

In focus: John Singer Sargent



A learning resource featuring works from the National Portrait Gallery Collection, one of a series focusing on particular artists whose practice has changed the way we think about the art of portraiture and who have in turn influenced others.

Introduction

It can be useful to look at developments in portrait painting through the lens of a single, significant artist, appreciating their techniques and innovations, the way that they have been influenced by the advances of others and how in making their contribution they in turn influence others.

This resource focuses on a limited number of paintings and study details taken from them. It includes questions about the practice and historical context of the artist, with suggested lines of enquiry and ideas for classroom activity, plus links for further research. The aim is to support teachers in encouraging students to investigate the artist and their practice in-depth.

The narrow focus of this resource on a selection of Sargent's portraits enables a concentrated view and it explores the qualities of his recognisable style as well as giving us a glimpse at his humanity. This resource coincided with the major exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, **Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends** (12 February – 25 May 2015).

These portraits were selected not because they are the most obvious candidates but because they are representative of the broad body of Sargent's portrait work and show the high quality of his art no matter whose portrait he was drawing or painting. The portraits reproduced include two commissioned pieces and two portraits of friends, one that he admired and championed, the other a drawing of a poet requested by a writer friend. All portraits are from the National Portrait Gallery Collection.

This resource seeks to explore the following key questions for teachers:

- What made his technique unique and special?
- Who was he influenced by / who influenced him and how?
- Why was he famed as the greatest portrait painter of his time?
- How did an American painter become significant in the UK?
- What was his impact on future painters?
- What was the impact of his portraiture? What is his legacy now?

Sargent and his impact

John Singer Sargent (1856 – 1925) is considered to be the greatest portrait painter of his time because he combines elegance with a keen eye for distinctive details that convey the essential characteristics of a sitter. Acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic, he was closely connected to many of the other leading artists, writers, actors and musicians of the time.

The son of an American doctor, Sargent was born in Florence. He studied painting in Italy and with Carolus-Duran in France and in 1884 caused a sensation at the Paris Salon with his daring and unconventional painting of *Madame X* (Madame Pierre Gautreau). He portrayed the beautiful American, who was married to a French banker, in an unusual pose; her left arm twisted, her head in profile and her shoulders bare, initially with one strap of her black gown slipped off her right shoulder (this study is held in the Tate Collection). The painting was more criticised than praised and the scandal precipitated Sargent's move to England where he established himself as the most fashionable portrait painter in the country. He retained his American citizenship and continued to visit the USA where as well as portraits he worked on a series of decorative paintings for public buildings such as the Boston Public Library (1890) and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1916). A prolific artist, Sargent created over 900 paintings and 2,000 watercolours.

Sargent is special as an artist, succeeding in flattering his sitters whilst honestly capturing their likeness. In this way he follows the lead of Henry VIII's royal portraitist, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497 or 1498 – 1543), who was a master at this approach. Sargent also managed to update the bravura style and technique of Van Dyck (1599 – 1641), whose brushmarks are fluid and set down with a confident flourish, sometimes overtly showy and ostentatious. Sargent adopted this style and by combining it with an Impressionist approach to his subjects and dramatising his compositions, made it distinctively and recognisably his own, in both oil and watercolour, and this in turn, was to influence future portrait painters.

Octavia Hill



Octavia Hill

John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas, 1898
NPG 1746

Biographical context

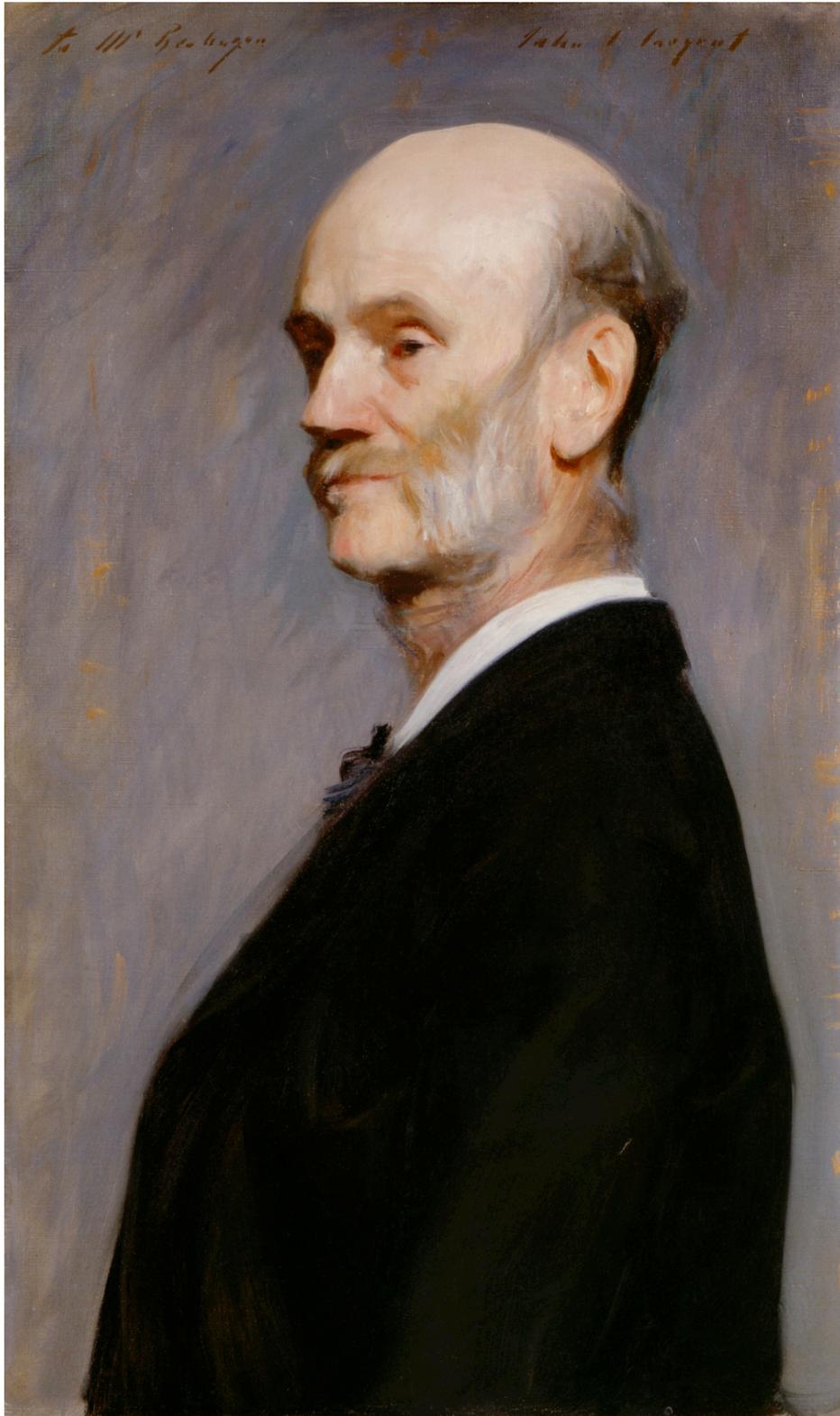
Octavia Hill (1838 – 1912) was educated at home by a progressive mother and influenced by her grandfather a noted health reformer. Aged fourteen she worked alongside her mother at the Ladies Guild, supervising the socially deprived girls who also worked there, becoming aware of their appalling housing conditions. Hill was influenced by Christian Socialism and encouraged by John Ruskin in her schemes for improving the overcrowded insanitary housing of the poor and supervising the building and management of numerous dwellings. She also campaigned for the protection of open spaces, saving Parliament Hill Fields in London and also the Lake District which led to other areas of charity work specifically as a founder of the National Trust. When this portrait was commissioned, over 200 people contributed to the fund to pay for it. At the presentation she said: ‘When I am gone, I hope my friends will not try to carry on any special system, or follow blindly in the track which I have trodden. New circumstances require various efforts; and it is the spirit, not the dead form, that should be perpetuated.’ (Octavia Hill, quoted in Hill, 1956, p.161. *Later Victorian Portraits Catalogue*, Elizabeth Heath).

The painting

This painting highlights Sargent’s ability to tackle challenging aspects of portraiture. Octavia Hill is smiling and her hands are clasped; both of these aspects of portraiture are notoriously difficult to render in a convincing manner. It is the furniture that is weak and unconvincing despite the fact that she sits so solidly within the space, her beatific smile lighting up her sturdy features. She is a handsome woman, with a ‘no nonsense’ appearance and nut-brown eyes that gaze past us into the distance. Sargent uses the Van Dyck trick of a fleck of white paint to achieve the gleaming highlight and create the double sparkle animating her sober features. Her general composure and rotundity is enhanced by the volume of the grey billowing folds of puff sleeves and wide skirts. The soft forms of her figure and the generosity of cloth give an impression of her personality, and her position as an indefatigable charity worker, providing homes for the poor. Overall this painting is moderate and unfussy, the only levity injected by the bravura brushstrokes of impasto. Her personality seems warm and the swift daubs of liquid white paint that suggest the ruffles of her blouse balance the broad, confident grey and black strokes that bring her clothes and personality to life. The portrait embodies a private view of an uncompromising moral and open-spirited character; a woman in her own right. This portrait was commissioned from Sargent by her friends and was given to Hill on her sixtieth birthday.

For Hill’s portrait, Sargent chose a carved frame of leaves and fruit, probably 17th century Italian, a style widely fashionable at the time. Although the majority of his portraits were housed in modern frames, it is possible that the frame for this portrait was chosen after the painting’s completion, as it was altered to fit the canvas. Gillian Darley, who wrote Hill’s biography, *Octavia Hill: Social Reformer and Founder of the National Trust* (Francis Boutle Publishing, 2010), notes that the frame for Hill’s portrait was Sargent’s gift, ‘his own contribution to the celebration of a life of such extraordinary achievement’.

Hercules Brabazon Brabazon



Hercules Brabazon Brabazon

John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas, early 1900s
NPG 5706

Biographical context

Hercules Brabazon Brabazon (1821–1906), became financially independent in 1840 when he inherited his uncle's fortune and took on the name Brabazon. He devoted his life to travel, the study of art both contemporary and the old masters. He was an amateur landscape and still life watercolourist, who produced rapid colourful sketches and become an original member of the New English Art Club.

'In person, Brabazon – or "Brabby", as one dared to speak of him – was tall and spare, with a bald cranium and side whiskers, and a gentle, courtly manner. Sargent has painted a very characteristic portrait of him,' wrote the artist G. P. Jacomb-Hood in his memoirs. Brabazon's biographer C. Lewis Hind met him once in the 1890s, and his impression was of a 'very tall, thin, keen, [...] noticeable man, a presence'. (*Hercules Brabazon Brabazon 1821–1906: His Art and Life*, George Allen, London, 1912).

It was perhaps because Sargent was such a keen and proficient watercolourist that he appreciated and championed those painted by Brabazon. Together with fellow New English Art Club admirers, he encouraged the seventy-year-old to have his first solo exhibition at the Goupil Gallery, London in 1892 and Sargent wrote the introduction to the catalogue, enthusing, 'Each sketch is a new delight of harmony, and the harmonies are innumerable and unexpected...'

The painting

This painting shows Sargent's skill in the combined innovative use of colour and form. The long thin shape of this canvas coupled with the intense dark profile shape of the body and three-quarter pose for the head creates an unusual and arresting portrait. Brief patches of light peach-coloured ground show through to the pale lavender-blue background. We can 'feel it' as a coloured environment that communicates the character of the sitter rather than imagining that Brabazon sat for the portrait outside. The patchy light ground corroborates with and draws attention to the wispy grey of his sideburns and merges softly with that indeterminate fluff suggested by the dry paint touches at his Adams's apple and on the back of his neck. Severe dark paint around his left eye socket, below his nostril, under his chin and behind his ear all work simultaneously to intensify the profile and long oval-shaped ear. He uses impasto whites to delineate the rounded clear bright pate which together with the strip of white collar bracket the most important aspect of this tender and intelligent portrait: the fellow artist's eye, seen here literally at the top centre of the painting. It is an old man's eye depicted as a withdrawn, experienced and private gaze.

Alice Meynell



Alice Meynell (née Thompson) detail
John Singer Sargent
Pencil, 1894
NPG 2221

Alice Meynell (née Thompson)
John Singer Sargent
Pencil, 1894
NPG 2221

Biographical context

Alice Meynell (1847 – 1922) was an important poet, essayist, art critic, journalist and suffragist. Charles Dickens was a family friend, and her sister, the artist Lady Elizabeth Butler (known as Mimi) was famous for her paintings of military action scenes. Meynell was a well-known writer, contributing regularly to publications including *The Spectator*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and *The Art Journal*. Her first collection of poems was in 1875, and she published her poetry infrequently for the rest of her career.

Meynell was married to the publisher and editor, Wilfrid Meynell, and worked with him on the writing and editing of magazines including the Catholic publication *The Weekly Register*. She was a vice-president of the Women's Writers Suffrage League. Meynell was also noted for her beauty and charm.

The drawing

This incisive pencil drawing is small and intense, it is a work in its own right rather than a sketch intended as information gathered for a painting. Meynell's limpid eyes infuse the drawing with a direct emotional engagement making the portrait seem lifelike while enhancing the subject's beauty. Sargent uses pencil in the vigorous cross-hatching of the space around her head increasing the chiaroscuro effect, we can tell just by looking at it that he was putting physical pressure onto the surface to achieve the dramatic darkness. The head appears isolated between the wavy hair curls and the fluted fabric of the high collar. The overall feeling of this drawing is busy and active; the direction of the lines leads us to understand the variety of volumes associated with her period clothing and her clasped hands make a visual play with the stripes indicated on her blouse. Despite the restriction of pencil, the mid-tones achieved render it very three-dimensional while maintaining the immediacy and elegance of line. Sargent's inscription 'To Coventry Patmore, Singer Sargent', personalises it further.

The context

This drawing was done at the request of Sargent's writer friend, Coventry Patmore (1823 – 1896) whom he also painted in 1894 (NPG1079). The latter was a friend of Alice and her husband Wilfred; young writers who enjoyed the company of this poet from another generation, who was best known for his narrative poem about an ideal Victorian happy marriage; 'The Angel in the House'. Patmore would come up to London from his home in Lymington, Hampshire and stay with them. He would go out to receptions and parties with Alice and often visited Sargent's studio with her, where this drawing was done and later reproduced in the book of her collected poems in 1913. Ironically Patmore became so obsessed with Meynell that she was obliged to terminate their friendship.

General Officers of World War I



General Officers of World War I

John Singer Sargent

Oil on canvas, 1922

NPG 1954

The context

This work is one of three group portraits commissioned by the South African millionaire Sir Abraham ('Abe') Bailey and presented to the National Portrait Gallery, London. The works were conceived to commemorate the role of the army, the navy and politicians in bringing the First World War to a close. Sargent was approached by the Trustees of the Gallery and asked if he would be willing to undertake one of these paintings, despite his well-known wish to retire from portraiture. The chairman of the Trustees, Lord Dillon, explained the circumstances of the commission in a letter to the artist on 17 December 1918, the contents of which and extensive information about the portrait can be viewed online:

This group portrait depicts the generals in standard uniform, who, when viewed from a distance seem to almost disappear into horizontal bands of unremarkable tonal colour, the only brightness coming from their red lapel stripes and hatbands. These are the men known to the troops as the 'Brass Hats', on whom history has turned a cold and critical eye. They were mocked at the time in the soldiers' version of the hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*: 'Onward Christian soldiers, Onward without fear, With our great commanders, Safely in the rear.'

This was a war in which the horse became obsolete, and tanks and aeroplanes were used for the first time. The First World War mobilised 5.7 million British and

Dominion soldiers, cost 7,000,000 lives (19,240 on the first day of the Battle of the Somme) and left 1.6 million wounded. 80,000 women volunteers, working in dressing stations and hospitals witnessed the damage to human life.

The painting

This huge work is bound by the horizontal, and Sargent uses this and the colour scheme to his advantage in the composition. The boots anchor the work and form a soft undulating line along the base. These generals are all in cavalry uniform, their jodhpurs and spurs reinforcing what to us today looks almost like a pantomime line-up. It is difficult nowadays to imagine the horse as a necessary part of the war machine, which it was in the First World War.

The tan colour of the riding boots is echoed in their belts with the horizontals here lifted by the diagonal leather part as it crosses the torso suggesting movement to this otherwise static set piece. The variation in height levels lightens the severity of the horizontal belts that bisect the landscape format. The bases of the two pillars appear weighty above the heads, lighter 'wings' that encase the dark backdrop of the centre stage, they both suggest some kind of patriotic security and with the darkness add a further theatrical, dramatic quality. The touches of red enliven the overall khaki blend of tone.

Despite their uniforms these are all individuals. Sargent's head studies attest his focus on the range of different characters that he portrays in the huge group. There are twenty-two men, one in profile, five in three-quarter pose, the remainder stare out at us in sombre mood.

This is a fictitious group composed from a series of drawings he made directly from the wide range of sitters and put together in his studio. The generals would never have been together like this and Sargent felt that this resulted in them 'all standing up in a vacuum'. The group was chosen from a select number of generals, not included was Hugh Trenchard who helped to set up the Royal Air Force.

Sargent has his generals all in a row for a purpose: it is a way of avoiding potential issues of hierarchy and bruised egos, keeping their power relationships at bay by enforcing a measured distance between them. The massive pillars at each side contain the group and reinforce the verticals. Sargent's more famous work *Gassed*, 1919 (Imperial War Museum) uses the landscape format in a similar way, but stages the work outside and depicts the lower ranking infantrymen blinded by mustard gas led on by two medical orderlies. Sargent had visited the Western Front in July 1918, spending time near Arras and Ypres and his experience of this is imbued in the tragedy of this second linear narrative. This painting also references *The Parable of the Blind*, 1568 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy) and was voted picture of the year when shown at The Royal Academy in 1919.

Studies for generals

In these studies Sargent makes all kinds of notes – measurements, pose, fall of fabric, shape of cap in relation to plain areas of hanging cloth, footwear, ways to hold belts, batons, caps and greatcoats, and the proportions of the body in relation to the overall final scale of the intended painting. We can see his written notes and small unfinished outlines of things that catch his attention. Today, a portrait artist might simply use a camera to ensure documentation of salient details and also to organise the rhythm of the composition.



Jan Christian Smuts
John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas, c. 1919–1922
NPG 4187



Sir Henry Hughes Wilson, 1st Bt.
John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas, c. 1919–1922
NPG 2889



**Henry Seymour Rawlinson,
1st Baron Rawlinson**
John Singer Sargent
Oil on canvas, c. 1919–1922
NPG 4181



**Henry Seymour Rawlinson,
1st Baron Rawlinson of Trent**
John Singer Sargent
Pencil, c. 1922
NPG 2908(2)



**Henry Seymour Rawlinson,
1st Baron Rawlinson of Trent**
John Singer Sargent
Pencil, c. 1922
NPG 2908(14)



**John Denton Pinkstone French,
1st Earl of Ypres**
John Singer Sargent
Pencil, c. 1922
NPG 2908(11)

General enquiry questions

Sargent's portraits are admired for their insight into character. Explore how scale, use of light, colour and brushstrokes in his work contribute to a sense of character in his paintings.

- How might the different approaches of developing large scale commissioned portraits and smaller intimate paintings of friends affect the portrayal of character/personality in a portrait?
- In a *Time* magazine article from the 1980s, critic Robert Hughes praised Sargent as 'the unrivaled recorder of male power and female beauty in a day that, like ours, paid excessive court to both.' (Trevor Fairbrother, *John Singer Sargent*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994, p.145). Who might be the equivalent today? What might be the contemporary mediums or practice now that explore male power and female beauty? How might these categories have changed in current representations?
- Sargent was influenced by many of the great masters from first-hand observation, citing Tintoretto, Michelangelo and Titian as influences. Who might Sargent have influenced in painted and drawn portraiture today?
- Sargent was interested in the framing of his paintings and during the 1890s in London, showed a taste for using antique frames for his commissions. How might a leading portrait artist today present or frame their work? How might historical or contemporary portraits at the National Portrait Gallery use frames to enhance the work or the narrative?
- Sargent painted his friend Henry James's portrait in 1913. James wrote, 'Perception with (Mr. Sargent) is already by itself a kind of execution ... it is as if painting were pure fact of vision, a simple manner of feeling' ... 'Mr. Sargent simplifies with style; and his impression is the finest form of his energy' How does this quote open up the relationship between the artist and the sitter? How do artists, writers, and other practitioners establish and work in inter-disciplinary discussions and collaborative relationships today?

Ideas for the classroom

- Sargent used a limited palette of blacks, highlights and some bright colours to describe character in his portraits. How can students use a limited palette of paint colours to describe the personality of sitters?
- Sargent has been described as a master of ‘drawing with a brush’, and tended to work directly in paint rather than relying on under-drawing. How can students use Sargent’s technique and bypass pencil outlines in portrait paintings to develop a series of fast oil or acrylic paintings of colleagues or friends?
- Explore the challenges of how to create half-figure profile compositions in a narrow frame.
- Investigate how Sargent tackles the challenges of composing a large group portrait, especially with individual sittings. Working with a group of individuals, use drawing, photography, and working paintings to explore composition and the relationships between different figures, and how colour can enhance composition.
- Research the practice of contemporary painters inspired by Sargent. Sargent’s influence can be seen today particularly in the portrait work of Nicky Phillips (NPG 6878) who painted the young princes, HRH Prince William, Duke of Cambridge and HRH Prince Harry in 2009.
- How difficult is it to paint a smile? Use Sargent’s portrait of Octavia Hill as inspiration.
- How can pencil marks and brushstrokes suggest the drape and volume of clothing? Explore the relationship between the flourish of the paint that suggests Octavia Hill’s flouncy blouse and the way her hands are linked together, reinforced by the white of her fluted cuffs and echoed again in the white curved brush marks in her hair. Compare the way Sargent suggests the ruffles in the drawing of Meynell.

Further research

Sargent in the National Portrait Gallery Collection

- npg.org.uk/collections/search/person.php?LinkID=mp05734&search=sas&sText=sargent&OOnly=true&role=art&wPage=1

Further information on the Hill and Brabazon portraits, and sitters, can be found in the Later Victorian Portraits catalogue section of the National Portrait Gallery's website

- npg.org.uk/research/programmes/late-victorian-catalogue.php

Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/12127

A study of Madame Pierre Gautreau in the Tate Collection

- tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sargent-study-of-mme-gautreau-n04102

Sargent's biography and images at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston

- mfa.org/news/sargent_bio

Waldemar Januszczak visits John Singer Sargent's former home and studio in Chelsea and explores why the artist was in such demand from high society, especially Edwardian London's equivalent of today's 'It' girls

- bbc.co.uk/programmes/p016lvxw

Octavia Hill

- octaviahill.org

Redcross Cottages built by Hill in the 1880s

- <http://www.heritage-explorer.co.uk/web/he/searchdetail.aspx?id=10214&crit=Octavia+Hill&start=1&rt=0>

Hercules Brabazon Brabazon

- museumwales.ac.uk/art/online/?action=show_item&item=1634

General Officers of World War I

- npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00108/General-Officers-of-World-War-I

National Portrait Gallery Learning

For more information about the varied programme of school's events and learning resources, including others from this **In focus** series, see:

npg.org.uk/learning.php

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Front cover pictures

Left:

[John Singer Sargent](#)

Alvin Langdon Coburn

Photogravure, 12 January 1907

NPG Ax7779

Right:

[John Singer Sargent](#)

Sir (John) Bernard Partridge

Pen and ink and black crayon, c. 1925

NPG D6612a

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Back cover picture

Above:

[Octavia Hill](#) detail

John Singer Sargent

Oil on canvas, 1898

NPG 1746