

Madame X stars in

Sargent exhibit

The strap of madame's evening gown slips from her shoulder at a portrait sitting in France. The painter, John Singer Sargent, preserves the erotic detail on canvas. Madame secretly lauds the picture as a masterpiece but Parisians are outraged.

Madame Virginie Gautreau, the stunning, Louisiana-born idol of Paris society, faces ostracism for her risqué pose. Sargent repaints the strap at its proper place, but he's undone by the public uproar. He flees to London to restart his career, securing his place as one of America's greatest artists.

The scandal of *Madame X* at the 1884 Paris Salon exhibition, and her recently deciphered letter praising the portrait, inspired *Sargent's Women*, the first retrospective focusing on the artist's relationships with his models, according to Warren Adelson, the organizer.

The exhibition of 55 oils, watercolors and drawings — which opened Wednesday at the Adelson Galleries and lasts through Dec. 13 — draws from the holdings of U.S. museums and private collections, including about a dozen from Sargent's descendants in Britain and the United States.

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The review aims to document Sargent's attraction to the glamorous women he portrayed during his early career, from 1878 to 1890, and his genius for capturing their essence — even though he was sexually ambivalent and never married, Adelson explained.

Born in Florence, Italy, in 1856, to American parents who spent their time travel-

ing in Europe, Sargent learned to sketch from his mother, then received formal training as a teenager in Rome, Florence and Paris.

Influenced by French impressionism, he used bold brushstrokes, earthy tones and luminous highlights in portraits of women he met during his travels in Britain, France, Spain, Italy and North Africa, honing his technique and seeking commissions for portraits.

Among his renowned portraits on display are several poses of the ravishing teenager, Rosina Ferrara of Capri; Judith Gautier, the French mistress of composer Richard Wagner, immortalized in *A Gust of Wind* (1883-85); Mrs. Wilton Phipps, a wealthy American socialite; and Violet Sargent, the painter's lovely sister.

Exotic women in Venetian street scenes, Spanish gypsies, Javanese dancers and a young Moroccan woman in white robes inhaling



AP/courtesy Adelson Galleries

Rosina, oil on panel, circa 1878, by John Singer Sargent.

fumes from an incense burner are other highlights of the exhibit.

The renowned full-length portrait of *Madame X* in black, with her jeweled shoulder strap in place and her gaze averted, is in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The gallery show includes three of Sargent's pencil sketches for *Madame X*, one with the controversial strap slipped to fully reveal her comely shoulder. Even for the French, it was too much skin for a society woman during a time when Victorian morals prevailed.

A crucial piece of background about the portrait emerged in 2002 when Adelson — a specialist in Sargent's work — purchased a collection of the painter's letters at auction in London.

One of the letters, in neat, girlish handwriting, described a Sargent portrait as

a "chefs d'oeuvre" or masterpiece, and was signed "Amelie Gautreau."

The name of the sitter for *Madame X* was known as Virginie Gautreau, but the mystery of "Amelie Gautreau" wasn't solved until Deborah Davis, author of a recent biography about *Madame X*, *Strapless*, identified them as the same.

The statement that the portrait was "a masterpiece" was, Adelson writes in the show's catalog, "astounding. ... This statement, in her hand, contradicted a hundred years of folklore claiming that she and her family hated the painting."

Sargent spent most of his life in Europe, but came to the United States periodically to do portraits and larger commissions, including murals at the Boston Public Library and Museum of Fine Arts. He died in London in 1925 on the eve of a trip to Boston to complete the murals.