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# Art & Literature

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'Dom, Saas Fee', Hilda Hechle, c1920, watercolour, 55cm x 39cm. Täschhorn, Dom, Lenzspitze, Nadelhorn from slopes of the Trifhorn east of Saas Fee.  
*(Courtesy of Tony Astill/www.mountainpaintings.org)*

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## John Singer Sargent

His Mountain Sketchbooks



'Val d'Aosta'. (Alamy)

Any review of mountain art prompts this question: what do mountain paintings reflect? They can express a truth unobtainable in text. They can also deconstruct notions of reality. The message of mountain paintings may be philosophical, making us consider the nature and effect of existence, or of nature, of creation itself and humanity's role in it. Paint may conceal but also recreates; it covers but in doing so changes.

Inevitably, mountain art speaks to the nature of mountaineering. The way we see and approach mountains is reflected in the way we record them. These images are not simply illustrative. They magnify the nature and purpose of our involvement with the mountains, how we engage our imaginations in our perception of their landscape. In contemplating mountain

images, we can experience, perhaps only briefly, a liberation, from business or professional cares, but most deeply from ourselves.

Whatever it is that calls us to the mountain environment, and it can be an invitation, a challenge, a demand, that impulse must be recognised and considered. It may be a call to witness, to experience, a summons to a privileged position, or even to the discomfort of doubt, but that inherent aspect of desire has to be acknowledged. Desire has the capacity to alter attitudes and conceal realities, to create a restlessness that is almost beyond understanding. Mountain art provokes memory in the mountaineer, revisiting intense experiences, the emptying of self and the process of refilling, or refuelling.

Text can be noisy and too often attempts to deal in absolutes. But in the space between the viewer and the canvas there is a silence or stillness; in that stillness we find the process of interpretation. We're looking not only at an impression, at the painting's structure or meaning, but also at the artist's state of mind. And in that understanding we may recognise that we're dealing with an examination of our own selves, our own fears and inadequacies. If this is the case for us as viewers with a passion for mountain landscapes, what of the artist whose speciality and income was derived from non-mountain painting? If mountain canvases can stimulate our desire, what were the motivations for a society portrait painter?

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) was an American expatriate artist who became famous as the leading portrait painter of his day, rendering outstanding pictures of Edwardian era luxury and style. He was also devoted to mountain scenery and travelled extensively through the Alps and visited mountain settings across the world. Never a mountaineer, though he did walk significantly through Alpine areas, he recorded rocky mountain locations and environments throughout his life. Born in Florence to American parents he trained in Paris before moving to London. He lived most of his life in Europe, enjoying international acclaim and an extraordinarily successful career as a society portrait artist. While many of his studies reveal an awareness of Impressionism, his commissioned portraits were rooted in what was termed the Grand Manner, an aesthetic style derived from Classicism and the art of the High Renaissance. Yet Sargent's colour choice and paint handling established a style immediately recognisable as his own.

Over his long career Sargent travelled widely all over Europe, the Middle East and north Africa, made several trips to America, visiting, among other states, Maine, Montana and Florida. Each destination offered creative opportunities and we have more than 2,000 watercolours from his travel sketchbooks. His drawing from the outset was 'rarely less than dazzling in its fluency'.<sup>1</sup> In his watercolours there is a freshness and energy expressed with a fluidity often lacking in his more formal portrait studies. Similarly, his large-scale mountain pictures retained a freshness and vivacity that many of his studio portraits lost.

Despite his popularity, or perhaps because of it, Sargent had his critics,

1. R Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, Collins Harvill, London, 1990, p101

some of whom saw him as a mere illustrator who relied on superficial dashing effects for his success. His expatriate lifestyle also clashed with emerging artistic trends in America, particularly the Ashcan School which was centred on New York and dealing with urban realism often depicting life in the poorer communities. Sargent's portraits of what the contemporary American art world would have deemed 'high society' did not find a strong audience in the States. While Sargent's drawing and compositions were highly impressive and his paint handling techniques second to none he did, it seems, occasionally lack tact, as in the case of the murals he produced in the Boston area. 'The Church' was revealed as a beautiful young woman while 'The Synagogue' appeared as a blind, unattractive old woman resulting in accusations of antisemitism. Sargent failed to understand how his representations might offend and was both astonished and upset when he was criticised. When the press fanned the controversy, Sargent abandoned the mural project.

Boyhood and family life changed in 1870 when they moved, for the first time, to Switzerland for the summer, to avoid the hot, unhealthy atmosphere in Florence where cholera and malaria were often prevalent in the summer months. In addition, Mrs Sargent had just given birth to her second daughter and was anxious about her infant's health. This seeking refuge in the mountains was to become an annual event as Sargent's sister Emily was an invalid who regained strength in the mountain air while John undertook long, challenging hikes to nearby peaks, recording what he saw.

'When they reached Thun,' wrote Stephen Rubin. 'Sargent and his father began a walking tour.'<sup>2</sup> By the time they reached Mürren, Sargent, then 14 years old, was using two sketchbooks and separate sheets for larger works. 'Sargent dated many of the pages and identified a number of sites, making it appear that the sketchbooks were a chronological, pictorial record of the journey through Switzerland.'<sup>3</sup> This peripatetic style continued. Successive summer trips never remained in one place for long as the family enjoyed a nomadic existence on holiday. Family letters reveal that while based at Mürren they travelled extensively across the Alps and even visited spas in the Pyrenees.

John Sargent's education had been largely private until 1869 when he was enrolled at a day school in Florence where literature and languages were foremost. His artistic abilities went beyond drawing and painting; at this point, he was a highly accomplished pianist playing the works of Mendelssohn, Beethoven and Schubert. Music remained a serious interest especially in later life when it became one of his chief pleasures. In 1871, the year after their first Swiss holiday, Sargent, accompanied by a drawing tutor, made a sketching tour of the Tyrol. Much of the work contained in these early sketchbooks can be viewed online, indeed downloaded, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is work of a very mature nature for one still in his teens. The quality of line drawing, water-colouring and choice

2. S Rubin, *John Singer Sargent's Alpine Sketchbooks*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1991, p7.

3. *Ibid* p7.

of subject matter disclose an adult capacity and an established technique in both drawing and painting where ‘the ease and accuracy of judgement ... would be hard to beat.’<sup>4</sup>

The few paintings examined here give the briefest introduction to a lifetime’s interest. They range from the initial teenage expedition to those of middle years and Sargent’s maturity. They reflect not only his awareness of differing mountain regions but also reveal his changing attitudes to mountain ranges and his varying treatments of the subject as each study was considered as unique. It may well be that this aspect was at the core of his creativity whereas his society portraits, while never simply a repeated process, did have to conform to the tastes of the culture that they represented.

While the stark Alpine summit at the head of a glacier made an obvious choice for a large canvas, his studies and sketchbooks reveal a noticeable delight in the whole mountain environment, a love of high places that never left him, and as du Montcel commented, ‘adventure is not in things but in ourselves.’ His society portraits created worldwide fame and engendered a large and comfortable income but his continued investigation of mountain ranges and his journeys to the rugged settings of high mountains from his teenage years to old age displays a love of that specific environment that was largely a private interest.

If ‘a love of mountains, in a man, is more than anything the child in him which refuses to die’<sup>5</sup> then Sargent’s first boyhood excursion to the Alps in 1870 may well reflect Mauriac’s comment. What this love generated was a body of work based on the study of the mountain environment that was not rooted in commercialism or the desire to promote an interest or passion in others but simply because of the stimulation he found in these areas. One of the unifying aspects of his mountain paintings is the quality of light which he rendered in these studies which, apart from the structure of the mountains, is an overarching feature in his compositions. It may well be that Macfarlane’s remark: ‘it is the light of the mountains which has always attracted more comment than any other aspect of their beauty’<sup>6</sup> is particularly relevant to Sargent’s collection.

Several large sketchbooks containing hundreds of drawings and watercolour studies were left to relatives on his death. They were never seen by the public; they were never exhibited during his lifetime. The Alpine Sketchbooks of his teenage years are still complete and record the awe and wonder he sensed in the high mountains, a form of eternity that we, through his continued work in this field, may share in.

### ‘Schreckhorn, Eismeer’<sup>7</sup>

This large watercolour was produced during that first summer in the Alps in 1870. The view of the glacier and central peak was obviously created from

4. Hughes, *op cit* p102-3.

5. F Mauriac, foreword to *High Heaven* (J Boell & P Elek), London, 1947, p7.

6. R Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind*, Granta, London, 2004, p213.

7. ‘Schreckhorn, Eismeer’, watercolour and graphite on off-white woven paper, 27.6cm x 40.6cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1870.



'Schreckhorn, Eismeer'. (Alamy)

the north, from the Grindelwald end of the valley and features the dramatic crest of the Schreckhorn (4078m), first climbed by Leslie Stephen only nine years previously in 1861, with the summit of the Lauteraarhorn (4042m) in the background. This then was an area few would have witnessed and the spires of the Schreckhorn must have had an immediate appeal to the teenager.

His handling of the rugged, rocky ridge leading to the Nässilhorn (3750m) is part of a series of jagged diagonal lines receding to the towering Schreckhorn adding to the illusion of distance and the dominance of the summit. The aiguilles of the ridge are echoed in the icefall where the Obers Ischmeer drops to the Unders Ischmeer, close to the point where the Schreckhornhütte, built in 1877, now stands. The glacier forms a counter diagonal that supports the mountain while the white of the snowfields links to the colouring of the icefall allowing a framing effect of the rocky aspects of the mountain and enhancing the piercing perpendicularity of the scene. This concentration on spiked verticality is re-echoed in the left foreground where a soaring arête will lead to the Obere Buggel (2831m) and hence to the Pfaffstecki (3114m). Even allowing for a little dramatisation this is a remarkable painting for a 14-year-old boy, retaining as it does the freshness and stirring vividness that was captured the day it was painted.

### 'Val d'Aosta'<sup>8</sup>

Exhibited as 'Mont Blanc' (the highest peak in the central distance) this canvas has been referred to as 'Val d'Aosta' since 1935. This region is the

8. 'Val d'Aosta', oil on canvas, 92.1cm x 97.8cm, Tate Gallery, London, c1908-10.



'Cliffs at Deir el Bahri, Egypt'. (*Alamy*)

highest in Italy bound by Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa, Gran Paradiso and the Matterhorn. Given this vast mountain area, Sargent's painting is not one of isolated drama reflecting wonder and majesty; here is a huge mountain hinterland rolling off into untold distances: a barren, rocky landscape, a remote glacier, a far-flung peak and the suggestion that anyone entering this trackless waste must be aware of the consequences.

Painted in his maturity (in his mid fifties) there is sunshine and blue sky in the distance but a long way to go to achieve the final summit. It offers an open road but the gates to this route are hard and barren. Sun may reflect off the glacier, but deep shadows frame the view and clouds are brewing. It's a stark mountain environment, open and approachable but only for those who are fit, capable and determined. An honest, bold and impressive scene offering more to the viewer than merely a prospect of distant mountains, perhaps it was an indication of how he felt at that age: still capable, but aware of the wastes ahead.

### 'Cliffs at Deir el Bahri, Egypt'

Painted near Thebes, this canvas reveals a vertical panorama in the desert. The bleaching effect of the strong sunlight causes the sky and sandy desert to be practically the same tone allowing shadow alone to delineate the structure of the cliffs. This is Sargent at his most Impressionistic. A painting that deals with the effects of light upon colour and structure based on his personal favourite subject matter.

Ostensibly a quite simple scene, it is Sargent's mastery of composition that creates a painting of two halves where the solidity of the cliff formation is balanced by a long diagonal ridge leading the eye off into the distance away from the dust and aridity to the lushness of the Nile waterway. Yet that device that enhances the illusion of depth does not hold our eye. It is

9. 'Cliffs at Deir el Bahri, Egypt', oil on canvas, 34.9cm x 62.9cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1890-91.



'Simplon Pass'. (Corcoran Collection, National Art Gallery)

instead drawn back to the towering cliff configuration, to the sandstone walls and columns we now more readily associate with the American south-west, although the increasing popularity of Wadi Rum and other desert climbing areas are perhaps reclaiming Sargent's vision. What is central here in this seemingly 'empty' painting is the beauty and subtlety of the desert environment, the open challenge to climbers to explore these sandstone cliffs beyond the, for Sargent, recognised mountaineering centres, and the overall invitation to enter this world of subtle colour and wonder.

### 'Simplon Pass'<sup>10</sup>

This canvas demonstrates Sargent's fondness for all aspects of mountain topography. This is not a simple view of a mountain pass from a distance whereby all details may be included but produced in the heart of the pass and including many of the mountain features he obviously enjoyed: the boulders and rock falls, the screes and moraines, the small patches of vegetation splashing colour across the rocks and the movement of water down the stony surface.

If it is true that 'the paintings of a period contain all its enthusiasm and illusions'<sup>11</sup> then nothing in the mountains escaped Sargent's eye. His expression of mountain landscape was determined partly by his reaction to it and partly by the structures, colour combinations and the light he experienced. He was unfailingly in close touch with the intricacies of mountain configuration to the extent that 'Sargent embraces difficulties one after another.'<sup>12</sup> Nothing was too complex. What arrested his vision in the mountains he recorded for all to see and contemplate.

10. 'Simplon Pass', 1911, oil on canvas, 71.8cm x 92.6cm, Corcoran Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

11. T Martin Wood, Sargent, ed M Gioffredi, 2019 reprint of 1909 first edition by Jack, London & Stokes, New York, p7.

12. *Ibid*, p22.