

PETER MILTON



In Search of Lost Time

Notes on: *In Search of Lost Time*

Some first observations

Titles Proust wanted the English title of *Temps Perdu* to be a line from a Shakespeare sonnet: *Remembrance of Things Past*. But for me “searching for lost time” is far more mysterious. So I stay with *la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. So do the latest translators..

Origins *Lost Time* started in 1999 as *Visions and Revisions* which was completed in 2001. In 2005 I re-etched, scraped, gravure etched and extensively engraved the plate. In 2006 it had become *In Search of Lost Time*. *Visions and Revisions* editioning was stopped at 55. As a plate it no longer exists.

Sargent I began *Visions and Revisions* with two photographs. One was a John Singer Sargent interior and one was Sargent working on a double portrait; both photographs are from the Boston years, 1882 and 1903. The brooding mysteries of *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* got me interested in the first place. Developing the scene as a drawing on Mylar, I added Sargent working on the mother-and-daughter

portrait of Gretchen and Rachel Fiske Warren. These were the sessions where he was photographed in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Mansion in Boston. And it was Sargent all the way until suddenly...

Proustcame into it when I was invited to join a show of Proust-inspired images at the National Theater in London. The show was to accompany a staging of Harold Pinter's screenplay for *Remembrance of Things Past*. Reluctant to break my momentum, but thinking, how arbitrary, I pondered the coincidences between Proust and Sargent: same periods, same country (sometimes). And the superb new film just come out of Proust's *Time Regained* by the surrealist film maker Raoul Ruiz. I did hesitate, but fascination trumped caution. After all, I decided, once you have seen one belle epoque you have seen them all. And I often suspect that coincidence is just another name for a haunting (see Pear entry below). Accepting these spirits as benign, I pressed on.

La Belle Epoque With these themes of memory and time, past, present, and future started dancing around. Such promiscuity! The past, which Proust was reinventing in *Remembrance of Things Past* as the novel's present, was the *Belle Epoque* present of Sargent; the present of Proust, in which he was actually writing, was the time of that past's future, the time of Art Deco and the Jazz Age. Of course that new future is our present's past. But, putting such vertiginous thoughts aside, I was now being allowed to expand the temporal scale of the print, and to include the much freer, subversive slap-dash of the twenties, a welcome and necessary relief to my original impulse and the formality of Sargent's (and Proust's) *Belle Epoque*.

Gretchen and Rachel Proust's deep involvement in the nature of observation helps underline why I had been so attracted to those photographs of Sargent painting the Fiske Warrens in the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum. 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 will soon be observed by the sitters themselves. The whole project will ultimately be observed and critiqued by its patron Isabella Stuart Gardner, and (I am getting dizzy again) by who-all-else to follow.

The Face To emphasize this theme of observation, a large face peers in from the back of the image. Its source is an anonymous French photograph of an equally anonymous woman, circa 1910. As we look in, the face looks back. My original thought when I added an image on such a dominating and surreal scale was of a doll's house. With Proust's arrival it grew even further, to be an icon for the monumentality of Proust's childhood memories. Or at least the monumentality of his undertaking to recreate them.

In the course of the two years of my work the face became my nemesis – and I, its. It was out, it was in, it was out, and what about that hand? A truce was finally effected by way of veils, lights and a diminutive Proust, who both gave the face its

mnemonic rationale and a suggestion that the image was still a kind of artist's doll's house. Further, I hope the face can now give thought that the print is perhaps actually a mirror. In the final state, I returned to the battle, and now the hand is totally gone.

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

The Pear Bottom left corner table. I chose a pear for no other reason than liking its shape. Coincidences? Later I discover: Erik Satie's *Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear* was composed in 1903. John Singer Sargent painted his portrait of *Mrs Fiske Warren and her Daughter, Rachel* (at the right) in 1903. Maurice Ravel composed his *Pavane for a Dead Princess*, title of my 1999 *Points of Departure IV* print, in 1903. And I learned just last month from *Proust at the Majestic*, that this was the music Proust requested for his funeral in 1922.

Vermeer Jan Vermeer, from *Allegory of Painting*, is above the pear. He is with his model, who has a pearl earring, and has just received a letter. She looks up at Proust on the balcony. Vermeer was a favorite of Proust, Sargent's and just about everybody else. Proust's last major foray out from his reclusive apartment was to the 1922 retrospective of Vermeer's paintings in Paris.

Helleu Right of Vermeer, Paul Helleu, the French artist, and the one shared friend of both Sargent and Proust. A photograph of him standing in his studio has a painting behind him of *Leda and the Swan* which I move up to the top right corner.

The Bed Upper left, Proust's bed and piles of notebooks in his cork-lined room. Here much draped. Very quiet.

The Portraits On the left column, portraits by Sargent: Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson, and a photograph of Sargent himself taken shortly before his death. All inserted before the Proust arrival.

Madame X In the center, Sargent's flamenco painting, *El Jaleo*, his early, triumphal splash of an arrival into the Paris salon world, To the right, his *Madame X*, a scandalous splash leading to his exit. The scandal was basically a Parisian annoyance about Sargent for not being a Parisian.

Marie de Bernardsky Below *Madame X*, Proust's first schoolboy crush.

Mary Louisa Boit To Marie's right, the young Proust. Actually an actor playing the part of Proust in the 1999 Raoul Ruiz film, *Time Regained*. Young Proust stands just behind Mary Louisa, one of the girls from Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darcy Boit*. Mary Lousia is getting involved with her reflection which leads us back to Marie de Bernardsky who is now laughing at the whole thing.

The Swan Top of the right column, *Leda and the Swan*, the painting which hung in the photo of Paul Helleu in his studio. I am guessing it was by Helleu, given Helleu's fondness for the ladies which was no secret. I Googled "Leda, the Swan and Helleu" and the first entry to come up was "petermilton.com." Full circle.

Leda Leda was a nymph visited by Jupiter in the form of a swan. Juno outraged, might have wished for his head on a platter, but instead turns Leda into a cow. At least, that is what she did to the similarly romped upon nymph, Io (cat.125)." A revenge any betrayed woman might be thrilled to have thought of. If it didn't occur to her that Jupiter would be delighted when returning as a bull for the rape of Europa (cat.103). Though his hands were probably full, judging by the Titian painting.

Charles Haas To the left of the Leda circle, a globe containing Charles Haas from a photograph of Nadar and Proust's model for Charles Swann, the central figure in *Swann's Way*.

Charles Swann and Odette The central section of *Swann's Way* is about Swann's obsessing over Odette de Crecy, an elegant lady of the night. He ultimately marries her, scandalizes all, and together they produce Gilberte, who later gives the narrator his next big crush and subsequent countless pages of his own wild obsessing. Preparing us, I guess, for Albertine.

By now, in the print's development, I am beginning to enjoy the symmetry of Leda, the swan/Swann and Odette through a coincidence involving Paul Helleu, an artist who recorded Marcel Proust on his death bed. And did Proust get Odette from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, my wife asks?

Odette and Gilberte An even stronger hint of Odette appears in the Sargent *Fiske Warren* painting as he is watched by Helleu. I do hope the Fiske Warren heirs do not wince at reference to such a tempting lady as Odette de Crecy, but for me Gretchen and Rachel are Odette and Gilberte.

Edith Sitwell In the recesses at the right, more family with daughter, now Sargent's portrait of young Edith Sitwell. We seem to have been suddenly moved into the next Proustian world, *Time Regained*, and the Jazz Age. It was Edith Sitwell's collaboration with William Walton for *Façade* that brought me to Art Deco, and thus, just below the Sitwells, to the twenties fashion illustrator...

George Barbier ...which leads to the dancers floating anachronistically, insouciantly, out into the starched and ruffled world of La Belle Epoque.

The Writer The main change from *Visions and Revisions* to *Lost Time* is the addition of light-splashing windows in the back walls and two dominant figures in the front. The Proust-like figure at a desk is a combination of a Getty Collection daguerreotype and Man Ray's photograph of Proust on his death bed.

Mary Magdalene The young woman at the desk is taken from Georges de la Tour's *The Magdalene at the Mirror*. Which leads to the proliferation of candles, and the wind beginning to blow through the image. I have been asked why Mary Magdalene. Her sweet air of searching? Proust's Madeleine? In fact, she was simply just right.

Tea and a Madeleine Returning to the top, a clock with ambiguous times. If this search for lost time is a mirror, it is 7:30. In Proust's memory, 7 p.m. is the perpetual childhood time in Combray. If this is not a mirror it is 4:40; time for tea and a madeleine.

Edition size 75. 2006. The edition for the first state, *Visions and Revisions* was stopped at 55/140.