

John Singer Sargent

- master of the society portrait

'Cliveden is not for me. Together with paughtrait painting, I have renounced the polished circles into which it led me for a brief and anxious time'.

Letter to Nancy Astor 1910



Whether in London, New York or Boston, society flocked to John Singer Sargent to provide a prestigious portrait conferring glamour and social status. But ironically it was never his intention to become purely a 'paughtrait' painter. The above extract from a letter to Nancy Astor, diplomatically declining a repeat invitation to a weekend at Cliveden, goes some way to explaining his reservations.

In the 1890s he had complained to friends that he was painting three sitters a day *'with scarcely an interval between each sitting'*. His close friends were concerned that despite his phenomenal physical energy he was *'busy all the time, at white heat always, rushing from one place to the other'*. In 1907 he officially closed his Chelsea portrait studio to pursue other artistic interests, but he continued to undertake intimate portrait studies of friends or personalities who intrigued him such as John Rockefeller Senior, whereas J P Morgan was never successful in his request.

This lecture will explore both Sargent's dazzling society portraits - ranging from presidents, oil magnates, patrons of the arts and the aspirational new plutocrats who sought social recognition in the absence of aristocratic lineage - but also his more intimate portrait studies and sketches. The range and versatility of Sargent's portraits is astonishing, including his representations of childhood, as is his psychological insight and humorous observation.

Max Beerbohm's caricature brilliantly satirises the hopeful Edwardian society ladies queuing outside Sargent's London studio, but his nomination of Sargent as '*the supreme interpreter of this restless, nervous age .. an age on edge*' is especially prescient.







