrait from then on was simply known as "Madame X", even after Sargent painted the strap back on her shoulder. The painting now hangs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This is a wonderful story about fascinating personalities and times.

Dana Stabenow says

In la Belle Epoque Paris people lined up for art exhibitions the way we do today for blockbuster movies. In this case John Singer Sergeant caused a scandal by painting something that was much more than just a portrait of a beautiful woman, and Paris didn't like it. It almost ruined him, it did ruin his model, and I still want to ask him why he put the strap back up. Go [here](#) to see the portrait and then go read the book.

Michelle says

Fascinating book about the John Singer Sargent portrait "Madame X" and the woman behind it, Amelie Gautreau ("the unpaintable beauty and hopeless laziness of Madame Gautreau"). Not only is the time period fascinating (love the Belle Epoque) but the cast of characters seem more from fiction than non-fiction. It's mind-boggling that this portrait caused so much scandal with its loose strap when Parisians had infidelity hours (4-5 - get your affairs on!) Not to mention, I'd think Sargent's "Dr. Pozzi at Home" work would've caused a much bigger stir. Also interesting is how the portrait of Mme Gautreau eventually developed a cult following just as she was starting to fade from the spotlight (read: she was aging). Ultimately when he sold it to the Met, he erased her name from the title and Madame Gautreau became Madame X, denying her the chance to be forever immortalized, which is all she really ever wanted. Kind of sad, really, especially since she spent so much time and money trying to get new portraits made to replace this one.
