

# Studying With Sargent

## What do we want to learn?

We are looking to understand and internalise the combination of colors, values and design that combine to make this portrait painting one of the most appreciated in all of art history.

Through copying this painting you will develop a base of knowledge about value, color, and techniques that you will draw upon later, when creating your own work.

Copying from successful works of art is a way to connect with the thought process, the techniques, the choices that the previous generations of historically famous artists made.

**One of the keys of understanding Sargent is looking at the painting methods of his teacher Carolus-Duran.** He recommended that students **block in the tones in discreet mosaic-like patches at first** and then later on in the process one would blend those patches into each other.

## Materials

Palette: flake white, ivory black, cobalt blue, alizarin crimson, vermilion extra, yellow-brown, and raw umber.

Brushes: **1.** Blick Wonder White Synthetics, long handle. Filbert 2-6, round 1-6. **2.** Rosemary Brush Co. Eclipse Combers, flats 1/8-3/4. **3.** Utrecht Manglon Synthetic Brushes. Flats 4-8, round 4-10. **Links below:**

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/blick-scholastic-wonder-white-brushes/>

<https://www.rosemaryandco.com/eclipse-combers>

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/utrecht-manglon-synthetic-brushes/>

Support: oil primed linen, very fine weave. Claessens 13dp.

Medium: linseed oil.

Some notes from Sargent himself and my reflections on their application to this lesson:

## Palette

“The range of pigments was quite wide but did not include every pigment available at that time. He regularly used Mars yellow (a synthetic iron oxide) and cadmium yellow; viridian and emerald green, sometimes mixed; vermilion and Mars red, both alone and mixed; madder; synthetic ultramarine or cobalt blue; and ivory black, sienna, and Mars brown. The dark backgrounds of many portraits include a mixture of ivory black, Mars brown, and a generous quantity of paint medium, which gives a colour similar to the traditional Vandyck brown. A pale shade of chrome yellow, cadmium red, and cobalt violet were found on occasion, but not in every portrait examined. There is a more limited selection of blue and yellow pigments in the later portraits than in the earlier ones, which is once more reminiscent of Whistler's deliberate limitation of his palette to create a colour harmony, and to fix a cool or warm overall tone to each painting.”

“The palette was set as follows: Black, verte emeraude, raw umber, cobalt, laque ordinaire, brun rouge or light red, yellow ochre, and white (the colors being placed on the palette in this order from left to right).”

MY THOUGHTS: It's important to have a way to address every painting you come into regardless of the knowledge that you have of the artist's palette. More or less. My interest in Sargent here is his organisation, value sense, light effect, structure, and simplification- I think that I can get to where his color is without really changing my palette. If I need to eventually that's okay too- I'll add that color later.

## Support

"A characteristic of Sargent's supports is an excess of primed canvas, in some cases several inches, lapped round the back of the stretcher. This excess of canvas provided yet further opportunity for Sargent to make modifications.”

“His portrait canvases all have a plain weave' (that is, with one warp and one weft thread), generally very fine, though a few are of medium weight.”

“The colour of the priming was either grey or white. The grey primings contribute to the overall cool appearance of these works, and serves to provide a mid-tone which also intensified the colour of the brown, thinly-painted backgrounds which Sargent frequently used in portraits.”

**MY THOUGHTS:** We are going to use an oil primed linen made with a very fine weave. The ground is made with traditional materials and so is likely similar enough to Sargent's that I will be able to get the same performance out of it.

## **Brushes**

“Painting is quite hard enough without adding to your difficulties by keeping your tools in bad condition. You want good thick brushes that will hold the paint and that will resist in a sense the stroke on the canvas.”

The width of his brushes varied considerably, with fine points being used for subtle details of faces, in contrast to the sweeping strokes up to an inch in diameter which he used to capture folds of fabric, in the later stages of painting. Unfinished portraits show that initial paint-layers have brushstrokes from quarter-inch and half-inch brushes: the boldest, broadest strokes were used for finishing.

**MY THOUGHTS:** I am going to go with the materials that I know best, remember here that we are trying to integrate Sargent's wisdom into our process. So, if there are materials you are quite used to using- let's try to be true to that as well.

## **Medium**

Sargent's liberal use of oil and turpentine to thin his darker paint is confirmed by the dribbles seen on tacking margins.

Analysis of a small number of paint samples from the Wertheimer portraits revealed that Sargent's paint medium consisted of linseed oil in the darker colours and poppyseed oil in white paint: this is typical of manufactured tube paints at this time. Poppyseed oil turns yellow more slowly than linseed oil, and was preferred for grinding colours whose yellowing should be minimised, such as whites and pale blues.

**MY THOUGHTS:** I will only be using oil. I work in a small studio at home and I prefer not to have toxic fumes swirling around.