‘Hewn with a Hatchet’

John Singer Sargent’s sculptural approach to form in painting

By Ruth Smith

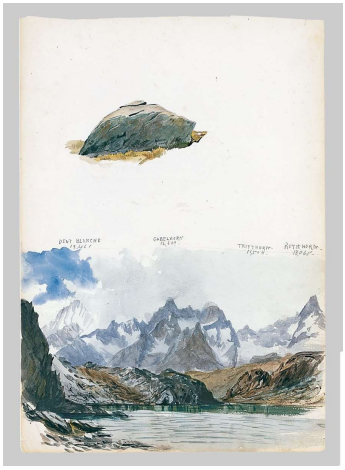
John Singer Sargent, *Home Fields*, oil on canvas, 73 x 96.5 cm, 1885, The Detroit Institute of Arts.

John Singer Sargent (born 12 January 1856, Florence, Italy—died 15 April 1925, London, England).

Sargent has often been seen as a compromise between avant-garde developments in Impressionism and traditional portrait painting. This is an oversight and I believe he was engaged in the ocular effects of light just as much as the Impressionist painters. He combined loose painterly brushwork with a focus on tone to render form in radically new ways.

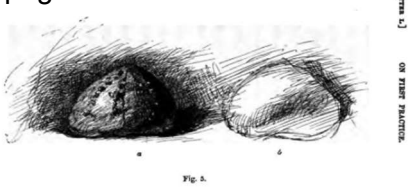
Claude Monet, *Impression Sunrise,* oil on canvas, 48 cm × 63 cm, 1872, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris.

Impressionists such as Monet experimented with colour interaction. E.g. here the sun is the same tone as the sky, despite being a very different hue. This creates a shimmering, iridescent effect. Sargent, however, was more concerned with the ocular effects of portraying three dimensional, solid forms.



John Singer Sargent, *View of Four Mountains from the Gorner Grat, Rock (from "Splendid Mountain Watercolours" Sketchbook)*, watercolour and graphite on off-white wove paper, 1870, 40.6 x 27.6cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

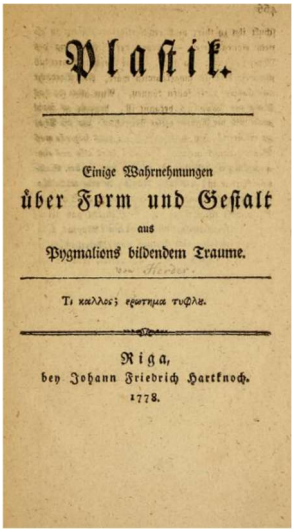
Sargent is likely to have begun to learn drawing as a child from John Ruskin’s book, *The Elements of Drawing* (1857). ‘Exercise VIII’ required the reader to make a tonal drawing of a stone to render it a three-dimensional object on the flat page.



J. Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing: In Three Letters to Beginners*, (Smith, Elder and Co.: London, 1857), p. 45.

For Enlightenment philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder (of whose book, *Plastik*, (1878) Sargent was almost certainly aware), sculpture was grounded in touch and was seen tonally, whereas painting was rooted in sight. He used this example of a man with poor sight:

‘Even when the man’s cataracts were at their worst, he could still distinguish light from dark, and, in strong light, black, white, and scarlet. But his sense of sight was still only a sense of touch. What moved upon his closed eyes were bodies rather than properties of surfaces or colours.’ - Herder *Plastik,* p. 34.



‘For you can see no outline; what you see is only a certain space of gradated shade’…‘you will get it more right by thus **feeling your way to it in shade**, than if you tried to draw the outline at first’. - Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing,* p. 51

The language used to describe Sargent's method, and how his own teacher, Carolus Duran, taught, demonstrates his desire to give a sense of a three-dimensional presence through a strong tonal awareness:

'It annoyed him very much if the accents were carelessly indicated without accurate consideration … **They were, in a way, the nails upon which the whole structure depended for solidity**.' - Sargent's pupil, Julie Heyneman

'We blocked in the curtain first, and then put in the figure or face in **big touches like a coarse wooden head hewn with a hatchet**' - Student of Sargent's teacher, Carolus Duran

'At first [Sargent] worked only for the middle tones, to model in large planes, as he would have done had the head been an apple. **In short, he painted, as a sculptor models**' - Sargent's pupil, Julie Heyneman

John Singer Sargent, *Carolus-Duran*, 1878, oil on panel, 34.3 x 26.7cm, Estate of Mrs Norman B. Woolworth.

John Singer Sargent, *Vernon Lee*, oil on canvas, 53 × 43 cm, 1881, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Massachusetts.

Michelangelo, *The Atlas*, 1530-1534, marble, height 277cm, Accademia Gallery, Florence.

'Get in your mind the sculptors [sic] view of things'.

- John Singer Sargent to his pupils.

Sargent's loose paintwork meant he was often accused of leaving works 'unfinished'. However, the writer Walter Pater believed that the unfinished qualities of Michelangelo's sculptures 'etherealised pure form' through the imaginative engagement of the viewer. Perhaps similarly, Sargent's painterly brushwork is only 'completed' in the imagination of the viewer, giving subjects an impression of solidity yet also changeability and vitality.

John Singer Sargent, *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*, oil on canvas, 1892, 127 × 101 cm, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh.

In *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture* (1893), Adolf Hildebrand argued that sculpture was seen as 'kinaesthetic' glimpses stitched together by the mind, while painting was seen as one instant visual projection. Hildebrand believed that the aim of the artist was to unite the two modes of seeing in their work. *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*, is an example of how Sargent combined fine modelling of the face with a painterly periphery, thus replicating a 'kinaesthetic glance' in painting. Similarly Sargent united a unified pictorial arrangement of his sculptural piece, *Crucifix*, at the Boston Public Library.

John Singer Sargent, *Crucifix*, 1903, gilded and painted plaster with metal and papier-mâché reliefs, 335 x 232 x 26cm, Sargent Hall, Boston Public Library, Massachusetts.