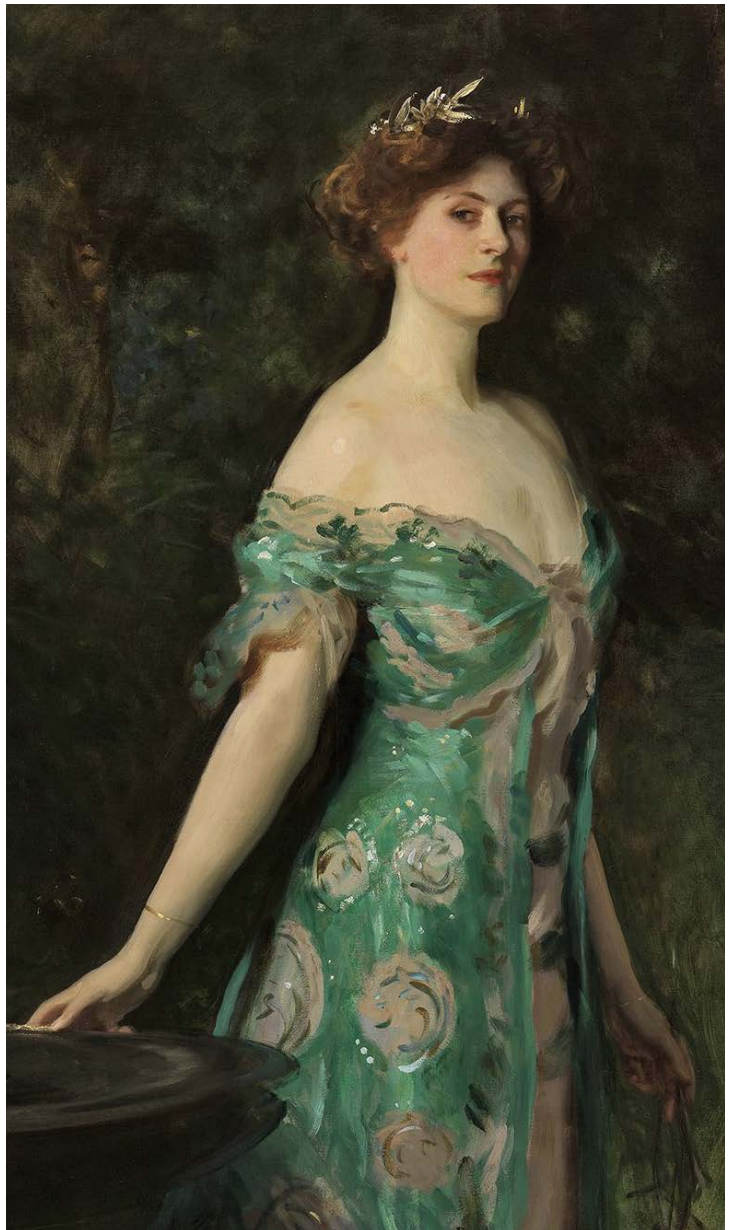


# Lady Britain: John Singer Sargent's portrait of Duchess Millicent

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Alba Campo Rosillo



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John Singer Sargent  
*Portrait of Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, 1904*  
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

In 1904 they had both achieved public recognition, and they came together to craft a genial portrait.<sup>1</sup> She, the sitter, was an esteemed figure in London's social, literary and diplomatic circles. He, the painter, was a consecrated artist who captured on canvas the celebrities in that milieu. At that moment, Lady Millicent Fanny St Clair-Erskine (1867–1955), Duchess of Sutherland since 1892, was a British beauty of 37. Society hostess at large, she was also a writer of short stories and novels (often published under the pen name Erskine Gower), poet, editor and social reformer.<sup>2</sup> John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), the London society painter who chronicled British aristocracy through portraits, was an acclaimed American artist of 48, as well as a gifted pianist and an amateur architect. Both spoke several languages – including English, French, Italian and German – and the two were charismatic figures who jointly engineered an iconic portrait of the duchess [fig. 1].<sup>3</sup> It is hardly surprising that Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, a cosmopolite, avid art collector and successful entrepreneur, should have felt attracted to this masterpiece of public self-fashioning, an art he mastered himself.<sup>4</sup>

The formal composition of the painting references the tradition of 18th-century portraiture and calls up two previous portraits by Sargent in which the artist imbued the works with his persona [figs. 6, 7]. But this was more than just an art manifesto; it was also a political declaration of intentions in which Anglo-French relations shone in the context of British imperialism. Great Britain, the third and last country where Sargent established his residence, was crucial in re-launching his career. Moreover, the British art establishment quickly claimed the artist as a full British citizen. The duchess was a modern, progressive woman whose initiative enabled her to forge her own path. I would like to argue that this portrait rooted the duchess in a traditional female role to appease jealous sexist criticism. Together with the exaltations of Britishness in her travelogue and the symbols of British might in the portrait, Duchess Millicent appealed to national pride, veiling her career achievements to advance her convictions.

**1**

Special thanks to Sabena Kull for her suggestions and comments to improve this article.

**2**

Elizabeth Ewan, Sue Innes, Sian Reynolds and Rose Pipes, eds, *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women: From the Earliest Times to 2004*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 311.

**3**

Watch the lecture on this portrait given by the museum's artistic director, Guillermo Solana, 'Retratos de Mujer en la Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza: John Singer Sargent: Retrato de Millicent, Duquesa de Sutherland', Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Vimeo, 2009, available at <https://vimeo.com/5056178>.

**4**

See Alba Campo Rosillo, 'Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza and the Dissemination of American Art', in Paloma Alarcó and Alba Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection*, with texts by Clara Marcellán and Marta Ruiz del Árbol, Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, 28–39. The baron owned two more paintings by this artist: *Venetian Onion Seller*, c. 1880–82, acquired in 1979 and *llex Wood: Majorca*, 1908, purchased in 1997.



fig. 1  
**John Singer Sargent**  
***Portrait of Millicent,***  
***Duchess of Sutherland, 1904***  
**Oil on canvas, 254 × 146 cm**  
**Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,**  
**Madrid, 732 (1983.12)**

## The goddess of the woods

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Duchess Millicent was certainly special. Renowned for her beauty, charm and militancy as much as for her literary talent, she was seen as a force of nature. Moreover, her long slim body, hazel eyes and copper hair secured her a place among the six best-looking Londonites of her time.<sup>5</sup> When she became Duchess of Sutherland, she rose in the ranks of London's social circles as a cherished hostess who brought to her new quarters in Stafford House a wealth of warmth and wit. Besides turning her residence into a diplomatic centre, she took to more activist endeavours, fighting the causes of the Lifeboat Association, the Veterinary Relief, the Inverness Sanatorium, the Scottish Home Industries, the Potteries' Cripples' Guild, the Scheme for the Encouragement of the Kindly Treatment of Animals and the British Women's Temperance Association.<sup>6</sup> By 1901, the passion with which she pursued these philanthropies – among the potters, for instance, she contested the use of poisonous lead in the glazing process – gained her the nickname 'Meddlesome Millie'.<sup>7</sup> Celebrated for her good looks and despised for her activism, Duchess Millicent's reception functioned as a thermometer of the period's disposition toward ambitious women like herself.

In the portrait, Duchess Millicent is presented as a goddess of the woods. Silhouetted against an indistinct green and brown mass of vegetation that almost completely covers the sky, her figure stands out. Both her shimmering dress and her glowing skin draw visual attention to her. She wears a silver laurel wreath and a copper green gown with a floral pattern in pink and a low neckline. In her left hand she holds a willow branch, while her right arm is turned outward as her hand softly caresses the edge of the fountain basin. She is posing on a path lined by thick foliage, which blocks the lower part of a pedestal supporting a female bust. The floral dress and bay leaf tiara in her hair together with the sylvan setting in which she stands present her as an individual in communion with nature. The luminosity of her skin and the glimmer of her wreath introduce the idea of her person as a magical being, a divinity with creative powers of some sort.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Stuart, *Dear Duchess: Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, 1867–1955*, London, Gollancz, 1982, 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 57, 105.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



fig. 2  
**Stephen Crane**  
**Frontispiece for Millicent Sutherland,**  
***The Winds of the World*, London,**  
**William Heinemann, 1902**

By the time Sargent painted her, Millicent was a renowned author. In 1889 she had published *How I Spent my Twentieth Year*, a travelogue of her tour around the world. In her literary pursuits she cultivated many genres, including novel, short story, poetry, drama, journalism and, in 1892, poetry, with 'Lines Dedicated to Those Who Mourn Their Dead in the Wrecks of the Bokhara, Roumania, and Scotch Express'. By 1899 she had written another novel, *One Hour and the Next*, followed in 1902 by a collection of short stories, *The Winds of the World*. Subsequent to the time she sat for Sargent, she edited the volume of contemporary poetry *The Wayfarer's Love* in 1904, published the musical libretto *The Conqueror* in 1905, and in 1914 narrated her *Six Weeks at the War*. Her written publications are nowhere to be seen in the portrait. I contend that this was an intentional move to make her public persona more palatable, and that all references to her literary genius are veiled in classical or symbolic iconography.

Many of Duchess Millicent's published works allude to nature, either directly in the text or through the illustrations that adorn them. In *The Winds of the World*, for instance, a visionary collection of seven tragic stories that look into themes of passion, dreams and fate, the duchess's literary talent is matched by the artistic prowess of Stephen Crane, who designed the frontispiece of the book [fig. 2]. In the centre, a man and a woman embrace as if to protect themselves from the four winged women who blow large horns as they spread the winds referenced in the book's title. The illustration shows these creatures floating in the air, their majestic wings spread out as they turn to face the couple. Each fantastical being wears her hair in a different way: the figure portrayed upside down has a long straight mane floating upwards; the one to her left has thicker straight hair held back with an Egyptian-looking hair band; the character at the bottom has wavy tresses crowned with a floral wreath; and the one closing the circle has short frizzy hair. Unlike the hugging couple, these beings merge with the natural background in which the fringes of their wings echo the leafy shapes of the trees. The wreath blending with the surroundings worn by the woman at bottom reappears in the duchess's portrait, as if she was embodying in her likeness the power to blow the worldly winds.

Sargent's portrait evinces the link between literature and nature in Duchess Millicent's self-fashioning. Alison Syme observes that like many fellow artists from the 19th century, Sargent believed in the role of the 'artist-as-pollinator' and 'artist-as-plant'. She argues that 'a poetics of vegetal creation became central to literature and the visual arts.'<sup>8</sup> In the likeness, the wreath worn by the duchess is made of laurel. The species used to make it was probably *Laurus nobilis*, the title used by Sargent's friend Violet Paget – whose nom de plume was Vernon Lee – for the sixth volume of her *Chapters on Art and Life*, which included an essay on 'The Use of Beauty' (1909). In it Paget extols the many benefits of bay leaves and describes them 'as a symbol of what we have no word to express; the aggregate of all art, all poetry, and particularly of all poetic and artistic vision and emotion'.<sup>9</sup> Precisely because of its evergreen character, the laurel tree represents immortality, which explains its use in antiquity to crown heroes, geniuses and the wise.<sup>10</sup> Connected to this, Duchess Millicent's way of grasping a willow branch in the manner one holds a pen when writing makes reference to her literary undertakings. The willow tree evokes nostalgia, melancholy, death and immortality,<sup>11</sup> and thus stands for her written legacy. The duchess's accomplishments in the world of letters also appear to be commemorated by the bust on the pedestal behind her, which, having a female face, suggests that her written legacy would outlive her for posterity.

The portrait of Duchess Millicent echoes themes found in another Sargent painting from 1885–86, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, both participating in the same modern take on sentimentality [fig. 3]. The flowers in the painting surrounding the girls connect with the roses on the duchess's dress. A rose, once shorn of its thorns, is a privileged symbol of the Virgin Mary, an allegory of love and silence.<sup>12</sup> Besides this, the willow's graceful shape and evergreen character represents female fertility, a theme that links the two works.<sup>13</sup> As in the duchess's gown, the flowers permeating the earlier canvas enfold the little girls and recreate a world of innocence and fragility around them.

8

Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010, 4, 1.

9

Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life*, London, New York, J. Lane, 1909, 4.

10

Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos*, Barcelona, Herder, 2018, 972; Federico Revilla, *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2007, 388; James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, with an introduction by Kenneth Clark, London, John Murray, 1974, 190.

11

Revilla, *Diccionario de iconografía*, n. 10, 600.

12

*Ibid.*, 580.

13

Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos*, n. 10, 1416.



fig. 3  
**John Singer Sargent**  
***Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885–86**  
**Oil on canvas, 174 × 153.7 cm**  
**Tate Britain, London, Presented**  
**by the Trustees of the Chantrey**  
**Bequest 1887, N01615**

**14**

Rebecca Bailey Bedell, *Moved to Tears: Rethinking the Art of the Sentimental in the United States*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018, 144–45.

**15**

'The picture was bought for the Tate Gallery in 1887, under the terms of the Chantrey bequest, largely at the insistence of the Royal Academy President, Sir Frederic Leighton. A portrait by Sargent of Mrs Barnard (1885), made at the same time as *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, is also in the Tate (Tate Gallery N05901)', in Terry Riggs, 'Summary: *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*', Tate Britain, 1998, available at <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sargent-carnation-lily-lily-rose-n01615>.

Sargent, an avant-garde aesthete, despised conventionality and bourgeois appeasement, two elements linked to the culture of the sentimental. But as Rebecca Bedell has convincingly argued, he engaged with sentimentality in this work, in which the evanescence of childhood imbues the painting with 'a tenderly poignant nostalgia'. Bedell associates the sentimental with the portraits of children by Joshua Reynolds and the Pre-Raphaelite artists, and states that this was 'the most sentimental of all [Sargent's] paintings'.<sup>14</sup> This is significant given that Sargent exhibited the work at the Royal Academy in 1887, only a year after having moved to England. Tate Britain acquired it that same year, consolidating Sargent's fame in Great Britain, his country of adoption. The title derives from the 18th-century song 'The Wreath', which once again connects the portrait of poet Millicent with the poetic painting of the girls.<sup>15</sup>

## Among titans

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Sargent's portrait of Duchess Millicent used an old-fashioned framework to cloak the ambitious and outspoken character of the sitter. As period criticism described it, the likeness provoked the same pleasure as those signed by Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney or Sir Joshua Reynolds.<sup>16</sup> The latter was the greatest British portrait painter of his day, president of the Royal Academy of Art between 1768 and 1792. During his long tenure, Reynolds set the ground for the art to come and, in particular, for portrait painting. He delivered a total of 15 lectures, each one on the occasion of the Academy's annual prize-giving ceremony, offering priceless advice to students. His *Discourses on Art* established that grace in portraiture 'consists more in taking the general air than in observing the exact similitude of every feature'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he stated that 'if a portrait-painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject [...] [he] changes the dress from a temporary fashion to one more permanent'.<sup>18</sup> This Reynolds called the 'Historical Style', which is 'neither an exact minute representation of an individual, nor completely ideal'.<sup>19</sup> Finally, he argued that this style was to infuse 'this contracted subject' with 'large ideas'.<sup>20</sup> Reynolds enhanced the art of portrait painting by appealing to the atemporal and the conceptual.

As witnessed in Duchess Millicent's portrait, the Historical Style advocated the transformation of sitters into divinities or allegorical figures. More than a century earlier, Reynolds painted the portrait of *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* [fig. 4] with Sarah (Kemble) Siddons seated in front of the representations of comedy and tragedy. Duchess Millicent's laurel wreath associates her with the god Apollo and with the allegorical figures of Clio, Immortality, Eternal Felicity, Strength, Glory and Poetry.<sup>21</sup> Besides linking the sitter with these divine, conceptual figures, Millicent's likeness also underlines her grandeur. As in the portrait of Lady Jane Halliday [fig. 5], where Reynolds depicted the sitter as a wind goddess commanding the natural elements in the landscape, Sargent renders the duchess larger than life, with a disproportionately elongated body to evoke her exceptional nature. Also like Lady Halliday, the duchess appears to operate wonders in the portrait: from her left hand grows a willow branch and from her right a golden light emanates, illuminating the edge of the water fountain. Duchess Millicent is not only dazzling, she literally dazzles.

**16**  
'Art Notes', *14th Exhibition, Royal Society of Portrait Painters*, London, 1904, 530.

**17**  
Joshua Reynolds, 'Discourse IV', in Robert R. Wark, *Discourses on Art*, New Haven, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (London), Yale University Press, 1997, 59.

**18**  
*Ibid.*, 72.

**19**  
'Discourse V', in *ibid.*, 88.

**20**  
'Discourse XI', in *ibid.*, 200.

**21**  
Ester Lels, *Personifications & Symbols: An Index to H.F. Gravelot and C.N. Cochin's Iconologie par Figures*, Leiden, MarePress, 2011.





fig. 4  
**Joshua Reynolds**  
*Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse*,  
 c. 1784–89  
 Oil on canvas, 240 × 148 cm  
 The Huntington Library, Art Museum  
 and Botanical Gardens, San Marino



fig. 5  
**Joshua Reynolds**  
*Lady Jane Halliday*, 1779  
 Oil on canvas, 238.7 × 148.5 cm  
 Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire

22  
 'Titania', *Encyclopedia Britannica*,  
 18 March 2011, available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Titania-fictional-character>.

There is a compelling connection between the duchess's figure and one of the characters created by the greatest Anglo-Saxon writer of all times, William Shakespeare. In *Midsummer's Night Dream*, Titania, queen of the fairies, becomes entangled in a series of romantic misunderstandings which are finally resolved thanks to her husband's magic. Titania resembles the goddess Hera.<sup>22</sup> In Greek mythology, Hera, as the wife of Zeus, was queen of the gods and goddess of women, marriage, family and childbirth, in sum, of love unions and fertility. The many iconographic elements already discussed and their common symbology representing fertility and immortality firmly establish the link between Duchess Millicent and Titania as female figures with magic powers. Titania was Shakespeare's genial way of interlocking Greek mythology with British lore; Duchess Millicent's portrait, Sargent's way of depicting not only a superwoman, but a British superwoman.

Sargent's painting of the duchess exudes the same ambition as two other equally stunning works: the portraits of Dr Samuel-Jean Pozzi and Madame Pierre Gautreau [figs. 6, 7], which have been regarded by scholars as pictorial reflections on the art of portraiture.<sup>23</sup> Conceptually, all three are Historical Style pieces that render the subject in a grand manner, with little detail to indicate time or place. Formally, Duchess Millicent shares with Dr Pozzi a pyramidal shape created through the use of a diagonal line, in his case introduced by the right slipper, in hers by the edge of the dress underneath the fountain. Moreover, both sitters are rendered in a dominant palette, red in the case of Pozzi, who is surrounded by scarlet curtains, carpet and clothing; green and brown in that of Duchess Millicent, where the hues of nature are echoed by her dress. Regarding Madame X, her likeness set a precedent for scandal when Sargent painted a seductively fallen dress strap on the sitter's right arm. Public uproar forced the artist to paint the strap on her shoulder, but this was not enough for Parisian society to pardon Sargent, and he ended up having to move to London. Both female sitters appear standing with their right hand touching the circular surface of a prop occupying the same space in the painting. But beyond being a portrait sitter and a customer for Sargent, Duchess Millicent was a fellow artist, a British muse and an immortal goddess. Through her portrait Sargent reiterated ideas and patterns that make it possible to insert his art in the history of grand portraiture of the British school. After painting the duchess's image in 1904, Sargent continued cultivating his fame as the best living portrait painter, while Millicent carried on promoting her celebrity grandly.<sup>24</sup>

**23**

Juliet Bellow, 'The Doctor Is in: John Singer Sargent's *Dr. Pozzi at Home*', *American Art* 26:2 (2012), 42–67; and Susan Sidlauskas, 'Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*', *American Art* 15:3 (2001), 8–33.

**24**

In the catalogue of the Anglo-American Exposition held at White City in London in 1914, Sargent was celebrated as America's 'greatest living artist'. See Lewis C. Hind, *Illustrated Catalogue of the American Fine Art Section: Anglo-American Exposition, 1914*, London, Art Museums Galleries, 1914, 13–21; reproduced in Barbara Dayer Gallati, 'Sargent in London, 1889–1913', in *Sargent: Portraits of Artists and Friends*, ed. Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, London, National Portrait Gallery, 2015, 126.

fig. 6 ↓

**John Singer Sargent**  
*Dr Pozzi at Home*, 1881  
Oil on canvas, 201.6 × 102.2 cm  
The Armand Hammer Collection,  
Gift of the Armand Hammer  
Foundation, Hammer Museum,  
Los Angeles



fig. 7 ↑

**John Singer Sargent**  
*Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*,  
1883–84  
Oil on canvas, 208.6 × 109.9 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York, Arthur Hoppock Hearn  
Fund, 1916, 16.53

## Building empires

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Duchess Millicent was a cosmopolite acquainted with world politics, an aspect that is lost in her portrait. The natural setting in which she poses isolates her in the microcosm of a desirable world, the gardens of Stafford House built by Benjamin Wyatt on Berkeley Square in 1820. The thick foliage creates a dark netting that separates the duchess from the modern city that was London, and from the social circles in which she caused a furor. Painted *sotto-in-su* to elongate her tall figure, she appears as the magical queen of her empty territory.

But the Duchess of Sutherland was much more than a nature deity, as the painting would have us believe. She was an engaged citizen with political views of her own. In her travels around the world between 1886 and 1887 she visited India, Burma, Australia, China, Japan, the United States and Canada. In this list, the countries that at the time were, or had previously been, part of the British Empire carry considerable weight. In her travelogue she described Hong Kong as a 'Celestial Empire' and Delhi as a ruined place after having been a flourishing land. She then went on to reflect:

India is certainly a delightful country [...]. The position of Viceroy must be a tremendously responsible one, for literally he is an autocrat, and the good and evil of millions of people are entirely in his hands. The present Viceroy also stands at a disadvantage, the country from a financial point of view being at its poorest [...]. For years past, natives have been receiving as good an education as any Englishman; and consequently they are clamouring for more authority in the management of affairs. These requests are certainly quite reasonable, but untold obstacles stand in the way of granting them [...]. Besides all this, there is always a threatening of Russian invasion; and in a smaller degree the interference of China and France. There is no doubt that at present the country is governed wisely, and the people are at their happiest [...]. Were they left to themselves, and were England not so strenuous in her efforts to keep all classes together by a firm and just rule, Mohammedans would clash with Hindoos; the native princes would arise and strive to extend their dominions; the foreign Powers would be the first to discover and take advantage of our weaknesses – and in a very short time *the greatest empire in the world* would fall into decay.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup>

Marchioness of Stafford, *How I Spent My Twentieth Year: Being a Short Record of a Tour around the World, 1886–87*, London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1889, 141–42.

In this passage, Duchess Millicent comments on world politics and boasts British might in a chauvinistic fashion unexpected in a cosmopolitan person like herself. Perhaps the fact that she was 20 years old when she wrote it accounts for her naiveté.

Back in England, the duchess moved in elite social, political and intellectual circles such as The Souls, an aristocratic 'gang', as they commonly referred to themselves, which began with the Balfour, Lyttleton, Tennent and Wyndham families and grew through their connections.<sup>26</sup> Sargent also had acquaintances in this group, as attested by the portrait of the Wyndham sisters he painted in 1899.<sup>27</sup> The society dinners of these groups offered the perfect opportunity to make new connections that resulted in sources of patronage. As Julia Rayer Rolfe explains, 'the ideal society dinner party at the beginning of the twentieth century would have consisted of a combination of aristocrats, politicians, and businessmen, leavened with a few intellectuals and a popular artist, ornamented with a society beauty, or a woman renowned for her wit, and definitely including a musician who would have been expected to perform after dinner'. Sargent was a fine pianist and he often accepted dinner invitations where a musician performed.<sup>28</sup> The duchess was active too among the members of the Marlborough House set, a social clique of fashionable people that gathered at the court of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, at Marlborough House.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, Sargent and Duchess Millicent moved in interconnected British social circles and likely corresponded in their artistic and literary interests.

Remarkably, the duchess's worldliness and intellectual cultivation are missing from the portrait that crafted her public persona. To offer a compelling contrast, the portrait of Dr Horatio C. Wood [fig. 8], painted by Sargent's fellow American artist Thomas Eakins, presents the sitter in a pensive attitude surrounded by the tools of his trade, his written oeuvre.<sup>30</sup> This is one of a series of portraits Eakins started making in 1886 to capture Philadelphia's intelligentsia. The work could not differ more from that of Duchess Millicent, in which there are

**26**

'The Souls', National Portrait Gallery, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/group/1230/The%20Souls>.

**27**

John Singer Sargent, *The Wyndham Sisters: Lady Elcho, Mrs Adeane and Mrs Tennant*, 1899, oil on canvas, 292.1 × 213.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1927, 27.67.

**28**

Julia Rayer Rolfe, 'Sargent and Lady Agnew', in J. Rolfe et al., *The Portrait of a Lady: Sargent and Lady Agnew*, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland, 1997, 30.

**29**

Duchess Millicent inherited her title from an original trustee of the circle. See Jane Ridley, 'Marlborough House set (act. 1870s–1901)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, available online at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-53154>.

**30**

Kathleen A. Foster, 'Portraits of Teachers and Thinkers', in *Thomas Eakins*, ed. Darrel Sewel and Kathleen A. Foster, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001, 95–106, 307–15.



fig. 8

**Thomas Eakins**  
***Dr Horatio C. Wood, 1886***  
Oil on canvas, 162.6 × 127 cm  
Detroit Institute of Arts, City  
of Detroit Purchase, 30.296

neither books nor writing tools, the latter only hinted at by the way in which she grasps a twig, which is akin to the manner in which one holds a pen. As I have argued, the portrait downplayed the duchess's active role in public life to make her more acceptable. By diminishing her intellectual achievements, 'Meddlesome Millie' the activist and published author disappeared from the plane of real life and entered the realm of magic.

But Duchess Millicent's political ideas matter significantly in the context of international relations at the time she sat for the portrait. In April 1904, the United Kingdom and the French Republic signed the geopolitical inter-imperial agreement of the Entente Cordiale to foster Anglo-French collaboration. The intent of the pact was to recognise each other's colonial territories and stop their rivalry for African land. The Entente alienated Germany and set the stage for the two fronts in WWI: the Triple Entente between France, Britain and Russia, and the Triple Alliance between Germany, Italy and Austro-Hungary. Duchess Millicent and Sargent were Francophiles. An American expatriate born in Italy and educated in France, Sargent's cosmopolitanism conflicted and even enraged many in the fin de siècle British art establishment, who wanted to present him as a local artist when exhibiting in international expositions. The conflict exploded when American art critics claimed Sargent as a rightful US citizen in the age of American imperialism. In 1904, Theodore Roosevelt extended the Monroe Doctrine's sphere from the Western Hemisphere to the global stage.<sup>31</sup> The year in which Sargent painted the portrait Western imperialism was at its peak.

**31**

See Linda J. Docherty, "Why Not a National Art?": Affirmative Responses in the 1890s', in *Paris 1900: The 'American School' at the Universal Exposition*, ed. Diane P. Fischer, New Jersey and New Brunswick, Montclair Art Museum, 2000, 96–99.



fig. 9  
**John Singer Sargent**  
***The Duchess of Sutherland*, c. 1904**  
**Oil on canvas, 86.3 × 73.6 cm**  
**Private collection**

**32**  
 Amalia Maureta Checa and Carmen del Ojo Carrera, *La moda femenina en los retratos del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza*, Madrid, Letras de Autor, 2016.

**33**  
 David Cannadine, 'The British Aristocracy in the Age of Sargent', in Rolfe et al., *The Portrait of a Lady*, n. 28, 48–50.

**34**  
 Charles Merrill Mount, *John Singer Sargent: A Biography*, London, Cresset Press, 1957, 243.

**35**  
 Cannadine, 'The British Aristocracy', n. 33, 48–50.

**36**  
 Between 1914 and 1918 the duchess directed a hospital unit called the Millicent Sutherland Ambulance. Duchess Millicent received the French Croix de Guerre, the Belgian Royal Red Cross medal, and the British Royal Red Cross for her war services to these three countries. Ewan, Innes, Reynolds and Pipes, *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, n. 2, 311. Read her war memory, Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, *Six Weeks at the War*, Chicago, A.C. McClurg & Co., 1915.

**37**  
 When they were both deceased in 1892, the Fairmount Park Commissioners were appointed the trustees of the collection.

The landed gentry and aristocracy found it difficult to deal with the political tensions and bleak reality of modern life. Rather than come to terms with contemporary events, this elite retreated into the frivolous existence for which the period was named the Belle Époque. Luxury and conspicuous display were all the rage at social dinners and balls in country houses.<sup>32</sup> Soon after this interval of 'splendour' languished, so did Sargent's best portrait years. With the progressive sale of large tracts of land to obtain the funds needed to pay for the luxuries of its extravagant lifestyle, this un-landed class also lost its power in urban democracy. What David Cannadine argues is that Sargent painted grand, refined portraits in the early 1900s to provide reassurance to the vanishing aristocracy.<sup>33</sup> Tellingly, the end of this golden age of portrait painting came in 1907, when Sargent abruptly exclaimed: 'Paughtraits [sic], ask me to paint [...] your fences [...], which I would gladly do, but not the human face'.<sup>34</sup> Tired of making likenesses, Sargent stopped painting large canvases in oil and from that moment on only made quick charcoal-drawn portraits, besides devoting himself to painting landscapes. During the course of WWI (1914–18) many aristocrats lost their lives in action: their palaces and art collections passed to the hands of plutocratic wealth, and the Belle Époque vanished, as had the aristocratic fortunes.<sup>35</sup> Once the conflict was over, Duchess Millicent sold her majestic painting, keeping a smaller bust portrait which Sargent had also painted in 1904 [fig. 9]. With this, the duchess divorced herself from her pre-war public persona.<sup>36</sup>

Sitter and artist experienced a reunion of sorts in 1922, when following the fall of the aristocracy and the sale of its goods, the duchess's portrait went to hang with another Sargent likeness. The painting entered the Anna H. and William P. Wilstach Collection<sup>37</sup> and was put on view in the



fig. 10  
**John Singer Sargent**  
*Lady Eden*, 1906  
 Oil on canvas, 110.6 × 86.5 cm  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
 Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach  
 Fund, 1920, W1920-2-1

Philadelphia Museum of Art.<sup>38</sup> Through the purchase and display of art, the original collectors and their trustees sought to provide a 'source of pleasure and the means of cultivation and refinement of the tastes of the people, be pure in sentiment, and never minister to vulgarity and vice'.<sup>39</sup> In this enlightened quest, Sargent's portrait of Duchess Millicent joined that of Lady Eden, painted in 1906 [fig. 10]. The typology of the pictures differs greatly: Eden is sitting and playing cards, Millicent is standing and directing the natural elements at her will; Eden is indoors, Millicent outdoors; Eden looks away, Millicent stares at the viewer. What they share is their freshness and the majestic approach that makes the sitters appear as supernatural beings.

Sargent's monumental portrait of Duchess Millicent presents her as an extraordinary creature: she is larger than life, controls the natural elements and wears the crown of a queen or goddess. Yet, the reason why such a character would have been extraordinary is unclear, if not literally invisible. The duchess's youthful chauvinism, although polished by the cosmopolitanism of her mature years, shines through in the painting's appeal to British cultural and portrait traditions of the past. Her philanthropic activism and literary production are substantiated into the marks of her fabulous character: she is ambitious and does not shy away from it. As in the portraits of Dr Pozzi and Madame X, in the likeness of Duchess Millicent Sargent crafted a new masterpiece in which he fashioned a modern woman that her age would not only accept but also celebrate as an example of 'cultivation and refinement'. It is remarkable that Lady Millicent should have parted with such a masterpiece. Maybe the experience of WWI drove her to recant her imperialist views in an attitude that clashed with the ideas expressed in the portrait. Duchess Millicent was an intellectual heroine and her willing separation from the portrait only confirms this fact. ●

**38**

For more information on its provenance, see Alba Campo Rosillo, 'Provenance', in Alarcó and Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection*, n. 4, 267.

**39**

*Catalogue of the W.P. Wilstach Collection*, Philadelphia, Fairmount Park, 1922, xvii.