

Boston's Glorious Gardner Museum

A splendid art collection
in a latter-day Venetian palazzo

by John Sedgwick

The lush center courtyard of the Gardner, with its high Renaissance windows and ancient sculpture, is awash in the color of seasonally planted flowers.

When Isabella Stewart Gardner, the eccentric Boston arts patron who once promenaded down Tremont Street with a pet lion named Rex, built her museum at the turn of the century, she never intended it to be a place of learning. How dreary! This was, she said, to be a place for "spiritual refreshment." Eschewing the imposing classical style of the Museum of Fine Arts, her neighbor in Boston's Fenway, she designed her museum in the style of a 15th-century Venetian palazzo. She wanted her showplace to be homey. And, until her death in 1924 at age 84, she lived in an apartment on the top floor.

The Gardner, a hulking brick building overlooking Frederick Law Olmsted's Fens, doesn't look like much on the outside. Inside it retains that distinctive blend of high-toned culture and personal charm that marked its owner, who was a friend of Henry James, dressed her coachmen in gilded livery and liked to spell her name Ysabella to be in spiritual harmony with the fabled Spanish queen. And as such, the Gardner Museum is the perfect antidote to winter in Boston: perpetual springtime. When the rest of the city turns cold and gray, the Gardner Museum, with its spectacular skylighted courtyard, stunning art and splendid period furnishings, remains a haven of warmth, color and beauty—a fitting memorial to the radiant grande dame known as Mrs. Jack.

Mr. Jack, or John Lowell Gardner, was a successful banker from an old China-trade family that also dabbled in the slave trade and controlled a sizable amount of Boston real estate. Presumably, he gave Mrs. Gardner plenty of free time, and she spent most of her life building her collection—much of it



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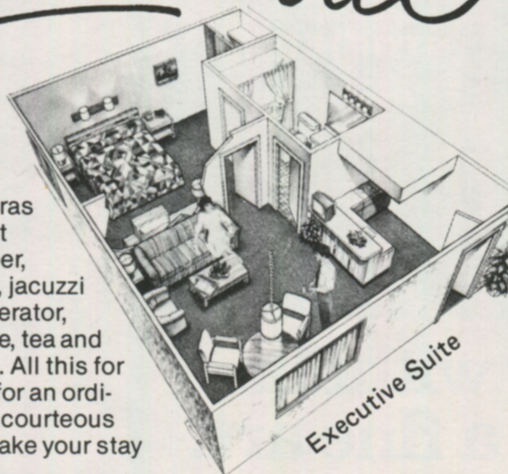
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at her own inspiration, and some under the guidance of the critic Bernard Berenson, whom she had first befriended when he was a Harvard undergraduate. Because her interest in a piece tended to drive up its price at auction, she sometimes observed the action with a handkerchief held up to her face. That was both disguise and signal: an associate was supposed to keep bidding until she brought her handkerchief down. She rarely brought it down. In this manner she acquired an impressive collection of masterpieces by the likes of Titian, Raphael, Manet and Rembrandt, not to mention considerable Chinese porcelain, Italian rare books and medieval sculpture. The treasures fill up three floors that ring the central courtyard of the museum.

But the art is presented to the museum's visitors as it always appeared to Mrs. Gardner: as a pleasure, never as a duty. Unlike those of most museums, the galleries are not organized by chronological, ethnic or geographical order so much as by compatibility. In the so-called Early Italian Room, for example, there are, appropriately, paintings by Simone Martini, Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca, but there is also a 19th-century Japanese pottery figurine depicting the Chinese poet Li Po atop a Japanese temple table, which rests in turn on a colorful 18th-century Venetian cabinet. And there is Persian pottery in the case across the window. Her confidence that others would enjoy her own taste, no matter how unconventional, is apparent in her motto that appears over the museum's entrance: "*C'est Mon Plaisir.*"

And pleasure it is. One look at the central courtyard inside this palazzo is enough to warm even the chilliest heart. Ringed by a colonnade that seems to have been snatched whole from a Burgundian monastery (Mrs. Gardner wasn't above that sort of thing), the courtyard presents a stirring collection of ancient sculpture—headless Roman copies of Greek bronzes, architectural fragments, a sarcophagus—amid a fabulous and exquisite indoor garden planted with a variety of flowers, shrubs and palm trees.

Mrs. Gardner always wanted her museum to be an experience of all the senses, not just sight. So, in the courtyard you hear the gentle lapping sound of water trickling out of the mouths of a pair of sculpted sea serpents and into a deep carved-stone tub. Because of that sound, and an abundance of deep green moss and ivy, you feel as if you have wandered into some enchanted glade. The smells are no less divine; the air is fragrant with gardenias and azaleas and other sweet-smelling blossoms. But it is the colors that truly dazzle. Rising out of a bed of moss, or lining the gravel walkways through the court, are clusters of

daffodils, jonquils and hyacinths—all grown in the museum's private greenhouses. At Christmastime, the court is red with poinsettias. And from the sills of the Venetian windows set in the high marble-like walls that rise up all around to an overarching skylight pour nasturtiums in a cascade of glittering orange.

In the center of the court, beside a second-century Roman mosaic of Medusa, there's a throne with a couple of Ionic pedestals stacked up to make a footstool. One can easily imagine Mrs. Gardner sitting there imperiously, taking well-deserved satisfaction in all that she has wrought. For this palace of art is her creation. And she oversaw its construction with all the vigilance of the Egyptian god of light, Horus, who, represented as a hawk, occupies a spot just to the throne's left in the center of the court. Mrs. Jack, who weighed barely 90 pounds (a fact unnoticed by those who came in contact with her), used to say that she always admired the Empress Dowager of China, whose favorite command was "Cut off his head."

Although she was nearly 60 when work on the palazzo began in 1898, she came in every day with a lunch pail to look after her Italian workmen. She was accompanied in her rounds by a foreman named Bolgi who played the cornet. One toot from Bolgi would summon the mason for her, two toots the steamfitter, three toots the plumber and so on. She was not averse to taking matters into her own hands if the help failed her. When the master painter—six toots—couldn't produce the right shade of pink for the courtyard's walls, Mrs. Gardner herself clambered up the scaffolding with a paint bucket and obtained exactly the marble-like effect she wanted. When her carpenters—four toots—didn't catch on to the way she wanted some beams rough-hewn, she took an ax and hacked away at them herself.

Mrs. Gardner announced her accomplishment to the world by sending out invitations to select Bostonians to attend an evening of music at Fenway Court, as the museum was called in her lifetime, on New Year's Day, 1903. The card set the time at "nine o'clock, punctually." As Mrs. Gardner sat alone on the landing of a staircase above them, 50 musicians from the Boston Symphony Orchestra performed Bach, Mozart and Chausson for the 150 guests. Then a mirror was removed from the corner of the music room, and the guests were allowed to see the courtyard for the first time. Lighted by lanterns in the Venetian windows, the court must have seemed like something out of a fairytale. Some of the guests walked out into it in a daze, according to one account, "pressing forward to make sure it was not all a dream." As one person wrote to Mrs. Gardner after-



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wards, "You are the Boston end of the *Arabian Nights*."

Nearly everything in the museum is now just as those first guests saw it. Indeed, there are little red circles marked on the floor to make sure that the furniture is put back in exactly the right spot after it's moved for cleaning. As in a theater set, each room is arranged to bring out the best in each picture. In the Raphael Room, for example, the walls are hung with deep-red damask silk (which, contrary to rumor, did not come from one of Mrs. Gardner's gowns) to match the red

vestments in Raphael's portrait *Count Tommaso Inghirami*. And, in the Tapestry Room, a huge 14th-century stone fireplace looms up at one end, and thick beams run across the ceiling to complete the effect of a medieval hall suggested by the many tapestries adorning the walls. Some of Mrs. Gardner's own little personal touches are also preserved, such as the small vase of fresh violets she always placed by Giorgione's portrait *Christ Bearing the Cross*.

Probably the most impressive room artistically is the Dutch Room on the

second floor, which contains four Rembrandts (including his only known seascape, *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*), two Holbeins, one Rubens, one Van Dyck and a Vermeer (*The Concert*, the first ever purchased by an American). A total of 18 works are shown here, against a wall of green damask and over a red-tile floor.

At the culmination of the usual tour, the Gothic Room on the third floor displays, fittingly, a portrait of the museum's creator by her friend John Singer Sargent, who used the room for a few years as his studio. The picture carries on the spirit of his famous, sensuous *Portrait of Madame X* that caused a sensation in Paris. This one depicts Mrs. Gardner in a tightly clinging black dress that showed off her hourglass shape to full advantage, with two strands of pearls around her waist, a pearl choker at her throat and extreme décolletage. When the portrait was displayed at St. Botolph's Club in Boston in 1888, it caused havoc. One paper noted—in a line that the museum is still trying to live down—that it showed Mrs. Jack "down to Crawford's Notch." The line was doubly scandalous, because it referred not only to a famous resort in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, but also to the novelist Frank Marion Crawford, who was suspected of being Mrs. Gardner's paramour. Understandably, Mr. Gardner refused to have the picture shown publicly while he lived. Yet, far from being incensed herself, Mrs. Gardner tried to get Sargent to proclaim it the best portrait he'd ever done. (Sensibly, he demurred.) And she proudly displayed it here under a rose window, among religious artifacts. Outrageous? Certainly. But as the divine Mrs. Gardner would say, "*C'est mon plaisir*." ■



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How and Where

The Gardner Museum is at 280 The Fenway, next to Simmons College. It is open Tuesday from noon to 9 P.M. and Wednesday through Sunday from noon to 5. For admission, a contribution of \$2 is requested but not required. In keeping with Mrs. Gardner's wishes to delight all the senses, free concerts are performed in the Tapestry Room on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Call the museum (617-734-1359) for recorded information giving details.

There is a small café on the ground floor that serves lunch and dinner during museum hours. Along with the sandwiches listed on the menu, more substantial and quite tasty specials, such as chicken stew and ratatouille pie, are offered daily. There is an assortment of pastries for dessert, and a range of modestly priced wines. Lunch or dinner for two, with wine, costs about \$25.