

In Search of Isabellas

“[Isabella Gardner] is the one and only real potentate I have ever known. She lives at a rate of intensity and with a reality that makes other lives seem pale, thin and shadowy” – Bernard Berenson, art advisor and friend, ca. 1900

“One of the seven wonders of Boston... as brilliant as her own diamonds” – Anonymous reporter, 1903

Isabella Stewart Gardner was one of the foremost female patrons of the arts. She befriended many leading artists and writers of her time, including John Singer Sargent, James McNeill Whistler and Henry James. She was a supporter of community social services and cultural enrichment. She was an ardent fan of the Boston Symphony, the Red Sox and Harvard College football. Isabella Stewart Gardner was also the visionary creator of one of the most remarkable collections of art in the world today. The Museum that bears her name remains a place where visitors can enjoy a personal connection with great art – and with the Isabella who created it!

Use this guide to explore the galleries and to find out more about Isabella Stewart Gardner’s artistic vision.



GOthic ROOM (3RD FLOOR)

PORTRAIT OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER BY JOHN SINGER SARGENT

Meet Isabella Stewart Gardner

John Singer Sargent painted this portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1888 when she was 48 years old. It took Sargent nine attempts before Isabella Gardner was finally satisfied it. She told him that she thought it was the best portrait he had ever done.

- **What do *you* think about this portrait?**
- **Why do you think Isabella would have liked it so much?**

Shocking?

Did you know that in Isabella’s own time many people did not like this portrait and felt that it was quite shocking? Critics commented on her display of wealth (the pearls and rubies), her low-cut dress and bare arms, and the hint of a halo and a crown behind her head.

No Entry Until Further Notice

The room that you are now standing in was not open to the public until after Isabella Stewart Gardner’s death in 1924—and it was all because of this portrait. Bothered by the unkind remarks that some people had made, Isabella’s husband Jack asked that the painting never be shown in public during his lifetime. And it never was. When Isabella built this Museum she placed her portrait here in the Gothic Room and from 1903-1924 this gallery was closed to the public.

LONG GALLERY (3RD FLOOR)

On to the next Isabella adventure: *Pass through the Long Gallery, noticing all the different kinds of things that she collected. Peek behind the curtains of the cases. What do you discover?*



TITIAN ROOM (3RD FLOOR)

EUROPA BY TITIAN

The Art of Collecting

Titian's *Europa* was one of Isabella Gardner's favorite paintings. She spent hours thinking about it and wrote to a friend, "*I have no words!... I am breathless about the Europa!... Every inch of paint in the picture seems full of joy.*"

- **How does this painting make YOU feel?**
- **Do you agree or disagree with Isabella Gardner?**

Putting It All Together

Isabella Gardner arranged paintings, furniture, and decorative arts in ways that encourage visitors to make connections between objects. Look for repeated shapes, colors and subject matter.

- **Look at the objects on the two tables below *Europa*.**
- **Can you find something that looks like waves?**
- **What other things can you discover that connect you to the painting?**

On to the next Isabella adventure: *When you go down the staircase, the entrance to the Dutch Room is straight ahead. Look to the right of the doorway as you enter the room.*



DUTCH ROOM (2ND FLOOR)

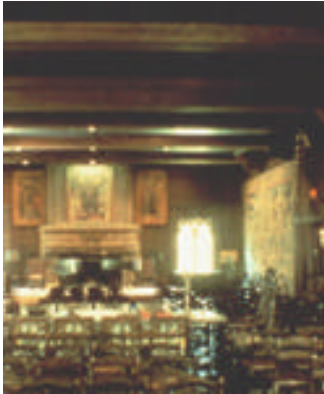
PORTRAIT OF ISABELLA CLARA EUGENIA BY FRANS POURBUS II

A Royal Isabella

In the Dutch Room you will find a portrait of another Isabella, an Archduchess of Austria who lived over 400 hundred years ago. We can learn more about this Isabella by looking at two portrait clues: her clothes and her facial expression.

- **What is she wearing that tells us that she is important?**
- **If you were to have your picture painted, what would you choose to wear?**
- **Look at the expression on her face. What do you think she is trying to tell you?**
- **If you could ask her one question, what would it be?**

On to the next Isabella adventure: *Go through the elevator doorway to the Tapestry Room.*



TAPESTRY ROOM (2ND FLOOR)

The Light in Your “Y” s

The name “Isabella” is popular in many different countries. Isabella Stewart Gardner especially enjoyed using the Spanish version of her first name which is “Ysabella.” She often signed her name with a “Y”. In the Tapestry Room, Isabella used the letter “Y” in a very unusual way to remind us of her name.

- **Look carefully around this very large room, paying particular attention to the standing lamps. How many “Ys” you can find?**

On to the next Isabella adventure: *Go through the doorway at the end of the Tapestry Room.*



SHORT GALLERY (2ND FLOOR)

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER IN VENICE BY ANDERS ZORN

“This is Too Beautiful to Miss!”

According to Jack Gardner’s 1894 diary, the Gardners and some guests were in Venice enjoying an after-dinner concert when Isabella stepped out onto the balcony to watch a fireworks display. Opening the glass doors, she turned back to the company and stood in the archway with outstretched arms said, “Come out – all of you – this is too beautiful to miss!”

- **Look carefully at this portrait, what do you think the artist is trying to tell us about Isabella Stewart Gardner?**
- **How do you think you would you feel if you were one of her guests that evening?**



MUSEUM FAÇADE

C’EST MON PLAISIR

C’est mon plaisir (*It is my pleasure*) was Isabella Stewart Gardner’s motto and tells how much she wants you to enjoy her Museum!

When you leave, please turn around to admire the outside of the building. Notice the Y-shaped flue that adorns the Museum’s front and the seal of the Museum with Isabella’s motto.

THANK YOU FOR EXPLORING YOUR MUSEUM WITH US!

We look forward to welcoming you to here again and again...