

## John Singer Sargent, American, 1856-1925

John Singer Sargent was one of those fortunates who, blessed with artistic talent, was also blessed with an understanding family and opportunities to develop his ability. He was born in 1856 in Florence, Italy, the son of a father who was a physician and author, and a mother, an amateur painter and musician. Encouraged by his mother, he studied first in the Academy at Florence and later elsewhere in Italy, in Germany, and in France. By 1874 he was in Paris in the studio of Carolus Duran and progressed so rapidly, that in 1879 his portrait of his teacher was hung in the Salon.

In 1880 he made the first of several extended trips in Europe, Africa, and the Near East, this time to Spain and Morocco, and back to Venice where he painted our portrait of Mrs. Dyer. At this time his talents were well developed and his skill, unquestioned but he had not yet acquired the titles, "brilliant society painter" and "only living old master." His early style, in fact, gives little indication of the bombastic and popular society portraits which were to follow. After 1884 much of his time was spent in England, mostly at his Chelsea studio where the English aristocracy sought him out to portray them.. But he also made frequent visits in America where he became equally popular. Before 1900 he began to develop a new interest in mural painting. His murals in Boston, in the Public Library and the Museum of Fine Arts, and those in the Widener Library at Harvard University are especially famous. At this period he did fewer portraits and for relaxation painted landscape. During the First World War he was the official artist with the British Expeditionary Forces in France.

His death occurred in 1925, probably as he would have wished it, suddenly and unexpectedly in his London studio, surrounded by his work.

Mrs. Charles Gifford Dyer (1880)  
 John Singer Sargent, American, 1856 - 1925  
 Friends of American Art Collection

In Sargent's thoughtful and exquisite portrait of Mrs. Dyer, the wife of the landscape painter, Charles Gifford Dyer, we see an early and excellent work of the great American painter. The dashing style of his later years is well shown in our portrait of Mrs. Swinton, and in Boston one can find his later broad and able handling of mural technique. But here at the beginning of his success is a sensitive recording of a sad and fragile person, more appealing to most of us than the rich worldliness of his later portraits. Early and late Sargent caught and portrayed the character and personality of his sitters, giving a vital impression of each one.

Here is a tragic figure whose wistful face haunts us. Sargent, returning from a visit to Spain, found in Venice in this old friend a subject which might well fascinate him, a woman whose face expressed a deep sorrow. Doubtless the artist had seen in Spain the intense portraits by Goya which this work recalls. Keen insight into personality and a facile brush were characteristic of both artists and here Sargent rivals the great Spaniard in his vivid recording. Skillfully he applies his paint to create a harmony in keeping with his subject. Drawing is never obvious, for by sketching constantly he had developed the ability to produce results with few brush strokes. In color the warm pink of the lady's lips and the briskly painted rose stands out against the subdued tones of the rest of the canvas. It gives the cue, however, for the pinky tan of the foreground and the rich, rusty brown of the background, both of which serve to set off the expressive contours of face, hands, and figure of the sorrowful Mrs. Dyer.

This painting is one of many in that important group, added to the Art Institute collection by the Friends of American Art.

*J. F. M.*

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH FOR SEPTEMBER 1942

MRS. CHARLES GIFFORD DYER BY SARGENT, JOHN SINGER

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