

Bruce Sargeant

(1898 – 1938)

Biography

The pure and brilliant world of Bruce Sargeant's art seems terribly removed from our own, unhampered by the prevalent inconsistencies of today's world. Peopled with comely thoroughbreds, his paintings project a world vision unchanged from the models cherished by idealist writers like E. M. Forster and Rupert Brooke in that golden decade that led up to the Great War. Neither buff nor narcissistic, his fairhaired young athletes pose, somewhat uncomfortably, before the painter's gaze, not wanting the attention yet feeling their duty to submit. Though tantalized by the New World dabbings of Robert Henri and John Sloan, Sargeant found his true inspiration in the art and ethos of fifth-century Athens, where the achievement of the *kaloï kagathoi*, young men who were "beautiful to look at and worthy of admiration," were the perfect models for artistic rendering and public adulation. At base, Sargeant's models, like the sculptures of Lysippus and Praxiteles, are idealized heroes whose achievements on the playing field earn them their renown. However, unlike his precursors, the painter requires no civic responsibility from his ephebes, only physical stamina, gymnastic prowess, and good looks. His work bespeaks a class that existed briefly, but was prolonged and attenuated in the languorous novels of writers such as Denton Welch and John Knowles and idled in the minds of their countless readers. Washed in Sargeant's omnipresent bluish-gray palette, trophies and cocker spaniels stand *pari passu* with his sportsmen, all hovering in that never-never land of privileged youth untainted by a harsh dose of reality. Though Bruce Sargeant's admixture would later be adopted by photographer Bruce Weber in the pages of fashion journals—covert homoeroticism employed in the service of commerce—the painter's naivete and glistening adulation of his subjects will never be equaled. His untimely death on the field of sport, today seems oddly appropriate. Had he lived, growing older and wiser to the ways of the world, his only recourse would have been despair. As the painter of the fatal bloom of adolescent youth and glabrous beauty, he remains unequaled.

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