

12-A Portrait of a Boy, 1890

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)



12-A John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). *Portrait of a Boy*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 56 1/8 x 39 1/2 in. (142.56 x 100.33 cm.). Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Patrons Arts Fund (32.1). Photograph © 2007 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pa.

The Art

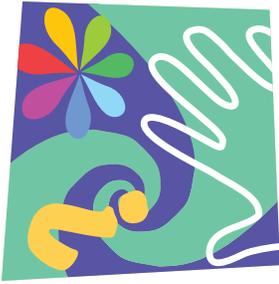
This oil painting is a portrait of a boy, Homer Saint-Gaudens, and his mother. The portrait was done for the boy's father, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, a sculptor and friend of the artist, John Singer Sargent, in exchange for a bronze sculpture Saint-Gaudens made of Sargent's sister. The boy is the main focus of the picture. He is wearing a dark suit and is sitting in a chair appearing restless and bored. Seated next to him is his mother, reading him a story. She is wearing a dark-colored dress and looking down at a book.

The Artist

Sargent was born in Florence, Italy, to American parents. He grew up in Europe and studied painting in Paris, France. He became a well-known portrait painter. During his travels throughout Europe and America, he was hired by many wealthy people to paint portraits. Sargent had a fresh new way to paint a subject that was becoming more popular in both England and the United States—children. The “age of the child” was taking shape as people began to realize that children were not just little adults. Sargent's paintings of children as they really were began to attract attention, earning him even more business from wealthy clients.

The Historical Perspective

Following the Civil War, America became industrialized. People became dependent on machines and factories to make the things they used. Business grew very quickly. This period, called the Gilded Age, was a time of great wealth for America's upper class. The period was also marked by a new wave of people coming to America from other countries in search of the “American Dream,” a better life for themselves and their families.



Conversations and Teaching Activities

Head Start Children ages 3 to 5

Encourage children to look closely at this painting—the objects, the background, the colors used. Ask questions, introduce new vocabulary, and find books that relate to the painting.

Describing



- ✓ What is a portrait? How do you know something is a portrait?
- ✓ Ask children who the subject of the portrait is. Can they guess how the boy feels from his facial expression and body position? What could be the name of the portrait?
- ✓ Ask the children who they think is in the background of the portrait. What is the person in the background doing?
- ✓ What colors do they see in the portrait?
- ✓ Ask the children to point to who is in the front and the rear of the painting. Which subject is looking at the painter and which is not?
- ✓ Pass around a piece of lace or velvet. Ask children to describe how the material feels, the color, and the use of such material. Are these fabrics in the picture? Where?

Analyzing and Interpreting



Ask the following questions to stimulate thinking and discussion:

- The name of this painting is *Portrait of a Boy*. Why do you think the painter chose this name?
- Why do you think the portrait was done with the boy and mother sitting and not standing?
- Do you think they are wearing everyday clothes or special clothes?
- How are their clothes different from ours?
- What expression do you see on the boy's face? What expression do you see on the mother's face?
- Does the boy fit into the chair? How could you make the boy fit better?
- How is this portrait like a photograph?
- Are there other things you would like to tell me about this painting? Children might say I want to pose for a portrait, I want to paint/draw a portrait.



Connecting and Extending

Introducing Vocabulary

background	painting	sitting
behind	polished	slump
gaze	portrait	subject
ornate	pose	tie

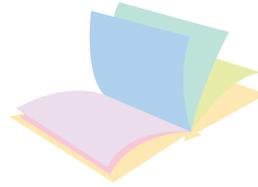


Connecting and Extending continued...

Related Family Literacy Experiences

Parents and children can

- ✓ sing the song "If You're Happy and You Know It" while waiting in long lines or on a long drive.
- ✓ make a list of situations when they each feel bored or happy.
- ✓ take turns drawing each other's portrait wearing different types of clothing (casual, dressy, etc.).



Books

Clothing in Art by Brigitte Baumbusch (G. Stevens Publishers, 2006)

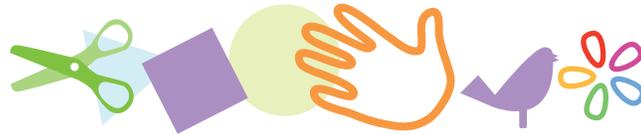
This volume focuses on clothing and includes many different genres of art as well as works from diverse cultures and time periods.

Josiah True and the Art Maker by Amy Littlesugar and Barbara Garrison (Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1995)

An itinerant woman artist comes to paint the True family's portrait and makes a special brush for Josiah before she leaves.

Little Girl in a Red Dress with Cat and Dog by Nicholas B. A. Nicholson (Viking Press, 1998)

A fictionalized story tells how this actual portrait of a young farm girl came to be painted by Ammi Phillips sometime around 1835 in Dutchess County, New York.



Related Educational Experiences

- ✓ Have children pose for a portrait drawn by fellow classmates. See how long they can stay still and how long it takes the classmate to complete the drawing. Let them exchange roles and then discuss how long the boy in the portrait had to remain still. Ask them what would have happened if the boy in the portrait refused to remain still. What would have happened if the painter took too long?
- ✓ Have children study their faces in a small hand mirror or their entire bodies in a full-length mirror. Let them discuss what they see in small groups of three or four. Help children use new vocabulary words to describe face shapes, hair color, and any special features. Provide large drawing paper and allow each child to create his or her own self-portrait. Children can hold a special prop.
- ✓ Use the portrait to discuss feelings. How do you think the little boy feels? How do you know? What experiences make you feel happy? Sad? Bored? Interested? On a large chart, make a list of "things that make us happy." Post the list and try to engage in one of these activities every day.

The ideas listed are just a few of the many activities that could be used to introduce or extend children's learning. Your knowledge of your children and families supports your ability to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. As an educator, you probably have ideas for books, songs, finger plays, and activities that you have thought of when introducing or extending children's learning related to the "A Head Start on Picturing America" artworks. We encourage you to confer with your colleagues, visit the local library or bookstore, and share your ideas with others.