

# Pass It On®...

## **Capturing Determination and Strength.**

*John Singer Sargent is noted for his ability to capture the essence of a person's character. In his portrait of Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler, we discover the strength of a woman who has suffered tragedy, borne heavy responsibility and developed great character.*

John Singer Sargent was born in the mid-1850s in Florence, Italy, to American parents. His elevated position in society allowed him to pursue the arts, not as merely a decorator, but as a painter determined to capture the essence of his subjects. He was endlessly fascinated with the physical expressions of inner emotions. His most famous paintings capture the complexity of childhood in a group portrait of siblings and a matronly portrait, titled "Madame X," that stirred controversy with the subject's disregard for social proprieties.

Each subject carried the weight of inner emotions defined by the forces of society and circumstance. Sargent was the silent observer, making no political or social judgment, only recording what he saw.

He believed in capturing the soul of the subject and sought out not only famous artists, politicians and socialites, but also the ordinary people he crossed paths with. He mastered light and shadow to add depth and contrast to the work, but also to reveal hidden emotions. Through dynamic brushwork, he gave life to vibrant feeling and blurred surroundings to subdue environments, as if the subjects themselves commanded the elements around them.

When Sargent met Elizabeth Chanler, he sensed a story in her that was yet untold.

Elizabeth held herself with grace and dignity. The artist was in awe of her, saying she "possessed the most remarkable repose in her pose." And indeed, there was a history. When Elizabeth was a child, her mother died, leaving her to care for seven younger brothers and sisters.

Sargent captured her portrait when she was 26 years old, at the peak of her beauty and also her strength. He put her in a black dress and captured the turmoil of the fabric as it cascaded around her in a tumult of darks. Her face emerges from the

chaos with the determination of an angelic being that has triumphed over hardship and knows tenderness. Her hands cross in front of her, holding the whole of her existence together; it is her story, and she proudly embraces it.

Although the casual viewer may not know anything about the life of Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler, her strength and determination shine through. And because an artist took the time to tell her story, we are inspired by her spirit forevermore.

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