Sargent Essay / Mike Witte

THE MISSING LINK

At right is a long-lost 1888 John Singer Sargent portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner, founder of Boston's Gardner Museum. It's one of eight early versions demanded by the insistent Gardner before she accepted the ninth, full-length final version (page 3) in 1888.

I purchased the oil for $50 in 1978 in a Brooklyn Heights antiques store, and it hung anonymously on various residential walls for almost fifty years until a recent heart attack opened time to research its identity and provenance.

To my astonishment, what I had long dismissed as an image of an unknowable Salvation Army officer in her military uniform turned out to be a portrait of a 19th-century multimillionaire, scandal-seeking Boston art collector in a fashionable "day dress" of the era.

Two years earlier, in 1886, Isabella Stewart Gardner had descended on Sargent's London studio to view his infamous 1884 portrait, "Madame X" (page 2), which so scandalized Parisian society that the artist had been forced to relocate to England.

By the time of his first Isabella encounter, Sargent had had his fill of scandal. But the free-spirited Gardner was actively shopping for an artist willing to offend her priggish Boston peers. The "long-lost" portrait was an early Sargent effort (let's call it "Isabella-2"). It was dignified and respectful, its timidity the opposite of what Gardner sought. She rejected it, then drove Sargent through six more versions before finally settling at scandal-satisfying "Isabella-9" (page 3).

Unfortunately, because the portrait revealed a bit too much cleavage and hinted at Isabella's marital infidelity, the hoped-for scandal exceeded expectation; as Boston society jeered, Isabella's husband. Jack Gardner, demanded that the work be withdrawn from public view until the couple's deaths. The two then sailed for Spain.

Abandoned by his patrons, embroiled in another scandal and seeing his recent work concealed in a back room, Sargent should have been crushed. Instead, he flourished.

Independent of Gardner's personal embarrassment, "Isabella-9" was the star of Sargent's first one-man show. His extraordinary talent was universally celebrated. New commissions flooded his appointment calendar.

Although they later became lifelong friends, Sargent at this time carried justified resentment toward Isabella. Her portrait demands and Boston society gossip had inflicted undeserved pain. But just months later, a new portrait commission arrived, magically offering a chance for reprisal. Mrs. Adrian Iselin, wealthy wife of a prominent New York businessman, appeared for her Sargent sitting with a maid bearing potential Paris session gowns. To her great frustration, Sargent insisted that she pose in the garment she then wore (page 3).



"Isabella 2": The author's 1988 John Singer Sargent portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner.

In an unlikely coincidence, Iselin had arrived wearing a "day dress" nearly identical to that worn by Gardner in the rejected "Isabella-2" portrait. A portrait artist knows instinctively not to paint two women in the same dress in the same year. But the resulting Iselin portrait was a deliberate Sargent confrontation between his day-dressed Isabella (January 1888) and his day-dressed Mrs. Iselin (November 1888).

"Iselin" has long been overlooked as a conventional, unremarkable Sargent effort. But its reunion with and linkage to the 137-years-lost "Isabella-2" recasts it as a major "payback portrait" containing secret messaging and defiant declarations.

Sargent intentionally sets Iselin in an ironic pose, linking suggestively back to his notorious "Madame X" (compare below). As with "X," a right hand rests supportively on a table; a left hand — at the same erotic angle — fondles a provocative, phallic fan. "Iselin" is a Sargent declaration of artistic liberation;

the now internationally famous, fully-booked artist will no longer fear or avoid scandal; issues with both "X" and Isabella are now history.

Even more, with "Mrs. Adrian Iselin," Sargent boldly declares that he will no longer be submissive to wealthy subjects (he complied with Gardner's demands but summarily rejected Iselin's gowns). When asked years later if he recalled the Iselin portrait, he replied, "I cannot forget that dominating little finger." How could he? It's a surrogate for his own now-powerful position in the world of art.

Track the Iselin pinkie downward and it points to three semi-circular decorative loops on a tableside. Compare with "Isabella-9." Gardner is adorned with two semicircular loops of pearls, loop number three supplied by arms linked at her hands. The once-imperial Mrs. Gardner has been exiled to a piece of furniture.

The four paintings span 1884 to 1888, four crucial years (age 28-32) in the still-young Sargent's life and career. Somewhat shaken in 1884 by "Madame X," he emerges in 1888 with "Mrs. Adrian Iselin" as the self-confident, formidable genius celebrated to this day.

"Isabella-2" fits into this narrative like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle. It's the "missing link."

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Sargent 's 1884 portrait of "Madame X."



"Isabella 9"(1888): Sargent 's ninth and final portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner and the star of his first one-man show.



Sargent 's November 1888 portrait of Mrs. Adrian Iselin, wife of a prominent New York businessman. In an unlikely coincidence, she had arrived at his studio wearing a "day dress" nearly identical to that worn by Gardner in the rejected "Isabella-2" portrait (page 1). Track the Iselin pinkie downward and it points to three semicircular decorative loops on a table side. Compare with "Isabella-9," left, in which Isabella Gardner is adorned with two semicircular loops of pearls, with loop number three supplied by her linked arms. The once-imperial Mrs. Gardner has been exiled to a piece of furniture.