

Jeremy Musson

London

“Snatched from Time’s effacement”: Sargent’s portrait of the Sitwells and the embers of aristocratic life

There is a work of art executed in 1900 that vividly lays bare the struggles self-image and identity that were taking place in the world of the English country house at the dawn of the twentieth century. This period is generally considered to be one of extraordinary wealth and confidence for this class of landowners. Comprising some 3,000 families out of a British population of some 44 million they controlled most of the land and held powerful positions of influence in government, in both the House of Commons and the Lords. In considering this work of art, is salutary to recall that in an age when over 20 million people earned less than £160 annually – and 15.5 million were living on a figure closer to £50 a year – this picture cost £1,500.¹ But the story that it tells – and the story of the society that produced it – is more nuanced and complex than it seems at first glance.

Painted by a leading society portraitist, John Singer Sargent [fig. 1: the Sargent group portrait] this is a group portrait of a landed English family; that of Sir George Sitwell (fourth baronet, 1860–1943) of Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire. This much sounds conventional enough but the portrait is a striking snapshot of the identity of the landowner against the backdrop of rapid political and economic change which was taking place across Europe in the 1890s and early 1900s.² It can be read as a document of the final great phase of aristocratic patronage, and is a portrait where society and family are interrogated by the very document intended to preserve their image for posterity.

What sets this portrait apart from most other 1900 group or family portraits is the fullness of the recorded evidence of

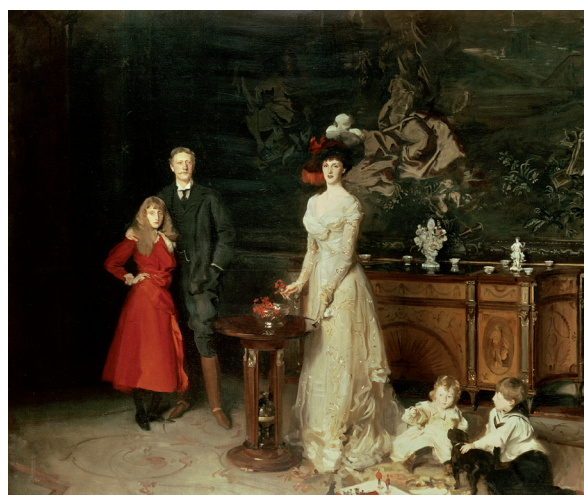


Fig. 1. John Singer Sargent, *The Sitwell Family 1900*, oil, canvas, private collection, photo: J. Musson, 2003

its inception and production. This reveals how commissioning a portrait to hang in a country house could be a stage-managed event encompassing complex ideas about taste, dynasty and possession, as well as an ambitious artistic endeavour. The three children in the portrait all grew up to become famous writers, and promoters of *avant-garde* modern art.³ One of them, Osbert (later Sir Osbert, fifth baronet, 1892–1969) recorded his memories of sitting for this painting in Sargent’s studio in Tite Street, Chelsea – in the heart of one of the most significant artists’ quarters in London. This detailed account gives us an opportunity to peer behind the scenes into the world of artist and client.⁴

Osbert Sitwell, Sir George’s eldest son and heir, wrote his account of sitting for the portrait in 1942, noting that London

¹ B. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890–1914*, Macmillan, London 1997 (first published 1966), p. 22–26.

² R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: the Later Portraits: Complete Paintings*, vol. 3, published for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, New Haven–London 2003, p. 44–47.

³ J. Skipwith, S. Bradford, *The Sitwells and the Arts of the 1920s and 1930s*, National Portrait Gallery, London 1994.

⁴ O. Sitwell, *Left Hand Right Hand!*, Macmillan, London 1946, the Reprint Society edition 1946, p. 214–254.

was "being bombed nightly at the time of writing".⁵ So he was looking back on the world in which this portrait was painted – a moment frozen in time in 1900 – from the cracking hopelessness of the Second World War. He also looking back over the damaging chasm of the First World War, in which he served as an officer in the trenches. The sittings for this portrait, with his family arranged and posed in the exotic interior of a London artist's studio, are assembled like a glimmering piece of mosaic within his biography, conjuring up a lost world in all its minute reality.

Osbert Sitwell recalls the experience in surprising detail⁶ and it takes up the entire final chapter of the first volume of his acclaimed biography, *Left hand, Right Hand!* (1946). He wanted to share this phenomenal act of memory because he felt – especially after his own wartime service in the First World War – that the confident Edwardian way of life he had once known so well was literally vanishing in front of his eyes. Although one has, perhaps, to be cautious about the accuracy of a child's memory, it is also clear that Sitwell bolstered his recollections by looking at family papers, quoting letters, and taking note of conversations with his father and siblings.⁷ "All works of art", he wrote, "are pulled out of the future" but "in this cruel and meaningless epoch behind the bars of which I write neither past nor future seems to have any existence; only the present which contains the dead ashes of the past". So he resolved on his extraordinary memoir.⁸

His father, Sir George Sitwell (fig. 2: photograph of Sir George), was an eccentric connoisseur – an authority on the history of Italian garden design on which he published a book. He began making plans for a group portrait around 1895, having previously commissioned portraits of himself and his wife from Frank Miles, another resident of Tite Street Chelsea, and a portrait of them together from Heywood Hardy.⁹

In these early commissions, Sir George's first concerns were to find a painter who could capture his wife Ida's much admired Grecian beauty – he had married her when she was just seventeen in 1886. Among Sir George's correspondence is a letter of 14 September 1887 to his agent and former tutor, Mr. Peveril Turnbull, in which enquired after an introduction to the painter Laurence Alma Tadema (fig. 3: photograph of



Fig. 2. Sir George Sitwell, 4th Bt (1860–1943), c. 1890, photographer unknown, private collection



Fig. 3. Lady Ida Sitwell (1869–1937), wife of Sir George Sitwell, c. 1890, photographer unknown, private collection

⁵ Ibidem, p. 227.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 215–254.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 219–222.

⁸ Ibidem, p. iii.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 219.



Fig. 4. The Dining Room Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire, 1793–1794, photo: J. Musson, 2003

Lady Ida): "ask him if he would be willing to paint a portrait of a young lady, and what would be the price of such a portrait without hands."¹⁰ Apparently he admired Tadmá's popular neo-classical fantasy paintings, and his impressive archaeological understanding of Roman buildings, but did not think he could paint hands. Eventually, in 1888, Sir George selected the artist Sir William Blake Richmond, then Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, who painted Ida in a stiff pose with a zither on her lap – an instrument which she could not play. During this process, Richmond and Sir George argued endlessly about the pose and clothes.

Sir George also sat to Henry Tonks, in evening dress, in 1898. Tonks was by then well established as a teacher at The Slade School of Art in London – academic status clearly appealed to the baronet. Tonks recalled Sir George instructing

him not to paint his hair on a particular day – "it's not its usual form."¹¹ This painting hangs today in the early 1800s dining room [fig. 4: the dining room at Renishaw Hall], which underlines how contemporary portraits were intended to hang alongside 18th-century portraits within the early 19th-century dining room – taking their place within a pre-ordained world and reinforcing the image of that world.¹²

After these preliminary experiments, in April 1899, Sir George wrote in a letter to his agent: "I feel now equal to paying for a large portrait group, and wish you would ask your artist friend D.S. MacColl whom he recommends." D.S. MacColl pointed him towards Jacques Emile Blanche and Hubert Herkomer, both of whom would have produced interesting

¹¹ J. Skipwith, S. Bradford, op. cit., p. 26.

¹² J. Musson, *Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire*, "Country Life", June 5, 2003, p. 148–153.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

results.¹³ But by June 14, Sir George had chosen his artist and he wrote to Turnbull: "I believe I have settled with Sargent for next year, but 'there's many a slip'. Sargent is very much the kind of painter MacColl recommends. He will only paint in his own studio in London, won't hear of a motive for the group or an outdoor picture, and will please himself. It is evident therefore that I cannot get the picture I want namely a portrait group that will give information and tell its own story, and will hang and mezzotint [i.e. could be engraved] as a pair to the Copley. At the same time, Sargent is a great artist, and I shall get the best this age can offer."

Sir George was not without reservations about his choice of artist, and he added "What I am afraid of is that Sargent has not studied the principles which have been considered in dealing with portrait groups, an art by itself, and that he will presently realize that five figures can't be grouped without a motive."¹⁴ The word motive seems to have been used in the sense of a story or narrative and it is revealing that Sir George expected this portrait to employ a narrative, a fiction, to confirm a reality. At the end of the letter, Sir George added somewhat unconvincingly: "I have a good deal to do with artists and always get on well with them."¹⁵

Sir George Sitwell was introduced to Sargent by his cousin George Swinton, who had sat for the artist, and whose wife, a singer, was painted by Sargent in 1896–1897.¹⁶ In his letter to his agent, Sir George notes that Sargent is American, which may have influenced his choice. He wanted the new group portrait to hang as a pendant to the six-foot canvas *The Sitwell Children*, painted in 1787 by the American portraitist John Singleton Copley.

This painting shows the children of the 1st Sitwell baronet (fig. 5: the Copley group portrait and the group portrait) memorably depicted in playful and affectionate attitudes. It is a choice that reflects the changing attitude to family life – especially amongst the aristocracy, partly influenced by the writings of Rousseau – in the later 18th century.¹⁷

Sargent, was summoned to the house in Derbyshire to agree terms, and to see the Copley, in August 1899. Of the Copley portrait, he is recorded as saying: "I can never equal that" but he did agree to try, for a fee of £1,500. In the cir-

cumstances, it is perhaps curious that his portrait has none of the confident freedom of the Copley depiction, tending rather towards the formality of a Van Dyck. The two portraits do not hang together at Renishaw Hall.

Sargent visited the Swintons nearby, and a note in Mrs. Swinton's visiting book (26–30 August 1899) reads: "A visit to induce Sargent to undertake the Sitwell group, which eventually succeeded. But I think he said – "Never again!", presumably referring to a visit to Renishaw."¹⁸ While staying at Renishaw Hall, Sargent painted a watercolour sketch of Lady Ida and the two boys, which Osbert said was: "said to be astonishing in its virtuosity and swift breath-taking resemblance." Sargent gave the picture to his hostess but she left it between the papers of a journal, and a maid inadvertently used it to light the fire.¹⁹

We can see from his letters that Sir George Sitwell wanted his family portrait to have a specific artistic as well as social pedigree. Sargent was already engaged in contriving art-historical precedent for his portraiture and evolving his own modern version of the grand manner through his observation of Reynolds, Gainsborough and Lawrence. This was in part a response to the growing admiration for these masters among art historians, experts and art galleries from the 1870s onwards. During this time, there were exhibitions and monographs devoted to Van Dyck and to Reynolds, and Sargent was especially interested in Van Dyck.²⁰

Sargent's career as a portraitist in the grand manner reached its apogee between 1900 and 1907, with an annual average of seventeen pictures. Sargent was actively conscious of the setting of his paintings for the English aristocracy, aware that they would form part of dynastic collections. He certainly made references to architectural settings in some of his pictures.²¹ But just to underline the shifting context of this 1900 portrait, Ormond and Kilmurray, observed in the major catalogue raisonnée, *John Singer Sargent: The Later Portraits*: "It is a historical irony that the revival of interest in the work of the old masters is paralleled by the disappearance of their works from the walls of British stately homes. The sale of hereditary treasures, as expressed in contemporary commentaries, is a powerful symbol of aristocratic decline."²² The Rothschilds and American collectors in particular were building up major

¹³ O. Sitwell, op. cit., p. 219.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 223; R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, op. cit., p. 46.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ O. Sitwell, op. cit., p. 225.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 221.

¹⁸ R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁹ O. Sitwell, op. cit., p. 225–226.

²⁰ R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, op. cit., p. 29, 31–32.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 76–79.

²² Ibidem, p. 30.



Fig. 5. John Singleton Copley, *The children of Francis Hurt Sitwell*, 1787, oil, canvas, private collection, photo: J. Musson, 2003

collections of 18th-century portraits, which can be seen at Wadsworth and in the National Gallery of Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The idea of his belonging to a landed dynasty was of critical importance to Sir George, notwithstanding the fact that his wealth derived entirely from coal mining rights over his estates. It was the aristocratic pedigree of his wife, Lady Ida, the daughter of the 1st Earl of Lonsborough, which had commended their marriage to him even more than her acknowledged beauty. The Sargent portrait was an overt attempt to assert his and his children's generation into the visual history of the Sitwell dynasty.

Sir George Sitwell stage-managed the setting of the portrait with an unusual and extraordinary detailed inter-

est.²³ Items sent to the studio from the house were chosen specifically to underline the Sitwell dynasty's inherited values. Sir George arranged to send the Copley to Sargent for use as a reference work, and Sargent followed the scale and had a matching frame created as a gift at the end of the commission. A Brussels tapestry which normally hung in the drawing room was also sent, as well as the family's admired Chippendale commode – thought then to be French chiffonier – above which the Sargent portrait hangs today. (Fig. 6: drawing room) A letter from the sub-agent to Turnbull confirms "the tapestry, picture and sideboard" were packed up and dispatched to London.²⁴

²³ R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁴ O. Sitwell, *op. cit.*, p. 226.



Fig. 6. Drawing Room Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire showing the De Vos tapestries, 1803, photo: J. Musson, 2003

After sending the furniture, Sir George Sitwell arrived to personally supervise its unpacking in the studio, while helpfully "jotting down in his note-book pieces of advice and various technical hints that he thought might be useful to the artist." Sargent's studio (fig. 7: the studio), in Tite Street in Chelsea consisted of an enormous room which combined space and light for the artist to work with a grandeur of scale and theatrical effect intended to impress the patron with the success and culture of his chosen artist.²⁵

The clothing and props were very carefully considered. Sir George wore polished riding boots, an allusion to his land-ownership rather than his actual interests. In hat and grand gown, Lady Ida was the picture of the dutiful wife, elegantly arranging flowers in a silver bowl which was a racing trophy

²⁵ R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, op. cit., p. xxi; J. Musson, *Artists' Houses*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Interior Design*, vol. 1, ed. by J. Banham, Fitzroy Dearborn, London–Chicago 1997, p. 58–60.

won by a sporting ancestor. The china and Chelsea figures were loaned by the art dealer Sir Joseph Duveen (ironically as he was one of the dealers who specialized in selling the old master portraits of England to American collectors).

The girl in the picture, later the famous writer and poet Dame Edith Sitwell, commented on the stage-management with her usual acuity and honesty: "My father was portrayed in riding-dress (he never rode), my mother in a white-spangled low evening gown and a hat with feathers, arranging, with one prettily shaped, flaccid, entirely useless hand, red anemones in a silver bowl (she never arranged flowers, and in any case it would have been a curious occupation for one wearing a ball-dress, even if, at the same time, she wore a hat) [...] I was white with fury and contempt, and indignant that my father held me in what he thought was a tender paternal embrace."²⁶

²⁶ E. Sitwell, *Taken Care Of*, Atheneum, New York 1965, p. x.



Fig. 7. John Singer Sargent in his Tite Street Studio, Chelsea, photographer unknown, private collection

At the time of the portrait, Edith was eleven, Osbert seven, and Sacheverell, two. The family pug – introduced into the composition to inject a bit of playful informality – bit the boys continually. Sir George had berated Sargent for not having a motive or narrative, but the very modern idea of the dysfunctional family seems to have produced its own unacknowledged one.

The sittings for the painting were on alternate days for six weeks, and Osbert recorded Sargent's impressive patience in the face of his father's constant interference. Sir George believed that Sargent was a great painter, but this: "in no wise relieved him of his duty as patron, which was to offer an opinion on every matter, whether of taste, feeling or technique."²⁷ Osbert Sitwell recorded that Sargent: "exhibited under this treatment a remarkable mildness and self-control." Nonetheless, there were emotional scenes – which Sir George evidently relished as a sign of the artistic temperament. At one point,

Sir George asked Sargent to be sure to depict his daughter's crooked nose clearly, Sargent was enraged at this cruel remark, made her nose straight in the canvas, and Sir George's crooked.

Sargent had just completed was another portrait *The Wyndham Sisters: Lady Elcho, Mrs. Adeane and Mrs. Tennant* (later Lady Glenconner), associated with the aristocratic group called the Souls. This was standing in the studio-house while the Sitwells were sitting for their portrait, and was a subject of fascination for the children. It was also exhibited at the Royal Academy, in 1900, to great acclaim.²⁸ Two of Lady Glenconner's sons later became close friends of Osbert Sitwell. They were both killed in the First World War, part of that doomed generation whose ghosts haunt Osbert's memoir. The painting of the sisters was sold for £20,000 pounds to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1926.

The Sitwells' painting was also exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1901, where it was admired by Diaghilev among

²⁷ O. Sitwell, op. cit., p. 231.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 234–235.



Fig. 8. Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire, seen from the garden, photo: J. Musson, 2003

others, and received some attention in the press – both positive and negative – *The Spectator's* critic observed: "Had the figures been as satisfactory as the cabinet and tapestry behind the, the picture would have been a very fine one. Unfortunately the figures in standing in curious isolation have an odd appearance difficult to describe but suggestive of marionettes".²⁹

The painting was then taken to Renishaw Hall (fig. 8: the house), where it has hung ever since. It hangs in the drawing room today, above the Chippendale Commode which was featured in the painting. The house and estate are still in the hands of the family, inherited recently by Sir George's great-grand-daughter and her husband. This continuity of ownership had seemed, like much else, no longer a certainty to be taken for granted when her great-uncle penned his account, in the

midst of the Blitz, in 1942: "The picture still hangs, I wonder for how long? In the house in which I write these words."

Writing about Sargent's paintings and how well he caught the Edwardian upper class, Osbert Sitwell observed with sharp brilliance that "looking at his portraits, [the subjects] understood at last how rich they really were... They had waited, among other things for Sargent to record them, and he snatched many of them from Time's effacement; the aristocrat with his top hat and his riding whip, his handsome ram's head and air of dowdy elegance, the fashionable beauties who were beautiful but in so unstylised and faded a manner that it was almost impossible to formulate them upon canvas, and the fashionable beauties who were ugly and so much easier to paint".³⁰

²⁹ "Spectator", 25 May 1901, p. 768, as cited in R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 252–253.



Fig. 9. The Sitwell Family by Sargent 1900 hanging in the Drawing Room at Renishaw Hall Derbyshire above the Chippendale commode, photo: J. Musson, 2003

The future careers of the Sitwell children lie beyond of the scope of a paper on art in 1900, but it must be observed that the children portrayed in Sargent's 1900 masterpiece, all played a role in developing *Avant grade* taste in Britain from 1913 and into the 1920s and 1930s. Unconventional, and informed by what art critic Ian Gale recently called as "champagne anarchism" their tastes were a reaction to both Edwardian convention and the crisis of the First World War. (Fig. 9: Beaton's portrait of the three). The image-making they experienced and observed as children, and their reaction to their father's controlling fantasies, clearly played a part in this.³¹

³¹ I. Gale, *The Sitwell Inheritance*, "The Independent", 11 October 1994, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/art-the-sitwell-inheritance-the-sitwells--eccentrics-literati-rivals-to-the-bloomsbury-set--but-what-did-they-actually-do-iain-gale-examines-their-achievements-1442304.html>.

By 1913, Edith Sitwell was mixing with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and writing her own poetry. During the First World War, on leave from the trenches, Osbert Sitwell dined in Paris with Wyndham Lewis and Augustus John. Under the influence of the writings and friendship of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, both Sitwell brothers travelled, in 1918, to Paris for an exhibition on French and British contemporary art.³² In August 1919, they exhibited new paintings by Picasso, Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, Soutine, and Modigliani. They also championed the Vorticists – to the horror of Roger Fry. The following year Sacheverell tried to commission Picasso to paint a series of murals for the family's castle in Italy. Sacheverell also championed a new understanding of baroque and the neo-Romanticism of painters such as Rex Whistler and Piper.

Ormond and Murray speak of Sargent's role as "performing a particular function [...] not so much recording his sitters, as idealizing, dramatizing and enhancing them. The authority of his portraiture is pictorial, rather than historical, offering an inflected vision rather than social documentation."³³ This is surely true of portraiture painted of the moneyed classes of any age.

Sargent's Sitwell family portrait reveals in one painting a number of intensely complex attitudes to art and image, as well as the self-conscious image-making of an English aristocrat trying to create an icon of permanence in the face of so much change. This painting informs a modern audience about the nature of that 1900 world, but thanks to the account of the process recorded by Osbert and Edith, the story it tells us is very far from the story its patron intended. What is undoubtedly true is that Sargent did indeed snatch an entire family from "Time's effacement."

³² Ibidem; J. Skipwith, S. Bradford, op. cit., p. 44–47, and p. 74–85.

³³ R. Ormond, E. Kilmurray, op. cit., p. 34.