



## Painting of the day:

### *Handmaid of the Lord*

by John Singer Sargent

Did you know that George Washington is listed as having two birthdays? One was February 22, 1731, and the other was February 11, 1732. What happened was this. Baby George was ready to be born in 1731, but when he took a peek outside of his mother's womb and saw icicles on the windows and felt how cold it was in the drafty house, he decided to go right back in and snuggle there for another whole year, till finally his mother had had enough of it, because he was getting as heavy as a cannonball. So she said, "George, this just won't do! You come out right now." And he did, because he was a good boy after all. I'd say that you might try what George did if you want someday to become president of the United States, but if you are reading this now it's probably too late.

Of course I'm teasing. "George's mother probably wrote down the wrong date," you will say, but no, she didn't do that. Nobody got the date wrong. Both days are correct. "That's not possible," you say. "February 11 is not February 22, and 1732 is not 1731!" But you are wrong. In this case February 11 was February 22, and 1732 was 1731.

I won't get into the 11 and the 22 here, because that involves us in some astronomy, and some fractions, and a Pope. I'll save that for another time. The difference between 1732 and 1731 is easy. It all depends on what day you decide to call the first day of the new year.

A year is a real thing. It is the time it takes the

earth to make one complete revolution around the sun. But there's no more reason for our choosing January 1 to flip the calendar, than any other day of the year. There's nothing special about January 1. We might as well choose January 2, or January 3, or March 25. And that is what the English had been doing for almost six hundred years. From 1155 to 1752, the English celebrated the new year on March 25, even while they knew very well that other people turned the year over on January 1. So when George Washington was born in February, it was still the old year, according to the old way of counting. It was still 1731, and wouldn't be 1732 until March 25.

But what was so special about March 25? Think of it. We celebrate Christmas, the birth of our Lord, on December 25. Now a

baby is in his mother's womb for nine months. If you go nine months before December 25, you end up at March 25. Count it out to see for yourself. Jesus did not come to live with us in this world on December 25. That was just the day when he left



his mother's womb. He came to live with us first on March 25. That was the day when the history of the world changed forever. That was the day when the Word was made flesh, as Saint John says in his gospel, and dwelt among us.

You know what happened on that day. The angel Gabriel, came to Mary and said that she would bear a son, begotten by the most high God. When Mary said, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to your word," then, at that moment, the seed was sown and came to life. At that moment God took on human flesh. What better day can we choose to mark a new beginning, than that? And that is what the English people thought, for those six centuries. They marked the beginning of the year from the day of the Lord's first presence among us – March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation.

And that is what John Singer Sargent is showing us in his painting. You have probably seen many pictures of Mary holding the baby Jesus, nursing him at her breast, gazing into his eyes, and looking lovingly upon him. But in this painting, it seems as if the baby Jesus were still in her womb, and Mary embraces him there, holding him, just as a woman who is near to giving birth will often put her hands upon her belly, in love, and feeling with her fingers the movements of the child within. It is an extraordinary work. Mary has her eyes shut, with a calm smile upon her lips, as if she is absolutely

confident, secure, and at peace. Jesus too is at peace. He even appears, in the womb, to be sucking on his thumb!

Sargent was a Roman Catholic who painted in the grand old style. Soon after he passed away, though, artists began to be impatient with painting trees that looked like trees, dogs that looked like dogs, and human beings that looked like human beings, and so they spattered their canvases with colors that were not supposed to mean anything at all. You can do that too, and you can sneak into a modern art museum and put your work in place of the work of a famous spatterer, and nine out of ten people would not notice the difference. But it would take you many years of patient study and practice even to pretend to paint as Sargent did. And to paint what he did here, you would have to

know a lot too, about who Jesus is and why we adore him.

If you are ever in the Boston Public Library, you can see this painting yourself, and twenty or so others that Sargent painted, as part of one big work called *The Triumph of Religion*. You see, the people who had Sargent decorate the library did not believe it was a bad thing for religion to be celebrated in a public place. Why should it not be, when the blessings of God are upon those nations that look to Him for guidance? George Washington would agree most heartily.



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