

Primitivism Displayed in American Art

[ALEXIS HEREDIA]

The twentieth-century art world was filled with great achievements and revelations. Many artists, especially those who traveled to foreign countries, influenced the kind of art we see today, for better or for worse. They exposed themselves to different cultures, some more respectfully than others, and painted the world that they saw. One of those artists was John Singer Sargent, an American painter born in Florence, Italy, who traveled abroad his entire life. All this traveling sparked his artistic brain, prompting him to paint in various locations. He visited numerous countries like Italy, Spain, and Morocco in his lifetime. He never became adapted to a single place and instead continued traveling. That being said, it was common for traveling artists to be culturally ignorant to foreign countries. However, it is a completely different situation when artists choose to be oblivious to the people and culture they experience, and painting the country however they see fit. This is where the idea of primitivism comes into view. Primitivism has appeared in many forms, some more subtle than others, and has evolved over the years in the art world, but its main idea has sustained: the artistic embodiment of cultural appropriation and disrespect toward societies exotic to Western eyes. In Venice, Italy, Sargent's *The Rialto* (1911) and Maurice Brazil Prendergast's *Canal* (ca. 1911-12) are discussed regarding how Venice was seen by a Venetian compared to that of a foreigner trying to exploit the city. In Spain, Sargent's *El Jaleo* (1882) and Mary Cassatt's *On the Balcony* (1872) have two different takes on the city, but both artists take advantage of the status of a tourist granted them. Lastly, in Morocco, the discussed works are Sargent's *Fumée d'Ambre Gris* (1880) and Henri Matisse's *View From a Window, Tangiers* (1913), which are two very different takes on the same city, one more respectful of its origins than the other. Although primitivism is not always transparent and recognized, it is still acutely present in pieces of modern art from the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Venice, Italy, is an alluring and unique location that many artists traveled to in an effort to paint a variety of subjects and landscapes. John Singer Sargent frequented Venice throughout his life and produced some of the most captivating landscapes of his career. Sargent's *The Rialto* (Fig. 1) was painted in 1911 in the perspective of a gondolier floating through the canals. As water runs throughout the city, there are many different styles that foreign artists adapted in their work to represent it, detailing a powerful characteristic of Venice. The brushstrokes that are used for the water, consisting of brown, blue, yellow, and orange hues in both the foreground and middle ground, are formed through steady flicks of the wrist, creating a sense of movement.



Fig. 1. John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1912). *The Rialto, Venice*, 1911, Italy. Oil on canvas, 55.9 x 92.1 cm. (22 x 36 ¼ in.) Philadelphia Museum of Art, The George W. Elkins Collection, E1924-4-28.

A vital aspect of this work is the emphasis on the contrast of light and shadow, a unifying factor that Sargent brings attention to in many of his other paintings. The bottom of the Rialto Bridge is an undeniably large area of darkness that blocks out the sun, creating a divide between the two sections of light. As the sun interacts with the darkness of the water, the contrast of both the color and the brushstrokes becomes more apparent. The light hitting the water creates hues of light blue, brown, yellow, and orange making a beautiful contrast between the two aspects. In the book entitled *John Singer Sargent*, Patricia Hills contributes an essay that expresses how Sargent's Venetian paintings “are neither typically Sargent in technique nor, insofar as artistic tradition is concerned, typically Venetian in subject, but their power and beauty are undeniable.”¹ Hills

1 Patricia Hills, *John Singer Sargent* (Whitney Museum of American Art in Association with N. H. Abrams, 1986), 70.

references how Sargent never attaches himself to the ongoing avant-garde movement in Europe and Western countries, and points out that he is not stylistically similar to other artists at the time. An important aspect to note is that Hills points out that the subjects in his works are not similar to what the country of Italy is actually like. This further backs the point that even though Sargent was born in Italy and even studied there, he was not true to Venetian culture when he painted there.

Like Sargent, American artist Maurice Brazil Prendergast was impressed by Venice's appeal, visiting multiple times to paint. On his second trip (ca. 1911-12), he produced the magnificent *Canal* (Fig. 2), painted with watercolors and pencil on paper. This painting



Fig. 2. Maurice Brazil Prendergast (American, 1858-1924), *Canal*, ca. 1911-12, Italy. Watercolor and pencil on paper. *The Art Story*, <https://m.theartstory.org/artist-prendergast-maurice-artworks.htm>.

is visually quite different to Sargent's *The Rialto* despite it having similar subjects. There is a lot of white space which gives the work an unfinished look. Prendergast utilizes a dissimilar palette to Sargent, as the former employs more conservative colors with an extensive range of shades, using them to their full potential. Additionally, the gondolier in the foreground who is wearing yellow mimics the dull-like colors of the buildings in the background, different to most of the other clothes of the figures in the work. The previously mentioned water brushstrokes in Sargent's painting are pointedly varying to Prendergast's. Prendergast's, as it was done through a post-impressionist eye, around twelve years subsequent to Sargent's

impressionist work, is geometrically produced. One could separate the different shades of blue, green, and brown into rectangle-like shapes.

Most people are under the impression that Venice is a city of color, sun constantly in the sky. However, according to an art review by Sebastian Smee, Venice

...is a grey and treeless place, which tends to be dominated by glinting silvers and a kind of optical washout...Just why it, then, that Prendergast's views of Venice is are so jewel-like, so crowded and brilliant with color? It's because he had a penchant for crowds. Crowds at the Rialto markets meant tourists, along with lots of fashionable and colorful dresses and hats. Prendergast spent four years in Paris, where, with modernity on the make, urban life was a favored subject of the avant-garde artists he fell to admiring. Prendergast was no [shabby] realist; he was...too much of an aesthete. But he wanted to capture Venice as it was.²

Smee's clear admiration for Prendergast's work shines through while remarking how Venice is not what the media jointly describes it to be. It is the people who make it a colorful, striking place. Specifically, in Prendergast's work, the figures on the bridge in the middle of the painting wear vibrant clothing. They wear shades of blue, yellow, orange, red, green, and purple, which enhances the tinge of the water and the lightly hued buildings, making the piece explode with color without actually having a large palette attached. He does not exaggerate the sun's presence on the environment nearly as much as Sargent does. On the contrary, Sargent chose the buildings, though unrealistically, to be much more vibrant shades of yellow and white, placing the subjects in the gondolas in muted clothes (i.e. the women in front wearing dark brown covers); this is the opposite of Prendergast's world. Margaretta M. Lovell, author of *A Visitable Past: Views of Venice by American Artists, 1860-1915*, interestingly studies and contrasts both artists' work against what Venice truly is:

The microcosm portrayed in both Prendergast and Sargent campi pictures is of a world living more in its memories than in its traditions. It often surprises visitors to find that Venice is basically a pedestrian city. While it is easier to travel to

2 Sebastian Smee, "The Man Who Colored Venice," *The Boston Globe*, September 5, 2009, http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2009/09/05/prendergast_in_italy_shows_off_the_artists_developing_sense_of_his_talent_with_color/?page=2.

some destinations by vaporetti, few people hire gondolas and most walk. When one sees in these canal and campi views is a pedestrian's-eye view of a newly discovered realm, one characterized by an extraordinary sense of urban quiet, sudden narrow vistas.³

This is an interesting comment as this would imply that both Prendergast and Sargent used their own personal aesthetics, adding elements to the work that were not there. This gave, and still gives, Westerners the false idea that in Venice everyone travels by gondola, when in fact there is more foot traffic around the city than anything else. Just as in primitivism, these two artists fill in the gaps or lack of substantive authenticity by incorporating their own personally pleasing elements to their pieces. This may make these exotic places, in an American's eyes, seem more authentic and attractive than in reality. The false appeal to Western countries is evident in not only *The Rialto* by Sargent, but in plenty of his other paintings where the sunset or sunrise is constant, giving the idea of an ever-present orange and yellow hue over Venice.

Another frequented art destination that is rife with culture, life, and beauty is the beguiling country of Spain. The work of Spanish artists like Diego Velazquez enticed foreign artists to travel across the globe to experience the country for themselves. John Singer Sargent traveled to Spain to observe and analyze the work of artists that defined the country. Sargent admired Velazquez and, after studying him and his art, incorporated aspects of his style into his own work. An 1882 painting of Sargent's that stands out among the many he produced is *El Jaleo* (Fig. 3), which translates to "The Ruckus." At first glance, there is a lot going on: the vivacious flamenco dancer, the additional dancers to the right, the mariachi band to the left, and the striking contrast of shadow and light. To start, the focus of the painting is the dancer who is the most prominent in the work, aside from the shadows she casts. The shape of the dancer's hands and position of her body indicates the performance involves a lot of movement and energy. Another sign of liveliness is the reactions of those in the background on both sides of the room, the dancers, and the mariachi band, add to and mimic the energy of the dancer in front. Despite the high-spirited atmosphere, there is a dearth of color in the work, just like Sargent's *The Rialto*, except this time the monotonous palette is mostly dark instead of bright and sunset-like. The top half of the dancer's traditional dress is dark red and mostly covered by a black shawl decorated with a blue tinsel or sequin-like material. The blue gives a satisfying contrast to the rest of

³ Margaretta Lovell, *A Visitable Past: Views of Venice by American Artists 1860-1915* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 69.

the dark clothing that is presented. The bottom half of the dress is quite the opposite, as it displays a distinction between the black shawl on top of the bright white dress. The shadows that are mentioned earlier are a large



Fig. 3. John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1912), *El Jaleo*, 1882, Spain. Oil on canvas, 232 x 348 cm. (91 5/16 x 137 in.) Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (P7sl).

part of this painting, both visually and stylistically. The bold distinction of black shadows, the white of the dress, and the overarching silhouette of the dancer on the back wall take up about one third of the piece: “Sargent had actually originally gone to Spain in order to see and make his own copies of Velazquez’s work. Due to his original intent, he studied Velazquez leading his work in *El Jaleo* and his other paintings in Spain which led many critics to draw resemblances between the two artists.”⁴ Sargent respected and admired the work of Spain’s native artists so much that he used aspects of Velazquez’s style, like dramatic shadowing, yet also makes it uniquely his with the monochromatic palette.

Another accomplished American artist who was fascinated by Spain and wanted to study the artistic masters of the country was Mary Cassatt. Many of her well-known paintings depict children and the experience of motherhood. However, when she traveled to Spain, “Cassatt was a tourist, a visitor who could watch Spanish society without fully participating in it. Being a tourist seems to have offered her the freedom to move beyond the themes generally deemed suitable for a female painter.”⁵ Cassatt was not

4 Marc Simpson et. al., *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* (Yale University Press, 1997).

5 M. Elizabeth Boone, “Bullfights and Balconies: Flirtation and Majismo in Mary Cassatt’s Spanish Paintings of 1872-73,” *American Art* 9, no. 1 (1995) 55.

restricted by American standards and embraced that fact with the artwork she produced in Spain. That said, some were shocked by the art she produced while abroad. This is conclusively evident through her painting *On the Balcony* (also known as *The Flirtation: A Balcony in Seville*) painted



Fig. 4. Mary Cassatt (American, 1844-1926), *On the Balcony*, 1872, Spain; oil on canvas, 101 x 82.5 cm. (39 ¾ x 32 ½ in.) Philadelphia Museum of Art, W. P. Wiltach Collection, W1906-1-7.

in 1872. This work depicts the flirtation between a Spanish woman and man, while another woman is looking down from the balcony, presumably toward people walking by on the street. In Spain, flirtation on balconies was a controversial setting and matter to portray at the time which is further evidence that Cassatt studied Spanish art instead of going into her work blindly.⁶ In "Bullfights and Balconies: Flirtation and Majismo in Mary

⁶ Laura Felleman Fattal and Carol Salus, *Out of Context: American Artists Abroad* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 26.

Cassatt Paintings of 1872-73,” M. Elizabeth Boone shares that “Cassatt’s evocative new surroundings undoubtedly fostered her enthusiasm for Spanish life...She noted [her surroundings were] ‘full of color, gay lively.’”⁷ Cassatt expresses this observation in the palette that she uses. Contrasted to Prendergast and Sargent’s Venice artworks, Cassatt’s palette is much livelier than Sargent’s *El Jaleo*. Her painting is filled with whites, greens, yellows, blacks, and reds. The woman in white has her head tilted back in the direction of the man as she comfortably has her elbow rested on the balcony railing, exuding an equal confidence and power to her counterpart. She is also wearing a light pink flower which prettily contrasts her dark hair. The man behind her is draped in darkness; the only part of him that is exposed by light is his hand on the white material that makes up the wall next to the woman he is flirting with. This woman stands out from the other due to the intricate detail that is placed on her clothing, while the other woman is just wearing a red dress without many details in place. Draped in traditional garb, she is illustrated wearing a lightly colored dress and fancy shawl that is covered in flowers, as well as a shiny, silver pearl necklace around her neck that compliments the rest of the colors in the outfit. The fanciful pieces of clothing help the viewer infer that the subjects could be middle-class.

As Cassatt had complete control over what her subjects wore, she respects Spanish culture by not painting them in a Western view, much like other foreign artists did when in exotic countries. Boone explains how the women in Spain had societal limitations set on their behavior, just as they did in the United States:

In Spain, as in the United States, a woman’s role was in the home, and public activity was generally discouraged. Spanish guides to deportment stressed the importance of ‘modesty’ in women of the middle and upper classes. The balcony’s position allowed it to function as the intersection between public and private space, and its elevated placement removed its occupant from the street while offering her an unobstructed view of the world below.⁸

As Cassatt was restricted as an artist back in the United States, she understood that this constraint on women made life limited at times. Given this, Cassatt demonstrates that she knew of Spain’s gender dynamics and how they influenced the population. The private-public balconies served as an escape for women at the time. Flirting was not something that was often publicly displayed in Spanish art because it was considered immoral by some. An article that was published in Cassatt’s hometown touches on the

7 Boone, 56.

8 Ibid., 57.

slippery and reckless behavior flirting was considered by its author. Boone responds to the article by stating “Despite its elusiveness, flirting could cross the line between acceptable social behavior and immorality, and the article concluded with an earnest caution to young ladies who chose to flirt with male companions.”⁹ Cassatt most likely depicted the subjects in this way to take advantage of the fact that she could paint in a more provocative manner as a tourist. Whether she took advantage of this in positive way, to challenge female expectations, or in a negative way, through primitivism, Cassatt places the viewer in a new position than what was typically displayed in Spanish paintings with women, therefore depicting the common balcony painting in her own style.

Just south of Spain is the country of Morocco, which was under French rule when many artist’s journeyed there in pursuit of artistic efforts. The piece John Singer Sargent produced while in Morocco in 1880, prior to colonization, is an oil painting titled *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* (Fig. 5), which translates to “Smoke of Ambergris.” Carrying on with the theme of monochromatism, *Fumée*, more than any other painting mentioned, is incredibly monochromatic, being unmistakably white and cream with small hints of yellow, red, black, and silver for the rug and ambergris at the bottom. The woman is wearing a veil which is lifted in order to use to ambergris, an artifact filled with “a resinous substance extracted from whales and considered an aphrodisiac as well as a guard against evil spirits.”¹⁰ Though it might be exotic to the American viewer, according to scholar and art curator Trevor J. Fairbrother, this was

...probably ordinary act [for her], but Sargent saw great theater in it. Although Sargent captured a place and a way of living that were different from bourgeois Christian life in modern France, the picture’s sensualism piqued the desires of fashionable Parisians and echoed the dreamlike, anti-rationalist yearnings of the emergent Symbolist movement in literature and visual arts.¹¹

Rather than just appreciating a different culture, when encountered with something exotic in the art world, French artists tried to use this to their advantage and sensualize it for their own art; their personal aesthetic. They saw it as a dream to capitalize on, which is another way of describing cultural appropriation of orientalism and understanding primitivism though

9 Ibid., 62-63.

10 Sue Canterbury and Robert Sterling Clark, “Fumée d’Ambre Gris, 1880” *JSS Gallery*, https://jssgallery.org/Essay/Road_to_Madame_X/Clark_Article.htm.

11 Trevor F. Fairbrother, *John Singer Sargent: The Sensualist* (Seattle Art Museum), 54-56.

the context of North Africa. There are many small, intricate details on the lower half of the work. The woman is wearing a white and cream-colored robe along with Moroccan accessories around her neck. What is interesting, however, is “the details of the costume and setting come from different regions and social classes. The painting is a *mélange* of Moroccan objects and customs that Sargent encountered in Tangiers and Tétouan. Therefore, the scene must be viewed as an imaginary one.”¹² The model that Sargent used was also never even in this backdrop. He had her on a balcony of the place where he was staying, finishing the painting in Paris. Sargent once again exhibits the role of primitivism in his work by using his personal aesthetic to create a western fantasy. Disrespectfully, he aimed to control the formation of this painting by overlapping Moroccan cultures, social classes, artifacts, and customs. Sargent had only captured the aforementioned Spain correctly in *Fumée* because Velazquez was an artist he had admired and studied. With the dearth of that source in Morocco, Sargent was oblivious to the art experience that surrounded him there, neglecting to go further than a surface level understanding of the country.



Fig. 5. John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1912), *Fumée d'Ambre Gris*, 1880, Morocco. Oil on canvas, 139.1 x. 90.6 cm. (54 3/4 x 35 11/16 in.) Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

The other artist who experienced and depicted Morocco, though in a very differing style and manner, is Henri Matisse. Unlike the other artists previously mentioned, Matisse is the only French artist. His painting, *View From a Window, Tangiers*, was created in 1913 with more color than anything Sargent had done while in the country. Present in the work is a

¹² Steven Kern, *The Clark: Selections from the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute* (Manchester: Hudson Hills Press, 1996), 116.

limited, although beautifully-used, palette of blues, whites, greens, browns, and yellows. The contrast between the blue hills and environment tastefully clashes with the yellow-tinged road that has three small, distinguishable, figures on its path. Yahya Bensouda praises this simple yet truly authentic work of Morocco for its respect and faithfulness to the culture:

Matisse intensifies the use of color palettes in most of his works; the only difference in the paintings he made of Morocco is that the final metamorphosis of the original state of people, places, and daily life scenes and routines didn't deviate that much from the country's atmosphere and lifestyle...Matisse gave a

fresh insight into Morocco, and North Africa in general, away from the exotic and fantasist vision of the Orientalists with their harems and baths, which refers more to dream than to reality. Matisse went to meet the people, so close and personal.¹³



Fig. 6. Henri Matisse (American, 1869-1954), *View From a Window, Tangiers*, 1913, Morocco. Oil on canvas, 115 x 80 cm. (45 ¼ x 31 ½ in.) The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Ivan Morozov's Collection, ЖК-3395.

Contrary to Sargent, Matisse held Morocco in a high enough esteem to be mindful of what he was painting and how he was painting it. The intense blue that covers the whole painting focuses on the light that covers the buildings, the windowsill, and the people on the ground.

¹³ Yahya Bensouda, "Do You Know That Henri Matisse Actually Came to Morocco?" *DailyArtMagazine.com – Art History Stories*, May 19, 2018, www.dailyartmagazine.com/matisse-actually-came-to-morocco/.

Matisse gives the viewer an artistically fresh view on Morocco that was very much admired in the art world.

Primitivism was an active art form in the twentieth century, taking host in the exotic places that American artists visited. The artwork of John Singer Sargent, Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Mary Cassatt and Henri Matisse has displayed the multiple ways foreign artists have taken on exotic cultures and both successfully and unsuccessfully incorporated their culture into their paintings. John Singer Sargent—with the exception of Spain to some critics—has administered the practice of primitivism to his artwork over the years through his Western fantasy of Venice and his ignorance of Moroccan culture. Other artists like Henri Matisse had taken greater care when artistically taking on a foreign country, like Morocco, by observing the atmosphere and culture around him as well as talking to locals. All things considered, primitivism is a discourteous practice that glorifies Western art forms as superior while ignoring the artistic and cultural beauty that other countries have to offer to the world.