

**“Embracing Individuality:
John Singer Sargent’s Mr. and Mrs. I.N. Phelps Stokes (1897)”**

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Excerpt

What is the effect of Mr. Stokes taking a secondary position behind his wife? Clearly, it allows her to take the spotlight. The question we may ask ourselves instead is whether it was Mr. Stokes who quietly inserted himself behind his wife, or whether Mrs. Stokes decided to step into the limelight to distinguish herself from the pair of them and, implicitly, the social construct of marriage. Some might interpret her husband’s crossed arms as that of impatience at his wife for being so brashly forthright. His imperceptible and expressionless face might support this take. However, we may also interpret his crossed arms as a way of expressing passivity. Indeed, he literally stands in the shadows with, as the cliché goes, a “hands-off” attitude. This interpretation suggests that Mr. Stokes is doing his best to avoid detracting from his wife’s presence.



Mr. & Mrs. I.N. Phelps Stokes (1897)
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/images/h2/h2_38.104.jpg

This latter interpretation is actually more feasible if we further examine the composition of the image: on the narrow canvas, Mrs. Stokes is more centered than is her husband; the frame even cuts off part of his right shoulder. The idea that both were the intended subjects of the painting and that Mrs. Stokes actively decided to break that balance by stepping forth does not fit with this compositional observation. Furthermore, the most appropriate amount of light is on her person rather than on him; it is more likely that Mr. Stokes deliberately took a position

behind his wife, who was already placed both in the center of the canvas and in the spotlight. The placement thus suggests that Mrs. Stokes was the intended subject and that her husband serves as an afterthought in the image—a prop, even. Rather than viewing Mr. Stokes as the ex-subject who bitterly bites the dust of his wife’s headstrong attitude, through the centrality of Mrs. Stokes the viewer understands her husband to be supportive and encouraging.

We have thus established that the composition of the painting both depicts the unusual dynamics of the couple’s relationship and allows Mrs. Stokes to stand out. But there is a greater significance to the way in which Mrs. Stokes stands out, especially if we examine the state of women in the appropriate historical and societal context.

At the time of this painting’s creation, the Victorian era was just coming to an end. As art historian Julie Codell points out, the portrait was especially popular during the late 19th century as a means of publicly depicting private life.¹ Fittingly, historian Elizabeth Roberts illuminates that a majority of Victorian marriages were characterized by husband and wife occupying equal roles in different spheres: he in the public, she in the private.² Portraiture was, thus, one of the rare occasions in which women could exhibit their day-to-day inhabitation of that private sphere not usually exposed to the public eye.

This idea is evident in Sargent’s other portraits of women in the mid-19th century. Female portraits by Sargent include his infamous *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* (1893) (Fig. 2) and *Mrs. Hugh Hammersley* (1892) (Fig. 3a), in which his sitters pose on ornate furniture. Their seated positions allow their skirts to fold and crinkle elegantly around their bodies, catching the light and shadows. The color palettes in both portraits allow the viewer to understand the sitter as an extension of her environment, reflecting the idea that each sitter is fully integrated into her domestic world like a flower in its natural surroundings.

¹ Julie F. Codell, “Victorian Portraits: Re-Tailoring Identities,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 34, no. 5 (2012): 494.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08905495.2012.738089#.U2M8kq1dV4U>

² Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman’s Place* (Oxford Oxfordshire; New York: Blackwell, 1984), 117.

After such discussion on the depiction of Victorian women as beautiful objects in their private spheres, it seems normal for Mr. Stokes to stand back in order to allow his wife to shine in the limelight. Yet, she does not shine in the same way we expect. While we admire the soft beauty of the fabrics and colors that envelope the sitters in *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* and *Mrs. Hugh Hammersley*, in *Mr. and Mrs. I.N. Phelps Stokes*, Mr. Stokes's fading into the background allows us to direct our attention to the unexpected boldness with which Mrs. Stokes is portrayed.



Lady Agnew of Lochnaw (1893)

Source: Wikipedia

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/Sargent-Lady-Agnew-of-Lochnaw-1893.jpg>



Mrs. Hugh Hammersley (1892)

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

<http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/ap/original/DT2064.jpg>

Author Commentary

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For the culmination of my work in the writing seminar entitled “Framing American Art” with Professor Nika Elder, I wrote a paper analyzing the painting *Mr. & Mrs. I.N. Phelps Stokes* (1897) by prominent portraitist John Singer Sargent. Despite the title, the painting features a woman in a blindingly white skirt and blazer confidently beaming at the viewer, with her husband standing off to the side in her shadow. In the paper, I argue that this unexpected compositional decision of Mrs. Stokes commanding central attention not only “characterizes the Stokeses’ marriage as one undisturbed by the defiance of implicit social rules but also predicts the eventual overturning of late-18th-century gentility and embraces American values of independence and individuality.”

The following excerpt from this paper immediately follows the thesis stated above. I begin the long road to clinching the argument with visual analysis, followed by a consideration of this analysis in the painting’s cultural context. The paper ends with some snippets of the true story behind this portrait, which serve to strengthen the arguments I make throughout the rest of the paper.

My writing seminar began the long journey to the final paper by traveling to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I found this painting, *Mr. and Mrs. I.N. Phelps Stokes* (1897), in an exhibit of beautiful and exquisite portraiture of the same time period. Most of the women in this exhibit were adorned in dresses of lavish and flowery material, which attracted me, but this painting was an exception—the woman in this painting seemed to be dressed more plainly, and yet her facial expression burst forth much more boldly than did the other “delicate” women in the exhibit. My intrigue with this observation prompted me to select this portrait as the topic of my paper.

While observing the painting at the museum, I was certainly not well enough acquainted with American history to realize the social implications of this visual discrepancy; my starting point to exploring these implications was research on the cultural context of the portrait.

Though my research on the role of the portrait during the time period eventually became a key part of my argument, as you can see, the exact characteristic that drew me to this painting—its stark differences from other paintings in its time period—eventually became part of a particularly key visual analysis in my final product. For quite a while in my drafting stage, I limited my visual analysis to the main painting. As I browsed through books on John Singer Sargent’s portraits, though, the portraits I encountered reminded me what drew me to this particular painting in the first place. By carrying out visual analyses of these paintings by the same artist and within the same decade, I was better able to demonstrate the uniqueness of this painting in both its artistic and cultural context, which ultimately strengthened my argument.

In retrospect, it is interesting to see that a majority of the visual analysis in this excerpt can be found in the notes I took while studying the painting at the museum. The close visual analysis was an important resource just as much as it directed further research that developed into my argument.