

We are presenting the maquette of the *Crucifix* by John Singer Sargent in a dossier because new information has come to light as to its importance in the evolution of Sargent's murals at the Boston Public Library.

In going more deeply into the *Crucifix's* history, we found information hitherto unknown to us. Sargent constructed a 1/3 scale model of the room. For this construction he painted, where the crucifix was to be placed, an expressionistic oil sketch of the crucifix. In developing the project, Sargent at some point decided to place sculptural elements onto the model of the room. Our plaster sculpture was initially placed over the painted crucifix.

Further along in the project, Sargent inserted another, more elaborate plaster crucifix containing the figures of Adam and Eve. During the recent restoration of the room model, this plaster was removed, and underneath was revealed a gold painted outline. It was presumed that this outline depicted the placement of an earlier plaster crucifix, which "no longer exists." In fact, it does exist. The outline corresponds exactly to the contours of the present *Crucifix*, including the lower horizontal bar that perfectly fits the missing molding in the room model.

Sargent's heirs donated the study material for the project to the Harvard University Art Museums in 1933. It is possible that the present *Crucifix* was not seen by the heirs as part of the project, but as an independent work of art. Therefore, in 1933, when the material was given to Harvard, it was not included, but was donated to *The Community of the Resurrection*, Mirfield, West Yorkshire.

RK/DW

Acknowledgements:

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A
REDISCOVERED MAQUETTE
BY
JOHN SINGER SARGENT
FOR THE CRUCIFIX
AT THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

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SARGENT, John Singer R.A.
1856-1925
American School

CRUCIFIX
MAQUETTE FOR THE 1/3 SCALE MODEL
FOR *TRIUMPH OF RELIGION*, BOSTON
PUBLIC LIBRARY, circa 1895/99

Polychrome plaster

Height: 31 1/8" (79.1 cm); width: 24 3/8"
(69.1 cm); depth from back of cross to front
of figure's forehead: 3 1/2" (8.9 cm)

Ex-collection:
Violet Ormond (*née* Sargent);
The Community of the Resurrection
(Mirfield, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom)



In 1890, architect Charles Follen McKim (of the firm McKim, Mead, and White) commissioned John Singer Sargent to paint murals in Boston's new Public Library. Thereby, Sargent joined the ranks of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Edwin Austin Abbey, who were also involved in the overall decorative scheme. Assigned the entrance hall to the library's special collections, Sargent first proposed Spanish literary themes as the subject for his mural cycle. However, in a not insignificant change of heart, the artist ultimately decided upon the theme of the *Triumph of Religion*. Insecure about being viewed only as a society painter, Sargent believed that linking his talents to this more "intellectual" subject matter of the story of the Judaic and Christian religions, would add some weight and seriousness to his artistic credentials. Sargent was ensconced in the never-fully-completed project, his "American Sistine Chapel", for nearly thirty years (1890-1916). He worked



fig. 1



fig. 2

chronologically from the north to the south walls, the latter of which culminates with a crucifix of the dead Christ. (fig. 1)

During his life, Sargent's *Triumph of Religion* was the focus of fascination, much praise, and some critique. And in the 21st century, the stylistic and technical complexities of the mural cycle have been of continued focus to scholars. In 1999, the Harvard University Art Museums exhibited Sargent's preliminary drawings for his three Boston area mural projects in *Sargent in the Studio: Drawings, Sketchbooks, and Oil Sketches* (fig. 2) and in 2003-2004, a full restoration of the Boston Public Library's murals heightened the understanding that Sargent's work must not merely be seen as a finished work, in stasis, but as a visual reflection of an artist's thought process and aesthetic progression throughout the last three decades of his career.

The conception and eventual installation of *Triumph of Religion* was a multi-stage event. In 1895, Sargent installed and debuted the "Hebraic End" of the mural cycle. Only then did the trustees give the artist a new contract to complete the "Christian End". Also in 1895, following a trip to Spain, Sargent moved to a new London studio where he began work on a 1/3 scale model of the South End, the *Dogma of the Redemption*. (fig. 3)

Following his death, during the distribution of his estate, Sargent's sisters gave the remaining

pieces of this scale model to the Harvard Art Museums. Now catalogued as inventory numbers 1933.45.A-F, the group consists of (A) Study for *Doctrine of the Trinity*, (B) Study for *Frieze of the Angels*, (B1) Overlay Drawing for *Frieze of the Angels*, (C) Plaster Study for *Crucifix*, (D) Study for *Coronation of the Virgin Roundel*, (E) Plaster Study for an *Angel*, and (F) Fragment for study of *Doctrine of the Trinity*. (E) Plaster Study for an *Angel* is a finial, a plaster piece intended to sit at the base of a cross. (fig. 4)

As it did not fit the plaster crucifix in the collection, conservators were led to believe that Sargent had worked with an additional plaster maquette. This hypothesis was confirmed during the removal of Harvard's plaster crucifix from the 1/3 scale model, to which it had been affixed, so that it could be restored. Underneath the crucifix, conservators found an outline of gold paint in a cruciform shape. (fig. 5)

And within that outline, there was an oil painting study of a crucified Christ, over



fig. 3



fig. 4

which a later sculpted crucifix had been affixed. At this point, Harvard conservators and scholars could take this mystery no further as it was determined that this first-stage maquette, placed by Sargent over his initial oil study, was lost.

There can be no doubt that the plaster maquette currently in our possession is *the* missing maquette. 1/3 in scale, the work, when placed into the outline heightened digitally by Harvard conservators (fig. 5), fills the space like a missing jigsaw puzzle piece. (fig. 6)

With the “extra” finial once again in place at the base of the cross, the transformation is complete. The location as to the three other missing plaster finials that would have adorned the maquette is unknown, however it is possible that a search of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum collection (which owns at least nine plaster reliefs for the Boston Public Library commission) or the John Singer Sargent Archive at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, would yield positive results. Other important pieces of visual information confirm the present maquette as Sargent's first stylistic exploration into his sculptural crucifix. It is believed that Sargent affixed the maquette to the wall and painted it subsequently, thereby leaving the outline on the painted surface beneath. Both the maquette and its now separate finial are specifically painted with gold paint as



fig. 5

opposed to being executed in gold leaf. Additionally, more hints can be gleaned from some undated sketches related to the project. In one such working image of the crucifix, Christ wears the more static and linear robes of the finished work, yet the cross upon which he lies is the narrow cross of this earlier maquette. (fig. 7)

And finally, the white color of Christ's drapery, which changes to red in the final work, is significant in that it reflects Sargent's eventual shift from a limited palette of "dilute[d] oil paint" of white, blue, red, and gold to primarily a vibrant red and gold; this shift from white to red in the drapery of Christ is also seen in the textiles worn by the angels of the *Frieze of Angels* at the base of the crucifix.

In the 1930s, Sargent's sisters donated the present *Crucifix* to *The Community of the Resurrection*, Mirfield, West Yorkshire, where it remained for the better part of 80 years. It seems likely that because of the stylistic differences between the early and late maquettes, the artist's heirs believed the early one to be an independent work of art, possibly

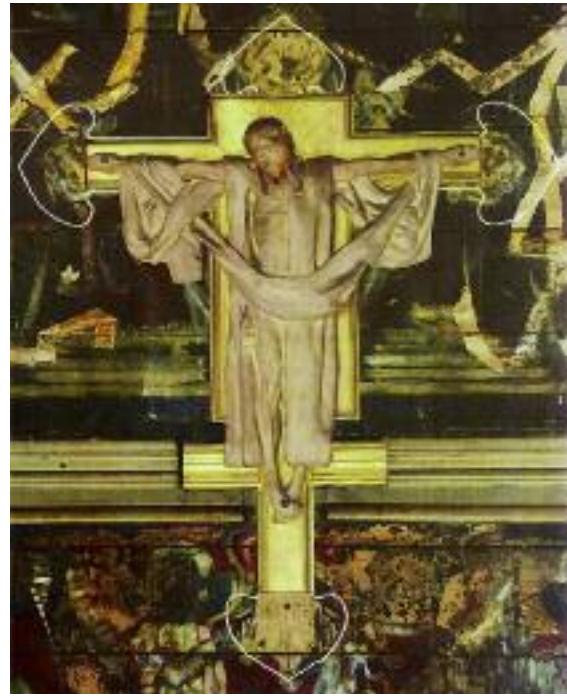


fig. 6

unrelated to the *Triumph of Religion* mural cycle. Ultimately, over time, the early maquette lost its art historical connection to and significance in its role in the realization of Sargent's crucifix, also known as his "most ambitious and critically acclaimed three-dimensional work". It is precisely the difference between the maquettes, and the initial oil study discovered underneath the later maquette that help to lead to a clearer understanding of Sargent's process as "far more experimental than previously assumed" and "decidedly modern". Additionally, the reinsertion of the early maquette into the history of *Triumph of Religion*, provides interesting insights into Sargent's quandary as to how exactly the crucified Christ should be represented, both in terms of style and overall mood.

During the summer of 1895, and before moving to his new, larger London studio off Fulham Road in Chelsea, Sargent traveled abroad to seek visual inspiration for the second half of *Triumph of Religion*. In Spain, he visited the Prado where "El Greco...fired his imagination"; he copied El Greco's *The Holy*

Trinity, as he admired the Renaissance Master's "intense spirituality", his stylistic application of "mannerist qualities", and his use of elongation and distortion in the limbs and body of the deposed Christ, in order to create a sense of weightiness and the feeling of human life slipping away. These expressionistic qualities can be found in the sketchy painted oil study of Christ discovered by Harvard restorers in the 1/3 scale model. And, although a few steps stylistically removed from el Greco, the present *Crucifix* demonstrates a similar desire on Sargent's part to emphasize Christ's humanity over his divinity. In the completed crucifix, Christ is depicted as a divine Redeemer; a halo surrounds his head, his blood flows into the cups of the original sinners, Adam and Eve; an inscription on the cross reads: *Remissa Sunt Peccata Mundi* (The sins of the world are forgiven). (fig. 8)

However, in the preliminary maquette, Christ hangs from a simple cross, free from ornamentation and the *horror vacui* that pervades the later work. Christ's hands are turned out; the nails that pierce them are emphasized. The draperies on his body hang loose to reveal a naturalistic depiction of the human body during its last moments of a painful death; Christ's muscles are sinewy and taut, his ribs are visible and his chest is uplifted as if caught in the moment of a final breath.

It is also interesting to note that this earlier maquette of the crucifix seems decidedly modern, predicting expressionistic styles that superseded the symbolist movement, especially in relation to the final iteration that would eventually grace the wall of the Boston Public Library. Both in the expression of anguish and in the stylization of the form, Sargent's Christ bears a similarity to the sculptures by his contemporary, George Minne, as can be seen in works like, *Relic Bearer* (1897) and *Man with a Watersack* (1897), the latter of which was initially conceived of as a *John the Baptist*. Although direct influence between the artists, if any, is



fig. 7

not known, both Sargent and Minne certainly looked to similar religious sources, such as the Northern Renaissance artists Matthias Grünewald and Martin Schongauer, and with Minne, to the *Tomb of Philippe Pot of Citeaux* (1477-1483).



fig. 8

It is uncertain why Sargent ultimately made the shift from the more expressionistic Christ of the earlier maquette to the final version, which is almost Pre-Raphaelite. Perhaps Christ as the Redeemer was more easily palatable to Boston audiences. Nevertheless, in January 1899, Sargent was making changes; he wrote to his friend Augustus Saint-Gaudens, also a contributor to the Boston Public Library project, the following: "I am very glad you are coming over here for I have been working at my crucifix and made very great alterations and improvements which I am very anxious to show you. I shall now start it on a large scale, and you will be able to give me some advice." By April 1899, progress had been made and Saint-Gaudens was writing to his niece of the Sargent crucifix: "Sargent has been here [Paris] recently, and I saw a good deal of him during his visit as he came to see me about the enlargement of his crucifixion for the Boston Library. It is in sculpture and is to go directly opposite the Moses. He has done a masterpiece." An additional letter, from Henry James to a friend in November 1899, reiterates Saint-Gaudens' praise: "Sargent grows in weight, honour & interest –to my view. He does one fine thing after another –& his crucifixion for Boston Library is a most noble, grave, & admirable thing."

In 1901, two years before he installed the completed crucifix in the Boston Public Library, Sargent exhibited a bronze cast of the final study for the crucifix at the Royal Academy, London. The casting of a handful of these smaller bronzes was overseen by Saint-Gaudens's plaster molder, Gaetan Ardisson, and they were given as gifts to Sargent's friends. One, now in the collection of the Tate Gallery, was owned by Robert "Robbie" Ross, companion to and great supporter of Oscar Wilde. Another was given to Mrs. Daniel Curtis, a Bostonian and the mother of one of Sargent's longtime friends and occasional painting companions. And final-

ly, a full-scale bronze cast was given by the artist's sisters to St. Paul's Cathedral, London, where it remains as a memorial to the extraordinary talent of Sargent and as an acknowledgement of the pride he felt for this exceptional work for the Boston Public Library.

Gianfranco Pocobene, in *John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, writes that "it is not surprising that the images [in *Triumph of Religion*] vary stylistically, for Sargent worked on the murals for nearly 30 years." And in a sense, Sargent's lengthy process is inextricably linked to the final product that exists on the walls of the Boston Public Library today. By reinserting the lost maquette of the crucifix back into the history of Sargent's mural project, a closer, more well-rounded and complete understanding and enjoyment of the *Triumph of Religion* can be achieved.

Stephanie Hackett

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