

The Jewish Museum
The Sassoons
Verbal Descriptions

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Introduction to the Verbal Descriptions

NARRATOR: Welcome to the Verbal Description guide for *The Sassoons*. This exhibition reveals the fascinating story of a remarkable Jewish family, following four generations from Iraq to India, China, and England, from the early nineteenth century through the end of World War II.

On this tour, you will meet members of the Sassoon family through an exploration of their portraits and the art they collected. We'll look closely at each piece, exploring the visual components and stories held within.

Join me in the first gallery with the portrait of David Sassoon.

700. Attributed to William Melville, *David Sassoon*, Mid-nineteenth century

NARRATOR: This painting, titled *David Sassoon*, is attributed to William Melville, a British artist, active in the 1840s. It is oil on canvas. It measures 41 1/2 inches high and 33 inches wide, about the size of a bath towel. Its frame is made from gilt wood. Let's explore what this painting tells us about David Sassoon, the patriarch of the first generation of Sassoons shown in this exhibition.

In this painting an older man is posed seated – his presence dominates the composition. He wears a beige turban with bands of red and blue patterns. His skin is a pale ocher with ruddy accents. His white mustache flows into a beard that frames his jowls and yellows as it comes to rest on his chest. His dark brows frame heavy-lidded eyes that look to the right. His nose is long and narrow. Thin pink lips - surrounded by facial hair - are closed - neither frowning nor smiling.

This man is shown sitting in a beige robe. The portrait is cropped at his thighs which rest under the folds of his garment. The robe has a red border and opens at the chest revealing a striped top and a paisley patterned band around his waist. The fabrics are painted with some shine, giving the impression of a man wrapped in luxurious and thick silks. This dress was typical Baghdadi Jewish attire, which speaks to David Sassoon's heritage and birthplace.

The wide sleeves of his robe cover his arms, but his hands are visible. His left-hand rests on his left thigh – fingers close together – a ring with a dark red oval stone on his pinky finger. His right forearm rests on a table. His hand hangs over the table – four fingers visible – another glittering ring on his small finger. His hands look soft and seem small in comparison to the bulk of his body.

David Sassoon's presence takes up most of the painting. He is framed by fragments of his domestic interior and the outside landscape. A partial view of a table, draped in orange-colored material holds a vase filled with roses to the left, followed by a view of a landscape – water, mountains, blue sky, soft clouds - in the upper left area. This piece was painted shortly before David Sassoon's death, and the scene shows Mumbai, India, where he resettled his family in 1832 after fleeing persecution. The upper right corner contains a warm brownish-red column that disappears behind the chair on which David Sassoon sits. With the shine of his robes, the placid scene behind, and the warm colors throughout, the painting seems to glow- stately, warm, and comforting.

701. Henry Jones Thaddeus, *Rachel Sassoon Beer*, 1887

NARRATOR: This artwork is a painting by the Irish artist Henry Jones Thaddeus. The title is *Rachel Sassoon Beer*. It was made in 1887 and is 52 inches in height by 37 inches in width, roughly the size of a large beach towel. This realist work is oil on canvas and sits within an ornate golden frame.

We are looking at a formal portrait of a young, elegantly posed woman. She sits facing the viewer and occupies the majority of the large vertically oriented canvas. She wears a golden silk ball gown that flows to the bottom edge of the painting. It cascades in pleats and patterns, a sea of elegant metallics and cream with subtle floral details flickering on the skirt. Her hands rest gently in her lap and delicately hold a slender stick which evolves into a plume of blush and billowy fluffy feathers, most likely a fan. Her waist is thin, likely enhanced by a corset under her garment. A low neckline frames her torso. Translucent short white sleeves act like flower petals, gently falling from her shoulders. She wears no jewelry, but her left shoulder is topped with a ribbon or a strip of the same gold-colored cloth, like a bow atop a present.

The woman has pale skin and a serene and dreamy facial expression. Her upright posture, long neck, and poise are accentuated by her up-do, a nest of chestnut-brown hair pulled in a loose but neat bun atop her head. She has jet-black eyes which gaze out and slightly up, beneath thin dark eyebrows. Her pink lips and cheeks give her complexion warmth. She seems to be dressed for a formal social event like a dance or perhaps simply for the occasion of this portrait sitting, to represent her affluent class position.

The seated woman rests in front of a lush wall of brown and dusty dark green colored leaves, like early fall when the foliage starts to change, giving the impression of a moody garden. In the distance, there is a partial representation of a tree trunk and branches, a path, and some grasses, all giving us evidence of a slightly deeper wooded space. While there is no hint of the sky in this outdoor portrait, the sitter seems to be pleasantly posed within the fronds, a vision of lightness engulfed by the growing darkness behind her.

Here's Curator Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Rachel was the daughter of Sassoon David Sassoon, who was the first of the eight sons of David Sassoon who settled in England. The portrait is monumental. And she's sort of romanticized... There's a contrast between the copious skirts and the very ethereal bodice. That transition between the materials, I think, emphasize her thin waist and her delicate torso. She's also holding an ostrich feather, which was a sign of luxury.

She was highly educated, she was very musical... she was a lover of art, and she met her match when she married Frederick Beer.

NARRATOR: Frederick and Rachel owned two prominent London newspapers, *The Observer* and the *Sunday Times*, and Rachel became the first woman in Britain to edit two papers. In

1898, in a journalistic coup, she published important evidence exculpating French Jewish army officer Alfred Dreyfus – who had been imprisoned after being falsely accused of treason.

702. Johan Zoffany, *The Family of Sir William Young*, 1767–69

NARRATOR: This painting by the German artist Johan Zoffany is titled *The Family of Sir William Young*. It was made between 1767 and 1769. The dimensions are 45 inches high by 66 inches wide, the size of a small area rug. The medium is oil on canvas. This framed realistic painting presents a playful and detailed scene of people set within an idyllic country landscape.

Gathered together and stretching across the entirety of this convivial yet elegant scene, are a group of a dozen people. The family is posed precisely, like stage actors or dancers at the start of an act on a dramatically lit stage. Sir William himself sits at the front of the family group holding a cello between his legs as if about to play. He's wearing a shiny dark gray coat with fine lace details at the collar and sleeves. His wife sits beside him playing a small mandolin. She is dressed in a white silk gown which reflects the daylight, with a high pleated collar and a dark lace shawl. Together they resemble a king and queen on their individual thrones surrounded by their court.

Their youngest daughter reaches across gingerly from her mother's left side to touch the mandolin's strings. This little girl who is perhaps three or four in age looks directly at us as she blocks the strings from her mother's fingers. At the base of her feet, a small white fluffy dog lounges on the grass. Behind them stands an older teenage daughter dressed in a shiny rose-colored gown holding an open music book. This central group might have been momentarily interrupted mid-melody or are about to play. Two more teenage daughters dressed in cool blue and green, one with a pink rose in her hair and the other with a pink sash around her waist, seem to blossom behind their mother. One of them elegantly reaches her arms towards a winding tree branch as if in dance. Beyond them, on the right edge of the painting, two more older children sit on the stone wall of a staircase affectionately reading a letter together.

On the opposite far side of the painting, to the right of their parents, a young blonde boy dressed in an open mustard colored coat and breeches embraces a larger groomed tan dog with a bushy tail, eagerly standing on his hind legs. This blonde boy is simultaneously reaching up to touch the hand of his younger brother, who sits atop a dark brown horse. Behind this little boy on the horse sits another youth dressed in a bright red cape and black hat with white feather. Both young boys are being tenderly supported and steadied atop the horse by a third, dark-skinned youth below. He is the only person with darker skin in this composition. This boy of about ten or eleven years of age has short hair and is dressed in a long-sleeved crimson shirt with a shorter blue collared shirt atop. He looks down and out towards the direction of the rest of the group. We do not know whether he is an enslaved person or not, but his presence in the painting evokes the subject of slavery today along with the fact that this family's wealth was in part derived from sugar plantations in the Caribbean. This figure would have been included in a familial painting such as this as an indicator of the family's social status.

The setting of this painting is a manicured outdoor area beside what appears to be a large estate. This lush landscape includes a giant oak tree, billowing clouds, and rolling hills in the distance. The light seems to peek through the large clouds in dappled shafts, giving the scene

dramatic light and shade moments. The curvilinear placement of figures and the musicality give the overall scene a whimsy and perfumery in the air. While there is a light-heartedness to the scene, the viewer is made keenly aware of the status symbols and expressions of power and race at play in this group portrait.

This painting was owned by Phillip Sassoon, great-grandson of David Sassoon and an avid art collector. It represents a genre of painting called conversation pieces, in which two or more people are shown interacting with one another. Here's Curator Esther da Costa Meyer.

ESTHER DA COSTA MEYER: They were particularly popular among families that were not born to great wealth or culture or status but could advertise that through paintings. So, the paintings evoked a culture and a cultivated past that they did not always have.

703. John Singer Sargent, *Sir Philip Sassoon*, 1923

NARRATOR: John Singer Sargent's *Sir Philip Sassoon*, painted in 1923, is an oil on canvas. It measures 37 1/2 inches high by 22 3/4 wide. The work is framed. It is displayed in a wall of portraits of family members from across generations.

This portrait is of a young man standing in the center of the composition. We see a three-quarter view of his head and body; he faces right, and his right shoulder is in the left area of the painting. The background is a dark brown and the man wears a black formal suit coat. The brushstrokes of the background and the black on his coat reveal a depth and richness of color, giving a smooth appearance while showing strokes of blacks and browns on closer look.

The light in the painting illuminates the man's pale flesh, the white of his waist coat – visible from his open jacket – and the white ascot knotted at his neck, leaving the background dark and moody. His steadfast eyes gaze beyond us, immediately giving an impression of seriousness. His hair is short, groomed and parted to our right. There are pink highlights in his skin: at the top of his cheeks and on the ridges of his ear, of which only the right one is visible. His nose is long and elegant. His rose lips are at rest – they neither smile nor pout. But there is something pointed in his face though none of his features are pointy. The forward energy in his chin, a slight tightness at the jaw, a tension at the corner of his lips – they convey something underneath the surface. His left hand holds a common gesture, hooking one's thumb around the waist. His fingers rest on his waistcoat, slender and delicate, a gold ring on his small finger, a glimpse of his white shirt cuff. The portrait is cropped below his waist.

This painting is taller and narrower than many of Sargent's other portraits from this period. After he finished painting the piece, it was cut down to fit the frame that Sargent suggested. Hanging to the right of this portrait is the painting of his right hand. We see the back of his hand emerging from the tip of his black sleeve and white shirt. Like the rest of him, it is pale, elegant, and relaxed, bent at the second knuckle so we do not see the full length of his fingers.

Sir Philip Sassoon was a member of Parliament, art collector, and curator. He was in his mid-thirties when this painting was made. His pose, his manner, the portrait itself – all convey wealth. Sargent's rendering captures a man who is secure with his place in the world.

704. After Qian Xuan, *Pear Blossoms*, China, Yuan dynasty c. 1280

NARRATOR: *Pear Blossoms* is a handscroll made by an unknown artist, based on one by Chinese artist Qian Xuan. It was made around 1280. It is from China, Yuan dynasty, which took place from 1271 to 1368. This piece uses ink and color on paper. The scroll measures about 12 inches high and over 34 feet long, although 11 feet are on display here, laid flat in a case and wound at either end.

This scroll would have been read right to left. First displayed on the right is a painted image of pear blossoms, which is about three feet long. Emerging from the bottom left of this section is a branch that angles diagonally to our right. It splinters like a fork in the road - creating two branches. Smaller twigs grow from the larger veins. Using translucent washes of light brown and gray, the artist expertly conveys the tenderness of the bark, its bumpy knobs, its speckled skin. Sprouting from the branches are clusters of pear blossoms. Slender pale golden leaves bend and flutter, often surrounding the white petals or buds. Some flowers have bloomed – their petals open to life - their green stems arching up. Others are still burrowed in their green enclosures. The artist has depicted the blossoms in all stages of growth – newborns peeping through the bark – yawning leaves waiting for flowers to appear. His colors are pale and soft, and he limits the use of lines.

To the right is a grouping of small red stamps containing different Chinese letters and symbols. They are a variety of shapes - including rectangles, squares, and an oval. The background color of the scroll is a neutral gray except for a thin strip of off-white at the right edge. Some of the red stamps straddle both areas.

To the left of the pear blossom painting is a poem written in vertical rows of Chinese characters in precise black ink. The characters are graceful and occasionally spiky, placed in orderly rows of vertical lines, with additional red stamps interspersed throughout.

Qian Xuan often mixed calligraphy, painting, and poetry in his work. Think of the fading beauty of his pear blossoms as you listen to the poem included in the text of this work:

The lonely tear-stained face,
teardrops drenching the branches,
Though washed off make-up,
her old charms remain.
Behind the closed gate, on a rainy night,
vainly sorrowing.
How differently she looked bathed in golden waves
of moonlight before darkness fell.