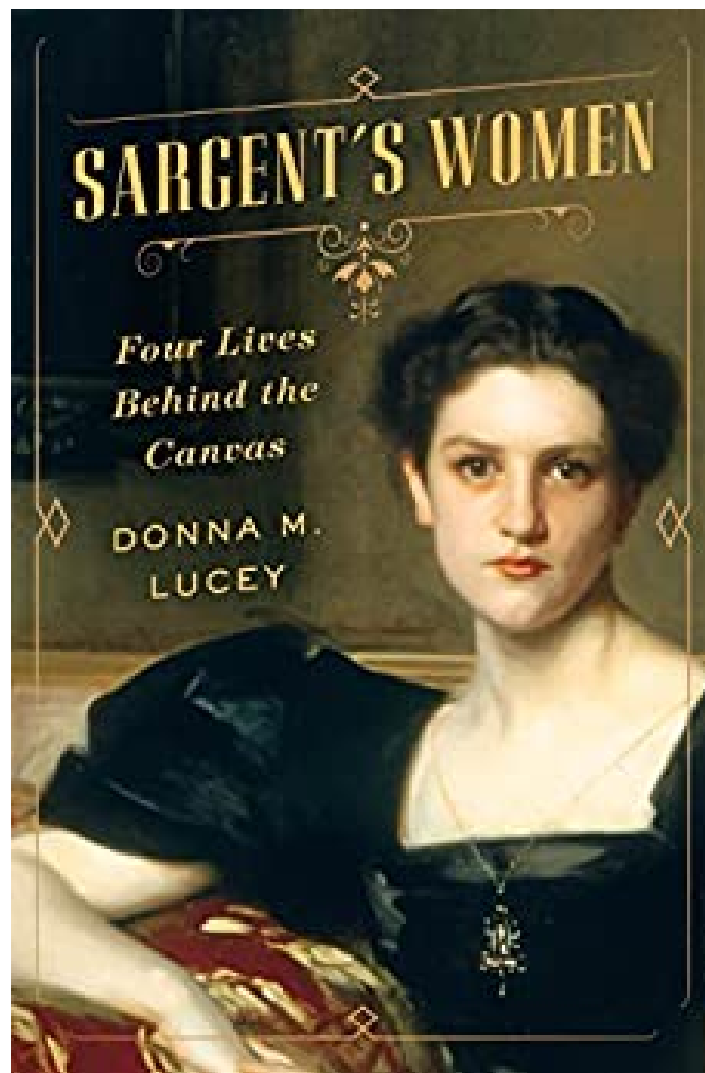


Sargent's Women: Four Lives Behind the Canvas

by

Donna M. Lucey



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Synopsis

A New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice Selection "[Lucey] delivers the goods, disclosing the unhappy or colorful lives that Sargent sometimes hinted at but didn't spell out."—Boston Globe
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. These women inhabited a rarefied world of wealth and strict conventions—yet all of them did something unexpected, something shocking, to upend society's rules.

What people say about this book

gammyjill, "John Singer Sargent and his ladies.... 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."

Richard S. Dixon Jr., ""Beware Ye Strangers, Passing By..." Finally, portraits that look back at you.. This is a fascinating book about people, who were influential a century ago, but whose deeds and influence has faded into the background of history since then. The residue of their existence is present in Sargent's depiction of them at the height of their power and wealth. What

a great reminder of the transitory nature of fame, wealth and power; what a great lesson in social history!! This book is very well written for its genre: folks who do not like the gossipy nature of its minutiae of human life at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century should be warned, but to all others, this is a great feast. How often have I gazed a famous portrait and wondered about the figure depicted; how often have I thought about the relationship of artist to subject. This book reveals these "secrets" in an engaging and enjoyable manner. I breezed through this in two days, relishing every page. It's a great momento mori for the high and mighty...and for all of us as well."

Nelson Lankford, "Entertaining and enlightening history at its best. Sargent's Women is a beautifully written account, proving once again that sound history can be written engagingly for a lay audience without sacrificing scholarly integrity. This is popular history at its best. One would not have thought it a reasonable strategy to choose only four of Sargent's myriad women to tell such a riveting story of art and high society in both Gilded Age America and late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. But Donna Lucey chose her women carefully. She has tied many disparate lives together in a compelling story. Some might think she engages too much in name dropping. But how would it be possible to write on her subject without tripping over all the well-known names of robber barons, artists, and society and literary figures on both sides of the Atlantic? At first I thought Sargent would only play a minor role, but it became apparent that he was ever-present as the connective tissue of Lucey's narrative. And what a brilliant stroke to choose as the final woman the irrepressible Isabella Stewart Gardner, who scandalized Boston and forced it by the power of her collecting originality to bow to her genius in bringing together such a unique assemblage of painting, sculpture, and decorative art. As a fellow historian and writer, I say kudos to Donna Lucey for a splendid book."

Ebook Tops Reader, "Fascinating account of the artist and his subjects. Loved this book! I was familiar with Sargent's work and had previously read Strapless about the 'real' Madam X. This book delves into the lives of 4 unique women who commissioned his work. I must admit that I kept my iPhone handy so I could reference the many additional people and paintings mentioned. It is an eye opening look into the world of the wealthy during the 19th century and an personal view of the women behind their portraits."

Publishing Professional, "Bravo!. This book was right up my alley. I'm a sucker for biographies, history, and society, plus I love Sargent. It doesn't fail at all. In fact it was so much better than I thought or could have hoped for. Ms. Lucey tells the story of each of the women with incredible detail, but not too much to overload the reader. Each women on their own has a fascinating story for Ms. Lucey to tell. I knew a little bit about 3 of the 4 characters in the book, but I couldn't put this book down. I hope this author continues to write. I would definitely purchase her books in the future!"

Richard Manly, "What women!. These four 19th century women all posed for the great painter John Singer Sargent who found a way to bring out their distinct characters in oil. Swashbuckling heiresses share Boston with introspective widows in a series of portraits that illuminate the thousand restrictions holding down yesterday's women. Well worth your time."

Jenny from Nottingham, "Such an interesting book !. I feel I must let potential readers of this book know how much I enjoyed it. When I first spotted the title with a rather gloomy review I think it must have referred to the dark cover only as the inside is full of light. Not at all gloomy, this book paints the historical backgrounds of these 4 interesting female sitters from rich families...where and how they lived, together with some colourful information about Sargent's life...finishing with the well-travelled, glamorous and acquisitive Isabelle Stewart Gardner whose eclectic museum I so much admired on a long ago trip to Boston - as it says in the book the very opposite to the J P Morgan library in New York - also a haven of art. I am inspired to make another US trip to visit some of these women's haunts. Bravo Donna Lucey - a great book !"

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