

ISABELLA  
STEWART GARDNER  
MUSEUM

## Isabella Stewart Gardner and Her Museum

*“Years ago I decided that the greatest need in our Country was Art... So I determined to make it my life work if I could.”* —ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER, 1917



*Isabella Gardner, 1888*

One of America’s most remarkable women, Isabella Gardner was almost as passionate about sports (especially the Red Sox and Harvard football), gardening, and music as she was about art. She was active throughout her life in her church (the Church of the Advent at the foot of Beacon Hill) and in the Boston community as a whole. Most importantly, Isabella Gardner was the visionary creator of one of the most remarkable and intimate collections of art, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

### **GETTING STARTED**

Isabella Stewart Gardner was born in New York City on April 14, 1840. Her father, David Stewart, made his fortune in the linen trade with Ireland and later through investments in Midwestern copper mines. Educated in New York and Paris, Isabella married her schoolmate Julia Gardner’s older brother John Lowell (“Jack”) Gardner Jr. in 1860. They moved to Jack’s hometown, Boston, where they settled into a house at 152 Beacon Street, a wedding gift from Isabella’s father.

In 1863, Isabella gave birth to a son, Jackie, who died shortly before his second birthday. Although the Gardners had no more children, they raised their three nephews following the suicide of Jack’s widowed brother.

Beginning in the 1870s, the Gardners traveled to Europe and Asia to discover foreign cultures and expand their knowledge of the world. Isabella’s favorite foreign destination was Venice, Italy. Her love of the city inspired the design of her museum.



*Isabella Gardner and a gondolier in front of the Palazzo Barbaro, Venice, 1894*

## **MAKING A MUSEUM**

On the death of her father in 1891, Isabella Gardner inherited \$1.6 million, which she and her husband agreed she would spend on art. Advised by the young scholar Bernard Berenson, she focused on Italian Renaissance and later on Spanish art. 1896, the year she acquired important paintings by Rembrandt and Titian, marked a turning point in Gardner's collecting. Realizing that their collection was of museum quality, the Gardners began planning for a new building to house it. Sadly, Jack Gardner died in December 1898. Undaunted, Isabella poured new energy into the project. She bought land in the Fenway (then entirely empty) and hired an architect. Construction of the museum began

in June 1899 and was completed by late 1901. Mrs. Gardner then spent the following year arranging her works of art in the museum. She opened Fenway Court (as the museum was known in her lifetime) to the public on New Year's Day 1903.

After the museum opened, Mrs. Gardner continued to buy new works and rearrange rooms; by 1914 there were so many new objects that she rebuilt the entire east wing, adding several new galleries. In 1919, Isabella Stewart Gardner suffered the first of a series of strokes and died five years later, on July 17, 1924; she is buried in Cambridge's Mount Auburn Cemetery.

## **A LASTING LEGACY**

Isabella Gardner left the museum an endowment of \$1.2 million, and stipulated in her will that the works of art must remain as she had arranged them. Her imaginative arrangements encourage visitors to look, think, and create their own connections among works of art. We can think of the galleries as works of art themselves.

Mrs. Gardner also filled her museum with a lively community of artists, authors, and musicians. In keeping with this tradition, the Gardner Museum today is home to a world-class concert series and an innovative artist-in-residence program for contemporary artists, performers, and writers.