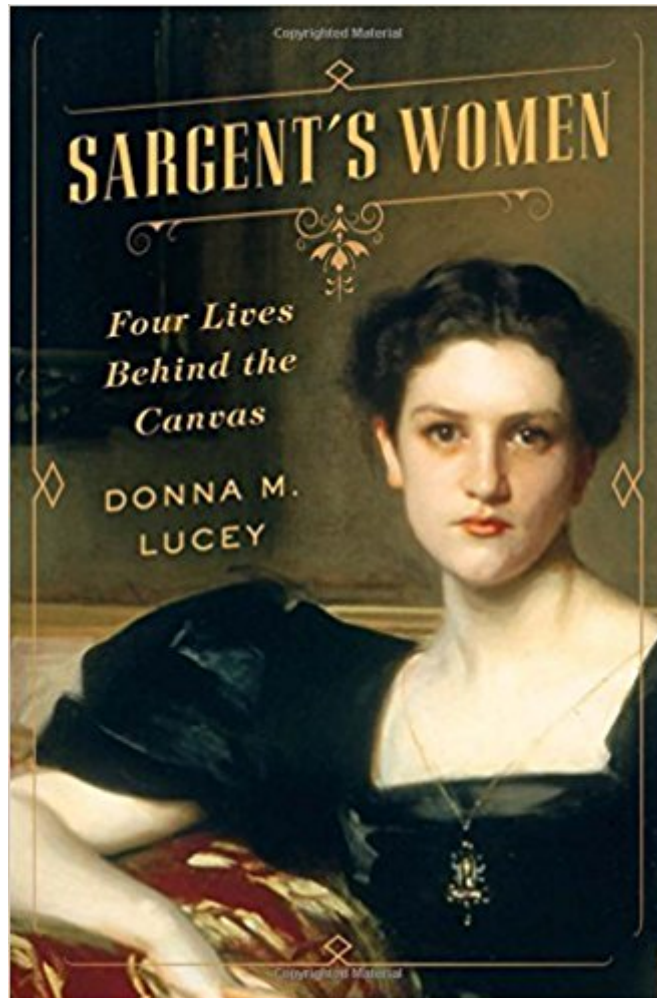


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# Sargent's Women: Four Lives Behind The Canvas



## Synopsis

"Sargent's *Women* has a distinct elegance and potency," Lucey's writing propels you forward, straight to the heart of the story, along the vibrant ties that linked this fascinating artist to the women he made infamous." —Christene Barberich, global editor-in-chief and cofounder, Refinery29

In this seductive, multilayered biography, based on original letters and diaries, Donna M. Lucey illuminates four extraordinary women painted by the iconic high-society portraitist John Singer Sargent. With uncanny intuition, Sargent hinted at the mysteries and passions that unfolded in his subjects' lives. Elsie Palmer traveled between her father's Rocky Mountain castle and the medieval English manor house where her mother took refuge, surrounded by artists, writers, and actors. Elsie hid labyrinthine passions, including her love for a man who would betray her. As the veiled Sally Fairchild — beautiful and commanding — emerged on Sargent's canvas, the power of his artistry lured her sister, Lucia, into a Bohemian life. The saintly Elizabeth Chanler embarked on a surreptitious love affair with her best friend's husband. And the iron-willed Isabella Stewart Gardner scandalized Boston society and became Sargent's greatest patron and friend. Like characters in an Edith Wharton novel, these women challenged society's restrictions, risking public shame and ostracism. All had forbidden love affairs; Lucia bravely supported her family despite illness, while Elsie explored Spiritualism, defying her overbearing father. Finally, the headstrong Isabella outmaneuvered the richest plutocrats on the planet to create her own magnificent art museum. These compelling stories of female courage connect our past with our present and remind us that while women live differently now, they still face obstacles to attaining full equality. 8 pages of color illustrations

## Book Information

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (August 22, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393079031

ISBN-13: 978-0393079036

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.2 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #11,563 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #10 in Books > Biographies &

Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Artists, Architects & Photographers #28 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Individual Artists](#) #166 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > Women](#)

## Customer Reviews

"In Sargent's Women . . . Lucey does . . . what she does best, creating a rollicking snow globe version of an almost unimaginable world of wealth, crackpot notions of self-improvement and high-flying self-indulgence." - Amy Bloom, New York Times Book Review

"[A] lyrical meditation on life, love, and art in the Gilded Age. . . . Sargent's Women abounds with dazzling characters in atmospheric settings. . . . As rich as [Sargent's] portraits are, the textural evidence in which Ms. Lucey ensnares them is finer still." - Jane Kamensky, Wall Street Journal

"[Lucey] delivers the goods, disclosing the unhappy or colorful lives that Sargent sometimes hinted at but didn't spell out. . . . Sargent's Women is a good read . . . [and its] chatty pleasures are considerable." - Michael Upchurch, Boston Globe

"Sargent's Women has . . . a good deal to say about life among affluent women with brains and talents beyond the Victorian strictures of their time. . . . Lucey wisely concentrates her attention on these women who epitomized their class and times." - Bruce Jacobs, Watermark Books & Cafe

"Choosing four striking Sargent portraits of wealthy, cosmopolitan American women, Lucey vividly reveals the hidden truths of their tumultuous lives, while also succinctly telling the artist's own intriguing story. . . . Lucey's superlative group portrait, rendered in crystal-clear prose, is spring-fed by . . . her keen insights into what drove these women to break out of their gilded cages." - Booklist (starred review)

"[Lucey's] narrative is engaging and elegant, set in a rich cultural and social framework that insightfully reflects the era." - Library Journal (starred review)

"Endlessly intriguing. . . . Lucey ably pulls these four compelling women out of obscurity with insight and infectious enthusiasm." - Publishers Weekly

"Perceptive . . . colorful, animated portraits sympathetically rendered." - Kirkus Reviews

"For as long as I can remember, I have stared into the eyes of the subjects in John Singer Sargent's paintings - often beautiful, young, seemingly unknowable women - and wondered who they were and what their lives had held. With her powerful and probing new book, Sargent's Women, Donna Lucey has answered that haunting question, and the truth behind the paintings is far more stunning and fascinating than I had ever imagined." - Candice Millard, best-selling author of *Hero of the Empire*

Donna M. Lucey, author of the best-selling *Archie and Alice: Love and Madness in the Gilded Age* and other books, recipient of two NEH grants, and a 2017 writer-in-residence at Edith Wharton's the Mount, is media editor at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

Have you ever looked at a portrait and wondered who the person was and what their life was like? Had they been chosen as a subject to pose for the artist or had they chosen the artist to portray them? Was the portrait done because the subject was famous or the artist was? A portrait can bring so many questions to mind about both the subject and the artist. Portraits are - hands down - my absolute favorite art. (You can keep your French haystacks; give me an interesting face any old time!) Donna Lucey has written "Sargent's Women: Four Lives Behind the Canvas". She delves into the lives of four women - all painted first around the 1890's - who were either painted by John Singer Sargent or - in one case - had a sister who was. Lucey - who has written about the Gilded Age both in the US and the UK in previous books - chose four women out of the many painted by Sargent in his long career. My minor problem with the book is the choice of the four women she chose to write about. All four were similar - wealthy young women from prominent American families who were as at home in English high society as they were in the rarefied air of Boston and New York City. (Though Lucey does point out the amusing differences between the two American cities.) It would be helpful if the reader has some knowledge of the artist John Singer Sargent - American-born, British-bred - and the times he painted in. Photographic portraits had begun to be popular by the 1880's, but painted portraits still reigned as the popular method for preserving the subject forever in art. Sargent was hired by many prominent families at the time to paint themselves and their children. Some subjects - Isabella Stewart Gardner, for instance - were painted more than once in their lifetimes. Sargent painted other subjects but he was most famous for his portraits. Donna Lucey does a good job at looking at the lives - most led somewhat restricted lives because of their gender, their familial circumstances, or their health. Two gained fame due to artistic endeavors - one collected art and the other was a painter of miniatures - while the other two lived quieter lives. John Singer Sargent had a tenuous connection with a couple of the women; his having painted their portraits seemed to be the only link. With the two others, he was a bit more in their lives. As I was reading Lucey's book, however, I couldn't help but wish that she had maybe chosen someone other than Isabella Stewart Gardner to highlight. Her life story is pretty well known. I'd have liked to have read about a woman, who like the previous three, were not well-known. But, okay, here's the thing. The author has the right to choose who she wants to write about. Just like a

portrait artist has the right to paint whoever he chooses - financial considerations aside. And Donna Lucey has written a good book about the lives behind the canvas.

I was fortunate to receive an Advanced Reading Copy of this book. 3.5 Stars John Singer Sargent has long been my favorite American painter. I first became fascinated with his work in the early 80's and was lucky enough to have been able to view the massive Whitney Museum of American Art retrospective of Sargent's work back in 1986. One thing that was evident from his massive production is that Sargent had immense natural facility that is often overlooked by his being brushed off as merely a high society portraitist. Like many artists before him, Sargent painted commissioned portraits on the Continent, in England, and in the United States, in order to make a living. These funded his peregrinations, documented in exquisite watercolours, oils, and simple sketches, throughout Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. His society portraits, many of which look as if they have captured characters straight out of an Edith Wharton novel, run the gamut from an homage to Velazquez (*The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, 1882) to the famously scandal-imbued *Madame X* (Virginie Amélie Avegno, Madame Pierre Gautreau, in a portrait that pretty much ruined her life). Sargent, an American expat who grew up in British and European society, was able to blend smoothly into high society and, until the "petite gaffe" with Virginie Gautreau at the Paris Salon exhibition in 1884, enjoyed a reputation of pleasant discretion. His reputation badly frayed after the Paris Salon of 1884, he departed Paris with the painting in tow. Sargent quickly recovered his reputation in England and the US, taking on some of his best known portraits. (Virginie, on the other hand, withdrew from society and though later commissioned portraits by Courtois and de la Gandara, never recovered her reputation, and was separated from her husband at her death. An interested reader can get the short version here or check out the book *Strapless*.) Modern viewers of Sargent's portraits may look at them and wonder who exactly these people were. While male subjects often had public lives and accessible biographies, far less is often available about his female subjects. Lucey has given us short biographies of four of Sargent's American female subjects, all of whom came from some of America's most privileged families. (Presumably American-born Virginie was excluded since she has already been the subject of another book?) Detailing the lives of Elsie Palmer, Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler, the Fairchild sisters, Sally (subject of several portraits) and Lucia (subject of none) and the iconoclast, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Lucey captures the lives of these women, particularly focusing on the period of time when they were painted by Sargent. While the chapter devoted to Elsie Palmer was interesting, providing information about the Palmer family, the Aesthetic Movement at Ightham Mote, and Glen Eyrie, I

found the chapter on the Fairchild sisters to be quite odd. Although Sally Fairchild was the object of a number of portraits by Sargent including a blue-veiled portrait now in a private collection, the bulk of the chapter is about her sister Lucia, presumed too homely by Sargent to bother painting, and who was herself a painter. So little information is provided about Sally's life that I found her selection for the book to be rather disappointing. The chapter on Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler, later Mrs. John Jay Chapman, was the most interesting to me. Filled with pathos, one feels the poignancy of her early childhood and youth, and the tinge of scandal with her late marriage to her deceased best friend Minna Timmins' husband John Jay Chapman, who was the great love of her life, even when Timmins was still alive. This was a moving biographical sketch. Isabella Stewart Gardner needs no real introduction to Sargent fans, or to Bostonians. She has been the subject of several books (a point which only makes me question the exclusion of Virginie Gautreau and inclusion of Sally Fairchild) This was an interesting chapter providing a brief biographical sketch of Belle Gardner, or Mrs. Jack, as she was also known. She was both Sargent's patron and friend. This ebullient woman had a great impact on art, privately collecting works by some of history's greatest artists. (Sadly, a number of them are equally famous for being part of art history's greatest theft, a 1990 robbery of 13 works from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, a museum whose security is greatly constrained by the terms of Gardner's bequest creating the museum. Although recently there is a sign that there may be a bit more movement on resolving the heist case.) I found the descriptions of the paintings by Lucey to be interesting and I'm not sure I always agreed with them. Elsie Palmer's painting, *Young Lady in White* feels almost preternaturally still and constrained, perhaps presaging her decades of being caught between two very different worlds (elite English society favored by her mother and a more rural Colorado lifestyle favored by her father) and her being shackled to a caregiver role in her family while her younger sister Dos engaged in an affair with the married man that Elsie loved. This portrait is currently on loan from the Colorado Fine Arts Center to Ightham Mote, in Kent, through December 2017. The Sally Fairchild painting favored by Lucey, that of her in a blue veil, while striking, reflects the fact that we don't really learn much about Sally in this book. This portrait is also now in a private collection (as are the other two portraits of her) so unless it is loaned for an exhibit at a major institution, the reader is not likely to see it in person. She remains rather obscured to the reader. The beautiful portrait of Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler, one of Sargent's better known portraits, now held by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art, speaks to me less of "innocence" than of her great personal strength and resolve. Sargent's admiration for his subject is palpable in this portrait. No doubt the similar health struggles shared by Elizabeth and Sargent's sister Emily fueled his empathy for Elizabeth. The prime of life portrait of

Isabella Stewart Gardner depicts her powerful persona against a backdrop that would suit a renaissance painting. This painting, of course, remains on display at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Sargent's delicate watercolor of her in dotage, swathed in white, is far more powerful to me than the large oil painting of her in her prime. It was touching that he painted her again, something that no doubt gave her pleasure. I do have to say however, much as I love Sargent, when I think of Mrs. Jack, I'm more inclined to think of her in the style of the dramatic pose in the Anders Zorn painting, also on display in that museum. All in all, I found the book to be a pleasant read. Those looking for a biography of more of Sargent than his subjects may be disappointed to see little of Sargent here, but I found the book, particularly the Chanler chapter, to be commendable for giving us a story to pair with these pretty society women, whose single job and worth were tethered to making a powerful marriage and retaining social position. These were real women, with real lives, loves and sorrows. Readers interested in perusing more of Sargent's catalog should check out the virtual museum of his work at the [jssgallery dot org](http://jssgallery.org).

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