



# Folio

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Margaret Holland Sargent, 52"x 28", Oil on Linen

# Margaret Holland Sargent

## A S T E L L A R C A R E E R

by Luana Luconi Winner

What better way to spend the evening of the Academy Awards than with a star in Los Angeles? Margaret Holland Sargent is most certainly a star among the world's portrait painting elite. She has been featured on the cover and in several issues of *American Artist*, featured in *Forbes*, and declared "the top woman portraitist in the United States" by *Town and Country*.

During my stay with Mrs. Sargent, we discussed her many clients who include presidents, prime ministers, princes, admirals, generals, playwrights, governors, educators, and notables on four continents. Presidents Ford and Carter, NATO Commander Alexander Haig, Saudi Prince Turki Saud, Admiral Stockdale, author Tennessee Williams, Miss America Terry Meeuwsen, and Bill Gates' mother, Mary Maxwell Gates, are just a few of the hundreds of luminaries that Mrs. Sargent has painted.

She constantly broke barriers for women including being the first female member of the prestigious Salmagundi Art Club in New York. With her portrait commissions, she continues to honor others who were also first, as the first woman midshipman at Annapolis, the first woman graduate from West Point, Andrea Hollen, the first woman Cadet First Captain at West Point, Kristin Baker, and

the first woman chaplain of the U.S. Armed Forces.

### Actress/Artist

Prior to and concurrent with this illustrious painting career, Margaret was also a star in New York and Hol-

land, was Hollywood's first makeup artist in the film industry. He wrote the book about the design of character makeup. Her first of many acting jobs in the movies came at three. Her father rushed home and told her

mother to dress Meg like a little boy in her brother's old clothing and, when taken to the set, she acted on cue.

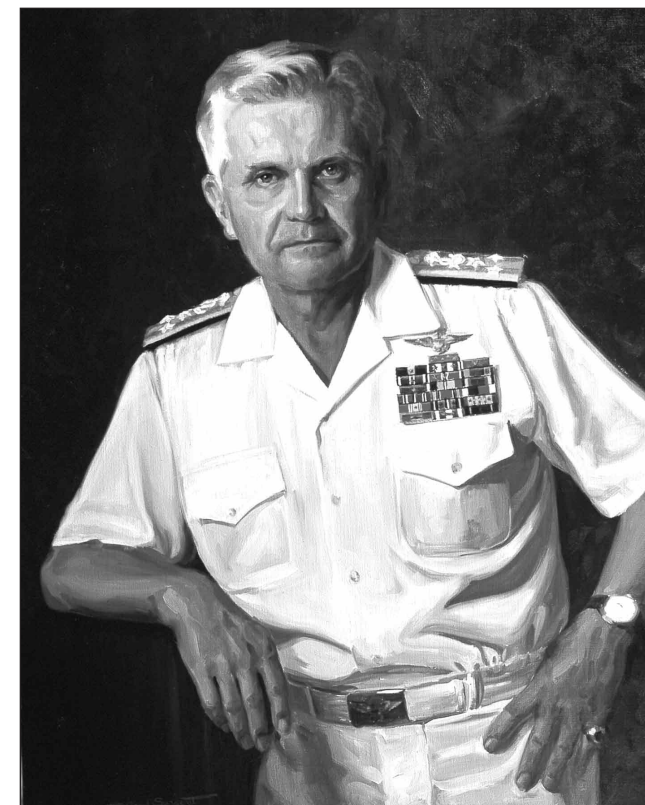
It followed naturally for her to become an actress. With her poise, beauty, natural charm, and calm demeanor, she worked as comfortably in front of the camera as she does now behind the canvas.

### Training

Mrs. Sargent's eye for painting may have first come from her father. But in the guest room of her home, there are also lovely watercolor paintings by her mother. At UCLA, Meg studied acting and costume design. Later, as the wife of a career army officer and the mother of two active boys, she first began painting landscapes in watercolor while moving the family every few years to different continents.

When the painter/teacher Herbert Abrams introduced her to oils during a stay at

West Point, it was the beginning of what became a long and illustrious portrait career. For two years, Abrams took her through the basics. On a weekly basis she worked with the new medium learning handling techniques, color mixtures, storage techniques, and values. Later she continued her studies with John



Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, II  
30" x 24" • Oil on Linen

lywood as a model and actress on the stage and screen. Before she followed her dream to paint the celebrities, she acted on the stage, on television and in the films with Angie Dickinson, Tuesday Weld, Kirstie Alley, Jack Klugman, and Fred Astaire.

Margaret's father, the great theatrical makeup designer, Cecil Hol-

Howard Sanden perfecting her alla prima techniques.

### Style and Approach

In a masterful, seemingly effortless alla prima style, Meg uses beautiful spontaneous brushwork to carry out clearly planned color harmonies in her portraits. She says, "My struggle is to constantly soften edges and simplify the strokes."

Her palette of premixed colors are described in one of her six video tapes. They include a variety of flesh tones and a series of grays and neutrals from which she further mixes her precise hues. The colors originated from those first introduced to her by Herbert Abrams and augmented with neutrals learned from Sanden. With experimentation, she developed all of the hues into her personal palette.

Margaret prefers very large brushes, often sizes 18 to 26 and larger, which afford her clarity of stroke and a firmer control. The large sizes prevent the strokes from getting too tight or too picky.

### Digital Data

Margaret has not let the digital age pass her by. She began to use the computer about six years ago when the combination of time constraints versus the ease and convenience of digital photography provided a new convenient way to collect data. Of course, it quickly followed that web communication became the way to advertise.

For years she used a Crown Graphic professional camera to shoot 4 x 5 film. Then she began using a large format camera which allowed her to shoot up to 8 x 10 film. It was specially fitted with a Rodenstock Lens made especially for copying. The complexity of the operation of this camera is not for the faint of heart. The room conditions and the

lighting need to be perfect. The film is carried to the camera in a holder, deposited, holder removed, and readied for exposure. The exposure is timed to the second and the process is reversed for removal.



Roswitha Stari Stark • 36" x 30" • Oil on Linen

Margaret used to develop all of her own negatives, film, and slides in the darkroom at the back of her studio, but the large format film is instead sent to the number one lab in Hollywood.

Since photography is such an important part of her production routine, she felt it important to have complete control of the process. However, the amount of time spent shooting, developing, enlarging, began to threaten her painting time. So Margaret's search to solve the dilemma of quality control versus time constraints led her to the digital world.

The advantage of digital capture of reference data is simple...speed, simplicity, and production efficiency. Recently, Meg has upgraded to the newer Nikon 995 with more bells and whistles.

### The Sitting

When Margaret's clients arrive, they first change in the dressing room/full bath at the back of the studio. This room is bathed in warm glowing light and filled with all the sitter may need including makeup, lighting mirrors, and a variety of colognes and perfumes to make them feel more beautiful.

The background drapery, all hung in a separate room, is chosen after careful consideration of the color lighting on the clothing and skin.

A variety of poses are shot with the digital camera always attempting to find the most natural, comfortable looking body position.

The Compact Flash disk is loaded into the reader, which acts as an external drive on her computer, and the days' shoot is downloaded for viewing with the client before they leave.

After studying all of the shots, the client may prefer elements from different shots to be consolidated. As she notes the choices, Margaret uses the photo manipulation software

Adobe Photoshop to compile these choices into one image. Nasty shadows, wrinkles in clothing, and other problems are then eliminated digitally.

The client approves the working photo, and if there is enough time or at a second sitting, Margaret also completes a full color oil sketch of the head. With the reference material ready, a deadline is set for the unveiling and the painting begins.

Using a lap top computer attached to a camera tripod, Margaret positions the screen at eye level flush with the canvas and begins to paint. She frequently studies the painting in the full-length mirror on an easel behind her. As the project reaches completion, Margaret shoots a digital photo of the painting and emails it to the client for approval. If the client chooses to make changes,

adjustments are made or a final sitting is planned.

### Computer Equipment

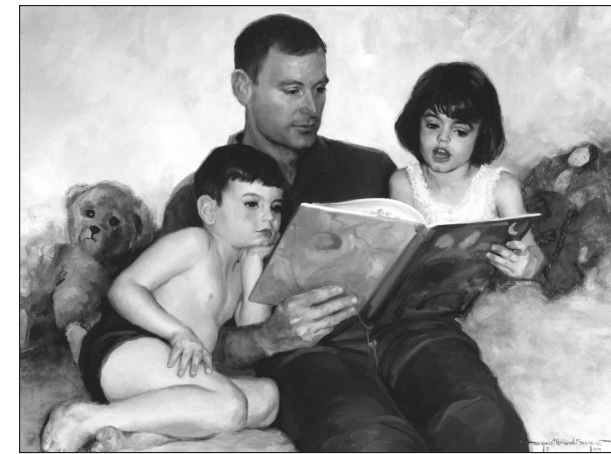
One entire wall of the studio is lined with computer equipment. Along with her two computer towers, she has two monitors a 21-inch and a 15-inch, two printers (one standard letter size and one large format for 13 x 17 prints), a large flat bed 11 x 17 inch scanner, a digital camera, and a laptop computer. Because of the huge tiff files she stores on the hard drives, she has upgraded her drives and memory several times.

There are zip and floppy drives, a Compact Flash reader, and a CD burner. The scanner is a dual mode scanner accepting both opaque and transparent media. This scans standard 35 mm slides, 4 x 5 transparencies, and printed materials. All hardware has been networked so that she can access files and peripherals from any computer.

Margaret's most recent printer is a large format 11 x 17 Epson for updating her 11 x 14 portfolio prints. However, she has not yet perfected the printout of these oversized prints. Still experimenting with varieties of new papers, she has had better luck with smaller format photos from her printer. Margaret still shoots her own 4 x 5 negatives and relies on her photo lab in nearby Hollywood to produce the 11 x 14's.

With much experimentation, Margaret has found that warehousing and archiving the new paintings is best done by scanning the 11 x 14 print from her lab in a tiff format. Then she burns a CD of the file, and saves it again in her other computer and in even another file. She says, "I found out the hard way that you can never have too many back ups."

Compilations of her paintings are then burned into a CD with the title, size, date, location, and file size. Besides being used for record keep-



Storytime – Taylor, Chris and Erin Sargent  
30" x 40" (Meg's older son with her grandchildren)

ing, this makes an easy digital portfolio for her to pass out.

### Meg's Advice

• Making certain that you have several exquisite examples of your work to show potential clients. Have extremely high quality reproductions to show anywhere anytime. It is best to have two 11 x 14 prints of each painting, one of the full image and one close up of the face.

• Spend advertising dollars wisely. We are in a unique time to take advantage of worldwide access through the internet. Margaret said the first year of her web page on the net had a 1000% return.

• Ask for the business. Go after what you want, but start at the top. Approach a likely client, and ask for the business. You may be surprised at the results.

• Don't fall behind in this new digital age. Every day there are new exciting ways to spread your business around the planet. Always be open to the new things. Every day there are new gadgets and gizmos that make our job easier. Jump in.

• Enjoy life! Do what makes you happy. When asked what she does

for fun she replied, "Why, I paint! I paint one of our children or a grandchild."

• Develop your own process... one that works for you. Find ways to improve what you do. Never be complacent. Constantly refine your skills and find new ways to achieve that better painting.

As a star of the portrait world and truly gracious hostess, Margaret divides her life among her loving husband, her devoted family, her groupie fans, her old friends, her new friends (who were once portrait clients), and her perfectly designed studio. Finding the right balance of stage time, volunteer time as a board member of the national portrait organization, and her solitary painting time is the only problem Meg may have.

It is obvious after meeting her that keeping an open mind to everything new keeps her young. Being married to the Colonel for 55 years keeps her happy. And with a new adventure every day, surely no star shines as brightly as Margaret Holland Sargent. ■



Meg Sargent in her studio with mounted laptop.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Our sincere thanks go to PSA contributing writer, Luana Winner, for the effort of traveling across the continent for this interview.

You may see more of Meg Sargent's work on her website at [www.sargentportraits.com](http://www.sargentportraits.com).