

John Singer Sargent's Tourist Experience in Venice

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WRITER'S COMMENT: An art history seminar on tourism inspired me to integrate the sociological study of tourism with artwork produced in a tourist destination. For my senior honors thesis, I researched the various aspects of tourism and applied them to the work of John Singer Sargent. I find Sargent's work to be exceptional and am particularly impressed by his interior and alley paintings of Venice. The paintings lend themselves to an analysis of tourist studies because they exemplify what is known in tourism studies as the back regions of Venice. As a tourist in Venice, Sargent created paintings that allow the viewer into spaces of the city unknown to the average sightseer. This essay is a condensed version of my honors thesis. I could not have begun or finished this endeavor without the guidance of my sponsor, Dr. Diana Strazdes. The experience of writing and researching was extensive but wonderful.



—Kristen Vera Koch

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Kristen's essay developed from an art history seminar examining connections between artists and tourism. The artist she selected, John Singer Sargent, was quite well-known in his time and has been well-studied among historians of American art. Noticing that Sargent's Venetian scenes have been labeled innovative mainly for their style, Kristen spotted an unanswered question hiding in plain sight: Despite Sargent's wide-ranging travels, why has his work not been described as directly affected by tourism? Kristen compared Sargent's settings with other views of Venice and writings about Venice to develop her argument that Sargent's Venetian views stood out for the way they presented their location, which corresponds neatly to what has been termed the "back region" of a tourist site. Here, the depiction of place as much as any other feature has allowed Sargent to claim he possessed a unique point of view, a point of view associated with the avant-garde.

What I especially like about Kristen's essay is the way she used both visual and historical evidence to make her case, informing her findings by bringing in key insights from another discipline. Her conclusion has important implications for art historians: How were claims of an exclusive artistic vision generated in the late nineteenth century? Kristen's analysis of Sargent's Venetian views contributes to the evolving answer to that question.

—Diana Strazdes, Department of Art History



JOHN SINGER SARGENT (1856–1925) was a major figure in American art, who was not content to follow in the path of past or contemporary artists, but aimed to strike out on a new approach to subject matter and style¹. Born in Florence to American parents, he was one of the most cosmopolitan of artists and a lifelong expatriate. Sargent was also a consummate tourist whose art bore witness to a life of touring the European continent. Sargent's original approach to well-known European sites is evident in his scenes of Venice painted between 1880 and 1882.

In the beginning of his stay in Venice, Sargent experimented with watercolor scenes of the topography and “some anecdotal subjects.” However, the subject of his first large group of works, a dozen paintings of working-class Venetians, evolved from his imagination and fantasies.² This innovative art portrays Venetian locals engaged in daily tasks in the confines of the city.³ The majority of these paintings are oil on canvas, ranging in size from 16 x 23 inches (*The Sulphur Match*) to 93 ¾ x 52 ½ inches (*Italian Girl with Fan*). They were exhibited at various galleries, including the Grosvenor Gallery, and Sargent intended his substantial *Italian Girl with Fan* to be entered in the Salon (although he never did enter it).

¹Sargent's independence may be due to his unconventional upbringing, as described in Warren Adelson et al., *Sargent's Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 28–29. Growing up, he was home-schooled and had virtually no formal education; the Sargent family's travels took priority over education. However the Sargent children did learn multiple languages and J. S. Sargent was encouraged to sketch every destination the family visited.

²Adelson et al., 47–49.

³Patricia Hills, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), 49.

Although art critics and scholars have long recognized Sargent's original and imaginative view of Venice, they have not recognized that the paintings owe those qualities to Sargent's reinterpretation of the tourist experience. In this paper, I propose that Sargent employed a particular way of seeing while painting Venice. Confronted by this legendary and mystical city, which had long summoned tourists from Europe and from the U.S., he chose not to focus on the sites which other artists, literary figures, and guidebooks had already examined. Instead, he revealed the city's "back regions"—a term more familiar to tourism studies—which contrasted with the expectations of the average nineteenth-century tourist.

Sargent's works as exemplifying the "tourist gaze"

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE EXPECTATIONS of the nineteenth-century tourist and Sargent's portrayal of Venice reveals intriguing possibilities for examining the boundaries of what has been termed the "tourist gaze," by scholars such as John Urry and Dean MacCannell. In *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry explains tourism as "a leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely. . . work." Tourists encounter places outside their ordinary lives and move through space to stay temporarily in a destination. The destination is "gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially though daydreaming and fantasy."⁴

Scholars in tourism studies propose that a tourist destination has two regions of: the back and the front. These areas are based on social interactions between the hosts of the destination and the tourists. The front region is the place where these two types of people meet. The hosts influence the way in which the tourist experiences the hosts' culture. Although the tourist assumes that the front region is an authentic portrayal of the city, it is really a performance. The opposite region, the back area, is closed off to the tourist and helps to create the sense of reality of the front region. In the back region, the hosts rest, prepare, and conceal "props" and "activities" that might threaten to disrupt the authentic feeling of the front region. These back regions constitute the tourist site as it

⁴John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 1–4. Urry studies tourism as a sociological concept and describes its relationship to changes in the wide culture of postmodernism.

is experienced by the local people; it is “authentic.” The back region has the feel of intimacy and a local sensibility.⁵

It is these back regions that Sargent was attempting to represent in his 1880–1882 compilation. He chose not to capture the canals, hotels, shops, theaters, churches, or entertainment areas of the city, places where the atmosphere caters to the tourist, where most tourists were guided, and which were the places most artists depicted. Instead, he chose to render the darkened interiors and claustrophobic back alleys, places not created to appeal to the tourist, but which provide a glimpse into the dark places behind the action and attraction of the mystical city. In these shadowy, box-like areas, Sargent portrays the world of the “genuine” Venetian, the working class that creates the products that are sold as souvenirs. These Venetians do not put on a show to suit the tourist’s idea of what Venice should be. The places they occupy are not luxurious or even attractive. The women are shown working (*Venetian Interior*) (fig. 1); the men and women in the alleys interact in a casual, suggestive way



Fig. 1. John Singer Sargent, American, 1856–1925, *Venetian Interior*, 1880–82, Oil on canvas, 68.3 x 87 cm, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, purchase. Photograph copyright 2007 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

⁵Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 94–95. MacCannell’s book, a sociological investigation of the ideology of tourism, is regarded as a classic by many scholars. The “front and back region” theory originates with Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 144–145.

(*A Street in Venice*) (fig. 2). And the architecture reflects not the opulent Venetian buildings that tourists gaze upon, but nondescript, unornamented, monochromatic walls and ceilings.

Venetian Interior (fig. 1) is a good example. In the painting, various women occupy one of the dark, box-like interiors of Sargent's Venice. The room is scantily furnished, with a hard wooden bench and a few other wooden pieces. In the background, a door at the far end opens to provide a slight glimpse of the canals and Venetian world outside. A woman on the balcony gazes out at this world,⁶ perhaps the world of tourism, of the front region.

The women in the dark room seem cut off and excluded from this region of Venice—they are creatures of the back region, the “underbelly” of society. Just inside the door, two women sit with a child. Another woman leans against the wall to the viewer's left, doing some simple labor (probably stringing beads). These women display a casual demeanor and seem uninterested in the work they do. In the middle ground, a pair of young women walks casually toward the viewer, past a streak of yellow impasto on their left, which represents a sliver of light from an unseen source.

Several elements of this painting suggest it depicts the back region, not staged for the tourist: The women wear contemporary working-class attire rather than the costume of a Gothic or Renaissance Venice; they do not engage, as hosts, in any social interaction with the foreigners; and the areas are not representative of places that appeal to the average tourist. It is interesting, then, that Sargent sought out these spaces, especially considering his situation in Venice, as a tourist himself.

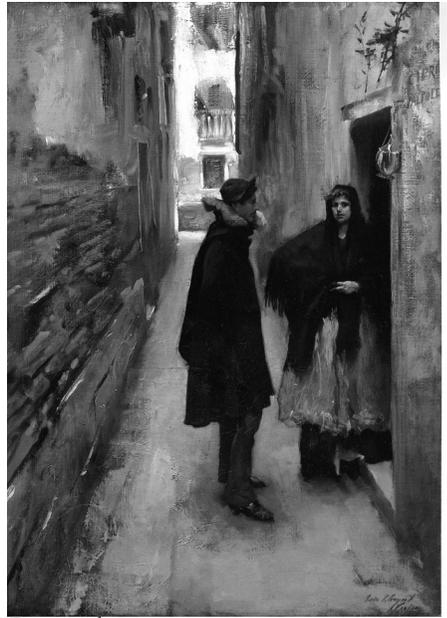


Fig. 2. title. credit line.

⁶Hills, *John Singer Sargent*, 53.

One might suppose that he chose to find these “real” places because of the continual traveling he did growing up. Perhaps he was no longer content with the generic sightseeing presentation of a city he visited. His family spent periods of time in many different areas, and he may have desired to find a genuine sense of the Venetian city to find intimacy and comfort. Or perhaps this was a way of affirming independence from convention, his attempt to break away from the common styles and subject matter of his contemporaries.

Sargent’s works as a challenge to traditional expectations about Venice

TO INVESTIGATE JOHN SINGER SARGENT’S motivation for portraying Venice in such a unique way, we can consider his difference from the most significant shaper of Venice’s nineteenth-century visual fame, John Ruskin (1819–1900). This highly influential and dogmatic art critic was enamored with Venice to the point of near obsession. He produced an extraordinary amount of commentary on the city and, as a leader in the art world, held the prestigious position of Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford University. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851), Ruskin fixated on his tragic vision of a once great city currently in decay. He wrote prolifically on the city and obsessively painted and sketched the Venetian architecture as if to capture it before it was destroyed by constant reconstruction. He also took photographs of the architecture and copied Venetian artwork by Tintoretto, Titian, and others.⁷ Ruskin focused on Gothic architecture above all, believing that it is “not only the best, but the *only rational* architecture.”⁸ To him, the Byzantine, Gothic, Early Renaissance, and the Roman Renaissance structural designs best characterized Venice, and he believed the new Venice threatened the beauty of the old.

The Stones of Venice circulated Britain and America and was reprinted roughly every year since its initial printing in 1851. Many English-speaking tourists in Venice no doubt had read *The Stones of Venice* (including Sargent, most likely) and would have used the book not only to shape their view of the city but to understand the aesthetics of the area. Ruskin

⁷Robert Hewison examines John Ruskin’s research for *The Stones of Venice* in *Ruskin’s Venice* (London: Pilkington Press, 2000), 9–20.

⁸John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1851, 1981), 123.

acted as a scholar and tourist, describing in detail the sites for which Venice was famous and which guidebooks recommended travelers visit: the architecture, canals, and panoramic views. This front region that Ruskin wrote about is a façade. The architecture, such as “reception offices and parlors” (or in this case, the palaces and churches) are the barrier between the front and back regions.⁹ Average tourists gawked at these façades and used Ruskin’s opinionated *Stones* as their Bible.

While Ruskin fixated on the old architecture of the front regions of Venice, Sargent focused solely on the present. His locals are depicted in present-day activities, and there are no signs of Byzantine ornamentation, Gothic forms, or Renaissance arches. Instead, black, gray, or yellow walls and ceilings enclose his figures. Sargent’s lack of architectural detail allows the figures and lighting to be the focus of the works. He was a traveler in an architecturally rich city, yet he chose to render local people in bland back alleys and rooms. This classifies Sargent as an atypical tourist, interested in the authenticity of the back region. The viewer of his paintings senses that Sargent was not out in Venice attending the theater, visiting St. Mark’s, or enjoying local shops. His artwork lacks the cliché views of a typical tourist’s holiday in Venice. It is as if the artist is attempting to create an imaginary Venice for himself, free of the tourists who must have swarmed Venice like the mosquitoes that infested the canals and were guided by writers, like Ruskin, rather than their own curiosity.

In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin similarly ignores the presence of tourists, although he does write about the workers. However, unlike Sargent, he avoids speaking about the contemporary laborers in Venice; instead, he writes about the workers who created the beautiful Gothic structures that line the waterways. His description of the laborers from centuries long ago is arrogant and condescending. He believed that the “results of inferior minds” create a “stately and unaccusable whole.”¹⁰ In other words, the work of hundreds of unintelligent and inferior hands created an ultimate masterpiece. He neglects the populace that is the heart of the city, and by pretending that these people do not exist, he is creating a frontal façade of a perfect destination, true to MacCannell’s

⁹MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 92. MacCannell shows that the physical barriers of structures and buildings mark the boundary between the people of the front and back regions.

¹⁰Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 120.

philosophy. Also unlike Sargent, Ruskin's workers are hidden, to better give the effect that Venice is a floating paradise of shimmering gilt and opulent Byzantine palaces.

Sargent, on the other hand, does not pass patronizing judgment on the laborers in his paintings. In his "subtle and somber" views, he observes the working class with "objectivity and detachment."¹¹ His workers are not portrayed as inferior or simple. They are real Venetians that make up the insides of the city. In contrast with Ruskin's laborer, they are more important than the work they create. They string tiny beads, hardly the detailed masterpieces of Gothic structures that Ruskin reveres. In Sargent's work, *Venetian Glass Workers*, for example, the emphasis is on the figures and the lighting rather than on the bead-work. The beads, represented by strokes of white paint, can hardly be distinguished, due to the broad brushstrokes. Unlike Ruskin (with his meticulous sketches of the architecture), who believed that the laborer was a means to an end, Sargent paints the figures (not their work) in detail. These subjects in the back region are unaware of the intrusion of the artist. In contrast to Ruskin's obsession over the past glory of the Gothic era in Venice, and his contentment to merely admire and observe the masterpieces for which the city was known, Sargent penetrated the areas of the city unseen by the average tourist.

Sargent's artwork as a response to nineteenth-century tourism

COMPARING SARGENT'S WORK WITH THE POPULAR nineteenth-century Baedeker guidebooks provides further evidence of Sargent's atypical tourist outlook. The little red Baedeker guidebook was filled with maps and information on popular destinations, and it illustrates what a typical upper-class tourist experience during Sargent's era would have been like. His book, *Italy: Handbook for Travellers*, portrays Venice as a lagoon navigated by gondolas, with colorful infusions of Gothic, Renaissance, and Oriental architecture. It explains how to get from the railway station to a gondola and finally to a place of lodging. Hotels are listed, along with restaurants, cafes, theaters, and shops.¹² It also provides an overview of

¹¹Hills, *John Singer Sargent*, 64.

¹²Karl Baedeker, *Italy: Handbook for Travellers* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1892), 199–201. This small book also includes the history of each Italian city mentioned and offers tips on conducting oneself in a foreign culture. The preface notes that Baedeker has sought out each site, hotel, and tourist destination, and

the famous architecture and art for which Venice is known, and describes the beautiful products of Venice, such as goods produced by the Venetian Glass Factory.¹³

Baedeker's "plan of visit" recommends sightseers spend three or four days in the city and urges them to take in St. Mark's Square, Palace of the Doges, San Giorgio Maggiore, the Campanile, Santa Maria della Salute, the Grand Canal, and the Accademia de Bella Arte, along with a "labyrinth" of streets as places of interest.¹⁴ Upon closer inspection, the "labyrinth" of streets and alleys, some measuring only five feet in width, could be compared to the enclosed feeling of Sargent's paintings of the back regions, and the mention of the Venetian Glass factory calls to mind Sargent's working class bead stringers, who are probably using the famous Venetian glass. However, nowhere in Baedeker's guidebook is it recommended that the visitor enter the dark rooms that are occupied by the working class figures.

Baedeker mentions the local people only in a degrading way. He explains that one-fourth of the population is "paupers."¹⁵ He goes on to describe the "importunities" of the gondoliers and flower girls in a condescending tone and recommends that the traveler keep a good temper when dealing with the locals. To thwart the men's sly and shrewd business tactics of charging for two gondoliers, the tourist is advised to say, "*basta uno*" (one is enough).¹⁶ The author also mentions that in Italy begging continues to be a nuisance. When a tourist encounters beggars, usually to be found in front of churches, Baedeker suggests he or she give them "the smallest possible copper coin."¹⁷

In contrast, John Singer Sargent presents the local people in a kinder, more honest way. In his work, *Venetian Bead Stringers* (fig. 3), the Venetians do not engage in any of the behaviors associated with

that all of the accounts in the book are from his personal experience.

¹³Ibid, 250. Baedeker explains the layout of the city, which is constructed around the lagoons, 150 canals, and 378 bridges. There are 15,000 houses and palaces, built on "piles" atop 117 small islands. Inside, the city is comprised of numerous alleys (labyrinths).

¹⁴Ibid., 206–207.

¹⁵Ibid., 206.

¹⁶Ibid., 199.

¹⁷Ibid., xv. In the introduction of the guidebook, the author discusses beggars under the heading: V. Public Safety. Beggars.

Baedeker's description. Three women occupy the bare space of an interior scene. Two women sit, facing the audience, preoccupied with their bead-stringing. Another woman stands, with her back to the viewer, watching the two working. They "appear self-absorbed, and completely undemonstrative." The women look down or off into the distance.¹⁸ When looking at this painting, the viewer receives no sense of Baedeker's locals. These women are not about to besiege the viewer, beg for charity, or bother the viewer in any way. Furthermore, they are free from the scrutiny of the tourists. The only tourist present is Sargent, and he allows the locals to exist in a sheltered community behind the architecture and entertainment that the tourists scramble to see.



Fig. 3. title. credit line.

Upon comparing Baedeker's written observation of Venice with Sargent's visual expression, we see that the artist is avoiding the familiar depiction of Venice's front region and a stereotypical view of the locals. Sargent found a way to portray an authentic and personal space that no other artist was able to capture. Although Venice was a major tourist destination, Sargent portrayed it in an innovative and unexpected way. He represented the people that defined the core of the city with honesty and

¹⁸Robertson, *Sargent and Italy*, 67. [NOTE: MISSING COMPLETE BIBLIO INFO]

consideration. He embraced the essence of the Venice not mentioned in guidebooks or academic texts and painted a unique picture of a city to which he was personally drawn.

Sargent's distinctive depictions as products of his "tourist gaze"

CLEARLY, SARGENT'S LIFE OF CONSTANT TRAVELING affected his disposition and style, enabling him to create a compilation of artwork that set him apart from other artists and that challenged the ideology of famous art critics, such as John Ruskin, and the popularity of nineteenth-century tourist guidebooks, such as Karl Baedeker's.

Sargent's interpretation of the tourist gaze, apparent in his interior and alley scenes of Venice in the early 1880s, emerges from a personal tourist experience. It is interesting, then, that he did not paint these works for his own consumption. Instead, he painted these scenes of Venice for galleries, such as the Grosvenor. Why would Sargent want to possess these back regions and yet show them to a collective gaze? Perhaps he was fulfilled and ready to move on to another destination, to assume another tourist gaze, and was willing to share the beauty of the Venetian back areas with others.

