

Crying over Spilled Ink: A Century of John Singer Sargent's "The Synagogue" in the Boston Public Library **Elena Hoffenberg**

Description: Among the beautiful murals produced by John Singer Sargent for the Boston Public Library, *The Synagogue* stands out for its fraught history. While recognizing Sargent's exceptional artistic achievement, the community of Boston and beyond met this piece's installation with resistance. For several years following its initial unveiling in 1919, public debate raged over whether the piece reinforced past prejudice, taking place in printed words, in legislation in the Massachusetts State House, and in splashing ink on the painting itself. This case study of responses to the mural and controversy around its continued presence in the library sheds light on the representation of Judaism in public spaces, specifically the role of the public library as a forum for the Jewish community's negotiation of this representation.

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When the “Unite the Right” rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, national attention was directed to historical monuments and their power to incite contemporary responses as the Robert E. Lee statue in Emancipation Park became a focal point of the protests. A month earlier, when a Ku Klux Klan rally was planned for the site, the statue was vandalized with red paint and black graffiti.

This power of the past to shape our understanding of the present is at the core of the field of cultural heritage, and cultural heritage professionals engaged in these debates to draw attention the context for these objects, their creation, and their continued presence. This debate about works of art in prominent public places, the context in which they were created, and how they are interpreted is not limited to Confederate monuments, to the American south, or to the twenty-first century.

In this presentation, I would like to use an example from a different time and place to examine the history of these debates over representation in public institutions. In 1919, John

Singer Sargent, an acclaimed American artist, revealed his fourth last installment of his series hanging in the Boston Public Library: a pair of images depicting “the Synagogue” and “the Church.” Debate raged on whether something should and could be done to counter the perceived prejudice in Sargent’s *Synagogue* in this public institution. These debates were not only about what should be on the walls of the Boston Public Library. They were about the definitions of Boston as a city, the public served by the institution, and the role of the library.

While Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 and Boston, Massachusetts in 1919 may seem worlds apart, the responses to Sargent’s installation in the Boston Public Library can serve as a case study for how the debate around the presence of cultural objects in institutions can challenge the ideas they represent—especially when the objects remain where they are.

John Singer Sargent was an established painter before he started his murals for the Boston Public Library, but this project offered him the opportunity to earn a place among the masters. Sargent was born in Florence, Italy, in 1856 to American parents. He studied painting in Paris at the age of 18. In the following years, he became a prominent portrait painter both in England, where he had settled, and in the United States.¹ Later in his career, he was drawn to murals, permanent, public works of art, which offered him “a kind of immortality that his portraits did not afford.”²

Work for the murals began in May 1890. Sargent met with the architect of the Boston Public Library’s Copley Square location, Charles Follen McKim, and other artists. They pored over reproductions of works from the Renaissance to inspire the murals they would create.

¹ H. Barbara Weinberg, “John Singer Sargent (1856–1925),” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sarg/hd_sarg.htm.

² Carol Troyen, “American Mural Painting, the Boston Public Library, and Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion*” in *John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 23-33.

Sargent initially planned to paint themes from Spanish literature, a reference to the Ticknor Collection of Spanish and Portuguese Literature, which the Boston Public Library received in 1871. He settled on painting, instead, a sweeping narrative of religion and would eventually give it the title “Triumph of Religion.” That, too, fit the library’s special collection holdings, which included an extensive collection on the history of religion.³

Sargent’s “Triumph of Religion” joined other works by significant artists to comprise the first major mural program in an American public library. As American public libraries expanded at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, the site-specific works of art commissioned for their walls represented “complex assertions about public responsibilities” and sometimes “rather revealing historical representation of a community’s own self-image,” as Derrick Randall Cartwright describes in his Ph.D. dissertation on American public library murals.⁴ This came at the height of the American mural movement more broadly, which optimistically presented a generalized, genial classical past to inspire progress in the present.⁵

For Boston, these murals would solidify Boston’s reputation as “the hub of a new Renaissance,” in the words of critic and scholar Ernest Fenollosa.⁶ Yet, the mural also presented a tension in the Boston Public Library’s operations: who was the public it intended to serve? It was an institution that was “free to all,” as the Boston Public Library still proclaims today, but who determined what ideas were presented inside? Sally M. Promey, a scholar of Sargent’s murals in the Boston Public Library, argues that the public library, and indeed these murals and

³ Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 30.

⁴ Derrick Randall Cartwright, “Reading Rooms: Interpreting the American Public Library Mural, 1890-1930,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1994), 4-5.

⁵ Troyen, “American Mural Painting, the Boston Public Library, and Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion*,” 23-33.

⁶ Ernest Fenollosa, *Mural Painting in the Boston Public Library* (Boston, 1896), 28.

their didactic message, were a tool of the upper class in Boston—a city where status was organized around cultural institutions—to reinforce its social and cultural narrative, grounded in the Protestant, Puritan tradition.⁷

Sargent depicted a narrative that began with the “Pagan Gods” and “Israelites Oppressed” and continued through the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the “Messianic Era.” Reception of the sets of paintings revealed in 1895, 1903, and 1916 was mostly positive. As Sargent wrote to Mrs. Charles Hunter after his third round of murals were opened to the public, “The total effect of the hall at the library is better than I hoped, and it doesn’t matter if the individual paintings are good or bad.”⁸

These murals caught the attention of Boston’s Jewish population. Mary Antin, in her autobiographical book *The Promised Land*, published in 1912, describes looking up at the murals in Sargent Hall in Boston Public library. She writes, “Before the “Prophets” in the gallery above I was mute, but echoes of the Hebrew Psalms I had long forgotten throbbed somewhere in the depths of my consciousness.”⁹ Rabbi Charles Fleischer, the rabbi at Temple Israel, Boston, wrote to correct discrepancies in the Hebrew Sargent included in his “Old Testament” images.¹⁰

For his final murals, which would grace the east wall, Sargent planned to have *The Synagogue* and *The Church* flank the “Sermon on the Mount.” This was a solution he devised after he realized that the space was too large to be devoted entirely to the “Sermon on the Mount.” In a theatrical flourish, in 1916 Sargent installed curtains in the place of *The Synagogue* and *The Church*, stoking the fire of anticipation for the reveal of these works.

⁷ Promey, *Painting Religion in Public*, 152-154.

⁸ Sargent Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, roll D 169, cited in “Appendix A: A Documentary History of Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion*,” *John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁹ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912).

¹⁰ Promey, *Painting Religion in Public*, 194.

On October 5, 1919, *The Synagogue* and *The Church* were revealed. Color unified these new additions with the earlier sections, linked by red and blue tones. Yet, *The Synagogue* still remained distinct. *The Synagogue* was the only mural in the hall executed entirely in oils, without gilded or added relief elements.¹¹

In truth, the controversy started before the murals were even revealed. In an early preview of the murals, the art critic of the *Boston Sunday Herald* expressed a hope that Mr. Sargent would “avoid the old-middle age bigotry in working out this perilous theme . . . in the interests of racial and religious amenity in this community.”¹² This critic went on to note that Judaism was alive and well, as the neighborhood near the Boston Public Library showed with its prosperous and well-attended synagogues. The day after the paintings were revealed, the *Boston Evening Transcript* printed a favorable review by the art critic William Howe Downes that acknowledged its medieval sources and recognized the possibility for “theological controversialists . . . [to] object to the revival, in our day, even in a modified form of these obsolete suggestions of doctrinal difference.”¹³

Downes ended his review with a somewhat dismissive remark that “Boston tax payers of Jewish faith feel they have a right to opinion about public monuments.”¹⁴ A week later, the critic from the *Boston Sunday Herald* published another review of the mural, which recognized Sargent’s artistic achievement while also acknowledging that “If one were a rabbi or a cantor, it

¹¹ Teri Hensick, “Painting Materials and Techniques,” in *John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 65.

¹² Frederick W. Coburn, “In the World of Art,” *Boston Sunday Herald*, September 14, 1919, C4.

¹³ William Howe Downes, “Two New Panels by Sargent,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, October 6, 1919, 16.

¹⁴ Downes, “Two New Panels by Sargent.”

might be a little distasteful to have this middle-age fashion of depreciating his ancient religion revived in a building supported by public taxation.”¹⁵

Indeed, Jews in Boston did have opinions about this painting by Sargent—and Sargent understood these opinions were not positive. In response to this criticism, Sargent addressed a letter to the community in which he appealed to the authority of a tradition of iconography that could be found in prominent European cathedrals.¹⁶ As Sargent wrote to a friend two weeks after the murals were revealed, “I am in hot water here with the Jews, who resent my ‘Synagogue,’ and want to have it removed.”¹⁷

The responses to Sargent’s painting shed light on Jewish self-image and sense of establishment in Boston. In early twentieth century Boston, the Jewish community was not yet established enough to prevent such a mural from being installed, nor Judaism normalized enough to render such a representation self-evidently inappropriate. Yet, the Jewish community felt it had standing to voice concerns about what was happening in a public institution and spoke out against the mural.

As background, the situation of Jews in Boston had changed in the previous few decades. Between 1880—a decade before Sargent began his work on the murals—and 1920—a year after he revealed what would be his last murals in the Boston Public Library—the population in Boston doubled while the Jewish population of the city increased sixteenfold, from 4,500 to 80,000.¹⁸ In 1919, four percent of Boston’s population was Jewish. Although Boston was a city

¹⁵ Frederick W. Coburn, “In the World of Art,” *Boston Sunday Herald*, October 12, 1919, C8.

¹⁶ John Singer Sargent, “Letter to *The Jewish Advocate*,” reprinted in “Editorial,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, November 7, 1919, page 4.

¹⁷ Sargent to Charteris, October 24 [1919], reproduced in Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (New York, 1927), 209.

¹⁸ Jonathan D. Sarna, , Ellen Smith, and Scott-Martin Kosofsky, ed., *The Jews of Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

as old as any other in the United States, it was one of the last major American cities to have a significant Jewish community.¹⁹

Immigrants contributed to much of this growth. Anti-immigrant sentiment was also on the rise. It was in Boston in 1894 that the Immigration Restriction League was founded; this organization saw Eastern European “new immigrants” as incapable of assimilating into the nation and advocated requiring a literacy test in English before immigrating to the United States. Elsewhere in Boston, just a week after Sargent unveiled *The Synagogue* in October 1919, the Young Men’s Hebrew Associations of New England’s committee on Americanization and Naturalization launched a new program to encourage teaching English.²⁰

The initial response to *The Synagogue* emphasized that it is a work of art and should be evaluated as such. *The Jewish Advocate*, a Boston newspaper, announced that an art critic from New York had been invited to pass judgement on the painting.²¹ Alexander Brin, the editor of that paper, pledged to let the matter rest if the art critic decided the painting was no affront.²² As the editors of the *B’nai B’rith Messenger* wrote a month later, “It may be art, but it certainly fails to do justice.” They continued, “there is fiction in art, but th[at] fiction does violence to fact.”²³

A young Jewish artist, Rose Kohler, responded with a corrective work of art: a medallion depicting Judaism as vibrant.²⁴

¹⁹ The first congregation—Ohabai Shalom, founded in 1842—was established a century after congregations had been founded in similar East Coast colonial cities, and even a decade after synagogues in midwestern states.

²⁰ “Americanization Program Launched by Council of YMH Kindred Associations,” *The Denver Jewish News*, October 15, 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn91052360/1919-10-15/ed-1/seq-5/>.

²¹ *Evening star*, October 12, 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1919-10-12/ed-1/seq-23/>.

²² “Jews Offended by Mr. Sargent’s Synagogue,” *Literary Digest*, November 1, 1919, 31.

²³ “Editorial,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, November 7, 1919, page 4.

²⁴ B. M. Bakar, “Editorial Jottings,” *B’nai Brith Messenger*, July 30, 1920, page 4.

Rabbi Henry Raphael Gold of Temple Adath Jeshurun in Roxbury, the largest Orthodox synagogue in New England, visited the mural and published his response. Rabbi Gold introduced his criticism of *The Synagogue* with three points of judgement.

“First, whether or not it is good art; second, whether or not the painter has the right to choose such a subject, and third, whether it is good taste to place the picture in a public institution, supported by all the citizens, where some of the citizens may be hurt.”²⁵

Addressing each consideration in turn, he acknowledged that, first, he “hardly know[s] good art from bad,” and second, the artist does have the right to choose a troublesome subject for an artwork. Indeed, Rabbi Gold believed it is a good work of art, or at least richer than *The Church* which had “the stiffness” of illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. Rabbi Gold anticipated an argument against removing *The Synagogue*, the allegation that the objections to *The Synagogue* are caused by “lack of appreciation of its great intrinsic merit as a work of art.”

As for the question of whether it should be placed in a public institution: Rabbi Gold draws a stark divide between the sources of Sargent’s ideas—cathedrals—and their setting—the public library. He writes, “for the sake of justice and fair play such sentiments should not be eternalized on the walls of a free institution like the Boston Public Library.”

Rabbis from across the country took note of this painting. “Anti-Semitism has found many a cruel weapon with which to fight its unholy battle,” Rabbi Leo M. Franklin said in a sermon at Congregation Beth El in Detroit, “but surely the time has not come in American when even art may be prostituted to so base a purpose.”²⁶ Rabbi Louis Wolsey published an editorial in a Cleveland Jewish newspaper condemning the hypocrisy of the Boston Public Library trustees

²⁵ Rose S. Klein, “John Singer Sargent’s Painting – The Synagogue,” Rose Klein transcriptions and articles; P-386; box 1; folder 6; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Boston, MA.

²⁶ “The Historical Background of the New Sargent Pictures,” typescript, BPL, Ms Bos Li B18o, cited in “Appendix A: A Documentary History of Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion*,” *John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

for rejecting a nude sculpture while permitting visitors of the institution to “see what an intolerant and ignorant art thought about the Jew’s house of prayer.”²⁷ Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf denounced Sargent’s mural as a piece of “Dark-Age bigotry” from the pulpit of Philadelphia’s Reform congregation Keneseth Israel.²⁸

Sargent’s *The Synagogue* appeared on the agendas of national Jewish organizations, as well. In November 1919, the Central Conference of American Rabbis met in Detroit and sent a cable to the Boston Public Library trustees to protest the presentation of the synagogue since such a picture “will hurt a large section of the community in their tenderest sensibilities and deepest convictions it should not appear in a public institution supported by public taxation.”²⁹ When the National Council of Jewish Women met in Nashville, Tennessee, that same month, the board adopted a resolution decrying Sargent’s painting as “an affront to the Jewish citizens of the United States”³⁰ and denouncing doing “anything which can encourage discrimination against any part of its citizenship” as “against the spirit of these particular times and against the spirit of America at all times.”³¹

²⁷ Rabbi Louis Wolsey, “Bigotry and Nudity,” *Jewish Review and Observer*, December 5, 1919, BPL, Ms Bos Li B18b, folder 1, cited in “Appendix A: A Documentary History of Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion*,” *John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁸ *Evening public ledger*, November 24, 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045211/1919-11-24/ed-1/seq-2/>.

²⁹ Leo M. Frank[lin], president, and Felix A. Levy, secretary, Central Conference on American Rabbis, Detroit, to library trustees, cable, November 5, 1919, BPL, Ms Bos Li B18b, folder 1 cited in “Appendix A: A Documentary History of Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion*,” *John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

³⁰ *The Chattanooga News*, November 22, 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038531/1919-11-22/ed-1/seq-5/>.

³¹ National Council of Jewish Women resolution, quoted in Promey, *Painting Religion in Public*, 181.

It was clear that the claim by Jews to this great American institution of culture and ideas was at stake in this debate. The initial petition labeled the painting as “un-American.”³² The *B’nai B’rith Messenger* objected along similar lines, with a focus on the educational mission of the public library: “It is felt that a public institution, particularly one fostering education, is no place for harboring religious paintings which may offend one class of citizens.”³³ Rabbi Leo M. Franklin bemoaned the fact that this untrue image had found a place “in a public institution devoted to the spread of knowledge and to the dissemination of truth.”³⁴

In this effort, Jewish organizations worked with non-Jewish organizations, too. Rabbi Leo M. Franklin urged participants of the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ 1920 conference to cooperate with other Jewish organizations to bar Sargent’s “The Synagogue” from the Boston Public Library and to “promote good fellowship” between Jewish synagogues and Christian churches.³⁵ Anecdotally, this was happening in some communities. After Sargent’s mural was unveiled, the rector of a church in Baltimore invited a rabbi to examine the Old Testament figures decorating the church. Reporting on this, the *B’nai Brith Messenger* praised the rector of “display[ing] a spirit which John Singer Sargent and the trustees of the Boston Public Library could do well to emulate.”³⁶

Ultimately, this advocacy did not change the situation and *The Synagogue* remained on the walls of the Boston Public Library.

³² *Evening Star*, October 12, 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1919-10-12/ed-1/seq-23/>.

³³ “Editorial,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, November 7, 1919, page 4.

³⁴ “The Historical Background of the New Sargent Pictures,” typescript, BPL, Ms Bos Li B18o, cited in “Appendix A: A Documentary History of Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion*,” *John Singer Sargent’s Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

³⁵ *The Ogden Standard-Examiner*, June 30, 1920, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85058393/1920-06-30/ed-1/seq-1/>.

³⁶ B. M. Bakar, “Editorial Jottings,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, March 12, 1920, 4.

After a quiet period of two years, attention returned to *The Synagogue*. A proposal was introduced in the Massachusetts State House to remove the mural, making headlines in New York and Philadelphia.³⁷ The legislator who championed this cause was Coleman Silbert. Born in 1892 to Jewish immigrant parents, Silbert had attended Harvard College and worked in the Jewish community in New England—including in the YMHA’s so-called “Americanization” programs for new immigrants that began in October 1919, a week after *The Synagogue* was revealed.³⁸ That same year, he had been elected to the Massachusetts State House for the upcoming term starting in 1920.

In January 1922, Silbert introduced a bill to direct the Boston Public Library trustees to remove *The Synagogue*, but legal interpretations made such a directive unconstitutional. Silbert introduced a revised bill that would empower the Department of Education of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to seize the mural by eminent domain and place it in the schools for use in art courses.

To Silbert, what was at stake was not merely a slight against Judaism, but against history, and it was not only Jews, but all people, who were harmed by this. As he phrased it:

[T]he action taken by the Legislature was not done specifically for the Jewish people. We put it in a broader light, claiming that it did not depict history correctly. . . . It is against the broad spirit of Americanism.³⁹

³⁷ *Evening Public Ledger*, June 10, 1922, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045211/1922-06-10/ed-1/seq-1/>; *The New York Herald*, June 10, 1922, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045774/1922-06-10/ed-1/seq-1/>.

³⁸ “Americanization Program Launched by Council of YMH Kindred Associations,” *The Denver Jewish News*, October 15, 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn91052360/1919-10-15/ed-1/seq-5/>.

³⁹ Coleman Silbert as cited in “John Singer Sargent dies during sleep,” quoted in Promey, *Painting Religion in Public*, 200-201.

Other Jewish communal leaders supported removing the painting. Assistant Attorney General Lewis Goldberg, president of the Young Men's Hebrew Association of New England, Leo J. Lyons, president of the local lodge of B'nai B'rith, and Isadore Fox, chair of the New England Anti-Defamation League delivered testimony. The Central Conference of American Rabbis was represented by Rabbi Harry Levi of Temple Israel, Boston.

The testimony submitted during discussion of this bill illustrates this issue's broad reach beyond the Jewish community of Boston, as well. Two representatives from the Massachusetts Federation of Churches declared their support for the measure.

Although the bill passed the House, it was not without opposition. Viewing *The Synagogue* as a part of Sargent's larger work, artists objected to removing the panel, which would destroy the unity of the series.⁴⁰ Peyton Smith, Commissioner on Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, protested this plan, claiming that his department was ill-equipped to handle such a costly original painting and, more importantly, it would not resolve the controversy, but rather bring it into the schools.⁴¹

There were Jewish dissenting voices, as well. When thanking the house for its vote, Silbert attacked Simon Swig, a Lithuanian-born Boston banker who had attempted to use his influence to defeat the measure to remove the painting from the Boston Public Library, as "a menace to civilization and to Americanism."⁴² Another prominent Jewish philanthropist, Louis Edward Kirstein, a trustee of the Boston Public Library, privately supported Sargent and his painting. In public, he merely affirmed that the trustees could not remove the painting.

⁴⁰ Rose S. Klein, "John Singer Sargent's Painting – The Synagogue," Rose Klein transcriptions and articles; P-386; box 1; folder 6; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Boston, MA.

⁴¹ Rose S. Klein, "John Singer Sargent's Painting – The Synagogue," Rose Klein transcriptions and articles; P-386; box 1; folder 6; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Boston, MA.

⁴² *The New York Herald*, June 10, 1922, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045774/1922-06-10/ed-1/seq-1/>.

Other activities in the 1922 legislative session provide context for this vote on *The Synagogue*. Silbert did introduced an order encouraging the government of the United States to recognize the status of Jewish people in Mandate Palestine.⁴³ Silbert’s bill to seize *The Synagogue* for educational purposes was considered at the same time as an order submitted by another legislator creating a joint special committee to investigate “alleged or proposed discrimination against persons of the Jewish race” at Harvard University.”⁴⁴

On the pages of the *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, the report of this bill’s passage appeared alongside other news items that paint a picture of triumph and acceptance, but also rising concerns about the status of Jews in American and elsewhere. Silbert’s plea for “a spirit of broad tolerance in keeping with American traditions” was echoed in news that Rabbi Leo M. Franklin of Detroit—who just a few years earlier had condemned Sargent’s mural—would be an invited preacher at a Catholic church in Detroit. This picture of interfaith tolerance contrasts starkly with the announcements printed elsewhere on the page, which mention that Henry Ford—a notable anti-Semite of Detroit—has been making plans to run for president, that the government is seizing synagogue property in the Soviet Union, and that pogroms are being carried out in Ukraine.⁴⁵

In 1924, vandalism thrust Sargent’s *The Synagogue* back into the spotlight in 1924. In February, staff of the Boston Public Library discovered a black, inklike substance splattered on the painting and surrounding wall.⁴⁶ Restoration happened the following day, done by a specialist selected by

⁴³ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1922), 607-608.

⁴⁴ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1152.

⁴⁵ B. M. Bakar, “Editorial Jottings,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, July 7, 1922, page 6.

⁴⁶ *Evening Star*, February 22, 1924, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1924-02-22/ed-1/seq-21/>.

Sargent himself. The next day, the hall was crowded with visitors who were flocking to see the vandalism; the only evidence they found was the work crew cleaning the sandstone wall nearby.⁴⁷

The vandalism was denounced by writers in Jewish newspapers and non-sectarian newspapers alike.⁴⁸ The perpetrator was never identified, and this act did not change the government's assertion that the mural should remain. A repeal of Coleman Silbert's bill from two years earlier was passed through the Massachusetts Legislative committee with the support of the Department of Education.⁴⁹ When repealing this measure to seize *The Synagogue*, Governor Channing H. Cox signed a bill into law stating that "works of art, which by their nature and character reflect upon any race or class within our commonwealth, should not be placed in public buildings."⁵⁰

Since the splashing of the ink, and the ultimate dissolution of legislative efforts to remove the painting, this series of murals have been reframed to emphasize the narrative of religious progress and tolerance. The 1921 handbook of the Boston Public Library introduces the series of murals as "The Triumph of Religion" and the pairing of *The Synagogue* and *The Church* as "The Medieval Contrast."⁵¹ In the 1939 version of the guide, the text regarding Sargent's murals is

⁴⁷ Rose S. Klein, "John Singer Sargent's Painting – The Synagogue," Rose Klein transcriptions and articles; P-386; box 1; folder 6; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Boston, MA.

⁴⁸ Charles H. Joseph, "Random Thoughts," *The Sentinel*, February 29, 1924, page 12.

⁴⁹ *Evening Star*, March 8, 1924, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1924-03-08/ed-1/seq-8/>.

⁵⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Chapter 220 of the Acts of 1924, BPL, Ms Bos Li B18b, folder 2, cited in "Appendix A: A Documentary History of Sargent's *Triumph of Religion*," *John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*, ed. Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁵¹ Frank H. Chase, *The Boston Public Library: A Handbook to the Library Building Its Mural Decorations and Its Collections* (Boston: Association Publications, 1921), 38-40.

exactly the same, except that the mural series is introduced as “Judaism and Christianity” not “Triumph of Religion.”⁵² The controversy is noticeably absent from these handbooks.

Despite the fact that the controversial painting *The Synagogue* remained on the walls of the Boston Public Library, interest in other parts of Sargent’s “Triumph of Religion” persisted. In 1927, when students performed at Medinah Temple in Chicago, *The Sentinel* reported great interest in seeing biblical scenes reproduced with living figures, including the “Frieze of the Prophets,” Sargent’s famous image in the Boston Public Library.⁵³ In 1938, representatives of the Jewish Community Center of Rochester, New York corresponded with Milton Lord, librarian at the Boston Public Library, to request a photographic reproduction of Sargent’s depiction of the prophets.⁵⁴ The image was ultimately mounted in the JCC library.

Interest in Sargent did not suffer, either. In the *Denver Jewish News*, news of controversy around *The Synagogue* was printed beside a profile of David Bomberg, a young Jewish artist in London, who was able to pursue the study of art thanks to a scholarship provided by none other than John Singer Sargent himself.⁵⁵ Sargent was praised as a “friend of Jews” in 1923, in the midst of “The Synagogue” controversy. Sargent had painted the prominent British Jew Asher Wertheimer and when Wertheimer willed the paintings to the British nation, the House of Commons’ deliberations on the matter brought to the fore anti-Jewish sentiment in Great Britain.⁵⁶

⁵² *The Boston Public Library: A Handbook to the Library Building Its Mural Decorations and Its Collections* (Boston: Association Publications, 1939), 41.

⁵³ “The Pageant ‘Conquerors,’” *The Sentinel*, May 13, 1927, page 34.

⁵⁴ Sally M. Promey, “The Afterlives of Sargent’s Prophets,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, The Reception of Christian Devotional Art (Spring, 1998), 31-44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777990>.

⁵⁵ *The Denver Jewish News*, December 3, 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn91052360/1919-12-03/ed-1/seq-6/>.

⁵⁶ Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public*, 207.

Ultimately, the artwork fell victim to neglect and its environment. As a transportation hub, Copley Square suffered from poor air quality. In 1928, the *Boston Herald* reported on people's desire to have better lighting for "the sequence of murals depicting the progress of Judaism."⁵⁷ After the vandalism, it was nearly thirty years before the murals received conservation treatment—which ended up being controversial and left the impression that the murals had suffered irreversible damage.⁵⁸ When Rose Klein, a local Jewish communal activist, studied the controversy around Sargent's *The Synagogue* in the 1980s, she found the image "covered with layers of dust so thick that the figure of the blinded old woman could not be discerned."⁵⁹ Surveys and studies culminated in a thorough conservation treatment finally in 2003-2004, resulting in the painting as it can be clearly viewed today.

The Boston Public Library does not avoid mention of the controversy today. Upon entering Sargent Hall in the library's old building on Copley Square—a place which I hope you have had a chance to visit during your time in Boston—one can find a glossy, laminated brochure of the Sargent Gallery Murals. On one side, the murals on the walls above are flattened onto an illustrated map with their given titles; on the other side, one can find a written version of what docents would say at this stop on the tour. Under the heading "1919 Installation," the brochure identifies the medieval depictions that inspired Sargent's murals. In one sentence, the library summarizes the controversy as follows:

"to detractors, this depiction appeared both outdated and defamatory; it could imply that Judaism, like the ruins around Synagogue, was somehow 'broken'—a message that Sargent never intended to send."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ H. F. Manchester, "Lighting of the Famed Abbey Murals at Library Criticised by Art Pilgrims. Present Illumination is Annoying to Artists and Laymen Alike," *Boston Herald*, October 14, 1928.

⁵⁸ *John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration*. Ed. By Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene, Kate Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 14.

⁵⁹ Rose S. Klein, "John Singer Sargent's Painting – The Synagogue," Rose Klein transcriptions and articles; P-386; box 1; folder 6; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Boston, MA.

⁶⁰ "Sargent Mural Gallery," Brochure, Boston Public Library.

An online exhibition—created in 2003 in connection with the murals’ restoration—focuses on Sargent’s artistic and contemporary sources more than on the mural’s critical reception.⁶¹

I would like offer a few observations as a conclusion. First, claiming a controversial image as art cannot protect it from criticism; if anything, it directs the criticism to a single person, whose genius created the contested image. The focus on an individual source of the work encourages examining the individual to find answers or assign blame. If it is art, then there must be an artist, and an artist is a complex individual who can say whatever they want about their work, but it may not change what people see in it.

Second, whether artistic expressions of particular beliefs or historical depictions of specific instances, images in public places are a product of their time. For the contemporary viewers of *The Synagogue*, this was somewhat true—Sargent was illustrating a medieval idea—but that did not mean his ideas did not affect those living in his time. This is partially true for us viewing these images today, as well. Their continued presence is a product of our own time.

Third, and finally, the reaction we have to an image like this documents the viewers’ changes, as well. There was undoubtedly a range of reactions to Sargent’s *Synagogue*, the voices that have been preserved in the historical record are those who reacted most strongly, as you have heard in this presentation, but someone who is Jewish and encounters the image today may not feel so insulted as to vandalize it or to introduce legislation to seize it by eminent domain. As we saw with the debate around Sargent’s *The Synagogue*, it is through responses to challenging

⁶¹ Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, “The Sargent Murals at the Boston Public Library: History, Interpretation, Restoration,” 2003, <http://sargentmurals.bpl.org/site.html>.

images that we assert that we have arrived, that we have a claim to public institutions, and negotiate representation in those spaces.