



MARGARETT W. MCKEAN SARGENT (1892-1978)

Stepping Out, 1916

Bronze

14 x 6 x 8 inches

Signed and dated on base

Provenance:

Walker-Cunningham Fine Art, 2007

Private Collection, Hingham, MA

Margarett Sargent was born into a prestigious family in Boston society and was the fourth cousin of the famed portrait painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). However, her art and lifestyle were an emphatic rejection of that birthright and of the high society style of her cousin. Sargent had a brief period of productivity which resulted in modernist images that reflected the influence of her mentor, the realist painter George Luks (1867-1933), yet went beyond his tutelage.

The details of Sargent's life, considered scandalous by early 20th century standards of propriety and femininity, were only recently rediscovered by her granddaughter Honor Moore, who wrote a biography of her grandmother, *The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margarett Sargent*, published in 1996.¹ Her work was rediscovered in the 1990s when Berry-Hill Galleries held a retrospective exhibition in 1996, which also traveled to Wellesley College.

Sargent began her art education while a student at Miss Porter's, an exclusive boarding school in Farmington, Connecticut. While the art classes were standard for a girl's finishing education, Sargent had access to the art collection at Hill-Stead, a nearby country estate, whose collection of Impressionist paintings (including works by women artists like Mary Cassatt (1844 - 1926)) likely inspired her early creations and personal art collection. When she received \$1,000 for her nineteenth birthday, she purchased the Cassatt pastel drawing *In the Loge*, which she later donated to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

¹ Honor Moore, *The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margarett Sargent by her Granddaughter* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009).



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When Sargent traveled to Florence, Italy to attend a finishing school from 1910 to 1911, she became inspired by the sculptures of the Renaissance artist, Donatello (c.1386-1466). Returning to the United States, she joined the National Association of Women Artists and began her training in sculpture in the autumn of 1914, studying with the Russian realist sculptor Bessie (Bashka) Paeff (1893-1979), a young woman of Sargent's own age known for her bohemian lifestyle. Under Paeff's tutelage, Sargent soon began earning her own sculpture commissions. She supplemented this sculptural training with two summers of study in painting with the Boston native Charles Woodbury (1864-1940) at the artist colony in Ogunquit, Maine. Sargent continued her studies in sculpture with Gutzon Borglum (1867-1941) in New York, and through him she met George Luks who introduced her to the avant-garde circle in New York and would have a profound influence on her life and art. Luks nicknamed her the "White Blackbird." Sargent continued sculpting until the mid-1920s when she turned to oil painting.

Stepping Out is a rare surviving early sculpture, as many of her works were destroyed by a fire in her studio during the 1960s. Here, a young woman stands before a wall. As she pulls forward, clutching and pressing against the wall, she seems unable to free herself – as if the weight of her surroundings were restricting her movements. The melancholic expression of the woman, in combination with the dark patina of the bronze and rough impressionistic modeling, contributes to the overall emotive quality of the work. It may be possible to see this work in an autobiographical context, as Sargent too felt oppressed and restricted by the demands of her high-society upbringing, and it was around this time in 1916 that she began to gain independence and became influenced by her ever-growing circle of bohemian friends and artists.

Of the few remaining works that survive, one of which is a bronze head of her mentor, George Luks. In 1916, Sargent exhibited her work for the first time, showing two sculptures at the Art Institute of Chicago, one titled *Sketch, Outdoors* and the other titled *The Cheever Boys*. Sargent was one of more than 60 women among the 200 exhibitors. From 1917 through 1919, she also exhibited numerous sculptures at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the National Academy of Design, New York, including the portrait of Luks and two different sculptures of parrots.

Sargent married Quincy Adams Shawn Mckean, a polo player from an old Boston family, in 1920 and bore four children between the years of 1921 and 1924. After the birth of her children, she began making



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frequent trips to Paris and began collecting modernist art, continuing to paint oils and watercolors on the side. The vibrant and dissonant colors of her paintings strongly reflect an influence of Henri Matisse (1869-1954), though her work has an edgier quality with a greater degree of psychological insight conveyed through her portraits, reflecting a growing sense of alienation with the modern world. Sargent had the first of several solo exhibitions in 1926 at Kraushaar Galleries in New York. The period around 1930 was exceptionally fruitful for her. Even though she had painted in oils for only about three years, she had had five major exhibitions in New York, one in Chicago and one in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1930, she exhibited at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, the first exhibition of her work in her hometown. Other exhibitions include the Corcoran Gallery biennial in 1930 and a solo exhibition at Doll & Richards in Boston in 1932. Her last exhibition was in 1936 at the Boston Society of Independent Artists, at which point she gave up painting. There is no historical documentation for the reason behind this decision to end her artistic career. However, it was likely due to a number of factors, not the least of which being her tumultuous personal life.

Sargent's adult life was plagued by alcoholism and mental illness. She was known to have had many love affairs with both men and women and frequented parties attended by her social circle of celebrities including Alexander Calder (1898-1976), Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), Arnold Genthe (1869-1942), Harpo Marx and Fanny Brice.

After a divorce and several long stints in sanitariums, Sargent died in a nursing home in 1978 after a series of strokes. Though she had a relatively brief period of artistic productivity, from the late 1910s to 1936, Sargent was a painter and sculptor of genuine talent who managed to create a striking portrait of the privileged society in which she circulated.

Sources:

Hirschler, Erica E. *A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston 1870-1940*. Boston: Museum of Fine Art Publications, 2001.

Moore, Honor. *The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margaret Sargent*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

Nochlin, Linda. *Margarett Sargent: September 12-October 5, 1996*. New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, 1996.