

RIGHT: *In the Generalife* (1912; watercolor, wax crayon and graphite on white wove paper, 14¾x17½) depicts the artist's sister, Emily, working at her easel en plein air. Sargent's watercolor—like so many of his paintings of fellow artists at work—becomes a reflection of his own interests, a self-portrait by implication. The aging Dolores Carmona all but blends into the vegetation, while Emily and Jane de Glehn are plucked from darkness by a shaft of light. Interestingly, it is Emily's face that Sargent left nearly blank, as if to symbolize the mysterious process of painting.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art; purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1915



a noted physician and art collector. Instead of celebrating the effects of stippled sunlight, visual excitement was created with a scheme dominated by a single flamboyant color. Pozzi's matinee-idol looks, ultra-elegant posture and marvelously suggested fabrics—lace shirt peeking from beneath a plush dressing gown—create a natural pendant to the Metropolitan's *Madame X*; the two were lovers. *Dr. Pozzi* was the first painting Sargent showed at the Royal Academy in London, and though its critical reception was lukewarm, his friend Vernon Lee wrote that it was “magnificent, of an insolent kind of magnificence, more or less kicking other people's pictures into bits.”

The fuel for Sargent's brilliance was ambition, and early portraits like that of Pozzi epitomized the artist's attempts to gain public notice and attract commissions. The undiluted materialism of Sargent's world can be savored vicariously, but it can also be offputting—there's a reason for the persistent accusation of superficiality. His masterpieces, of which there are more than a few in the current exhibition, occurred when he responded favorably to a subject, and personal engagement added depth to the flair.

The Casual Portrait

Two portraits of Robert Louis Stevenson (page 39), intimate in both scale and sentiment, are characteristic of this deeper personal engagement. In the Taft Museum's *Robert Louis Stevenson*, the palette is more restrained, while the brushwork displays an agitated energy that seems to emanate from Stevenson himself. The famous author's slender fingers and rather defensive comportment allude to a nervous intelligence; Sargent called him “the most intense creature” he'd met. This deceptively casual portrait was painted at Stevenson's home on the southern coast of England and was commissioned by a Boston banker for his wife, who greatly admired the author.

Odder is the composition of *Robert Louis Stevenson and his Wife*, which Sargent painted

RIGHT: One of Sargent's most captivating plein air oils, *The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy* (1907; oil on canvas, 28½x22¼) depicts his friends, the painters Wilfrid and Jane de Glehn. Jane's figure, her hat and veil spilling in fluid strokes onto a buttery white wardrobe, is as commanding as that of any of Sargent's formal portraits.

The Art Institute of Chicago; Friends of American Art Collection