

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Elisa Hamilton Artist Audio Tour

September 2019

This Artist Walk was produced by Sandy Goldberg of sgscripts.

To start this walk, go to the Veronese Room on the Third Floor of the Palace.

Select STOP 320 and press play to enjoy! Elisa will guide you around the Museum in these rooms:

Palace 3rd Floor

Veronese Room

Palace 2nd Floor

Dutch Room, Tapestry Room, Raphael Room, Early Italian Room

Palace 1st Floor

West Cloister, Courtyard

Palace 3rd Floor, Veronese Room

That painting on the ceiling is “heavenly”; but from wherever you are in the room, turn to face the fireplace. To the right of the fireplace, past the window, there’s a corner-cabinet filled with lace. Move over to it - and peer into the top section. With the section on the left, I want to point out the second horizontal band of lace from the bottom. There are flowers within it that seem to be growing. On the far left there’s a creature with a fanciful hat underneath one of those flowers, playing a musical instrument. There’s also a peacock displaying its beautiful feathers. It’s a joyful fantasy garden - everything rendered by hand, individually, thread by thread. I’m fascinated by the fact that Isabella Stewart Gardner collected lace so avidly. When I look at the wonderful examples in this case, I always think of the tremendous amount of intricate labor that goes into making lace. On this walk I’ll be using lace as a way to look at this museum. We’ll also be looking at other kinds of materials, and “unraveling” different kinds of stories as we go.

Turn to the nearby table with the white tablecloth now. Isabella set it with a fine lace tablecloth – with more animals woven into it. I think that she chose these plates to put on it because of their openwork borders. To me they’re a porcelain version of lace. A visual connection to her lace collection. Look also at the two sets of windows with curtains nearby. Isabella selected these curtains for this room; and they’re made from... what else? Lace! OK, now turn so that your back is to those windows. We’re going across the room, to the open doorway ahead of you. It leads to the stairway. But just on the other side of the doorway — on the landing before the stairs — turn immediately to the left. There’s a painting of a woman with a huge white collar. Look what’s she’s holding in her lowered hand. At the time the artist Domenico Tintoretto painted this noblewoman’s portrait – just before the year 1600 – lace was very expensive. It was just as much a status item as that incredible necklace she’s wearing. Both the jewelry and the lace make me think of the crafts people whose skilled hands and eyes went into creating such minutely detailed objects. So, for me, this painting doesn't just tell the noblewoman’s story. It tells the story of so many individuals who were a part of the creation of her opulent persona. My eyes also go to the frame. It’s a kind of jewelry – an accessory – for the painting itself. I was actually a picture framer for a number of years.

That's how I supported myself before becoming a full-time artist. There's such craftsmanship in the creation of a frame. Making something with our hands with time-intensive focus isn't something that we value so much, in our digital age. But each of us has something – hopefully – that we do in our daily lives that does require some special care. For artists, it's our work. I think of bakers, or anyone who makes food for their family. I wonder what it might be for you....

Let's go down the stairs now. Take your time and we'll meet at the bottom of the stairs. Pause your audio now as you're going down – or, if you want to use the elevator instead of the stairs, go back into the Veronese Room and the guard there can direct you to the elevator. Ask how to get to the Dutch Room once you're on the second floor. That's where we're going next.

At the bottom of the stairs, go into the room directly in front of you. As you pass through the doorway, turn around — and look at the painting just to left of the doorway you passed through. It's from about the same date as the painting we were just looking at upstairs... But this lace! I'm both mesmerized, and overwhelmed by it. It's like flames coming out of her sleeves. Her facial expression is a little bit off-putting. And I think that's intentional on the part of the artist, Frans Pourbus the Younger. He specialized in portraits of nobility – and his incredibly detailed rendering of her clothing is part of the statement of this woman's power. She was Archduchess of Austria, and her name was Isabella Clara Eugenia. Another Isabella! That may have been part of the reason Isabella Stewart Gardner bought this painting. She had a thing for royal women and liked to link herself to them in various ways. Imagine the tiny brush the artist used for every almost every stitch of that lace. And that fabric of her gown and robe too!: it looks like it has metallic threads woven into it. I can almost feel the textures. This woman's extravagant excess of lace is her "power suit." Her armor of lace.

Now turn directly around, to the opposite wall. Let's look at the painting in the middle of that wall: the man in actual armor. This is by Peter Paul Rubens – whose paintings of luscious female nudes are the origin of the term "Rubenesque." I'm attracted to those highlights on his sleeve. They're smack dab in the center of the painting; and I think that Rubens really wants them to be the focal point. Take a close look at the way he painted

them: using a wide brush, with long sweeps of white paint. So different from the tiny brushwork in the painting we were just looking at. But what they have in common is that each artist is showing us the way that light plays with textures. On the metal armor the light is reflective. In that woman's lace it's passing through and creating those delicate patterns. For me, it's a very interesting 'conversation' across the room: about the act of depicting light through painting.

Now, turn left from the Rubens portrait. We're going to move on from this room now, towards the doorway ahead of you. It's to the left of the fireplace.

As you go through the doorway, you'll move through a narrow passageway. Then you're suddenly in a huge gallery: the Tapestry Room. As you enter, turn right and move to the fireplace. Let's look at the painting above the fireplace. For a long time, whenever I would visit this museum, I would go directly to this painting and look. And look. And look. I loved it – even though I didn't know who that winged man was supposed to be. The painting reminded me of a tarot card. It's an example of how you don't always need to know the 'facts' about a work of art to connect to it. I feel strangely protected by this man. He looks like he might take flight at any moment and hover above me, suspended in space and time. It was later that I learned that this is a 15th century Spanish painting which depicts the Archangel Michael. He's swooping down to conquer that devil figure, Satan, splayed across the bottom. On the left you can see Satan's feet: they're like fish flippers, with claws. And look at Satan's stomach! There's another face there: a second grotesque orange face. When we started this walk, we looked at lace with fantastical, made-up creatures – and I feel a connection there, and here, with artists of the past who found ways to let their vivid imaginations run wild.

In this painting St. Michael is not only trampling Satan; he's also weighing the souls of those little figures on the scale he's holding. The soul on the left, next to the angel, is getting into heaven. The one on the right is going to Hell. My original attraction to this painting, however, had nothing to do with the story of St. Michael. I don't come from a background that's Christian in a traditional way. But I've always been captivated by Biblical stories. And it was the fantastical elements of this painting that pulled me to it in particular. Some visitors, though, have a different reaction. In front of this painting, some

visitors find the dark skin of the devil troubling; especially in contrast to the paleness of Michael and the angel. When I learned that I understood, as a person of color myself, why that was disturbing, even though I hadn't made that connection before. It's an ugly historical trope: associating dark skin with evil. It's an important reminder that we each bring our own lived experience to art, and that each of our perspectives is valid. They're part of the story of any artwork. Sharing those perspectives helps us to understand the works of art, and one another, more fully

Now, turn and start to move slowly through the length of this room. Both walls are lined with tapestries. They're from two different sets of tapestries. One tells the Biblical story of Abraham. The other is about the Persian king Cyrus the Great. But Isabella mixed the sets together in the way she installed them on the walls! To me that says that she was less interested in us understanding a traditional narrative. I like to think that she's encouraging us to make up our own stories to connect them. To bring our own background and lived experiences to the way we understand them. Just like I was just talking about at the St. Michael painting...

As you're moving towards the other end of the room, I want to look at a small object that's on the wall to the right. To find it, look for the four tall windows on that wall. Just past the windows, do you see the round brass plate on the wall? Among these grand, monumental tapestries, you may not have noticed it. It's a humble object. That's part of why I like it. I'm really taken by the winding design in the center. I just love the balance of it. To me, they look like strawberries, but they're actually grapevines, with abstracted versions of their pointy leaves. The metal's raised, bumpy embossments really make me want to touch it - which of course I can't. I suppose other people were a little too tempted too because of the sign just below: 'please don't touch.' In my mind's eye I can feel the coolness of that metal and the puckers of those berries. There's a really beautiful handmade quality to it. You can envision the way a pair of hands with tools molded the brass. I like the way the brackets hold it onto the wall too. They embrace it. They clamp down on it the way that it was probably clamped during its creation.

Now let's turn to the left. On the wall ahead of you, notice that there are two doorways. Let's go through the doorway on the left. It leads into a narrow space. When you're in

there, go through the next doorway on your left; and enter the room with vibrant red walls. It's the Raphael Room.

As you enter it, turn around to face the doorway you just passed through. Just to the left of the doorway there's an amazing painting of a man on a rearing horse. He's wearing ornate armor – and his horse is too! They're battling a grotesque beast. Now, if you move to look at the painting a little bit from either side – you can notice that the artist, Carlo Crivelli, built up parts of the armor three-dimensionally from the surface. Those gold details are themselves a kind of jewelry for the piece – and they would have made the man's raised arm, and the action of the horse reflect light in the dark spaces of the day. The glistening light would animate their movements – making this action-packed scene come alive. According to the story, St George was a knight who slayed a dragon that was terrorizing a town. The only way to appease the dragon was a daily sacrifice, of a young maiden. That little kneeling woman on the left was slated to be his next victim – and she's clasping her hands, praying to be saved. There are so many compressed moments in this single scene. We can tell that, in the moment before this one, St. George tried to use his lance to impale the dragon through its mouth. The broken half in on the ground. Now he's using a sword that looks too heavy for him. His horse looks terrified! Look: we can see the whites of the horse's eyes as it tries to turn its head away from the monster. This is great storytelling!

Now, turn and let your gaze sweep around the room. What do your eyes latch onto? Mine are drawn to a completely different kind of ornament than that 'animating' armor. It's the narrow white border along all the room's edges. It's in the corners, and around doorways. It also separates the lower white sections of wall from the upper red sections. Its carved design seems to be weaving in and out as it moves around the room. It's like Isabella was giving a lace trim to the red fabric walls. It provides more of an intimate, hand-made element to this opulent and grand space. For me, it makes it more personal. Less imposing.

Now make your way towards the other doorway. We'll be moving into the next space. Find any comfortable place to stand towards the center of the room. We're going to keep that big wide-angle view here. In this space – the Early Italian Room – maybe more than any other in the museum – I feel like I'm transported to another world. A Medieval world. From wherever you are, turn your eyes upward – to see the narrow carved wooden molding near the ceiling. It's on three of the walls. If you look for places where the light hits it, you can see the wonderful detail within it. I think it's just so beautiful. The museum doesn't have any records of who made it. It's another example of Isabella "trimming" her rooms; and of unnamed craft people's hands and their labor. That's juxtaposed with the big-name works of art in this room – most of which were important church commissions, using gold and precious minerals for pigments. There's another piece of "trim" I really love here – which was made for a very different purpose, and place. From wherever you are, turn so the big fireplace is on your right. Now you're facing the doorway leading to the stairwell. Above the doorway, look up again – way up! Near the ceiling there's a wide horizontal wooden carving. I'd describe its openwork design as "lacy." It's a Japanese temple carving from the 1600s. It's carved with flowers - peony blossoms. They're full of energy and movement. It reminds me of the openwork nature designs that we saw in the lace.

Now go underneath the carving, through the doorway. Just outside the doorway, look on your right. There's a carved wooden panel with a scalloped shape. It's also from Japan. Within it are marvelous plum trees. You can see that it's the top part of a door. Maybe it led to a garden? Just looking at this carving, I can really feel its texture with my eyes. And I get a real sense of the artist's hand at work – seeing the tactile marks of the carving tools. It's like the brass plate with the strawberries we saw earlier. And the swipes of white paint in the Rubens portrait of the man in armor. It's in these kinds of moments in this museum where I feel the presence of artists from other times and places most intensely. Let's move down the stairs. Pause your audio and meet me at the bottom landing.

At the bottom of the stairs, turn and move along the side of the stairway you just came down. Move to the first alcove under the stairs. Poke your head inside and have a look.

On the windowsill, there are two arching snakes. Do you see them? Isabella positioned them so that they look like they're having a bit of a kerfuffle.

For me, the fact that Isabella placed these here is part of the way she's a storyteller in her museum. Because ... turn and look into the Courtyard. What's in the very center? The mosaic of the head of Medusa: she's the creature whose hair was made of snakes! I don't think it's any accident that Isabella placed these charming little snakes adjacent to her. Isabella did have a good sense of humor.

Now find a comfortable spot anywhere along the Courtyard. If you like, have a seat on one of the stone benches. As you gaze into the greenery, I want to bring back that idea of invisible labor. There's a devoted, expert team of gardeners that are here at the museum every day. Even on holidays, the plants are tended by hand, with extreme care. Just like the labor of lacemaking that we began with, intensive, invisible labor creates the vision. But that labor doesn't have to be invisible. Today, by looking closely and thoughtfully we've seen all the hands, hearts and minds that are a part of this wondrous place; they are an inherent part of its stories. And now that you've been here, your own experience is a part of this museum's story, too. As you go about the thorough tasks your own day to day, I hope that you'll share these stories with others.