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## Irene Sargent: Rediscovering a Lost Legend

Cleota Reed Gabriel

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# THE COURIER

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# *Irene Sargent: Rediscovering a Lost Legend*

by Cleota Reed Gabriel

Professor Irene Sargent was a distinguished teacher of the history of fine arts at Syracuse University for thirty-seven years, from 1895 to 1932. As a noted author and critic in these years, she was influential in promoting and maintaining the values of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America; yet, since her death in 1932, she has been largely forgotten. We can begin to form an image of her as an awesome pillar of knowledge and a great lady with a colorful personality through the vivid memories of her former students. Interviews with some of her students brought forth the following recollections:<sup>1</sup>

She insisted on being called Doctor or Madame, *never* Miss. We freshmen were terribly in awe of her, believing of her, both truth and legend.

We usually referred to her as “Doc Sargent” among ourselves, but sometimes used the title “Empress Irene,” after the Byzantine ruler of that name.

She always looked the same—dark blue suit, dark blue shirt waist, and dark blue hat with a broad brim.

She wore a felt hat with a well-worn silver fox in the winter months, which she changed to a straw hat with a chiffon scarf when Spring signaled that it was coming. This could happen in April or in January.

She lectured from a Mottville chair, precisely describing, with the use of slides, how the arts of each period reflected the history and culture of their time.

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This article is adapted from a lecture given to the Syracuse University Library Associates on March 30, 1979. A bibliography of Irene Sargent’s work will appear in a future issue of *The Courier*.

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<sup>1</sup>These recollections are only a small sampling of the memories of Irene Sargent’s former students, friends, and colleagues (too numerous to mention) gleaned from personal interviews and letters.

We knew and respected Dr. Sargent as a scholar and authority. In Aesthetics she emphasized that there *is* a philosophy of art, a “why” as to the worth of a work of art. One principle she dwelt on was that to be great, a work of art, no matter how exciting its subject matter, must leave one with a feeling of peace.

She believed that architecture is the greatest of the arts. The architecture students were her pets. She told them, “Never work for money. Work for the love of your art.” She began many of her lectures, “Gentlemen and architects....” To her the names were synonymous.

She spoke in a precise, well modulated voice—every word beautifully enunciated.

At the beginning of each session she would intone, as the light dimmed, “The gentlemen will kindly sit in the rear of the room and the lady students will sit in the front of the room. Gentlemen and ladies will not sit together as the dark inspires men to evil deeds.” No one laughed.

She was the most inspiring teacher I ever had. When I finally, much later in life, climbed the hill to the Acropolis, I turned to look at the view and spontaneously said aloud, “Dr. Sargent, you were right!”

She was one of the seven most brilliant women in the world. It was rumored that she had willed her brain to the Yale medical school.

Another rumor was that she had promised her brain to Harvard and was living off the proceeds. That was why (we thought) she could afford to take a taxi back and forth from the Yates Hotel, where she lived, to Crouse College every day.

These sometimes tender and sometimes amusing anecdotes help us to understand why Irene Sargent became a legend in her own time, but they do not provide many of the facts of her life. A few of these facts appear in the *Syracuse University Alumni Record 1910-1925*:

IRENE SARGENT, 1895-96 and 1901-

Student at University of Paris; Rome, Italy; Professor Bocher, Jacquinet, Charles Eliot Norton, Harvard. Litt. M. (Syracuse) 1911. Litt. D. (*Ibid*) 1922.

Instructor in French and History, College of Fine Arts, 1895-96. Instructor in Italian, 1901-5. Instructor in Italian and Lecturer on the History of the Fine Arts, 1905-8.

Professor of the History of Fine Arts, 1908-14. Professor of the History of Fine Arts and Italian Literature, 1914- .<sup>2</sup>

But these facts, added to the remembrances of her former students, still do not form a very complete picture of Irene Sargent. They tell us little of her real accomplishments. She was at one time a well known and influential author and critic in the history of art and a respected translator of Italian and French literature. She has been largely forgotten for these achievements, particularly by persons in her primary field of scholarship, the history of art.

Though her original contributions to the Arts and Crafts Movement have lain largely unread for many years, there is now a renewed interest in them by a new generation of scholars. The Arts and Crafts Movement shaped the concepts of many architects, designers, and craftsmen in America in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Because Irene Sargent made a substantial contribution to the literature of that movement, the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University has received an increasing number of inquiries from present-day historians wanting to know more about her.

\* \* \*

When Irene Sargent died on September 14, 1932, she was eulogized by Ernest J. Bowden in the *Syracuse Post-Standard* as a woman of quiet dignity and versatile talents and one with a "remarkable faculty for stirring enthusiasm and winning devotion."<sup>4</sup> Bowden made the only published reference to her early life. He wrote that her father, Rufus Sargent, was a machine designer near Boston who was disappointed when Irene was born that she was not a son and found compensation in giving her a boy's education. Bowden reported that she studied architecture at Harvard University as a non-degree student, although Harvard has no record of her enrollment. Bowden's article, compiled perhaps from interviews with a few members of the Syracuse University community, did provide an important clue, her father's name.

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<sup>2</sup>Frank Smalley, ed., *Alumni Record and General Catalogue of Syracuse University 1910-1925, . . . Faculty of Syracuse University, 1852-1925*, (Syracuse: Alumni Association of Syracuse University, 1925) Vol. 4, Pt. 1, pp. 1362-63.

<sup>3</sup>For the best introduction to the movement see Robert Judson Clark, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916*, exhibition catalogue, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). For an in-depth study of a Syracuse architect who was active in this movement see Cleota Reed Gabriel, *The Arts and Crafts Ideal: The Ward House—An Architect and His Craftsmen*, (Syracuse, IDEA, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>*Syracuse Post-Standard*, September 16, 1932, p. 6.

Through a genealogical search, the present writer pieced together some facts about her life.<sup>5</sup> The Onondaga County census of 1900 records that she was born in Massachusetts in 1863. Either she reported her birthdate and birthplace less than accurately or the census taker was hard-of-hearing, for in fact, she was born eleven years earlier in 1852 in Auburn, New York. At the time of the 1900 census, she has just begun her career at Syracuse. Perhaps she felt that it was to her professional advantage in beginning her university teaching career to be almost forty rather than almost fifty and more prestigious to be from Boston than from Auburn, New York. At this time, she had no surviving family. Alone in the world, she needed to make her own way as best as she could.

Jesse Irene Sargent, to give her full name, was born in Auburn, New York on February 20, 1852, the fourth daughter of Rufus and Phebe [sic] Sargent. Rufus Sargent was born in Massachusetts in 1806 and moved to Auburn with his wife in 1833. He became very successful as a manufacturer of carding tools. His other three daughters, Mary, Adeline, and Cornelia were in their teens when Irene was born; none of them married and all died as young women, the last, Adeline, in 1878. Rufus retired and moved with his wife and Irene to Boston in 1879. He died at the age of seventy-six in 1882 when Irene was thirty years old. Her mother Phebe lived in Boston five more years until 1887. She probably died before 1890, in which year Irene returned to Auburn for a short time, boarding at a hotel.

Evidence of Irene's education, has thus far not been located. There are no records of her attendance in any of the public or private schools in Auburn. Her sister Adeline was a teacher and may have tutored her. There is also the possibility that she was sent away to school, perhaps to Boston. As for her professional training, it is clear from her achievements that she was well-educated by one means or another, even though no record of university enrollment has been found. According to Bowden's obituary, she came into contact with such great minds as those of George Herbert Palmer, the American philosopher, and Charles Eliot Norton, the historian of art, both of Harvard University; and she associated with the connoisseur and art historian Bernard Berensen, who was her contemporary, in Italy.

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<sup>5</sup>Genealogical and biographical information compiled by the author has been deposited in the Irene Sargent collection of the Syracuse University Archives, George Arents Research Library.

After her short stay in Auburn in 1890, Irene was resident in Utica, New York, from 1891 to 1893, and again from 1895 to 1896, perhaps teaching. She helped organize a loan exhibition of art and antiquities in 1895 for the New Century Club, a women's social and cultural organization that still exists in Utica. For her part, Irene secured, among other treasures, the loan from a private collection of "Head of The Christ" by Dürer, painted on wood, dated 1521, and valued at eight thousand dollars.<sup>6</sup>

Bowden stated in Irene Sargent's obituary that she traveled and studied in Europe after her father's death and that when she returned to the United States, she worked as a free lance writer and did some editorial work in Philadelphia before coming to Syracuse. No published works by her dating before 1897 have yet been found, and no trace of her ever having lived in Philadelphia exists, though she was later associated with a Philadelphia periodical.

From 1895 Irene Sargent's life, at least her professional life, is a matter of record. At age forty-three she was appointed to the faculty at Syracuse University to teach French for the school year 1895-1896. She was reappointed in 1901 to teach Italian in the College of Fine Arts to music students, so that they might better understand and pronounce the words they were singing. In succeeding years she also taught aesthetics; the history of art which included architecture, painting, and sculpture; and the history of ornament, a course vital to careers in architecture, illustration, and design in which it was important to have a historical vocabulary.

For a few years, from 1901 to approximately 1904, Irene Sargent taught French, Italian, and Spanish at the Syracuse Classical School (a day school which later became the Travis School) which was located at that time in the Yates Castle.

She was very popular as a speaker. She lectured to such community cultural groups as the Browning Club, of which she was an active member, the Classical Club, the Social Art Club, the Shakespeare Club, and many Syracuse University clubs, on such diversified subjects as "The Art of the Venetian School," "The Dreyfus Case from a Historical Point of View," "The Evolution of the Pastoral with Reference to the Eclogues of Virgil," "Classical Painting: Its Origin and Character," "The English Pre-Raphaelite Movement," "Modern American Sculptors," and "The Life and Art of Rodin."

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<sup>6</sup>"A Loan Exhibition to be Held at the House of The New Century Club, 253 Genesee Street, Utica, from May 22 to May 29, 1895," (Utica: New Century Club, 1895), p. 51. The catalogue lists the Dürer as an "undoubted original" loaned by Mr. William Matthews.



Perhaps even more significant than her two honorary degrees from Syracuse University in 1911 and 1922, was the honorary membership awarded her by the American Institute of Architects, in 1926, for a lifetime of outstanding contributions to architecture and its allied arts. She was the second woman in the history of that distinguished organization to receive such an honor.

Dr. Sargent taught until the end of the spring term in 1932. By then she was eighty years old and in failing health and could hardly ascend the stairs to her classroom in Crouse College. She fell in her room at the Yates Hotel on July 5 and was hospitalized until her death on September 14. She is buried in the Syracuse University plot at Oakwood Cemetery.

\* \* \*

Her work survives her. Since she left no personal papers or diaries, it is to published writings that we must turn to know what she thought and felt. Most of Dr. Sargent's writings were articles and critical essays for periodicals. Her main achievement was *The Craftsman*, a magazine published in Syracuse from 1901 to 1916 by Gustav Stickley, the Syracuse designer. Stickley was famous for his so-called "Mission" furniture, one of the major products of the Arts and Crafts Movement. *The Craftsman* became the most influential voice in forming and spreading the movement's aesthetic in America. A leading scholar of that movement, Robert Judson Clark, recently described Irene Sargent as "the initial force behind the publication."<sup>7</sup> Another present-day scholar, Barry Sanders, calls her "the guiding spirit for the magazine's early years."<sup>8</sup> Both of these descriptions are understatements.

Irene Sargent single-handedly wrote the first three issues of *The Craftsman*: she wrote all five articles in the first issue; all eight articles in the second issue; and all four articles in the third issue. Thereafter other authors contributed, though she almost always wrote the lead article which set the theme for the issue. From October 1901 until March 1902, she contributed twenty-six of thirty-three features. She spelled out the philosophy of the magazine which was that of the Arts and Crafts Movement itself. These are articles of great substance and considerable originality and are immensely valuable to present-day scholars of American taste of the early twentieth century.

The first issue of *The Craftsman* was devoted to William Morris; the second paid homage to John Ruskin; the third concerned the history of Medieval crafts guilds, so important to the movement as a model in its ideal of a return to handcraftsmanship. She also wrote

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Judson Clark. p. 38.

<sup>8</sup>Barry Sanders, ed., *The Craftsman, An Anthology*, (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1978), p. x.

reviews, translations, critiques, and some poetry. Once the historical groundwork for the magazine was laid, she devoted issues to such topics as “Robert Owen and Factory Reform,” “The Gothic Revival,” and “The History and Design of Textiles.” She wrote on such diversified subjects as “[Richardson’s] Trinity Church, Boston, as a Monument of American Art,” “Color, An Expression of Modern Life,” and “The Silversmith’s Art in the Middle Ages.” She wrote a series of articles on American art potters and potteries, including such notable figures as Charles Binns of Alfred University, Mary Louise McLaughlin of the Rookwood Pottery, and Thomas S. Nickerson of the Merrimac Pottery. She wrote extensively of the decorative arts on such subjects as “The Life and History of a Design” which examined the use of the lotus as a design motif, and “A Minor French Salon” in which she illustrated the works of the French glass designers, Lalique and Gaillard.

A reading of her articles shows that she learned a great deal from Charles Eliot Norton as well as from William Morris and John Ruskin, but her expression of these ideas and her application of them to American culture is quite original. Though Stickley was nominally the publisher, *The Craftsman* was very largely Irene Sargent’s conception. *The Craftsman* was the leading voice of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America, and its voice was Irene Sargent’s.<sup>9</sup> In all, in the first eight volumes of *The Craftsman*, from October 1901 to September 1905, Irene Sargent made eighty-four contributions. After that she stopped writing for the magazine entirely.

In 1904, Stickley had moved his entire operation from Syracuse to New York City and shifted his interests. Irene Sargent stopped contributing to *The Craftsman* soon thereafter and turned to another periodical, *The Keystone*. From 1905 to 1930 she wrote sixty-six articles of the soundest scholarship for *The Keystone*, a journal of the jewelry trade. She wrote profusely illustrated articles about historical and contemporary silver, jewelry, ceramics, and glass, and about outstanding artists who created them. Among her subjects were “Examples of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Domestic Silver,” “The Napoleonic Table Service in Silver,” and “The Transformation of René Lalique.” She wrote three articles about her colleague at Syracuse University, Adelaide Alsop Robineau, the master potter of Syracuse, who provided the illustrations for the Lalique article; and she wrote one article for Robineau’s own magazine, *Keramic Studio*, published in Syracuse.

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<sup>9</sup>The complete issue of *The Craftsman* can be found in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University.



**Dr. Irene Sargent standing by the entrance of Crouse College, Syracuse University, perhaps in 1922 when she received her honorary doctorate from the university.  
(Photograph: Syracuse University Archives)**

*The Keystone*, published in Philadelphia from 1891 to 1933, changed its format several times. In 1917 Irene Sargent was listed as Contributing Editor of the Art Department of the magazine. This is probably the “editorial work” in Philadelphia, mentioned in Bowden’s obituary.

Irene Sargent wrote for a trade magazine like *The Keystone* because until the 1920s there were, for all practical purposes, no American art journals regularly receptive to extended scholarly historical writing in the decorative arts. The age of specialized historical research in the arts and the journals it would spawn arrived just as Irene Sargent passed.

Irene Sargent also wrote in 1915 and 1916 for *The Colonnade*, a literary magazine published by New York University, and in 1920 for *Le Livre Contemporain*, a serial published in Boston. She was a major contributor to the first editions of two encyclopedias; in 1911 she wrote “Art Schools and Art Instruction in Europe” for *A Cyclopaedia of Education*, issued in five volumes by Columbia University; and in 1924 she wrote the entire section on the Fine Arts, including “The Introduction of Fine Arts,” “Painting, Architecture, and Sculpture,” and a “Revised and Expanded Dictionary of Art Terms” for the *Lincoln Library of Essential Information*. This single-volume, concise family encyclopedia which had great influence in the 1920s and 1930s continued to use Irene Sargent’s entries for many years.

Irene Sargent’s scholarly writing is of interest mainly to other scholars; her poetry speaks to a wider audience. Two of her poems afford a fair measure of her skill. The first is a sonnet which appeared in Volume One of *The Craftsman* in January 1902:

#### Inermis

Musing, I sat within the House of Life,  
Intent to watch the soft sleep of a child;  
Saffron and rose his bed; radiant and mild  
His countenance; tranquil his form, though rife  
With Strength that seemed to court and long for strife.  
But while he slept, there came in garb defiled,  
Sinister, scarred, bearing a distaff piled  
And plumed with nodding flax, an old witch-wife.

She plied her art, and round the sleeper span  
A knotted web which bound him limb and thigh;  
Startled he writhed and wrestled, but too late:  
Strength wrought in vain against the cunning plan;  
The woven bonds held fast. And then I knew  
The child was Hope. The ancient crone was Fate.

The second poem appeared in *The Colonnade* in 1915 and, like the one above, has a fatalistic message, though now expressed in humor:

Tom's a-Cold

Poor Tom's a-cold. His mew and moan  
Mounts to me as I sit alone  
In evil mood, and fancies spin  
Of all I might have done and been,  
If human hearts I well had known.  
My heart is cheerless. Let him groan,  
His paws be stiff, his fur be blown!  
My gloves are worn, my coat is thin  
If Tom's a-cold.

The Mice are frozen; birds have flown;  
And clients keen and few are grown;  
Lost, lost is all we strove to win;  
Then, why not let the suppliant in  
Since misery must seek its own,  
And Tom's a-cold.

\* \* \*

Most people now alive who remember Irene Sargent recall her in her last years, when she was in her middle-to-late seventies, the years in which on snowy mid-winter days the architecture students formed a human chain to assist her, in the most proper manner, from the door of her taxi to the door of Crouse College. By then she had taken the last of her many trips to Europe and her accomplishments as a great voice in the Arts and Crafts Movement in America were already part of history. Only an echo of her magnificent abilities as a teacher remained; but this was enough to convince her last students that she was not only an unforgettable personality of the strongest character, but also a force that opened minds to the intellectual and spiritual power of the fine arts.

The British novelist E.F. Benson wrote in 1940 in his book of memoirs, *Final Edition*, of a kind of woman he called the "Sibyl" from the ancient female prophets. He wrote:

...In earlier generations there existed, though always rare and remarkable, a type of woman who has now vanished.... Though hard to define, she was unmistakable when met with. She was thoughtful, she was intellectual.... Often indeed, she was literary, and often her attainments as an author were connected with her Sibylity, but the highest attainment did not [alone] qualify her. The Sibyl's quality was primarily a condition of the Soul; if she was an author it was involved with the moral responsibility which her gifts as

such entailed on.... Sibyls have disappeared. Unlike poets they were made, not born, and nowadays nobody makes them.<sup>10</sup>

If Benson had known Irene Sargent he might very well have included her in this category of “rare and remarkable” women.



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<sup>10</sup>E.F. Benson, *Final Edition*, (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1940), p. 78.