

Scandal in Paris

John Singer Sargent's Mysterious Portrait of Madame X

'I suppose it is the best thing I have done'.

John Singer Sargent writing about the portrait of Mme X in 1915



Why did this iconic painting send such shockwaves through seemingly unshockable Parisian society when it was exhibited at the salon in 1884?

The striking femme fatale portrait of Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau in the little black dress, which now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, will be examined in the context of John Singer Sargent's major earlier works which would have been known to his famous sitter.

Not a commissioned portrait, this intriguingly poignant and nuanced story of ambition, misjudgement and social convention is brought to life with extracts from letters, diaries, and contemporary photographs. As a direct result of the Mme X fracas, Sargent was forced to flee to England to escape the bitter criticism of the art establishment who accused him of 'cynical audacity' and of being 'too clever and too French'.

The portrait remained in the artist's studio until after the sitter's death in 1915. Why? The lecture will dig deeper into the possible motivations of both artist and sitter in this complex drama, and explore the reactions and prejudices of a rapidly changing society at the turn of the century.

'Sargent's intention, no doubt was to produce a work of absolutely noted effect – one calculated to excite, by its chic and daring, the admiration of the ateliers and the astonishment of the public. And in this the painter has succeeded beyond his desire'

Royal Academy reviewer, London, 1884



