



## The Smithsonian Institution

---

Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's "Madame X"

Author(s): Susan Sidlauskas

Source: *American Art*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 8-33

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109402>

Accessed: 04-08-2015 18:51 UTC

### REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109402?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109402?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press, Smithsonian American Art Museum and The Smithsonian Institution are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Art*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Painting Skin

## *John Singer Sargent's Madame X*

Susan Sidlauskas

John Singer Sargent's (1865–1925) best-known portrait, *Madame X* (frontispiece), has become an icon of an elegant, but jaded, beauty, a sign of fashion at its most extravagant and narcissism at its most insistent. Within this field of predictable associations, however, *Madame X* has proven to be remarkably adaptable. The myriad acknowledgments—both laudatory and irreverent—that have followed in the painting's wake since its debut at the Paris Salon of 1884 range from a caricature of the subject's hourglass figure by a salon critic (fig. 1) to the recent masquerade of Nicole Kidman in *Vogue* magazine (fig. 2). Perhaps even more expressive of the portrait's multiple meanings is *Madame X*'s defining role in an elaborate pop-up card (fig. 3) offered for sale at the recent Sargent retrospective in Boston. Appearing simultaneously fragmented and magnified, *Madame X* is cast as both centerpiece and frame for the composite design, and thus, by inference, for Sargent's entire production.<sup>1</sup>

Which of these canny transformations do we smile at and set aside—the caricature, perhaps? Do we take more seriously the *New Yorker* cover by the artist Russell Connor (fig. 4), in which *Madame X* appears to take the full measure of Pablo Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932)? Which of these representations can we

use to understand more fully the complexity of the elusive “original,” an already freighted word with its own particular ambiguities in this case?<sup>2</sup> We do well to attend to *Madame X*'s continuing resonance as a cultural icon, and to observe carefully the manner in which her form is adjusted to suit the occasion. Nicole Kidman's lyrical grace emphasizes how contorted *Madame X*'s posture really is. And the *Madame X* who, reversed, adorns the *New Yorker*'s cover, looking critically at Picasso's rival apparition, is painted with a brio of hue and an elasticity of contour that dramatize the morbid skin coloration and the far more chiseled profile of the original figure. In this essay, I try to understand the social and cultural circumstances of the creation and reception of Sargent's *Madame X* in light of recent ideas about the presentation of the self—the various ways we display who we are and who we want to be—at its most fundamental level, in and through the skin of the body. My hope is to explore more fully why the painting inspired such intense reactions when it was first exhibited, and why it continues to fascinate. *Madame X*'s appeal may seem shallow at first: a vain woman striving for social advantage. But there is much to see beneath the surface of both *Madame X* and the talented and ambitious young man

John Singer Sargent, *Madame X* (*Madame Pierre Gautreau*). 1883–84. Oil, 208.6 x 109.9 cm (82 ½ x 43 ¼ in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916



whose idea it was to paint her. What Sargent painted, and what his audience saw, was more than “skin deep.”

### Painting and Subject

Almost everyone who saw the portrait in 1884 grasped its radical strangeness, a strangeness that has since been almost eclipsed by the acceptance of *Madame X* as an emblem for vanity gone awry. Consider the subject's extraordinary pose, the sum of opposing rhythms arrested and contained within a silhouette of uncommon clarity. The body appears impossibly erect because of the shoulders' wide span and the pinnacle of the head fixed high in space. But then we realize that *Madame X*'s left hip is provocatively tilted, an asymmetry that becomes the fulcrum for a series of movements that course through the dress and the body it so dramatically exposes. This rhythmic flow travels from the hem of her skirt, up through gleaming diagonal folds of satin, then pauses at the fan she holds in her left hand. The momentum then passes up through the gown's stomacher and out to the two splayed petals of the bustier, which barely defies gravity with its fragile straps of brilliants, then sweeps across the tilting plateau of her shoulders and trails down to her arms.

While *Madame X*'s left arm is draped languidly over her hip, gathering fan and fabric to her body, her right arm gestures away from her figure, its usually soft transparent interior made rigid and opaque as it thrusts aggressively toward the viewer. This arm is torqued and strenuously pushed back; the bent-back wrist tapers down to an ungainly thumb, which pushes against the table. Thumb, reflection, and table leg together constitute a vertical brace against which the rhythms within the arm and torso fortify themselves. Any sense of unrestricted movement is displaced from *Madame X*'s body onto the elegant table she leans upon,

which presses into her right thigh. The table legs ascend from clawed feet that suggest a poised feline only momentarily stilled, then spiral up energetically to culminate in Sirens, whose outstretched arms bear the table on their backs. The shining surface of the table could be a surrogate for the absent mirror that her pose seems to demand.

*Madame X*'s body appears to press forward, a sensation reinforced by the slight projection of her dress's bustier and by the flexed tendons in her neck. These tensed cords make us intensely aware of the supreme physical and mental effort that she must exert to hold her head in profile, while keeping her body in an adamantly, even aggressively, frontal position. Strained movements so tautly contained suggest a creature entrapped: the monarch butterfly pinned to the exhibition board or a cornered gazelle.<sup>3</sup>

*Madame X*'s slightly pointed chin is aligned with the right shoulder that curves away from it, as if the outer edges of her body are sealing themselves off from the world, resisting the curiosity of those eager to scan the face that crowns such a defiantly exhibited body. Perhaps it is just as well, for we shudder to consider the Medusan stare that would meet our eyes were *Madame X* to pivot her head toward us. The cameo profile also reinforces the illusion that the subject, as painted, is a unified aesthetic entity, displaced from the real world.

As for the coverings that sheathe her body, I have briefly mentioned the dress, with its burnished satin skirt, and a velvet bustier painted so densely that it appears to absorb light. The inkiness of the gown sets off *Madame X*'s stark pallor, which is further intensified by the reddened ear, the mahogany eyebrow, and the blood red of the archly curved lips. The hair is hennaed and crowned by a crescent moon tiara. Then there is the skin itself, which, upon close inspection, verges from alabaster to an unmistakable shade of bluish purple, a tone most concentrated in the

1 Draner (Jules Renard), "Le Salon pour Rire," *Le Charivari* (1 May 1884): 3



area above *Madame X*'s breasts, the sinews of her neck, and the hollow of her right arm. This pearl-blue tint was, in part, the product of the subject's own handiwork. The chalky lavender powder she applied to her body every day or, perhaps more accurately, every night, was a well-known aspect of her highly aestheticized self-fashioning.

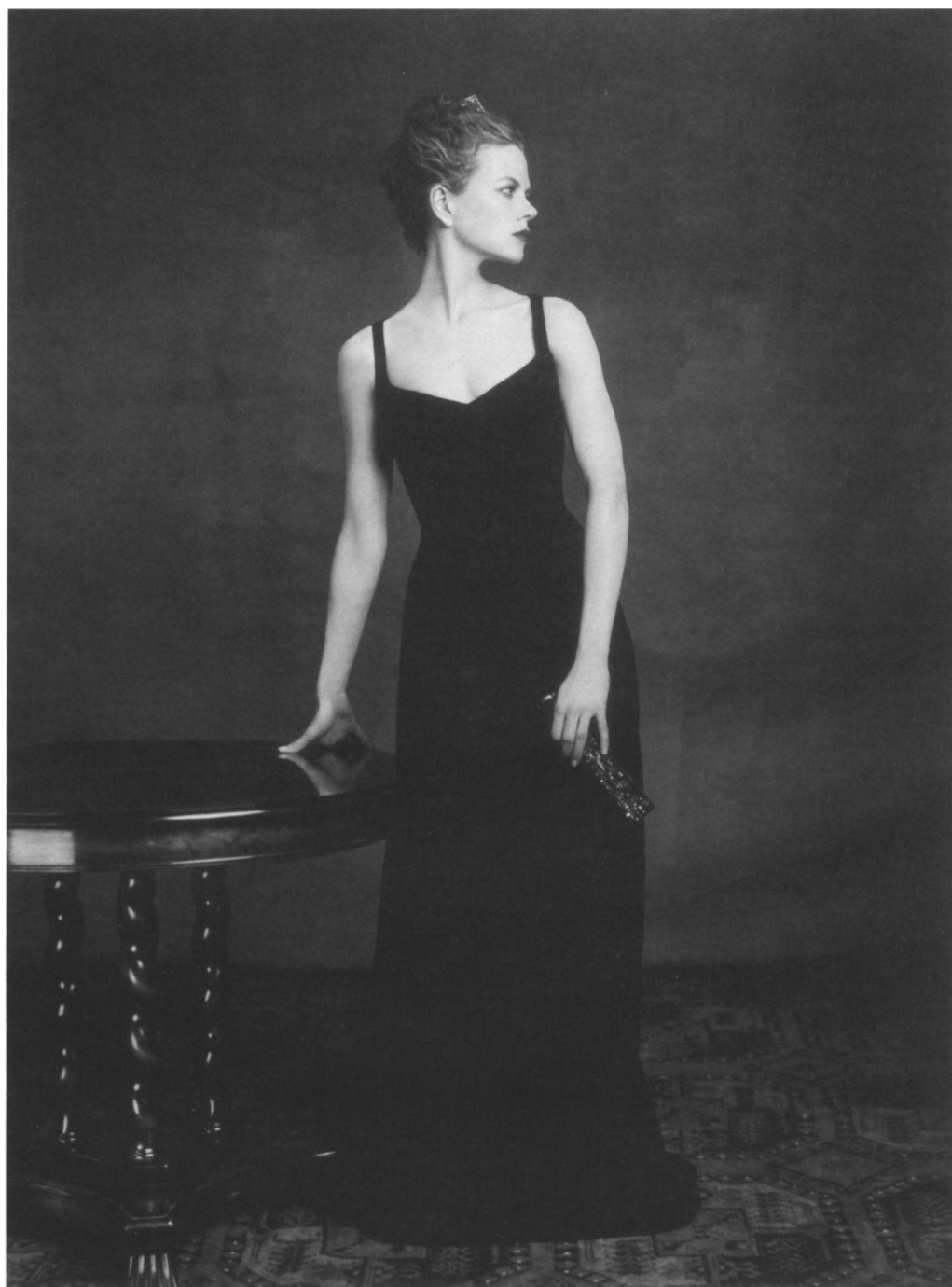
Sargent not only painted a woman who had already painted herself, he also posed her, although she was accustomed to choosing her own carefully calibrated positions for social display. For *Madame X* was as celebrated for her sylphlike glides and effortless head turns as she was for her violet-tinged skin. Descriptions of her grace as she entered a room stress the apparent lack of physical effort that her movements through space seemed to demand, a perception that is distinctly at odds with the effortful pose Sargent painted. *Madame X*'s body set into motion a collaboration or, more precisely, a competition, between an artist identified with the virtuosity of his painted surfaces—particularly of his skin tones—and a notorious beauty who orchestrated the hues, shape, and comportment of her own figure.<sup>4</sup>

Sargent's designation of his subject simply as *Madame X* (or, more precisely, *Madame \*\*\**) for her debut at the salon was no impediment to identifying her; Virginie Avegno Gautreau was well known to all who attended the exhibition. An expatriate American of French and Italian ancestry, she was making her name as a "professional beauty" (a phrase preserved in English) under the direction of her ambitious French mother. A refugee from the American Civil War, Madame Avegno had lived in the South with her husband, an Italian-born major badly wounded at the Battle of Shiloh, and her two lovely daughters, whose eventual marriage prospects were deemed to be more advantageous in the French capital.<sup>5</sup>

The critical response to *Madame X* is a famous disaster in the annals of reception history. The denunciation of the painting, which was considered a "spectacle of shameless selfdom," in the words of art historian Trevor Fairbrother, has been cast as the impetus for Sargent's widely lamented retreat from Paris, the act by which he sold his artistic soul to the society world of London. In truth, a number of critics did admire the painting. Yet the intensity of the original clamor before the portrait has not been exaggerated. Comments ranged from "Oh, quel horreur!" to "Is it a woman or a chimera?" a glib, but nonetheless revealing, skepticism about the very taxonomy of the figure whom Sargent himself called "the creature."<sup>6</sup>

*Madame X*'s doubly painted skin and willfully flexed body raise fundamental questions about portraiture in general and about the portraiture of visually provocative women in particular, women whose self-definition depends upon some kind of vivid performance. Who is the truer "original"—the portrayer or the portrayed—and whose immortality is more profoundly at stake—that of the painted or the painter?<sup>7</sup> Many of the reasons that Gautreau's portrait offended the salon audience are evident: the brazenness of her

- 2 Steven Meisel, *Nicole Kidman*,  
American *Vogue*, Art + Commerce  
Anthology, 1999. Used with  
permission



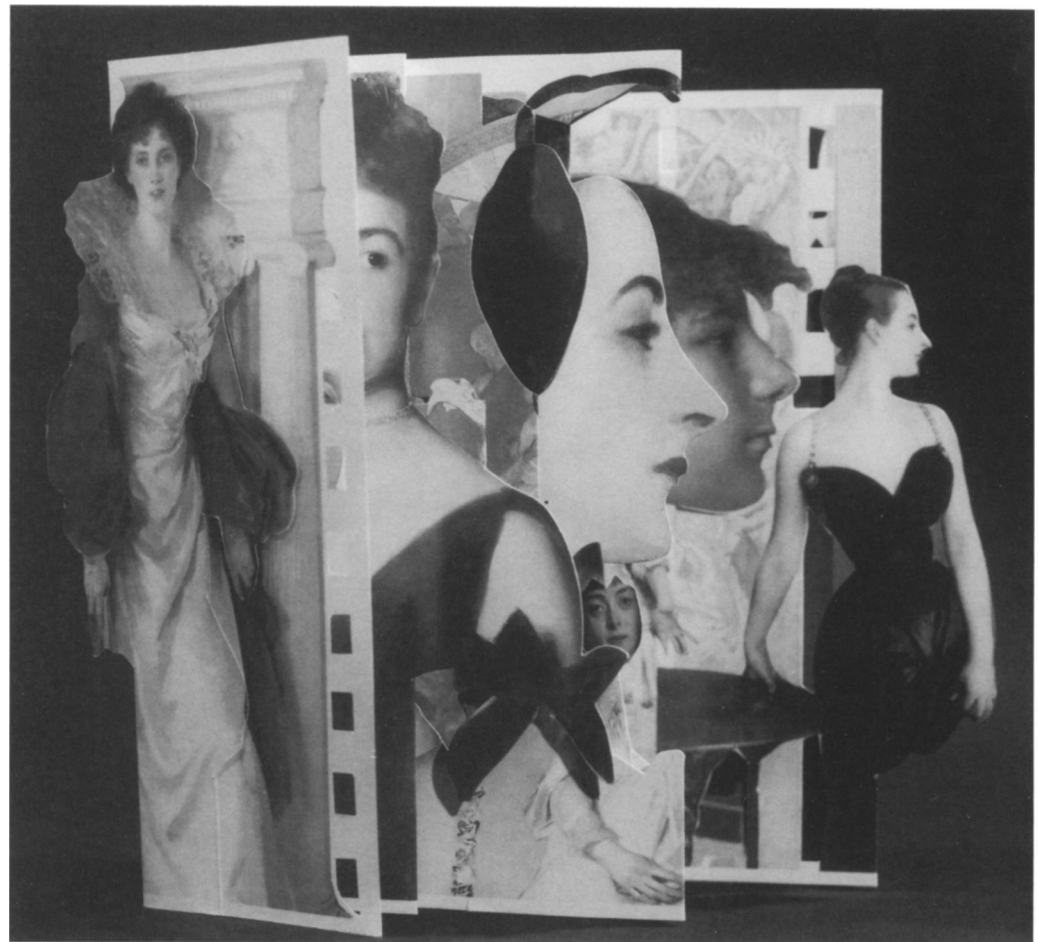
self-display; the singularity of her adornments, both sartorial and cosmetic; and the crudeness of her American ambitiousness. But there were other concerns voiced less directly that, I believe, touch upon Gautreau's contested claim to life after death. The criticism around *Madame X* oscillated between associating her with life

or death. Gautreau herself possessed, indeed flaunted, a sensuality that was undermined by death and decay.

Gautreau aroused the anxieties of her audience and, apparently, of Sargent himself, who agonized over the painting, which he called a "Portrait of a Great Beauty." He wrote to Margaret White,

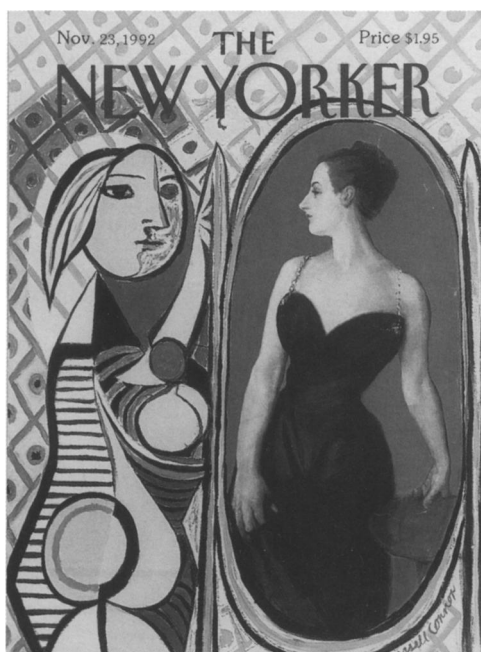
whose likeness he was working on at the same time: "Neither you nor Mme. Gautreau were finished. I have been brushing away at both of you for the last three weeks in a horrid state of anxiety." In collapsing the distinction between his subjects and their pictorial realizations, Sargent suggests that his apprehension went beyond his avid desire for a salon success. Art historian Robert Lubar has recently argued that Picasso's nervousness before Gertrude Stein's lesbian sexuality prevented him from finishing her portrait as he had first envisioned it. Lubar contends that Picasso's inability to confront his own sexual ambivalence, as well as Stein's singular approach to female identity, inspired the masklike visage he painted in a burst of activity after scores of aborted attempts. We know far less about Sargent's attitudes toward sexuality

than we do about Picasso's. There is no real evidence of Sargent's romantic life or intimacies. However, it seems likely that, as Fairbrother has argued, Sargent was a homosexual, who was intent on passing as a heterosexual bachelor in a society in which any perceived deviance was not tolerated. Fairbrother cites not only the plethora of homoerotic images that Sargent produced over his career (the late drawings of young men sprawled on the grass being the most overt), but also his characteristic silence about his private life, and his lifelong anxiety about preserving a socially spotless persona. Sargent's great-nephew, Richard Ormond, coauthor of the catalogue raisonné now underway, believes, on the other hand, that paintings such as *Madame X* and *El Jaleo* (1882) testify to the sexual attraction that Sargent as a young man felt for these women.<sup>8</sup>



3 Jill Barnes-Dacey, *John Singer Sargent*, "The Leporello Card"  
© 1999 All Rights Reserved

- 4 Russell Connor, cover illustration for *The New Yorker* (23 November 1992) © 1998 *The New Yorker* Magazine, Inc., Reprinted by permission, All rights reserved, Courtesy of Condé Nast Publications
- 5 John Singer Sargent, *Lady with the Rose* (Charlotte Louise Burckhardt), 1882. Oil, 213.4 x 113.4 cm (84 x 44 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Mrs. Valerie B. Hadden, 1932



Ormond concedes that the artist is not known to have had any significant romantic liaisons, although there were rumors of a lapsed engagement with Charlotte Louise Burckhardt, whom we see in *Lady with the Rose* (fig. 5), and a prolonged attachment to the extravagant and enigmatic Flora Priestley, whose portrait (fig. 6) has an interesting resonance with *Madame X*. Sargent paints Priestley with coarsely whitened face and hands, which contrast dramatically with the poppy red of her lips and her decorative ribbons. Sargent pictures her as if she—or he—has smeared on white face paint, the cosmetics that a clown or theatrical performer might use. Sargent also paints her “real” skin as though it shows beneath the makeup. We recognize the provisional nature of the white mask that Priestley wears. Mask and self, figured in the makeup and the exposed skin, have been conjoined on the surface of the painting. Priestley’s posture is also strained, although in a fashion distinct from the pose that her predecessor adopted. Priestley presses her right wrist tightly to her waist. In fact, she folds her hand so that her palm must be touching the inside of her wrist.

This is, perhaps, an unwitting mimicry of Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot’s famous “hysterical” patients at the Salpêtrière Hospital outside Paris. Charcot would hypnotize his patients in public performances, then demonstrate that their gestures were no longer under their control, thus showing signs of neurological disorders.<sup>9</sup>

Even if Gautreau brought out Sargent’s personal anxieties, or at least his uncertainties, about his sexuality, he was also distilling a far more general contemporary ambivalence toward the sexuality of women, especially when publicly displayed, an ambivalence mirrored in the dismayed reactions of the salon audience. Unlike the majority of Sargent’s portraits of this period, *Madame X* was not a commission. The artist actively pursued Gautreau as a portraiture subject, in great measure because of her artfully contrived skin tone and physical grace. He queried his friend Vernon Lee, “Do you object to people who are *fardées* (or “made up”) to the extent of being a uniform lavender or blotting-paper color all over? If so, you would not care for my sitter; but she has the most beautiful lines, and if the lavender or chlorate-of-potash-lozenge color be pretty in itself I should be more than pleased.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it was not unusual for a well-traveled man of the 1880s (and an artist who may have occasionally mixed his own pigments) to know the composition of a woman’s face paint, but Sargent’s detailed musings betray an uncommon preoccupation. Gautreau’s skin seemed to become for him almost a fetish. While Sargent perhaps recognized that his subject was an expert colorist in her own right, he had apparently assumed that her eccentric, though modest, talent would be incorporated into his more elevated mode of painting, an assumption that would continue to frustrate him.

In fact, frustration colored Sargent’s experience of Gautreau from the beginning of their encounter, which commenced in Brittany at the summer home that she shared with her banker husband,





Pierre. Also in residence was Gautreau's proprietary mother—the third party who had a great stake in the favorable reception of the portrait. Madame Avegno believed that Sargent's keen interest in her daughter would cement her ascendancy into the pantheon of French style. Likewise, a salon success with so conspicuous a society figure would engender many commissions for Sargent. Mother, daughter, and artist were all to be sorely disappointed, at least temporarily, in their overlapping ambitions.

Many of Sargent's preliminary sketches of Gautreau suggest the tactics of a hunter unsure about how to capture his prey. He rotated around his subject, while she posed sitting (fig. 7), half-kneeling on the cushion of a settee (fig. 8), and slouching languidly on the same piece of furniture (fig. 9), giving credence to Sargent's frequent complaints to his friends about the "laziness" of his subject. In one fluid sketch, Sargent captured an uncharacteristically animated Gautreau, whispering confidingly into the ear of another woman (fig. 10). Apparently, the artist needed to contemplate the full range of Gautreau's movements, so that he might later arrest them on the final canvas.

Sargent was drawn to Gautreau's striking profile from the beginning. There are several delicate pencil views of both the left and right contours, in which her head rests lightly on a swanlike neck (fig. 11). Notably absent is the tension in the twisted neck that appears in the painting. In another cluster of sketches, Sargent focused on Gautreau's upper body, paying particular attention to the angular slope of her shoulders and the slightly insolent slouch of her back (fig. 12).

The most elaborate study of this first series is a watercolor of Gautreau seated on the same settee (fig. 13), looking toward a book or folio in her lap. Gautreau's air of inattention is exacerbated, since whatever she is gazing at seems about to slide off her lap—some pages have already begun to float toward the floor. While Gautreau's



6 John Singer Sargent, *Flora Priestley*, ca. 1889. Oil, 45.8 cm x 38.1 cm (18 x 15 in.). Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York

lassitude dominates the watercolor's overall effect, there are intimations of the strain that Sargent would later include in her portrait. He resisted Gautreau's torpor in the watercolor by enclosing her within the settee's wooden frame, whose curves act like pincers clasp her from both sides. Her right hand grips the side of the settee, while her chin intersects with the top of the frame. The torsion of the final painting is subtly echoed in the frontal presentation of Gautreau's upper body. Although she appears to be on the verge of slipping off the seat, she presses her

---

*Her skin became an ever-shifting canvas that Sargent could not duplicate, let alone supercede.*

---

shoulders into the back of the settee, while she rotates her head in profile. In the violet-blue wash that outlines her face and the faint violet shadow on the left arm, Sargent anticipates the pallid lavender of Gautreau's skin. Sometime before these sittings, Sargent also painted another study of Gautreau, which Count Samuel Pozzi (fig. 14) obtained for his collection. He was the elegant and demonically handsome gynecologist who may have been her lover. In Pozzi's painting, Gautreau blithely offers a toast (fig. 15). While her posture repeats the languor of Sargent's seated sketches, the tension of her outstretched arm is more allied to the coiled flexion of her entire body in the later portrait.<sup>11</sup>

Literary scholar Elisabeth Bronfen has characterized the "primal sitting" between painter and subject as a charged interaction, and a reminder that the initial sitting stimulates anxieties in both the portrayer and the portrayed. The former is anxious about his model's resistance to being painted. The latter is afraid of being literally "captured" on the surface of the canvas—a living being cast into an

inanimate object. Indeed, many critics already believed that Madame Gautreau, with her mannered style, was well on her way to becoming an object herself. The pencil drawings attest that Sargent struggled mightily with Gautreau's final posture. Yet it was her skin tone that remained most vexing to him. Biographer Charles Merrill Mount records the artist's state of mind:

*When [Sargent] returned to the Gautreau home he was discouraged. He realized that his model was unpaintable: the color of her skin, which in the clear light of day was an unholy blue, with purple overtones, had not been taken into consideration when he planned the picture—her color proved remarkably insistent. The further he progressed the more he saw that the color of Madame's flesh would be a very proper blue, rather than the gentle tint for which he had hoped.<sup>12</sup>*

Madame Gautreau painted herself for the artificial light of the evening. But Sargent was painting her in the summer light of Brittany.

It is probable that the color of Gautreau's skin, depending upon the proportion of pigment to powder and the thickness of the application, changed at least slightly every day she posed for Sargent.<sup>13</sup> Any minor variation invisible to her admirers would have wildly irritated a perfectionist such as Sargent. It was as if Gautreau's skin became an ever-shifting canvas that Sargent could not duplicate, let alone supercede. In short, Gautreau's body painting foiled Sargent's painting of her body. The struggle for dominance seems figured in the materiality of the portrait. There is a noticeable amount of overpainting around Gautreau's head and shoulders, as well as in the faceted space between her torqued right arm and the contour of her body. These applications of paint are akin to repeated erasures, as if Sargent tried to expunge Gautreau's own "paint" with layers

of his own. At one point, discontent with the increasing thickness of the paint surface, Sargent even decided to begin the portrait afresh, leaving us the unfinished version (fig. 16) now in the Tate Gallery in London.

Art historians Carol Armstrong and Jean Clay independently compared aspects of Edouard Manet's paint application with women's use of cosmetics, or "paint of a feminine kind." Armstrong argues that in a number of Manet's late works, for instance, *The Reader of the Illustrated Magazine* (1879), he collapsed the two layers of paint into one, a radical intervention that cast surface as subject in modern painting. Clay invoked poet Stéphane Mallarmé to describe the phenomenon. Mallarmé advised artists "not to paint women, but the *way* these women are painted. Not faces, but that which, on these faces, is painting: makeup. To paint, not the structure of the model (bones, muscle), but the surface areas where the object offers itself as light sedimentation, and to render these sprinklings of powder by the powder of the pigment." Unlike the fluid marriage between the two kinds of paint that Armstrong and Clay described, Sargent's painted skin constitutes a far more ambivalent and incomplete fusion of subject and object, of masculine and feminine "paint." The artist's own pronouncement of his model as "unpaintable" distills his resistance to imaginatively and structurally merging his pigments with the cosmetics they constructed on the canvas—a refusal matched by Gautreau's own opposition, figured not only in her skin but in her flexed body as well. As a subject for representation, she adamantly refused to be rendered into "life," as the terms of late nineteenth-century mimetic portraiture defined it.<sup>14</sup> *Madame X* is a testament to a painterly standoff between a subject who was accustomed to complete mastery over her public appearance and a painter who insisted on controlling even the smallest details of a sitter's costume, pose, and affect.

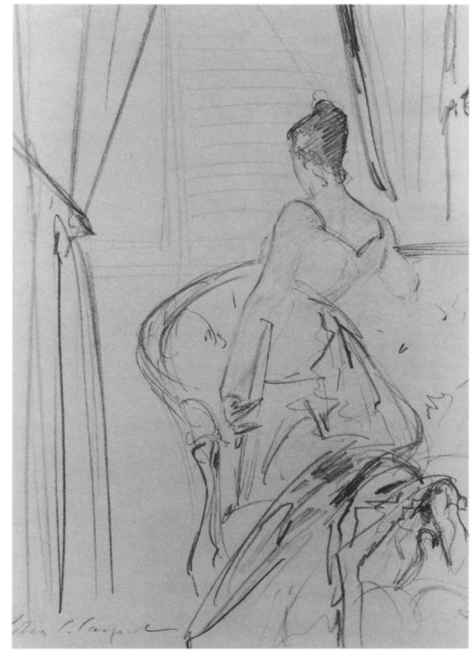
## Skin

The skin is the social and physical frontier of the body, where a person's private identity interacts with the larger stage of his or her surrounding culture. The significance of nineteenth-century attitudes toward skin—in particular, the adornment, expressivity, and medical health of the female skin—can be understood more fully by recent psychoanalytic analyses of its meaning and function, as both psychic defense and physical boundary.

Historian Kathy Peiss, writing about the cosmetics industry in nineteenth-century America, has observed that cosmetics use was considered less a deception or false face than a dramatic performance of the self in a culture increasingly oriented to display and spectatorship.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, Gautreau had embarked on a performance of self that depended on the luster of her collective surfaces: her corseted body displayed in a fashionable gown, the glow of her colored hair, the gleam of the sensually reddened lips and ears, and, not least, the pale lavender finish of her skin. The sum of her surfaces *was* her substance, allying her rhetorically to a painter who was alternately vilified and esteemed for the virtuosity of his surfaces.

Skin has a paradoxical nature, writes the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu. It is "both permeable and impermeable, superficial and profound, truthful and misleading. It is regenerative but caught in a continual process of desiccation." A number of critics would extend the latter characterization to Gautreau herself. Sargent's subject seems an apt candidate for what Anzieu defines as a "narcissistic disorder of the skin ego," with her makeup an imaginative second skin, constructed to encase, and mask, a fragile psyche. Such a disorder extends and solidifies the envelope to give a sense of security, "but it lacks flexibility, and the slightest narcissistic wound makes a tear in it."<sup>16</sup>

References to what we would now call "narcissism" surfaced in much of the



7 John Singer Sargent, *Madame X (Madame Gautreau)*, ca. 1883–84. Graphite, 24.6 x 33.5 cm (9 1/16 x 13 3/16 in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase 1970, Charles and Anita Blatt Fund, John Wilmerding Gift, and Rogers Fund

8 John Singer Sargent, *Madame X (Madame Gautreau)*, ca. 1883–84. Pencil, 29.2 x 21 (11 1/2 x 8 1/4). Private collection

9 John Singer Sargent, *Madame Gautreau (Madame X)*, ca. 1883. Graphite, 24.6 x 26.6 cm (9 5/8 x 10 3/8 in.). Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop



criticism around *Madame X*. The critic Louis de Fourcaud described her at the 1884 salon as a “plastic idol.” He directed his audience to

*know that in a person of this type everything relates to the cult of self and the increasing concern to captivate those around her. . . . Her sole purpose in life is to demonstrate her skills in contriving incredible outfits which shape her and exhibit her and which she can carry off with bravado and even a touch of innocence, like Diana sporting her loose tunic.*

- 10 John Singer Sargent, *Whispers*, ca. 1883–84. Charcoal and graphite, 34.4 x 24.7 cm (13 ½ x 9 ¾ in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, 1950



Art historian Albert Boime summed up Gautreau’s equivocal appeal as “the *femme froide*, the sterile woman resplendent in her own useless beauty. . . . the cruel and aloof Diana whom men approached with mingled fear, disgust and desire.”<sup>17</sup>

Gautreau’s twisted and flexed body incarnates the impenetrability that is suggested by the opaque surface of her skin. Through her taut musculature, the carapace of a costume that “flees from the flesh,” as the critic Henri Houssaye put it, and a densely applied skin powder that suggests decay, Virginie Gautreau constructed a second skin of her own devising, one that was not necessarily continuous with the skin that Sargent painted.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Charles Baudelaire had enthusiastically endorsed the artifice of *maquillage*, or makeup. He wrote, “Woman is well within her rights, and is indeed performing a sort of duty, in studying to appear magical and supernatural. It is necessary that she should astonish and bewitch. Being an idol, she must be gilded to be adored.” Baudelaire’s words seem to have been written, *avant la lettre*, for Gautreau herself. Fifty years later, the aesthete Max Beerbohm would elaborate in an essay called “The Pervasion of Rouge,” in which he pointed out that in cosmetics “its ground and its subject matter are one.” He wrote, “Artifice is the strength of the world, and in that same mask of paint and powder, shadowed with vermeil tinct and most trimly pencilled, is woman’s strength.” Beerbohm even ventured that within the history of makeup was lodged the primal history of painting, for “the painting of the face is the first kind of painting men can have known.” This blurring of boundaries between artistic and feminine paint tended to make American art critics nervous. A writer from New York named James McCabe complained in 1872 that, “So common has the habit of resorting to [cosmetics] become, that it is hard to say whether the average woman of fashion is a work of nature or a work of art,” a

- 11 John Singer Sargent, *Madame X (Madame Gautreau)*, ca. 1883. Graphite, 32 x 21 cm (12 5/16 x 8 1/4 in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond and Miss Emily Sargent, 1931
- 12 John Singer Sargent, *Madame X (Madame Gautreau)*, ca. 1883–84. Graphite, 32 x 21 cm (12 5/16 x 8 1/4 in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond and Miss Emily Sargent, 1931



collapse of distinctions on which Gautreau's identity, in fact, depended.<sup>19</sup>

In the early 1880s, Gautreau's aggressive brand of artifice was still uncommon among the upper-middle and upper classes. The wisdom was that women should strive for "naturalness" in their cosmetics. A gentle reddening of the cheeks and lips was appropriate, as was a slight thickening of the eyelashes and brows. Anything more obvious would render the woman susceptible to the insults of society. Anthropologist Jennifer Craik has argued that "makeup should not be visible in its component parts, only its transformative impression."<sup>20</sup> With her hennaed hair, reddened ears, and lavender skin, Gautreau defiantly violated this cherished precept of nineteenth-century decorum.

Commentaries on beauty of this era emphasized that the skin was a "living organ," and cautioned women against impairing the impression of vitality. In *The Woman Beautiful* of 1882, writer Ella Adelia Fletcher observed, "This perfect tissue is capable of revealing in the face every emotion, from the ashen pallor of fear to the rosy flush of delight. . . .

[T]here is no part of the human body which should receive more thorough study and scientific attention." The author concluded, "for upon nothing else does woman's appearance, and, consequently, her happiness, more closely depend." Later, the writer Paul Valéry would amplify this idea, arguing that the unadorned surface of the skin was nothing less than the revelation of the soul, which the fundamental biology of life supported. The neurological system and the skin have the same embryonic origin—the ectoderm. "We are all ectodermal," Valéry wrote. "Nothing is deeper in man than his skin—provided he knows himself."<sup>21</sup>

Anzieu agrees that the skin and brain have a common origin. He argues that when something goes awry in the psyche, the external layer imposed by the human environment becomes rigid and resistant, becoming a "second muscular skin." It is the inner self that turns out to have holes in it, to be porous (something Anzieu calls the "colander Skin Ego"). Although the narcissist might feel that her doubly fortified outer skin is heroic and immortal, it becomes more like the poisoned tunic of classical mythology—"suffocating,





- 13 John Singer Sargent, *Madame Gautreau (Madame X)*, ca. 1883. Watercolor and graphite, 35.5 x 25.2 cm (14 x 9 in.). Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop

burning, disintegrating”—Medea’s fatal “gift” to her rival for Jason’s love. This is what Anzieu calls the “toxic function of the Skin Ego.”<sup>22</sup> *Madame X* may have not worn a poisoned tunic, but the rhetoric of toxicity pervaded the criticism of her portrait.

### Toxins

While the skin was a “living organ,” the whiteners and other paints that women applied, masking its physiological nuances, were for many nineteenth-century observers signs of morbidity. In 1858, the famed beauty Lola Montez wrote about the evils of enameling, a practice favored mostly by actresses and courtesans, who applied lead-based paints to the face and upper body for as long as a year. “Nothing so effectually writes ‘memento mori’ on the cheek of a beauty,” wrote Madame Montez. “Many a time I have seen a gentleman shrink from saluting a brilliant lady, as though it was a death’s head he were compelled to kiss.”<sup>23</sup>

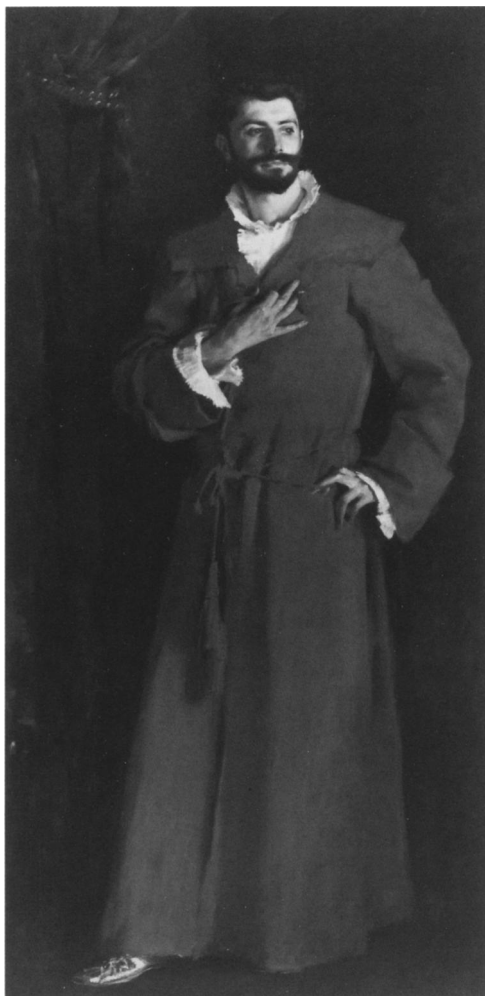
While associations with death were abetted by the ghostliness of the painted complexion, these cosmetics also carried significant medical risks. Peiss points out that “Women applying dangerous lead-based whitening lotions like ‘Bloom of Youth’ began to appear in medical case records after the Civil War.” Typically, such women patients were initially “diagnosed with hysteria or reproductive disorders, the usual suspects in Victorian women’s ailments.” By 1884, it was widely known that the metallic compound of chlorate of potash (or potassium chlorate, as we might recognize it today), the basis for Gautreau’s lavender powder, could be toxic for its users. (At a fraction of its nineteenth-century strength in cosmetics, it is used today in insecticides.) Facial tremblings, even paralysis, were not uncommon for those who applied excessive amounts of lead- or arsenic-based compounds. Carbonate of lead, carmine of

ammonia, and trinitrate of bismuth, all lead-based compounds, formed the bases for, respectively, lip salve, “bloom,” or liquid rouge—the substance Gautreau would have used to redden her ears so conspicuously—and face powder. A decade later, medical journals would report on the neurotoxicity of potassium chlorate, as well as the thyroid tumors it was thought to cause in babies in utero.<sup>24</sup> With her lavender pallor, Gautreau did not simply allude to death and decay: she embodied them.

Scholar Sander Gillman has pointed out that the nineteenth-century viewer had a great need to see *under* the layer of makeup, for in a time of rampant tuberculosis and syphilis, only a vivid, unadorned skin was proof of good health. Not surprisingly, some of her critics saw the diffuse violet of Gautreau’s skin as evidence of damage or disfigurement. Her skin seemed to suggest for viewers both a bruised surface and whatever imagined aberration lay beneath, a literal conflation of the damage and its mask. Sargent’s close friend Ralph Curtis wrote to his parents after first seeing the portrait at the salon: “I was disappointed by the color. She looks decomposed. All the women jeer. ‘Ah voila “la belle”: Oh, quel horreur!’” Reviewer A. D. Paterson of *The Canadian Magazine* commented on the “unpleasant purplish hue” of her right arm, “not giving the feeling of blood beneath the skin.” Another reviewer called her “pearl blue” skin “cadaverous and clown-like.” Critic William Sharp commented on the “almost willful perversion of the artist’s knowledge of flesh-painting. . . . [It] has far too much blue in it” and “more resembles the flesh of a dead than a living body.” The painter Marie Bashkirtseff seconded the comment, observing that the “chalky paint gives to the shoulders the tone of a corpse.”<sup>25</sup>

Psychologist Efrat Tseëlon argues that it is possible to draw a connection between the ministrations of beauty and the rituals of death. She observes, “One can easily note that many beauty procedures that

- 14 John Singer Sargent, *Dr. Pozzi at Home*, 1881. Oil, 204.5 x 111.4 cm (80 ½ x 43 ⅞ in.). Armand Hammer Collection, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles



are targeted at women (for instance, makeup and plastic surgery) share similar features with some funerary rituals (death masks and embalming). In both cases, the mask of permanence replaces undesirable temporality while drawing attention to it.” Paradoxically, “reproducing the features of death was the best way to imitate life.”<sup>26</sup> If we extend this interpretation, *Madame X*’s “great beauty,” to paraphrase Sargent’s own words, was potentially a lethal one, achieved at the cost of life itself.

Sargent’s *Madame X* confounded the conventional tradition, cherished in art history, whereby beauty is linked to immortality. Literary scholar Elaine Scarry imagines the association in this way: “[One] can see why beauty . . . has been perceived to be bound up with the

immortal, for it prompts a search for a precedent, which in turn prompts a search for a still earlier precedent, and the mind keeps tripping backward until it at last reaches something that has no precedent, which may very well be the immortal.” She adds, “If the beauty of an object lasts exactly as long as the life of the object—the way the blue chalice of a morning glory blossom spins open at dawn and collapses at noon—it will not be faulted for the disappearance of beauty.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast, a woman who is perceived to outlast her beauty is rebuffed and considered foolish.

The link between beauty and death is hardly new, as seen in the beautiful consumptive woman, for instance. Indeed, it was a trope of romanticism.<sup>28</sup> Its usual manifestation in some of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings, for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (*The Annunciation*) (1849–50), depends on a passive, pale young woman made ethereal, sometimes even radiant, by disease. The disfiguring signs of illness, such as deformations of the skin, were almost always suppressed. The rhetoric around Gautreau’s figure is of a different order. The ostensible disfigurement of her skin, her “bruises,” prompted viewers to imagine a damaged soul within.

A touch of blue could be, however, an appealing embellishment to a woman’s toilette, as long as it appeared to float beneath the surface of the skin, rather than on top of it. For years, society beauties had ingested arsenic water to make their skin more transparent, thus allowing the blue capillaries beneath to show through. (In the 1870s, Sears Roebuck offered consumers “Arsenic Complexion Wafers” in both a forty- and seventy-five-cent size.) If the fashionable woman wished to emulate the effects of arsenic while avoiding its toxicity, she could paint delicate blue veins on her powdered skin using a mix of Prussian-blue pigment, Venetian chalk, and gum water. One expert, a Professor Hirzel, claimed that “when the

work is artistically performed, the effect is good and natural.” Baudelaire praised the arsenic-quenching *chloroses* of the satirist painter Gavarni, and in their book on eighteenth-century French painting the brothers Goncourt wrote with relish of the delicate skin tones of Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Jean-Honoré Fragonard.<sup>29</sup> These artists were particularly admired for their skill in hinting at the blood flowing beneath the skin of female sitters by subtly applying blue and brown tints. In other words, these blue tones were understood not only as evidence of the life of the subject, but also as signs of the artist’s singular ability to render life through art. If skin is a living surface, what better site for confirming the artist’s mimetic powers? The woman who confounded this artistic license did so at her own peril. By inserting a layer of opaque color between herself and the painter, Gautreau violated the conventions of life-affirming transparency and compromised Sargent’s primacy as metaphorical life-giver.

In fact, some of *Madame X*’s spectators believed that Gautreau had already produced the original work of art—herself. Ralph Curtis recorded one “blagueur club man’s response” to the painting. The club man stood before Gautreau’s portrait at the salon and remarked to a friend, “This is a copy.” His companion objected, “How is it a copy?” only to be assured that “a painting made after *another* piece of painting is called a ‘copy.’” Even Sargent seems to have been susceptible to thinking of his painting as a copy of a work that already existed, to which he had deferred. When he defended himself against his severest critics (Gautreau’s mother principal among them), he invoked the fidelity of his canvas to his sitter’s public persona, as if he were merely duplicating reality. Sargent told Gautreau’s mother that he had “painted her exactly as she was dressed, that nothing could be said of the canvas worse than had been said in print.”<sup>30</sup> Sargent refused to take the portrait down from the salon, as Madame



15 John Singer Sargent, *Madame Gautreau Drinking a Toast*, ca. 1883. Oil on wood, 31.7 x 41 cm (12 ½ x 16 ⅛ in.). Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

16 John Singer Sargent, *Study of Madame Gautreau (Madame X)*, ca. 1884. Oil, 206.4 x 108 cm (81 ¼ x 42 ½ in.). Tate Gallery, London, Art Resource, New York



Avegno begged him to do, and he resisted touching up the canvas, despite the onslaught of negative criticism. But there was one passage that was an exception.

The salon public first saw the portrait of Madame Gautreau with her fallen right shoulder strap pressing into the flesh of her upper arm (fig. 17). The torsion of her arm now makes sense if we imagine that only this strained position guards her already tentative modesty. The fallen strap was a critical component of Gautreau's currency as an object of sexual desire. Sargent restored the strap to her shoulder, but his refusal to make other revisions

body's sinuous curves, it possesses an almost masculine assurance. Gautreau configured, and Sargent painted, a pose that is about posing, a "metapose," which calls into question the agency of the artist in controlling the terms of the portrait.

Gautreau—through Sargent—brazenly defied the conventions for feminine display, and in so doing spurned the visible signs of masculine possession. Her defiance is unmitigated by the sketchily painted, but clearly visible, wedding ring, which is less a reassurance than provocative evidence of familial attachment lightly worn.

---

*Sargent refused to take the portrait down from the salon, as Madame Avegno begged him to do, and he resisted touching up the canvas, despite the onslaught of negative criticism.*

---

prompted the salon painter William Bouguereau to scold him about "the danger of unconventional practices," which, according to the older painter, "led to breaking up of families and other dire consequences."<sup>31</sup>

Gautreau's skin may have pictured death for her viewers, but the tensed, "élancé" body, as Sargent himself described it, spelled life, in particular the erotic life of a woman who seemed demanding yet disdainful of homage. With her head turned defiantly away, and her body contracted in a most unyielding manner, *Madame X* confounded fantasies of possession, one of the time-honored privileges extended to the male viewer of the female subject. Gautreau's tensed body challenges the entire cultural history of how a woman *should* pose. Her restless immobility contests the presumed passivity of posing, which enables a woman to be stared at in the first place. It is almost as if Gautreau's body, rather than her unavailable gaze, somehow looks back at the viewer.<sup>32</sup> Despite her

Traditionally, women were painted to invite the illusion of touch, and, by extension, of physical possession. But *Madame X*, as Sargent presented her, violated those presuppositions and the implied privileges that went with them. Viewers could look—indeed Gautreau's presentation virtually commanded them to look. For a variety of reasons, though, it was clear that they could not touch, an implicit prohibition that contradicts Sargent's usual attentiveness to the luster of satiny fabric and the matte softness of skin.

In the commentaries about the painting, an almost visceral repulsion inflected many critics' remarks, as if they imagined, then rejected in horror the possibility of touching the object of their gaze. Houssaye was expansive in his distaste: "The profile is pointed, the eye microscopic, the mouth imperceptible, the color pallid, the neck sinewy, the right arm lacks articulation, the hand is deboned. The décolletage of the bodice doesn't make contact with the bust, it seems to flee any contact with the flesh."<sup>33</sup> The language is extraordinary,



as if the stiffened dress itself repels the critic's own touch.

If Gautreau's body evokes sensuality and life, and her skin registers death and decay, other passages in the painting adopt more ambiguous positions on this spectrum. They seem to be sites of mutual resistance, failures of accommodation between artist and subject. These passages suggest Sargent's recognition of the fragility of Gautreau's public performance of a role that masked, perhaps even preempted, her private identity. Sargent painted Gautreau's brazenness, but he also suggested that there were interruptions, or tears, in the carefully constructed second skin, as Anzieu might articulate it. Consider, for example, the auburn tendrils that curl at Gautreau's exposed nape, the vivid redness of the interior of the nostril, the blur of the mascaraed eyelashes, and the lightly held fingers of her left hand. Gautreau's sexuality is at once flaunted and withheld. The fan she holds points directly to the stomacher of her costume, an attenuated triangle whose deep V both defines and conceals her sexual parts.

Elsewhere, Sargent soundly trumps the mimetic death-in-life of his subject. Gautreau's reddened ear is not only saturated in tone, but highlighted with white flecks that give it a nearly sculptural presence as well. It is rendered even more conspicuous by its position in the center of the upper half of the painting. Not only does her ear seem a revelatory rupture in the "second skin," but also its scarlet hue and delicate architecture offer an unmistakable invitation to imagine it as an opening into the interior of Gautreau's body. And because the ear's fiery color is contrasted dramatically with the lavender pallor of her surrounding face and neck, her ear comes to seem, in comparison, more "natural." In this passage, it is as if the mask had given way to provide a glimpse of the reality hidden beneath, even though the ear, too, is doubly rendered with paint. Furthermore, the fleshy inner palm of Gautreau's right

17 *Madame X*, n.d. Albumen print. From a scrapbook of photographic reproductions of paintings by John Singer Sargent, p. 49. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Thomas J. Watson Library. Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, 1950

hand is articulated with flattened, almost crude, bands of coral and crimson, as though here, at last, Sargent can assert *his* conception of what counts as a vital skin tone. It is his painted resistance to the paint of his subject.

Nothing could console Gautreau's devastated mother after the contentious salon debut. Ralph Curtis recorded her agitated pleading: "All Paris mocks my daughter. She is ruined. My people will be forced to defend themselves. She'll die of chagrin."<sup>34</sup> Madame Avegno's hysterical entreaties appear to have been inspired not by the portrait, but by the reactions to it, as if something previously unarticulated or inadmissible had been exposed to view.

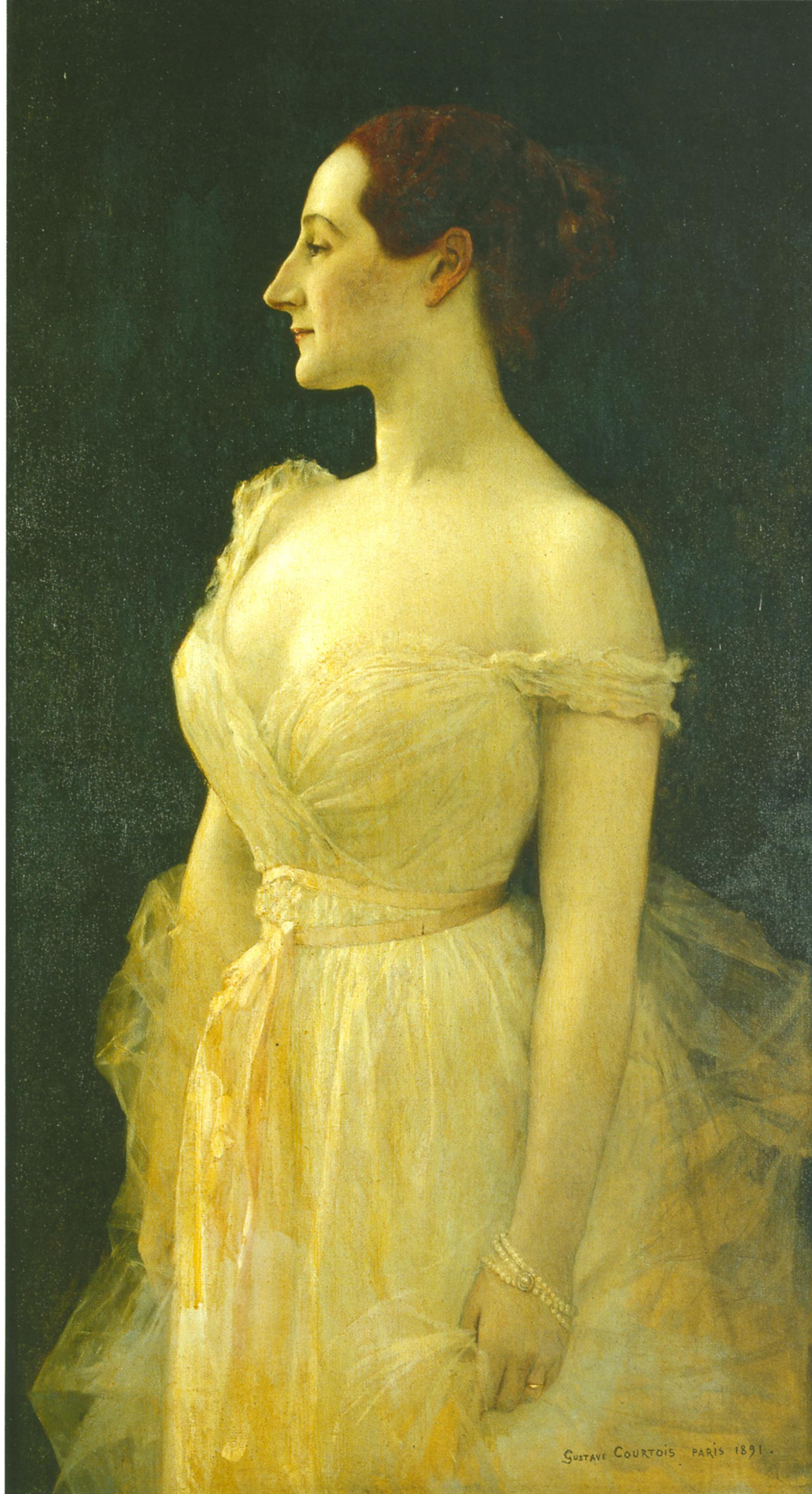
We may understand Madame Avegno's reaction in greater depth if we consider that in psychoanalytic terms the original "envelope" is the skin of the mother. It is that "primordially glorious skin," as writer Francette Pacteau has said, "which is enacted in the magically elaborated corporeal surface of the made-up and costumed body of the daughter." Pacteau argued, "In displaying her sartorial covering, therefore, the woman parades that which she has acquired from the mother by either gift or theft."<sup>35</sup> For Avegno, her daughter's skin, dress, and pose evidently constituted a kind of poisoned tunic, which the mother herself had conspired in making. In 1884, neither Gautreau's mother nor Sargent could claim satisfactory possession of the imaginatively purloined skin of the daughter, whose representation—in life and art—each had struggled assiduously to control.

As for Gautreau herself, she eventually expanded the bounds of her second skin and engendered her own mythology. She posed for other artists who, unlike Sargent, retreated from the force of her apparition (see, for example, Gustave Courtois's 1891 portrait of her [fig. 18]). A story is told about the crowds that would gather to watch the famed beauty bathe at the seashore. On coming out of the water (where she lost much of her

makeup), she paused, refusing to cross the sands. A "mulatto giant," as one witness said, threw a huge towel over her, and then carried her, completely covered, to a dressing room. The dark skin tone of this mother-substitute offered a calculated contrast to the pallor of her employer whom she was compelled to cradle like a child. Having lost her magical skin by immersion, Gautreau presumably would later apply her makeup afresh; when she reappeared, standing erect, the regeneration would be complete.<sup>36</sup> For this creature of artifice, rebirth depended not on deliverance to a purer, more innocent state, but on the restoration of the morbidly colored skin powder and posture that defined her. She did not, and could not, exist until that fortified second skin was restored. She was defined from the outside in.

The decomposition that Gautreau and Sargent were complicit in visualizing for the canvas anticipated the actual organic decay of the youthful body and the paintable skin on which Gautreau's social identity depended. She is said to have become a recluse after overhearing a remark in Cannes that her physical splendor was disappearing. The New Orleans *Picayune* reported that she had all the mirrors removed from her home, and traveled only in private trains hidden behind white, opaque veils.<sup>37</sup> When Gautreau strolled on the beach in southern France, she was said to shroud herself in layers of white fabric as she glided over the sand: the *femme froide* had become a ghost.

A consummate actor himself—likely performing nothing less than heterosexuality—Sargent understood well the terms, and the cost, of enacting an identity constructed from the outside in. Sargent retained possession of *Madame X* until 1916 (fig. 19), exhibiting it occasionally, mostly in America. He once refused a request from the Kaiser to loan it to an exhibition in Germany, even after Gautreau sent him a pleading letter. Less than a year after she died, in 1915,



18 Gustave Courtois, *Madame Gautreau*, 1891. Oil, 106 x 58.5 cm (41 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 23 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.). Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Sargent finally sold the painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, conceding that it was probably the best thing he had ever done.<sup>38</sup> The scandal of *Madame X* had been a blow to the youthful, ambitious Sargent, as it was to both Gautreau

and her stage-managing mother. Despite the artist's original frustrations at not being able to fully co-opt his subject's elusive self-coloring and self-shaping into his picture, he ultimately became the agent of her immortality, as she became one of his.



19 John Singer Sargent in his Paris studio with *Madame X* on an easel, ca. 1885. Photographs of artists in their Paris studios, 1880–1890, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

## Notes

I want to thank the audiences at SUNY at Albany, Washington University at St. Louis, the University of Pennsylvania, and the nineteenth-century session chaired by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer at the 1997 College Art Annual Meeting in New York for their stimulating comments. I also want to acknowledge the help of H. Barbara Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown, curator of American paintings and sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and her staff for generously sharing their files on Sargent. Marc Simpson's early encouragement made the project seem viable, and the support of Elizabeth Childs and Janine Mileaf made the

difference. I thank Susan Taylor-Leduc and Sarah Cohen, who commented on earlier versions of the draft. For their thoughts on the equivocal nature of beauty, I also thank the members of my reading group—Elizabeth Bartman, Ülkü Bates, Anne Lowenthal, Lucy Oakley, and Lisa Vergara.

1 For the most recent publications on Sargent, see Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Early Portraits, Complete Paintings, Volume I*, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1998), pp. 112–17; and *John Singer Sargent*,

Kilmurray and Ormond, eds. (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), pp. 100–3. See also Marc Simpson, with Richard Ormond and H. Barbara Weinberg, *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale U. Press, 1997). On Sargent's work in light of his temperament and social standing, consult Trevor Fairbrother's *John Singer Sargent: The Sensualist* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2000). See *Vogue*, June 1999, pp. 208–13. The card was sold in the shop of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

- 2 For excerpts from a variety of responses to *Madame X* at the time it was first exhibited, see Simpson et al., *Uncanny Spectacle*, pp. 140–41. Also important is Fairbrother's "The Shock of John Singer Sargent's *Madame Gautreau*," *Arts Magazine* 55 (Jan. 1981): 90–97. Other critical texts include: William Howe Downs, *John S. Sargent: His Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1925); Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1927); Charles Merrill Mount, *John Singer Sargent: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955); Stanley Olson, *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Fairbrother, "John Singer Sargent and America" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard U., 1969); Fairbrother, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1994); and Patricia Hills et al., *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986).
- 3 I am inspired by Marc Simpson's comment on Sargent's *Dr. Pozzi at Home*. He said that Pozzi, "almost like a highly strung thoroughbred, lifts his head and sniffs the air." See Simpson et al., *Uncanny Spectacle*, p. 130.
- 4 I thank Lucy Oakley for pointing out some of the structural details of the dress. On *Madame X*'s comportment, see Albert Boime, "Sargent in Paris and London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray," in Hills et al., *Sargent*, pp. 75–109, especially pp. 86–91.
- 5 For brief biographies of Gautreau and her family, see Carter Ratcliffe, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), p. 79; Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, p. 113; and also the painting files of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of American Paintings and Sculpture.
- 6 See Fairbrother, "The Shock of John Singer Sargent's *Madame Gautreau*," pp. 90–97. Fairbrother quotes a favorable review by the critic for *The Art Amateur*, "Two Portraits of a Lady," *The Art Amateur* 30 (Jan. 1894): 44–45. Boime points out Louis de Fourcaud's psychological insights regarding the painting when it was first exhibited; see Hills et al., *Sargent*, p. 89. Also see Louis de Fourcaud, "Le Salon de 1884," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 79 (1884): 477–78, 482–84. See Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, pp. 113–14, for comments on the painting.
- 7 On recent approaches to portraiture, see Harry Berger Jr., "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture," *Representations* 46 (spring 1994): 87–120; Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1991); Melissa Feldman, with essay by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, U. of Pennsylvania, 1994); Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1993); Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn.: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale U. Press, 1993); and *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Joanna Woodall, ed. (Manchester: Manchester U. Press, 1997).
- 8 See Simpson, *Uncanny Spectacle*, p. 118, for Sargent's letter to Mrs. Henry White, 15 March 1883; Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, roll 647, frames 856–58. On Picasso, see Robert Lubar, "Unmasking Pablo's Gertrude: Queer Desire and the Subject of Portraiture," *Art Bulletin* 79 (March 1997): 57–84. On Sargent, see Fairbrother, "The Complications of Being Sargent," *John Singer Sargent: Portraits of the Wertheimer Family*, Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1999), pp. 34–42; id., "Sargent's Genre Paintings and the Issues of Suppression and Privacy," *Studies in American Art*, vol. 37, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Symposium Papers XXI, *American Art Around 1900: Lectures in Memory of Daniel Fraad*, Doreen Bolger and Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., eds. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990), pp. 29–49; and also id., "A Private Album: John Singer Sargent's Drawings of Nude Male Models" *Arts Magazine* 56 (Dec. 1981): 70–79. These ideas are elaborated most recently in Fairbrother, *The Sensualist*. See also Kilmurray and Ormond, *Sargent*, pp. 14–15.
- 9 For a short discussion of Flora Priestley, see Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, pp. 226–30, cat. nos. 225–29. On Charcot, see Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1989) esp. pp. 75–108; and Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Invention de l'Hystérie: Charcot et l'Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Editions Macula, 1982).
- 10 For Sargent's letter, see Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, p. 113. The original letter was addressed to Vernon Lee, 10 February 1883, and sent from Nice. The letter is now in the Ormond family archive in London.
- 11 For discussion of the various sketches, see Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, pp. 114–18; the watercolor is cat. no. 117. On Pozzi's background and the social contacts that overlapped with Sargent's, see Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, pp. 55–56, cat. no. 40. For a discussion of Pozzi's portrait by Sargent, see Juliet Bellow, "Engendering the Masculine Interior: John Singer Sargent's *Dr. Pozzi at Home*," (unpublished master's thesis, U. of Pennsylvania, 2000). For discussion of *Madame Gautreau Making a Toast*, see Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, p. 117, cat. no. 116.
- 12 Elisabeth Bronfen, "Facing Defacement: Degas's Portraits of Women," *Degas Portraits*, Felix Baumann and Marianne Karabelnik, eds. (London: Merrell Holberton, 1994), pp. 227–49, especially p. 247. Mount, *A Biography*, p. 81.
- 13 On the history of makeup, see Maggie Angeloglou, *A History of Make-up* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970); Jennifer Craik, "I Must Put on My Face: Making up the Body," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1989): 1–24; Murray Wax, "Themes in Cosmetics and Grooming," *American Journal of Sociology* 62 (1957): 588–93; and Neville Williams, *Powder and Paint: A History of the Englishwoman's Toilet—Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957). Also important for my thinking has been Kathy Lee Peiss's *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998). On costume in Sargent's work, see Leigh Culver, "Performing Identities in the Art of John Singer Sargent" (Ph.D. diss., U. of Pennsylvania, 1999).
- 14 Carol Armstrong, "Facturing Femininity: Manet's *Before the Mirror*," *October* 74 (fall 1995): 75–104. For the Clay quote, see Jean Clay, "Ointments, Makeup, Pollen," *October* 27 (winter 1983): 3–44, 43. On the issue of likeness in portraiture, see Brilliant, *Portraiture*, pp. 23–44.

- 15 Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, p. 39.
- 16 Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, Chris Turner, trans. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale U. Press, 1989), pp. 17, 123–24.
- 17 See Boime, “Sargent in Paris and London,” p. 91, 89.
- 18 Henri Houssaye, “Le Salon de 1884,” *Revue des deux mondes* 63 (1 June 1884): 589, quoted in Evan Charteris’s *John Sargent* (New York: Charles Scribner’s & Sons, 1927), p. 62.
- 19 See Charles Baudelaire, “In Praise of Cosmetics,” *The Painter of Modern Life*, collected in *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*, Peter Quennell, ed., Norman Cameron, trans. (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson Ltd., 1950), p. 63; and Max Beerbohm, “A Defense of Cosmetics,” originally published in *Yellow Book*, April 1894, reprinted as “The Pervasion of Rouge,” in Beerbohm, *Works and More* (Grosse Pointe, Mich.: Scholarly Press, 1969), pp. 78–98. See Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, p. 27.
- 20 On the general conventions of 1880s cosmetics, see especially Richard Corson, *Fashions in Make-up: From Ancient to Modern Times* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), pp. 338–52. Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 158, especially her chapter, “Cosmetic Attributes,” pp. 153–75.
- 21 Ella Adelia Fletcher, *The Woman Beautiful: A Practical Treatise on the Development and Preservation of Women’s Health and Beauty, and the Principles of Taste in Dress* (New York: W. M. Young and Co., 1899), p. 134. Paul Valéry, *Idée Fixe: A Duologue by the Sea*, David Paul, trans., preface by Jackson Matthews, intro. by Philip Wheelwright, Bollingen Series XLV, vol. 5, *Collected Works of Paul Valéry* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1965), p. 31.
- 22 Anzieu, *Skin Ego*, p. 62; *ibid.*, pp. 107–8.
- 23 Lola Montez is quoted in Corson, *Fashions in Make-Up*, p. 326.
- 24 Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, p. 41. See “Chronic Lead Poisoning Following the Use of Cosmetics—With Cases,” *St. Louis Courier of Medicine and Collateral Sciences* 1 (1879): 514–16; Virginia Smith, “The Popularisation of Medical Knowledge: The Case of Cosmetics,” *Society for the Social History of Medicine Bulletin*, no. 39 (1986): 12–15; and Corson, *Fashions in Make-Up*, pp. 351–53, 375–77.
- 25 See Sander L. Gilman, *Creating Beauty to Cure the Soul: Race and Psychology in the Shaping of Aesthetic Surgery* (Durham, N.C.: Duke U. Press, 1998), p. 47. This extract from a letter that Ralph Curtis wrote to his parents is quoted in Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, p. 113. The original letter is in the Sargent Papers, Boston Athenaeum, box 1, folder 12. See A. D. Paterson, “Sargent: A Memory,” *The Canadian Magazine* 65 (March 1926): 30; William Sharp, *Art Journal* (1884): 179–80, quoted twice; and Marie Bashkirtseff, *The Last Confessions of Marie Bashkirtseff, and Her Correspondence with Guy de Maupassant*, Jeannette L. Gilder, ed. (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1901), p. 87, quoted in Mount, *John Singer Sargent*, p. 74.
- 26 Efrat Tseñlon, *The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life*, Mike Featherstone, ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 114. Tseñlon is quoting Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, Helen Weaver, trans. (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1991), p. 262.
- 27 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. Press, 1999), pp. 30, 50.
- 28 See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester, England: Manchester U. Press, 1992).
- 29 Corson, *Fashions in Make-Up*, p. 370; *ibid.*, p. 354. See Charles Baudelaire, *L’Idéal, XVIII of Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1888). Edmond de and Jules de Goncourt, *French Eighteenth-Century Painters: Watteau, Boucher, Chardin, La Tour, Greuze, Fragonard* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell U. Press, 1981). My thanks to Suzanne Lindsay for pointing out this reference to me.
- 30 Ralph Curtis to his parents, quoted in Kilmurray and Ormond, *Sargent*, p. 102. See Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, p. 114.
- 31 Quoted in Fairbrother, “The Shock of John Singer Sargent’s *Madame Gautreau*,” p. 94.
- 32 Boime, “Sargent in Paris and London,” p. 89. I am paraphrasing the title of the book by James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1997), in which the author discusses the eerie conviction we often have that the objects around us are “looking back” at us.
- 33 Houssaye, “Le Salon de 1884,” p. 589. Also see Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1994), especially pp. 118, 218, n. 54.
- 34 Ralph Curtis writing to his parents, quoted in Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, p. 114.
- 35 Pacteau, *Beauty*, p. 158.
- 36 From an article by George Jordan in the *Times Picayune*, New Orleans, 22 June 1975, collected in the painting files for *Madame X*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of American Paintings and Sculpture.
- 37 Jordan, in the *Times Picayune*, was quoting Gabriel Pringue, “who wrote about Virginie Gautreau in 1948,” although there is no source mentioned; also from the painting files of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of American Paintings and Sculpture. In *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. Press, 1999), Sally M. Promey intriguingly discusses Sargent’s use of veils, tents, wrappings, and coverings of all kinds. See especially pp. 252–63.
- 38 Cited in Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, p. 114. Sargent’s original letter on the subject is quoted in Charteris, *Sargent*, 1927, pp. 64–65. Letter to Edward Robinson, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 8 January 1916, painting files of the Metropolitan, Department of American Paintings and Sculpture. Madame Gautreau would have a longer life within Sargent’s paintings. Jane Dini has shown that Sargent adapted her features for the goddess Diana in his mural of *Apollo in His Chariot with the Hours*, part of the mural cycle for the *Triumph of Religion* at the Boston Public Library (1921–25); see Dini, “Public Bodies: Form and Identity in the Work of John Singer Sargent,” Ph.D. diss., U. of California, Santa Barbara, 1998.