



Biography | *Book Review*

‘Sargent’s Mess’

Why the artist felt an affinity with a Jewish family grudgingly admitted to
high society

By Peter Parker



“Essie, Ruby and Ferdinand, Children of Asher Wertheimer” by John Singer Sargent, 1902. Oil on canvas. From the book under review
© Tate. Presented by the widow and family of Asher Wertheimer in accordance with his wishes, 1922. Photograph: Tate

IN THIS REVIEW

FAMILY ROMANCE

John Singer Sargent and the Wertheimers
311pp. University of Manchester Press. £25.

Jean Strouse

In 1898, Asher Wertheimer, a leading London art dealer, marked his silver wedding anniversary by commissioning John Singer Sargent to paint two portraits, one of himself and one of his wife. Sargent went on to paint all ten of the Wertheimers' sons and daughters, and became a close friend of the family. Asher Wertheimer would eventually bequeath nine of the ten portraits to the National Gallery with the request that they should be displayed together, which they were amid controversy in 1923. It was almost unprecedented that the work of a living painter should be hung in the Gallery, and some complained that it was wholly inappropriate for paintings of Jewish upstarts to be exhibited alongside portraits of noble and long-established English families by Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and Thomas Lawrence. Questions were asked in the House of Commons, the Conservative MP Sir Charles Oman suggesting that "these clever, but extremely repulsive, pictures should be placed in a special chamber of horrors, and not between brilliant examples of the art of Turner". In 1926, the portraits were moved to a new Sargent Gallery at the Tate, but after that were not again displayed together until 2022, and then only in a temporary exhibition.

The Wertheimer paintings are remarkable not simply as artworks, but because they form the largest collection of portraits by Sargent of a single family and tell us a good deal about social attitudes to Jews in English society. They reflect a period in which a new cosmopolitan plutocracy began to gain ascendancy over the old English aristocracy, and it is a nice irony that the Wertheimers spent much of their professional lives buying up paintings and other heirlooms reluctantly put on the market by English aristocrats impoverished by the great agricultural depression and selling them on to the Rothschilds.

The disappearance of most of the Wertheimer papers, and Sargent's habit of destroying his correspondence, present obstacles to anyone telling the story of the paintings and their sitters. Jean Strouse has, however, tracked down some of the dealer's descendants, and was fortunate enough to come across and buy a small but revealing cache of Sargent's letters to the family. She provides detailed descriptions of the Wertheimers' German-Jewish ancestry and of the art market in which Asher played so significant a role, but several members of the family were both religiously and socially unorthodox, marrying out, converting to Christianity, or apparently preferring their own sex, and her accounts of their lives still contain frustrating lacunae.

Asher Wertheimer's father had arrived in England from Bavaria in 1839 and set up a business trading in brass and ormolu mounts. He then started selling decorative objects from Russia and the Continent, and held a royal warrant as a "dealer in china, curiosities and antiquities". When he died in 1892 his estate was valued at £382,810 (the equivalent today of around £52 million), left in equal portions to his sons, Charles and Asher, who had both followed him into the family business. In 1871, Asher had married Flora Joseph, whose family were also art dealers. By the time Sargent met them, the Wertheimers were living in a five-storey house in fashionable Connaught Place. Sargent became a frequent visitor after he had begun painting the family's portraits, which Asher hung in the dining room, causing some wag to dub it "Sargent's Mess".

It is not clear how the two men met, but it seems likely that, wanting to commission paintings of his family, Wertheimer simply had the good taste and social aspirations to go to the most acclaimed portraitist of the age, whose huge prices he could well afford. In *The Grand Affair: John Singer Sargent in his world* (2022) - a book conspicuous by its absence from Strouse's bibliography -

Paul Fisher observed that as an Italian-born American living in London, as well as almost certainly being homosexual, the painter felt an affinity with those who were to some extent outsiders in British society. Certainly, a significant number of his portraits were of people who were considered both “alien” and nouveau riche or seemed sexually ambiguous. Not everyone approved of these choices; for example, a critic in the *Spectator* wrote of the bravura 1896 portrait of “Mrs Carl Meyer and Her Children” that “even Mr Sargent’s skill has not succeeded in making attractive these over-civilized European Orientals”. What was meant, of course, was that the sitters looked Jewish, as Wertheimer himself did in Sargent’s lively and affectionate portrait of him painted two years later. Indeed, some commentators thought - and still think - this painting comes uncomfortably close to antisemitic caricature, though Wertheimer himself greatly liked it.

The younger Wertheimers were painted, either individually or in groups of three, between 1901 and 1908. Strouse charts the subsequent lives of the sitters, some in fascinating detail, some only glancingly. There is perhaps not a great deal to say about Essie (b. 1880), who married a stockbroker, acquired a country house at Stoke Poges, and had three children, all of whom were baptised in the Church of England, but her brother Conway (b. 1881) is less excusably given short shrift. The most thorough account is of the oldest daughter, Ena (b. 1874), who was undoubtedly Sargent’s favourite. One story has it that when asked whether she worried about the amount of time Sargent spent with her daughters, Flora Wertheimer replied: “Of course not: he’s only interested in Venetian gondoliers”. Sargent’s real affection for Ena is, however, clear from his paintings of her. He said that he preferred Jewish subjects “as they have more life and movement than our English women”, and those qualities are exemplified by his 1901 double portrait of Ena and her younger

sister Betty (b. 1877). The two young women look as if they are about to sweep triumphantly into a party, with the six-foot-tall Ena displaying the engaging self-confidence that characterized those who had no qualms about being considered arriviste.

Betty and her first husband commissioned Sargent to paint her again in 1908. Unusually the picture is oval in shape, and Betty almost leans out of the frame in her low-cut scarlet dress. Both she and Ena were delighted with the painting, but Strouse rightly describes it as “more faux eighteenth century than genuine early twentieth”, and it never took its place in Sargent’s Mess. Betty had been the first of the Wertheimer children to marry, but her husband died in the war. There were no children from this marriage, or her second, which seems to have been rather semidetached and ended in separation, after which her husband removed all reference to her from his *Who’s Who* entry. She spent her last two decades living with an Austrian woman in a cottage in Surrey.

Sargent’s second portrait of Ena was painted in 1905 at the same time as his formal portrait of the Duke of Marlborough and his family. The two paintings are linked by the duke’s Garter robe and plumed hat, which - left at Sargent’s studio after a sitting - Ena dons with the fabulous swagger that gives her portrait its title, “A Vele Gonfie” (“In Full Sail”). Ena’s conscious play-acting is emphasized by Sargent including in the picture the broomstick he had used to keep her borrowed robe afloat. Ena’s glowing expression suggests the sheer fun the painter and his subject were having, and Strouse nicely describes the picture as an “artfully transgressive collaboration”. By comparison, the group portrait of the Marlboroughs, though not without charm, looks exactly what it was, a dutiful commission fulfilled.

Ena remained *a vele gonfie* throughout her life. Intending to be a painter, she went to the Slade, but the year she graduated she married Robert Mathias, a wealthy German industrialist, and had five children in quick succession. She nevertheless moved in advanced artistic circles, attending the premiere of *Façade* and befriending members of the Ballets Russes. In 1925, she founded an art gallery in Mayfair which showed works by such artists as Dufy, Léger, Gaudier-Brzeska, and members of the Bloomsbury Group, becoming a close friend of Ottoline Morrell and a large number of gay men (among whom Strouse inexplicably includes Percy Grainger). It is shocking to learn that she sold Sargent's portrait of her, probably to fund this new enterprise, but as Strouse says, Ena was "as extravagant, strong-willed and impulsive as her husband was cautious and restrained". Mathias appears to have been extremely long-suffering: at one point Ena painted a mural based on Uccello's "Battle of San Romano", "with her children as mounted warriors and her husband on the ground being trampled by a horse". The gallery closed in 1931, "probably in financial arrears", and Ena would die from cancer five years later at the age of sixty-one, *The Times's* obituarist noting that "She was never one to shorten sail, and when the storm struck her she sank swiftly, but with all her colours flying".

Some of Ena's siblings did not even have time to hoist their colours. Her older brother, Edward (b. 1873), who had become a partner in his father's business, died of typhoid in 1903 after eating a bad oyster during his honeymoon in Paris, which explains why Sargent's 1902 portrait of him remains unfinished. Sargent had already painted the Wertheimers' second son, Alfred (b. 1876), who had wanted to be an actor but was forbidden from doing so by his father, who more or less threatened to cut him off. He instead became a research chemist, and Sargent painted him against a backdrop of glass flasks - though as

Strouse observes, Alfred's "striking looks and impeccable clothes seem more suited to the stage than a lab". Alfred got into further difficulties when he borrowed money from his father to lend to someone who did not return it. In one of the letters Strouse bought, and of which she makes very good use, Sargent generously proposes giving Alfred the missing money so that he can pretend to his father that the debt had been repaid. It is unclear whether Alfred took up this offer, but this and other letters show just how intimate Sargent was with the family.

For reasons Strouse does not explain, and which are perhaps unknown, Alfred had been spending time in South Africa with a wealthy older friend called Harry Freeman Cohen, a British financier who had founded the *Rand Daily Mail*. A few months after his portrait had been "the sensation of the year" at a Royal Academy exhibition, he died in a Johannesburg hotel aged just twenty-six, after overdosing on morphine, to which he had become addicted. The burial certificate adds "Suicide" in parentheses to the cause of death, and Cohen (who was forty-nine and married with four children), killed himself fifteen months later. "It is impossible to know whether there was any connection between these untimely self-inflicted deaths", Strouse writes. Somerset Maugham seems to have borrowed some details of Alfred's life and death for his short story "The Alien Corn" (1931).

The story of the youngest son, Ferdinand (b. 1888), whom Sargent painted in a beautiful group portrait with his sisters Essie and Ruby as an exquisite-looking fourteen-year-old, is also intriguing. He would change his name to Bob Conway, become a painter, pianist, writer and art collector, convert to Anglicanism, and commission a modernist house from the young Denys Lasdun. From the 1930s until his death in 1950 he lived with a sculptor called George Edward Campbell,

to whom he left half his estate, the other half going to the Bishop of Bath and Wells. One feels there must be more details to this story than those Strouse has been able to discover. His sister Ruby's life is more fully documented and a good deal sadder. She sang in charity concerts during the First World War, then moved to Italy in 1925, becoming involved with a member of the Blackshirts thirteen years her junior. This man may have protected her when Mussolini introduced his Racial Laws, or perhaps in the end was responsible for her being rounded up. Because she suffered from diabetes, Ruby was eventually freed from a detention camp into what was known as "free internment", living under surveillance with her maid in her own apartment, and she died there aged fifty-two of "diabetic gangrene and cardiac insufficiency".

Conway was more conventional, marrying and becoming a QC and an unsuccessful Conservative candidate. Given that Strouse often writes about the various Jewish charities and causes with which the family was involved, it seems odd for her not to mention that Conway was also an active supporter of the Jewish Education Aid Society, which among other things provided grants to send David Bomberg, Mark Gertler and Isaac Rosenberg to the Slade. It is presumably no coincidence that Sargent too had helped Bomberg secure his place at the school, while Conway offered to fund Gertler on a painting trip to Italy. Gertler turned him down, but it is surely worth remarking on this association since he was one of the artists Ena exhibited at her gallery.

It is hard to agree with some of Strouse's judgements of the paintings. She dismisses Sargent's 1901 portrait of Hylda (b. 1878) as "awkward", finding the sitter's pose "unnatural", but there is surely something very touching about this least confident-looking of the Wertheimer daughters arrayed in a staggeringly lovely pale mauve gown but refusing to remove her pince-nez. She

also suggests that Sargent was “less than engaged” when painting Hylda a second time in the 1905 triple portrait in which she, Conway and Almina (b. 1886) are posed against a balustrade in a country park. This picture is, however, a clever variation on the kind of paintings the landed classes favoured. Gundogs surrounded by piles of dead game usually feature in such portraits, but the Wertheimer’s terrier and spaniel are clearly pets, and Conway is tenderly holding one of his dog’s paws in his left hand. Strouse further writes that the painting “appears to be set outdoors but was probably done in the studio with props”. The setting was in fact both real and personal to the family: it is Wexham Place, the home of the man who married the sitters’ sister Essie the same year that the portrait was painted. Sargent would go on to paint a second portrait of Almina, dressed *alla Turca* (1908). Strouse observes that, rather than minimizing “the Anglo-Saxon identification of Jews with Eastern exoticism”, Sargent used props to emphasize it in several of the Wertheimer portraits. While this may be true of some of the paintings, the triple portrait shows Hylda, Almina and Conway as fully assimilated into English society, while not taking it entirely seriously - play-acting again.

This is an absorbing story, and would have sustained an entire book without at its conclusion a rather scrappy account of Sargent’s later life and reputation, which includes so many paintings and prices that it sometimes resembles a sales catalogue. The book’s structure leads to rather a lot of repetitions, which an editor should have spotted, but all that said, one ends it very grateful to have learned more about this extraordinary and engaging family and of the important part it played in Sargent’s life and career.

Peter Parker has written books about the First World War, J. R. Ackerley, Christopher Isherwood and A. E. Housman