

THE MUSEUM THAT ECCENTRICITY BUILT

Boston's Gardner Museum displays a collection of art as whimsical as the nineteenth-century woman who created it all

By John Sedgwick

So with her museum: On the outside, it looks like a turn-of-the-century warehouse, a great big box of drab brown brick. Mrs. Jack hated stuffiness. When Boston ladies were competing to see who could wear the largest and showiest corsage, she appeared without a single flower on her lapel. But she did love beauty. So, here, pass through the museum's dark entrance hall and you come upon a dazzling Venetian courtyard with pointed Renaissance windows, lightly

playing fountains, shining ancient statues and an imported mosaic floor set into a bank of thick green moss. While the museum's many rooms of art are stunning, this

courtyard is what I, as a longtime Bostonian, keep returning to. To me, it is lovelier and more stylish and moving than all the priceless Titians, Rembrandts, Vermeers and Sargent's combined. Here I sometimes imagine I have found the one still point in a swirling universe.

Contemporaries called the place Mrs. Gardner's "palace," and so it was. God knows, nobody else in Boston would have dreamed up such a glorious extravaganza. She'd taken an interest in art after her only child, a son, died in 1865. Advised by Berenson, whom she had befriended when he was a Harvard undergraduate, Mrs. Jack started collect-

ing. Because her interest in a piece often drove 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 would bid until she brought her handkerchief down.

She rarely did so. In this manner she acquired an impressive collection of masterpieces, including *The Concert*—the first Vermeer to be bought by an American—and Rembrandt's only known seascape, *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. (She obtained others by guile. For instance, toward the end of her life, she borrowed Sargent's large oil painting (continued on page 90)



BOSTON'S ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER Museum doesn't look like much from the outside, but then, neither did she.

Physically, the fabled Mrs. Jack, as she was known, was a plain, almost dowdy woman of ninety pounds, with rust-colored hair, a crooked nose and paper-white skin. Spiritually, however, she was something else again: a wealthy patron of the arts; a friend of Henry James, James McNeill Whistler and Bernard Berenson; and an eccentric. She once drove down Tremont Street with two lion cubs in her coach, once wore a Red Sox headband to Symphony Hall and liked to spell her name "Ysabella" so as to be in spiritual harmony with the Spanish queen. She took as her motto "C'est mon plaisir" ("It's my pleasure").

Fenway lark: With its elements drawn from several ancient centuries, Mrs. Gardner's courtyard, above, left, suggests an almost postmodern sensibility. Indeed, some find the courtyard more compelling than her collection of art.

«elements of style»

(continued from page 87) of a sensual Spanish dancer, *El Jaleo*, from her relative Thomas Jefferson Coolidge while he was away in Europe, and then built a corner in her museum expressly to display it. When Coolidge returned, he hadn't the heart to take it back.) In addition to paintings, she also amassed a considerable collection of Chinese porcelain, rare Italian books, medieval sculpture, whatever pleased her fancy. But unlike other collectors, she never bought, say, "a Manet." It had to be the right Manet or she wasn't interested.

Before too long, her holdings started to exceed the space in her Beacon Street home, and she gradually turned her attention toward building a museum to house them all. The work began in earnest upon the death of her husband, John Lowell Gardner, in 1898. Possibly to distract herself from her grief, Mrs. Gardner threw herself into the creation of her palace. During construction, she arrived every day carrying a lunch pail. She was assisted by a foreman named Bolgi, who played the cornet. One toot from Bolgi summoned the mason, two toots the plumber and so on. She took 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 walls, Mrs. Gardner clambered up the scaffolding with a paint bucket to show the marblelike effect she wanted. When the carpenters—four toots—didn't catch on to the way she wanted some beams rough-hewn, she hacked away at them herself.

She employed only Italian-speaking workmen, in the hope that word of the enterprise would not leak out into high society. Miraculously, it didn't, and curiosity was great when the museum was completed four years later. To celebrate, she invited 150 members of Boston society—"summoned" might be a better word—for an evening of music at nine o'clock, punctually, on New Year's Day, 1903. At the appointed time, the guests were ushered into a long, narrow music hall, where fifty musicians from the Boston Symphony Orchestra would perform Bach, Mozart, Schumann and Chausson. Mrs. Gardner, wearing a long black gown and a necklace of 149 pearls, greeted her friends, then sat by herself, above the guests, in a chair on the landing of a staircase during the performance.

Afterward, a mirror was rolled back from a corner of the room and the guests saw the palace courtyard for the first time.

Lighted by lanterns, it must have seemed a fantasy. Some of the guests were dazed, according to one account, "pressing forward to make sure it was not all a dream." A guest later wrote to Mrs. Gardner, "You are the Boston end of the Arabian nights."

The courtyard was a dream—Mrs. Gardner's dream. There is no other way to account for it. Karen Haas, associate curator of the museum, has spent years looking through photographs of the woman's travels trying to find the inspiration for the courtyard. But the more Haas considered the matter, the more intrigued she became.

For instance, it is customary to describe the courtyard as Venetian (indeed, I have done so here), but, in fact, there's no such thing as a Venetian courtyard in anything like the Gardner style; Venice's palazzi look out on canals. But the courtyard isn't Florentine or Roman, either, for those varieties are rarely so grandiose. No, it's Venetian. Mrs. Gardner filched some of the window balconies from the Ca' d'Oro, took the actual windows from less distinguished Venetian palazzi and made use of the Venetian technique of embedding sculptural fragments into the walls at odd intervals. What she did, in short, was to take Venetian exterior walls and turn them outside in. The result seems so Venetian, it is hard to imagine that such a thing exists only in Boston.

Despite the Venetian look, the courtyard's objects have been gathered from enough places and times to make a postmodernist blush: The mosaic was taken from a second-century Roman villa, the stone fountain tub is a fourth-century Roman sarcophagus, the Horus Hawk is a granite sculptural fragment from third-century-B.C. Egypt, the dancing maenad set into the far wall is of first-century Greco-Roman origin—and so it goes.

No less confusing, the courtyard, roofed with glass, is an atrium—one of the first in America and the inspiration for many that followed it. (In fact, architect Moshe Safdie visited just recently to look at it.) The skylight itself, resting on a Moorish-looking parapet fifty feet up, is an oddity: The design of its large panes of glass and black mullions and muntins was modeled after Mrs. Gardner's greenhouse at her country estate in neighboring Brookline.

Indeed, the courtyard is more greenhouse than anything, with its palm trees, its banks of moss, its fruit trees, its ivy, its cascades of glittering nasturtiums. For they, depending upon the season, along with the sound of the trickling fountains, provide an organic unity to the whole enterprise, turning the courtyard into a glade or bower and linking it to the ever-changing seasons as the freesias appear in the spring, the lilies at Easter, the chrysanthemums in the fall and the poinsettias at Christmastime.

Henry Adams congratulated Mrs. Gardner for escaping the laws of evolution. "You are a creator," he wrote, "and stand alone." Quite so. In a way that seems astonishing even by today's standards, she played God with objets d'art. To her, they were merely materials for her own artistic imagination. So what if she turned columns upside down? So what if she used an elegant Italian wrought-iron bedstead as a stairway railing? So what if she stuck a Japanese door on the wall as if it were a tapestry? These things looked good that way, and that was that.

Upstairs in the Gothic Room stands an 1888 portrait of Mrs. Jack by her friend John Singer Sargent, who used the room for a time as his studio. The picture carries on the spirit of his famous sensuous portrait, *Madame X*, which had caused a sensation in Paris when he painted it four years earlier. This one depicts Mrs. Gardner in a tightly clinging, extremely décolleté black dress that showed off her hourglass shape to full advantage, two strands of pearls about her waist. When the portrait was displayed at the St. Botolph Club in Boston, it created 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 quip was doubly scandalous because it referred not only to a famous resort in the White Mountains of New Hampshire but also to the novelist F. Marion Crawford, who was suspected of being Mrs. Gardner's paramour. Understandably, Mr. Gardner refused to have the picture shown publicly again while he lived. But Mrs. Gardner was delighted with it. And she displayed it here under a rose window, among religious artifacts. Outrageous? Certainly. But it looks great. Besides, as the divine Mrs. Gardner would say, "C'est mon plaisir." ■

John Sedgwick wrote about the Harvard Square kiosk in the September issue of GQ.