

Young Portrait Explorers: John Singer Sargent



Learning Objective: Discover the artwork of John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) and learn about some of the techniques he used for drawing portraits.

Portrait Discussion:

Look at Sargent’s portrait of the actor Ethel Barrymore. Spend 30 seconds letting your eyes wander from the top of the drawing to the bottom.

Facial Expression: Look at Barrymore’s facial expression. What emotions do you read in her face? Her mouth is slightly open, right? Is she smiling? Speaking? Thinking? What might she be feeling or thinking about?

Pose: Notice the position of the subject’s body. Her shoulders are down and back, her neck is out, and her chin is up. Does she look shy or confident? Why? Can you try posing like Ethel Barrymore?

Technique: John Singer Sargent drew portraits of his friends using **charcoal**. Charcoal is a black drawing tool that gets its dark color from being burned, like when a stick or candle wick burns. Have you ever touched charcoal? It can crumble and be messy, but artists like how it blends from dark to light.

Light versus dark: Notice the many **shades** (lights vs. darks) of black. Can you see the different **strokes** (marks from the artist’s charcoal on the paper) that he used as he drew the portrait? Where do you see the lightest strokes? And the darkest ones? There are places Sargent **highlighted** (drew lightly or left the paper blank) and other places where he **shaded** (created dark areas).

Focus on the hair for a moment. Sargent used both soft and hard strokes to show the light and shadow. Where do you see the light? Where do you see the shadow? In some places, he drew specific hairs, and in other places, he created big swirls to imagine large sections of hair. He even included some white stripes alongside Barrymore’s hair to make it look glossy.

Historical Context: *John Singer Sargent was one of the most popular portrait artists of his time. This portrait of the actor Ethel Barrymore was one of over 750 charcoal drawings he made. After Sargent saw Barrymore in a play, he told her, “I would like to do a drawing of you, and I would be so honored to present you with the drawing afterward.” Barrymore let him draw her portrait and later called it “quite my most treasured possession.”*

Related Children’s Books:

Lines by Suzy Lee

Great American Artists for Kids by MaryAnn F. Kohl and Kim Solga

Activity: What can you do with a pencil?

Materials:

Pencil or black crayon

Paper

Instructions:

Divide a piece of paper into 8 sections. Use the sections to practice the following:

- Light shades like Ethel Barrymore’s cheeks

- Dark shades like her eyes
- Straight lines like the background
- Swirls and squiggles like her hair

Now combine these styles:

- Light and dark lines
- Light and dark swirls and squiggles

Finally, combine all styles to create faces! Draw a friend or use your imagination to experiment.



Ethel Barrymore by John Singer Sargent, 1903. Charcoal on paper. Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Mr. Samuel Colt, 1984

Find the portrait on our website, here: <https://npg.si.edu/exhibition/john-singer-sargent-portraits-charcoal-1>