



John Singer Sargent's Portrait of Vernon Lee

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The year is 1881 and John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) has captured his close friend, the art historian and aesthetic critic Vernon Lee (1856–1935) on canvas. Sargent's bravura brushstroke conveys Lee's keen intelligence and sharp wit, with inquisitive eyes peering through her gleaming spectacles. Reinforcing her agency to look, as a woman and as a woman art historian, Sargent's portrait conveys Lee's status as an authoritative cultural mediator who, as Hilary Fraser has observed, 'decisively usurped the gaze' through the medium of writing.



The year is 1881 and John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) has captured his close friend, the art historian and aesthetic critic Vernon Lee (1856–1935) on canvas (Fig. 1). From a young age, the French-born and Italian-bred Lee exhibited great intelligence and attuned sensitivity to the artistic and cultural centres of Europe that provided her childhood playground. Such attributes found their creative expression through her talent for writing; in particular, on a topic that was to prove the continual haunting influence on her entire *oeuvre* — art and, by extension, the role and importance of beauty in modern life.



Fig. 1: John Singer Sargent, *Vernon Lee*, 1881, oil on canvas, 537 × 432 mm, Tate Britain (inv. N04787). Photo © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sargent-vernon-lee-n04787>>.

The bottom of the canvas has an unfinished appearance and Lee seems to be merging into, or appearing out of, the blotchy whiteness in the lower-left corner. The movement of brushstrokes upwards, which takes wisps of white paint with it, gives Lee a ghostly, apparitional quality. The whiteness sweeps up her torso to congregate in a black shirt and white collar, above which appears an inquisitive, pale, pointed face, with spectacles. The androgynous style of her clothing, together with her short, unkempt hairstyle, is implicative of Lee's non-heteronormative sexual identity; her ambiguous sexuality and her refusal to be limited by gender. The background against which she is depicted is perhaps most evocative of her. Though positioned in a frame, Lee hovers over a thick black vertical line. Sargent has positioned Lee over a boundary, at the in-between. Dismantled in Derridean thought, the portrait becomes the 'por-trait' or the 'pro-trahere', an act of drawing forth and revealing the *trait* of difference within the image of the same. The trait of difference that Sargent marks on Lee's portrait is his inscription which addresses her as 'Violet', a trace which hovers over the figure whose androgynous dress and short hair communicate her as 'Vernon'. The indeterminacy of both representations — the inscription and the sketch — point to Lee's '*becoming* identity' that she embodied in both her public and private life, an identity 'not conceived as ongoing and fixed, but forever in process'.¹

¹ Hilary Fraser, 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between', in *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880–1930*, ed. by Marysa Demoor (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 114–33 (pp. 120–21), emphasis in original.

Sargent conveys Lee's keen intelligence and sharp wit through the gleaming spectacles and her inquisitive eyes peering through them. Reinforcing her agency to *look*, as a woman and as a woman art historian, the glasses signify Lee's status as an authoritative cultural mediator who, as Hilary Fraser has observed, 'decisively usurped the gaze' through the medium of writing.² Sargent's rough, sketchy brushwork suggests a 'resistance of the sitter' to being captured on canvas.³ This sense of movement and transience, an unwillingness to be defined, is conveyed in Lee's own response to the portrait and her recollection of sitting for Sargent:

The sketch is, by everyone's admission extraordinarily clever & characteristic; it is of course mere dabs & blurs & considerably caricatured, but certainly more like me than I expected anything could — rather fierce & cantankerous [...]. [John] says I sit very well; the goodness of my sitting seems to consist in never staying quiet a single moment.⁴

Lee's playful self-description as 'fierce & cantankerous' and admission of her own forthright verbosity pinpoints certain aspects of her manner of articulation that garnered much hostility, especially from her male contemporaries. At the age of twenty-two, she adopted the (suitably androgynous) pseudonym 'Vernon Lee', because as she observed, 'I am sure no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt.'⁵ Her self-fashioning as a public intellectual and unwavering ambition to make her voice heard within male-dominated intellectual discourses provoked both admonishment to temper her zealousness — as with Henry James's sharp response to her controversial novel *Miss Brown* (1881): 'Cool first — write afterwards. Morality is hot — but art is icy!' — and vitriol directed towards her physical appearance.⁶ As Frankie Dytor has explored most recently, Lee's voracious appetite for knowledge was seen as indicative of her disruptive queer masculinity, conveyed by Michael Field's discomfort at Lee's 'eyes with a look of greed for discussion, the eyes of an intellectual Vampire'.⁷

² Hilary Fraser, 'Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse', *Victorian Studies*, 42 (1998–99), 77–100 (pp. 89–90).

³ Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 119.

⁴ Vernon Lee to Mrs Paget, 25–27 June 1881, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856–1935*, ed. by Amanda Gagel and Sophie Geoffroy, Pickering Masters Series (London: Routledge, 2017–), I: 1865–1884, ed. by Amanda Gagel (2017), pp. 295–98 (pp. 295–96).

⁵ Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, 18 December 1878, in *Selected Letters*, I, 243–44 (p. 244).

⁶ Henry James to Vernon Lee, 10 May 1885, in *Selected Letters*, II: 1885–1889, ed. by Sophie Geoffrey (2021), pp. 27–30 (p. 29).

⁷ Quoted in Frankie Dytor, "'The Eyes of an Intellectual Vampire': Michael Field, Vernon Lee and Female Masculinities in Late Victorian Aestheticism", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 26 (2021), 582–95 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcab035>> (p. 583).

Indeed, Lee's parted mouth suggests she has just paused mid-conversation. With her head turned to the right though her torso still faces the viewer, something appears to have caught her attention beyond the frame. Lee's assertiveness in establishing and expressing her voice in her chosen fields of writing — art, history, and aesthetics — was particularly channelled through her unabashed insistence on exposing what she saw as the hypocritical, hedonistic, and asocial undercurrents running through the work of her male counterparts. The aesthetic phenomenon was, for Lee, a physically and spiritually ameliorating experience. In her essay 'The Use of Beauty' (1909), she explains the beneficial effects that the experience of beauty affords the viewer:

The cosmic power of the Beautiful [...] is the power of making human beings live, for the moment, in a more organically vigorous and harmonious fashion, as mountain air or sea-wind makes them live; but with the difference that it is not merely the bodily, but very essentially the spiritual life, the life of thought and emotion, which is thus raised to unusual harmony and vigour.⁸

Lee advocated the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility that would not only improve the individual, but also contribute to greater social harmony. Her growing awareness of the social disparity inherent in the appreciation of, and access to, art meant she could no longer support an aestheticism that pursued the 'pleasant and certain things of this life [and] shut our eyes and ears resolutely to the unpleasant and uncertain'; in order for aestheticism to grow and mature past its current state of 'juvenilia', the world must be viewed 'no longer as a mere storehouse of beautiful inanimate things, but as a great living mass'.⁹

Lee critiqued 'the practice of various schools of art, [...] particularly of the persons styled by themselves aesthetes and by others decadents', whose approaches she denigrated as having 'attempted to reduce man's relations with the great world-power Beauty to mere intellectual dilettantism or sensual superfineness' (*Laurus Nobilis*, p. 12). Understanding such an approach as alienating, she sought to 'justify that perfectly simple, direct connection between art and ourselves, which was the one I had felt, as a child'.¹⁰ Proposing a socially aware aesthetic sensibility, Lee still maintained her fundamental belief of the autonomy of beauty from morality; for Lee, 'the enjoyment

⁸ Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), pp. 13–14.

⁹ Vernon Lee, *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), I, 18, 20.

¹⁰ Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Satchell, 1883), p. 13.

of beautiful things is originally and intrinsically one of those which are heightened by sharing' (*Laurus Nobilis*, p. 50). Caught in a moment of transforming what she sees into words for her audience, Sargent depicts Lee in the midst of her creative process, perpetually occupying the space between art and word.

