

The Fate of a *Ficus*

Peter Del Tredici

A series of coincidences brings life and art together.

The little details that make up one's daily life fit together like the links of a chain—a chain that grows longer with the passage of time. On rare occasions, the past and present ends of this chain intersect, and, at this point, one always finds a tiny detail linking them together. Recently, I was lucky enough to stumble across a curious detail that united the past and the present in just this way.

The story starts with some drawings made by John Singer Sargent towards the end of his life. Sargent was, of course, one of America's greatest portrait painters and a cousin of Professor Charles Sprague Sargent, the first director of the Arnold Arboretum. The artist died in 1925, and in 1931 his two sisters, Miss Emily Sargent and Mrs. Francis Ormond, donated six of his botanical sketches to the Arboretum. Oakes Ames was the director at that time, and in the June 24, 1931, issue of the *Bulletin of Popular Information*, he reproduced one of the drawings, and described it:

This subject, which is the most interesting of the Sargent drawings in the Arboretum collection, is a carefully worked up study of the roots of *Ficus aurea*, a strangling fig, that had become entangled with a discarded wagon wheel. The extraordinary association of fig roots and wheel must have made a strong appeal to Sargent, because the sketch was executed with meticulous fidelity to the original and constitutes a record that would not be out of place in a textbook of botany. The subject is botanically unusual and hardly one that we should expect to find attracting the attention of a great portrait painter.

In the same *Bulletin*, Professor Ames went on to describe a remarkable coincidence concerning Sargent's drawing:

During the preparation of the fourth number of the *Bulletin*, a search was being made in the Library of the Arboretum for colored plates of the Yoshino cherry of Japan. The search led to the *National Geographic Magazine* where on page 191 of the forty-second volume, attention was drawn to the reproduction of a photograph showing the roots of a strangling fig holding an old wagon wheel. It was not only a photograph of the same wheel which had engaged Sargent's attention, but a view of it taken from almost the same location from which Sargent had made his drawing. Through the kindness of the *National Geographic Magazine*, the *Bulletin* is permitted to reproduce the photograph and thus make possible a comparison between it and our reproduction of Sargent's drawing. Fortunately the photograph which was made at Cutler, Florida, localizes Sargent's work and indicates those details which the artist suppressed in his interpretation of the scene.

Indeed, the most striking difference between the two is the presence of two metal "springs" in the lower left-hand side of the drawing, which are hidden by the tree trunk in the photograph. When making his picture, Sargent was obviously standing a little to the right of the spot where John Gifford set up his camera.

Sargent probably produced the *Ficus* drawing during his only trip to Florida, a three-month stay from February through April, 1917. He went to Florida to paint a portrait of the seventy-eight-year-old John D. Rockefeller, who was then living at his estate at



Ficus aurea. This photograph by John C. Gifford originally appeared in 1922 in National Geographic Magazine, vol. 42, p 191



Ficus-Florida. Reproduced from an original drawing by John Singer Sargent (original drawing 9-5/8 by 7 inches). Donated to the Arnold Arboretum by Miss Emily Sargent and Mrs. Francis Ormond.

Ormond Beach, near Daytona. It took Sargent about three weeks to complete the commission, after which he traveled south to Miami to visit his long-time friends Mr. and Mrs. Charles Deering. While in the Miami area, he produced a number of watercolors and drawings, including *Ficus Florida*, reproduced here.

Ames' 1931 article on the Sargent drawing was the last word on the subject until 1982, when, in the course of my own work on an Asian strangling fig, *Ficus benjamina*, I noticed for the first time that one of the drawings hanging on a wall in the Hunnewell Building was of a *Ficus*. I was amazed to learn, upon closer examination, that it was a John Singer Sargent original. I had walked by the

drawing countless times, but, like the proverbial swine before whom pearls are tossed, I took no notice.

Excited as I was by the "discovery" of the Sargent drawing, it was nothing compared to my reaction while reading an article titled "Florida's *Ficus*" in the January-February 1981 issue of *Garden* magazine. The author, Yvette Cardoza, described a scene that bowled me over:

The strangler, *Ficus aurea*, is perhaps the most aggressive of the Florida ficus: the drooping aerial roots can and will engulf just about anything that is stationary. Landscaper Bert Newcomb remembers slashing one trunk and finding the remains of a turn-of-the-century wagon wheel.



Ficus aurea in Key West, Florida, photographed in 1886 by James M. Codman, from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

Could it possibly have been the same wagon wheel that Sargent drew? A phone call to Mr. Newcomb revealed a soft-spoken gentleman who, unfortunately, could not remember where the tree was located or when he had cut it down. The image of the wheel inside the fig tree was all he could recall, the same image that Sargent had captured with his pencil. To my mind, the tree had to have been the same one that Sargent captured in his drawing—how many such figs can there be in southern Florida? And besides, the chain of coincidences that surrounds this plant dictates just such a dramatic finish.

Afterword

In his article Professor Ames gives an excellent account of the life of a strangler fig. I quote it here because it helps one appreciate Sargent's drawing more fully.

Ficus aurea usually begins life as an epiphyte, that is, it springs from a seed that has been dropped, by a bird or some other agency, on the limb of a tree or in the leaf axil of a palm. In the beginning the plant is a true epiphyte, having no connection with

the ground. After the seed germinates, the roots, being geotropic, begin to grow downward. At first they are slender, but as they develop, there takes place an increase in diameter. After the roots enter the ground in their downward passage, the fig ceases to be an epiphyte in a strict sense and becomes a true terrestrial plant, the support for the leafy crown being largely composed of an interlacing and anastomosing system of tough roots. In time, if the fig prospers, the roots completely enclose the trunk of the host tree or palm and a so-called strangling action begins. In the later stages of this strange association, the tree on which the fig began its development appears to emerge from a rigid gray sheath. Finally the host tree dies, leaving the fig perfectly independent. During the formation of the root system, rocks or other objects that are in the way are often enmeshed and securely held.

Acknowledgment

Special thanks are owed to Margaret S. Moore, Research Coordinator for the John Singer Sargent Catalogue Raisonné, for providing the author with a key reference on the life of Sargent, *American Traditions in Watercolor: The Worcester Art Museum Collection*, edited by Susan E. Strickler, Abbeville Press, New York, 1987.

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