

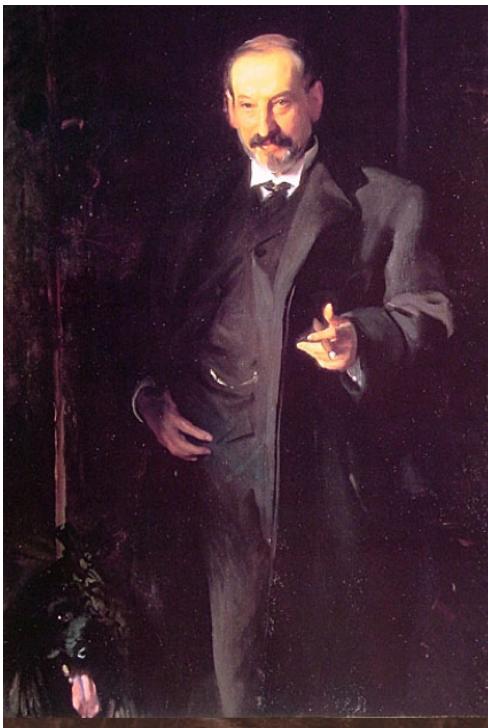


The John Singer Sargent Portraits of the Asher and Flora Wertheimer Family

John Singer Sargent, foremost portrait artist of the early 19th century, painted twelve portraits of the Wertheimer, between 1898 and 1908. Ten of the twelve paintings are at The Tate Britain, London. Nine of these were bequeathed to the Tate in Asher Wertheimer's will and at the death in 1922 of his wife, Flora. The bequest was for the "benefit of the nation." The tenth painting was acquired by the Tate in 1996. Of the two remaining paintings, the 1898 painting of Flora Wertheimer hangs in the New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana. The other, a small 1908 oval painting of Betty Wertheimer, is at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, DC. The Tate Britain also has an 11th portrait by Sargent of Robert Mathias. This painting was commissioned by the sitter the same year that his youngest child, David Mathias, was born, 1913. This painting was also acquired by the Tate in 1996.

From the Tate Britain Website:

Sargent's best work is his series of portraits of the Wertheimer family, painted between the years 1898 and 1908...and inducing in him, he said, "a state of chronic Wertheimerism." He painted the father, a great art dealer with a sublime admiration for Sargent, the mother, the numerous children — young and old, single and wedded, en masse and separately — ten pictures in all. The artist neither flattered nor maligned them: he turned his cold observant eye on them — as he did on all his sitters — and transferred to canvas as much as he could grasp at a single impression — and no more of a family moving with ducal importance in high society. His Asher Wertheimer, the art dealer, is a peering masterpiece — the portrait of a plutocrat who, by virtue of an artist's great prestige, planted himself and his family in one of the great national galleries. For this service, Sargent, according to Roger Fry, became "the brilliant ambassador between Asher Wertheimer and posterity."



1898- Asher Wertheimer and Mrs. Asher F. Wertheimer
The two paintings of Asher and Flora, painted in 1898, were the first that John Singer Sargent painted of the Wertheimer family. He intended these to be hung together in celebration of the couple's silver wedding anniversary in 1898. Flora, then 52 and the mother of 12 children, is standing in a white silk dress wrapped in an extremely long string of pearls. This painting is in contrast to the painting of her husband, Asher, also standing, who is dressed in black.

The effect, contrasting the wife in white and the husband in black, reminds me of the builder of the Taj Mahal in India. In the mid-fifteenth century Shah Jahan built the most beautiful mausoleum in the world. It was built out of white marble and precious stones for his wife Arjumand Banu Begum. Shah Jahan had intended to build a black marble mausoleum for himself on the other bank of the river but, alas, his tomb was never built as his son put him in prison before work began.

This 1898 portrait of Flora is in the New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana.

Flora, in selling the first portrait, it seems to me, really had no idea at what a great honor and prestige Sargent gave the couple. On the other hand my grandmother told me that her grandmother worried that the pearls made her appear as if she was flaunting her wealth. Flora worried that this portrait would lead to unfavourable comparison with two previous portraits that Sargent has done of women wearing pearls. Maybe Sargent worried that he was becoming repetitive using the same motives to many times. There is in our family a sketch of Flora touching a huge Asian vase. Sargent uses that pose in his next painting of the family. Next we see my great grandmother, Ena lightly touching the top of the great jar lid.





Ena and Betty Daughters of Asher and Mrs Wertheimer

1901- Ena and Betty,
Daughters of Asher and Mrs.
Wertheimer

This 1901 double portrait shows Wertheimer's eldest daughters, Helena (Ena), and Elizabeth (Betty). Sargent was much attracted by the charm of the Wertheimer family, especially the vivacity of Ena (right), something which is clearly revealed in this portrait. The different textures of the sisters' dresses are skilfully evoked, the rich depth of Betty's red velvet contrasting with the shine of Ena's white damask." Tate web site. Sargent painted Ena again in 1905.

Apparently Sargent originally painted Betty strap fallen from her right shoulder, just as he had in the painting of Madame X, that had so scandalised Parisian society,

some seven years earlier. Although I had not heard that story, my grandmother did tell me that Sargent was very amusing. Betty and Ena were entertained by Sargent while they poised for him.



Alfred son of Asher Wertheimer

1901- Alfred, Son of Asher Wertheimer.
This portrait of Alfred is considered to be one of Sargent's finest portraits. Sargent seems to have had amazingly intimate relationships with many of the Wertheimers. This is true of Alfred although the exact details of their relationship are lost. Hopefully scholars more skilful than I can uncover this mysterious relationship.

1901- Hylda, daughter of Asher and Mrs. Wertheimer

From the Tate web site:

Hylda was the third daughter [ed: Sarah, the eldest, died at 16 months of age] of the wealthy art dealer Asher Wertheimer, who had commissioned Sargent to paint twelve portraits of his family. Sargent's reputation ensured that such portraits were a token of wealth and social standing. The portrait of Hylda is in the grand manner of the old masters, and great care is given to the depiction of the different luxurious textures of her clothing. Sargent tried to dissuade Hylda from wearing her pince-nez, which undermine this illusion, but they were retained at her insistence.

You have to love her for this. The pince-nez makes her look like she has terrible allergies. Still wearing the pince-nez, she was painted again in the 1905 group portrait alongside her brother Conway and sister Almina. This is a much more successful painting of the pince-nez.

1902 – Essie, Ruby and Ferdinand, Children of Asher Wertheimer,

Of the painting Essie, Ruby and Ferdinand, Children of Asher Wertheimer, 1902 the Tate writes:

These three Wertheimer children were painted in the schoolroom of their home at 8 Connaught Place, London. Essie (aged 22) is presented as an adult, seated slightly detached on the sofa with a small dog on her lap. Her younger siblings, Ruby (aged 12) and Ferdinand (13), lean more informally across an ottoman, dressed in clothes typical of the upper classes at this time.

Despite the naturalness of the grouping, certain critics disliked the atmosphere of privilege. The Spectator observed 'Here the pet dogs are bedecked with bows, and the air we feel smells of scent and burnt pastilles'.

(From the display caption July 2004)

This is rather ironic when we find out these children's fate. To read a brief account read the next article: Wertheimer- Bio



Hylda Daughter of Asher and Mrs Wertheime



Essie, Ruby and Ferdinand Children of Asher Wertheimer

1902- Edward, Son of Asher Wertheimer

This portrait of Edward was painted in Paris, France, and is dated 1902. Unfortunately Edward died on Jan 2, 1903. The painting is very sketchy compared to the other paintings of the family, as if Sargent did not have enough time to finish it. The painting was shipped back to London and hung along with the other portraits in Asher and Flora's house. The 12 portraits hung in the Wertheimer dining room, affectionately named "Sargent's Mess" by the family.



Edward, Son of Asher Wertheimer



1904- Mrs. Wertheimer. Sargent painted Flora Wertheimer again. This time she is sitting in a chair, dressed in black. On reflection it must have been very hard for her to look at the first celebratory picture by Sargent of her silver wedding anniversary when just 5 short years later she had to endure the death of her two eldest sons. Apparently she much preferred this second portrait, contrary to her descendants.

1905- Hylda, Almina and Conway, Children of Asher Wertheimer. Apparently this picture was painted on the estate of Esther's husband, Eustace Henry Wilding. Sargent painted the three grown up children, Coway was now the eldest son of the family. group of three: Hylda, Conway, and Almina. He painted Almina again in 1908 as "the Jewish Princess" another of his great paintings.



Hylda, Almina and Conway, Children of Asher Wertheimer



1905- Portrait of Ena Wertheimer, A Vele Gonfie

Sargent's second portrait of Ena, titled "A Vele Gonfie," was painted in 1905 for Ena's engagement to Robert Moritz Mathias.

From [John Singer Sargent](#) edited by Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, published by Princeton University Press, 1998. P.157

Sargent was particularly taken with Ena, an ebullient and mercurial character: 'She was a dashing figure, hopelessly vague about money, engagements, and any domestic routine when she set up house herself at Montagu Square... She had the same quick devotion to paintings, painters and music as her parents.'

Ena, my mother's grandmother, had a children's dress shop on Brook Street in London. She sold this painting to finance the shop and had a copy made to hang in its normal place. Her husband, when he found out, was furious with her. Sargent who had arranged for the sale of the painting never visited the house again. I'm sure that Sargent was very embarrassed by this incident as he was friends with both Robert and Ena. In fact Sargent died the year

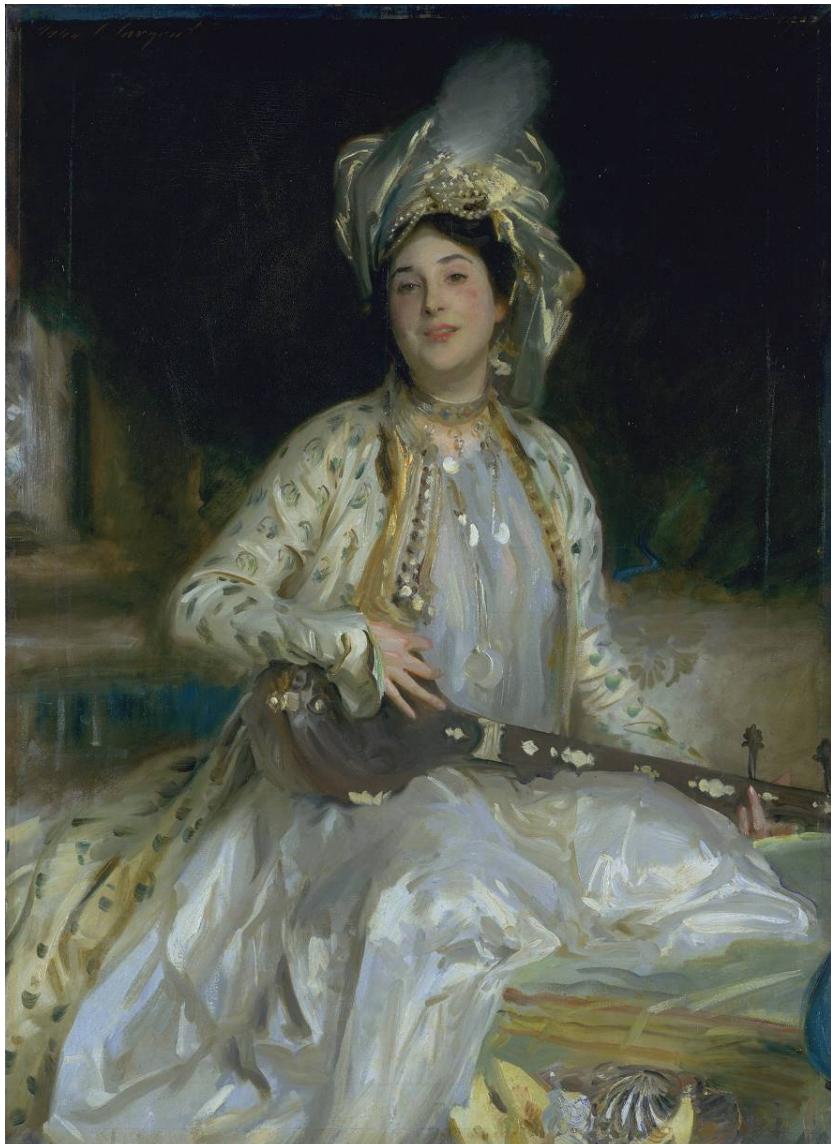
after he arranged for the sale of this picture. In 1937, Robert Mathias did manage to buy the painting back but it arrived after Ena died so she never saw the painting again.

My grandmother, Diana de Bosmelet, wrote a letter about this painting. The original always hung in [her brother] Uncle John and Aunt Ludmilla's flat in 23 Rutland Sq, London. My grandmother had the painting moved on Oct 1959, so that it could be the backdrop for my parents' wedding reception. When Aunt Ludmilla moved to a smaller flat, Diana gave it to Tony Mathias' eldest daughter, Vicky Jarvis, to be hung in Doddington Hall. It was bequeathed by the Jarvis family to the Tate to "benefit of the Nation" in 1996. The Tate gave a copy of the painting to hang in place of the original, which visitors can see if they go to Doddington Hall. Another copy by Reginald Eves did hang in the Château de Bosmelet but now is at the big house near Moorhouse

belonging to Jonathan Mathias (David's second son). Robert regretfully gave it to his Aunt Kay Mathias. It turns out that David Mathias loaned the copy to Diana. He was given it by his father. Kay and Jonathan went over to Bosmelet and shipped the painting back to England. The copy had developed mildew by being kept at the Château. Kay had the painting restored at her own expense.

1908- Betty Wertheimer

Sargent painted Betty twice: once in 1901 in the famous double portrait with her sister Ena, and again in 1908. This painting is in the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.



1908- Almina, Daughter of Asher Wertheimer. This last portrait of the Wertheimer children is in some ways his most ambitious. Sargent has painted Almina as a Jewish princess. Surrounded in oriental trappings owned by Sargent. He captures this young women's exoticness. I think that the resemblance in this picture to my grandmother and myself is the most striking.



1913- Sargent painted Robert Mortiz Mathias, Ena's husband and my mother's grandfather. It is slightly smaller painting than "A Vele Gonfie." By this time Sargent had tried to stop taking commission portrait as he believed that his reputation would endure better with paintings in other genres. That same year he did at least two other portraits: One of his great friend Henry James and another friend, Sybil Sasson.

After Robert Mathias's death in 1961 the paintings were supposed to be given to each for their children in turn. Once all of them had died then it was to be offered for the "benefit of the Nation."

Julian Mathias wrote:

1996 was the year in which the Tate acquired the painting which was part of Grandpa's (Robert Mortiz Mathias) estate, and after he died c. 1961 it was kept by Uncle David after whose death, after much recrimination, Robert Mortiz Mathias's trustees were obliged to hand it over to the Tate, at the same time as the portrait of Ena, which Vicky had been looking

after at Doddington on behalf of your grandmother Diana who had it for her lifetime.

The reason for this was that Robert Mortiz Mathias in his Will wanted both paintings to be "offered" to the Tate after the death of the last survivor of his children.

There was a disagreement with the Tate over whether the word "offer" meant that the paintings should be offered for sale, as we maintained, or given to the Gallery as a gift. We lost the argument after both sides consulted lawyers. It was a sad affair from the family's point of view.

I want to end by comparing the two portraits of my great grandparents. Sargent knew them both well and enjoyed their hospitality for decades. He observed this young couple courting, then marrying and having children; all three stages of life that he did not personally experience. He has captured their relationship. Ena, tall, some say over 6ft, flightily and yet always turning back towards her husband. Robert, the solid dependable one, a bit out of shape with his cigaret in his hand, his right hand reassuringly on his right leg just below the knee. The family remember that Sargent returned many time to repaint Robert's right hand. Sargent paints his friends' hands surprisingly well.. A small triumph for Sargent in his lifelong struggle to immortalise his patrons.



All images of Sargent paintings are copied from the Tate website
or http://hoocher.com/john_singer_sargent/john_singer_sargent.htm

