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Spotlight on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

A museum created out of a personal art collection is a rare find, but then so is a personal art collection containing the likes of Botticelli, Vermeer and Rembrandt. **Isabella Stewart Gardner** was an American art collector and philanthropist at the turn of the 20th century, buying paintings and objects with her husband Jack with the intention of creating a museum. Finding their home to be too small for this purpose, they hired an architect to construct a 15th century Venetian-style palace that would later be referred to as Fenway Court. Although Jack died during the planning stages, Isabella proceeded with the creation of the museum in 1899. She was incredibly involved in every aspect of the construction and upon completion spent a year installing her collection.

On February 23, 1903, Gardner opened her museum to the public—an intimate, intensely personal setting for artists, musicians and thinkers to gather. Because Gardner disliked the cold, mausoleum-like spaces of most American museums at the time, she designed Fenway Court around a sun-drenched courtyard filled with flowers. With a collection of her personal



Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1888.
© Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

Now a cultural landmark in Boston, the **Gardner Museum** receives nearly 200,000 visitors annually. This puts considerable strain on a building that was built to create a personal setting for about 2,000 visitors each year to view art one day a week. As the museum has grown in popularity and visitation has increased, museum staff have struggled to uphold Gardner's original vision for the spaces of her museum while balancing the demands of a larger audience. The purpose of several rooms—such as the Tapestry Room, which was once one of the nation's renowned galleries for viewing tapestries yet has served as the stage for the museum's concert series for the past 40 years—had been altered from what Gardner intended to accommodate new programs and features at the museum.

As a result, a century after the museum first opened, the bold decision was made to **build an addition to the original building** to relieve pressure on its historic spaces. Museum Director Anne Hawley notes, "One of the most important goals of the new wing is the relocation of programming which has outgrown the historic galleries. The Tapestry Room is perhaps the most dramatic example of that as it had become the hub of the museum's largest and most popular programming and had lost its focus as a gallery."

The **new 70,000 square foot wing** designed by architect Renzo Piano does not attempt to mimic the grandeur of the historic Venetian-style building. Rather, it provides an interesting contrast—a simple, light-filled, modern structure, consisting mostly of glass and vibrant chemically patinated copper. This new wing of the museum now contains all of the modern conveniences that museum-goers expect including a restaurant and gift shop, while also hosting more expansive areas for past features the museum struggled to fit in the original building, such as an adjustable-height contemporary art gallery for new exhibits, an intimate performance hall for their many concerts and speakers, a greenhouse to cultivate plants for Gardner's historic courtyard, an education studio and apartments for its Artists-In-Residence program. The new wing also makes more room for museum staff and provides a conservation lab devoted to the preservation of Gardner's works of art, as well as expanded archival and collection storage.

central courtyard filled with flowers. With an aim of love of art, not knowledge of art history, Gardner created a museum that was a work of art in itself. She arranged her collection of more than 2,500 paintings, sculptures, tapestries, furniture pieces, manuscripts and rare books in a way intended to evoke very personal responses by mixing the different media and grouping objects from different cultures and time periods. When Gardner passed away in 1924, she left specific instructions in her will, along with a \$1 million endowment, that the permanent collection not be significantly altered. As a result, when patrons visit the museum today, they see much of the collection in the exact way in which Gardner intended it to be viewed. In fact, several empty frames still hang in their designated places after the museum experienced **one of the largest art thefts in history** in 1990.



Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, exterior.
© Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



Exterior view of the new Evans Way Park entrance of the new wing of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Outdoor art installation "Ailanthus" by Stefano Arienti (right).
© Nic Lehoux / Renzo Piano Building Workshop

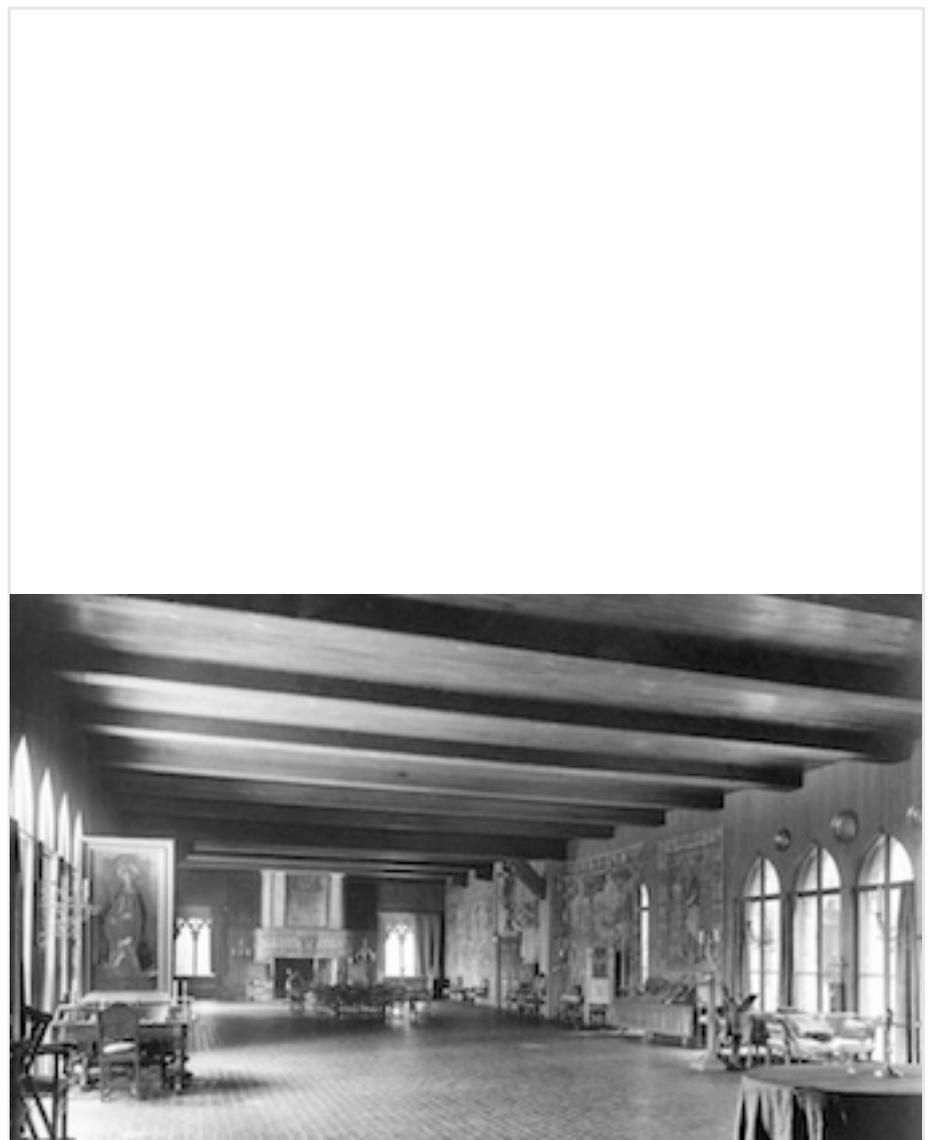
...the original building from each other, recognizing that both their style and purposes were drastically different. He connected the space with a tree-lined glass tunnel. The contrast between walking from the light, glass-encased new space to the dimly lit, brick historic building has been likened by some to traveling back in time. Now as visitors enter the Venetian building from the glass corridor, they are greeted by the shock of color and overwhelming beauty of Gardner's courtyard, allowing them to appreciate its full glory with formalities such as coat check and admission already behind them in the new building.

Despite its necessity, the expansion of the museum was not without controversy. Because

the expansion deviated from Gardner's stipulations in her will, the museum sought court approval confirming that the project was consistent with her mandate that the museum remain "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever" before proceeding. In addition, many loyal patrons questioned whether the original appeal of the museum—that intimate, personal setting Gardner so carefully crafted—would be preserved with the new, considerably larger, modern architecture. Since its grand re-opening in January 2012, the museum continues to receive comments on its **Facebook page** about the new wing. The overall response has been favorable: "I visited today after many years, and was pleasantly surprised and impressed with the R.P. addition. The distribution of spaces and connection to the existing historic building were beautiful! Can't wait to visit more often for music/performances. Thank you!" commented Karen V. Schaub, who likes the museum's Facebook page.

Contributing to the expansion's warm reception is the museum's dedication to keeping its patrons well informed throughout the years-long process. They created a **website specifically devoted to the renovation project** where they provided concept sketches, site plans, articles from staff members and interviews with Hawley and Piano. They also kept visitors updated as construction phases were completed and made them aware of the museum's temporary closure on the site and their **Facebook** and **Twitter** pages.

What many have also found encouraging, no doubt, are the museum's efforts to restore areas of the original building and create a better preservation environment so that both the iconic building and the works within will last for centuries more to come. Most notably, the beloved **Tapestry Room has been restored** to its original glory. Using historic photographs from the museum's archives, curatorial and conservation staff have cleaned and restored the French medieval stone fireplace, many original tapestries and other precious artwork, as well as reupholstered several pieces of furniture and reinstalled them all in a way to retain the historic arrangement of the gallery. "The Tapestry Room is one of the few galleries affording room to wander freely," says Head of Conservation Gianfranco Pocobene. "The sense of space and openness that visitors will discover in the restored Tapestry Room will be amazing—and unexpected for many—and a celebration of Gardner's original vision."





Tapestry Room, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.
Photo by T. E. Marr and Son, 1926

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