

Robert Langton



John Singer Sargent, *Mrs. Edward Goetz*, 1901

ARTIST BIO

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), an American artist born in Italy, is known primarily for his portraits of high society. The artist studied painting in Italy and France, and visited both Spain and Holland to copy works by Diego Velázquez and Frans Hals. Sargent exhibited in the Paris Salon as a portraitist, ruffling a few feathers with his controversial painting *Madame X* (1883-1884). Shortly thereafter, he moved to London where English audiences were initially wary of his “French style.” By the 1890s, he enjoyed elite patronage, which is reflected in his numerous dazzling portraits from this period. Demand for Sargent was high, both in Europe and in America, and this popularity earned him the title “Van Dyck of our times.” By 1907, Sargent grew tired of portraiture and, among other subjects and materials, turned his attention to watercolor landscapes. He was never able to escape portraits completely, however, and created portrait commissions with charcoal in a quicker process than oil paints had allowed. Despite Sargent’s popularity, he fell out of favor with other artists after his death as they considered his style out of step with the modern-leaning artistic atmosphere following World War I. Sargent began to regain popularity in the 1960s and his renown has grown steadily ever since.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

John Singer Sargent’s style has been labeled both as Impressionist and Realist. Alone, neither term fully describes his art, but combined, they are more fitting descriptions. His contact with Claude Monet is evident in Sargent’s loosened brushstroke and an interest in natural light. The American expatriate conveys a great deal of detail and texture through his expressive brushwork. Employing primarily oil paints, watercolors, and charcoal, he worked at the tail end of the Gilded Age and critics have commented both on the influence that opulent period had on Sargent’s patronage and style, and the counterpoint it posed to the proliferation of modernist styles flourishing in post-World War I Europe.

ARTWORK

This portrait depicts Mrs. Edward Goetz, a genteel upper-class lady who frequently hosted a musical salon. The fact that she could afford to commission a portrait attests to her affluence. Her wealth is further suggested by her formal attire and proper pose. By the time Sargent painted this amateur pianist in 1901, his long and successful career with portraiture was coming to a close, due entirely to his own waning interest in the genre. Sargent’s brushstroke emphasizes textural differences in the velvet chair, the lace shawl, highlights in the jewelry, and the fabric of the dress. The painter also employs a softer composition with the sitter angled toward the viewer, with a gentle gaze that pulls us in.

INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Edward Goetz is a beautiful example of a portrait painting created by John Singer Sargent. Sargent painted with a realistic perspective that never failed to capture his subject’s unique identity. His carefully crafted portraits also provide a lens into the lives of his subjects, and shed light on the society they represent.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- 1 Use visual evidence to draw conclusions about the subject and context of a painting
- 2 Identify artistic choices and infer the reasoning behind them
- 3 Create original artistic and/or literary works inspired by the painting

LOOK AND DISCUSS

- Portraits not only capture an individual’s appearance, but they can also tell us about the sitter’s lifestyle, social standing, and personal interests. How would you describe Mrs. Edward Goetz based on her expression, posture, and clothing?
- John Singer Sargent chose to portray Mrs. Goetz looking directly at the viewer. How would your experience with the painting change if she was looking elsewhere?
- What textures can you identify within the artwork?
- If you were to sit for a portrait, what would you wear? What or who else would you want included in the painting? What setting would you choose? Why?

CONTINUE THE STORY

During John Singer Sargent’s lifetime, photographed portraits became increasingly popular. Sitting for a photograph was quicker, cheaper, and arguably more true to life. As technology advanced, some photographers wanted to promote photography from its status as a commercial or scientific tool to a fine art medium. These artists, known as Pictorialists, captured creative and expressive scenes paying careful attention to artistic elements, like composition and lighting. Similar to a painted portrait, a photographed portrait could reflect the subject’s personality and interests. The image of Peggy Lee and her mother Agnes Lee, seen below, was captured in 1899, just two years before Sargent painted *Mrs. Edward Goetz*. How would you describe Peggy and Agnes based on this photo? Do you think paintings or photographs provide a more accurate representation of their subjects? Why? Would you rather sit for a painted or a photographed portrait, and why?

Note: This image is available in the public domain; you may choose to access a larger version online to show your class.

Gertrude Käsebier, *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (1899)



ACTIVITY #1: PHOTOGRAPHED PORTRAIT

Materials: Paper, pencils, a camera, butcher paper and crayons or colored pencils (optional)
Subject Areas: Visual Arts, Language Arts
Duration: 60 minutes



After discussing various elements of portraits such as background, clothing, and props, stage your own photographed portrait. First, choose who you will represent in the photo: yourself, someone you know, a historical figure, etc. Include at least three details (props, poses, costumes, backgrounds, frames, etc.) that give your audience some information about your identity. Then, have your picture taken! Write an exhibition label to

accompany your portrait with a short paragraph about who you are and why you selected each detail (scan QR code for template). Display your portrait, along with your exhibition label, in a classroom gallery.

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Create (V.C)
Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation.

Strand: Present (V.P)
Students will analyze, interpret, refine, and select artistic work for presentation. They will convey meaning in the manner in which the art is presented.

Strand: Respond (V.R.)
Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

ACTIVITY #2: A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE FOR MRS. GOETZ

Materials: Internet, paper and pencil
Subject Areas: Language Arts, Social Studies
Duration: 60 minutes

What was life like for Mrs. Goetz? She lived in England from 1830 to 1901. What was happening during that time? Choose one contemporary event or one contemporary figure Mrs. Goetz might have met during her life and compose a journal entry describing her potential involvement or experience with that event or person. (For example, perhaps she hosted a famous composer from the era in one of her social gatherings. What might she write in her journal about their interaction?)

Your journal entries should be written in the first person, as if you were Mrs. Goetz. Dates and locations should be included to add to the authenticity of the narrative. You should also incorporate details and inferences about Mrs. Goetz from your discussion of her portrait. How did the artwork inspire your journal entry? The length of the entry should be sufficient to thoroughly and imaginatively explore the chosen event or figure. Entries may be shared with a partner or displayed on a bulletin board in the classroom.

Optional: To align with grade-level curriculum, invite students to consider what was going on in the United States or even in the Utah region during the same time period. Who might Mrs. Goetz have met on a trip to these places?

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Respond (V.R)
Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

Strand: Connect (V.CO)
Students will relate artistic skills, ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment for this lesson may include group discussion, group reflection, or individual presentation of completed projects. The activity “Photographed Portrait” allows students to integrate their personality and personal ineterests into their learning experience. The activity “A Historical Narrative for Mrs. Goetz” can be used to expand creative imagination in literary form, practice perspective-taking, and inspire responses to historical events and themes.