

Portrait of a Boy, 1890

In December 1889, the expatriate artist John Singer Sargent, accompanied by his younger sister Violet, arrived from London at New York harbor. Not yet thirty-four, Sargent was approaching the highpoint of his fame on both sides of the Atlantic as a portraitist. His previous American visit, an eight-month trip undertaken in 1887–1888, had resulted in an enthusiastic reception, many new commissions, and the promise of future contacts in Boston, Newport, and New York.

Like Gilbert Stuart before him (see *George Washington*, 3-B), Sargent painted formal portraits for the Gilded Age's patrician class in the manner of European aristocratic portraiture. He also brought with him a fresh, new way to depict a subject that was popular in both England and the United States—children—at a time when childhood was being singled out as a critical period in human development (and in national progress). Because children were understood to be the direct link to the future, they warranted special attention. From the widespread manufacturing of special books, toys, and clothing to child protection laws, the later nineteenth century ushered in what writer Sadakichi Hartmann called, in a 1907 article for *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the “age of the child.”

Dismissing his contemporaries' sentimental approach to childhood as a period of lost innocence, Sargent approached his youthful sitters directly, painting them naturalistically and with a keen, psychologically penetrating eye. His many portraits of the young heirs of America's upper class also helped to further the artist's career, pleasing conservative critics and reassuring future patrons who might harbor some lingering doubts as to whether they

wanted to submit themselves to Sargent's forceful brushwork and bravura technique.

Sargent's portrait of the young Homer Saint-Gaudens, the son of the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (see 10-A), and his mother Augusta, a cousin of Winslow Homer (see 9-A), is an intimate portrait for a friend, not a commission that paid the bills. Sargent first encountered Saint-Gaudens in Paris in 1878. When the artists met again in New York in 1890, Saint-Gaudens expressed interest in sculpting an image of Violet, and the painting was done in the spirit of an exchange. Nonetheless, the fact that Sargent preferred a generic title, *Portrait of a Boy*, to the specific name of the child, and excluded his mother's name entirely may indicate the artist's desire to elevate his depiction of Homer Saint-Gaudens to a universal statement about the nature of boys (or perhaps just American ones).

In *Portrait of a Boy*, ten-year-old Homer confronts the artist and viewer head-on and eye to eye with a bored, yet penetrating glance, while behind him, and painted in a more summary manner, Augusta is absorbed in reading. Homer is dressed (uncomfortably, it appears) in a “Little Lord Fauntleroy” suit, an outfit based on the title character from Frances Hodgson Burnett's wildly popular, serialized story of Cedric, an American boy who, through Yankee ingenuity and the wisdom imparted by his mother, was able to lay claim to his aristocratic English heritage. Cedric's costume, derived from the attire worn by Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* of c. 1770, was so popular with mothers that, by the turn of the century, wearing it became synonymous with being a “mama's boy.”

Homer, however, wearing his fancy suit, does not appear to be the obedient child listening to his mother's every word. We know from Homer's adult recollections of these sittings that Augusta was vainly attempting to entertain her son with the story of a naval battle from the War of 1812. Sargent expressed the boy's impatience and nervous energy not only through his pose but also through the structure of the composition. The child slumps sideways in the ornate studio chair. And while his right foot turns languidly inward, his left foot is braced against the rung, ready to spring. The latent energy of his spread, bent fingers matches the complexity of the swirling pattern of the red carpet, and this unease is intensified by Homer's pose, which is at a slight angle to both the viewer and to his mother.

As with Sargent's more ambitious pictures, the portrait of Homer and his mother was conceived with an eye to enriching the painter's reputation. Critics were quick to praise the immediacy of the subject: “The exquisite truth of its pose and the rare vitality of every line of the body, not less than the beautiful face itself reveal the power of a master.” The painting won a gold medal at the Art Club of Philadelphia the year it was painted, and was one of the works Sargent chose to exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.



12-A John Singer Sargent (1856–1925). *Portrait of a Boy*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 56½ x 39½ in. (142.56 x 100.33 cm.). Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Patrons Arts Fund (32.1). Photograph © 2007 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pa.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M | S**

Posing for a portrait painted in oils can be a long process involving many sittings. Have students sit on a chair (or low table) in the pose Homer assumes in this painting. Ask them to describe how it makes them feel.

Sitting slumped over and sideways with one foot dangling limply and the other poised against the rung of the chair gives a sense of being unsettled, with a desire to squirm around.

E | M | S

Ask students to sit with a book on their laps and read out loud, as Homer's mother does. Ask them to describe how this pose makes them feel.

Sitting as Homer's mother does probably makes them feel focused and still, but also very aware of what the person who leans on them is doing.

E | M | S

Ask students what the difference between the two poses says about how each sitter probably felt about posing for this picture.

E | M

Homer is dressed in an outfit based on a story that was extremely popular with mothers. However, this costume was also beginning to be associated with being a "mamma's boy." Ask students if they think Homer is portrayed as a "mamma's boy" and to point out why or why not?

Homer isn't acting obediently. He is sitting restlessly and awkwardly in his chair with a bored expression on his face, fingers spread, and his back at an angle to his mother.

Ask students to imagine how they would pose under similar circumstances.

E | M | S

How has Sargent used the room and accessories in this painting to intensify Homer's feeling of impatience?

The chair is too large for the boy to sit comfortably (his feet do not reach the floor), and the swirling pattern of the carpet reflects his frustration with posing.

E | M | S

Ask students who is more important in this double portrait.

Homer is.

How did the artist emphasize Homer's importance?

Sargent has positioned Homer in the foreground at the center of the painting. The boy sprawls across a large, ornate chair and looks directly at the viewer (or painter). There is a strong light shining on his face, hands, and bowtie, and he is painted in more detail than his mother is. His importance is also reflected in the title, Portrait of a Boy.

INTERPRET **E | M | S**

Sargent made his living painting portraits of wealthy Americans and Europeans. How do you think this work, done for a friend, might have differed if it had been commissioned by a wealthy family who wanted to hang it in a prominent place in their home?

Like George Washington in Gilbert Stuart's portrait (3-B), Homer's mother probably would have been shown wearing more formal and expensive clothing and perhaps also been portrayed looking out of the painting, Homer may have been made to appear less restless, and the room and accessories would have been more elaborate.

M | S

Sargent was praised for his "truthful" portrayal of children at a time when childhood was becoming an important focus in Europe and America. Pretend you are an art critic and explain what you consider to be "truthful" about Homer Saint-Gaudens in this work.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: the Gilded Age; industrialism; child labor; orphan trains

Historical Figures: Historical Figures: Jane Addams; John Peter Altgeld; Charles Loring Brace; Andrew Carnegie; John D. Rockefeller; Cornelius Vanderbilt

Economics: capitalism

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, Frances Hodgson Burnett (middle, secondary); *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain (secondary), and *Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain (middle); *Little Women*, Louisa

May Alcott (middle); stories of Horatio Alger (1834–1899), (middle)
Arts: portraiture; American expatriate artists; influence of Velázquez, Van Dyck; Lewis Hine