



**ABOVE: *An Interior in Venice*** (1898; oil on canvas, 25½x31¾) was a gift to Ariana Wormeley Curtis, seated in the center foreground. The Curtises' apartment had long been the artist's base in Venice, and Sargent was particularly close to the Curtises; Ralph, seated at right, was a fellow student at Carolus-Duran's studio. Mrs. Curtis declined the painting, thinking that it made her look too elderly, and her son too nonchalant. Lent by the Royal Academy of Arts, London

in which Sargent kept company with some of the most prominent writers, artists, musicians and business people of his era. What is documented, though, is circumscribed by Sargent's tact. Remarkable when compared to the cult of contemporary celebrity is the dignified reserve of his work—seen at their leisure, the people who populate Sargent's world remain eminently presentable. Sargent surely did have “insides,” but he was discrete in his observations. This may help to explain why, during a century that began with the Freudian examination of id and ego, Sargent fell so deeply out of fashion for so long. It also explains why he's once again so wildly popular—at a time when our pretenses are exposed and undone by social media, the impeccable manners of Sargent's art offer a beguiling window into a bygone age.

In 1910, Walter Sickert coined the term “Sargentolatry,” referring to the mania for

the artist's work and signaling the beginning of Sargent's critical descent. A hundred years later we're seeing a second wave of Sargentolatry, such that his status in many studios is nearly equal to that of Rembrandt's. The Metropolitan's show is wonderful, the exhibition of the season—there may not be another opportunity to view Sargent in this scope in our lifetime. It's an occasion to weigh its subject's splendid talents and recognize that the truth about him resides neither in the current superlatives nor in the trough of neglect, but somewhere between.

“Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends” will be on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City until October 4. ■

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