

Conjuring a Mysterious Sorority

In ‘The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit,’ John Singer Sargent upended conventions with inspiration from Velázquez.

M.J. Andersen Aug. 4, 2017 11:31 a.m. ET



‘The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit’ (1882), by John Singer Sargent Photo: Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Sisters can behave monstrously. I heard once of a girl who was reading “Little Women,” and was lying on the couch engrossed when her sister walked by. “Beth dies,” the sister remarked. Yet if sisters can be profound antagonists, they can also be each other’s fiercest champions, linking arms against the pressures of family, femaleness and the world.

The four girls in John Singer Sargent's mysteriously compelling "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit" evoke this sisterly paradox. The longer you look, the more they deflect all efforts to read their relationships. This is a private sorority, and its codes will never be surrendered.

The painting was completed in 1882, when Sargent was 26 and a rising star. Born to expatriate Americans in Italy, he had come to Paris in 1874 to further his artistic education. The peripatetic Boit family took up residence in the city around the same time.

Though educated as a lawyer, Edward Boit wished to paint and was drawn to the artistic activity flourishing in Europe. He and his wife, Mary Louisa Cushing Boit, both came from well-to-do Boston families, enabling him to pursue his vocation.

Exactly when the Boits met Sargent is unclear, as are the terms under which their daughters' portrait was undertaken. But its unconventional design indicates that Sargent had considerable freedom.

He set his large-scale composition just inside the main door of the Boits' Paris apartment. The girls, in the foreground, are in a theatrically lighted space that melts into a darkened interior. Much of the painting's allure lies in its careful balancing of color. Warmth slips in sparingly, through the caramel tones of a wall and the red of a dagger-shaped screen. Blackness holds the center, drawing the eye beyond the riddle of these four self-possessed children.

The most we can be confident of is their relative ages. The youngest, seated on the floor, holds a large, pink-cheeked doll and glances slightly away. The eldest stands in the shadows, in profile, next to her second-born sister. Daughter number three, distinguished by her blond tresses, is planted on pipe-cleaner thin legs at the far left, and seems to gaze inward. It is only the second-born daughter, dead center you suddenly realize, who truly looks back, her eyes alert with expectation.

Her older sister leans against an outsize vase, one of a pair. Flanking the passage into what appears to be a well-appointed parlor, the vases lend a sculptural quality to the three standing figures. A ruffle at the neck of the blond child echoes the fluting on the vases.

At the time of the painting's creation, Paris was a laboratory for new artistic approaches and techniques. Sargent trained under Charles-Auguste Emile Durand, known as Carolus-Duran, who urged his students to turn their pictures into extensions of real space. For Sargent, this was easily done.

He borrowed his structure from Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas," which he had copied on an 1879 visit to Madrid. Both works feature young girls and, unusually, are large and square. Like Velázquez, Sargent overcomes the square's potentially deadening symmetry with a pleasing off-balance arrangement enhanced by deep space. And, also like him, he upends the conventions of group portraiture by giving each figure room to breathe. A viewer of the Boit daughters could seemingly join 4-year-old Julia on the carpet.

Carolus-Duran also emphasized close attention to values. Contrasting light and dark with rapid strokes could render a fleeting sense of illumination—the world as it was actually perceived. Sargent mastered this approach. At times, it can seem he scarcely paints at all, but merely suggests. The legs of the older sisters, Florence and Jane, are absent, implied with a dash of light bouncing off each girl's shoe.

The girls' pinafores let Sargent deploy multiple shades of white, enriching the painting's tonal contrasts. One early critic objected that the garments were over-starched, rendering stiff figures even stiffer. Yet, subtly triangular, they bolster the painting's underlying geometric structure.

While the record on the Boit girls' lives is scant, Erica E. Hirshler, a senior curator at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, has seemingly run down every shred. Her book "Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting" should

perhaps come stamped “Spoiler alert” for those who have come to love this enigmatic work for itself.

None of the girls married, nor did they pursue fulfillment in work. Jane, the touchingly vulnerable second oldest, may have suffered from mental illness: She wound up living alone, assisted by caregivers.

Though the best Sargent painting tends to be the one you have just seen, few of his portraits leave as haunting an impression as that of the Boit daughters. In 1919, the family donated the painting to the MFA, where today it holds iconic status, seeming to embody Boston propriety and the city’s eternal aloofness.

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