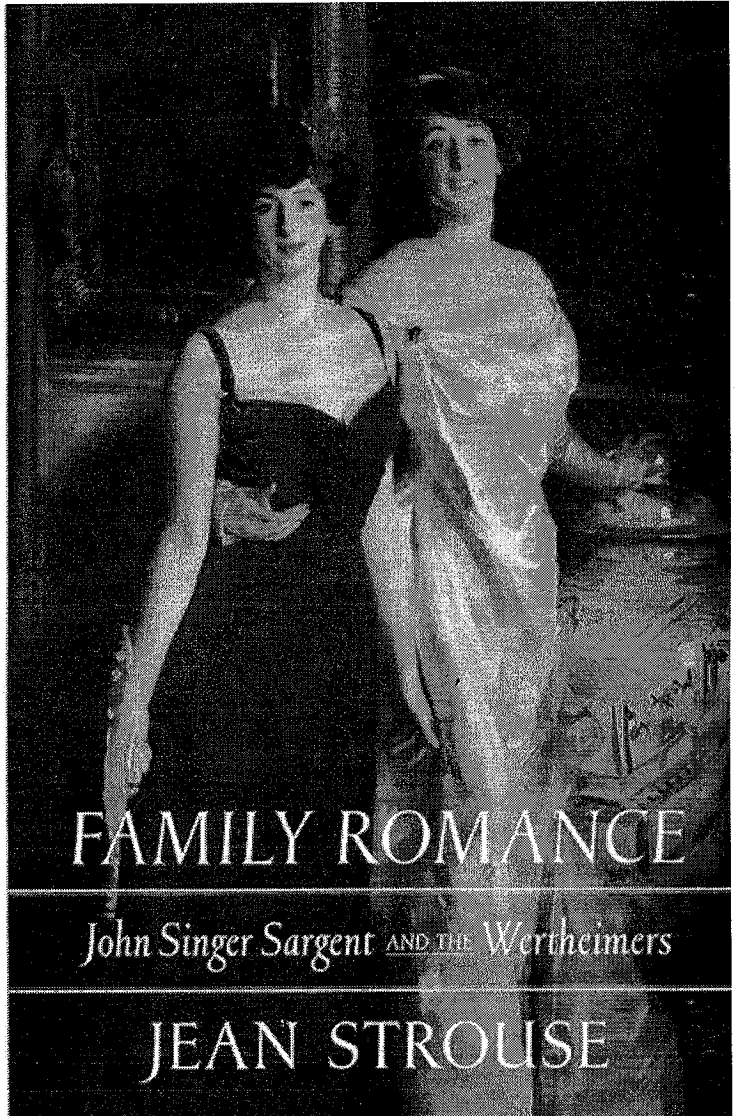
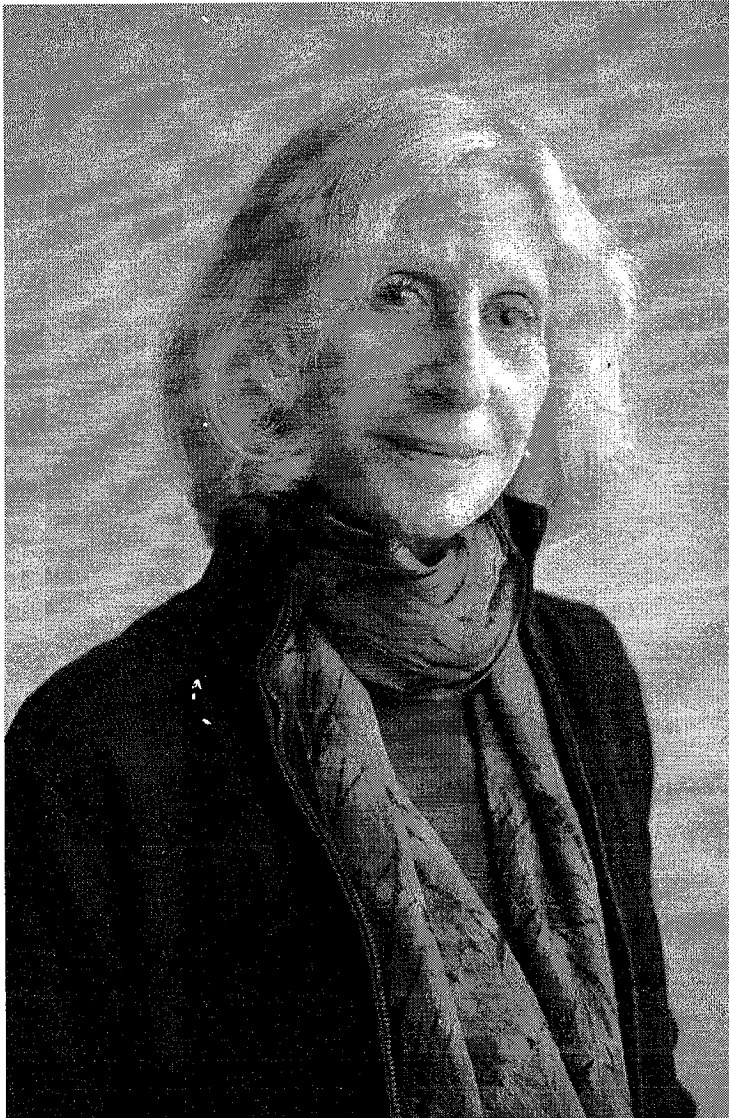


BOOK REVIEW

# ‘Family Romance’ paints a portrait of Sargent and his patrons

Jean Strouse explores the fin-de-siècle story of the artist and one family he portrayed.

By **Charles Finch** Updated November 21, 2024, 2 hours ago



Author Jean Strouse and the cover to “Family Romance.” NINA SUBIN/FSG

Did the first cave painters, thirty thousand years ago, get some special reward from the chief? Extra pebbles, maybe, or pottage? The history of art is a history of commerce: a winding helix of transactions down the centuries, the brute power of money bartered for the ethereal authority of beauty.

In “Family Romance: John Singer Sargent and the Wertheimers,” Jean Strouse delicately and thoroughly traces one such exchange. Beginning in 1897, the virtuosic Sargent, the premier society portraitist of his time, painted the large family of the art broker Asher Wertheimer. The commission resulted in twelve paintings, the majority of which Wertheimer would ultimately pledge to the National Gallery. They reside now at the Tate, where they stand as one of the treasures of English art.

What Strouse — expert in this transatlantic fin-de-siècle milieu, having previously written biographies of J.P. Morgan and Alice James — finds interesting is that neither party was in fact precisely English, at least as English snobbery might have understood the term. Sargent was an American who didn’t visit America until adulthood, while the Wertheimers were part of the Anglo-Jewish aristocracy that played such a vital and enlivening role in British society before World War I without ever winning total acceptance. *Family Romance* teases this tension into an absorbing, frequently tragic portrayal of that glittering, fragile epoch, which would so swiftly be annihilated by the horrors of the twentieth century.

John Singer Sargent, born in 1856, was, like Raphael or Goya, undeniable from the start, a success very young and without interruption thereafter. His contemporary Henry James summed it up best; Sargent’s early work, he said, presented the “uncanny” effect of “a talent which on the very threshold of its career has nothing more to learn.”

But was he a genius? As Strouse establishes there has always been a debate. As extravagant as his gifts may have been, he was not original, in an age of great

originality in painting; his models were Velázquez and the Dutch trio of Hals, Rembrandt, and Vermeer, with a slight indent upon his consciousness later added by Manet. He had precisely one moment of heresy and adventure in him: the famously shocking portrait of “Madame X,” a young society beauty presented in profile, a dress strap falling from her shoulder. “I suppose it is the best thing I’ve ever done,” he said near the end of his life, and he was right. His second most memorable painting, “The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit,” is a pure Velázquez tribute, and the ambitious murals of his late career, in the Boston Public Library, are more beloved than brilliant.

Yet I think the answer is that he was. His genius was emotional. His portraits are a joy, somehow both fluid and exact, and above all possessed of a piercing emotional intelligence, capturing their subjects so accurately that they still seem alive. This quality is there in the first of the Wertheimer portraits, of Asher, the patriarch, one of the “kings of the London art trade,” capturing him in mid-stride, cigar in hand, open, handsome, game, utterly self-confident. Instantly a friend.

Asher presided over one of those surreally enormous households the Victorian era produced: parents, ten children, various relatives, a dozen servants, and “many dogs.” Sargent, who was almost definitely gay, was a perfect “extra man,” as the saying used to go, and the Wertheimers’ dining room became known over time as “Sargent’s Mess.” In his portraits of the family — “Family Romance” is beautifully and generously illustrated — this familiarity is borne out, the handsome faces full of mystery and truth, the sumptuous backgrounds a testament to the family’s ascent.

As Strouse shows, however, the insouciant grandeur of the portraits had two shadows: bigotry and tragedy. The first was easier to predict. Between 1830 and 1871, she writes, “Jews gained the rights to conduct retail business in the City of London, practice law, hold municipal office, vote.” When the sons of the most successful of these Jewish families went off to the nation’s best schools, however, they were subjects to “Jew-

hunts,” while one of the earliest critics of Asher’s portrait felt free to sneeringly and nonsensically comment that the dealer seemed to be “counting golden shekels.”

Then there is the age they inhabited. From the peak we see in the portraits, the Wertheimers experienced a rapid fall. Asher’s sons died young and wretchedly, and of all his children, bursting with youth and innocence and potential in Sargent’s depictions, only one, Ena, retained any prominence in London society. She died almost exactly one hundred years after Asher’s father Samson arrived in England from Germany to set up a trade in art — and that is it, the whole story of the Wertheimer family, more or less, barely the lifespan of a single Medici.

What remains is the golden beauty of Sargent’s pictures of them. Such must be Asher’s compromised victory; perhaps it is more often than not this way when the hubris of money pursues the prestige of art to commemorate itself. The pre-war era merely accelerated the decline. For all its glamor, it was “an age on edge” wrote Max Beerbohm, who saw as deeply into the heart of his time as any other Englishman. As he went on to add, vindicating both Strouse’s cultured group biography and those of us who believe in the painter’s contested genius, its “supreme interpreter,” was, “of course, Mr. Sargent.”

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Family Romance: John Singer Sargent and the Wertheimers

By Jean Strouse

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