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‘Family Romance’ Review: The Painter and His Patrons

John Singer Sargent made his name as the preeminent portraitist of Edwardian England’s wealthy. The Wertheimer family took a special place among them.

By *Benjamin Balint*

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‘Essie, Ruby and Ferdinand, Children of Asher Wertheimer’ (1902) by John Singer Sargent. PHOTO: TATE

The arrangement between an artist and a patron can be a delicate one, filigreed with implicit understandings and potential hazards. Patrons often provide financial help in return for the chance to varnish their prestige. Artists, in turn, can find themselves working within constraints set by a patron’s tastes, though they are ever eager to find room for some degree of creative freedom. In “Family Romance,” Jean Strouse conjures the singular relations between the portrait artist John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) and the Wertheimers, a prominent Jewish family whose commissions helped shape his oeuvre.

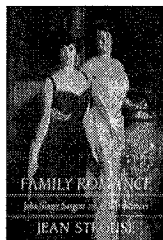
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Family Romance: John Singer Sargent and the Wertheimers

By Jean Strouse

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

336 pages



The setting for this intimate association is the gilded world of Edwardian England. It was a world, Ms. Strouse says, “precariously balanced between centuries, between tradition and modernity, between a past dominated by Europe and an indistinct American future, between long-standing social hierarchies and disruptive forces of new power and wealth.” Echoing Max Beerbohm, she casts Sargent as the “supreme interpreter” of this transitional age.

Even so, Sargent—an American expatriate trained in France who settled in London in the 1880s—never fully belonged to the surrounding society, no matter how many fashionable people converged on his Chelsea studio. “To Americans he seemed British,” Ms. Strouse writes, “to Britons, American.” To Sargent’s critics on both sides of the Atlantic, he could seem a flatterer of moneyed clients and a squanderer of his talents. He gave too much attention, it was said, to overpowdered socialites and sybarites in décolleté gowns. (Think of “Madame X,” his 1884 portrait of a New Orleans-born belle dressed in daring black velvet.)

Yet to be immortalized by Sargent was the *ne plus ultra* of social status and confirmed affluence. The writer Osbert Sitwell said that those who sat for portraits by Sargent (members of his own family included) looked at the results and “understood, at last, how rich they were.” In their association with Sargent, the Wertheimers—navigating a social realm that welcomed them while also holding them at a remove—sought a visual

assertion of their ascent.

The Wertheimer clan, by the late 19th century, had achieved an enviable level of commercial success and social prominence. The self-made art-and-antiques merchant Samson Wertheimer, who traced his ancestry to court Jews of 17th-century Vienna, had emigrated to England from Bavaria in 1839. Although he came to London “with virtually nothing except his intelligence and skill,” writes Ms. Strouse, he had built a thriving business.

Within a couple of decades Samson was selling decorative objects and 18th-century French furniture to the Rothschilds and the Vanderbilts. Samson’s son Asher enlarged the business by trading in works by the Dutch masters—Rembrandt, Vermeer, Rubens—and made himself one of the most respected dealers in England. His success placed him in a position to commission Sargent’s largest private project: a series of 12 family portraits.

Sargent began painting Asher, his wife Flora, and each of their 10 children in 1897, the year he was elected a member of the Royal Academy. As he worked on the series over the next decade, Sargent was heard to jest of “chronic Wertheimerism,” though the project clearly engaged both his creative sensibility and his personal affection.

Ms. Strouse, whose previous books include biographies of Alice James and J. Pierpont Morgan, offers vivid social portraiture of her own in “Family Romance.” Drawing on letters, memoirs and diary entries, she shows that the collaboration between the artist from New England Puritan stock and his prosperous Jewish patron was more than transactional. It grew into feelings of rapport and sustained friendship. The dining room of the Wertheimers’ home—where eight of the pieces would eventually be displayed and where Sargent came to dine nearly every week—became known as “Sargent’s mess.”

Among much else, the portraits catch a duality in the members of the family: their aspirations and anxieties, their pride and vulnerability. It is this tension—between belonging and exclusion, between public success and private doubt—that lends the works their depth and, in Ms. Strouse’s telling, allows them to be seen as evidence of an intricate cultural negotiation.

The portrait of Asher shows the poised art dealer with a hand gripping a cigar and a gaze tinted by insecurity. Sargent’s larger than life-size portrait of Asher’s daughter Ena depicts her in the plumed hat and billowing cloak worn by members of the Order of the Garter. The image both alludes to the highest reaches of the British aristocracy and challenges conventions of femininity. The same sort of challenge assumes different form in the portrait of Ena’s sister Almira, rendered as a courtesan in languid elegance, exotically costumed in a Turkish robe and silk turban. “In his Wertheimer portraits,” writes Ms. Strouse, “Sargent took striking liberties with social types, strictures, the history of art.”

More controversially, Sargent took care that Jewishness was never far from the surface of the canvases—expressing the self-perception of the sitters or the fascination of the portraitist or both. William Rothenstein, a friend and fellow artist, records in his memoirs that Sargent “thoroughly enjoyed painting the energetic features of the men and the exotic beauty of the women of Semitic race” and that Sargent called Jews “at once the most interesting models and the most reliable patrons.”

At a time when nativists resented Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe flocking to London’s East End (Parliament passed the Aliens Act in 1905 to stem the tide), the Wertheimer pictures served as a “cultural Rorschach test,” Ms. Strouse suggests. Charles Aitken, appointed director of the Tate Gallery in 1911, regarded Sargent’s portrait of Asher as “perhaps Sargent’s masterpiece ... a consummate synthesis of character in another race.” The American architect I.N. Phelps Stokes (who saw the same painting when he came to Sargent’s studio to pose with his wife) remarked that the subject seemed to be “pleasantly engaged in counting golden shekels.”

Henry James once wrote that “there is no greater work of art than a great portrait—a truth to be constantly taken to heart by a painter holding in his hands the weapon that Mr. Sargent wields.” As he completed the Wertheimer series in 1908, Sargent laid down this weapon and renounced portrait-painting altogether. “I abhor and abjure them,” he wrote to a friend, “and hope never to do another, especially of the Upper Classes.”

During World War I, Asher announced his intention to bequeath to the nation nine of the Sargent portraits, effectively making these visual chronicles of a family’s inner life part of the public tableau. When they went on display at the Tate a decade later, as the art historian Kathleen Adler has observed, the portraits were seen as “an attempt by a Jewish family to infiltrate a British institution.” When Asher died in 1918, however, the *Saturday Review* lauded his “generous patriotism” and noted that “while Sargent’s fame endures the name of Wertheimer will inextricably be bound up with it.”

“Family Romance,” a book as finely crafted as the portraits it describes, tells a story that is both specific and universal—about the yearnings for recognition and the tenuous rewards of achieving it.

—*Mr. Balint is the author of “Bruno Schulz: An Artist, a Murder, and the Hijacking of History.”*

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