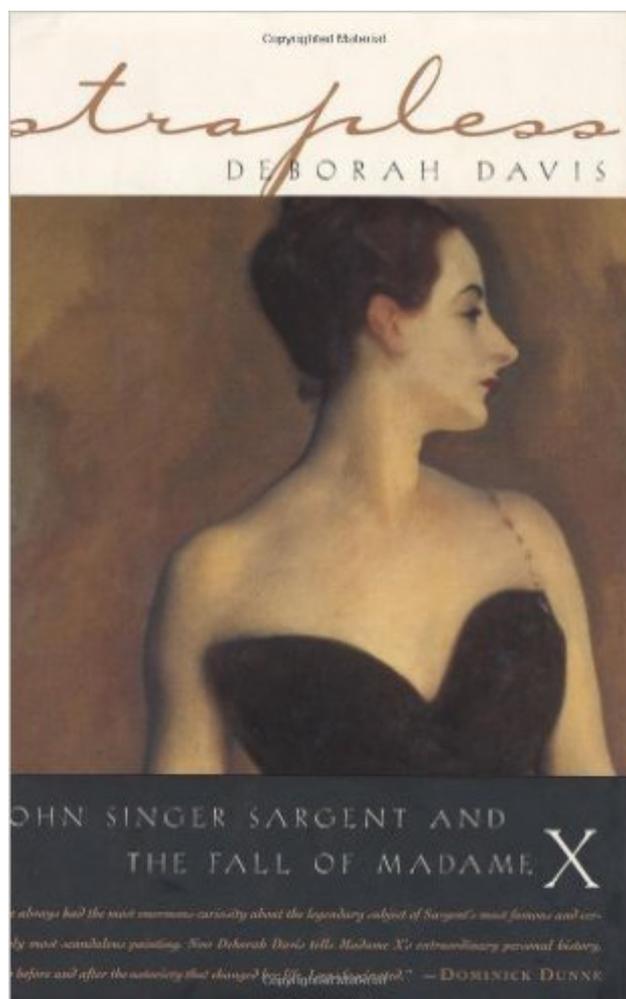


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# Strapless: John Singer Sargent And The Fall Of Madame X



## Synopsis

The story behind the legendary John Singer Sargent painting that propelled the artist to international renown but condemned his subject to a life of public ridicule. John Singer Sargent's *Madame X* is one of the world's best-known portraits. As the Metropolitan's most frequently requested painting for loans, it travels to museums around the globe. The image of "Madame X" decorates book and magazine covers, greeting cards and screen savers. She's even been immortalized as a Madame Alexander doll. Few people, though, know the fascinating story behind the painting. "Madame X" was actually a twenty-three-year-old New Orleans Creole, Virginie Gautreau, who moved to Paris and quickly became the "it girl" of her day. All the leading artists wanted to paint her, but it was Sargent, a relative nobody, who won the commission. Gautreau and Sargent must have recognized in each other a like-minded hunger for fame. Unveiled at the 1884 Paris Salon, Gautreau's portrait did generate 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, to outraged Parisian viewers, either the prelude or the aftermath of sex. Her reputation irreparably damaged, Gautreau retired from public life, destroying all the mirrors in her home so she would never have to look at herself again. Why had Sargent chosen to portray her in such a provocative manner? Was the painting, with the scandal it generated, the machination of a sexually conflicted man who desired a woman and a lifestyle he could never possess? 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 an enthralling tale of art and celebrity, obsession and betrayal.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The title of this review refers to something John Singer Sargent wrote in a letter when he was attempting to complete the "Madame X," painting. He was having a great deal of difficulty in deciding what pose Madame Gautreau should adopt for the painting. It didn't help that the 24 year old woman appeared to suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder: she hated to hold a pose. She was rich, she was young, and, well, she had other things to do! I have to admit that when I read on the book jacket that "Deborah Davis is a writer and veteran film executive...", I was a bit put off. I thought, "Oh, this is going to be presented in a 'Hollywood' way, with a lot of style but no substance." Well, shame on me. Ms. Davis (who admits she is not an art "expert") has written a very good book. Although the book is relatively brief, the author covers a lot of ground. Even though the book is not meant to be a biography of Sargent, we still get a pretty good feel for what the man was like: sensitive, intelligent, ambitious, lonely and sexually conflicted. Sargent had already made a pretty good name for himself before he painted Amelie Gautreau. By painting a celebrated beauty, however, he was going for the brass ring - he was hoping to become even more well known and to generate more commissions for portraits of the rich and famous. When Ms. Davis talks about the actual public display of the painting at the 1884 Paris Salon, she also is quite good. We learn about the quirks of a culture where it was perfectly fine to have acres of naked flesh cavorting in a historical painting, but it was scandalous to have a fallen shoulder strap if you were painting a real, contemporary woman.

I read this book in August 2008 and have been meaning to review it ever since. For shame. Most people know John Singer Sargent's infamous painting "Madame X" even if they don't know the name and have never heard of the artist because this painting has quite the sensational story attached to it. According to surrounding lore, Sargent initially painted "Madame X" with the right strap of her black gown slipping off of her shoulder. When the painting debuted at the 1884 Salon in Paris (the place to have a painting displayed at the time and a good signifier of current or future artistic success) it created an uproar, so scandalous was the pose. Indeed, facing numerous charges of the painting's indecency, Sargent eventually repainted the strap sitting firmly, and properly, on Madame's shoulder. Pursuing my art history minor in New York City I had the amazing opportunity to see "Madame X" in person at the Metropolitan Museum. The painting has always had a special place in my heart for, if nothing else, the drama associated with its debut. So I was very pleased when a copy of Deborah Davis' book *Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X* (2004) fell into my lap. Part historical research, part biography, part social commentary, part feminist

text, Deborah Davis handles a lot of material in a relatively small volume (320 pages with font of average size and relevant pictures included). One of the reasons Davis decided to research this particular painting and its subject is because so little information remains about Virginie Amelie Gautreau, her life, or how Sargent came to paint her scandalous portrait.

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