

ART APPRECIATION GROUP – Report by Tony Seward

For our September meeting Professor Kloss introduced us to three painters active in Paris in the 1880s: Edouard Manet, Georges Seurat, and John Singer Sargent.

Close analysis of Manet's groundbreaking 'A Bar at the Folies Bergere' (1882), from the Courtauld Institute, revealed subtleties in composition and perspective that few of us had noticed before, even though the painting is so familiar – especially the way in which most of the scene is in fact a reflection in the mirror behind the barmaid.

Seurat, who was only 31 when he died, pioneered the technique of pointillism, building up colour and shading through clusters of small dots of carefully contrasted colours, so perhaps taking the first steps towards modernist abstraction. 'A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte' (1884), from the Art Institute of Chicago, depicts Parisians from a variety of classes strolling on an island in the Seine. It has an oddly stiff, formal air, partly influenced by his study of Egyptian art, and is probably the only famous painting that has inspired a musical: Stephen Sondheim's 'Sunday in the Park with George', 1983.

Sargent's 'The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit' (1882), from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is not well known in Britain as it has never been exhibited here. It is, however, regarded by the Americans as his masterpiece. Clearly inspired by Velasquez' 'Las Meninas' it portrays the four girls, ranging from a toddler on the carpet to a teenager leaning in profile against one of two massive Oriental vases. The painting's grand scale, its sombre tones and mysterious depths, plus the apparent lack of communication between the girls, draw the viewer into an experience that is rich and strange. After the break we explored this great painting further, with a lecture from Sargent expert Erica Hirshler describing how it came to be painted, and leading on to some of Sargent's other major portraits and the great success he achieved after moving from Paris to London.

[insert image of 'The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit']

Next up – Wednesday 1st November. 'Living and Dying – Bruegel, El Greco, Caravaggio'.

