

A Portrait of American Feminine Independence: John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*

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Given the multiple values, traditions, religions, artistic and intellectual manifestations, the culture of any country is quite difficult to define. The case of the American culture is even more complex than usual. In fact, emerging from the short and rapid conquest of an enormous land-mass sparsely settled by diverse indigenous peoples, the American culture is composed of imported traditions that have always strived to create their own identity and culture. One of the first American expressions of identity emerged during the nineteenth century with writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) who proposed the American character as individualistic, connected to natural and spiritual sources rather than the conventions of social life. However, it is important not to forget that America is a country of immigration and diversity introducing different ideas and lifestyles. The late nineteenth century is, as well as in Europe, a period of industrialization with the growth of the cities leading to new styles of life. Women of this *fin de Siècle* period had an important place in the American society where they represented the development of a free spirit which can be also seen in the literary works of Henry James (1843-1916) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), which express the feminine aspirations and give a keen regard to American women, not only as a reflection of



Fig.1, John Singer Sargent, *Madame X*, 1884.

“beauty” but also as a reflection of the feminine “independence.” However, literature is not the only way to define a culture. Painting also expresses the ideas and aspirations of the life of a period, and according to Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), a work of art must not be judged on the unchanging and eternally valid laws for all the times, but uses the criteria peculiar to the culture where the work of art is born.¹

Thus, along with the writings of Henry James and Charles Baudelaire, I will analyze a painting by John Singer Sargent to explore this feminine world which also represents a part of American culture. Contrary to the majority of American painters who focus on nature, household interiors, or masculine life, John Singer Sargent makes us feel this feminine force representing the aspirations of American people living in Europe through the painting *The Portrait of Madame X* (see fig1).

Biography of John Singer Sargent

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, American portraitists were very much in demand by wealthy patrons. Photography had become popular, but for the elite it was not as important as portrait paintings. In fact, painted portraits are still preferred today for this class.

Sargent, maybe the most celebrated portraitist of his time, received many portrait commissions from wealthy patrons and he also portrayed social climbers. In fact, to be painted by Sargent was to be painted by the best.² Born in Florence (Italy) in 1856 to American parents, he traveled throughout Europe where he spent most of his life, even though

1. Herder: *Kritishe Wälder*.

2. Westfelder: *Madame Gautreau*.

he loved his country America. Sargent was also famous for landscape painting, water color and public murals, and even started sculpting at the end of his life. Influenced by the French Impressionists, the Spanish master Diego Rodriguez da Silva Velasquez (1599-1660), and the Dutch master Frans Hals (1582/83-1666), he was the darling of Paris until the scandal of his *Madame X* painting at the 1884 Salon, which became a turning point in his life. The portrait was not well received by the Salon and the general public who considered the pose of *Madame X* to be sexually suggestive. Sargent, who considered this painting to be his best, was discouraged by the rejection and decided to leave France to settle in England where he reached the height of his fame. He was noted as a subtle, skillful physiognomist and flatterer who gave women an air of elegance which they were very keen to have. He was one of the last of his generation who had the secret to make a work of art which exceeds the particulars of an individual.

The portrait of *Madame X* shows us a masterful depiction of the aspirations of nineteenth century women.

***Madame X* as Reflection of Beauty**

Madame X is an oil on canvas, (208.6 × 109.9 cm), purchased by the Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and painted in 1884. The size of this painting is really enormous, measuring nearly seven feet tall (2 meters) and emits a certain sensuality. Except for the table, nothing disturbs the aura of the model. The brown background evokes the influence of Velasquez who painted in this way. The luminosity comes from the color of the model's skin. This white skin attracts attention. This whiteness is not natural

and looks macabre, corpse-like. As a matter of fact, in the nineteenth century, women used cosmetics to enhance their looks and improve on nature whenever possible. The prolific essayist Octave Uzanne³ said that women painted their flesh as artists painted their canvases, and profiled a range of women, from the aristocrats to prostitutes, but wrote most tellingly about the moneyed bourgeoisie (as in the case of this model), whom he saw as brilliant butterflies who believed their role in life was "to be seen and to shine."⁴

The model was Virginie Amelie Avegno Gautreau (1859-1915),⁵ twenty-three-years old at the time of the conception of the canvas. She was an American of French ancestry born in New Orleans. Both New Orleans and Los Angeles stand out as American cities that are opposed to the dominant puritanical moral values. It is why this portrait was rejected by the rest of society who were less liberal than the society of New Orleans. Thus, she chose artifice over nature. Her makeup was more daring and original than that of other women who simply used lipstick and reddened their cheeks. Madame Gautreau used not only lipstick and rouge but added a touch to the tips of her ears which look inflamed and outlined her eyebrows with a mahogany pencil. Her makeup and her white skin are sufficient and she has no need of extra jewels. The contrast of the white skin, enhanced by the makeup, with the black gown and dark background was condemned by the society. Nineteenth century moralists associated cosmetics with the face paint of actresses and prostitutes. Similarly, Victorian Puritanism spoke out against sex, the emancipation of women, and strong individualism in women, be-

3. Uzanne: *The Modern Parisienne*.

4. *Op. Cit.*

5. Westfeldt: *Madame Gautreau*.

lieving that they would lead to the end of strong moral standards in the family and in society as a whole. It is why the canvas was not appreciated by the American society, too. They thought young women should look clean and natural. The use of rice powder made the skin so white it gave the impression that women were sick and showed some eroticism.

The poet Charles Baudelaire said that "the woman devotes herself to appearing magical and supernatural; she has to astonish and charm us; as an idol; she is obliged to adorn herself in order to be adored."⁶ One of his poems, *La Beauté*⁷ (Beauty⁸) expresses his aesthetic analysis and is suitable to the portrait of *Madame X*:

Je suis belle, ô mortels! Comme	I am as lovely as a dream in
un rêve de pierre,	stone,
Et mon sein, où chacun s' est	And this my heart where each
meurtri tour à tour,	finds death in turn,
Est fait pour inspirer au poète	Inspires the poet with a love as
un amour	lone
Eternel et muet ainsi que la	As clay eternal and as taciturn.
matière.	
Je trône dans l' azur comme un	
sphinx incompris ;	Swan-white of heart, a sphinx no
J' unis un coeur de neige à la	mortal knows,
blancheur des cygnes ;	My throne is in the heaven' s
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace	azure deep;
les lignes ;	

6. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Others Essays*, ed. Jonathan Mayne, London: Phaidon, 1995.

7. Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal* (*The flowers of evil*).

8. Baudelaire, Charles, *The poems and prose poems of Charles Baudelaire*, ed. James Huneker, New York: Bernano's 1919, ctd. at (<http://www.poetry-archive.com/beauty.html>).

Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.	Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles !
Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,	Before my monumental atti- tudes,
Que j' ai l' air d' emprunter aux plus fiers monuments,	That breathe a soul into the plas- tic arts,
Consumeront leurs jours en d' austères études ;	My poets pray in austere studi- ous moods,
 Car j' ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,	 For I, to fold enchantment round their hearts,
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles ;	Have pools of light where beauty flames and dies,
	The placid mirrors of my lumi- nous eyes!

This poem, as well as the painting, represents an allegory of the Beauty. Madame Gautreau appears proud and despised, as a goddess:

"Je suis belle, ô mortels ! Comme un rêve de pierre," ⁹ lines 1-2.

"Je trône dans l' azur comme un sphinx incompris;" ¹⁰ lines 9-10.

Baudelaire, like Sargent, glorifies a real cult of Beauty greeted as a privileged form of the Ideal. Thus, she is the perfection of a statue, "rêve de pierre"¹¹ (line 2). She is both strange to this world like a dream, and, stiff and cold like a stone, and bruises her lovers ("amants," line 24).¹² Beauty is especially elevated as the supreme value. By her immo-

9. "I'm as lovely as a dream in stone," line 1-2.

10. "Swan-white of heart, a sphinx no mortal knows," line 8-9.

11. "a dream in stone," line 1-2.

12. "to fold enchantment round their hearts," line 21-22.

bility and impassivity, Beauty has a power of fascination. It also is the same case for Madame Gautreau who is similar to a statue. Using a great many representations, sometimes contradictory, to translate his conception of Beauty, Baudelaire relates "Beauty" to a "sphinx," a huge frozen and stiff monument in stone. This vision of Beauty is completely cruel because it excludes the animation and cadence of life. Both, Baudelaire and Sargent look for an ecstasy in beauty which can make them forget their misfortune. They are not anxious about morals; thus, they show us in poetry, as in painting, all bodily erotic yearnings of human beings. This kind of behaviour is quite coarse for the nineteenth century. In fact, the sensuality and eroticism of this poem, as with this painting, aroused condemnation and reproach from bourgeoisie who were apprehensive about morality. With her cold and proud regard, she is compared to a "sphinx" (line 8), but also considered as a muse.

Like Baudelaire, Madame Gautreau searched for absolute beauty, through the use of makeup. The painting is for her like a mirror which at origin allowed to reach for eternity. However, this mirror broke her. The critic for *L'Événement*¹³ wrote: "Mr. Sargent made a mistake if he thinks he expressed the shattering beauty of his model. Even recognizing certain qualities that the painting has, we are shocked by the spineless expression and the macabre vulgar character of the figure."¹⁴ Vulgarity is not only a result of the makeup, but also, because Sargent painted her with her face away from him in order to show beauty as unattainable as well as the self-destructive narcissism of the woman and the decadent society she embodied. The position seems quite un-

13. French newspaper.

14. Articles of May 1 and May 19, 1884.

comfortable because of her arm leaning tensely on a table a little too short. As Baudelaire says, the ideal advances through suffering.¹⁵

Madame X as Reflection of Feminine Independence

As Sargent, said himself: "I do not judge, I only chronicle."¹⁶ He has only represented the world of his time and the aspirations of the culture; however, his aspirations were rejected by the American and European society of the nineteenth century, especially by feminine society. Indeed, a major part of society was directed by women who were at work in the American underground world: a Puritan, strong, complex world. This force of women is seen in the novel of Henry James with the hero of *The Ambassadors*,¹⁷ where Leland S. Person¹⁸ says that this hero, Lambert Strether, learns from Madame de Vionnet, lessons such as the "art of taking as they come" or with the heroines of *The Portrait of a Lady*,¹⁹ where the feminine characters use other characters, as Madame Touchett employs Lord Warburton; Henrietta uses Caspar Goodwood, Madame Merle uses Isabel who herself uses Pansy.²⁰ The Ralph's description of Madame Merle presents her as a widow spider associated with stealth, manipulation and death, who afterwards uses without regret Isabel to attain her purposes:

"How can we have discussed such things? Monsieur Merle was then

15. cf. Baudelaire Charles, "*meurtri*" ("finds his death in turn") in *La Beauté, Les Fleurs du Mal*.

16. This saying of Sargent is quoted in the book of Hollander: *Seeing Trough Clothes*.

17. James: *The Ambassadors*.

18. Stuart Burrows, *Victorian Studies*, Bloomington: Spring, 2004, Vol. 46, p. 530-3.

19. James: *The Portrait of a Lady*.

20. Person, Leland S., *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003; p.206) .

living.”

“Is he dead now?”

“So she says.”

“Don't you believe her?”

“Yes, because the statement agrees with the probabilities. The husband of Madame Merle would be likely to pass away.” ²¹

In this novel, everyone or more exactly women, employ or use someone in a way that shows this feminine force in the “Society” of the nineteenth century. In the novel *The Ambassadors*, Volume I, Book three, Chapter two, James reveals that Miss Gostrey expresses this feminine force balancing between etiquette and manipulation:

“no further sign than to show how she dealt with boys; meeting them with the air of old Parisian practice that she had for every one, for everything, in turn. Wonderful about the delicate daubs, masterful about the way to make tea, trustful about the legs of chairs.”

In fact, she handles the “boys” as she is handling Strether.

In addition to the poem of Charles Baudelaire, it is interesting to join this painting to the heroine of *A Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel, similar to Virginie Amelie Avegno Gautreau, thinks that she can chose her own destiny. She finds refuge in sublimation in order not to tarnish the very beautiful image that she has made for herself, to live on faithful to her ideal. As the regard of Madame Gautreau, James is not very tender in his regard of the heroine. In Chapter VI, he stresses the superiority of Isabel who loves to find herself on the *noblesse* of her imagination, on the exceptional quality of her soul, her purity, and above all her coldness, her

21. James: *The Portrait of a Lady*, Chapter Eighteen.

hardness, her curiosity, but also her superb capacity of indifference. Mrs. Touchett understands it and asks her in the chapter XXXIII if she marries with Gilbert Osmond out of charity. In fact, Isabel accepts to give up all except her dignity. As Virginie Amelie Avegno,²² she does not let any one manipulate or manage her. However, these two heroines are captive of their own fantasies and egoistic requirements, very representative of the feminine aspirations of some women of this epoch. The color of virginie Amelie Avegno's gown expresses these fantasies. In fact, the black gown is fairly unusual because at this time the fashion papers spoke of white and pastels. Black is above all for domestics, shop girls, nuns. According to the art historian Anne Hollander, at the end of the nineteenth century, black was coming to be seen as a sign of dangerous sexuality.²³ However, on the other hand, black also is the color of clothes imposed by the Puritan values in America. The deep low neckline and the fallen strap intensify the provocative parts of her body, and even eroticism. The color shows then a decent and indecent Madame Gautreau at the same time,²⁴ that also confirms her independence toward the society.

Conclusion

As I mentioned in the introduction, American culture is a complex case. It is an ensemble of imported traditions, ideas and lifestyles from the entire world, America gave birth to its own identity above all during

22. Virginie Gautreau, too had always controlled her own life, that was a little despised by the Society around her, leaving a reputation as well as that.

23. Hollander: *Seeing Trough Clothes*.

24. Nuns who represent the body of the Church, so a certain sobriety, wear in black. While on the other hand, black means also a sign of sexuality.

the nineteenth century after the Civil War where, as well as in Europe, industrialization brought growth to the cities which in turn led to a new style of life. The post Civil War migration to the West would build up the nation's economy. Most residents recognized Protestantism as the true religion and that the Republican Party, which had saved the Union, had done so as the result of divine guidance. Much of masculine Americans looked toward the frontier in order to define its identity. Even if relatively few Americans had direct experience of the frontier, was cultivated by books or reports from newspapers. On the other hand, feminine culture, which was more representative in the East Coast of America, was more closely aligned with traditional European values of civil order, social restraint and "genteel individualism." In contrast with the "tall tales" and adventure stories of the Wild West, East Coast culture emphasized realism in art and in literature. John Singer Sargent in painting and Henry James in literature are an example of artists who portray this American realism marked by industrial power and wealth. This new wealth of America allowed the prosperous classes to go in Europe for study and bring European art and culture to mix with an American Puritanism and Victorian Etiquette. Individualism and independence are ideals shared by both masculine and feminine American society. The portrait of *Madame X* is a good example of American feminine attitudes. Though she seems to be an aloof and cold "beauty;" in fact, a great deal of turmoil and struggle were required to strike of pose of independence from the puritanical values which had dominated society at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Therefore, according

25. Kazin: *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*, p.

to Alfred Kazin in *On Native Grounds*,²⁵ “*Fin de siècle* is a stale phrase today for the ferment of mind that fired the closing years of the nineteenth century with innovation and scandal.”

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