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*“Le Pavé Rouge” : Making an Example of John Singer Sargent*

**Abstract :**

‘Le Pavé Rouge’ is the ironic title given by Robert de Montesquiou to a monographic article he devoted to John Singer Sargent in France in 1905. Within a frank condemnation of the American painter, the aesthete weaved around Sargent’s name a complex network of his own personal enemies (artists, writers, collectors) as other targets of his article. This essay tries to establish how Montesquiou reinvested his own ambitions in a declaration of war. The aim is to show how Sargent becomes a strategic issue for Montesquiou’s agenda as an art critic, writer and preeminent figure of ‘le Tout-Paris’.

**Keywords:**

art criticism; art press; John Singer Sargent; Robert de Montesquiou; Paul Bourget; nationalism; portraitists; symbolism

At first blush the story of the article ‘Le Pavé Rouge’ (Figure 1) could seem like a trivial incident, an anecdotic news item among other small artistic and social scandals. Written by the famous aesthete Robert de Montesquiou (1855–1921), it was published in the June 1905 issue of the magazine *Les Arts de la vie*. It was both a critical essay about John Singer Sargent and a review of the book *L’Œuvre de John S. Sargent de l’Académie royale de Londres*, a translation of the monograph written by English art critic Alice Meynell (1847–1922, Figure 2). At the heart of the Parisian artistic season, the article was a declaration of war against multiple targets, including, among others, the above mentioned English art critic, its French publisher and the American painter. Its title ‘Le Pavé Rouge’ referred to the massive character of the book, likened to a doorstep, as well as to its cover, judged ‘garish’ by the critic.<sup>1</sup> At the opening of the annual Salon, Sargent’s last in Paris, the effectiveness of Montesquiou’s attack was particularly striking, as its violence seemed to come out of nowhere. Montesquiou’s judgement was a major part in the establishment of a common point of view about Sargent in France, as it sets the narrative of the artist’s career and his image as a deserter.

Montesquiou’s witty remarks articulated three arguments against Sargent. He reproached the painter for his abuse of open mouths: ‘his characters seem to play the game *as-tu vu la ferme!*’, a cutting remark alluding to the homophony of the French expression ‘la ferme’ meaning both ‘the farm’ and ‘shut up’.<sup>2</sup> Another judgment, the lack of quality in the drawing of the hands, was an old critique against Sargent. The most important and original criticism, and in fact the only one really developed by Montesquiou, was against ‘the ugliness of accessories’.<sup>3</sup> This argument led Montesquiou to his principal goal, to reveal Sargent’s art as an ‘*illusion of great art*’. Going against the established consensus about Sargent’s grand

manner style rivalling the Old Masters, Montesquiou affirmed: ‘Yes, I say, the illusion. Because after all, great art is more than this.’<sup>4</sup>

In 1905 ‘Le Pavé Rouge’ caused a polemic in the small world of Parisian art amateurs, since it pitted the reputation of a high-profile writer against the fame of an international portraitist. It was indeed the article to read that summer. The newspaper *Gil Blas* raised the alarm with a paragraph entitled ‘Montesquiou against Sargent’:

At the moment everybody is talking, in the artistic world ... and elsewhere, about the dazzling pages that the author of *Professionnelles Beautés*, the Count Robert de Montesquiou, had devoted, in the last issue of *Les Arts de la vie*, to the famous portraitist of the English aristocracy, John S. Sargent. [...] In twenty little pages, everything that can be contested about an established celebrity, he contests, a smile on his face, in the most assured and the most elegant manner. It is impossible to be crueller, with more grace and subtlety. Read the ‘Pavé Rouge’ in *Les Arts de la vie*, and you will agree with me ...<sup>5</sup>

Gossip columnists encouraged the media sensation: *La Presse* qualified the ‘sensational article’ as an important talking point of the season for both the artistic milieu and the greater world.<sup>6</sup> When Sargent did not appear at the Salon in 1906, the art columnist of the *Figaro*, Arsène Alexandre, asked himself: ‘would it be in order to punish us for the subtle criticism of Robert de Montesquiou?’<sup>7</sup>

Montesquiou, who collected newspaper clippings related to the affair, also received numerous congratulations for his essay from close acquaintances in the art world, as well as from writers and preminent women in Parisian society.<sup>8</sup> At an international level, the Italian writer Carlo Placci applauded Montesquiou’s prose.<sup>9</sup> In the United States, Jean Joseph Renaud, friend of the count, presented the text to the American novelist Irene Osgood: ‘[she] wishes to translate your beautiful essay about Sargent; she hates this painter and she admires you totally’.<sup>10</sup>

Another close relation of the count, Marcel Proust, phrased his epistolary agreement in quite surprising terms: ‘As for Sargent, because the Salon closes at sundown, *I have never seen one*. But what you say can be applied to an entire *art* (and that’s what gives its high

impact).<sup>11</sup> Proust seemed to believe he did not actually need to see the paintings in order to understand what his mentor had wanted to say, especially in regard to Sargent's 'illusion of great art'. Later, in the August issue of *Les Arts de la vie*, Proust dedicated an article to Montesquiou, his 'Professor of Beauty', referring to 'Le Pavé Rouge'. Even though he was not sure that its author had chosen the right artist for his witty remarks, Proust glorified the brilliant style and the deep truth of this 'necessary sermon against false beauty and false great art'.<sup>12</sup> The controversy appeared to concern far more than Sargent, and could apply itself to 'an entire *art*' that the painter exemplified.

In such a context, the polemic allowed Montesquiou to use Sargent to define a distinction between true and false art, genuine filiation and bourgeois pastiche of Old masters. But in light of Montesquiou's personal issues as a critic, a poet and a figure of 'le Tout-Paris', this discrimination matched other contemporary distinctions being made between true and false literature, as well as true and false high society. Filled with allusions to a wider non-artistic context, the text epitomized Montesquiou's position in the contemporary changing cultural and intellectual climate of the French capital, and during a period generally considered as the apogee of John Singer Sargent's reputation in the international arena.

### ***Intersection points between Sargent's and Montesquiou's circles***

Nothing in Montesquiou's previous publications anticipated the brutality and the boldness of 'Le Pavé Rouge'. Although no public mention of the artist by the critic before 1905 has yet been found, a personal relationship between Sargent and Montesquiou did exist.

During the 1880s, Montesquiou built up a reputation as an arbiter of taste. He became a preeminent supporter and mediator in the art world, introducing the Parisian aristocracy to some of the most innovative aesthetic trends of the period, such as the paintings of Gustave Moreau and his Symbolist followers, and the creations of Émile Gallé. He was particularly

eager to appear as a connoisseur of foreign cultural innovation, by espousing such movements as Wagnerism and Pre-Raphaelitism.<sup>13</sup> Montesquiou and Sargent shared at that time three relations in particular: Samuel Pozzi, gynaecologist, gentleman and art amateur; the composer Gabriel Fauré; and the society portraitist Paul César Helleu.<sup>14</sup> The earliest known contact between Sargent and Montesquiou occurred in 1885, when the latter and his two friends, Pozzi and Edmond de Polignac, decided to spend a few days in London during the summer. For the occasion, Sargent provided a letter of introduction to Henry James: ‘I have been so bold as to give a card of introduction to you to two friends of mine. One is Dr S. Pozzi the man in the red gown (not always), a very brilliant creature! and the other is the unique extrahuman Montesquiou of whom you may have heard Bourget speak with bitterness, but who was to Bourget to a certain extent what Whistler is to Oscar Wilde.’<sup>15</sup> According to the same letter, Montesquiou was particularly ‘anxious to see as much of Rossetti’s and Burne-Jones’s work as he [could]’, and so Sargent had also given him cards of introduction to the studios of Burne-Jones and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. By providing these introductions, Sargent therefore played a role in recommending the French critic to major figures in the fields of modern English literature and art.

In London, the accommodating Henry James wrote to Montesquiou that he had planned his visit to the Pre-Raphaelites’ studios, as well as to Whistler’s.<sup>16</sup> This last encounter was to be the origin of the portrait *Arrangement in Black and Gold* (Figure 3), which inaugurated in Paris a new trend of ‘whistlérisme’ when it was shown at the 1892 Salon. Whistler’s archetype of depicting sober and dark male portraits of literary writers created quite a stir in Symbolist circles.<sup>17</sup> Montesquiou was one of the most avid supporters of this Whistlerian style among them.<sup>18</sup> Like other contemporary fashionable portraitists, Sargent adopted this kind of half-profound/half-dandy manner in his portrait of *Graham Robertson* exhibited at the 1896 Salon (Figure 4).<sup>19</sup> Paul Adam, former Symbolist supporter and new

rapporteur of the Salon for the art magazine *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, seized upon *Graham Robertson* with an interpretation in line with the Symbolist credo: ‘Art is the translation of an idea through a symbol’.<sup>20</sup> According to Adam, Sargent depicted an emblematic image of the modern decadent intellectual: ‘M. Sargent painted more than a portrait, he painted the *Expectation of Disillusion* [*l’Attente de la déception*]’.<sup>21</sup> Instead of the affable depiction of a gentleman, *Graham Robertson* exemplified an entire generation tortured by its analytical ability and incapacity to blindly enjoy the pleasures of life. Sargent adopted a similar melancholic mood and Whistlerian style in 1895–1898, when he portrayed the virtuoso musician Léon Delafosse, Montesquiou’s protégé at that time (c. 1895–8), whose career Sargent promoted in London.

After the trip to London, Sargent and Montesquiou maintained an episodic but cordial correspondence. In 1889, Sargent offered the critic, through their common friend Fauré, a photographic reproduction of one of his paintings: ‘You would do me a great favour by accepting this photograph that I intend for you for a long time. I become bolder offering it to you, since I learned from Helleu that the painting pleases you.’<sup>22</sup> Montesquiou’s papers retain a small photograph of *Madame X* (1883–4, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) that could be the gift mentioned.<sup>23</sup> The early Baudelairian interpretation of Sargent’s masterpiece indeed fell in line with the Symbolist figure of the *femme fatale*.<sup>24</sup> That same year they met in Paris at the Exposition Universelle, and shared a common passion for the Javanese dancers. As a result, in the following years Montesquiou dedicated a poem to the American painter, with Sargent responding in kind by offering him a sketch of the dancers.<sup>25</sup>

During the winter of 1902–1903, Montesquiou travelled to the United States. For the aesthete, it was a true parade to the New World. He was welcomed particularly in New York, where he gave a series of seven lectures at Sherry’s.<sup>26</sup> The most preeminent figures of American aristocracy patronized these conferences: Mrs. Astor, whom Montesquiou called

the “Queen of New York”; Mrs. Potter Palmer, the “Queen of Chicago”; Mrs. Moore Robinson, the “Queen of Philadelphia”; and Mrs. Ogden Goelet, the “Queen of Newport”.<sup>27</sup> Montesquiou described himself as an ‘apostle of beauty’: ‘I shall instill art into the dull American mind. I am the only French poet authorized to do this.’<sup>28</sup> Montesquiou had sailed to New York with his companion Gabriel de Yturri. Coincidentally, at the same time Sargent and Helleu had also decided to cross the Atlantic. Helleu was very enthusiastic about this voyage and proposed that Montesquiou and Yturri join them.<sup>29</sup> However his daughter’s ailing health called Helleu back to Paris before he could see Montesquiou. Sargent, in turn, expressed to the count his desire to meet him in America, suggesting a potential rendezvous during one of his visits to Boston, Washington, Philadelphia or New York.<sup>30</sup> As he had done previously in 1885, Montesquiou asked Sargent for introductions, but this time the painter replied ‘I do not see how I can be personally useful to you. My relations in this country which I only visit every ten years all being superficial.’<sup>31</sup> In the same letter Sargent expressed his fear that this impossibility could appear as ‘an act of hostility’.

Perhaps Sargent’s negative answer of 1903 irritated Montesquiou, but it seems a limited explanation for the aesthetic crusade against the American painter that occurred two years later. In fact, correspondence between Sargent and Montesquiou showed a fruitful discussion of aesthetic passions, with Montesquiou’s highlighting his search for the newest, the most obscure, and most refined of artistic curiosities. As the shift in this relationship indicates, Sargent had first found a comfortable place within several Symbolist art discourses, thanks to the memory of his heroic debuts at the Parisian Salon and to his contemporary international reputation. He was a well known and established figure, and critics, such as Paul Adam, could use his name to associate Symbolism with cosmopolitan and aristocratic values. However, a new nationalist and neoclassicist climate emerging within French Symbolism at



the beginning of the new century meant that his art was rapidly falling out of favour. The change in Montesquiou's opinion of Sargent may have shifted as a result of this new climate.

### ***Sargent and Symbolist art criticism***

It is difficult to identify a specific event that would have motivated Montesquiou to write an article about Sargent, and a hurtful one at that. The fact remains that there was something in the air amongst Symbolist art critics against the American painter, something that provided a ready audience for Montesquiou's criticisms. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Sargent's friends, competitors, and fellow international portraitists, were all at the height of their careers; men such as Helleu, Giovanni Boldini, Albert Besnard, Jacques-Émile Blanche, Philip Alexius de László, and others. Yet these established reputations also produced acrimony within Symbolist circles. This resentment may have stemmed from dialogue that appeared in the opposing texts of the avant-garde symbolist 'petites revues' and the mainstream French newspapers, the latter of which was seen to promote such 'accepted' artists as Sargent.

It also coincided with a new intellectual climate, as several Symbolist writers began to criticize cosmopolitan and impressionist art, urging artists to create a more national art which they described as classical, healthy and virile. Gabriel Mourey, for example, introduced his critical account of the 1904 Salon for *Les Arts de la vie* with the following statement: "True painters, who are at the same time true artists, give up more and more, as it seems to me, artificial researches, vain complexities; we are going, I think, towards more simplicity and truth, we are heading for a more virile, a healthier art".<sup>32</sup> Two important surveys exemplified this artistic crisis of 1904–1905. The symbolist magazine *Les Arts de la vie*, where 'Le Pavé Rouge' appeared, was an example of the new direction taken by Symbolism. In October 1904, its director Gabriel Mourey conducted the first survey of intellectuals and painters regarding

the ‘Separation of the Fine Arts and the State’.<sup>33</sup> One year later, during the summer of 1905 and as an echo of the scandal of ‘Le Pavé Rouge’, Charles Morice organized a similar survey in the *Mercur de France*.<sup>34</sup>

While some Symbolist art critics had managed to use Sargent’s name and reputation in line with their aesthetic credo during the previous decade, a true campaign against him crystallized at the 1904 Salon with his *Lord Ribblesdale* (Figure 5), just one year before publication of Montesquiou’s ‘Pavé Rouge’. This criticism of *Lord Ribblesdale* by Symbolist art critics and their ‘petites revues’ was especially noteworthy since the painting received positive comments from several established newspapers and magazines.<sup>35</sup> These favourable comments highlighted two particular qualities of the portrait: the nobility of its subject and its Old Master quality. André Michel for example exalted ‘a simple and strong work, of the highest distinction, which would not fear any neighborhood in a museum’.<sup>36</sup>

On the other side, while Mourey spoke positively about the evolution of French art towards simplicity and truth, virility and health, he also proposed to cut Sargent’s portrait of *Lord Ribblesdale* into two parts: keeping the head and throwing away the clothes.<sup>37</sup> By decapitating the English aristocrat, Mourey symbolically looked to dissociate the intellectual from the more decorative or fashionable part of the painting. According to another Symbolist art critic, Charles Morice, *Lord Ribblesdale* proved a ‘corporeal lack under the clothes’ and a ‘spiritual lack under the mask of a figure painted in a conventional manner’. Furthermore Morice employed the same expression that Montesquiou would later use in his ‘Pavé Rouge’: ‘the illusion of beauty, the counterfeit of a chef-d’œuvre’. *Lord Ribblesdale* was thus ‘maybe the most complete expression of this “American art”’, which for Morice invaded the French art scene, and meant a kind of mixed-race virtuosity paired with financial perversion and capitalist greed.<sup>38</sup> The Symbolist paranoia against American greed and prosperity also appeared in Sar Peladan’s critical account of the same Salon, which strengthened the

complete reversal of the critic's opinion, since Peladan had been a strong supporter of Sargent's Parisian exhibitions from 1884 to 1903.<sup>39</sup>

Montesquiou's article largely benefited from this hostile environment of popular clichés against Sargent that appeared within the Symbolist 'petites revues'. In fact, several of his ideas came from the arguments against *Lord Ribblesdale*: a portrait of an American millionaire, disguised as a noble; a pretentious and fake style in the manner of Van Dyck; an embodiment of a feminized establishment, as opposed to the true virility of the avant-garde.

In Montesquiou's 'Le Pavé Rouge', Sargent's masterpiece as a true artist had been *Madame X*, 'a culminating point, unique, reached at the very beginning [of his career]'.<sup>40</sup> The scandal caused by its public exhibition was *per se* the proof of its merit. Therefore, Sargent's escape from Paris was interpreted as the artist running away from the battle. If the young artist had taken advantage of the scandal instead of adopting a childish rancour, he would have continued to produce paintings of the same value as *Madame X*.

With such a Manichean conception that again highlighted his own preference for the warlike virtues of the avant-garde ('roughness', 'combativeness', 'revolt', etc.), Montesquiou built an explicitly gender-based argument against Sargent. He ridiculed him by making him the leader of a female army: 'he has cut, for his female sitters, satin jackets from the trains of this admirable army of women, that the current Director of our Villa Médicis has launched into a conquest of the world.'<sup>41</sup> Sargent thus embodied academic attempts to modernize itself, such as the decision in 1903 that allowed female students to obtain the Prix de Rome. Montesquiou suggested that true art was found on the battlefield of the avant-garde, while Sargent's art was far too concerned with academism and an early feminism. Due to this, Montesquiou portrayed Alice Meynell, one of Sargent's greatest supporters, as a Molieresque 'Femme Savante'.<sup>42</sup>

### *A tricky game of sympathies and antipathies*

Montesquiou thus used *Les Arts de la vie* in order to reaffirm his rallying cry to the mutating symbolist milieu, to promote himself as a defender of French taste and classicism, and to express his commitment to the old and new values of the avant-garde. Sargent embodied all demons for an avant-garde critic: feminism, bourgeoisie order, and mass consumption. Meanwhile, Montesquiou also weaved around Sargent's name a complex network of his personal enemies (painters, writers, amateurs), who were also targeted by his article.

Montesquiou continued with the symbolist tradition of associating painting and literature, a popular game of correspondences in which Sargent himself had played a role. One must consider here another figure in both Montesquiou and Sargent's circles: the French novelist Paul Bourget (1852–1935). The Sargent-Bourget relation was not only personal but also public, with an impact on the painter's French image in the literary milieu.<sup>43</sup> During the 1890s, Bourget had achieved major fame as an author, and became a member of the Académie française in 1894. His aristocratic and cosmopolitan novels were explicitly addressed to the same upper-class audience as Sargent's art. In his roman à clef, *Cosmopolis* (1892), the French author used Sargent as the fictional, but still perfectly recognisable, American painter Lincoln Maitland. Beginning in 1894, Bourget also reported on his cultural exploration of the United States in a series of articles for *Le Figaro*, gathered in 1895 into a book about American culture entitled *Outre-Mer*. During the 1890s, the literary and art magazine *Cosmopolis*, named after Bourget's successful novel, tried to reconcile symbolist poets with successful 'psychologist' novelists. The magazine was associated with the diffusion of English modernity, and often discussed such topics as the Pre-Raphaelite painters and several English novelists with connections to Sargent. *Cosmopolis* was for symbolists a

way of integrating themselves among an acceptable, elitist and international milieu, alongside the revolutionary rhetoric of the ‘petites revues’.

A symbolist exegesis that associated Bourget’s novels with Sargent’s paintings appeared as early as 1887. That year the esoteric poet Victor-Émile Michelet (1861–1938) wrote for the royalist newspaper *Le Gaulois* an analysis of Bourget’s female characters, whom he compared with the female sitters in Sargent’s and Burne-Jones’ paintings.<sup>44</sup> According to Michelet, these modern English painters depicted the two kinds of women that could be found in Bourget’s novels: the *femme fatale* and the victim, the latter of which was embodied by Burne-Jones’ *Princess Tied to the Tree*. As for the former, the description of Sargent’s sitters as *femmes fatales* was quite common for art critics, following a Baudelairian reading of Sargent’s paintings dating from the 1880s.<sup>45</sup> In an article of 1888, using the same pictorial reference to Sargent, Michelet further explained an ideal of the modern woman. He stated that her condition had been corrupted by democratic egalitarianism, and that an ‘eternal female’ needed to be restored. Women had to follow the role model of Joan of Arc, not the warrior but the ‘creature of sweetness’ with an ‘irresistible power of seduction’. According to Michelet, this ideal was incarnated in Renoir and Sargent’s ‘mysterious figures’.<sup>46</sup> Such an exegesis of Bourget and Sargent’s art implied a kind of aristocratic symbolism: intended for upper classes, it intertwined the literary establishment with, amongst others, English modern painting, medieval ideals, and the misogynist *fin-de-siècle* platitude of the *femme fatale*.

Montesquiou’s attack in 1905 thus became a broad one, directed not only at Sargent but also at this presumed Anglo-French circle. The French critic targeted both Sargent and Bourget with his witticisms, even though he had been close to the novelist in the 1890s. The literary allusions were in fact numerous in ‘Le Pavé Rouge’. One of the first was directed against Maupassant, who had succeeded in compromising himself with a society novel, *Bel Ami*, a major influence on Bourget’s bestsellers. Describing the misfortune that had befallen

Sargent after the ‘relative failure’ of *Madame X*, Montesquiou wrote: ‘Let us imagine Flaubert, angered by the relative failure of *L’Éducation Sentimentale*, and starting to court success by the dilution of his qualities. The result is that he would have begun to write like Maupassant. It would have been less good. In other words, he would have accidentally found himself becoming his own disciple.’<sup>47</sup> In order to avoid the popular association of Sargent and Bourget, Montesquiou ironically found a new literary symbol for the painter. Sargent became the Edmond de Rostand of painting, a playwright newly received in the Académie française, a nearly perfect equivalent to England’s Royal Academician: ‘The same *veni, vidi, vici*; the same manner of dragging every heart behind him.’<sup>48</sup> As for Bourget, who remained the preeminent literary target of ‘Le Pavé Rouge’, he was associated with the other painter condemned by the article, Jacques-Émile Blanche.<sup>49</sup> If Montesquiou chose to attack Sargent and Bourget, he could not forget the third part of their shared artistic/literary correspondence: the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, painter of ‘properly flabby Botticellian pictures’ and ‘properly stringy pastiches’.<sup>50</sup> Despite his interest in meeting the Pre-Raphaelite painters in 1885, Montesquiou had a change of heart at the end of the 1890s, and had also broken up with their French supporter Baroness Deslandes.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Montesquiou also mentioned in his article two women of the great Parisian world, two former acquaintances. He commented: ‘Oh! the ugliness of the furniture in this *Interior in Venice* [Figure 6]! It could only be the Palais Montecuculli, reconstructed by Princess Edmond de Polignac! –Unless Countess René de Béarn had also a pied-à-terre in Venice.’<sup>52</sup> The American Princess de Polignac, born Winnaretta Singer, had been Sargent’s last patron in Paris in 1889, when she was still married to her first husband Louis de Scey-Montbéliard. Winnaretta Singer and René de Béarn had shared some of Montesquiou’s inclinations during the 1890s, also shared by Sargent: enthusiasm for Wagner, and taste for neo-gothic symbolism.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout his article, Montesquiou attempted to make a fresh start. He connected Sargent with several of his own former relations of the 1890s, and rejected as a whole the symbolist strategy of the last decade, when the literary and art avant-garde had tried to establish itself through contact with successful novelists, English painters, or famous patrons. The affair was quite paradoxical, since Montesquiou had himself played a role in this attempted affiliation.

As an aesthete, he divided the art and the literary worlds, as well as high society, according to a sole criterion: taste. Taste was one of his favourite expressions and arguments, and in his article he targeted what he saw as Sargent's poor taste. After 'Le Pavé Rouge', in an essay about Edmond de Rostand entitled 'Le Météore', Montesquiou condemned the playwright star for a similar lack of taste: '*Taste* is a very special thing, some imperfect talents may have it and more assured masters lack it; Wagner had all the genius it is possible to have; had he taste? It is not through taste that Rubens excelled; Whistler and Stevens had it, and Mister Sargent who is a great painter, had none.'<sup>54</sup>

### *Montesquiou's clique*

If Montesquiou's article roughly corresponded with the point of view of the magazine *Les Arts de la vie*, his judgment was problematic as the critic also managed to still support an artistic clique sharing strong similarities with Sargent's art. Montesquiou had indeed not entirely given up his previous inclination for cosmopolitan portraitists; and maybe he wanted to even save his protégés from this upheaval in the artistic world. In this regard, his use of taste as a sole criterion to distinguish false and true art allowed him to provide a subtle division between contemporary painters: the bad ones, such as Sargent and Jacques-Émile Blanche, and the good ones, like Besnard, Boldini, Helleu and László.

According to Montesquiou, taste supposed a certain classical simplicity, which could also correspond with the new direction promoted by symbolist circles. Taste associated with the true Ancien Régime formed a kind of modern classicism. In the particular case of Montesquiou, this involved his praise of the art of Louis XIV and his numerous essays and lectures about Versailles. Pierre de Nolhac, the contemporary director of the château, was even one of the epistolary partisans of 'Le Pavé Rouge', opposing like the count 'the Velázquezes from America' and an 'authentic' Fragonard.<sup>55</sup> When Montesquiou no longer found them in favour, the aristocrat sitters mentioned in the article were often accused of damaging that same quality of authenticity, and the respect due to art monuments. In his condemnation of Winnaretta Singer, Montesquiou directly attacked her restoration of the Palazzo Contarini Dal Zaffo in 1902, a Venetian palace of the fifteenth century. One year after 'Le Pavé Rouge', when René de Béarn donated a new gilded frame for Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Montesquiou singled out this act for its pride and its lack of respect for the masterpiece.<sup>56</sup>

Taste thus implied a preference for true art of the past rather than the new pastiches of Sargent's art. Before 'Le Pavé Rouge', in his notes made during his American trip in 1902–1903, Montesquiou used the argument of 'bad taste' to explain American collectors' propensity to buy expensive and mediocre new products instead of authentic works of art.<sup>57</sup> In 'Le Pavé Rouge', Montesquiou mostly based the painter's '*illusion of great art*' on the use of modern imitations instead of true antiques in the decor of his paintings.<sup>58</sup> Sargent used 'fake Louis XV wing chairs and armchairs' made in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine (the modern Paris furniture district), and this behaviour was particularly unforgivable in England 'the country of the Wallace collection'.<sup>59</sup> Whereas Boldini and Helleu's furniture were true antiques, Sargent's furniture were from Braquenié or Mercier frères' stores. Through these commercial names, Montesquiou blamed the Second Empire for attempting to rival the Ancien Régime



with its revival styles. Therefore, Sargent painted ‘du *Boldini bourgeois*’. His portrait of Samuel Pozzi had particularly the ‘false look of a Valois of Gynecology’, presenting a doctor from high bourgeoisie in the decorum of Baroque royal portraits.<sup>60</sup> Sargent’s bad taste created fake royal furniture as well as fake royal portraits.

Montesquiou’s *connoisseurship*, his ability to distinguish right and wrong between two apparently similar forms, led him to odd considerations upon some of the most established celebrities of the art world. He was adamant about bringing down Sargent, yet Montesquiou still wanted to preserve the reputation of his own *protégés*, which led him to often-contradictory angles of support and rejection. According to him, Boldini and Besnard ‘had known how to preserve in their great reputation a certain air of the *controversial*’, that made them different from an *arrivé* such as Sargent.<sup>61</sup> Montesquiou’s art of nuance even managed to praise László for his portraits of Montesquiou’s acquaintances, the Gramont family (Figure 7), displayed to the Parisian public in 1902, even though their explicit borrowing from English eighteenth-century portraits was quite similar to Sargent’s grand manner style.<sup>62</sup> Montesquiou’s judgment was not entirely based on reason, but partly on sentiment. The critic supported a team of artists who were all connected to him in some way. They had all produced portraits of him, and László completed the very same year as the ‘Pavé Rouge’, in December, a portrait (Figure 8) which repeated the appropriate Whistlerian type in a thoughtful and melancholic image.<sup>63</sup>

Considering that Montesquiou still defended a similar kind of cosmopolitan art, his opposition to Sargent could appear as an arbitrary resentment. In fact, his position was complex: with one foot in the new mainstream of frank condemnation of foreign influences in French art, and the other in the camp of critics in favour of the cosmopolitan portraitists. By using Sargent as a straw man, he could on one hand taunt contemporary literary and social figures, and in another defend his own team of preferred artists.

All in all, Montesquiou defined himself as an apostle of Parisian taste by stripping Sargent of all the positive qualities attributed by the mainstream newspapers: artistic authenticity, respect due to Old Masters, and aristocracy. He built with Sargent an opposing counterpart, not only an Anglo-American, feminist, bourgeois and consumerist alter ego, but also a mythical hydra with the heads of all his personal enemies: painters like Blanche and Burne-Jones; writers like Bourget and Rostand; and high society figures like Winnaretta Singer and René de Bearn.

The example of Sargent had been for Robert de Montesquiou a perfect occasion to promote himself as a defender of a modern classicism, tinged with the nationalist and royalist nostalgia that emerged in France at the beginning of the century. In this regard, the dedication of Montesquiou's collection of essays *Altesses sérénissimes*, which included 'Le Pavé Rouge' in 1907, to the major figure of a new French nationalism, Maurice Barrès, was quite significant. Yet Montesquiou pragmatically developed a double standard according to his affinities with various international portraitists. His article embodied an arbitrary play with peremptory labels, easily given and taken back, in terms such as 'aristocrat' and 'bourgeois', 'authentic high art' or 'false pastiche', or 'good' and 'bad taste'. This double-dealing, between nationalist avant-garde posturing and cosmopolitan private interests made all Montesquiou's statements ambiguous, especially his nationalist comments about a so-called 'American' commercial civilisation as opposed to aristocrat elitism.

Due to a lack of resources, it is impossible to know how the painter reacted to 'Le Pavé Rouge'. The rare negative reactions are to be found in private correspondences, which demonstrates how the article could be read as a problem of social networking rather than an aesthetic statement. Helleu, the life-long French friend of Sargent, sulked for a while against Montesquiou: 'I hold it against you for having damaged Sargent who has been a friend for me

several times during my life. You know it is a rare thing...'<sup>64</sup> Jacques-Émile Blanche angrily wrote to Marcel Proust: 'So tell Robert that the interior Sargent painted in Venice, perfectly admirable and without mistake, is that of M. Curtis, and not what he described as an installation of Mrs de Polignac. So severe a judge should be impeccable at least in his information.'<sup>65</sup>

Twice, Montesquiou's tricky game of associations placed Proust in a difficult situation: 'I do not know the Palais Montecuculli, but I passed through the Béarn mansion during a charity reception, [...] and it seemed to me that there were some wonderful things.'<sup>66</sup> Confronted with Montesquiou's inextricable network of crossed targets, Proust, who owed to Blanche his well-known portrait (1892, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), expressed his difficulties to his mentor: 'I found you quite unfair with Jacques Blanche. It is true that by saying this I appear to be so with Bourget, and I do not want to be – always this terrible game of comparisons from whence we cannot escape.'<sup>67</sup>

Montesquiou's attack had been stormy in a tightly knit circle of artists, but some of the responses – Proust's for example – focused its praise more on the critic's style and its general meaning of speech than its choice of examples. Indeed, they may have reckoned that the count's lack of objectivity and his subtlety partly hid bad faith. Nevertheless, if Proust and Montesquiou did not come to an agreement about what was true art, at least they reconciled about Sargent as a scapegoat. The name of 'Sargent' was thus a practical label to give to a larger group of their enemies, whose characteristics were so vaguely defined that the same could also be applied to their friends.

Sargent studies have so far focused their attention upon his critical reception in France during his actual stay in Paris, and they have assumed a smooth expansion of his international celebrity from London to the French capital during the years 1890s and 1900s. 'Le Pavé Rouge' provides us an occasion to examine the French Symbolists' perception and strategies

in front of Sargent's art. The article also underlined a crucial difference of means between the American painter and his fellow internationally reputed portraitists. For French art critics, John Singer Sargent was a defenceless victim, with a very particular and precarious position compared to other painters of his generation. He benefited from a high reputation on the international scene, but appeared as a true invader without any personal ties with the local Parisian arena. Furthermore, Sargent's move to London had prevented him from gaining support in the French capital.<sup>68</sup> Since his departure from Paris, Sargent indeed lacked supporters from the 'petites revues' and other publications with a specifically avant-garde position, whereas his portrait-painting competitors could count on art critics crossing almost promiscuously between journalistic extremes. Sargent's was manifestly aware of this risk. While leaving Paris he expressed to Claude Monet a fear of bad-mouthing, that unfortunately became with Montesquiou a historiographical consensus: 'I beg you, if you hear from our friends that I am a deserter or an ingrate, or that I am sulking, to contradict such nonsense.'<sup>69</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Montesquiou, 'Le Pavé Rouge', 329.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>5</sup> Le Diable boiteux, 'Échos', *Gil Blas*, June 25, 1905. Robert de Montesquiou kept this clipping in his papers. National Library of France (BnF), NAF 15141, f° 21. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are the author's.

<sup>6</sup> 'Nos Échos', *La Presse*, July 2, 1905. The same words appeared in Le Masque de fer, 'Échos', *Le Figaro*, July 4, 1905.

<sup>7</sup> Arsène Alexandre, 'Les Salons de 1906', *Le Figaro*, April 14, 1906. Alexandre only knew Montesquiou's article for its reputation; he first read it when the author send him a copy of his *Altesses Sérénissimes*. Letter from Arsène Alexandre to Robert de Montesquiou (RDM), [1907], BnF, NAF 15144, f° 12–13.

<sup>8</sup> BnF, NAF 15144, f° 12–13, 89–92, 99–100, 111–120, 124–125, 145–147; NAF 15145, f° 13–14, 37–40, 45–47, 83–84.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Carlo Placci to RDM, July 14, 1907, BnF, NAF 15145, f° 48–50.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Jean Joseph Renaud to RDM, August 27, [1907 ?], BnF, NAF 15141, f° 95–97.

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from Marcel Proust to RDM, after July 9, 1905, BnF, NAF 15256, f<sup>o</sup> 19–22. At this time of his life Proust stopped going out during daylight.

<sup>12</sup> Proust, ‘Un Professeur de Beauté’, 70.

<sup>13</sup> See Bertrand, *Les Curiosités Esthétiques de Robert de Montesquiou*.

<sup>14</sup> Montesquiou’s papers include two undated letters from Gabriel Fauré and Samuel Pozzi mentioning Sargent (BnF, NAF 15141, f<sup>o</sup> 92–93 and 98–99). In his 1905 article, Montesquiou mentioned as disastrous the portraits of Pozzi and Fauré (1881, UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles; 1889, Cité de la Musique, Paris). Montesquiou, ‘Le Pavé Rouge’, 333, 336.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from John Singer Sargent to Henry James, June 29, 1885, Manuscript Division Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, b MS Am 1094 [396], quoted in Munhall, *Whistler and Montesquiou*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Henry James to RDM, [June/July 1885], BnF, NAF 15335, f<sup>o</sup> 45.

<sup>17</sup> About Whistler’s influence on French portraitists see, among others, Badea-Păun, ‘Les Portraitistes “Whistlériens” aux Salons de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, 1890-1903’, 303–21.

<sup>18</sup> Boldini’s portrait of Montesquiou, exhibited in 1897 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris), can appear as a similar kind of monochromatic portrait.

<sup>19</sup> According to the sitter, Sargent would have been afraid of the similarity between his work and Whistler’s: ‘Everybody will say that I’ve copied it.’ Robertson, *Time Was*, 236.

<sup>20</sup> Adam, ‘Les Salons de 1896’, 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> BnF, NAF 15141, f<sup>o</sup> 74–75.

<sup>23</sup> BnF, NAF 15141, f<sup>o</sup> 86.

<sup>24</sup> Comparisons between Sargent and Baudelaire occurred within French newspapers as early as 1880. When Sargent exhibited *Madame X* at the Salon in 1884, the name of Baudelaire had notably been mentioned by the art critic Gustave Geffroy. See Gustave Geffroy, ‘Salon de 1884’, *La Justice*, June 11, 1884.

<sup>25</sup> BnF, NAF 15141, f<sup>o</sup> 79–80, 81–82.

<sup>26</sup> A section of Montesquiou’s papers is devoted to this travel, BnF, NAF 15053 to NAF 15061.

<sup>27</sup> See the chapter ‘Souveraines d’Outre-Mer’ in Montesquiou, *Assemblée de notables*, 215–229.

<sup>28</sup> *The Telegraph*, January 18, 1903, newspaper clipping kept in Montesquiou’s papers, BnF, NAF 15059. See also the chapter ‘Souveraines d’Outre-Mer’ in Montesquiou, *Assemblée de notables*, 215–229.

<sup>29</sup> BnF, NAF 15054 f<sup>o</sup> 42–45, 76–77, 78–79.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from John Singer Sargent to RDM, January 30, [1903], BnF, NAF 15141, f<sup>o</sup> 83–84. See also two letters from Helleu to RDM about his daughter’s disease, BnF, NAF 15054, f<sup>o</sup> 80, 81–82. We did not find any evidence of an actual meeting between the two men in the United States.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from John Singer Sargent to RDM, February 5, [1903], BnF, NAF 15141, f<sup>o</sup> 72–73.

<sup>32</sup> Mourey, ‘Les Salons de 1904’, 281.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Enquête sur la Séparation des Beaux-Arts et de l’État’, 200–3. The title referred to the controversial discussions about the law on the Separation of the Churches and the State.

<sup>34</sup> Morice, ‘Enquête sur les Tendances Actuelles des Arts Plastiques’, 346–59.

<sup>35</sup> See ‘Le Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-arts’, *Le Petit Journal*, April 16, 1904; Gustave Babin, ‘Le Salon de 1904’, *L’Écho de Paris*, April 16, 1904; André Michel, ‘Le Tour

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du Salon', *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*, April 16, 1904; F.-George Morot, 'Les Salons de 1904', *La Presse*, April 17, 1904; Baudin, 'Les Salons de 1904', 468–9; Marx, 'Les Salons de 1904', 322.

<sup>36</sup> André Michel, 'Le Tour du Salon', *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*, April 16, 1904.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>38</sup> Morice, 'Les Salons de la Nationale et des Français', 690, 693–700.

<sup>39</sup> Peladan, 'Le Salon de la Société Nationale', 386, 402. The association of Sargent and American mercantilism had appeared within Peladan's art chronicles just few months before, see Peladan, 'L'Exposition internationale', 450.

<sup>40</sup> Montesquiou, 'Le Pavé Rouge', 331–2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>43</sup> Sargent and Bourget had begun to visit each other during the summer of 1884. See Ormond and Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: The Early Portraits*, XV.

<sup>44</sup> Émile Michelet, 'Les Femmes de Paul Bourget', *Le Gaulois*, November 10, 1887.

<sup>45</sup> See note 24.

<sup>46</sup> Émile Michelet, 'Femmes de France', *Le Gaulois*, October 5, 1888.

<sup>47</sup> Montesquiou, 'Le Pavé Rouge', 332.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 334. Before his reception in 1903, Rostand had been elected into the Académie Française in 1901. That year, Henry James had attacked his popular success in an article for *Cornhill Magazine*. James, 'Edmond Rostand', 577–98. Associating Rostand and Sargent, Montesquiou mentioned James' article and used it against James' fellow countryman and friend.

<sup>49</sup> Montesquiou, 'Le Pavé Rouge', 334.

<sup>50</sup> Montesquiou, 'Le Pavé Rouge', 337.

<sup>51</sup> See Saunier, 'Edward Burne-Jones et la France', 57–70.

<sup>52</sup> Montesquiou, 'Le Pavé Rouge', 338.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Jean Carriès' *Porte de Parsifal*, commissioned by Winnaretta Singer, or René de Béarn's *Salle du Chevalier* designed by Jean Dampé (1900–1906, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Both Montesquiou and Sargent were friends and promoters of Jean Carriès. See Ormond and Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: The Early Portraits*, 92–3.

<sup>54</sup> Montesquiou, *Têtes couronnées*, 190–1.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Pierre de Nolhac to RDM, [undated], BnF, NAF 15145, f° 45–47.

<sup>56</sup> Robert de Montesquiou, 'Ne Touchez pas à la Joconde', *Gil Blas*, January 13, 1906. Lucien Daudet reacted to this article in a letter to the count where he associated the event and a conversation with Montesquiou about Sargent. Letter from Lucien Daudet to RDM, [after January 13, 1906], BnF, NAF 15144, f° 91–93. On January 1<sup>st</sup> Daudet had asked Montesquiou for a copy of his 'Pavé Rouge'. BnF, NAF 15144, f° 89.

<sup>57</sup> BnF, NAF 15055, f° 46–47.

<sup>58</sup> Montesquiou, 'Le Pavé Rouge', 337.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 340, 333.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 336–7.

<sup>63</sup> László's portrait would be used as the frontispiece of the 1906 edition of *Les Hortensias bleus*.

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Paul César Helleu to RDM, quoted in Ader Nordmann, *Lettres et manuscrits autographes*, lot 92.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Jacques-Émile Blanche to Marcel Proust, September 10, 1905, quoted in Proust, *Correspondance*, 16: 1917, 398–400.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Marcel Proust to RDM, after July 9, 1905, BnF, NAF 15256, f<sup>o</sup> 19–22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> The portrait of *Princess de Scey-Montbéliard* had been his last commission in Paris, and the London-based artist was clearly not expecting much more from the French art market. About Sargent's network in Paris, see Ormond and Kilmurray, 'Sargent in Paris', 13–22.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Sargent to Monet, March 11, [1887], Boston, Museum of Fine Art, The John Singer Sargent Archive, SC.SargentArchive.6.1. Translation provided by the MFA website.

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