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book review of

*A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* by Alison Syme

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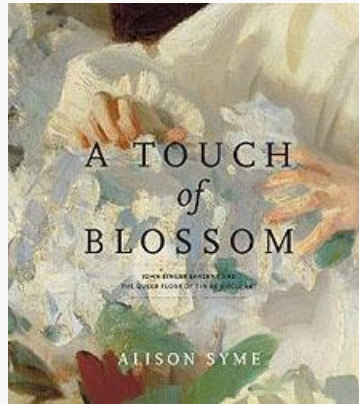
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Alison Syme,

*A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art.*

University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010.

324 pages; 75 color, 125 black and white ill's; bibliography; index.

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No portrait painter was better at capturing the elevated élan of the aristocracy than John Singer Sargent. The trite conventional wisdom, always intoned when describing compelling portraits, is that they capture the 'inner lives' of their subjects. But how did a painter like Sargent discern such hidden depths? Once discovered, how did he convey them? And how do we begin to interpret the ghostly image of a long-dead personality, resurrected for us by an artist's intuitive mind and unparalleled skill? In fact, great portraits most likely served as vehicles for communicating and perpetuating what people already knew about a subject, or at least what the subject perceived about him/herself. That said, forget everything you thought you knew about the seemingly staid luminaries of the American Gilded Age. Fasten your seatbelts, for you are about to embark on a bumpy, beguiling ride!

The title of this book promises to "out" Sargent as both queer and botanical. However, the painter is but the touchstone for Alison Syme's virtuosic examination of artistic conventions, scientific perceptions, and sexual mores. *A Touch of Blossom* deftly builds the argument that Sargent and his contemporaries drew on a well-established, iconographical discourse in order to embody the realm of the "invert," or homosexual. In so doing, they created and expanded an identity that existed as an open secret in the "pictorial gardens" of the fin de siècle, where sex, botanical models, and artistic creation were virtually synonymous. With impressive intellectual *sprezzatura* and devastating clarity, Syme weaves an intricate web in support of this contention, seamlessly blending botanical, literary, musical, gynecological, biographical, semantic, and visual sources. The result is an enticing portrait of an alternative era, which bears little resemblance to your great-grandmother's parlor.

Beginning with a broad sweep, Syme introduces the 'painter as pollinator' metaphor straight away in the book's introduction, "The Birds and the Bees." Here the widespread metaphor of the floral artist, whose own hand "pollinates" his subject in order to generate "flowers" of art, is supported by contemporary scientific discourse and popular culture. Artists and writers alike mobilized the ideas of botanical cross-fertilization and hermaphroditism to naturalize homosexuality and to legitimize the "offspring" of the invert artist's immaculate conceptions. Summoning diverse evidence from the realms of journalistic caricature, greeting cards, ballet, opera, and fashion design, Syme paves the way for such themes as the *femme-fleur*, artist-pollinator-creator, and hermaphrodite invert, which she examines at length in subsequent chapters. It is her contention that Sargent acted, by turns, as both phallic pollinator and receptive flower within his privileged circle of patrons and acquaintances. The heady intellectual world of invert sexuality, suggested in these introductory pages, makes the crude eroticism of present-day mass-media seem puerile by comparison.

In the chapters that follow, Syme's argument unfolds like the petals of the flowers she so artfully applies to Sargent's creative aesthetic. Chapter one, "La Vie en Rose," begins by investigating the nineteenth-century fascination with the sex lives of flowers. By bringing to light some unfamiliar readings of floral and vegetative sexuality from which artists took inspiration, it becomes clear that nothing escaped the fin-de-siècle fascination with botanical troping. Continuing this train of thought, Chapter 2, "Lascivious Digitation, or The Importance of Manual Stimulation to the Invert Artist," focuses on Sargent's painted hands, which call to mind the full display of flowers' reproductive organs. These distinctive hands, which grasp, entwine, and cup growing things, become important sites of identity, signification, and communication. Among this chapter's many revelations is an examination of the exclusive male-to-male custom of shaking hands. Scientific discourse of the time held that electric impulses could be transmitted more immediately and directly to the nerves by the palms. Sargent's delicate, alluring hands are, therefore, potent metaphors for covert transmission of erotic desire. Syme's investigation of the galvanizing power of touch leads to a fascinating examination of animals, who conduct electricity, such as the eel. The chapter brings new meaning to the "snips and snails and puppy-dog tails," of which little boys are made.

Chapter 3, "Dr. Octogynecologist," brings together the themes of palpation, pollination, painting, and perversion in a discussion of one of Sargent's most celebrated portraits, *Dr. Pozzi at Home* (1881). Known as "Dr. Dieu," the attractive and charismatic Samuel Pozzi revolutionized French gynecology by introducing the now-standard bimanual technique of examination. Sargent's seductive portrait presents the doctor, and his extraordinary hands, as a gynecological gardener, who prunes, irrigates, cuts, and hand-pollinates his willing subjects. Not incidentally, Pozzi, who relied on both sight and touch in his gynecological probings, was also a fellow explorer of the intersections of human and floral sexualities. Illustrations from his famous *Traité de gynécologie* (1890) present the cysts and polyps of diseased female genitalia as "vegetations" of the womb. These graphic images, which are not for the faint-hearted, reinforce Sargent's efforts to naturalize sexual inversion through the use of floral metaphors.

The fourth chapter, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Ladybird," interprets Sargent's paintings of female children in gardens and conservatories as veiled self-portraits, paralleling several years of his artistic life. Focusing primarily on two works, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1884) and *Portrait of Helen Sears* (1895), Syme demonstrates how Sargent conflates palette and bouquet to

suggest his fraught negotiation of artistic, sexual, and national identities. The intimation of hermaphroditism in these works recalls both perverse human sexuality and interspecies desire, ultimately personifying the artist as both receptive hermaphroditic plant and active pollinator. Chapter 5, "The Sting," brings the revelations of the previous chapter to bear on Sargent's contemporaries, among them James McNeill Whistler and Robert Louis Stevenson. Here, the suspect sexiness of Sargent's child-subjects yields to a more aggressive botanical narrative, in which the dangers and pleasures of invert sexuality are unmasked. In portraits of fellow artists, floral creation articulates the illicit desires it serves to screen in other paintings. Paintbrushes, whips, swords, riding crops, and cigarettes become suggestive fetishistic devices that define the artist as a predatory pollinator. From the cruel elegance of *Lord Ribblesdale* (1902) to the precocious insolence of the *Honourable Victoria Stanley* (1899), who presages the steely-eyed menace of the mature Joan Crawford, such portraits make a public statement about the existence of homosexuals and their contributions to the style, manners, and thinking of the day.

*A Touch of Blossom* achieves a profound synthesis of sources and ideas, grounded in the international currents of fin-de-siècle thought. If a weakness could be found in this eloquent study, it might be in the perception of the nineteenth century as a self-generating source of originality. All of the concepts and motifs discussed in this book have long histories that provided fertile soil for nineteenth-century decadence and cynicism to flourish. An example is the sixteenth-century image of the alchemical hermaphrodite from Salomon Trismosin's *Splendor Solis*, illustrated in reference to *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. The late nineteenth century saw a resurgence of interest in the occult aspects of alchemical philosophy, evidenced scientifically in the psychological theories of C. G. Jung and manifested artistically in the symbolist Parisian Rosicrucian Salons, led by Joséphin Péladan. The alchemical hermaphrodite was, for centuries, a symbol of the pinnacle of creative thought, personified by the union of opposites. This image, and hundreds like it, would have been profoundly relevant to Sargent's identification with a singular being, which was by nature superior to either sex. It is therefore unlikely that the similarity of Sargent's and Trismosin's figures is incidental. A similar instance has to do with early botanical images, which appear in support of various human/floral analogies throughout this book. The orchid, represented by no less than five examples, is a case in point. Its long and salacious history was rediscovered in the seventeenth century when Dutch botanists began cultivating them in the hothouses of Northern Europe. A favorite symbolist bloom, orchids were believed to be self-fertilizing. Surprisingly, this sexual attribute is not emphasized in the book's learned analysis of Sargent's provocative *Madame X* (1883-84), though its subject, the "orchidaceous" Virginie Avegno Gautreau, was rumored to have become pregnant without sexual contact with a man. Likewise, analysis of Sargent's *The Hermit* (1908) would have gained much from an awareness of the tradition of chaste and melancholy hermit saints from which it comes. In fact, the early modern identification of artistic genius with all aspects of melancholia provided nineteenth-century artists with many an inspirational motif. These comments do not in any way detract from the book's substance and quality, but rather suggest the relevance and importance of its observations to cultural historians in fields beyond nineteenth-century art history.

*A Touch of Blossom's* contention that Sargent openly pursued an "invert" agenda in his portraits may seem radical to some readers. However, any skepticism, if such exists, soon evaporates in the face of Syme's cogent, finely crafted argument. Written with wit and grace, and filled with vivid stylistic analyses and ingenious verbal and visual puns, this book is as engaging as the

brilliant portraits it examines. Its opulent illustrations and sophisticated design complement Penn State Press's admirable commitment to breaking down the academic barriers between art and science. The result is a brave and original cultural portrait that rivals Sargent's own in subtlety, depth, and beauty. The visceral joy of reading such a book prompted me to examine my own long experience as a researcher and teacher of art history. Why do my students complain that so many of their reading assignments are pedantic and confoundingly dull? Why, when battling a bout of insomnia, do I reach for *The Art Bulletin* before the Ambien? Alison Syme's splendid book brings us new hope for future hours spent anticipating the wit and wisdom of each succeeding page, and staying awake to savor the experience.

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