What’s There, What’s Not

A Performer’s View of
Sargent’s El Jaleo

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*El Jaleo* (frontispiece), the enormous—and enormously ambitious—canvas that made John Singer Sargent’s reputation when it was exhibited at the 1882 Paris Salon, is not a superficial memento of an American tourist’s first encounter with flamenco. Nor is it a vehicle for demonstrating all that Sargent had learned from the masters of Spanish painting. Rather, *El Jaleo* is a dramatic—and impressively accurate—record the young aficionado made of what he had actually observed upon entering the seductive world of flamenco music and dance, a world he continued to admire for the rest of his life.

Much of the voluminous literature dedicated to Sargent (1856–1925) deals with *El Jaleo*. However, this painting has been seriously misunderstood by some of the most distinguished observers of the last one hundred years. Both critics and art historians have made major factual errors in their comments about Sargent’s picture, even describing things that simply are not there. In addition, they have sometimes misinterpreted the overall tone of the painting. Since the details of both historic and present-day flamenco remain relatively unknown to nonpractitioners, such mistakes are understandable. A discussion of *El Jaleo* in terms of flamenco performance practice can help correct these oversights and enrich our understanding of this powerful painting.

While he is best known for his stunning and sometimes controversial society portraits, Sargent also painted landscapes, religious themes, and so-called “subject” pictures, including *El Jaleo*, which more than one critic has hailed as “the great masterpiece of [Sargent’s] early years.” Even a French reviewer who saw the painting at the salon admitted that he did not share “the general infatuation” with this painting, but felt compelled to add that “it forces on the mind an irresistible impression of its strength.” He continued: “Incontestably
supreme among foreign artists in this Salon is M. John Sargent, the American; his picture of the gipsy dance, *El Jaleo*, seems to have turned the head of all Paris.¹

Sargent’s picture of a dance performance in southern Spain seems remarkably authentic, considering that it was painted in France by an American artist born in Italy, using professional artists’ models who were neither dancers nor Spaniards, three years after the events it depicts.² The eight by eleven-and-a half-foot canvas, and its numerous related studies, were inspired mainly by the five-month trip Sargent took to Spain during the winter of 1879–80, when he divided his time among Seville, Granada, and Madrid.

Sargent sent the finished painting to the Paris Salon, along with a second, very different picture, *The Lady with the Rose* (1882). This relatively conventional portrait of nineteen-year-old Charlotte Louise Burckhardt holding a white flower provided a strong contrast with his more daring Spanish subject. Although Sargent’s portrait was praised, it was *El Jaleo* that became an overnight sensation, attracting a great deal of attention from both the public and the press, and making twenty-six-year-old Sargent “the most talked-about painter in Paris.”³

Soon after the salon closed, Schaus & Company, a prominent New York art dealer, purchased *El Jaleo*, then immediately sold it to Thomas Jefferson Coolidge, a retired American diplomat. After much prodding by his good friend (and cousin by marriage) Isabella Stewart Gardner, he gave it to her. In 1915 the painting, installed in a specially designed “Spanish Cloister,” became the centerpiece of the music room in Gardner’s Boston home.

On one level *El Jaleo* is a typical example of the phenomenon known as Hispanism, that fascination with everything Spanish which became widespread throughout Europe, England, and the United States from the early nineteenth century into the twentieth. Hispanism was sparked by the sudden influx of British and French soldiers into Spain during the Peninsular War of 1808–14. Previously Spain had been isolated from, and largely unknown to, the rest of the world. Spanish influence is clearly evident in nineteenth-century literature by Théophile Gautier and Washington Irving; music, notably, Georges Bizet’s opera *Carmen*, which premiered in Paris in 1875; and visual art as seen in the paintings of Edouard Manet, Eugène Delacroix, Thomas Eakins, and Mary Cassatt. Spanish artists, too, suddenly found themselves focusing on Andalusia, the most exotic, Moorish-influenced, southernmost part of their country, and the region where flamenco has traditionally held sway.⁴

However, the scene depicted in *El Jaleo* is quite different from the typically escapist fantasies painted by most nineteenth-century artists, including those from Spain. Works such as *El Baile (Sevilla)* by Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida (1863–1923; fig. 1) or the many works with titles like *Fiesta Flamenca* by Sorolla’s contemporaries Ricardo Brugada (1867–1919) and José García y Ramos (1852–1912) are delightful but hardly realistic representations of actual dancing. In French romantic ballet (exemplified by *Giselle*, choreographed by Jules Perrot in 1841), the corps of peasants inevitably returns from long days in the vineyard unsoiled, unscratched, and curiously energetic. Likewise, the “peasant” performers depicted in paintings by Sorolla, Brugada, García y Ramos, and others are scrupulously clean, well-fed, fashionably dressed, and smiling, dancing to please themselves or the occasional passers-by, in bucolic outdoor or spotless, brilliantly lighted, colorful indoor settings.⁵ Yet the titles of such works frequently indicate that the dancing represented is supposed to be flamenco, a form intimately identified with Gypsies, whom the people in the paintings obviously are not. In Spain,
as elsewhere, Gypsies have historically been a despised and oppressed minority. Gypsy dancing in late nineteenth-century Spain presumably looked more like Young Dancers (fig. 2), a drawing by Gustave Doré (1832–1883) that shows small, disheveled Gypsy children dancing bare-foot in the dirt to beg for coins. Historical photographs (fig. 3) show that professional groups of Gypsy dancers and musicians from this period were far from the graceful, well-schooled, and expensively clad performers seen in most paintings.

The subtitle of Sargent's El Jaleo is Danse des Gitanes (Gypsy dance), which then, as now, means that the type of dance represented is flamenco, rather than any of the other types of Spanish dance. Additional Spanish dance forms that were popular in the 1800s included traditional folk dances from Spain's various cultural regions and classical Spanish dance of the so-called bolero school (the escuela bolera). Like ballet, this form was danced in soft slippers, with the women playing castanets and wearing fluffy, mid-calf-length skirts that resembled romantic-style tutus. Ironically, Spanish classical dance was initially made famous by Fanny Elssler, the Austrian ballerina best known for her sensual, classical solo La Cachucha, which she first danced in Paris in 1836, and which made her the toast of Europe and later, the United States. This is the same kind of dance Manet painted in Spanish Ballet (fig. 4) and several of his other early works.

However, flamenco is something entirely different. As it is known today, flamenco dance first developed in the nineteenth century. Spanish classical dance evolved, as did ballet, from European court dance of the 1600s, and therefore is based on a rigid system of written rules governing both technique and style. Unlike classical dance, flamenco began as an intimate, largely improvisational form, performed without formal training by and for Gypsies, in the caves of Sacromonte or their modest homes elsewhere in Andalusia. Historically, flamenco was a solo dance form, usually accompanied by a singer and a musician playing a guitar (when he could afford one) or pounding a stick against the floor or slapping a clay jug with his hands for additional rhythmic accents. Generally the flamenco dancer would be female and the musician male; the singer could be of either gender.

All this changed during what is now known as the Golden Age of Flamenco, from around 1860–1915, when entrepreneurs recognized its entertainment and money-making potential. They moved flamenco into the public arena via the café cantante—a large room with a raised stage at one end, a bar at the other, and chairs and tables in between. The café cantante was the equivalent of today's tablao, a sort of flamenco nightclub, where food and drink are served and several flamenco shows are presented nightly.

Flamenco, as presented in the café cantante, became more and more theatricalized, with greater stress placed on attractive female dancers in colorful costumes doing showy, crowd-pleasing movements in a light, happy tone to stimulate the patrons' interest in eating and drinking. Because there is a dance in the escuela bolera repertoire called El Jaleo de Jerez, which features this exuberant aspect, art historians have suggested
Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, *El Baile (Sevilla)*, 1915. Oil, 351 x 302 cm (138 x 118 1/2 in.). The Hispanic Society of America, New York.
that that dance is the subject of Sargent’s painting, and the source of his title. But El Jaleo shows a completely different kind of costuming, instrumentation, and mood.7

Rather, flamenco experts maintain, Sargent’s title refers to the process known as el jaleo, in which performers support the dancer by yelling encouraging sounds—“¡ole!”—and rhythmically snapping their fingers (pitos) and clapping their hands (palmas), while the singer and guitarists accompany her steps. By the time Sargent got to Seville, all southern Spanish cities had large-scale, successful cafés cantantes featuring elaborate shows put on by Gypsy performers four times a day. Therefore, a good deal of jaleo would have been needed to keep the performances fresh.

An accomplished pianist who also played the guitar, Sargent was very fond of music. While there are no records of any specific details regarding his Spanish trip, Sargent often stated that he particularly liked Andalusian Gypsy music. In an 1880 letter, he extolled “the half-African . . . Soleares, [a] dismal, restless chant that is impossible to [notate].” Soleares is a serious flamenco form, named for la soledad, Spanish for loneliness or solitude. Thus, his letter indicates that the darker, more “pure” type of flamenco songs appealed to him, which is unusual, since true cante jondo (deep, or serious, flamenco singing) and baile jondo (serious flamenco dancing) were seldom appreciated by non-Gypsies. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that the flamenco music Sargent probably heard in 1879–80—and the effect he hoped to convey in this painting—was that of cante jondo. As demonstrated in both present-day and historical recordings, the typical cantaor (male flamenco singer) has a voice that is hoarse, harsh, and filled with raw emotion. Such a voice is adored by flamencophiles, but seldom appreciated by audiences accustomed to more mellifluous, conventionally pretty sounds. Serious flamenco singing has often been compared to the blues, because it conveys a gritty, unvarnished, anguished mood.8

Sargent’s El Jaleo superlatively evokes the kinds of emotions expressed through cante and baile jondo. Yet much of the commentary on this painting by art historians has stressed the “artificial,” “contrived,” and “exaggerated” nature of this “studio production,” crediting Sargent
with inventing—or borrowing from earlier masters—things he could easily have observed during the flamenco performances he saw in southern Spain.

One example is the peculiar effect, cited by many writers, of the line of figures running horizontally across the canvas, behind the dancer. Admittedly, this would be an odd choice as an “invented” compositional device. But it is customary in both historical and contemporary flamenco shows to arrange the singers and instrumentalists in precisely that way (fig. 5). Traditionally, flamenco was presented on a tiny stage, with no space for the dancer to move about if the other performers were not crowded into a line or arranged in a shallow semicircle behind her. There is also an important performance-related reason for this arrangement. Since the dancer determines the tempo of the accompanying music, the flamenco guitarist, singer, and palmero (the person who adds rhythmic interest by clapping his hands) must carefully watch the dancer’s movements, especially her footwork. The best view—without blocking the audience’s sightlines—is directly behind the dancer.

Scholars and critics have regularly commented on the pose of the dancer in Sargent’s El Jaleo, finding it strange or even “anatomically impossible.” In particular, writers have singled out the right arm, held “grotesquely akimbo” on her hip (fig. 6). However, it is standard procedure for a flamenco dancer to catch up part of her skirt with one hand and rest that hand on her hip, thus holding the skirt high enough off the floor to perform her footwork and ensure that it is easily seen. Moreover, there is much photographic and anecdotal evidence to prove that the position of the dancer’s elbow is not only possible but also common in flamenco.

Writers have also voiced concern over the dancer’s left arm, which is outstretched in what one critic referred to as “a feverish and menacing gesture.” For eyes accustomed to ballet’s graceful symmetry, this pose would indeed seem peculiar. But flamenco dance is based on opposition and asymmetry—for example, as the left shoulder moves forward, the right foot also moves forward, forcing the torso...
Edouard Manet, *Spanish Ballet*, 1862. Oil, 61 x 90.4 cm (24 x 35 ⅜ in.). The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Therefore, what may have seemed a contorted pose is a standard flamenco dance technique and style. In fact, this particular gesture in *El Jaleo* is widespread in flamenco because it allows the dancer to direct the audience’s attention to the skillful circling motions of her wrist and fingers. Because of its importance, the position has been captured in myriad but rarely seen paintings, sculptures, and photographs of female flamenco dancers.

One of the most startling elements in Sargent’s painting is the singer, who sits directly to the dancer’s right, his mouth wide open and his head dramatically thrown back (fig. 7). Art historian Mary Crawford Volk calls this figure “a marvelous pictorial invention,” while several other scholars have found a source for his highly emotional depiction in the art of Francisco de Goya—specifically, the faces of the terrified victims in *The Third of May, 1808*. While Sargent’s singer may, indeed, be marvelous, I would argue that he is neither invented nor particularly indebted to Goya. Instead, he looks like a real flamenco singer caught in the middle of an especially moving performance. Just as flamenco song frequently sounds harsh, the faces of flamenco singers typically reflect profound emotion. As a result, their grimacing expressions can appear strange, even grotesque, when captured by a photographer (or a painter) and seen out of context (fig. 8). Such extreme expressions are expected and even considered beautiful by flamencophiles; these expressions are also characteristic of flamenco dancers performing baile jondo.
Many writers have cited the limited palette, mysterious shadows, and dark overall tone of El Jaleo as evidence of Sargent’s indebtedness to the art of Diego Velázquez and Goya. Certainly Sargent was strongly influenced by both these Spanish masters; his teacher, Emile-Auguste Carolus-Duran (1838–1917), stressed the importance of Velázquez in particular, and Sargent is known to have spent time in the Prado copying this painter’s work. But one need not search through art history to find precedents for things that Sargent would have seen in the café cantantes. Black, gray, and white—with occasional touches of red—is the standard flamenco color scheme, especially for men’s costumes. Also, flamenco is generally performed at night. As a form that originated inside caves, enjoyed its Golden Age before the invention of electricity, and is compared to the blues, flamenco belongs in a darkened setting. Moreover, the footlights of that time—a row of candles set inside cow-like, metal reflectors placed across the front of the stage—would, in fact, cast strange, mysterious shadows.

Aside from the tendency to attribute too many aspects of Sargent’s painting to the artist’s imagination or to the influence of other artists, there has often been a more significant misreading of El Jaleo. In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, critics have often seen things in this painting that simply are not there.

Two items, described by a variety of writers on Sargent’s painting, are especially problematic: the dancer’s castanets and her mantilla. Castanets are mentioned in descriptions of El Jaleo right from the beginning. In an 1882 salon review, Antonin Proust asserts about the main figure: “She is dancing to the accompaniment of her own castanets,” a comment echoed in virtually the same words by Henry James in his essay on Sargent published five years later. However, Sargent’s dancer has no castanets. Her unencumbered right hand lifts her skirt while her empty left hand extends forward in a typical flamenco gesture. For several reasons, she could not be holding castanets; furthermore, she should not be using them. She could not be holding castanets because these large

Presuming that this dance is probably the classical Jaleo de Jerez that is performed with castanets, Volk notes that it is odd that Sargent “seems to have omitted [her castanets] or at least rendered [them] invisible.” Given the level of detail that is evident elsewhere in *El Jaleo* (such as the narrow slashes of red fabric lining the vest pockets of the standing male figure at the viewer’s left), it would indeed be odd if Sargent had left out something as obvious as castanets. However, the role of castanets in Spanish dance is little understood outside that relatively small dance world, and thus misunderstandings often arise. Some viewers of *El Jaleo* assume that there is probably a castanet hidden in the dancer’s extended hand. However, no one plays a single castanet; they are made and worn in pairs. Their sound depends on the interaction between the higher-toned castanet (worn on the dancer’s dominant hand) and the lower-toned one. Moreover, it would be virtually impossible to hide castanets inside the palm of the hand. Even if that were the case—for example, if a dancer with unusually large hands held a particularly small set of castanets—the cords that join the halves of each instrument would still be visible on the dancer’s thumbs.

In addition to discussing nonexistent castanets, a number of writers have said strange things about the dancer’s mantilla. James in his 1887 essay refers to her “black mantilla,” and Henry Houssaye, art critic for *L’Art*, says “the light from below . . . catches the green sequins of her mantilla.” The problem, once again, is that Sargent’s dancer is not wearing a mantilla. A mantilla is a veil made from a wide variety of materials and typically double-hinged, rounded musical instruments would obscure her palms and prevent her from using her hands expressively. Moreover, their sound would interfere with the ambiance created by both the cante jondo and her own movements. Contrary to the popular stereotype of the female flamenco dancer as a castanet-wielding figure enveloped in ruffles, with a rose clutched between her teeth, dancers use castanets almost exclusively in Spanish folk and classical dancing. With rare exceptions, true flamenco dancers are not supposed to use castanets, certainly not in a form like *Soleares*. For the same reasons, it would be extremely unlikely for the women seated on the dancer’s left—who are cheering her on with their arms raised above their heads and snapping their fingers to the music—to be wearing castanets. Nevertheless, several writers have assumed they are using them.
worn with a peineta, a large ornamental comb set at the back of the head to lift the mantilla, thus giving it a more pleasing flow across the dancer’s back and shoulders. Artists as diverse as Cassatt and Joan Miró have painted Spanish women wearing mantillas, but this accessory would get in the way of someone performing flamenco, though mantillas are sometimes worn for Spanish classical dances.

Perhaps James and Houssaye were thinking of the dancer’s shawl. The woman in *El Jaleo* is wearing a large, embroidered shawl (mantón) wrapped around her shoulders. This common flamenco costuming has several purposes: to add aesthetic interest to the woman’s dress or skirt, to augment the modesty of her costume, and to emphasize her motion. Mantones inevitably have long silk fringes around their borders, which fly wildly about every time the dancer moves (fig. 9). It is easier to see the fringe in Sargent’s drawings and paintings that are related to *El Jaleo* than it is in the finished painting. But in the final canvas there are indeed green accents—probably embroidery thread instead of sequins.

Writers have also presumed that the dancer in Sargent’s painting is stamping loudly. Volk, for example, points out that the dancer’s heeled shoe is visible beneath her voluminous skirt, “implying the strenuous zapateo.” Today one of flamenco’s identifying traits is certainly the furious, lightning-fast, and intricate footwork called zapateado, from the word zapato, or shoe. Therefore, present-day flamenco dancers prefer to perform on wooden floors, which are often miked, to amplify the rhythms of their feet. However, flamencologists agree that until recently (and certainly throughout the nineteenth century) only male flamenco dancers performed any significant loud, vigorous footwork. Before that time there were gender-specific movements in flamenco. Women only brushed their feet across the floor, emphasizing instead of their footwork the supple movement of their arms and upper bodies. Women’s flamenco shoes, then as now, had high heels, but the nineteenth-century version lacked the tiny nails that today stud the bottoms of the toes and heels to intensify their sound.¹⁶

However, there is at least one element in *El Jaleo* for which Sargent exercised considerable artistic license. He chose to drape his dancer in an elegant, voluminous white satin skirt. As several commentators have noted, no nineteenth-century Gypsy could have afforded such a garment, and flamenco performers have favored more colorful, patterned costumes.

Then there is the matter of the guitarists. In a passionate article published in 1976, guitar authority Gregory D’Alessio roundly criticizes what he
sees as “grievous errors” in Sargent’s canvas. Specifically, D’Alessio claims, based on historical photographs, that flamenco guitarists of the time played sitting up straight, rather than hunched over their instruments as in the painting. He also faults Sargent for the angle at which the musicians hold their guitars, the way they use their hands, and the proportions of the instruments themselves. Other guitar experts disagree with D’Alessio, finding in El Jaleo a reasonably accurate depiction of nineteenth-century flamenco guitars and guitarists, while even a casual observer of flamenco performances today will quickly discover that there is no single playing posture that guitarists favor.¹⁷

Remarkably, even those writers who disliked El Jaleo have felt obligated to mention its good points. The same Gregory D’Alessio praised the picture’s “evocation of a dynamic subject, painted dynamically.” In fact, he continues, “Sargent has caught better than any other painter thus far, the mood, atmosphere, and excitement of an Andalusian [flamenco scene] and the spirit of jaleo.”¹⁸

Many elements of El Jaleo contribute to its dynamic quality. Perhaps most obviously, the painterly surface of the canvas produces an impression of enormous energy. The swirling fringe and the dramatic gestures of both the dancer and the figures seated behind her further emphasize this dynamism. In addition, the dancer’s position—far to the right of center—creates an unexpectedly asymmetrical composition. It also implies that she has already moved across much of the stage, and will continue to do so.

One other visual surprise, which creates an exciting and irregular visual rhythm and also balances the colors that dominate the extreme right of the painting, is the empty chair. Set between a palmero and the two guitarists, this light-toned chair, with a single orange placed on its seat, echoes the white dresses and red-orange shawls worn by the other women. Aside from its usefulness in purely formalist terms, the empty chair is something that Sargent had probably observed on more than one occasion. In a flamenco performance, when the musicians are holding forth and no one is dancing, it is standard practice for the entire company to remain seated in a long line. When a dancer rises to perform, her chair will be left unoccupied. Thus, Sargent also suggests that the dancer,

8 Elke Stolzenberg, Enrique Morente, 1985
Implied movement is intrinsic to much of Sargent’s work. Even in a relatively static portrait, such as his painting of La Carmencita (fig. 10), a dancer from Spain who was popular in New York during the 1890s, he stresses dynamism through the tilt of her head, the lift of her eyebrows, and her haughty posture.

Virtually all of Sargent’s paintings, especially those with Spanish dance themes, have a sensual, erotic charge that makes them exciting. Like many critics, Trevor Fairbrother believes that Sargent chose the subject of El Jaleo largely because of the growing market for exotic imagery in late nineteenth-century Europe and America, and as a reflection of his own love for Andalusian music and dance. Fairbrother theorizes that Sargent’s choice also “gratified his need for a release from the primness of his Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultural heritage through esoterically coded sensualism.”

To be sure, the eroticism of Sargent’s subject and his treatment of it are one of the underlying bases for the painting’s widespread appeal to late nineteenth- and twentieth-century viewers.

In fact, one of the most remarkable aspects of El Jaleo is its continuing resonance for casual observers, flamencologists, and flamenco artists alike more than a hundred years after it was completed. El Jaleo inspired both the name and the series of murals that adorn the interior of Jaleo, a Spanish restaurant in Washington, D.C., which was established in 1993, one year after Sargent’s painting was the focus of a major exhibition at that city’s National Gallery of Art. Reproductions of this canvas are still found on the walls of numerous flamenco dance studios, guitar shops, and related venues. Perhaps the best proof of El Jaleo’s lasting appeal is that it is so obviously valued even by flamenco performers and scholars from Spain, who have not been eager to embrace foreign aficionados of this peculiarly Spanish art form. Sargent’s picture was chosen to illustrate several important books about flamenco. It is reproduced on the cover of Juan D. Grecos’s The Flamenco Guitar (1973), the inside front cover of Barbara Thiel Cramer’s Flamenco (1991), and—most tellingly—the jacket for both volumes of the imposing
John Singer Sargent, *La Carmencita*, 1890. Oil, 228.6 x 138.4 cm (90 x 54 ½ in.). Musée d’Orsay, Paris
Diccionario Enciclopédico Ilustrado del Flamenco (1990) by José Blas Vega and Manuel Rios Ruiz (fig. 11).

Its impressive size, unconventional compositional structure, and its dynamic, sensual quality have made El Jaleo a symbol of flamenco for more than a century. In retrospect, then, perhaps it should not be surprising that even those critics who disliked Sargent’s picture when they saw it in the salon singled it out as “one of the successes of the season.”

Even today, El Jaleo continues to impress viewers with Sargent’s ability to convey—not a hackneyed impression of the swirling draperies and frenzied strumming typically associated with this kind of music and dance—but rather the deeply felt emotional core, the true spirit, of flamenco.

Notes

I presented an early version of this paper in October 1998 at the annual meeting of the Southeastern College Art Conference, in Miami. I wish to thank our panel’s chair, Dr. Betsy Fahlman, for enabling me to participate in the conference, and for her extraordinarily generous encouragement and help with this manuscript during subsequent months. I would also like to acknowledge the inspiration for this research provided by Dr. Raymond Erickson, Director of the Ashton Magna Academy, along with other faculty members and participants at the academy’s 1995 seminar, “Cultural Cross-Currents—Spain and Latin America, c. 1550-1750.” Much of the travel associated with this research was supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the University of the Arts’ Venture Fund; I wish to express my deep appreciation for both these opportunities. In addition, I have been fortunate enough to enjoy numerous discussions about flamenco with several authorities in the field, most notably Angel Alvarez Caballero, William J. Christie, Paula J. Durbin, Dame Marina Keet Grut, and Ralph Pemberton. The artist and art critic Lila Snow and art historian Bonita Billman contributed important ideas and suggestions. Invaluable assistance was also provided by Sara J. MacDonald, Public Services Librarian; Mark Germer, Music Librarian; Dr. Robert Ackerman, Director of the Liberal Arts Division; and Dr. Nancy Davenport, all of the University of the Arts; Wendy Thompson, Curatorial Intern in the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; and Ed Deegan of the Fisher Fine Arts Library at the University of Pennsylvania. Ongoing moral support came from Gloria Heller, Dr. Jules Heller, and Robert G. Regan. It should also be noted that since 1984 I have been a student, performer, and teacher of various forms of Spanish dance, working primarily in the United States but also in England and Spain.


2 The sitter who posed for Sargent’s dancer is generally identified as the popular Parisian model Marie Renard. See, for example, Volk, El Jaleo, p. 37, and Richard Ormond, John Singer Sargent: Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors (N.Y. and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 28.

3 See the unsigned article, “The Salon: From an Englishman’s Point of View,” The Art Journal 44 (1882): 218. It is noteworthy that so many critics singled out El Jaleo for comment from among the nearly three thousand oil paintings on view at the salon.


6 The best source available in English on the many types of Spanish dance is The Language of Spanish Dance by Matteo Marcellus Vittucci (Norman and

For an exceptionally readable discussion of flamenco history, see James Woodall, In Search of the Firedance: Spain through Flamenco (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992). I was fortunate to have the opportunity to discuss the history of flamenco and related topics with participants at the First and Second Biennial Flamenco History Conferences, held at the University of New Mexico (Albuquerque), in 1996 and 1998. I am grateful to the conferences’ staff members and invited experts for their help with this paper.

Sargent’s letter of 1880 is quoted in Ormond, Sargent, p. 28. In another letter, dated 1916, Sargent mentioned as the singer in one of his favorite flamenco recordings, La Niña de los Peines, the stage name of Pastora Pavón (1890–1969). A famous performer from Seville, she made her professional singing debut at age eight. For that letter, see the Hon. Evan Charteris, John Sargent, 1927; reprint (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1972), p. 50. For an excellent selection of flamenco recordings (both historical and new), including an interesting recording from the 1930s of La Niña de los Peines, see the extensive annotated catalogue of the Flamenco Connection, P. O. Box 76, Falls Church, VA 22046. This mail-order company was established by guitarist and flamenco expert, William J. Christie.

Quoted in Ormond, Sargent, p. 28. In her article, “John Singer Sargent and the Dance,” Dance View (autumn 1992): 9–13, Ann Daly argues that it was precisely the spatial complexity of the dancer’s pose that inspired Sargent to paint her. For examples of artworks featuring female flamenco dancers in similar poses, see Antonio María Manescas’s oil painting Fiesta Flamenca, Medina Vega’s drawing Una Bailaora, and Mariano Benlliure’s sculpture Bailaora Flamenca. These are illustrated in Blas Vega and Ríos Ruiz, Diccionario, vol. 1 (p. 50), vol. 2 (p. 20), and vol. 1 (p. 56), respectively.


One notable exception to this general rule of not using castanets in true flamenco is the form of baile jondo known as Seguiriyas, where the unusually complex rhythm is often accentuated by the dancer’s use of castanets. For comments about the proper use of castanets in Spanish dance, see Matteo Marcellus Virtucci, “Woods That Dance,” special issue of Dance Perspectives (spring 1968); Blas Vega and Ríos Ruiz, Diccionario, vol. 1, p. 169; and Woodall, Firedance, p. 141. For specific references to the women holding castanets to the left of the dancer in El Jaleo, see Patricia Hills, John Singer Sargent (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Abrams, 1986), p. 40; and J. D., “Art in This Year’s Salon,” in the salon review published in the New York Times, 26 June 1882, p. 2, col. 2.

Volk, El Jaleo, p. 35.

See James, Sargent, p. 689, and Henry Houssaye, quoted in Ormond, Sargent, p. 28.

David Park Curry also notes this presumably loud zapateado in his review of the National Gallery’s El Jaleo exhibition in Burlington Magazine (August 1992): 554. Points about nineteenth-century footwork performed by female flamenco dancers come primarily from Alberto Lorca, a noted flamenco dancer and teacher, as quoted by Dame Marina Keet Grut (another respected authority, who seconded his opinions) in an email message I received from London on September 22, 1998. Today, flamenco footwork, like so many things, is essentially unisex. Carmen Amaya (1913–1963) is credited with pioneering the idea of female flamenco dancers performing in trousers and stamping as quickly and as loudly as their male counterparts.


D’Alessio, El Jaleo, p. 25.

Fairbrother, Sargent, p. 21.

Ormond, Sargent, p. 28.