

American Artist Series.

JOHN S. SARGENT.

A YEAR ago Mr. Sargent's life-size portrait of a little girl called Beatrice hung at the end of the main gallery, in the place of honor, at the annual exhibition of the Society of American Artists. All New York talked about it, and this was surprising enough, as our city does not often interest itself very keenly in a picture of so unsensational a kind. But it was still more surprising to find that all New York not only discussed but admired this "Beatrice," for as yet it is the way of the world that what artists praise the public does not find quite satisfactory.

In truth, attractive qualities which are not often combined in a picture unite to make this one beautiful in the eyes alike of the most critical and the most ignorant. The charm of the subject is the first thing to be noted — the rare and exquisite individuality of the little lady herself. But, it should quickly be said, we must not overestimate the intrinsic importance of this charm, since it is one that would certainly have been lost under the brush of any but a consummately able artist. To paint a child well is perhaps the most difficult of the portrait-painter's tasks — to preserve the naïve, infantile look of a face upon which time and experience have made no marks, and at the same time to express the character and soul which reveal themselves so shyly that the interpreter must be singularly in sympathy with children if he is to perceive them at all. It is one of Mr. Sargent's greatest distinctions that he never fails of entire success when he has a child before him. No painter who ever lived could more sympathetically have expressed the delicate, peculiar personality of little Beatrice with more truth and fullness or with more simplicity; and none now alive could have done it so well. It is worth noting, moreover, that Mr. Sargent did not "costume" the child for the sake of pictorial effect. The dress is one she was in the habit of wearing, and the bird is her own particular pet.

Beauty of color also counts for much in the attractiveness of this portrait. The dress, with its pale-brown stripes and sprinkled flowers, the rosebud-tinted flesh and light-yellow hair, the pink topknot, and the pink and gray bird in its gilded cage, all relieved against the rich, deep tone of the background, unite in a harmony as brilliant as it is pure and tender. The pretty pose, too, must be taken into account, and the scheme of composition, where the height of the canvas, as well as the tall table and cage, so admirably emphasize the fairy-like smallness of the child.

All these things a brother-painter appreciated as fully as the public. And yet he might almost have overlooked them all for a time in admiration for the technical skill displayed — for the truth and beauty, the combined force and delicacy, of the handling. Rarely had the values and texture of flesh been so perfectly reproduced, and never, one was tempted to decide, the values and texture of flesh of this fragile transparency. The treatment of the neck, where white skin, white lace, and white pearls met, was a marvel of delicate vigor, and in all the rest of the canvas it was

wonderful to see how so dashing a brush could produce an effect so complete, refined, dignified, and quiet. One did not feel that brilliant handling had been displayed for its own sake, but simply that the painter had known so exactly what he wanted to do, and been so sure that it was exactly the right thing, that he could not help working broadly and swiftly. It was masterly painting, because a master's eye had seen the subject before the master hand began its reproduction. Mr. Sargent had seen not only form and color with clearness and acuteness, but also the baby soul behind them; and he had reproduced them all so beautifully that, when the tears came in one's eyes from sheer delight, it was hard to tell whether emotion was more touched by the work of nature or the work of art. Yet when we reflect a minute, and say again, A pearl among babies portrayed in a pearl among pictures, we feel that art must be allowed the chief share in the result. Exquisite children are born into the world more often than exquisite works of art, and nothing is beautiful upon canvas unless beautifully painted. Mr. Sargent might have found another model to give him as happy a chance; little Beatrice could hardly have found another painter to do her such absolute justice. To art, not nature, will be due the credit when in later years this child shall win an immortality like that with which a Velasquez or a Van Dyck endowed the royal children of his brush. I should hesitate to say that this is the finest picture Mr. Sargent has painted; but it is one of the very finest, and is certainly the loveliest of them all.

John Singer Sargent was born of American parents in Florence, Italy, in the year 1856. His mother is a Philadelphian, and his father belonged to the Boston family several members of which have been honorably conspicuous in journalism, literature, and science. He studied painting under Carolus Duran in Paris, and evidently, in another fashion, under the spirit of Velasquez in Spain. In 1878 he received an honorable mention at the Salon, and in 1881 a medal of the second class, while at the International Exhibition of 1889 he was given a medal of honor and the rank of chevalier in the *Legion d'Honneur*.

Born in Italy, educated in France, living much in London, and traveling widely, Mr. Sargent is that typically modern product, a citizen of the world. Yet he is not a man without a country. Blood has proved the strongest influence. No American would take him for a "foreigner," and we are only following his own lead when we claim him for the Western World. The pictures which won him the highest honor that could be gained at the Paris Exposition formed the chief feature of the American collection, and though he is a member of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in France, he is also a member of the Society of American Artists in New York; and Americans appreciate their good fortune in being able to claim him as a fellow-countryman. Wherever his pictures have been shown they have excited a very unusual amount of interest; prizes have been awarded him in Chicago and Philadelphia; and he is now working upon a large mural painting for the Boston Public Library.

M. G. van Rensselaer.