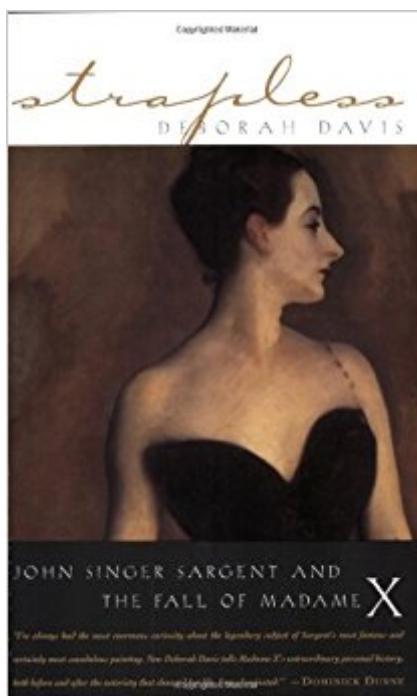


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Strapless: John Singer Sargent And The Fall Of Madame X



Synopsis

The subject of John Singer Sargent's most famous painting was twenty-three-year-old New Orleans Creole Virginie Gautreau, who moved to Paris and quickly became the "it girl" of her day. A relative unknown at the time, Sargent won the commission to paint her; the two must have recognized in each other a like-minded hunger for fame. Unveiled at the 1884 Paris Salon, Gautreau's portrait generated the attention she craved-but it led to infamy rather than stardom. Sargent had painted one strap of Gautreau's dress dangling from her shoulder, suggesting either the prelude to or the aftermath of sex. Her reputation irreparably damaged, Gautreau retired from public life, destroying all the mirrors in her home. Drawing on documents from private collections and other previously unexamined materials, and featuring a cast of characters including Oscar Wilde and Richard Wagner, *Strapless* is a tale of art and celebrity, obsession and betrayal.

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Customer Reviews

"Readers will enjoy this brisk, sometimes breathless account of the creation of the work the artist once called his best...A fascinating commentary on the evanescence of fame and beauty." --Kirkus Reviews"An entertaining, observant novel about the gorgeous, enigmatic Madame X." --from Bustle.com's roundup of "11 Novels Every Art History-Lover Should Pick Up""A stunner about a stunner." --The Philadelphia Inquirer"The book's pace is lively and its breadth impressive." --Houston Chronicle

Deborah Davis is the author of *Party of the Century: The Fabulous Story of Truman Capote and his Black and White Ball* (Wiley, April 2006), and *Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X* (Tarcher/Putnam, 2003). Her most recent book is *The Secret Lives Of Frames: One Hundred Years of Art and Artistry* (Filapacchi, 2007).

Always a devoted fan of John Singer Sargent and enthralled by *Madame X* from the moment I first saw the painting, I devoured *Strapless*. I believe Deborah Davis did her research and I wish there was more to know about Amelie Avegno as both Sargent and the painting *Madame X* certainly have eclipsed the original woman. Sargent captured her in what I consider to be his best work, which is saying something considering he was prolific and left a mesmerizing look into the Gilded Age and those privileged few who inhabited that world. Amelie's life began in Louisiana, the daughter of the Proud South and a product of the plantation system, guided by her very strong grandmother and mother. The haunting photograph of Amelie and her sister, Valentine, during the Civil War shows the long arms and tiny waist as well as the Avegno nose which would be her trademarks later. Her life as an expatriate in Paris during a truly fascinating time period is intriguing while her ambitious mother set about marketing her daughter for a good marriage. Amelie embodied the modern woman of Paris but sadly, being a Professional Beauty has a short shelf life which doomed her to a miserably empty existence. I think the chapter, *Dancing on a Volcano*, dealing with the peculiarities of the citizens of Paris who found viewing corpses in the morgue as entertainment yet were shocked by Sargent's painting is very well done. Ms. Davis explains how confounding the duplicity of this was. There were plenty of "traditional" nudes of women on display but people chose to be shocked and horrified by Sargent's depiction of Amelie as she really was, with that shoulder strap casually slipped down and her proud arrogance. One is left wondering how differently things might have turned out if he had sent the copy with the strap on her shoulder to the Salon instead, would everyone have been as outraged? Honestly, I wish there were more details into this woman's life, but she lives on in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, beguiling and elusive, a testimony to the unwise strategy of basing one's entire existence on one's beauty when we all grow old.

I never knew the portrait was originally called *Portrait of Madame X*. I always thought that was how people referred to it because of its femme fatale attitude. This is an engaging back story to the painting of this iconic portrait. The author worked in Hollywood as a story developer and it shows. She takes what is essentially very little hard information and paints a vivid picture of the lives involved in this masterpiece and the era which produced it. The story development comes through

in an overabundance of phrases like "One can imagine that she was among the guests at the grand ball." and "He might have felt..." Loaded with storytelling license that sometimes goes too far, it's still good to know the background of one of America's greatest portraitists and the woman whose reputation he ruined with his most famous work.

Viewing the amazing watercolors by John S. Sargent gave me the nudge I needed to read this autobiography of both the artist, John Singer Sargent, and the person captured in the famous Madame X portrait. Virginie Amelie Gautreau was an American expatriate living in Paris at the time Jon Sargent was gaining prominence as a portraitist, having had successive impressive showings at the annual Salon in Paris. Amelie Gautreau was the 'It' girl of Parisian society in the late 1800s and lived for ostentation, non-stop parties and lavish spending. She was known for her alabaster skin and her beauty. The paparazzi of the time followed her every move and reported on them accordingly. She had famously declined invitations from many a painter to sit for them, but she agreed to sit for Sargent. It was a difficult sitting and Sargent faced more challenges with this portrait than he had with others. He actually painted a second portrait of Amelie Gautreau which he thought was better than the original, but didn't finish it, having been persuaded that he should show the original in the Salon, and that it was one of his masterpieces. The original Madame X was not received well at all at the exhibition. Viewers were scathing with their reviews, attacking Sargent for the cadaver-like hue to her skin and that with one strap of her dress hanging off her shoulder, that the painting was pornographic. Ironical considering the nudes also exhibited that year were highly praised. The negative reaction to the painting affected Amelie Gautreau as well. She became reclusive for a spell and then she commissioned more portraits of herself, seeking to undo the damage she perceived she suffered from the Madame X portrait. Alas, none of the subsequent portraits were pleasing, nor did they propel her back up to the pedestal she had fallen from. Amelie was aging and she did not want to accept that. Sargent's life was somewhat nomadic. His parents traveled across Europe, mainly because his mother did not like to stay in one place for too long, but they were supportive of their son's talent and provided him with opportunities to hone his talent. Sargent's rise as a portraitist was meteoric and coupled with a nice nature, he gained many friends, both among other artists and patrons alike. Up until his Madame X portrait, he had been lauded as a brilliant star and there were many who sought him out to paint portraits of themselves or of their family members. The negative reception to Madame X was devastating. For the longest time, he kept that painting and wouldn't sell it. It seemed to serve as a reminder to him that he had once failed spectacularly. He did recover from that set back and went on to paint many other portraits and

landscapes. What's sad is that while Sargent and Madame X have both remained famous, the sitter of the portrait, Amelie Gautreau, faded into obscurity.

I read this book after reading I am Madame X by Gioia Diliberto which is an historical novel. Strapless is a biography and doesn't seem to make Virginie Amelie Gautreau's life as daring as the novel. In the novel, it goes much more into her love life and the many lovers she had and tells more about her marriage. Their marriage was more a marriage of convenience since he had a lover that was married and Madame X was supposedly pregnant at the time so the marriage was advantageous for both of them. Strapless doesn't mention any of this so it still remains to be seen which story is true. One thing that is true as far as I'm concerned is Madame X had many lovers and the gynecologist, the very handsome Samuel Pozzi, was one of them and the other truism is that she was a very vain woman but this all makes her the interesting creature that we want to know about.

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