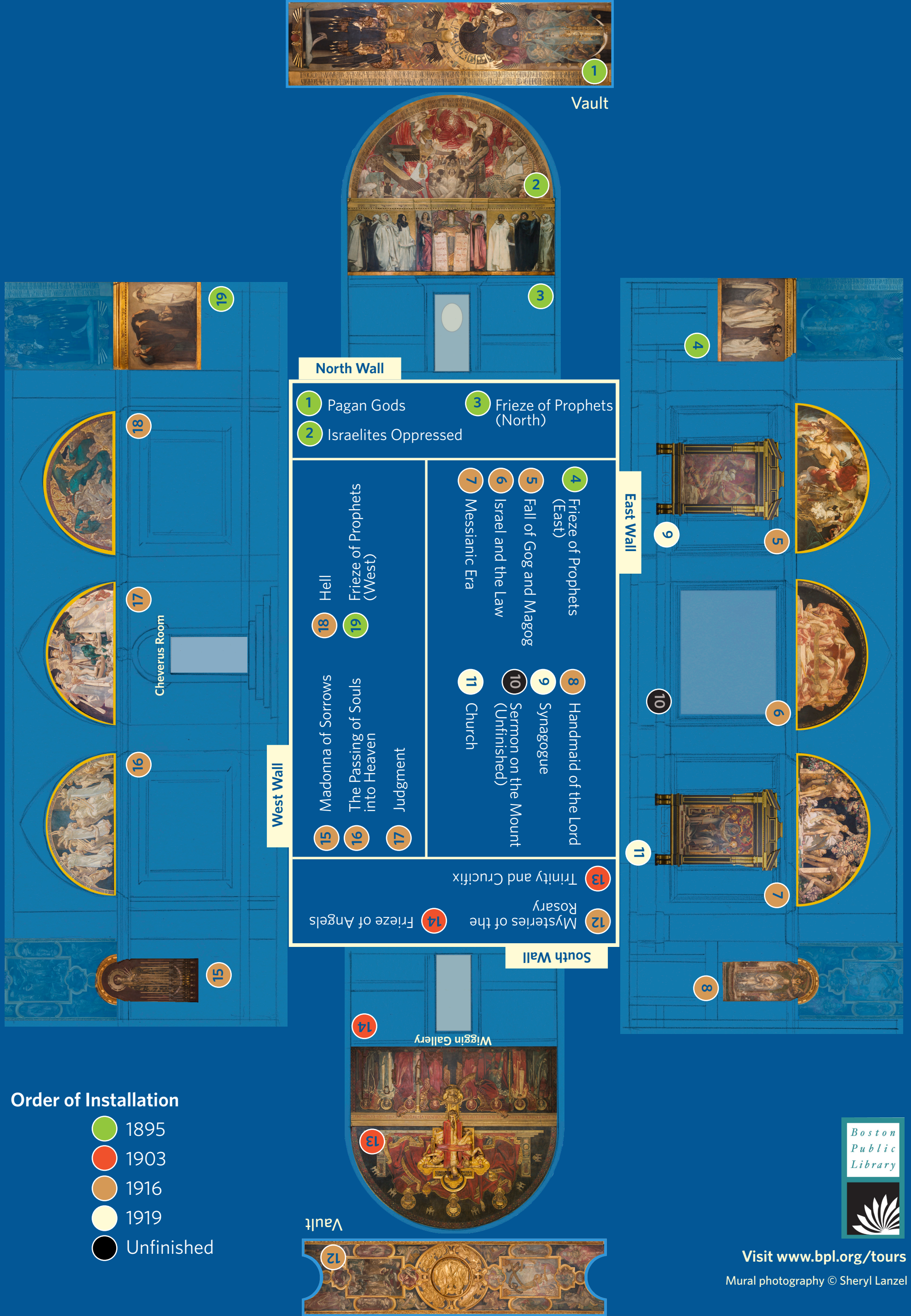


# Sargent Gallery Murals

## Triumph of Religion

Works by John Singer Sargent, installed 1895-1919



Visit [www.bpl.org/tours](http://www.bpl.org/tours)  
Mural photography © Sheryl Lanzel

# Sargent Gallery Murals

## Triumph of Religion

### Works by John Singer Sargent, installed 1895-1919

#### 🌀 SARGENT AND THE COMMISSION 🌀

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) was born in Florence to an American family that maintained close ties to Boston. As a developing artist, Sargent studied painting in France and later moved to England, where he spent the majority of his life.

Boston Public Library architect Charles Follen McKim gave Sargent freedom of subject matter in this vaulted space when they began discussing the project in 1890. For the 34-year-old artist who had made a living and name from painting famous faces of the day, the library work represented his chance to solidify his reputation as a master.

While he first considered depicting scenes from Spanish literature, Sargent pursued a more ambitious—and controversial—theme in the vault, titling his work *Triumph of Religion*. The mural panels were painted in what was then the largest studio in England, which Sargent shared with artist friend Edwin Austin Abbey, who was working on his own mural cycle for the Boston Public Library. The murals were installed in four phases between 1895 and 1919.

This extraordinary mural cycle has received legions of admirers and detractors since its inception. In composing these works, Sargent never intended to show a comprehensive study of religion—or all religions—but rather a few key moments in the history of early Egyptian and Assyrian belief systems, Judaism, and Christianity, as he had come to know them through study.

#### 🌀 1895 INSTALLATION 🌀

In the large lunette above the doorway at the north end of the gallery, Sargent depicted the Israelites, shown clustered at center and oppressed by the Egyptian Pharaoh (left) and the Assyrian King (right).

The long panel below them, the *Frieze of the Prophets*, spans the north wall and the adjacent corners. The names of the prophets are written above each figure, while Moses, at center, holds two tablets bearing the Ten Commandments.

On the right side of the north-end vault, Astarte, the blue-robed pagan goddess, stands atop a crescent moon. She is adorned with jewels—elements of metal and glass that sparkle against the canvas. Above her lies the dark face of the goddess Neith, with her round gold neck plate bearing the signs of the Zodiac. Her body spans the heavens, with her fingers touching the horizon below Astarte and her legs meeting the opposite horizon, where the mummified pharaoh lies. Here, Sargent placed Moloch, another pagan god, with his gold crown of the sun and its rays radiating downward as golden hands. These are among some 600 individual pieces of raised relief in the mural cycle, which Sargent employed to catch light and illuminate the figures.

#### 🌀 1903 INSTALLATION 🌀

At the south end of the gallery, Sargent approached the subject of Christianity in *Dogma of the Redemption*. The *Frieze of Angels* in this section mirrors the *Frieze of Prophets* to the north.

The large lunette above bears the three figures of the Holy Trinity, bound by a single red robe. The robe is laced with gold lettering repeating the word *sanctus*, Latin for “holy.” At center lies the high-relief figure of Christ on the cross, flanked by Adam and Eve.

#### 🌀 1916 INSTALLATION 🌀

In the vault above *Dogma of the Redemption*, Sargent depicted *Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary*, including the *Joyful Mysteries*, the *Glorious Mysteries*, and the *Sorrowful Mysteries*. At left, this sequence is supported by *Handmaid of the Lord*, and at right, by *Madonna of Sorrows*, with her seven swords representing seven sorrows.

Running along the top of the long east and west walls are six smaller half-moon shaped lunettes, which Sargent also installed in 1916. Above the entrance to the Cheverus Room, the central lunette on the west wall depicts *Judgment*, with a set of embossed scales weighing souls at the gates of Heaven. Those who “passed the test” would be

directed to the scene at left, depicting *The Passing of Souls into Heaven*, with heraldic figures rising into the sky and angels playing harps. For those who didn’t meet standards, a frightening fate awaits in the right lunette, which depicts *Hell* as a muscular green monster, clamping its fangs down upon the souls directed to it.

Along the east wall, three lunettes depict *Armageddon*, or *The Fall of Gog and Magog* (left), *Israel and the Law* (center), and the *Messianic Era* (right), with its elaborate foliage of pomegranates flanking the golden figures.



John Singer Sargent in his Paris studio, shown with his paintings *Madame X* and *The Breakfast Table*, c. 1884

#### 🌀 1919 INSTALLATION 🌀

Sargent installed the fourth phase of panels in two intricate frames along the east wall. Here, he inserted expressions of *Synagogue* (left) and *Church* (right), with the latter following the Pietà imagery of a seated Madonna with Christ at her feet. While the image of *Synagogue* as a blindfolded figure bearing her staff aligned with traditional Medieval depictions, it met instant criticism from those within and beyond the Jewish community. 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. While the public called for its removal, one patron splashed ink across the piece, requiring Sargent himself to restore the panel.

#### 🌀 THE UNFINISHED PANEL 🌀

Sargent became increasingly distracted from *Triumph of Religion* for a combination of reasons. He lost his dear niece, Rose-Marie Ormond, in a bombing of a Parisian church in World War I. He was also preoccupied with another significant mural commission at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The library’s central panel was never completed, as Sargent died of heart attack before traveling from London to Boston in 1925.

From sketches for this final unfinished panel, *Sermon on the Mount*, Sargent had intended to show a beautiful and barren Middle Eastern landscape with a small gathering of figures around Christ at center. This would have been a powerful capstone to the ambitious project, and the still-blank panel leaves a poignant reminder of what was left unfinished by the great artist. 🌀

Please return the mural guide to its holder when finished.