John Singer Sargent’s “Devils”

With eight writhing tentacles and viscous flesh, the *octopus vulgaris* has intrigued and terrified fishermen since ancient times. By 1866, when Victor Hugo penned *Les Traveilleurs de la mer*, the monstrous “devil-fish” had gained such mythic notoriety that several naturalists set out to investigate the habits and anatomy of these elusive—yet edible—cephalopods.1 Whereas the octopus’s “inexplicable shade” and “horrible...softness”2 invited scientific analysis, the same mysterious texture might not seem an appealing subject for a young artist—particularly one who would become famous for his portraits of high society. Yet in 1875, when John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) painted a picture of two octopuses splayed against the deck of a fishing smack, he did so without squeamishness and with a technical facility never before seen in his work.

According to a now untraceable letter by the artist, the picture was “a sketch done on the deck of a fishing boat in Brittany when he was about 19 years old.”3 Now titled *Two Octopi*, the small canvas was one of the very earliest oil paintings in the artist’s oeuvre. Though never intended for public exhibition, this picture has much to tell us—from its surface, its subject, its shading—about a young artist at the threshold of his professional career.

In 1875 Sargent, like many French art students released from the studios, spent his summer by the Brittany coast, composing paintings *en plein air*. Though this wasn’t his first time on the north coast of France, it was the first summer in which the artist seriously experimented with paint.

Born in Florence to a peripatetic family, Sargent demonstrated youthful proficiency while drawing in notebooks on his travels in Nice, Rome, and Dresden. He enrolled briefly at the Academy in Florence and, in 1874, moved to Paris to study in the atelier of portraitist Carolus-Duran. This nontraditional tutor emphasized the definition of form by means of values and tone gradations, urging his pupils to paint with bold, loaded brushstrokes. In *Two Octopi* we see this technique by the suggestion of the bulk of the octopuses’ bodies, which emerge only from the light that plays across their speckled skin. Just as the exotic seaside attracted Parisians to these beachside resorts, the unfamiliar mysteries of the strange texture and colorations of the octopus must have appealed to an experimental young artist with a newly acquired skill set.

Perhaps the most telling influence of Carolus-Duran’s method is the circumferential space between the figure and the background. According to one of his pupils, Carolus-Duran instructed students to paint “the envelope of a figure,” explaining, “all tints used in painting the figure must be swept into and blended with their neighbors.”4 In *Two Octopi* the subjects are cocooned in shadow, the dark brown values of the creatures’ silhouettes merging into inefable darkness on the floorboards of the boat.

Notably, this was not Sargent’s first time to record a cephalopod. The year before, while vacationing on the nearby Normandy coast, Sargent made a pencil drawing of an octopus, recording its shape next to simple compositions of a starfish, jellyfish, and squid. This small pencil sketch, juvenilia in comparison to the oil painting, illustrates Sargent’s transformative shift in artistic priorities and how his interest in modeling with light and color developed during the winter of 1875.5

For the painting, the artist approached the creatures from above, where they appear to be partially lit by an overcast sky. The pinks, grays, and white of the flesh stand out against the smudged, brown brushstrokes depicting the dirty deck of the fishing boat. Their entwined tentacles spread and stick to the wooden planks and to one another: a scene at once repulsive and alluring. With gray and pink shadows and occasional white flecks for highlights, Sargent relied on his newly acquired technical vocabulary from the studio, as well as his personal imagination, to tackle a subject he had likely never painted, nor even seen painted, before.

Despite its freshness of impression, the painting reveals a careful arrangement. Even as some of the tentacles appear to be irrevocably intertwined, others seem weightless, capable of rapid and unpredictable movement. This dynamic
interplay between the invertebrates’ winding contours and their muddied, static environment is made even more pronounced by the canvas’s radical cropping. The scene takes place outdoors, but the scale suggests a cozy—even claustrophobic—encounter with these sinuous invertebrates. With no horizon line to allow visual escape from the scene and its limited, neutral palette, the picture enfolds the sensitive viewer, forcing him or her to methodically examine the octopus as a scientist might.

Above: Two Octopi, ca. 1875. Oil on canvas. PRIVATE COLLECTION
Perhaps for Sargent, the challenge of accurately recording an octopus's translucent flesh and gesticulating arms prompted him to capture these creatures in the liminal space between the sea and the shore. Octopuses, known to survive for up to an hour outside of water, will rapidly change colors when dredged from their natural habitats. Biologists at the time noted that an octopus "in its natural state had the power to pass through a series of brilliant colors, changing from one to another with wonderful rapidity. After being taken from the water...it becomes translucent and spotted with black." Even Henry Lee, the scientist who sought to recuperate the octopus's ill repute, conceded that, "there is a repulsiveness about the form, color, and attitudes of the octopus which invests it with a kind of tragic horror." 

That Sargent chose to paint these octopuses right out of the water prefigures his later experiments in portraiture—most notably in his scandalous portrayal of Virginie Gautreau, or Madame X—where the young painter sought to confront the transient flesh and comportment of his sitters as they transformed before his eyes. Just as Sargent was attracted to sitters with an "exotic, far-fetched quality," he might have been drawn to the challenge of depicting a creature whose transient position, color, and existence wavered between ominous and pathetic. While the specific subject of an octopus struggling out of water may be reminiscent of realist still lifes by Antoine Vollon and Édouard Manet, Sargent's brushwork and dramatic lighting suggest an interest in the aesthetic, rather than a narrative or symbolic, treatment of his subject.

In addition to its aesthetic allure, the octopus may have held gastronomic appeal for the young painter. Newspapers on both sides of the English Channel reported on the odd
custom of eating octopus from Greece to Japan, from diligent Catholics in Spain to Italian fishermen who “give preference to smaller and younger ‘devils’ but they by no means despise the large ones.”11 Increasingly, Parisian chefs embraced the devil fish as a culinary novelty, simply boiling or frying them, or beating larger ones on jagged rocks to tenderize the flesh before cooking them in a stew or broth. By the beginning of the twentieth century, some plucky Parisians were willing to sample a “stewed devil fish” at the Zoological Society of France luncheon, an event known for its “curious culinary novelties.” Though a few brave souls initially enjoyed the dish, “someone thoughtlessly passed around a bottle containing a small octopus to show what it was like,” at which “the guests put down their knives and forks and requested the waiters to take away their plates.”12

Having spent much of his peripatetic childhood along the Mediterranean, Sargent was most likely familiar with cephalopods as a table delicacy, and he may have even eaten the octopus in the same manner with which he reportedly ate his lobster: “with almost a peasant’s gusto.”13

Poised on the threshold of his professional career, Sargent was able to explore his technical virtuosity and artistic imagination without the limitations of commissioned portraiture. In 1931, after Sargent’s death, William Rothenstein compared Sargent’s literal appetite with the creative restrictions placed on his late professional life. He noted that Sargent was “like a hungry man with a superb digestion who need not be too particular what he eats.”14 From this early picture of two octopuses writhing in limbo between the sea and the shore, we can mine the ambitions and priorities of a young art student hungry for new surfaces and subjects to execute in oil paints.

NOTES
1. See, for example, Henry Lee, The Octopus, or, The “Devil-Fish” of Fiction or Fact (London: Chapman and Hall, 1875), 123.
4. In fact, in his letter Sargent referred to this canvas simply as “Octopus.” Octopus is not a correct plural. The ancient Greek plural is octopodes. Despite his multilingual skills, Sargent might have had difficulty determining the proper plural, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, can be either octopodes or octopuses.
5. “In the Studio of Carolus-Duran,” Art Interchange 21, no. 3 (28 July 1888): 36; the article was written by an English student who studied at Carolus-Duran’s atelier from 1885 to 1887. For more information on Sargent and Carolus-Duran, see H. Barbara Weinberg, “Sargent and Carolus-Duran,” in Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent (New Haven, CT and Williamstown, MA: Yale University Press and Clark Art Institute, 1997), 5–30.
6. For more information on Sargent’s earliest paintings, see Ormond and Kilmurray, John Singer Sargent and Sarah Cash et al., Sargent and the Sea (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
9. For an illuminating discussion of Sargent’s painting of Madame X’s skin, see Susan Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s Madame X,” American Art 15, no. 3 (Autumn, 2001), 8–33.
13. The New York dealer Martin Birnbaum wrote of Sargent at a dinner: “He ate his lobster with almost a peasant’s gusto. How he loved his food… [His eyes] began devouring Mrs. Longfellow’s delicious New England dishes, even before they were served, but in every other way, he struck me as a quiet, emotionally reticent man of good breeding.” Martin Birnbaum, John S. Sargent, January 12, 1856–April 15, 1925: A Conversation Piece (New York: William E. Rudge’s Sons, 1944), 5.