

# PETER MILTON



*Visions and Revisions*

## Notes on: *Visions and Revisions*

Like most of my prints, the idea for *Visions and Revisions* started with a photograph, which, with a great deal of improvisation, I then recreated as a drawing. In this case, the photograph was of John Singer Sargent in 1903, working on the mother-and-daughter portrait of Gretchen and Rachel Fiske Warren, which he painted in the Gothic Room of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Mansion in Boston. Elaborating on the scene, I expanded the space and added figures from *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, which Sargent painted in 1884.

But I had trouble finding a solid center with the Sargent Material: and then, quite unexpectedly, Marcel Proust came into it. He came by way of a show of Proustiana, to which I was invited, at the National Theater in London. What Proust brought with him was a sudden focus and seriousness and the themes of memory and time. Past, present, and future started bouncing around: the past which Proust was reinventing in

*Remembrance of Things Past* was in large part the present of Sargent; the present of Proust, in which he was actually writing, moved into the time of Art Deco and the Jazz Age. That allowed me to expand the temporal scale of the print, and to include the much freer, quite contemporary, slap-dash of the twenties, and it brought welcome and necessary relief to the formality of Sargent's *belle époque*.

Better still, Proust's deep interest in the nature of observation pointed out why I had been so attracted in the first place to that image of Sargent in the process of painting the Fiske Warrens. The idea of one artist depicting another artist depicting a pair of sitters, was too good to pass up. And it led to the tantalizing concept of there being an observer – you – observing an artist – me – observing another artist observing his sitters and the painting for which they are sitting and which they will soon be observing for themselves.

To emphasize this theme of observation, a large face peers in from the back of the image. As we look in, the face looks back. My original thought when I added an image on such a dominating and surreal scale was that it would be the icon for the monumentality of Proust's childhood memories. But, in the course of the two years I worked on the print, the face became my nemesis – and I, its. It was out, it was in, it was out. A truce was finally effected by way of veils, lights and a diminutive Proust, who both gave the face its mnemonic rationale and emphasized a suggestion that the image was kind of artist's doll's house. But I hope that the face now gives an even stronger hint that the print is perhaps a mirror. That possibility is further suggested by the transparent figure of Proust in front at the bottom looking back out. He carries a hat and cane, which I took from a late photograph of his visit to an exhibition of Vermeer, who was his favorite artist – and one of Sargent's and of mine.

*Visions and Revisions*, Etching and Engraving, 2001, 25" x 40", Ed. 140.

### A Few of the Details (Loosely from left to right)

- A pear. Satie's *Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear* was composed in 1903, the year both of the Fiske Warren painting and of the Ravel *Pavane* of my last print.

- Vermeer and his model, who has received a letter...from where?
- Paul Helleu, the artist, and friend of both Sargent and Proust.
- Proust's bed and piles of notebooks.
- Portraits from Sargent: Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson.
- Sargent's *El Jaleo*, his early triumphal splash into the Paris *salon*, and his *Madam X*, a scandal leading to his exit.
- Charles Haas, model for Proust's Swann.
- *Leda and the Swan*, a painting which hung in Helleu's studio.
- Marie de Bernardsky, Proust's first love.
- The young Proust, actually an actor in the surrealist, Raoul Ruiz's recent film, *Time Regained*.
- Sargent's young Edith Sitwell (with family.) Edith Sitwell's collaboration with William Walton for *Façade* brought me to Art Deco illustration, just below, by the French fashion illustrator, George Barbier...
- Which led to the dancers floating anachronistically, insouciantly out into the starched and ruffled world of *la belle époque*.
- A clock with ambiguous times. If this is a mirror it is 7:30 – in Proust's memory, 7p.m. is the perpetual time in Combray. If this is not a mirror it is 4:40; time for tea and a madeleine.

**Editor's Note:** These notes do not cover any of the elements that have been added to the second state of *Visions and Revisions*.