Under the Skin: 
Reconsidering Cecilia Beaux 
and John Singer Sargent 

In considering the life and career of Cecilia Beaux (1855–1942), it seems impossible to ignore or discount the fact, and the effects, of gender. Beaux strove to become a professional painter and achieved notable success when it was still very difficult for women to rise in an art world dominated by men. As Tara Tappert has argued, Beaux’s preeminence rested at least in part on her ability to balance hard-edged ambition and single-minded dedication to her work with the public persona of a non-threatening, well-bred, charming lady. As the exceptional figure who proved that professional success need not be won at the expense of femininity, Beaux came to the fore as the quintessential great woman painter, recipient of many honors, always in demand, never in the least degree “masculine” or intimidating. Although most of her many admirers and critics gave full credit to her talent, vision, and technical skill, they almost invariably ranked her a notch below John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), the renowned contemporary with whom she was most often compared. This order of rank boiled down to gender difference. Sargent’s manly prowess and uncompromising realism automatically placed him ahead of Beaux, supposedly more feminine in the sympathetic interpretation of her subjects.

It is time to revisit these two contemporaries, and to reconsider the dynamics of their careers relative to one another. I would like first to propose a small, temporary name change. Let us look briefly at the domestic and professional life of "Cecil" Beaux. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Cecil began as a commercial artist, producing meticulous drawings of fossils for a U. S. Geological Survey project, and painting portraits on porcelain. After some art lessons, he moved on to full-scale portraits. His first success, patterned obviously (and deliberately) on James McNeill Whistler's famous portrait of his mother, brought instant recognition. While he worked to build on this first triumph, his devoted female relatives looked after his every domestic need.

Cecil soon reinforced his professional credentials by studying in Paris at the Académie Julian and exhibiting a group of six strong paintings at the Salon of the Champ de Mars. Although he worked with great determination to develop his own distinctive style, he thought it no disadvantage when critics coupled his name with that of Sargent, whose rapid rise to international fame had made him the celebrity painter of the hour, and the man most worthy of emulation. After all, to succeed in business, the up-and-coming painter had to be fluent in the language of fashionable portraiture, of which Sargent was the supreme master. Cecil's strategy was effective. He carved out a niche for himself, creating vivid likenesses of blue bloods, businessmen, and literary lights of the eastern seaboard in a manner less flamboyant than Sargent's, but recognizably up-to-date.

Cecil earned rich rewards for his accomplishment. He won many gold medals and other prizes in national and international exhibitions. He became a member of the National Academy of Design and the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. Later in life, he won the supreme and rare honor of election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City. The University of Pennsylvania awarded him an honorary doctorate, and he received an honorary M.A. from Yale. Often an invited speaker before prestigious gatherings, he also published several articles setting forth his lofty artistic ideals. Perhaps the crowning triumph of all was the invitation to contribute his own image to the Uffizi's exclusive and highly selective collection of artists' self-portraits, which already included John Singer Sargent's.

Cecil traveled many times between Europe and America and was as much at home in Paris as in New York, his residence from the late 1890s on. A confirmed bachelor, he remained close to his immediate family but also
enjoyed an active social life both in the city and at his summer residence in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Here he built a charming house, well tended by his staff, notably his loyal Italian servant, Natale. Cecil shaped his home life to suit his own professional and recreational needs, and woe betide anyone foolish enough to disrupt his morning hours of work in the studio. Like many artists, he was egocentric and insecure. He demanded constant attention and was happy to receive it, especially from the series of young, handsome men who were always among his entourage. Although he long outlived his fame, Cecil nonetheless was an enormously successful, widely praised, superbly skilled portrait painter, whose life encompassed hard work and sacrifice but also brought privilege, excitement, material luxury, and intellectual rewards.

This story of “Cecil” seems entirely credible, yet it follows the main contours of Cecilia Beaux’s actual career. In fact, we need only restore the feminine suffix for the above to resolve itself into an accurate thumbnail sketch of her life. Admittedly, trimming “Cecilia” down to “Cecil” may seem gimmicky. The objective is not, however. My interest is in raising the issue of just how much, and to what degree, Cecilia Beaux’s gender told against her in her struggles to win recognition and success as a portrait painter. The fact that she was a woman was inescapable, and during the period of her apprenticeship and subsequent renown, being female could hardly count as an advantage. Beaux came to maturity at a time when women were entering the art world in unprecedented numbers, for the first time constituting a visible threat to the male-dominated establishment. The men closed ranks, however, and retained control of art-world institutions while relegating women to the margins. Despite that, Cecilia Beaux managed to compete so effectively that when she eventually rose to the top of the field she had surpassed not only the vast majority of her female contemporaries but also a large number of her masculine peers.2

Beaux’s career path did diverge in certain respects from that of Sargent. They were born one year apart, and both had Philadelphia roots (though Sargent was born in Florence and raised abroad). Sargent had artistic

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beginnings that were neither humble nor commercial. He commenced his French academic training in the studio of the trendy portrait painter Carolus-Durand, at a young age, and by the end of the 1870s had already begun to make his mark. A series of flashy triumphs thrust him into the public eye by the early 1880s. The critical debacle attending the exhibition of his scandalous *Madame X* (1883–84; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) shattered his hopes of supremacy in Paris, but before the end of the 1880s he had regained his momentum, in England, and begun his conquest of the United States. There, on his third trip in 1890, he completed some forty portraits and secured the immensely prestigious commission to execute a suite of murals for the new Boston Public Library.\(^3\)

Probably the most “feminine” phase of Beaux’s career was the early period of training and her labors as semi-commercial producer of technical drawings and portraits on porcelain. Illustrating fossil forms might count as scientific work and therefore a more nominally “masculine” pursuit. It was also an occupation that demanded strictly literal reproduction of minute details—a skill suited to the purportedly feminine talent for mimicry, rather than creation. These pursuits, in addition to private lessons with William Sartain and other studies, cost Beaux some ten years, relative to Sargent’s progress. While her contemporary was blazing the trail brilliantly with early successes at the Paris Salon, she was still in training, and by the time Sargent was licking the wounds incurred by the ruckus about *Madame X*, she was just on the verge of her first notable success, the exhibition of *Les derniers jours d’enfance* (see Tappert, fig. 4) at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1885.

She hit her stride after returning from nearly two years of study in France, and through the 1890s her career arc rose higher and higher. From the early nineties on, she steadily closed the gap that separated her from Sargent and a handful of others (such as Anders Zorn) who dominated the international portrait market. Her pattern of success also duplicated Sargent’s, albeit a bit belatedly and on a somewhat more regional scale.

At the height of her long career, Beaux painted the cream of the American elite. Her sitters included college presidents, businessmen, socialites, eminent medical men and women, and political notables,\(^3\)

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including the wife and daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt. She exhibited widely, and had the distinction of several solo shows in New York and elsewhere. She had two honorary degrees to Sargent's one, the latter awarded by Yale in 1916. Although the Uffizi solicited Sargent's self-portrait years before Beaux was invited to submit hers, both eventually hung there. As the first woman to secure a regular faculty appointment at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, she taught portrait painting and drawing there for twenty years.

Sargent's fame was undoubtedly broader and more sensational. He was in hot demand on both sides of the Atlantic and in the turn-of-the-century years produced a large number of "swagger portraits" for stately homes in England. He renounced portrait painting almost altogether in 1907, when Beaux was still in mid-career. He never relied on regular teaching stints to augment his income. This was unusual for artists of either gender at the time. Even successful cosmopolitans such as William Merritt Chase had to supplement their work in portrait and subject painting with time in the classroom. Sargent's mural commissions, however, set him apart from nearly all female painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With a very few exceptions, the decoration of American walls remained a masculine enterprise.4

Within the area of her own specialization, Beaux achieved equal distinction. After World War I, the National Art Committee selected her as one of eight painters commissioned to execute portraits of war heroes. Her autobiography was reviewed widely and warmly in 1930. In 1935, the American Academy of Arts and Letters organized a full-scale retrospective of her work, at a time when Sargent's reputation, demolished by hostile modernists such as Roger Fry, continued to languish. In the short run, at least, Beaux had outlived and outpainted her famous countryman and peer.

From the start her goal was to surpass Sargent. Beaux returned from France in 1889, just when Sargent was about to cross the Atlantic once again, this time to secure his reputation in the United States as the supreme master of the modern portrait. In 1887, the year before Beaux's pilgrimage to Paris, he had already made himself highly visible, painting wives of the wealthy in Newport, Boston, and New York. Sargent stood supreme, a fit

target for the aim of the intensely ambitious Beaux, who challenged Sargent in the portraits she showed to great acclaim in the 1890s. The painting of her nephew, Cecil Kent Drinker (1891; Philadelphia Museum of Art) prompted recollections of one of Sargent's most beloved and popular works: his portrait of little Beatrice Goelet (1890; private collection), which one critic rated as Sargent's highest achievement. A contemporary review coupled Beaux with Edouard Manet and Sargent, stating: "It looks as if [Sargent] had had a pupil who had learned her master's art." Beaux's representation of four-year-old Cecil flaunting his red-ribboned walking stick in brown greatcoat with layered coachman's capes was not merely an echo of Sargent, however. It was tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet in a bid for supremacy, or at least parity.5

Beaux herself was candid about this connection. When she was painting young Harriet Sears Amory (1903; Wellesley College), she described the work to Helena de Kay Gilder as a "mimic Sargent." Nevertheless, she felt daunted on occasion by Sargent's sheer productivity. In another letter to Helena, she wrote, "I have not seen the Sargent Ex yet, but there are 20 pictures all painted between February and May! I feel like a footless hare." Yet she was fundamentally ambivalent about Sargent (whom she met, cordially, several times). In her commemorative address to the Contemporary Club in Philadelphia, she characterized her renowned contemporary as an idiot savant of art, a purely sensuous eye whose paintings, like natural forces, had the power to stimulate and revive. Beaux herself made a concerted effort to style her portrait-painting enterprise as a highly intellectual calling.6

Despite whatever connected or separated the two, critics throughout the nineties and well into the next century routinely trotted out the name of Sargent when assessing Beaux's accomplishment. Certainly it is possible to make the case (as I have elsewhere) that built-in gender bias in the critical language automatically consigned Beaux to inferior status because of the "feminine" qualities, such as softness and sympathy, that supposedly marked

5 William A. Coffin, "Sargent and His Painting," The Century Magazine 52 (1896), 178; unidentified newspaper clipping, 1892, Cecilia Beaux Papers, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art (hereafter Beaux Papers, AAA) microfilm roll 428, frame 1694.

6 Beaux to Helena de Kay Gilder, April 14, 1903, and June 14, 1903, cited in Tappert, "Choices," 311, 431; Beaux, MS of memorial address on John Singer Sargent, Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frame 1151. For Beaux's account of her encounters with Sargent, see Background, 224–26.
her work. Such rhetoric was pervasive at the time and played an active role in reinforcing social constructions of gender based on near-binary oppositions of masculine and feminine.7

Yet it could hardly diminish Beaux to share in the radiance of Sargent’s limelight, and she herself was so unconventional that in nearly every respect she deviated from the norm. In her career, she pursued a path almost indistinguishable from that of successful male painters of the day. In life, she was an independent professional, unmarried but never an old maid, an active participant in the culture and leisure of elite circles in New York and Gloucester. Her domestic life was undomestic in the normative sense. She had no husband but entertained swarms of admirers, even as a very old woman. Unlike the majority of “new women,” Beaux did not weave a network of female support, nor did she actively associate herself with women’s art organizations, electing always to act on her own in the world of men. Childless, she was a doting but highly selective aunt, favoring her pretty niece Ernesta while treating the plainer Catherine with indifference and occasionally callous disregard.

While critics united in praise of the womanly touch that sweetened her portraits, Beaux herself was a tough contender with an extraordinary resolve to win whatever the cost. A letter from Paris during her studies there gives us a glimpse of that steely core. “You know how I hate to fail,” she declared, “and that my grip is pretty hard as a rule.” Later, she told an interviewer: “When I attempt anything, I have a passionate determination to overcome every obstacle. Work is a struggle to conquer something. And I do my own work with a refusal to accept defeat that might almost be called pitiful.” As she spoke, the reporter “saw [Beaux’s] hands involuntarily clench, as if she were gripping something tangible . . . I said to myself ‘There must be some hidden quality in her that corresponds with this grip of her hands.’” These are fascinating statements, flatly contradicting her public image as a supremely feminine artist, sensitive, ladylike, and demure. A successful female painter who denied that “sex in art” had any significance whatsoever, she approached a point of androgynous fusion between her female self and

7 See Burns, “The ‘Earnest, Untiring Worker,’” and Burns, Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America (New Haven, 1996), 172–86.
the “masculine” pattern of her career.8

It is at this juncture that it becomes interesting to return to the question of comparison with her contemporary John Singer Sargent. What more can be said about the parallel lives of the world’s greatest male and female portrait painters? If Beaux so forcefully went against the grain of normative femininity, can we make a similar case (from the opposite end) for Sargent? So often lauded for the strength and vigor of his towering virility, was the “real” Sargent softer and more sympathetic than this female rival, whose hard grip seemed ill-fitted to the delicately sympathetic “woman’s hand” so many singled out for praise? Indeed, while most reviewers persisted in singling out Beaux’s softness and sensitivity, some critics, such as Beaux’s friend Leila Mechlin, argued that Beaux and Sargent shared a “similar virility of manner.” Which one, then, was actually the more “virile”?9

At a time when, despite feminist advances, the prescribed place for most middle- and upper-class women remained the home, Beaux was an intensely public figure, often putting herself on display in salons or at the podium just as she displayed her large canvases in the galleries. She was an intimate of Century editor Richard Watson Gilder and his wife Helena de Kay. Other close friends included the New Haven lawyer George Dudley Seymour, and the young Harvard professor of economics A. Piatt Andrew, who started the summer colony in Gloucester where Beaux built her cottage “Green Alley.” She was acquainted with scores, perhaps hundreds, of the socially and culturally prominent.

Nearly everyone who met Cecilia Beaux reported that she was a powerful presence, in public and private life alike. The journalist Maud Carrell interviewed Beaux in Pittsburgh, where she was serving as a juror for the Carnegie International exhibition. Beaux, the only woman on the panel, was no shrinking violet. When the jurors were socializing informally after lunch, “Miss Beaux, gifted with a quick wit . . . made a gay sally, which was being laughingly answered.” Later in her article, Carrell offered a more detailed

description for the benefit of "feminine readers":

She is tall and slender, has gray eyes that look directly at one and are sometimes as luminous as her canvases. She has the gift of witty speech and the laugh that comes readily. She suggests the woman of highest breeding, of poise, of grace, of reserve. One would say that Bohemia and Cecilia Beaux were strangers. It would be hard to imagine this elegant woman in velvet and rich furs claiming any of the license allowed to genius, adopting any of the bizarre habits of dress or familiar camaraderie that it sometimes affects.

Beaux's persona was a combination of wit, charm, and assertiveness, but as Maud Carrell's account hints, her social face masked and barricaded whatever lay deeper inside.¹⁰

Beaux's niece, Catherine Drinker Bowen, had a somewhat more jaundiced view, yet her account corroborates those of uncritical admirers. In 1938, the year Beaux at age eighty-two paid her last visit to her sister, she "looked a handsome sixty," recalled Bowen. Her eyes "had darkened to a steel-blue; their glance could cut. In her eighth decade, she wore a red hat tilted over one eye, furs up close around her chin, and beautifully made tweed suits." She had a "ready laugh" and told "enchanting, caustic stories" about people who had crossed her path. Of the two sisters, Cecilia had been the "stormy one" from the beginning, a "tiger cat" who once flew at Etta in a rage, leaving a "great scratch" on her cheek for all to see.¹¹

Relentlessly disciplined and self-absorbed, Beaux was a kind of Sun Queen in a kingdom where her every wish was law. Catherine recounted the story of a visit to Beaux's summer house in Gloucester

... when my sister Ernesta fell on the stairs one morning and broke an arm. She told me it never occurred to her to call Aunt Cecilia, who was down the hill in the studio with a sitter. Ernesta had been well trained; nobody interrupted those working hours. My sister telephoned a doctor and was at the hospital by noon when Cecilia returned to the house—nor did Ernesta resent the incident. Caring for the sick or heedless was not Cecilia's business. That lay elsewhere. We all knew this and respected it.

¹⁰ Maud Carrell, "Pittsburgh Abreast of the Times," Pittsburgh Dispatch, April 9, 1911, clipping, Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 429, frame 217.
¹¹ Catherine Drinker Bowen, Family Portrait (Boston, 1970), 204, 173, 145.
Catherine's feelings for her aunt were riddled with ambivalence. She claimed not to love her, yet she found this powerful woman fascinating and inspiring: "her vision of the world and of beauty held contagion." The same devotee of beauty also bullied Anna, her Irish maid of forty years, and when she visited her sister's house in Merion, Pennsylvania, she imperiously enforced absolute quiet. "The household understood that Miss Beaux was not to be annoyed by the sound of crying or quarreling children." It would be difficult to imagine any pattern that deviated more from mainstream ideologies of femininity than Beaux's. She was the very opposite of the nurturing angel in the house.12

Indeed, so far from nurturing, Beaux was capable of inflicting severe psychological wounds. Ever the perfectionist, she upheld rigid standards of beauty, refusing to paint the homelier children of her family and friends. In 1910, young Rosamond Sherwood was "paraded out to be looked at" by Beaux as a possible subject. When Beaux rejected her, Rosamond felt "lower than mud." Catherine Drinker Bowen belonged to the same unpaintable tribe. When Beaux visited, she recalled, there was "much talk about bones, measurements, the distance from brow to ear, the advantage—in fact the absolute necessity—of having one's eyes placed far apart. This stressing of the right kind of bones had early convinced me that mine were very wrong indeed. A forehead too high, a chin too long were not going to alter themselves. My aunt said bones stayed; they stayed till you were ninety." Condemned to an existence blighted by second-rate bones, Bowen wrote that she "hated Beaux" for her role in creating this enduring sense of inferiority.13

Beaux's diaries offer interesting glimpses of her passionate, ambitious, egocentric persona, often lonely, greedy for attention, alternating between concentrated periods of struggle in the studio and jolly times—concerts, dinners, excursions—with a large, expanding circle of friends. One Saturday night in March of 1911, for example, she went hat shopping and then to Durand-Ruel's gallery to see some "fine Manets." In the evening she attended a soiree at the Gilders', where she met "Mr. Morris Egan our minister to Denmark... I had a jolly talk with him. Very flatteur when he found I was 'Not Miss Beaux, not CECILIA Beaux...'." Beaux often

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12 Ibid, 205, 211. The broken arm was Bowen's euphemism for a miscarriage. I thank Tara Tappert for this information.

13 Tappert, "Choices," 313; Bowen, Family Portrait, 41.
described what she wore on important occasions when she wanted to make an impression: "To the Stokes for din. white satin," "Wore my lilac and feather hat," "Wore white liberty with small black bow," "Got into scarlet satin... but veiled with grey for Guerins din." Her entries detail jolly talks and gay times, interspersed with dull days and evenings of boredom and fatigue. Yet her public lectures bear witness to the importance of abstract thought and high ideals among the furnishings of a sharp and lively intellect.\textsuperscript{14}

Obviously, Beaux's concern for fashion and making a good appearance could be written off as typically "feminine" concerns, though any male dandy—Whistler comes to mind—would take no less an interest in such matters. Beaux's poise before the public, however, offers one point of telling contrast with Sargent. Accounts vary considerably as to Sargent's powers of conversation, or lack thereof. There seems to be some consensus that in his intimate circle he talked freely and well. But he was literally paralyzed by the mere thought of having to get up before an audience and make a speech, however informal the circumstances.

More than once at dinner, noted his friend and biographer Evan Charteris, Sargent would stand struggling with his nervousness, unable to utter a word. On one occasion, he blurted, "It's a damned shame," and sat down to tempestuous applause. Even in later years he suffered this handicap. He refused to accept an invitation to address the Philosophical Society of Harvard University on the subject of art. He would reconsider only if a miracle occurred: "The miracle of overcoming something like panic when asked to speak." In 1894, Sargent approached the actress Ada Rehan, telling her that he was eager to paint her young artist friend, W. Graham Robertson. "I can't quite remember what he said," she reported, "but he was tremendously enthusiastic." Robertson noted in his memoirs, "I was well able to supply the missing words. Sargent, I felt sure, had delivered himself thus—'You know—there's a certain sort of—er—er—that is to say a kind of—er—er—in fact a—er—er—' and so on and so on." Robertson went on to analyze the friendship of Sargent and the novelist Henry James. "Both were fond of society," wrote Robertson, "though neither seemed altogether at one with it: Henry James, an artist in words, liked to talk and in order to

\textsuperscript{14} Beaux diary, March 11, Feb. 2, 5, 24, 1909, and March 25, 1911; Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frames 504, 275, 279, and 509.
talk there must be someone to talk to, but Sargent talked little and with an effort; why he 'went everywhere' night after night often puzzled me."

Sargent's fear of public speaking was decidedly at variance with standard criteria of manliness in force at the time. After all, Theodore Roosevelt, the supreme public he-man of the day, was almost inseparable from his bully pulpit. Sargent's strong attraction to social and racial others also typed him as a man who had crossed over into ambiguous ground. Of course, peasants and exotics of all descriptions were the cosmopolitan painter's stock-in-trade. Sargent, however, did not merely make pretty, picturesque images. He sought out the strange and the bizarre, at the same time perhaps even wishfully identifying himself with them. Certainly the same cannot be said for calculated Orientalists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose paintings of Arab slave markets and Turkish baths were slick, colonialist exploitations. Nor could Sargent slip out of his own white skin. However, the passion and eccentricity of his Orientalism set it apart from the ubiquitous ethnographic tableaux in the galleries.

When critic William Coffin described the effects of the newly installed Boston Public Library murals, he recalled Sargent's earlier painting *Fumée d'ambre gris* (1880; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute), in which a Moorish woman perfumes her veils over a smoking incense burner. "Looking at it," Coffin stated, "one felt a sensation of the Orient brought to one's door." Sargent's conception of the moon goddess Astarte had the same effect, multiplied: "The love of things weird and mysterious, manifested in the fanciful portrayal of the Moorish woman, found a wider scope. . . . The insinuating charm of the face, the vague, inscrutable enticement of the figure, with its diaphanous veiling of tender, gas-like blue, fascinate the eye." Sargent himself professed the desire to cast off whiteness entirely, writing in a letter of 1908: "My hatred of my fellow creatures extends to the entire race, or to the entire white race, and when I escape from London to a foreign country my principle is to fly from the species. To call on a Caucasian when abroad is a thing I never do."

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Since Sargent always traveled with a retinue of family, friends, and retainers, this was to some extent an idle wish. Still, it suggests discontent with conventional social roles imposed on men, even if they happened to be artists. At the very least, there is an intensity about such subjects as his watercolors of Bedouin tribesmen (ca. 1905–6; Brooklyn Museum)—with riveting black eyes above azure veils—that seldom reaches the same pitch in the commissioned portraits. Given the fact that colonial others were almost invariably coded as feminine, Sargent’s imagined alliance with them seems significant in considering the nature of his own gender identity.

Sargent was also strongly responsive to sense impressions. When he was struggling with Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose (1885–86; Tate Gallery), he wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson, “I wish I could do it! With the right lighting and the right season it is a most extraordinary sight and makes one rave with pleasure.” Coupled with his necessary involvement in minute details of fashion and accessories, this taste for voluptuous sensation might well have consigned Sargent to the status of “man-milliner,” as male department-store clerks were once derisively dubbed—if he had not been a celebrity portrait painter in such colossal demand. There was something colossal, too, about his own physical and emotional nature. William Rothenstein described Sargent’s appetite as “gargantuan,” and the painter was renowned for the immense generosity and kindness he extended to anyone in need. Beaux, on the other hand, selectively groomed a few protégés, such as the young George Bellows, who would be the exclusive focus of her largesse.\(^17\)

Opinion varied on whether Sargent’s portraits were sympathetic or brutal. Many thought of Sargent as a virile diagnostician whose brush might as well be a scalpel. But William Coffin praised Sargent’s “intuitive perceptions” which enabled him to “grasp his sitters’ mental phases.” Intuition was more

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frequently typed as a feminine attribute. Sargent himself did show a sensitive side in his perception of sitters. When the husband of one subject wrote asking that the painter soften his wife's expression, the artist refused, saying: "I have very often been reproached with giving a hard expression to ladies' portraits, especially when I have retained some look of intelligence in a face besides amiability, as I consider myself forced to do in this case. The expression of ____'s face in the portrait is kind and indulgent, with over and above this a hint of a sense of humor. If I take this out, it will become as soft as anyone can desire." Sargent's sympathy, in this case, lay in his recognition of female complexity, and his refusal to reduce it to a conventional formula.18

Sargent often turned humor on himself in self-deflating sallies. Charteris recalled that the painter was reluctant to pull out for sale any one of the watercolors that used to lie in their frames, jammed tight in a large rack on the floor of the studio. If pressed, he would produce one or two with derogatory remarks and titles: "Troglodytes of the Cordilleras," "Blokes," "Idiots of the Mountains." His own variant of his most famous title was "Darnation, Silly, Silly, Pose." Many accounts stressed the boyish spirit of the painter, and the streams of whimsy that flowed from his pen in his correspondence. He often spoke of faces as "mugs" (his own among them), and once wrote to his childhood friend Vernon Lee that he was soon to paint "several portraits in the country, and three ugly young women at Sheffield, dingy hole."19

While Beaux prided herself on her youthful appearance and demeanor, she never came across as girlish in the same sense that Sargent was boyish, nor did she indulge in a sense of humor. She took herself and her calling with high seriousness, playing adult to Sargent's prankish, precocious child. Sargent invested the greater part of his intellectual and aesthetic ambition in his mural programs for the Boston Public Library and other sites. Portraits were his bread and butter, target of irreverent jokes about "mugs." To be sure, they offered technical challenges, and he took their execution seriously. At the same time, he could compare the process of painting an eye

18 Coffin, "Sargent and His Painting," 178; Charteris, John Sargent, 160.
19 Charteris, John Sargent, 178; Mount, Sargent: A Biography, 4; Sargent to Vernon Lee, ca. Feb. 1884, Colby College, quoted in Marc Simpson, Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent, exhibition catalogue, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, 1997), 122.
For Beaux, by contrast, the portrait was tantamount to a sacred trust and equal to the loftiest forms of art. No simple mimicry of physical surfaces, the portrait was a work of the imagination that transformed matter into mind. In this process, the eye of the artist was instrumental, penetrating the veil of transitory appearances to discover essential beauty in things. Through "imaginative insight and design," the painter then realized this essence on canvas. Such aggrandizement was a vital component of Beaux's enterprise. It lent weight and substance to a genre that some might discount as mere unimaginative documentation. Portrait painting was the moral and aesthetic equivalent of mural art, which was almost exclusively the province of men. Here more than anywhere else, the dividing lines of gender remained in force.

However casually Sargent may have ranked his portrait business, he threw himself into producing the most arresting images possible. To this end, he labored mightily, often scraping out the day's work to start over again the next morning. Thus the appearance of his canvases, seemingly so spontaneous and immediate, was deceptive. He told a student, Julie Heyneman, that he had repainted the head of Mrs. Hugh Hammersley no less than sixteen times. The Duke of Portland recalled his wife's ordeal during the month that Sargent stayed at the family seat to produce her portrait (1902; private collection):

His first attempt did not at all satisfy him, nor could he make the work move, as he termed it, or live. This caused him great annoyance, and very often he filled his brush with paint and then rushed at the picture, muttering strange Spanish oaths. After sitting to him for about a fortnight, my wife came down one morning to find a clean canvas on the easel, and the remains of the picture he had painted slashed right across and lying in a corner of the room.

Yet many accounts of sessions with Sargent also included notes of sheer frivolity. Mrs. George Swinton wrote that her portrait (1897; Art Institute of Chicago) "took a great many sittings, as we wasted a lot of time playing

20 Charteris, John Sargent, 183.
21 Beaux, "Portraiture," May 14, 1907, MS, 4, 9, Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frames 1095, 1100; Swinth, Painting Professionals, 176, notes that among her female peers, Beaux developed the most elaborated defense of portraiture in an effort to elevate it.
the piano and singing.”

Beaux, too, advanced by painstaking fits and starts, often ending a day’s work with deep dissatisfaction. As the story of her niece’s broken arm suggests, studio time was sacrosanct. There would be no socializing, no piano playing, no singing, but only the communion of artist with muse, though at times she did admit someone to read aloud in an effort to alleviate the sitter’s boredom. Beaux’s diaries chronicle a very regular, disciplined schedule of mornings in the studio followed by social visits and meals, reading, concerts, and other diversions. Each day she worked on discrete parts: an arm, a hand, a knee, a foot. She was relentlessly self-critical. One March day in 1911, for example, she wrote: “Had C. W. L. [Charles Wellford Leavitt] and did not good things.” The next day she was working on the portrait of her widowed friend Helena de Kay Gilder: “Had Helena and did arm not well. Too much talk.” The day after that, “Had H. again and worked the whole morning without much success on one eye. Terrible struggle.” No less than Sargent did Beaux labor to achieve a spontaneous effect. Unlike Sargent, however, she plodded ahead persistently while he dashed one step forward and two back, hurling himself from frenetic fun to furious concentration.

Even the most ephemeral appearances in their paintings were the result of calculation and protracted labor. Sargent’s *Carnation, Lily, Lily; Rose* depicts a garden at dusk, where two little girls in white frocks are lighting Chinese lanterns. This effect, Sargent wrote to his sister Emily, lasted only ten minutes. To capture it on canvas, however, was the work of many months. As Edmund Gosse recalled, the models and Sargent’s tools were placed in readiness while the painter took part in the afternoon session of lawn tennis at the artists’ colony in Broadway.

But at the exact moment, which of course came a minute or two earlier each evening, the game was stopped, and the painter was accompanied to the scene of his labors. Instantly, he took up his place at a distance from the canvas, and at a certain notation of the light ran forward over the lawn with the action of a

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23 Beaux diary, March 8, 9, 10, 1911; Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frame 503.
wag-tail, planting at the same time, rapid dabs of paint on the picture, and then retiring again, only, with equal suddenness, to repeat the wag-tail action. All this occupied but two or three minutes, the light rapidly declining, and then . . . Sargent would join us again . . . in a last turn at lawn tennis.  

Beaux painted *Dorothea and Francesca* (1898; Art Institute of Chicago) in the tobacco barn on the property of the Gilders' summer residence in Tyringham, Massachusetts. The young sisters had invented a simple, playful dance, which they performed artlessly. Beaux made this her subject and spent the early autumn working on it under increasingly challenging conditions:

> I built a platform with my own hands, as the girls could not move easily on the bare earth. When it rained hard, in September, the orchard let its surplus water run down the hill and under the barn-sill, so that, as my corner was rather low, I put on rubber boots and splashed in and out of my puddle . . . October was difficult, for it grew bitterly cold. But valiant posing went on, though the scenic effect of the group was changed by wraps.

Beaux very likely saw *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1889. The painting of the dancing Gilder daughters might be her response.  

Sargent and Beaux gained reputations as discerning interpreters of female character. Beaux in particular won praise for what seemed to be her tenderhearted, sympathetic portraits of children. Both, however, also produced compelling public and private images of men. As Tara Tappert has noted, Beaux painted and sketched nearly as many portraits of men and boys as of women and girls—more than 110. Many were strangers, but a good number were of acquaintances and friends. Probably the pinnacle of achievement, in her own eyes, was the commission after World War I to execute grand commemorative portraits of three European leaders: Cardinal Mercier, Admiral Beatty, and Premier Clemenceau. For Sargent, the majority of commissions on his first two working visits to America were for portraits of females. As his reputation in London grew, the number of male

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24 John Sargent to Emily Sargent, late September 1885, facsimile reproduced in Charteris, *John Sargent*, between pages 76–77; Edmund Gosse to Evan Charteris, ca. 1925, quoted in Charteris, *John Sargent*, 74–75.

portraits rose, and on the average equaled those of female sitters in the early twentieth century. His subjects included millionaires, aristocrats, and military men.  

Beaux and Sargent utilized grand-manner conventions to present their sitters in poses of power, dignity, and superiority. There was some disagreement about Beaux's ability to convey a truly masculine air. In 1897, she exhibited the portrait of the Reverend Matthew Blackburne Grier (see Toohey, fig. 7) at the St. Botolph Club in Boston (Sargent's stamping grounds). A critic admired the painting, noting it as proof that “Miss Beaux is quite as successful in painting the true look of a man as of a woman and child.” Most critics, nonetheless, maintained that they preferred Beaux's images of the latter, “for Miss Beaux's manner of painting seems to lend itself better to representation of the fairer sex than to the ruggedness of masculinity.”

This was an arbitrary judgment. Beaux's men look no less rugged than Sargent's and perhaps more so in certain cases. The stumbling block was the painter's gender. The act of seeing and portraying a model of the opposite sex—in the life class or in the portrait studio—came freighted with issues of power and control. These were neutralized, more or less, in cases of same-sex representation—men painting men, and women women. Women sitting for men, however, fell “naturally” under the painter's authority, figuratively speaking. Their power relations traced a familiar profile of male dominance and female deference. For a woman to step into that position of power at the easel, subjecting the male to her controlling gaze, was to disturb the balance. However temporary this power relation, its connotations could be unsettling. Critics therefore tended to downplay or discount the effectiveness of Beaux's male portraits, even when they admitted that there was a certain virility about her style.

Yet perhaps because of the androgynous professional persona she...
cultivated, Beaux was often the painter of choice to immortalize tycoons, religious leaders, and even war heroes. However much she lived up to the title of greatest woman painter, behind the easel she tried to cultivate a detached, transcendent professionalism. Occasionally, she met her match and then some, as in the case of the distinguished novelist Henry James, who provided both Beaux and Sargent with portrait opportunities. James traveled in the circle of Sargent and also in the orbit of the flamboyant Boston collector Isabella Stewart Gardner. Helena de Kay Gilder commissioned the portrait drawing (fig. 1) and brokered Beaux’s meeting with the writer in her New York studio on April 12 and 13, 1911. Sargent drew and painted James on several occasions; the last (fig. 2) was a commission by subscription from friends and fans to mark the novelist’s seventieth birthday.

In James, Beaux discovered a challenge. Before Helena and the writer arrived, Beaux sat in the park for a while “getting keyed up for HENRY JAMES,” as she confided to her diary. When the great man arrived, she found him “Almost impossible to do. So delicate and spiritual in solid exterior ... and was all wrong standing or on high stool. Commenced sitting down. Bad for me and got it too big. A good deal of talk but was too occupied to DRAW and also to express. “The next day, Beaux put James on the platform and improvised with better results, she felt. James, she wrote, seemed “really impressed” when he saw the drawing. “Wonderful economy of means,’ was one comment.” Again, though, the artist lamented how impossible it was to suggest the mind within all that matter.29

James’s sittings with Sargent began almost exactly two years later in London. Sargent completed the portrait in about six weeks. James wrote, “it is now finished ... and is nothing less, evidently, than a very fine thing indeed, Sargent at his very best and poor old H. J. not at his worst; in short a living breathing likeness and a masterpiece of painting ... I don’t, alas, exhibit a point in it, but am all large and luscious rotundity—by which you may see how true a thing it is.”30

The degree to which any portrait representation reveals or suggests mind and soul is to a considerable extent a subjective judgment. Sargent had known James for thirty years and was probably not much in awe of him, as Beaux so clearly was. His painting took six weeks; her drawing two days.

29 Beaux diary, April 12, 13, 1911, Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frames 516–17.
Nevertheless, the differences in these two views of James are worth discussing. Beaux’s portrait might fittingly bear the name HENRY JAMES in capitals as she inscribed it in her diary. The frontality of his pose makes him iconic, rigidly centered and staring out with startling intensity. His pate is massive, bald, and round, his lips compressed, his cheeks fleshy. He could be a banker foreclosing on a mortgage as easily as a celebrated author of refined and sophisticated fiction.

Sargent's interpretation is no less dignified but considerably more approachable. The famous writer is in an expansive mood, listening, about to utter a mot, one hand visible with thumb cocked through waistcoat
button. There is considerably more matter in Sargent's portrait: James's vest with its sleek stripes, his charcoal-gray suit coat, his watch chain and spectacles, his paunch. Sargent, however, infused this matter with spirit, whereas Beaux's depiction of James remains an effigy, a well-executed mask.

Although Beaux may not have penetrated James's reserve, she, like Sargent, cultivated her most intense and pleasurable friendships with men. Both adopted similar tactics for the portrayal of male intimates. Sargent's Robert Louis Stevenson (fig. 3) and Beaux's Man with a Cat (fig. 4), a portrait of her brother-in-law Henry Sturgis Drinker, are images of men in domestic spaces. Long legs slung sideways in a wicker chair on a fur rug,
Stevenson holds a cigarette and looks candidly out. Beaux's portrait, on a larger scale, is somewhat more formal. Drinker's bristling muttonchop whiskers and crinkled brow make his face seem guarded. However, his sun-drenched white suit, casual posture in the Windsor chair, and especially the marmalade cat nestled drowsily in his lap send distinctly nonthreatening signals.31

Sargent and Beaux also paralleled each other in their worship of male beauty. Both even had handsome, mustachioed Italian servants: Sargent's

31 Tappert, Cecilia Beaux, 60, notes that Drinker, a corporate railroad lawyer and president of Lehigh University, was a "strong-willed patriarch" who "lived his life at a furious pace." Nonetheless, his "equally energetic sister-in-law . . . succeeded in subduing him on canvas."
Nicola d'Inverno, the painter's valet and model for some twenty years, and Beaux's Natale Gavagnin, gardener and handyman, on whose devotion she depended. Beaux treated this servant well. In a 1911 diary entry, she noted that she had been at Macy's, "wandering in the men's dept looking for things for Natale." What she might have been looking for there is a bit of a puzzle. Photographs in the Beaux albums at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts show Natale invariably dressed in white pants and jersey, bound with a presumably colorful cummerbund, as if he were a Sicilian fisherman. Like
a picturesque prop, he hovered in the background, serving Beaux's rich and famous guests (fig. 5). For his part, Sargent paid for Nicola's fitness training at the Quinting Hogg Gymnasium in London, and replenished the valet's pockets when he lost money at the races, as was his usual custom.32

The nature of Sargent's erotic life—or if he had one—remains a mystery. Although he was rumored to be romantically involved with the young Swiss-American Louise Burkhardt in the early 1880s, Sargent never married, and whatever his affairs might have been, they were never posted on the

32 Beaux diary, May 20, 1911, Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frame 536; "The Real John Singer Sargent, as His Valet Saw Him," Boston Evening American, Feb. 7, 1926, 3. On Natale, see, for example, Beaux's diary entry for Feb. 22, 1909, in which she noted that Natale had seen her off at the train station, "very devoted." Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frame 279.
grapevine. There has been some speculation that he was homosexual—consciously or unconsciously—and given that his male nudes are intensely eroticized, the circumstantial, visual evidence is persuasive. He could not have existed in ignorance of alternative sexualities. After all, he was living and painting in London in the 1890s, when the trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde made homoerotic activity very public, and very notorious.33

For Beaux, there may have been no sex in art, but in life she cultivated a long series of platonic though nonetheless romantic friendships with men, many of them young, and most handsome. Her jaundiced niece, Catherine, recalled the pattern of her aunt’s arrival for a visit:

It was [her] custom to arrive about tea time, in an old bright blue Packard touring car, driven by an admirer. Cecilia and the admirer occupied the front... Anna Murphy [Beaux’s maid] sat in back, carrying a folded steamer rug... Concerning the admirer, my aunt had possessed these willing followers ever since I could remember—ten or twenty years her junior as the case might be. Most of them were noticeably good-looking; my aunt did not like to be with ill-favored people.”

As Tara Tappert has detailed, Beaux liked the company of men and enjoyed the attention they paid her. She cultivated other women's husbands, notably Richard Watson Gilder, hobnobbed with confirmed bachelors such as T. Alexander Harrison and George Dudley Seymour, and accepted the adoration of much younger men: A. Piatt Andrew, Henry Davis Sleeper, and—probably her great love and greatest disappointment—the illustrator Thornton Oakley (see Leibold fig. 5).34

When Beaux was in her mid-fifties, she was courted by the New York businessman John Wilkie, who dubbed her the “Queen of Hearts.” Beaux seems to have reveled in this “Queenly” role, never happier than when standing surrounded by “admiring eyes and bending over heads.” Numerous photographs in the Beaux albums bear witness to the power of her charm. One is an interior at “Red Roof,” A. Piatt Andrew's Gloucester summer home. Beaux sits in by the hearth in a Windsor chair, with four handsome

33 Trevor Fairbrother has consistently maintained that Sargent’s work cannot be understood without taking his homosexuality into account. See note 40 below.
34 Bowen, Family Portrait, 208; Tappert, “Choices,” discusses Beaux’s social and romantic life in considerable detail; see especially 391–413.
young men grouped around her (fig. 6). In another photograph, she holds the ends of a bear leash attached to collars worn by A. Piatt Andrew and another young man, kneeling before her like trophies of the goddess's hunt (fig. 7). 35

Whether or not she had older suitors, Beaux relished the sight of young, sensuous male beauty. During the period she was receiving the attentions of John Wilkie—a widower with two little boys—she was infatuated with the looks of the dashing Mr. Dunn, "so beautiful and charming," who sent her violets, squired her about town, and indulged in cozy tête-a-têtes with her

35 Beaux diary, June 2, and Jan. 1, 1912, Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frames 737 and 668.
over books on the sofa. “I could watch his beautiful smooth black head and white forehead and never tire,” she wrote. “He has the LOOK of thought in his actual modeling of his face.” In such a face matter and mind, happily, were in perfect unity.36

Beaux undoubtedly projected the same unity into her vision of Thornton Oakley, a full quarter-century her junior. They met in Gloucester in 1898 and became devoted friends. As Tara Tappert has noted, Beaux to her regret fell in love with the handsome artist, while he only admired and worshipped her as a charming older woman and fellow painter. When he became

36 Beaux diary, Jan. 1 and Mar. 24, 1912, Beaux Papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frames 668, 711.
engaged in 1909, Beaux wrote in her diary: "very bad news for me . . . Bad period. must look out." Even though her charcoal portrait drawing of Oakley post-dated his marriage, it is easy to sense how powerful his attraction was (fig. 8). In the drawing, his face is perfect, with strong cheekbones, square jaw, straight nose, chiseled lips, and keen, dark eyes. His god-like beauty radiates what for Beaux must have been a lightning bolt of erotic and spiritual intensity.\(^{37}\)

Yet Beaux's drawings and paintings of men—beloved or revered—maintain a public facade even at their most intimate. Some of Sargent's

\(^{37}\) Beaux diary, Feb. 3, 1909, Beaux papers, AAA, microfilm roll 428, frame 275.
images, by contrast, are literally unbuttoned, never more memorable than in *Dr. Pozzi at Home* (1881; Armand Hammer Collection, Los Angeles). In this portrait, the doctor (a famous gynecologist and notorious womanizer) is grand and aristocratic in the rich, red dressing gown that makes punning reference to the red robes of Van Dyck’s *Cardinal Bentivoglio* (1623; Pitti Palace). At the same time, with his glistening eyes, red lips, black beard, and embroidered slippers, Pozzi is a seductive figure. With the tapering fingers of one hand he clasps the lapels of his robe, but with the other he plays teasingly with the sash, as if to release the knots and reveal the splendors underneath. That Sargent was dazzled by this figure is suggested by his description of Pozzi as “a very brilliant creature.”

As an academic trained in the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Sargent developed his draftsmanship through exhaustive study and knowledge of the nude. Beginning in 1890, he launched an intensive program of nude figure drawing as he planned his murals for the Boston Public Library. However lofty the subjects, there was still something risqué about them. At Sargent’s studio, Edwin Austin Abbey reported seeing “stacks of sketches of nude people, saints, I dare say, most of them, though from my cursory observations of them they seemed a bit earthy.” One of the earthiest of them all is Sargent’s portrayal of the young Nicola D’Inverno (fig. 9), who entered Sargent’s service in 1892. In this drawing, D’Inverno lies completely open to view, arranged sinuously upon his cushions, like an odalisque. He exhibits the same dark sensuality as Dr. Pozzi, here laid bare. It is difficult not to see him as an object of desire, whether in fantasy or fact makes little difference.

Trevor Fairbrother has argued that Sargent balanced his public career with a repressed sexuality. This conflicted social-sexual identity “may be a key to the successful tensions within his art: for example, his ability to paint a portrait that is ultimately respectable and yet is colored by showiness, grandeur, pride, or sensuality.” Fairbrother proposes, accordingly, that “the visual edge and emotional volatility of his work may have been shaped by his attraction to male beauty.” While this may be an instance of putting too many eggs into one sexual basket, it still offers a persuasive case for thinking

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Fig. 9. Sargent, Reclining Male Nude (Nicola d’Inverno), ca. 1890–1915. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, 18 3/4 x 28 ½”. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University: gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond.

anomalous socio-sexual position in a normative, late-Victorian world.  

For Beaux, as for any female professional in the late nineteenth century, there was no middle ground between conventional marriage with children and a professional calling. She was born too soon for the bohemian freedom and sexual experimentation that young women of the Progressive era made bold to try. For her, a middle-class woman, there was no safe territory for extramarital sex. To choose a life of celibacy, as Beaux apparently did, was an act of necessity. Clearly, however, the choice never dulled the edge of

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desire, as the Thornton Oakley story suggests.

What other manifestations of the tension between desire and professional life might we detect in Beaux’s portraits? There is, for one, her ambivalence toward the theme of mother and child, as Tara Tappert has so carefully explored. There are also tensions in many of her images of socialites, who despite their exquisite gowns and jewels often have plain, puddingy faces. In her portraits of couples—such as Mr. and Mrs. Anson Phelps Stokes (1898; Metropolitan Museum of Art)—the woman’s figure, large and expansive, fills the foreground, crowding the man into a dark corner behind her. On the other hand, her wedding portrait of nephew Henry Sandwith Drinker and his bride Sophie (1911; collection of Ernesta Drinker Ballard) proffers another vision of unattainable perfection and fulfillment in the beauty and sexuality of the young pair, so vigorous and healthy.

Under the skin, Beaux and Sargent were closer than it might at first appear. Sargent’s success was more spectacular, and his renown far-reaching. Yet as an anomalous figure traveling an international circuit somewhere between bohemia, aristocracy, and the bourgeoisie, he lived edgily in a kind of undomesticated domesticity, rootless in the midst of family, unmated in a world largely geared for heterosexual expression. Beaux too was on the edge, between professionalism and femininity, desire and celibacy, “masculine” toughness and socially prescribed sensitivity. Both, in the end, desired what they could not have, and they built their careers around that lack.

*Indiana University*

SARAH BURNS

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41 Of course, Sargent did this as well, and memorably, in the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes (1897, Metropolitan Museum of Art).