THE BLACK MALE NUDE: A STUDY OF JOHN SINGER SARGENT’S THOMAS
McKELLER NUDE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART
AND CULTURE

By

JENNIFER LYNN BLOUNT

JESSICA DALLOW, COMMITTEE CHAIR
HEATHER MCPHERSON
MINDY NANCARROW

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THE BLACK MALE NUDE: A STUDY OF JOHN SINGER SARGENT’S *THOMAS McKELLER NUDE* WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART AND CULTURE

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ART HISTORY

ABSTRACT

When addressed in the contexts of nineteenth-century masculinity, male nudity, and the notion of the artist’s studio, John Singer Sargent’s painting, *Thomas McKeller Nude*, provides a rich discourse on nineteenth and twentieth-century art and culture. The painting, which is now housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is unique because of its striking detail and subject matter. The image has predominantly been classified as a study for the rotunda decorations at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Sometime during his creation of the murals, Sargent came across the sitter, Thomas McKeller, an African-American bellhop, working in a nearby Boston hotel. McKeller has been called “Sargent’s favorite model,” which is evident in Sargent’s many charcoal sketches of him. This, coupled with the erotic nature of the large oil painting, illuminates the importance of exploring it as a means of adding another dimension to our current understanding of Sargent.

Chapter One situates *Thomas McKeller Nude* within the history of Sargent’s interest in ethnic and exotic forms inspired by his trips abroad. I also examine the artist’s most popular genre, portraiture, and establish a connection between it and *Thomas McKeller Nude*. In Chapter Two, the definition of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century masculinity plays an integral role in the understanding of *Thomas McKeller Nude* within a broader socio-historical context. This chapter incorporates a discussion of the
masculinity crisis, the emergence of physical fitness, and a growing acknowledgement of homosexuality, that all took place at the turn of the century. Chapter Three focuses on the issue of public versus private space and the possible relationship between McKeller and Sargent. I analyze the notion of private space, and how *Thomas McKeller Nude* may be viewed as a symbol of Sargent’s indulgences within his Boston studio.

There have been no in-depth analyses of the painting, the sitter, or Sargent’s relationship with him. My thesis will provide the first critical study of this important work.
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INTRODUCTION

John Singer Sargent completed his painting, *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller* (fig. 1), sometime during 1917-1920 amidst his work on three separately commissioned mural projects for the Boston Public Library (1890-1916), the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1916-1925) and the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University (1918-1920). The image has predominantly been classified as a study for the rotunda decorations at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Sometime during his creation of the murals, Sargent came across the sitter, Thomas McKeller, an African-American bellhop, working in a nearby Boston hotel. McKeller has been called “Sargent’s favorite model,” which is evident in the many sketches and drawings of him. The painting, which is now housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is unique because of its striking detail and subject matter. It is also the only image that depicts McKeller provocatively, in an overtly sexual pose. Sargent chose to depict McKeller, a light-skinned black man, fully nude. His arms grip the table behind as he strains to support his weight. His legs are bent at the knee and his left leg dangles awkwardly over a platform, which Sargent frequently used during his time in Boston, and can be seen in several of his drawings and portraits. McKeller’s neck is stretched upward as eyes looks intently beyond the canvas. Adding to the mystery of the work, the background of *Thomas McKeller Nude* is a concoction of browns, blues, and grays. Behind the sitter, the viewer can faintly see a pair of spread wings. Because of these wings, it is believed that Sargent painted *Thomas McKeller Nude* over a previous work—a study for the Prometheus figure from the Boston
Museum of Fine Arts rotunda murals. A sizeable painting at 49 x 33 inches, Sargent completed *Thomas McKeller Nude* and it hung in his studio where it remained until his death in 1925. Not only is the work intriguing for its sexual nature and its possible personal meaning to Sargent, but its connection to the mural projects also remains unclear since there is no direct, obvious correlation between McKeller’s pose in the nude study and any of the figures in the murals. What then was the purpose of the painting? What is its connection to the murals? Is it simply a study, or did Sargent consider it a finished portrait?

In 1916 and nearing the completion of the Boston Public Library murals, Sargent was commissioned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to decorate its recently finished rotunda. Although Sargent completed both the Widener Library and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts murals before he died, he never finished the Boston Public Library project and suspended work on it in 1919. We do not know the reason for this, but we do know that he was working simultaneously on all three murals because of his many charcoal sketches of McKeller in various poses that are clearly related to each project.

It has been determined by several Sargent scholars that McKeller modeled for nearly all of the figures in the rotunda murals. For the decorations, Sargent chose to portray allegories of Truth, Science, Philosophy, and mythological figures such as Phaethon, Apollo, Hercules, Atlas, and Perseus. It is believed that *Thomas McKeller Nude* is a study for the figure of Atlas, although, as previously stated, the wings indicate it may also have been painted over a previous study for Prometheus. However, McKeller’s pose is not identical to any one of the museum rotunda figures and the Atlas assumption is purely speculative due to the absence of confirmation from Sargent. There
are, however, several charcoal studies that are exact matches to the figures of Atlas, Apollo, and Achilles (figs. 2-4). All of these studies obviously depict McKeller because of their facial details. However, the museum’s finished rotunda figures are all stripped of any indication of ethnicity or contain any resemblance of McKeller’s face. If McKeller did serve as a model for many of the figures, Sargent chose to erase any trace of his race or facial characteristics. Which begs the questions: why are there no racial markers in the final decorations?

*Thomas McKeller Nude* is an anomaly amongst the many studies that Sargent completed because it is the only known oil painting of McKeller. Presently, Harvard’s Fogg Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale University Gallery, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts each house drawings representing McKeller. Within the entire body of Sargent’s drawings, there is an overwhelming number that clearly depict Thomas McKeller. The others feature his manservant Nicola D’Inverno, and other models that Sargent employed throughout his career.

Understanding the chronology of Sargent’s life and career is imperative when examining *Thomas McKeller Nude*. In 1874, his family left Italy for his budding art career, at which point, he principally resided in Paris and London before taking up partial residence in Boston in 1890. He immediately began accepting commissions for portraits, and portraiture remained his primary source of income for the majority of his life. From 1884 to 1886, Sargent began to take frequent trips to London and eventually settled there in 1885, a move also necessitated by the scandal surrounding his notorious *Madame X* (1884). London allowed Sargent to cultivate his career and the images for which he is best remembered: paintings representing powerful members of society, dressed in their

Figure 3 (right). John Singer Sargent, *Sketch for Apollo in his Chariot with the Hours-Male Figure*, 1921-1925. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

finest attire, flanked by rich interiors, and lit dramatically.

In 1890, Sargent received the commission for the Boston Public Library murals, which, he believed, could be an important opportunity to showcase his skills outside of portraiture. The library murals also proved to be a springboard for several new endeavors. Sargent made several trips to Morocco, Egypt, and the Middle East for research, which will be discussed in Chapter One. Subsequently, Sargent moved to Boston, and maintained a residence there from 1916 until 1925, although he also kept his studio in London and traveled between the two cities. There, he met Thomas McKeller who eventually became his favorite model and the central focus of this thesis. *Thomas McKeller Nude* is thought to have been created between 1917-1920, but we are unsure of the exact date due to Sargent’s habit of not dating his works.

Sargent perhaps developed a relationship with Thomas McKeller, but its extent remains unknown. Since Sargent received the commission for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1916, and since McKeller posed for almost all of the rotunda figures, it is possible that the two men knew each other for nearly a decade. Sargent never married, nor did he make his sexual orientation public, but it is widely accepted by most scholars that Sargent was a homosexual.\(^4\) We do know that he often admired the male physique more than the female physique, which is evident in his artwork as well as in conversations with his architect and friend, Thomas Fox, who remembered Sargent and McKeller’s first interaction:

On a hotel elevator he [Sargent] noticed that the operator, a young colored man, was possessed of a physique which he conceived would be of artistic value. Most of those who saw the museum murals in process learned that this young man served as the model for practically all the male figures, and indeed for some of the others [the female figures].\(^5\)
Little is known about McKeller, but we do know that he was born in 1890 in Boston and held jobs in the Hotel Vendome and with the U.S. Postal Service. He also had two different Boston residences between 1914 and 1925, but after 1925, little else is known. As stated earlier, McKeller posed for nearly all of the figures in the museum rotunda. From this, it can be estimated that there are approximately fifty preserved sketches of McKeller housed in various museums and galleries.

The provenance of the work places it within four different hands before its entrance into the Boston Museum of Fine Arts’ permanent collection. After Sargent’s death in 1925, most of his estate was put up for auction, although this excluded *Thomas McKeller Nude*, because his benefactors and two sisters, Emily and Francis Sargent, chose not to present the work to the public. This could have been because of the sensitive subject matter of the painting, or simply for tax purposes. *Thomas McKeller Nude* entered the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1986, after being purchased from the Alfred J. Walker Art Gallery in 1986. Before that time, the painting was in the hands of several different private collectors.

Much of the fascination surrounding Sargent’s nude is equally due to the lack of scholarship on *Thomas McKeller Nude*. Although an enormous body of scholarship exists on Sargent, only five scholars—Richard Ormond, David McKibbin, Trevor Fairbrother, Richard Leppert, and John Esten—have published on the painting. All agree that it is a unique work, yet none have discussed the work beyond one to two pages of text. Esten addresses the painting within the context of Sargent’s recurring motif of male nudes, stating that *Thomas McKeller Nude* is “emotionally charged” and an unusual painting by the artist. Leppert, however, inserts *Thomas McKeller Nude* within the
overarching theme of nudity within art history, most specifically, the male nude. Fairbrother gives the most detailed and complete account of the painting by discussing it and Sargent’s depiction of sensuality in many of his works. His discussion incorporates artworks that were produced throughout the course of Sargent’s life, effectively proving that Sargent was continuously interested in the sensual aspects of art. In regards to *Thomas McKeller Nude*, Fairbrother agrees that the museum rotunda murals have been racially sanitized writing that they were, “radically adjusted to fit the murals created for public consumption,” and argues that this is exemplary of Sargent’s compartmentalized life.\textsuperscript{10} Not coincidentally, Fairbrother was also the American Art curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and was responsible for acquiring the painting for the museum’s collection and conducting preliminary research. This thesis builds upon many of Fairbrother and Esten’s initial findings regarding *Thomas McKeller Nude*.\textsuperscript{11} The Boston Public Library murals have also been treated by scholars, most notably Sally M. Promey in *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library*. Promey’s focus, however, is the religious iconography behind the murals, so she does not delve deeply into McKeller’s background or his relationship with Sargent.\textsuperscript{12}

My goal in this thesis is to more fully examine *Thomas McKeller Nude* by situating the image within the context of current scholarship concerning the historical representation of the black male body, nineteenth-century masculinity, and the artist’s studio. Both the representation of the sitter—nude, African-American, and in an overtly sexual position—along with the fact that Sargent displayed the painting in his studio until his death confirm *Thomas McKeller Nude* as a curious image. By addressing the image
within such contexts, and exploring its erotic nature, this thesis adds another important dimension to our current understanding of Sargent. It also illuminates the relationship between Sargent’s academic studies and his finished paintings.

Chapter One situates *Thomas McKeller Nude* within the history of Sargent’s interest in ethnic and exotic forms inspired by his trips abroad. I examine the artist’s most popular genre, portraiture, and establish a connection between it and *Thomas McKeller Nude*. Although the male nude flourished in antiquity and in academic training, the black male nude has played a more taboo role within art history. Sargent’s painting reveals his inspiration from historical references through its juxtaposition of McKeller’s classicizing pose, and the painting’s erotic overtones typically seen in Orientalist depictions of the “Other.” An investigation of these historical references helps to better understand Sargent’s influences and the intriguing pose in *Thomas McKeller Nude*.

In Chapter Two, the definition of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century masculinity plays an integral role in the understanding of *Thomas McKeller Nude* within a broader socio-historical context. This chapter incorporates a discussion of the masculinity crisis that took place at the turn of the century. Supporting evidence about the emergence of physical fitness, and a growing acknowledgement of homosexuality within society, also helps to situate the painting. Sargent was not the only white artist in America representing provocative black male figures and photographer F. Holland Day’s *Nubian Series* (1896-1897) provides a counterpoint. In comparing Sargent’s work to that of Day—both sexualized, but very different depictions of black male bodies—my
argument illuminates the type of images of black men that were being produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapter Three focuses on the issue of public versus private space and the possible relationship between McKeller and Sargent. First, I examine the décor and overall style of Sargent’s studios in Paris and London. I analyze the notion of private space, and how Thomas McKeller Nude may be viewed as a symbol of Sargent’s indulgences within his Boston studio. Sargent and McKeller’s relationship can be hypothesized from the numerous studies of the model as well as the estimated amount of time spent together. Sargent was quoted by Fox to say, “I can conceive of few circumstances wherein I would have to paint a woman naked, but if I did I would not mutilate her for double the money. She is the most beautiful thing there is—except a naked man….”13 My approach to the latent homoeroticism of Thomas McKeller Nude, coupled with the notion of the nineteenth-century artist’s studio, sets the stage for the discussion of Sargent’s compartmentalized life.

To date, there have been no in-depth analyses of Thomas McKeller Nude, the sitter, or Sargent’s relationship with him. My thesis will provide the first critical study of this important painting. Thomas McKeller Nude is a unique and complex image within Sargent’s body of work that greatly contributes to our understanding of twentieth-century art. Also, I introduce Sargent into the discussion of African-American art, establishing a new association with the artist and his work. The scholarship surrounding Sargent typically involves his career as a portraitist. By establishing Thomas McKeller Nude as an important picture within the artist’s oeuvre, this thesis enriches our knowledge of Sargent and the body of scholarship surrounding him to propel the painting to the
forefront of a discussion about nineteenth- and twentieth-century notions of race and masculinity.
CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THOMAS MCKELLER NUDE

Thomas McKeller Nude is considered a study or preliminary work; however, this does not diminish its importance as an anomalous work within Sargent’s oeuvre. It is distinct from the artist’s most popular genre—portraits that emphasized the sitter’s wealth and status within society—and ultimately serves as a bridge between Sargent’s public and private lives. This work was neither sold nor exhibited during the artist’s lifetime; instead, it remained hanging in Sargent’s studio, which, at that time, would have served as a gallery allowing potential patrons to view his work. This chapter investigates precedents for Sargent’s unique painting as well as builds a case for the history and significance of McKeller’s distinct classical pose. It also addresses Sargent’s fascination with McKeller and the black male nude by situating Thomas McKeller Nude within Sargent’s oeuvre and his developed interest in exoticism and ethnic types.

Sargent as a Portraitist

Sargent is perhaps best known for his portraiture. The majority of his commissions came from wealthy patrons who appreciated his uncanny ability to make them appear regal, attractive, and wealthy. By highlighting fashionable attire, rich fabrics, and jewels, Sargent drew attention to the sitter’s beauty and status. Sargent’s public persona was that of a society portraitist—an Andy Warhol of the fin-de-siecle. At the apex of Sargent’s career, he had fully developed his portrait style for elegant images
of affluent members of American and European society. His *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* (1892; fig. 5) and *Wyndham Sisters* (1899; fig. 6) are exceptional works that were especially admired by patrons, and serve as examples of what was expected from Sargent. Each figure is seen in lush attire, surrounded by ornate furnishings, and enveloped in dramatic lighting. These paintings cemented Sargent’s reputation as a portraitist, yet he also created images that were more psychologically and socially complex. I intend to show that these earlier paintings foreshadow *Thomas McKeller Nude* as well as Sargent’s lifelong interest in complexity and depth within his works.

Both *Madame X* (1883-84; fig. 7) and *Isabella Stewart Gardner* (1888; fig. 8) highlight Sargent’s initial implementation of psychological depth and controversial social issues. It is known that Sargent wanted to bring attention to Virginie Gautreau’s status as a “professional beauty” and her interest in social climbing. The image’s risqué showcasing of Gautreau’s shoulder, décolleté, and nearly translucent skin provoked a scandal when the picture was shown at the Paris Salon. Initially, the painting confronts the viewer as a stereotypical Sargent portrait, but further inspection shows that every variable of the work is choreographed and intentional. Sargent hoped to enhance his own position as a society portraitist by painting Gautreau, but he was also fascinated by her as the painting and his many drawings of her indicate. Gautreau, an expatriate from Louisiana, moved to Paris when she was young, and was dedicated to nurturing her social status. She was known for her extreme cosmetic regimen—her lavender-powdered complexion—and her numerous infidelities. Salon goers knew Gautreau was the model even though the portrait was first exhibited as “Portrait of Mme ***.” Sargent later reworked the painting and changed its title to “Madame X.”

Figure 7. John Singer Sargent, *Madame X*, 1883-84. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Isabella Stewart Gardner’s portrait both idolized and idealized the Boston philanthropist. Yet, it, too, was in the end scandalous—so much so that Gardner’s husband refused to display it. Gardner’s plunging neckline and the exaggerated curvature of her figure makes the image seem sexually charged. In addition, although she was forty-seven years old at the time it was painted, Sargent gave her a more youthful complexion. The halo or aura that floats behind her conveys a sense of importance, but the peculiar patterning of the background makes Gardner seem flat, suggesting that she is no more than a mere object hanging on the wall.15 Both paintings, Madame X and Isabella Stewart Gardner, hint at Sargent’s early interest in going beyond the typical society portrait, and show that through such experimentation he often did not find success. He nevertheless continued his interests in exploring emotional and social complexity within his art, which he carried into other non-portrait related works such as genre scenes, mural projects, and Thomas McKeller Nude.

There are several accounts of Sargent growing tired of society portraiture. Anton Kamp, a model in Boston who began working for Sargent in the summer of 1921, writes in his 1973 memoir, John Singer Sargent As I Remember Him, “Thomas Fox came into the studio to remind Mr. Sargent that he had a charcoal portrait appointment on the following morning. This produced another slight grunt. It reminded me...that he was little or no longer interested in portraiture.”16 Kamp’s statement may explain the intention behind Thomas McKeller Nude: Sargent was growing bored of portraiture and began to venture into different subjects.
Following a Tradition: Sargent’s Trips to North Africa and the Middle East

Sargent traveled to Spain and Morocco in 1879. In 1880, he made his first trip to North Africa, Venice and the Netherlands. His Boston Public Library mural commission spurred another trip abroad to in 1890, this time to complete research for the central focus of the murals: the history of Judeo-Christianity. The 1879-1880 voyages suggest that Sargent was continually fascinated by ethnic figures, and his subsequent trips in 1890 and in 1905, when he traveled to Syria and Palestine, show that he was interested in revisiting and expanding upon ethnic and exotic themes.

Receiving the commissions for the library and museum murals was a milestone for Sargent; being asked to paint works outside of portraiture or historical subjects seemingly propelled the artist to delve into subjects that he had not explored before and was an opportunity for him to prove his artistic flexibility. Sargent’s travels inspired him to study exotic figures and ethnic types that would be the groundwork for Thomas McKeller Nude. On his trips overseas, he produced many drawings and figure studies for the murals that would eventually lead to the McKeller study. The new commission, in conjunction with his time abroad, may have cultivated his interest in ethnic and racial figures, and may have eventually helped Sargent to narrow his focus on sexualized and sensual forms. An investigation of some earlier sketches and watercolors will allow us to see the evolution of Sargent’s nude studies. His interest in the exotic nude form and the depiction of ethnic types is evidenced in his repetitive use of Thomas McKeller as a model.

In the nineteenth century, there was a growing vogue for European and American artists to travel to Northern Africa and the Middle East and a fascination with
Orientalism. It quickly became common for artists from Paris, London, and America to travel to the Orient to see the exotic locales and mysterious sites. In Europe, salon audiences were charmed by artists’ colorful depictions of mosques, harem women, open-air markets, and local inhabitants. The strangeness and sensuality of the images made them seem exciting and dangerous. The bourgeoisie’s fascination with the “Other” seemingly allowed salon patrons to separate their views of what was or was not appropriate. For example, while it would not usually have been appropriate for salon viewers to ogle French bathhouse prostitutes, it was perfectly safe for them to gaze upon sultry harem women, such as those in Eugène Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* (1834; fig. 9) or the naked flesh of Oriental odalisques as in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *Turkish Bath* (1862; fig. 10). Likewise, in addition to painting scenes revealing the mystic allure of the religious practices in the Orient (fig. 11), French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme titillated audiences with his *Slave Market* (1866; fig. 12), which depicts a nude slave girl being examined by interested buyers as a crowd looks on. All of these scenes were viewed as romantic, exciting, and enticed patrons to see the Orient for themselves. Sargent, a formally trained artist, was aware of these Orientalist artistic traditions, and had already traveled to Morocco in 1879.

Delacroix, Ingres, and Gérôme traveled to the Orient because of their interest in the exotic themes of the region. During this same period, other artists traveled abroad for religious purposes, but still included Orientalist themes in their work. Henry Ossawa Tanner was an American artist who was born in Pennsylvania, studied art while under the instruction of Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and later settled in Paris. He made several trips to Egypt, Jerusalem, and Morocco, where he drew from

Figure 10. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Turkish Bath*, 1862. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 12. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Slave Market*, 1866. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
life the exotic Orientalism of the region. Unlike Sargent, though, Tanner visited these regions to expand his personal faith and spiritual growth, in addition to conducting research for the primary focus of his works, religious imagery. Although Tanner is best known for his religious scenes, he also produced several depictions of African Americans in rural or domestic spaces. It is evident that he and Sargent differed in their purposes for visiting the Orient, but both were interested in ethnic figures. Sargent was still grappling with his persona as a portraitist, unlike Tanner, who was exclusively focused on moralizing and somber images.

**Sargent’s Work Abroad**

An interesting example of Sargent’s works created while in Africa is his 1891 *Egyptian Girl* (fig. 13), an image tinged with eroticism. Exhibited at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, it was well received by the public. The painting anticipates Sargent’s many nude drawings completed during 1890-1921 and is noteworthy because it is a depiction of a female nude. It differs from the majority of Sargent drawings which are male and far more suggestive in pose and detail. The figure stands with her back to the viewer, yet she twists to highlight her waistline and breast. Her hair entices the viewer as she looks playfully modest and makes no eye contact with the viewer. The *Egyptian Girl’s* prominent nose and tanned skin hint at her ethnicity, and ultimately separate her from typical nudes seen in the salons. Her twisting form and style is comparable to William Adolphe Bouguereau’s *L’aurore* (1881; fig. 14), and the similarity between the paintings is evidence of the fact that Sargent was still influenced
Figure 13. John Singer Sargent, *Egyptian Girl*, 1891. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

Figure 15. Jean Léon-Gérôme, *Snake Charmer*, 1870. The Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA.
by classical figures and poses. Yet, he was also interested in experimenting with Orientalist imagery similar to Gérôme’s *Snake Charmer* (1870; fig. 15). Both the *Snake Charmer* and *Egyptian Girl* accentuate the nakedness and rear view of the central figure. Also, both the young girl and young boy in Sargent and Gérôme’s painting respectively, are sexualized. Such are also traits of *Thomas McKeller Nude*. McKeller’s light skin is complemented by the tranquil look on his face; yes, he has a muscular body, but the roundness of his shoulder, his small waist, and complexion are effeminate, reiterating that the exoticized “Other” is typically gendered feminine.

**Sargent’s Album of Figure Studies and Thomas McKeller Nude**

Sargent worked on the Boston Public Library and Boston Museum of Fine Arts murals from 1890 until his death. During this time, he continuously made figure studies. *Album of Figure Studies* (figs. 16.1-16.29) is a loose-leaf binder consisting of thirty-one charcoal sketches glued to the pages of the binder. After completing the museum rotunda murals, Sargent donated a collotype reproduction to the museum. Following his death in 1925, his estate, under executrix Violet Sargent, donated the *Album of Figure Studies* to Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum where it still resides. In the album, the viewer is able to see that none of the figures are McKeller, but instead Sargent’s Italian manservant, Nicola D’Inverno. He was a shorter, stockier man who accompanied Sargent to Boston, and sat for many of his studies from the 1890s to the early 1900s. He went with Sargent on nearly all of his travels, including his trips to the Orient.

*The Album of Figure Studies* is more sensual and suggestive than *Egyptian Girl*. This could be attributed to Sargent becoming more comfortable with the nude form. Or,
it could be because *Egyptian Girl* is a finished work as opposed to the album, a large collection of sketches that may convey the time and labor spent with the sitter. *Egyptian Girl* is a singular image while the *Album of Figure Studies* consists of pages full of D’Inverno lying down, wrapped in drapery, or standing nude in a full frontal position. In fourteen of the drawings, D’Inverno is draped in cloth which evokes the feeling of a bedroom or boudoir setting, thus making the images more intimate for the viewer. The album also may reiterate Sargent’s interest in ethnic types due to D’Inverno’s Italian race, which ultimately establishes a trend when considering *Egyptian Girl*, his earlier Italian and Moroccan work, and his many images of Thomas McKeller.  

Like *Thomas McKeller Nude*, some of the D’Inverno drawings have the model in a full-frontal position, yet they lack the emotive quality of McKeller’s face. *Kneeling Man with Drapery* (fig. 16) is a classical reclining nude depicting D’Inverno as he rests on a pillow with a confident and idealized form. He has a similarly folded leg like McKeller, and both figures look out and beyond the canvas. McKeller’s pose is unusual, but is comparable to D’Inverno in *Reclining Male Nude with Billowing Drapery* (fig. 17), which is also in the *Album of Figures Studies*. Although D’Inverno is seen lying down, his legs, like McKeller, are bent at the knee with one pulled back. D’Inverno’s pose suggests the immediacy of the drawing as his hand charges the air above him. The billowing drapery wrapped around his body references classical antiquity and Sargent’s academic training. *Thomas McKeller Nude*’s pose is a progression of these same classical ideas of masculine strength and idealized form. The detail of the male body and an ethnic figure as the central focus of the album anticipate *Thomas McKeller Nude*, as they give insight into Sargent’s interests outside of society portraiture and mural projects.
Figure 16. John Singer Sargent, *Kneeling Man with Drapery from Album of Figure Studies*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.

Figure 17. John Singer Sargent, *Reclining Male Nude with Billowing Drapery*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.
Each sketch within the *Album of Figure Studies* illustrates an assertive and muscular male, similar to Thomas McKeller. The album as a whole illuminates Sargent’s evolution as a draftsman and his growing interest in the male nude as a subject.

**Classical References**

Thus far, this chapter has discussed the artistic evolution of *Thomas McKeller Nude*. *Madame X* and *Isabella Stewart Gardner* hint at the artist’s interest in psychological complexity within his portraits. *Egyptian Girl* and *Album of Figure Studies* exemplify Sargent’s growing interest in exotic and ethnic types. These images illuminate the evolution of *Thomas McKeller Nude*, yet they do not supply a direct corollary with the painting. *Thomas McKeller Nude* is unique because Sargent incorporated a classical pose, a nude black man, and faint outstretched wings behind him. Because of the classical pose of the sitter, the painting invites comparisons with the old masters. Caravaggio’s 1602 *Cupid Victorious* (fig. 18) provides an interesting comparison for several reasons. Both figures are undeniably similar, yet Caravaggio’s mythological subject matter differs from Sargent’s use of a black male model.

Having been born and raised in Italy, and receiving formal training as an artist, Sargent was greatly familiar with Caravaggio and the Italian artist’s oeuvre. Sargent’s *Album of Figure Studies* and McKeller’s pose are examples of this classical influence. The incorporation of the draped cloth and the reclining poses both reiterate the classical education of an academician. The similarity of the poses between Cupid and McKeller are the central issue, though. Both figures rest atop a platform with one leg tucked underneath their body while their other leg is awkwardly positioned below them. Their
Figure 18. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Cupid Victorious*, 1602-03. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
torsos twist as they both look beyond the viewer. The figures seem to mirror one another; Cupid’s right leg position echoes McKeller’s left. Cupid wears a playful look, while McKeller looks contemplative, sensual, and serene.

In addition to the comparable pose, both figures have outstretched wings behind them. Cupid’s wings are integral to his mythological narrative, yet Caravaggio’s choice of color and texture make them seem foggy and mysterious, quite similar to McKeller’s. However, McKeller’s wings are fainter, and are likely the product of an unfinished study for Sargent’s *Prometheus* tondo (fig. 19). Not only is *Prometheus* part of the rotunda decorations of the museum, but we also know that McKeller posed for this work (fig. 20). The wings delicately frame McKeller’s nude form and provide a complexity and depth to an otherwise unfinished background. The Prometheus sketch is an additional example of Sargent’s use of McKeller as a model, yet also emphasizes the artist’s tendency to strip away any signs of ethnicity or facial details from the museum figures. Nevertheless, the wings, in conjunction with McKeller’s pose and blatant nudity, make an interesting comparison with the *Cupid Victorious*.

Caravaggio produced countless sensual and highly sexualized depictions of male nudes, forming another parallel between him and Sargent. Caravaggio’s images of nude males in classical poses are tinged with sensuality, similar to *Thomas McKeller Nude* and the *Album of Figure Studies*. The Italian master’s most exemplary works feature young boys with a look of sensual delight, and wildly curly hair that mimics their poses. Sargent, however, seems to focus more on the sensual intimacy and complexity of the sitter, rather than the playfulness that Caravaggio employs.

Figure 20. John Singer Sargent, *Sketch for Prometheus* for Boston Museum Fine Arts Rotunda, 1921. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
A second classical reference for *Thomas McKeller Nude* is Michelangelo’s numerous slave sculptures (1520-23; figs. 21-24). Each slave is imprisoned within their block of stone, and like McKeller, has one leg faintly pulled back as the other slightly bends. The slave figures’ hands reiterate their captive pose as they are in a contorted, writhing position desperate to break free. McKeller is in a similarly captive pose as he holds his hands behind him. The issue of slavery itself is a connection between Michelangelo and Sargent’s work as McKeller, an African American, is in an unsettling and vulnerable position suggesting he has been captured and bound. The attention to detail, seen in both Caravaggio and Michelangelo, attests to their interest and dedication to the nude male form. These same characteristics of detail and interest in the male form can be seen in *Thomas McKeller Nude*. Like Michelangelo’s slaves, Sargent’s work is thought to be unfinished, yet this does not diminish its striking quality and power.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed many of the precursors for *Thomas McKeller Nude*. Sargent was part of the vogue for visiting the Orient, and it infused many of his works that were produced after several trips abroad. His interest in ethnic types seemed to develop throughout his career as indicated by *Egyptian Girl*, and by his use of Nicola D’Inverno as a model. It is likely that Caravaggio and Michelangelo’s classical poses served as references for Sargent, and the imagery in *Thomas McKeller Nude*—his ethnicity, hypersexuality, and classical pose—is an amalgamation of Sargent’s Orientalist and Classical influences. The next two chapters establish the socio-historical and psychological contexts of *Thomas McKeller Nude*. 
Figure 21 (left). Michelangelo, *Young Slave*, 1520-23. Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence.


Figure 23 (left). Michelangelo, *Awakening Slave*, 1520-23. Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence.

Figure 24 (right). Michelangelo, *Bearded Slave*, 1520-23. Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence.
CHAPTER TWO
A SOCIO-HISTORICAL DISCUSSION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY
MASCULINITY AND THOMAS McKELLER NUDE

This chapter argues that gender and race play an influential role in the understanding of Sargent’s painting within the context of early twentieth-century America. While Chapter One discussed how Thomas McKeller Nude was related to Sargent’s Orientalist and Academic interests, this chapter shows that these interests evolved during Sargent’s time in Boston and how they are evident in his studies for the murals and choice of models such as McKeller. Much of the intrigue surrounding Thomas McKeller Nude directly relates to the fact that it is a sexually explicit depiction of a black man painted by a white male portraitist. The painting conflicts with the dominant white male perception of masculinity in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—that masculinity and strength belonged to the aggregate white population and no one else. To better understand the social complexities of the early twentieth century, I first discuss the changing definition of nineteenth-century masculinity that anticipates this explosive time. I also argue that Sargent’s image simultaneously contests and perpetuates contemporary stereotypes of black men by creating a provocative yet beautiful nude work that also casts a light on the notion of the “Other” and its embedded exotic and forbidden qualities.
The Masculinity Crisis

It has been argued by several historians, sociologists, and anthropologists that there was a “masculinity crisis” that took place roughly between the years 1875 to 1910. As stated earlier, Sargent’s work was completed during the years 1917-1920 and poses interesting connections to the masculinity crisis. Caused by economic hardship, the demise of the self-made man, and the rise of immigration and minorities in the workplace, the masculinity crisis of late nineteenth-century America, and its effects on the perception of the male gender, would have been known and experienced by Sargent. The masculinity crisis may have also been the impetus for an emergence of physical fitness within the early twentieth century. White men were developing their interest in building muscle and being physically fit. Sargent lived in Europe at the time, but was making frequent trips to the United States and would have been surrounded by the crisis, most likely in the form of the influx of physical fitness. For instance, Thomas McKeller is black, very muscular, and has a beautiful physique. Within the context of the masculinity crisis and the white male obsession with physical fitness, Thomas McKeller Nude illuminates the possible feelings of white male inferiority caused by the flood of immigrants and blacks in the workplace, and the pressure for social equality.

The masculinity crisis is not fully attributable to one specific event, but a culmination of Western expansion, post-Civil War Reconstruction, a shift in the notion of manly duty, and the explosion of interest in physical fitness. Thomas McKeller Nude was completed during the early twentieth century, yet it was highly influenced by, and a product of, the onset of the modernity and industrialism of the late nineteenth century. Between the years 1875 to 1910, industrialism, conspicuous consumption, and
entrepreneurial capitalism impacted the nature of the nuclear family, changing the role of the man as sole provider and patriarch. From the colonial period to the early nineteenth century, the man’s principle role had been that of duty to family.

Towards the mid-nineteenth century, however, the trend of the “self-made man” became a more permanent fixture. Many men had left their antiquated professions and familial responsibilities for entrepreneurial exploits in the West or in the metropolitan Northeast. Instead of honoring the colonial tradition of duty to one’s family, neighbors, and God, the definition of masculinity focused on self-reliance and competition amongst peers. Economic hardship in an unstable market, the eventual demise of the self-made man and the rise of immigration and minorities in the workplace led to what has been called a “crisis” within the white male community. Men in the nineteenth century were of course not always directly conscious of this crisis, yet it is evident through many sources, such as archival letters and paintings, that they were grappling with their perceived identities and roles within a changing society. One particular scholar, Gail Bederman, cites a letter written in the late nineteenth century from a man proclaiming to his fiancé that he felt that “it is so unmanly and so unnatural to spend a lifetime in the pursuit of nothing. Suitable employment is vital to a man.”

Sargent and his peers would have also experienced the masculinity crisis on a personal and professional level. Sargent’s early career in Europe transpired during a period of time in which artists were seen as bohemian, intellectual, and essentially masculine. However, in the early twentieth century, the shift in the definition of masculinity was also reflected in a new definition of the artist. The public’s mentality regarding the artist in the twentieth century began to evolve. Artists were beginning to be
seen as effeminate, as new ideas of homosexuality were emerging. Author Sarah Burns explains how artists responded to the phenomenon by redesigning their studio interiors:

It became clear to many artists that to regain lost ground they must maneuver to create an appearance of greater distance between themselves, the feminine, and the marketplace. Stripping the studio constituted a sign that the artist rejected materialism...  

Artists were attempting to redefine themselves and their masculinity in a changing market due to the feminization of the artist in the twentieth century. *Thomas McKeller Nude* is depicted with a hyper athletic body, completely nude, and may be a sign of Sargent grappling with his understanding of masculinity. The painting may also be an example of how Sargent used his art to explore his own male identity. However, he used ethnic figures types as his models—D’Inverno, McKeller, and locals during his travels—which is problematic considering the social stereotypes of those ethnicities. I will discuss the stereotypes of those ethnic types within the socio-historical context of American culture and how they relate to the changing definitions of masculinity. I also argue that the masculinity crisis inspired the materialization of physical fitness and the effort to define homosexuality, all of which directly relate to the imagery within *Thomas McKeller Nude*—a muscular black male nude tinged with homoeroticism, thus making it an object of desire.

**The Emergence of Physical Fitness**

*Thomas McKeller Nude* serves as a reaction to, and a product of, the shift in the definition of masculinity. An integral part of the masculinity crisis was the emergence of a stress on physical fitness during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. McKeller’s muscular body illustrates the white male obsession with physical fitness at
the time. He is overtly sexualized, nude, and looks like an athlete. The nineteenth century saw the rise of solitary and organized sports involving rigorous physical activity: boxing, wrestling, body building, basketball and rowing. By the twentieth century, boxing had become one of the most popular (although illegal) sports; it was a sport where male audiences could gather together, drink, wager, cheer, and watch, if not directly participate, in physically aggressive, brutal activity. Male boxing stars were often seen as the epitome of fitness and therefore the epitome of masculinity.32

Thomas Eakins’s *Salutat* (1898; fig. 25) gives an intimate look at the late nineteenth-century interest in boxing and its reflection in art history. Eakins depicts a singular figure greeting the crowd after having won a match. The boxer salutes his fans, reinforcing the achievement of masculine athleticism and of winning. He wears barely any clothing, which subsequently exposes his lean, taught frame.33 Although, the room is filled only with men, the boxer showcases the obsession with the athletic, physically fit male form that was desirable to both men and women. Women desired the strength of a man to reinforce his placement as the figurehead of the household, and men desired to be like these boxing stars—strong, powerful, and cheered on by a crowd.

George Bellows’s art during the early twentieth century also addresses the culture of boxing and masculinity. Author Marianne Doezema alludes to Bellows’s interest in exploring masculinity is her 1992 book, *George Bellows and Urban America*. She writes that Bellows was curious about the central thematic elements of the novels *Red Badge of Courage*, *Moby Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, and their influence on the artist’s determination to earn his manhood.34 All three books focus on a protagonist’s quest for manhood realized in the form of “either a battlefield, aboard a whaling ship, or on a river
Figure 25. Thomas Eakins, *Salutat*, 1898. Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts.
raft.” As an artist, Bellows explored contemporary ideas of masculinity through the representation of boxing.

His 1909 work, *Both Members of This Club* (fig. 26), is, like *Salutat*, another compelling example of the explosion of interest in boxing. However, Bellows chose to incorporate the troubling scenario of an interracial fight in the ring. Although a literal representation of the interracial fights that happened weekly in underground urban sports club, it may also be read as a metaphor for continued black/white male conflicts—the rise of minorities in the workplace and the competition for jobs, pressure for equality, and racial violence such as lynching. *Both Members of This Club* emphasizes the paradoxical situation of black men and white men as equals in the boxing ring, but not anywhere else. In the painting, two men are entangled within the ring as onlookers cheer for the fighters. Stylistically, the two figures’ bodies seem to commingle to form a large mass of black and white tones. A dark void of space surrounds them, which seems to engulf the composition and mask the black fighter. The work depicts a black man and a white man fighting in the same ring and brings attention to events that took place that same year. In 1908, black fighter Jack Johnson won the championship title against the white front-runner Tommy Burns. Johnson eventually became unstoppable, beating every man he encountered. Doezema writes that:

> Many felt that the Burns-Johnson match should have never happened. In the first place, such a pairing, on equal terms, came too close to implying equality between the races; but worse, it might call white supremacy into question should the black man actually defy “natural law” and prevail.  

Boxing was essentially a classist sport, split between the middle and lower classes. The most popular boxing club at the time was Sharkey’s Athletic Club, an underground arena in New York City, and the inspiration for many of Bellows’s works. It differed greatly
Figure 26. George Bellows, *Both Members of This Club*, 1909. Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
from the YMCA, which was the more mainstream venue at the time. Robert Haywood, in “George Bellows’s Stag at Sharkey’s: Boxing Violence, and Male Identity,” acknowledges that the YMCA was more mild-tempered, conservative, and reflected the traditional views of male camaraderie. Sharkey’s, however, “offered the thrill of illicitness and revolt against mainstream society.” It would have been the ideal venue for capturing a scene like the one portrayed in Both Members of This Club because of its reputation as a prizefighting club, unlike the straight-laced YMCA. However, there are no archival records stating that Bellows ever witnessed an interracial fight during that particular year, nor at Sharkey’s.

The most vital aspect of Bellows’s painting is the black figure within the composition. Both Members of This Club and Thomas McKeller Nude contain idealized black bodies, but are placed in very different contexts. Bellows’s work, like Thomas McKeller Nude, highlights black physicality—strong, exotic, and powerful. However, Both Members of This Club is a gritty rendering of urban life that references the social tension of whites and blacks being portrayed as equals, and the overwhelming emotion of a fight. Sargent’s work is a study in which Thomas McKeller is alone and seems more like an object of desire with his black male body on display. He rests atop a platform—quietly, serenely—as the composition seems to become more intimate. McKeller is muscular with a hyper-athletic body, but he is not depicted fighting or engaging in athletic activity; he is beautiful and inviting. Excelling in physical fitness was primarily reserved for white men, so a naked and muscular black man may suggest that masculinity is equally attainable to both black and white races. McKeller also transmits a feeling of intimacy, thus making him attractive to both males and females. Envy amongst white
men was acceptable, but black male masculinity was viewed as untamed, therefore, idealizing McKeller and making him desirable is problematic. So in this way, Chapter One’s discussion of the notion of the “Other” that was seen as sexualized and mysterious, and Thomas McKeller’s placement as an object of desire, lays the groundwork for the investigation of black male stereotypes.

**Racial Stereotypes in the Late Nineteenth Century**

Sargent, a white male artist, created a provocative yet beautiful black male nude referencing the notion of the “Other.” The focal point of Sargent’s painting is McKeller’s dark skin and athletic naked body as he becomes an object of desire. The painting’s embedded exoticism and erotic quality reiterates the notion of the “Other,” previously stated in Chapter One. Sargent also plays into stereotypes of the black, hypersexual, and athletic male, yet aestheticizes the model in such a way that makes him seem acceptable. Ultimately, *Thomas McKeller Nude* simultaneously contests and perpetuates contemporary stereotypes of black men within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society.

*Thomas McKeller Nude* is a complex image. By depicting such a beautiful male physique, Sargent suggests the period’s stress on male physical fitness. In so doing, because McKeller is a black man, Sargent, perhaps unconsciously, also plays up stereotypical assumptions of the physique and prowess of the black male. This aspect is heightened by McKeller’s suggestive, sexual pose. Yet this pose, because of its classical reference, puts another spin on the interpretation of the painting as it reveals a reverence,
aestheticization, and deep appreciation for McKeller and shows a black man in a positive light.

But even this interpretation is too narrow because McKeller’s captive-like pose warrants particular attention, harkening back to the previously discussed bound slaves of Michelangelo. His kneeling position and straining arms suggest submission to point to the history of slavery and post-Civil War notions of African Americans that were still prevalent in the United States in the early twentieth century.

With McKeller’s body on a raised platform, seemingly on display, Sargent plays into the subject of voyeurism by making McKeller an object to devour. This quality perpetuates the notion of the “Other” as it suggests the untamed, racially inferior black man. Photographer F. Holland Day also experimented with the representation of black males at approximately the same time as Sargent. He created his Nubian series (1896-97) that highlighted African Americans dressed in stereotypical African garb. Some sources have claimed that Day used his chauffeur, Alfred Tanneyhill, as the model adding an interesting dimension when considering that McKeller was a bellhop. However, others have disputed this claim; either way, the inclusion of a black male body depicted in such a provocative fashion is useful to the understanding of the social framework of the period.

Day’s photograph Menelek (fig. 27) is an interesting comparison to Thomas McKeller Nude because of the figure’s brazen nudity, which also emphasizes his ethnicity. He sits with his chest pushed out, in a dignified manner, insinuating his ancestral pride. Menelek holds two spears upright in both hands, yet his arms seem to wilt at his sides. The lack of force he uses to hold the staffs, combined with his coyly
Figure 27. Frederick Holland Day, *Menelek*, 1897. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.
turned head, is antithetical to the untamed physicality of the exotic “Other.” Like Sargent, Day was a white artist living in Boston. And like Sargent’s painting, Day’s image is ambiguous as it both contests and perpetuates stereotypes of the black man. *Menelek*, though a formally beautiful pictorialist photograph, relies on ethnographic, primitive tropes. The decorative animal fur, his headdress, and the medallion on his stomach suggestively pointing downward, play into the stereotypes associated with the “Other.” But at the same time, by creating a lovely, pictorial image of a black man and his ancestral heritage, the photograph also contests these stereotypes, and points to escalating pan-African liberation movements initially suggested in the photograph’s title. Menelek was the tenth-century BCE founder and first emperor of Ethiopia, and Menelek II, in 1896, emancipated the nation from Italian rule. The political underpinnings coupled with the overt sexuality of this work are complex, but it can be discerned that the reference to an Ethiopian chief serves as a symbol of African liberation and illuminates this chapter’s discussion of racial stereotypes of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that because Thomas McKeller is alone and highly sexualized, he becomes an object of desire. Not coincidentally, McKeller’s beautiful physique is probably why Sargent liked him as a model. His muscular form would certainly have been appealing to Sargent, and because of this, McKeller becomes an object of desire for Sargent as well as potential viewers. Like Sargent’s painting, *Menelek* contains a black male body on display, and may also be read as an object of desire. In the context of the Orientalist images discussed in Chapter One, *Menelek* is titillating, sensual, and intentional in its references to the primitive “Other.” Day further intensifies the “Other” and black stereotypes by exaggerating the chief’s sexuality and
prowess through his sensual gaze—both expected and acceptable for images of primitivism. In Sargent’s painting, however, Thomas McKeller is a beautiful and sensual black man. The soft tonalities of the brushwork, and the painting’s blatant homoeroticism, cause the work to become more intimate and delicate, becoming less of a primitivizing image. Both works are more similar than different, except Day reinforces primitive stereotypes by employing traditional African accoutrements. Both images are complex and ambiguous through the homoeroticism of the thin, almost feminine physique of Day’s photography and the intimacy of *Thomas McKeller Nude*.

**Homoeroticism within *Thomas McKeller Nude***

The homoerotic undertones and sexually explicit pose of *Thomas McKeller Nude* perpetuate white male anxiety. By 1890, the term homosexuality had been acknowledged, defined, and become more prevalent within culture. Before then, homosexuality was described as “the crime that cannot be named.” Physicians used the term “invert” to designate homosexuals and homosexuality was typically treated as a mental disorder requiring complete isolation. In one generation, a paradigm shift in the notion of same-sex relationships occurred yet homosexuality was still not accepted by society at the time.

Homosexuality was becoming a topic of discussion in the early twentieth century due the fast-moving growth of metropolitan areas. Populations in cities exponentially expanded and for inhabitants there was a possibility of anonymity that was unavailable in the traditional small American town. People with same-sex tendencies were able to
explore their sexual feelings because of the influx of erotica in books, photography and drawings.\textsuperscript{41}

As previously discussed in Chapter One, Sargent was exceptionally interested in the nude male form. The \textit{Album of Figure Studies} and his countless other drawings and watercolors testify to Sargent’s preference for the masculine body. A further example of this is Sargent’s private watercolor study, \textit{Tommies Bathing} (1918, fig. 28). The viewer is confronted by two men lying side by side in a field. Flowers and tall grass encircle them, as their bodies seem to fuse. The jauntiness evoked by the colors and quick brushstrokes of the work elicits an innocence that mirrors the act of nineteenth-century men bathing together. The watercolor becomes problematic, however, when considering previous information presented.

Like \textit{Thomas McKeller Nude}, \textit{Tommies Bathing} is tranquil and serene, but ultimately a homoerotic image. Furthermore, within the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century masculinity, the painting becomes more troubling. The \textit{Tommies}, or privates in the British army, were off-duty in France when Sargent created this image. Military personnel were, and still are, seen as the epitome of masculinity and strength. By depicting them in a bathing scene and the intermingling of their bodies as the central focal point, Sargent elevates the homoerotic tone of the image.\textsuperscript{42} This image, though, may also be linked to the types of homosocial images of the nineteenth century, for example Eakins’s \textit{Swimming Hole} (1884, fig. 29), where men are depicted in an activity not unnatural for the time period.\textsuperscript{43} Men bathing together was a common occurrence, yet there are not as many images of men resting together, like in \textit{Tommies}. Either way,

Figure 29. Thomas Eakins, *The Swimming Hole*, 1884-85. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth.
Tommies Bathing is a further example Sargent’s tendencies toward sensuality and the male nude form previously seen in Album of Figure Studies and Thomas McKeller Nude.

Conclusion

The socio-historical contexts of Thomas McKeller Nude that have been discussed in this chapter build upon the arguments outlined in Chapter One to suggest reasons for why Sargent’s painting is so troubling. What ultimately separates Thomas McKeller Nude from its historical counterparts is that it positions McKeller as an object of desire, which forces the implied white male viewer to confront racial and sexual stereotypes. McKeller’s overt physicality and naked body suggests the social tensions between the white and black communities at the time as blacks usurped white working-class jobs and began organizing for greater political social equality. Changing definitions of nineteenth-century masculinity, the emergence of physical fitness, and homoerotic undertones serve as evidence for why the image is so problematic: white were men exerting their masculinity in physical fitness, and consequently, McKeller combats the expectation that only white men are physically fit with his hyper-athletic, idealized physique, causing him to become a desirable black male.
CHAPTER THREE
SARGENT AND THE ARTIST’S STUDIO

Chapter One has confirmed Thomas McKeller Nude as an important work within Sargent’s oeuvre by stating that it was a product of his many travels to North Africa and the Middle East. The discussion of Orientalism and the notion of the “Other” help to better frame the erotic painting’s homoeroticism and exoticism. Chapter Two builds upon this argument by discussing how the painting both resists and depicts racial stereotypes, and how it may be better understood within the context of changing definitions around the turn of the century. For example, Bellows’s boxing scenes supplied an example of the hyper-athletic and black body within the sports arena. F. Holland Day’s photograph, however, is an example of the stereotypes of primitivism that may have been associated with a black man. The juxtaposition of both images with Sargent’s painting emphasizes Thomas McKeller Nude’s intimacy and somber quality, as it suggests a private moment between the black model and the white artist.

We know that Thomas McKeller Nude hung in Sargent’s studio in the summer of 1921 and remained there until Sargent’s death in 1925. Kamp, a model who began working for Sargent during that same summer, published his memoir, John Singer Sargent As I Remember Him, in 1973. In his memoir, he recalls seeing the painting for the first time:

Above me on one of the walls hung an unframed canvas of a negro figure for which Tom McKellar, a postal employee and part-time contortionist had posed. This man had a superbly developed muscular figure. It was an impressive study in low key broad, simple and forceful, perhaps the outcome of an afternoon when
time permitted the painter to indulge in diversion away from the strain the murals may have imposed time and again.\textsuperscript{45}

In late nineteenth-century America and Europe it was a growing trend for artists to use their studio as a showroom for potential patrons. There were draped curtains, exotic décor, and paintings that boasted their abilities and served as publicity for the artist. Until 1884, Sargent maintained his residence in Paris. In 1885, he moved to London, where he kept two different studios at Fulham Road and Tite Street, of which, the latter, he kept until he died in 1925. From photographic evidence that will be discussed in detail later, it is evident that both his Paris and London studios embodied a cabinet of curiosity-like quality. Starting in 1916, however, Sargent began travelling back and forth from London to his new Boston residence, where he was completing the murals for the public library, the museum rotunda, and Harvard library.

Building on the scholarship about the nineteenth-century artist’s studio, this chapter reconstructs the fundamental differences between Sargent’s Boston and London residences to argue that Sargent’s London studio was an example of the public expectations of the artist, while his Boston workspace and \textit{Thomas McKeller Nude} were symbols of isolation and retreat for the artist. Ultimately this chapter makes conclusions regarding the notion public and private spaces within the context of \textit{Thomas McKeller Nude}. This chapter also incorporates the opinions of Sargent’s contemporaries and gives a deeper understanding of Sargent’s compartmentalized life and his relationship with McKeller during the time he completed \textit{Thomas McKeller Nude}. 
The Artist’s Studio and William Merritt Chase

One American artist in particular, William Merritt Chase, became famous for his New York City studio on Tenth Street, and provides evidence for what Sargent’s studios in Paris and London may have looked like. In the late nineteenth century, it was common practice for European and American artists to decorate their studios in a way that would invite potential patrons and buyers to feel enchanted once they entered the artist’s space. In 1879, the New York Art Journal gave a detailed account of Chase’s studio and the effect it had on the viewer. The article begins by stating that “the room is large and lofty, the north wall being almost entirely taken up by the indispensible window, the lower of which is obscured by curtains and hangings.”

A number of Japanese umbrellas are variously disposed here, and underneath stands a table littered with old books, quaint jars, Egyptian pots, paintbrushes, strange little wood-carvings of saints, Virgins, and crucifixes, and many other articles too varied to specify. The use of Japanese umbrellas, Egyptian pots, and religious insignia refers to the Oriental influence on artists previously discussed in Chapter One. It harkens back to the early modern and modern interests in Chinoiserie, Japonisme, and the nineteenth-century interest in Orientalism. The objects and souvenirs within the studio marked the artist as a worldly gentleman or woman, but also contributed to the sense of conspicuous consumption within the artist’s studio.

The Parisian studio functioned similarly to Chase’s American studio. It, too, was a place of consumption, but the typical Parisian artist’s studio differed from the American studio in that, there was a higher standard for artists living in the city. John Milner writes that:
A studio in Paris, in the capital of art, was the ambition and achievement of thousands... In the corner [of the studio] paintings are stacked against the wall. Outside is the bustle of the street, and the milling public boulevard. One is stillness, creativity and isolation; the other is activity, business, and competition. Paris proffered both in abundance.  

Sargent lived in Paris from 1874-1886 and artists at this time, including Sargent, marketed themselves to be more appealing to patrons and enlivened their studios as a fantasy world. It was the realization that customers were buying the public persona of the artist as well as his or her art. Burns writes that, “Luxuriously embellished, [artists’] studios, like department store displays, exerted irresistible inducements to dream of what was distant and past... and enhancing the notion of sanctuary from the humdrum world outside.” For inspiration, they began to look back at the cabinets of curiosities first seen in the sixteenth century and what was later referred to as the German kunstkammern (fig. 30), which held artworks, objects, and anything that held artistic value for its owner. The cabinets would be the place settings for precious shells, exotic coins, and also reiterated this notion of a fantasy and dream-like world. They also can be read as a precursor to the commoditization of objects. The trinkets in kunstkammern were the personal objects of their owner, but the emergence of Orientalism and the Industrial Revolution could mass produce these exotic charms and make them accessible to a majority of the general public.

**Sargent’s Paris Studio**

The influence of the sixteenth-century cabinets of curiosity, coupled with the influence of pilgrimages to the Orient discussed in Chapter One, inspired artists to fill their studios with rugs and ceramics from the East that would entice their patrons. Living
Figure 30. Samuel Quiccheberg, *Kunstkammer*, 1565. Location Unknown.
in Paris and in London during the majority of his early adulthood, Sargent also adhered to this doctrine. An 1884 photograph of Sargent’s Paris studio (figs. 31-32), reveals the artist standing next to his painting *Madame X*. Behind him are floor to ceiling curtains, Oriental rugs, and a shelf containing a row of posed figurines above the walkway designed to charm his patrons. These objects project the image of a worldly man with access to exotic locales. Sargent stands dressed in the standard artist uniform of dark jacket and pants, with well manicured beard and mustache. Sargent’s sartorial style and his studio’s accoutrements serve to enhance the experience of his artist’s studio.

The studio thus functioned as a critical site for the artists. It was a place that constructed the artist’s persona and advertised his wares. Milner writes that:

> He [the artist] was presenting himself as a painter with whom a commission could be safely lodged, an honorable, established, and fashionable man of business whose merchandise would reliably serve its purpose as both portrait and status symbol…”

Like the immense department stores that showcased goods to stir consumer desire, so, too, did artists display themselves as commodities. They presented themselves according to societal expectations: worldly, refined, and unique. Author Nicolai Cikovsky notes in an article that:

> For Chase and his generation, who pioneered this type of studio in this country, it was neither affection nor a mindless expression of fashion, but a willful act of faith;... in ways both practical and symbolic, to the conduct of their calling as artists as they conceived it.""}

They were manufacturing their personas in order to be desirable to their typical patron, the woman. Burns concludes in her argument that Oriental and *kunstkammern*-inspired studios were designed specifically with women patrons in mind, as seen in Chase’s 1880 work, *In the Studio* (fig. 33). By inserting the woman into the equation, the artist’s studio
Figure 31. Documentary Photograph of John Singer Sargent, taken in his Paris studio, 1884. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

Figure 32. Documentary Photograph of John Singer Sargent, taken in his Paris studio, 1884. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.
Figure 33. William Merritt Chase, *In the Studio*, 1882. Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn.
becomes a highly sexualized space that was “different in kind but not in degree from the show window of a department store.”\textsuperscript{53} She goes onto say that the studio was essentially a place for the consumption of the female, and that the female patrons become the objects themselves.\textsuperscript{54} The photograph of Sargent standing in his Paris studio with \textit{Madame X} hanging next to him is symptomatic of this space for female consumption.

\textbf{Sargent’s London Studio}

Sargent moved to London in 1885 and took up residence on Fulham Road, and then on Tite Street in Chelsea (fig. 34). As stated earlier, Sargent maintained the Tite Street studio until his death in 1925. Similar to the construction of his Paris studio, Sargent again crafted an environment for his portrait-seeking patrons. Photographs taken in 1920 (figs. 35–36) show large Oriental partitions adorned with fabrics and jewels, while Asian rugs cover the floor with ornate seating resting on top of them. A decorative chair rests in the corner and is flanked by large wall hangings framing the natural light that pours into the workspace. Sargent’s intent for this studio space reflects the same concept of his Paris studio, the examples of Chase’s studio, and the tradition of the \textit{kunstkammern}.

\textbf{The Boston Studio}

From photographic evidence, Sargent’s London and Paris studios remained examples of the German \textit{kunstkammern}, yet his Boston studio was not. Letters between Sargent and Fox confirm that Sargent spent the majority of the last decade of his life in Boston, but he did not orchestrate his studio the same way as he had his Paris or London
Figure 34. Documentary Photograph of Sargent’s London Studio, 1920. Ormond Family Collection.

Figure 35 (left). Documentary Photograph of Sargent’s London Studio, view 2, 1920. Ormond Family Collection.

Figure 36 (right). Documentary Photograph of Sargent’s London Studio, view 3, 1920. Ormond Family Collection.
workspaces. Kamp describes the Columbus Avenue studio in Boston, which was approximately one mile from the museum, as rather workmanlike:

The main studio workshop was anything but what my imagination had led me to believe, plain and simple it was a cluttered loft building room, having much the appearance of a storage area where packing cases, large canvases, small tables, one well smeared with dry color, a chair or two as well as a medium-size easel, everything more or less in disorder.

It is possible that Sargent simply chose not to fully move into his Boston apartment, but when considering the arguments made in Chapters One and Two, a different theory may arise. Chapter One sets the framework for this discussion, in that, it attests to a change in Sargent’s interests in ethnic figures, sparked by the new subject matter of his mural commissions. I feel that his London studio was a symbol of his public persona while his Boston residence, in conjunction with his Thomas McKeller Nude, may be a symbol of his personal indulgences. Kamp recalls the studio as being disordered and messy, which suggests that his Boston studio was a place for him to freely be innovative and experimental. Little is known about the Boston workspace, further implying its provisional quality.

Sargent’s work produced later in his life indicates that he was interested in issues of sexuality and race; yet, he never spoke or wrote about such matters. In fact, he was very intentional about his privacy. This is evident in a letter written in response to a biographer’s request for more information from the artist. Sargent responded by stating that:

As to biographical details there are none of the least interest to the public. I have left no diary, and am vague about dates marking events in my artistic career. It strikes me, and may strike you, that I am advocating a posthumous volume! That indeed would suit me “down to the ground.”

Yours Sincerely, John S. Sargent.
This letter from Sargent acknowledges the desire of the public to understand more about him, and it serves as an integral piece of the remaining argument of this chapter: that Sargent purposefully created a divide between his personal and private endeavors. As previously stated, this chapter attempts to position *Thomas McKeller Nude*, a black male nude, within the landscape of Sargent’s private life.

It is widely accepted that Sargent produced far more male nude studies than he did female. And, he definitely held a greater passion for the male form, a claim that can be supported by accounts by Fox and Sargent’s other colleagues. Sargent and McKeller’s first interaction was discussed earlier. I would like to reference that important meeting again, because it is a critical piece of evidence regarding Sargent’s and McKeller’s relationship, as well as Sargent’s overall interest in the male form: Fox recalls the artist commenting on a male bellhop’s (presumably McKeller’s) body. He states that:

> On a hotel elevator he [Sargent] noticed that the operator, a young colored man, was possessed of a physique which he conceived would be of artistic value. Most of those who saw the Museum murals in process learned that this young man served as the model for practically all the male figures, and indeed for some of the others [female figures].

Fox’s statement reflects that of several other contemporaries of Sargent. Fellow artists and patrons commented on the artist’s disinterest in women and that he “was completely frigid as regards to women,” indicating his preference for men over women. Scholars have always been hesitant to address Sargent’s sexuality due to lack of evidence, which was seemingly purposeful on Sargent’s behalf. Kamp also commented on Sargent’s intent and passion for the male form by stating that:

> About forty-five minutes after arriving at the studio I was on top of the elevated platform, relaxed, awaiting his orders. Whatever I did at the moment brought forth a request to hold a minute. Then, drawing a chair toward me, he [Sargent] sat down gazing at me intently. “Please remain as you are while I get some
paper” was his only remark. He then drew two figure studies on a single sheet, make them, I suspected, in the same spirit which some months brought forth the muscular study of Tom McKeller. The drawing had no special purpose in mind concerning the mural decorations. Simply the outcome of a moment when the routine imposed upon Mr. Sargent by the murals could be sidestepped, indulging in what might be assessed as an inspirational diversion.  

There are several important issues about Kamp’s statement. First, his mention of *Thomas McKeller Nude* indicates once again that the painting remained in Sargent’s studio. Second, the statement gives insight into Sargent’s desire to spontaneously capture the natural male form, evident also in the previously discussed *Album of Figure Studies*. Lastly, Kamp’s statement is an example of how the artist spent his idle time making indulgent drawings unrelated to his greater bodies of work. Fairbrother has written that, “To know that the male nude symbolized something of great consequence in Sargent’s life is important and necessary for building an honest and respectful understanding of his public stance.”  

Kamp’s statement, along with that of Fairbrother’s, reiterates that Sargent was intentional about keeping his private life inconspicuous. More importantly, though, their statements provide an interesting dimension to the discussion of *Thomas McKeller Nude*. We know that the painting was a study for a larger project, but it is also evidence of how much time Sargent spent with the nude male form. Also, the fact that the work hung in Sargent’s studio gives Fairbrother’s statement greater significance—that the male nude was important to Sargent, so much so that he kept the image close to him in an intimate space.  

In regard to Sargent’s time spent with the nude male form, it is also important to consider the time he and McKeller spent together, and its connection to *Thomas McKeller Nude*. One of the rotunda mural sketches, Sargent’s *Sketch for Cartouche over Music-Youth Seated* (1917-1920; fig. 37), obviously depicts McKeller, although it does not
contain the same feeling of intimacy like *Thomas McKeller Nude*. In the sketch, the figure is elegantly seated and Sargent has employed the same acute attention to the detail of the male body. The work is also clearly related to the rotunda murals because of the corresponding pose between the sketch and the finished product. In contrast, *Thomas McKeller Nude* does not possess the same relationship with any of the rotunda figures, even though the Boston Museum of Fine Arts claims that Sargent’s *Sketch for Cartouche over Astronomy-Youth* (1917-1921; fig. 38) is linked to *Thomas McKeller Nude*, yet I do a direct relationship.63 The legs are somewhat akin, yet I would argue there are more similarities found in the Caravaggio or Michelangelo works. Nevertheless, both sketches are additional evidence of the time Sargent and McKeller spent together, beginning in 1916, and continuing until Sargent’s death in 1925. Their relationship is further illustrated in the sheer volume of sketches featuring McKeller, which, approximately fifty of them, suggest the many instances that Sargent and McKeller met in the artist’s Boston studio for hours at a time. Sargent died while in London, but there is a record of McKeller visiting Fox in Boston to send his condolences. He writes that, “On the day of Mr. Sargent’s death the young man [McKeller] came to my office. I was not there. The next morning he came again saying, “I just came to pay my respects, sir.” We shook hands and he went quietly away.”64 It simply could have been a professional courtesy, which is something that will never be definitively known, but I feel McKeller’s actions further illuminate *Thomas McKeller Nude* as a special work.

Only assumptions can be made about Sargent’s private life. By reviewing accounts of people close to him, however, these accounts are direct and contemporary sources of Sargent’s demeanor and public persona. The art community within America
was overseen by white men and by placing a black male nude as the central subject—not as a slave or workman but as an artful figure depicting beauty—confronts what was expected of a public artist such as Sargent. *Thomas McKeller Nude*, as previously mentioned, was never exhibited during Sargent’s lifetime, and must therefore be considered within the walls of the artist’s studio. Upon Sargent’s death, his sisters gained control of his estate and immediately put many of his paintings up for auction. However, *Thomas McKeller Nude* remained in their private collection. This may have been his sisters attempting to protect Sargent’s reputation, although it may also have been because of tax purposes. Richard Hale, the family’s estate attorney, advised them against releasing Sargent’s works too closely together, and that it would be more fiscally responsible to hold onto certain paintings or drawings for tax advantages. Nevertheless, all the evidence presented in this chapter suggests *Thomas McKeller Nude* was a personal, private work, symbolic of Sargent’s interests in the later years of his life.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter One, Sargent’s compartmentalized life was first mentioned. The collection of charcoal drawings, the *Album of Figure Studies*, and *Thomas McKeller Nude* all aid in the discussion that Sargent was intentional in the separation of his personal and private lives. His London studio was a venue of consumption and a symbol of his public lives. His Boston studio, however, was messy, in disarray, and was a place simply for artistic creation. It was a symbol of a new beginning when he received the mural commission: chance to investigate new ideas, and to explore more innovative subject matter. The analysis of the personal accounts of Sargent’s public and private
 personas from his contemporaries, coupled with the discussion of the embedded homoeroticism of *Thomas McKeller Nude*, help us to grasp a better understanding of Sargent and his compartmentalized life. *Thomas McKeller Nude* is not only a depiction of a black male nude, but also an example of Sargent’s fascination with, and dedication to, an active pursuit of challenging subject matter that enriches our perception of the type of artist he was, and how he may have viewed himself.
CONCLUSION

In situating Sargent’s *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller* within the context of current scholarship concerning the historical representation of the black male body, nineteenth-century masculinity, and the artist’s studio, I have taken the relatively unknown painting, and have shown that it is a significant work of art within the artist’s oeuvre. The connections I have made between Sargent and African-American art introduce new ideas within art history. I addressed new themes in Sargent’s work outside of the context of portraiture—issues of gender and race—which go beyond the usual discourse on Sargent as a sensualist, portraitist, and nineteenth-century artist. This thesis has been able to establish a history of the painting, place it within a socio-historical context, and then connect the painting to the uniqueness of Sargent to demonstrate that *Thomas McKeller Nude* enriches our knowledge of Sargent’s enigmatic life.

Chapter One confirmed *Thomas McKeller Nude* as a direct product of Sargent’s many travels to North Africa and the Middle East. I argued that Orientalism, using Delacroix and Ingres’s works as examples, helps to situate the painting’s hypersexual and exotic qualities. Chapter Two examined *Thomas McKeller Nude* within a socio-historical context to demonstrate that Sargent’s painting is a complex and ambiguous image. Unique in Sargent’s oeuvre, and curious in the larger history of American art, it marks both Sargent’s interest in the male body, and may be read as a larger metaphor for the role of the black male in early twentieth-century society. Chapter Three was positioned around the fact that Sargent displayed *Thomas McKeller Nude* in his studio until his
I feel it can be discerned that Sargent’s interest in his privacy evolved throughout the course of his life, possibly protecting public knowledge of his sexuality, and that his final studio in Boston is evidence of this culmination.

After having summarized my general arguments in this thesis, I would like to address questions first posed in the Introduction: What was the purpose of the painting? Was it simply a study, or did Sargent consider it a finished portrait? It has been claimed to be a study for the rotunda murals, yet, when examining the finished product, *Thomas McKeller Nude* has little relation to the murals. His pose does not specifically match any figure, and any trace of McKeller’s race or physical traits has been removed. What does this aestheticization suggest considering Sargent’s continuous interest in ethnic figures? I would argue that it further supports my conclusions regarding *Thomas McKeller Nude* and Sargent: that the painting displays his continued affinity for ethnic types, that it illustrates their personal relationship as the painting is the culmination of years spent together, and finally, that the sanitization of the rotunda figures is proof that Sargent compartmentalized his life and was intentional about his privacy. I would now like to first look back at one of Kamp’s statement in Chapter Three:

> The drawing had no special purpose in mind concerning the mural decorations. Simply the outcome of a moment when the routine imposed upon Mr. Sargent by the murals could be sidestepped, indulging in what might be assessed as an inspirational diversion.

Kamp’s use of the word “diversion” implies freedom, leisure activity, and the opportunity to relax from the arduous work on the mural commissions. So, is this painting more than an afternoon indulgence? Yes, I believe that it is. Sargent is best remembered for his elegant portraiture of the upper-class, and his depiction of Thomas McKeller is vastly different from those images. The painting is the culmination of the immense number of
drawings of McKeller that Sargent produced, and the homoeroticism of *Thomas McKeller Nude* reiterates Sargent’s affinity for the depiction of male nudes over female. Also, that it is an oil painting with intricate detail reflects the amount of time Sargent spent with, and labored over, the work. This attention to detail also makes *Thomas McKeller Nude* seem more than just an indulgence, as it may allude to the amount of time Sargent and McKeller spent together throughout their relationship.

But if the painting is more than an indulgence, I return to my original question: is it simply a study? Essentially, the answer is both yes and no. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where *Thomas McKeller Nude* is housed, classifies the painting as a study. I agree, but would also say that it is very difficult to assign it a specific label. Sargent depicted McKeller as an idealized male nude, similar to that of any academic nude, but the model’s athletic black body posed in such an awkward and loaded way suggests the social tensions of the time period. The painting is associated with the Boston rotunda murals, yet Sargent erased all racial markers from the final product. *Thomas McKeller Nude* is not a public painting, but it may be considered a portrait, in that, we are able first, to know or to identify the sitter, and second, to make arguments surrounding the painting on many different levels. However, simply being able to identify the sitter does not diminish the fact that there is no concrete evidence of the extent of Sargent and McKeller’s relationship. The utter difficulty of classifying *Thomas McKeller Nude* is ultimately what makes the painting so fascinating. The painting causes viewers to question what was previously known about Sargent, and adds another dimension to our understanding of his art.
NOTES

1 Sargent did not title the painting, but the Boston Museum of Fine Arts has given it the name *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller*. Author Kay Bourne has referred to the work as *Thomas E. McKeller Nude Study* in her article “Sargent Nude Portrait Raises Questions.” Charles Merrill Mount referred to the work as a *Negro Study*. For the purposes of brevity, it will be referred in this thesis as *Thomas McKeller Nude*.

2 Thomas Fox, *Collections and Recollections*, Folder 27, Sargent Collection, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA.


4 Sargent scholars have determined that he was most likely a homosexual, although it can not be fully determined because of the lack of documentation from Sargent himself. See Trevor Fairbrother, *John Singer Sargent: The Sensualist* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 155.

5 Fox, *Collections and Recollections*.


7 The Sargent sisters were advised by attorney Richard Hale to be selective with the works that they auctioned, and to do so over several years. Hale stated that they could take advantage of tax benefits by only releasing a few documents or paintings at a time.


9 Esten, 11.


11 Fairbrother was the first scholar to investigate Sargent’s compartmentalized life, yet I provide the first in-depth study of *Thomas McKeller Nude*.


13 Fox, *Collections and Recollections*.


15 Prettejohn, 55.


Sargent is not the first late nineteenth-century artist to represent a black man. American and European artists during this period grappled with various portrayals of racial ideologies, especially within the contexts of colonialism and debates over slavery. Also, in the eighteenth century, during the democratization of America, John Singleton Copley created *Watson and the Shark* (1778), which portrays the merchant Brook Watson losing his leg in a shark attack. All of the men aboard the boat reach out to Watson, yet in center of the boat, next to the man piercing the shark is a black deckhand. He commands the central focal point of the image as he is at the apex of the pyramidal composition. He stands level with the man attempting to divert the shark’s attention. This begs the question, why would Copley make the single black man the central viewpoint of the work when it is a memorial of Watson’s near fatality? Many scholars have found answers by examining Watson’s profession, as well as Copley’s allegiance to Britain and his views on slavery. For example, see Albert Boime, *Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990). Another troubling image by Copley is his 1777 *Head of a Negro*. While it is a calm and seemingly demure representation of a man, it was painted during the height of slavery in America. Théodore Géricault’s 1818 *Raft of the Medusa* is also an interesting work when considering the imagery of a black man. A clear denouncement of French colonialist policy, this enormous painting depicts the artist’s interpretation of the wreck of the *Medusa* ship off the coast of Senegal, a devastating and widely publicized political scandal in France, and the survivors piled atop one of the too few lifeboats. While dead white bodies are piled on the raft and hang over its sides into the water, a very much alive black man, again, at the apex of the composition, waves the white flag of rescue at a distant ship on the horizon. The black man appears to symbolize a sense of hope or redemption in the midst of violent, corrupt state policies and actions in French colonies. Numerous other artists throughout the century—Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, William Sidney Mount — also created interesting images of blacks that have often been read as symbolic statements against the position and treatment of African Americans. *Thomas McKeller Nude* may be considered in the context of these historical images of Africans and African Americans, but unlike most of these earlier pictures, it was not made public and cannot be seen as such public statement of Sargent’s views. Nevertheless, the painting clearly was important to Sargent. He must have known of some of these prior images, and racial issues were certainly on the public stage in America when he returned to Boston to work on the mural projects. Indeed, *Thomas McKeller* was created during the founding of the NAACP, the beginnings of the African-American labor union movement, and the Harlem Renaissance, a flourishing of African-American talent that occurred in most urban cities across the country, including Boston. For more on Copley and Géricault’s images see Boime. For more on African-American history and art following World War I in America see Sharon Patton, *African-American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).


Patton, 98-103.

The album, which was constructed by Sargent, was presented in its entirety to the Fogg Art Museum in 1937 by his sister Violet. Please see Illustrations section in back matter of text for the *Album of Figure Studies* images, aside from *Kneeling Man with Drapery*.

23 Ibid.


25 For a more detailed account of Michelangelo’s slaves, please see Howard Hibbard, Michelangelo (Boulder: Westview Press, 1974), 169-177.


27 Author Gail Bederman writes that, “By 1890 a number of social, economic, and cultural changes were converging to make the ongoing gender process especially active for the American middle class. These factors were influencing middle-class views of men’s bodies, men’s identities, and men’s access to power” (58).

28 Ibid., 168.

29 Ibid.


31 Fairbrother also addresses the issue of body building and physical fitness in The Sensualist. However, he discusses it within the context of Sargent’s Album of Figure Studies, stating that the body of each figure in the album is similar to that of “strongmen” in the late nineteenth century. For more information, please see John Singer Sargent: The Sensualist, 109.


33 The boxer is in on display in front of a room of men suggesting a homosocial network that was typical in many of Eakins’s piece. For more information, please see Darrel Sewell et al. Thomas Eakins, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Also see Martin Berger, Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000).

34 Doezema, 76.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 105.


38 Doezema, 105.


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42 For a more detailed account of Sargent’s watercolors produced on his trip abroad see Carl Little, John Singer Sargent, and Arnold Skolnick, *The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999), 146.

43 See Berger, 86-92.

44 To date, I have not found any more documents describing or depicting Sargent’s Boston studio.

45 Kamp. Also, it is important to note that Boston City Archives have a record of McKeller being a postal employee, although I have found no corresponding documents of Kamp’s claim about him being a contortionist.


47 Ibid.


49 Burns, 217.

50 Kunstkammern were seen as “chambers for artistic objects and naturalia” and are discussed in-depth in Susan Pearce’s *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London: Routledge, 1994), 177-182.

51 Milner, 45.

52 Cikovsky, 6.

53 Burns, 236.

54 Ibid., 234.

55 Letters from Sargent to acquaintances in London establish that he was in Boston more often than he was in London, although he only leased his Boston studio and never bought it.

56 Kamp.

57 As stated earlier, I have not found any additional documentation of his Boston studio. However, the studio was in the Pope Building on Columbus Avenue, which still stands today. Also, it can be assumed that Sargent selected this particular studio space because of its location, which was directly in front of the train tracks. Many artists of this time period would choose studios in close proximity to mass transit since this meant that there would be no future construction that would block the natural light from entering their workspace.

58 Fox, *Collections and Recollections*.

59 Ibid.

In a recent exhibition, the Sketch for Cartouche over Astronomy was exhibited next to Thomas McKeller Nude as an indicator of what the painting is based on. The exhibition, John Singer Sargent and Mural Decorations, that contains the two works, is currently outlined on the museum's website.

Fox, Collections and Recollections.

Letter from R. Hale to Emily Sargent, Sargent Collection, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA.

Kamp.
ILLUSTRATIONS

COMPLETE ALBUM OF FIGURE STUDIES


Figure 16.9 (left). John Singer Sargent, *Standing Male Nude with Arms Akimbo*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.

Figure 16.10 (right). John Singer Sargent, *Standing Male Nude Seen from Behind*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.


Figure 15.13 (right). John Singer Sargent, *Crescendo Fusciardi*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.

Figure 16.14. John Singer Sargent, *Study for a Bible Illustration (Two Standing Males)*, 1898. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.
Figure 16.15 (left). John Singer Sargent, *Two Reclining Male Nudes*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.

Figure 16.16 (right). John Singer Sargent, *Study for a Bible Illustration (Two Reclining Draped Males)*, 1898. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.

Figure 16.17a. John Singer Sargent, *Study for Bible Illustration (‘David in the Camp of the Philistines’)*, 1898. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.
Figure 16.17b. John Singer Sargent, *Study for a Bible Illustration (Reclining Draped Male with Bolster)*, 1898. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.


Figure 15.23 (right). John Singer Sargent, *Standing Male Nude, Viewed from Below*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.

Figure 16.24 (left). John Singer Sargent, *Male Nude Seen from Behind, Right Arm Raised over Head*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.

Figure 16.25 (right). John Singer Sargent, *Seated Male Nude with Hands behind Head*, 1890-1915. Fogg Art Museum, Boston.


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