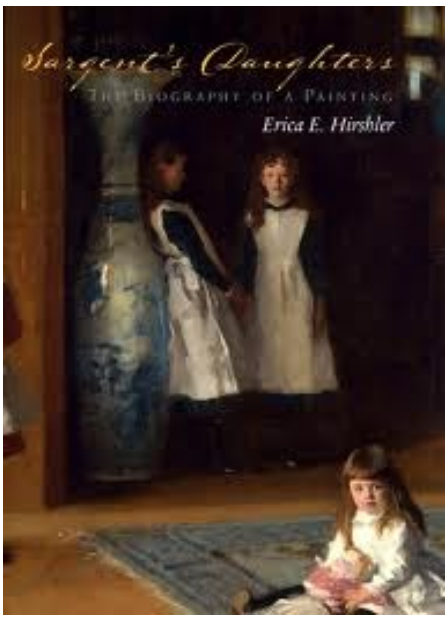

Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting

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One of the most celebrated painters of his day, John Singer Sargent defines for many the style, optimism and opulence of turn-of-the-century America. Among his renowned portraits, "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit" stands alongside "Madame X" and "Lady Agnew of Lochnaw" as one of Sargent's immortal images. This painting depicts four young sisters in the spacious foyer of the family's Paris apartment, strangely dispersed across the murky tones and depths of the square canvas, as though unrelated to one another, unsettled and unsettling to the eye. "The Daughters" both affirms and defies convention, flouting the boundaries between portrait and genre scene, formal composition and quick sketch or snapshot. Unveiled at the Paris Salon of 1883, it predated by just two years the scandal of "Madame X" and was itself characterized by one critic as "four corners and a void"; but Henry James came closer to the mark when he described the painter as a "knock-down insolence of talent," for few of Sargent's works embody the epithet as well as "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit."

Drawing on numerous unpublished archival documents, scholar Erica E. Hirshler excavates all facets of this iconic canvas, discussing not only its significance as a work of art but also the figures and events involved in its making, its importance for Sargent's career, its place in the tradition of artistic patronage and the myriad factors that have contributed to its lasting popularity and relevance. The result is an aesthetic, philosophical and personal tour de force that will change the way you look at Sargent's work, and that both illuminates an iconic painting and reaffirms its pungent magnetism.

Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting Details

Date	:	Published October 31st 2009 by MFA Publications
ISBN	:	9780878467426
Author	:	Erica Hirshler (Contributor)
Format	:	Hardcover 256 pages
Genre	:	Art, Nonfiction, History, Art History, Biography, Family, Literature, American

From Reader Review Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting for online ebook

Kalliope says

I am a great enthusiast of biographies of paintings. They have a centrifugal force, spiralling out onto many fields from a centre of origin. The one canvas will take you to the artist's world, to the lives of the sitters, to the world depicted. And the painting will remain with you.

And ***The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*** , painted in 1882 by **John Singer Sargent (1856- 1924)** at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, is one painting to keep in one's mind.

What prompted my reading of this biography is the Lecture offered recently by Erica Hirshler in the *Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum*American Impressionism. I had been lucky to visit a similar exhibition at the NY Metropolitan Museum in 2007 on *Americans In Paris 1860 - 1900*. Hirshler is also a co-author of that catalogue Americans in Paris 1860-1900, which thanks to a fortunate impulse is now sitting in my shelves.

Since Hirshler provides us with a lengthy quote from Henry James' description of the painting, I can only stand by and let James talk:

> *The artist has done nothing more felicitous and interesting than this view of a rich, dim, rather generalized French interior (the perspective of a hall with a shining floor, where screens and tall Japanese vases shimmer and loom)... The treatment is eminently unconventional, and there is none of the usual symmetrical balancing of the figures in the foreground. The place is regarded as a whole; it is a scene, a comprehensive impression; yet none the less do the little figures in their white pinafores (when was the pinafore ever painted with that power and made so poetic?) detach themselves, and live with a personal life.. a pair of immensely tall emblazoned jar .. seem also to partake of the life of the picture; the splendid porcelain and the aprons of the children shine together, and a mirror in the brown depth behind them catches the light... The naturalness of the composition, the loveliness of the complete effect, the light, free security of the execution, the sense it gives us as of assimilated secrets and instinct and knowledge playing together.*

To spin out of this particular Sargent cannot have been an easy task for Hirshler, since very little is actually known about it in comparison with other of Sargent's paintings, On the Boits there is no documentation left to us – no contract, no letters, no diaries, no photos, no descriptions or recollections from the owners and sitters, no sketches, no drawings. So, nothing can give us an indication of the most intriguing aspect, its genesis: who had the idea of going ahead with it? was it a commission and paid for, or an offering? And in particular who thought of the extraordinary composition? Other paintings, such as such as *El Jaleo*, or *En route pour la pacha*, have left us more indication of their births.

But we do know that it was painted very fast, in about one and a half months, which shows in the almost complete absence of pentimentos and in the thinner paint in parts of the background. We also know that it stayed with the family until later on when the daughters donated it to the *Boston Fine Arts Museum* in memory of their father.

With that scarcity of specific documentation what Hirshler does is embark on an excruciating and painstaking research on anything that has to do with the painting. She tracks the Boits-- the parents and individually the four girls--, their ancestors, their finances, their frequent travels, and their circles on both sides of the Atlantic at a time when it was cheaper to live in Paris than in Boston. Of course this is the world of the peripatetic Henry James and Edith Wharton, to mention just two of the considerable crowd of Americans living in Europe. James and Wharton actually met at a dinner at the Boits. We learn that Boit was also a painter and friends with Sargent so that they even organized a joint exhibition in 1912 in Boston, when both still stood on a not too different art podium. Sometimes I felt there was too much detail in Hirshler's account, as in for example her tracing of the manufacturing site of the large Japanese vases, which surprisingly, have not been lost.

But she is very good in connecting the rich visual sources for Sargent's conception with the most famous and often cited of *Las Meninas*, which Sargent copied during a visit to El Prado.

Even the literal translation of Velázquez's work as 'Maids in Waiting' acquires an additional figurative meaning with the Boit girls. Apart from an art historical genealogy, Hirshler also places this painting as the culmination Sargent's series of Venetian interiors, about eight of them, executed during the early 1880s and in which Sargent seemed to be digesting not only Venetian settings but also some of Degas way of framing the composition.

This read provided me with yet another visit to the art and cultural scene in Paris end of the 19C, area that does not seem to ever satiate me. This time it offered a closer look at the world of the art dealers and art schools --with *Carolus-Duran* and *George Petit*-- and without omitting the awkward relationship of Sargent to the French Impressionists. Degas acknowledged Sargent's facility with the brush but thought that he was no artist; while Monet allowed him to paint next to him, and to portray him painting, in Giverny.

In the actual analysis of the painting, by tracing the history of its criticism, Hirshler shows how evaluations sometimes tell us more about the subject than the object described. What stands out though, in the way this painting has been received through time, is its perplexing ambiguity. Could it really be categorized as a portrait when the faces of the two eldest daughters can barely be seen? Or should we look at it as a 'genre' painting.

Towards the end her book, Hirshler provides us with a few chapters she has titled *Afterlives*: of the Boit couple, tracing their later somewhat less happy life; of the daughters, none of whom married and a couple of whom had health problems; but most interesting for me was the account of Sargent's fame as it grew and demised in subsequent decades until revived in the later part of the 20C.

Hirshler then has achieved that at least for me, this painting will have a special place in my appreciation of Sargent’s work. It already captivated me during the Met exhibit. Now that I know its story, it has become so much more personal and memorable.

This edition does not provide illustrations of the many paintings mentioned, apart from the one in the title. I tried to keep track of them in my updates.

Lori says

I have long loved this painting. When I lived in Boston I would often walk to the MFA and spend time with it, and had a print of it over the mantle at home. This book is exactly what is promised, a biography of the painting. It encompasses the lives of the Boit family members; tells the story of what happened to each of the girls and their parents;, gives us context of where Sargent was developmentally and socially before and when he painted it; his relationship with the family; and provides reviews of, and evolving thoughts about, the painting. Hirshler's book is fascinating. It is as detailed as details are available. And it's also the tale of wealthy Americans involved with inner circles of the expat crowd in the late 1800s, including Henry James, as they lived in Paris and Tuscany, Boston, Brookline and Newport. It is a biography of the painting that is worthy of the painting, and I am very pleased with it.

Madame Jane says

The Daughters of Edward Boit is a mysterious painting. The history is fascinating. Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is about the daughters themselves: Florie, Mary, Isa and Julia. They are forever immortalized in one of the greatest paintings ever created.

Kate says

What a delicious read for any johnsingersargentophile-- and indeed for any artlover. I don't think I've ever read another such "biography of a painting," which tells about the people and circumstances surrounding its creation, its subsequent travels through exhibits and galleries-- and then the "what happened next" in the lives of its subjects.
Like nearly everyone who's fallen in love with the enigmatic daughters of Edward Darley Boit, I always had a sense that I understood them in an especially intuitive way. This book pointed me toward some of the artistic challenges that Sargent took on with this painting, and to a wide variety of other intuitive responses quite different from mine (but equally firmly believed.) The Boit family's artistic expatriate life and the daughters' adult lives fed my biographical cravings.

Karen says

The subject of this book is one of my favorite paintings, and having just re-visited it at the Museum of Fine Arts, I thought it would be a good time to learn more about it. I liked the way the book is structured and the evenhanded way the author presents the varying interpretations of, and reactions to, this work of art. The chapter on the grown-up lives of the Boit daughters was particularly interesting.

Gerald says

[Cross posted from my review on LASplash.com "Sargent's Daughters: The One Percent of Yesteryear"]

Nonfiction books on art history by scholars tend to be dry, written to impress a rarified peer group and too often arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Not so, this one. While Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting is hardly a Victorian bodice-ripper, it has its intrigues and its fascinations. Author Erica E. Hirshler is Croll Senior Curator of Paintings, Art of the Americas, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Not coincidentally, this painting by John Singer Sargent is one of MFA's most popular exhibits. So one might say it's Hirshler's job to be the foremost authority in the world about it, and with this book she's taken the task seriously.

At first glance, The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit is remarkable in a number of ways. It shows four girls in an elegant drawing room – three of them standing and a toddler seated, cradling her doll. To today's museum visitor, the poses might seem ordinary. Their expressions and body language are candid, as if they were caught by surprise in a snapshot. Except, in 1882 when this was painted, the snapshot hardly existed as a photographic technique, and certainly not for formal family portraits. Fine painters of Sargent's era prided themselves on being able to render imagery photographers could only covet – including vibrant colors, accurate reproduction of sumptuous fabrics, and even meticulous draftsmanship such that the species of flowers in a vase could not be questioned. Highly paid portraitists – and Sargent was one of the most renowned – were skilled at not only finding the most attractive couture and poses for their wealthy subjects but also making them look prettier than they were.

As well, Sargent's composition of the scene is odd, especially for the aesthetics of his time. The girls' demeanor looks all the more natural because their placement in the room seems offhand and happenstance. In fact, there is more empty space than subject matter, prompting one critic of the time to describe the painting as "four corners and a void."

So the viewer finds innocence surrounded by emptiness. Hmmmm.

As a personality, Sargent himself was somewhat opaque. Although viewers and patrons claimed to see subtleties of character and emotion in his paintings, he professed to no special insight. He regarded himself as a master craftsman and famously said he had no ability to see into the human soul. That is, he could only paint what he saw. In fact, art critic John Charles Van Dyke insisted Sargent was fanatical about realism. When the artist needed a marble column for a painting, he had a carpenter build one in his studio. Later, his jealous peers mocked him, teasing that he'd make an incredibly accurate picture of a wooden post painted white.

The most personal details Hirshler gives us about Sargent have to do with some of his experiences dealing with children as subjects. After sessions, he laughed, joked, and played games with some of them – exhibiting the childlike side of a man who no doubt presented a straight-laced persona to the adult world. But at least one of his young sitters complained of long hours enduring the tedium of his painstaking work, leaving her frustrated and angry – although she apparently continued to admire him.

You won't come away from this book feeling you know Sargent much better. Apparently his contemporaries

felt the same way. Never known as a carouser or a drinker, as were many of his colleagues, Sargent was a perfectionist workaholic.

The fascination in Hirshler's historical account is the culture, milieu, and personal drama of the Boit family. Wealthy Bostonians whose inheritance came from the shipping industry, the Boits were friends of the artist, who by this time was comfortable among aristocrats on both sides of the Atlantic. As Sargent did, the Boits moved their entire household from time to time from one cultured city to another, between New England and glamorous addresses in Europe. Although Mrs. Boit's health was a factor, it seems decisions to move had less to do with necessity than a desire for change of scenery. The father was an accomplished watercolorist with serious professional intentions. Although he exhibited and was discussed among the cognoscenti, he never won much of a reputation. It's not clear that he tried all that seriously. Edward probably regarded himself as an exceptionally skilled hobbyist rather than a mediocre professional.

I first saw The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit not long ago on a business trip to Boston. I toured the MFA with some friends, who are artists in their own right. They were eager to show me the painting. They also made sure we stopped in the bookstore to grab a copy of Sargent's Daughters. The museum has the painting on a wall by itself, flanked by the actual Oriental vases from the scene. Notably, Sargent did not render the bird pattern of the ceramics in full detail. Somehow he understood – restraining his realist inclinations – that too much artifice would detract from his subjects. Similarly, rather than take painstaking care with the fabrics of the girls' dresses, he sketched them in hasty brushstrokes. This masterful but only suggestive technique was typical of Impressionist painting but was frowned upon by Sargent's traditionalist peers. So, considering its departure from classical technique as well as its innovative composition, this painting is more forward-looking, more revolutionary, than perhaps any other work Sargent produced. It's almost as if, this time, he decided to paint one just for himself.

Hirshler traces the fates not only of the parents but also of each daughter, through the years. We get the same ominous sensation that lingers from the descriptions of aristocratic life in novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton. With immense wealth came sobering responsibility and privilege – but not necessarily any happiness.

These days, we fret about unfairness, about the overweening influence of the One Percent. But, as these stories from yesteryear remind us, you can't take it with you. J. P. Morgan founded a bank that these days doesn't even bother to use his name in its branding.

Gerald Everett Jones is the author of the recent historical novel Bonfire of the Vanderbilts and host of GetPublished! Radio.

Emma says

I never thought a book about a painting would be so engaging, but this book is awesome! I should have figured since it is about my second favorite painting (and has a little section about my favorite one). I loved learning all about John Singer Sargent and about the girls in the painting. It is definitely worth reading for those who love this painting.

Alarie says

If only the book had followed the title and focused primarily on painter John Singer Sargent. The author tells us about the painting of Sargent's important canvas owned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (shown on the book jacket). Like Sargent, Boit was an expat painter living in Paris in the 1880s, where he became friends with Sargent and with the famed novelist Henry James. We

are then swept into the full-life stories of all the Boits, a glimpse into the lifestyle of the wealthy. Unfortunately, the parts about Sargent and his art are by far the most interesting parts of the book.

It turns out that Boit, a fairly lackluster watercolorist in my eyes, got much better in his later years. When I Googled his art, I found paintings I liked a great deal, but those weren't the ones Hirshler included. However, there are a good many interesting reproductions and photos in this edition. I particularly liked a side-by-side comparison between a photo of one of the six-foot oriental vases used in the painting and a detail from the painting. We see how Sargent caught the vase's essence in a realistic style yet left out much of the detail so the vase wouldn't be the focal point.

Sue says

Always admired this painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Read this for an Art book club. Was interesting to learn about the famous ex-pat painter John singer Sargent and the young Boit sisters he'd painted in that iconic portrait. However, lost steam after my initial thrill and trudged through the remainder.

Marcia A says

I was disappointed in this book, thinking it was a biography of the Boit family. The first half, rather dull, discussed John Singer Sargeant, his paintings and those of his contemporaries. The first half read like a text book; the second half finally discussed the Boit family and as much information as is known about the four girls in the portrait as well as the history of the location of the portrait (of which there were many).

Susan Raines says

3.5 stars, actually. An interesting read, even though (as the author acknowledges) a lack of documentation about the Boit family and the daughters in particular means there's a good bit of surmising at times based on other, unrelated sources.

Louise says

The painting was new and different when first shown at the Paris Salon of 1883 under the name "Portraits of Children". It defied the norm in that the girls were not formally dressed or sweetly posed as was the period's norm for childhood portraits.

Reviews were mixed. Most critics responded based on their acceptance (or rejection) of impressionism as a new style of painting and/or of Americans who seemed too visible in the established Parisian world of art. Today, Sargent is considered the leading portrait painter of his generation and this painting to be one of his masterpieces.

Author, Erica Hirshler, had little to work with since not much is known about the conception of the painting or the lives of the girls pictured.

She begins with the character of the Bois family, their wealth, their itinerant lifestyle and the birth and loss of their children. She describes Sargent and the art world that he and Edward Bois faced on two continents. There is discussion of the setting which is clearly their home and the Japanese vases that have crossed the Atlantic several times with the family. You learn about the painting and its reception. The end, which tells of the later lives of the girls and modern interpretations of the painting, was the highlight for me.

Sargent, known for bringing out the essence of his subjects, was on to something. That “something”, whatever it is, is the allure of the painting. The girls stand apart and alone. There is the suggestion that they have been interrupted while playing, but only one has a toy. The atmosphere is stark, but its opulence is suggested by the size of this hallway or foyer, the seemingly valuable vases and the immaculate “play” clothing of the girls, two of which are getting too old for pinafores. The painting’s title does not acknowledge their mother (deceased at the time of its final naming). It is hard to define the expressions of these girls, but the three who acknowledge the viewer seem to be either uncertain about him/her. Hirshler shows various schools of thought on these girls, their expressions and their later lives.

Quotes embedded in the text and in their own indented paragraphs account for, perhaps, ¼ of the book. There are quotes are from Edward Boit, himelf; Boit’s brother, Bob; Sargent’s friend Henry James; a host of critics and writers of the day such as Edith Wharton. They describe the luxurious life of Americans abroad, the Boit family and the opinions of the art world.

There are lots of visuals. Black and white photos of art work, people appear with the related text. There are two sections of color plates. One section of color plates is devoted to this painting with several plates showing detail. This book would have worked well in a larger size (coffee table) volume.

The index worked for everything I checked. The Notes confirm the reliance on primary sources.

It is hard to tell if the narrative is dry due to the lives of the subjects or the author's distance from them. There was admittedly little to work with, and what she found was patchy, but Erica Hirshler has provided some insight into this landmark painting.

Jesse Richards says

Interesting, and a lot of great stuff in here, but there's a middle part that trudges through too much detailed history of the Boit family. When this book is a "Biography of a painting", as it claims, it's good; when it's a biography of the Boits, not as much.

Note: perhaps my favorite thing I learned was that Julia (the youngest daughter) grew up to be a talented painter herself.

Sandy says

4.5

Rachel says

I have always loved Sargent's paintings, especially the Daughters of Edward Boit, so I was a bit fearful that the book would take away from the work itself. Instead I was pleasantly surprised by the backstory of the family and the artist, the many social connections among artists of the day, and the glimpse back in time at Paris, Boston, and Newport. In fact, I found myself questioning how I ever ended up in Asian art when the American impressionists were so much closer to home. Ah... maybe in my next life...