



Inventing Isabella
Large Print Labels

Inventing Isabella

Who was Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924)? A woman shrouded in myth, the museum she built and named for herself has captivated audiences ever since it opened in 1903. Her public actions challenged the rigid conventions of her class and gender, prompting negative and sexist remarks from the press and peers. Her legendary aura is not accidental. She deliberately cultivated her public persona, pioneering the type of image control that many of us navigate today in the age of social media.

Pictures of Gardner are scattered throughout her museum and its archives. Brought together, they reveal a method behind the myth. She used paintings, fashion, and photography to shape her own image and negotiate the boundary between private and public. She purposely left behind few written, first-person accounts and dodged unauthorized photographs. Instead, she collaborated with trusted artists to craft her public identity and to create enduring portraits of herself for posterity.

Fashion was one of Gardner's tools. Like the artists featured in the Fenway Gallery and on the Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade, Fabiola Jean-Louis and Carla Fernández, she understood that fashion choices allow women to exert agency and communicate their power. Her principal artistic collaborator, John Singer Sargent, also understood the power of dress, a topic explored in the concurrent exhibition at the nearby Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: **Fashioned by Sargent.**

We invite you to reflect on your own perceptions of Isabella and how she—like many women past and present—shaped her public persona through art.



Inventing Isabella

About 5 minutes

Unless otherwise noted, all works are in the collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

I never saw anything so daring, so splendid so really great as your portrait. It is first, great as a likeness, after that it is everything enthralling. . . .

A mysterious + awful power is in that same Mr. Sargent.

—Frances Morse Lang to Isabella Stewart Gardner about the portrait, 1888



John Singer Sargent
(American, 1856–1925)
Madame Gautreau
Drinking a Toast
1882–1883
Oil on panel

Gardner never lost her fascination for Sargent's iconic **Madame X**, a portrait of Virginie Avegno Gautreau (1859–1915). Late in her life, she purchased one of Sargent's related oil sketches. As in the famous portrait, Gautreau appears here in profile, and her shoulders and chest seem bare.

John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925)

Mrs. Gardner

1887

Pencil

In 1886, Isabella Stewart Gardner was determined to meet the young American portraitist John Singer Sargent (1856–1925). The painter had recently settled in London, retreating from the controversy caused by his sensuous likeness of a beautiful American in Paris, **Madame X** (1884, below, currently on view at the MFA Boston). The negative critical and social response to that daring portrait jeopardized the young artist's career. Rather than avoid this drama, Gardner sought it out. She saw the notorious painting in Sargent's London studio and soon commissioned him to paint her own portrait.

Sargent arrived in Boston in November 1887 and worked on this painting for nearly two months in Gardner's Beacon Street home. His opinionated sitter, who wears an evening gown designed by the Paris couturier Charles Frederick Worth, proved difficult, and

progress was contentious. The result was a magnificent and provocative fusion of the pair's mutual interests in iconic imagery and fashion—and a shared drive to challenge convention. Gardner and Sargent became lifelong friends in the process.



John Singer Sargent,
Madame X, 1884
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond
and Miss Emily Sargent,
1931

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Metropolitan Museum of
Art.

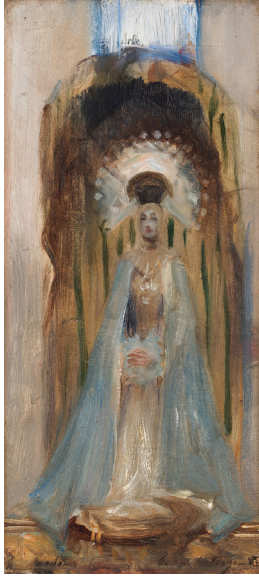
Image source: Art
Resource, NY



Chinese
**Buddha Calling the Earth
to Witness**
1700–1915
Painted and gilded copper

The background of Sargent's portrait of Gardner may also reference another of her spiritual interests: Buddhism. From 1883 to 1884, Gardner and her husband traveled throughout Asia, where she often noted Buddhist practice and imagery in her travel albums. She collected several Buddhist sculptures, including this one sitting on a lotus flower. The patterns behind her head both seem to echo a lotus motif and recall flaming halos similar to ones she would have seen behind statues of Bodhisattvas (see image to right) during her travels.

Chinese, Sui dynasty, Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin), late 16th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1912



John Singer Sargent
(American, 1856–1925)
A Spanish Madonna
about 1879
Oil on canvas

Sargent completed this small sketch in southern Spain during his extensive travels through that country in 1879. At some point, he gave it to Gardner, perhaps after their sittings ended in 1888. In his portrait of Gardner, her frontal pose, clasped hands, and the halo-like shape behind her head recall this work's religious imagery.



Italian
**Furnishing or Garment
Fabric**

1475–1525

Silk and velvet with gilt
yarn

Sargent fussed over an appropriate backdrop for Isabella's painting. Gardner supposedly replied, "Never mind that, Sargent, I knew exactly what would be the proper background for my portrait when I decided to have you paint it." The story may be apocryphal, but it shows both Gardner's agency and her collaboration with the artist. Sargent did not simply copy the pattern of this now faded fabric but elaborated, enlarged, and modified it to achieve a suitable artistic effect.

Mr. Sargent gives a little insignificant woman the air of a goddess

—**The Art Amateur (1888)**

Sargent had painted Mrs. Gardner all the way down to Crawford's Notch

—Rumored anonymous comment reported in **Mrs. Jack (1965)**

A Byzantine Madonna with a halo.

—Henry James to a friend (1888)



John Singer Sargent

**Isabella Stewart
Gardner**

1888

Oil On Canvas

Isabella Stewart Gardner
Museum

Sargent's portrait satisfied Gardner's thirst for theatricality. Isabella faces us directly, as if about to speak. She embraced an iconography of power, a figure to be worshipped, bedecked with jewels, and crowned with a halo behind her head.

When the portrait debuted at the St. Botolph Club in 1888, public reaction was decidedly sexist and predictably scandalized. The painting became a target enabling local audiences to condemn both her entitlement and her willful disregard of the constraints placed on upper-class women. Though her black evening dress was no more revealing than those of other portrait sitters, public comments alluded specifically

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to Isabella's rumored affair with F. Marion Crawford, a novelist fourteen years her junior. Upset by these comments, Jack Gardner asked his wife not to show the portrait again publicly. Until 1924, when Isabella died, it was officially visible by invitation only.

The quotes excerpted here represent the range of reactions at the time: critical, praising, and scandalized.

John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925)

Mrs. Gardner in White

1922

Watercolor

She was lying on a couch of white linen and her hair was entirely covered with linen bands of exceeding fineness. She looked like a corpse prepared for burial. Indeed, John Sargent made a drawing of her which now hangs in her gallery. . . . She looked so remote from anything connected with this world that I could only think of some of the primitive pictures of saints. Yet in my heart I knew she was not a saint.

—Elsie de Wolfe, interior decorator and friend of Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1935

Italian, Venice

Seat from a Gig (Sedia per Calesse)

early 18th century

Painted and gilded walnut

Gardner and Sargent were close friends from 1887 until she died in 1924. They spent months in each other's company and exchanged hundreds of letters. Sargent also made an artistic record of their friendship.

Late in his career, often in watercolor, Sargent made informal images of friends and family. These two of Gardner reveal the closeness of their relationship, scenes only friends would share. The first is almost faceless, an image of Isabella posing in her museum's newly opened Courtyard with only the smallest suggestion of her features sketched in pencil. The space was public, but Isabella remains hidden. Sargent knew that Isabella had become increasingly wary of public depiction. She often veiled her face, making the museum her public identity.

The second is a poignant portrait created after Isabella suffered a debilitating stroke in 1919. She withdrew from public life and stopped seeing many friends, only occasionally venturing out and preferring to be transported in an elegant Venetian chair (on view nearby). She continued to control her image and allowed Sargent to paint her. Draped in white, her air of fragility contrasts dramatically with the powerful image of her in black that Sargent had created thirty years earlier. This very different image, nonetheless, is usually displayed in the museum's MacKnight Room, where Gardner had posed for it.

Mrs. Gardner makes no confidences. No more self-contained woman lives. She plays a big part in the social world but also plays it alone. Even the protégés, who have been most near her, are not really of her life.

—**New York Sun**, February 22, 1903

John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925)

Mrs. Gardner at Fenway Court

1903

Watercolor

Sarah Choate Sears (American, 1858–1935)

John Singer Sargent Drawing Ethel

Barrymore

1903

Platinum print

John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1925)
**Letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner from
the Grand Hotel Britannia, Venice**

September 14, 1902
Ink on Paper

In this letter from the fall of 1902, John Singer Sargent writes to Isabella Stewart Gardner about his plans to visit Boston in the coming months and he looked forward to “staying with you among the beautiful things, whose fame has reached me.” He is describing staying with her at the museum, which would open in January 1903.

Isabella Stewart Gardner and photography came of age at the same time. The daguerreotype, an early and popular kind of photograph, was invented in 1839, the year before her birth. The technology became commonplace during Gardner's adolescence. As Isabella matured, so did photography: by the late 1800s, it was a staple of American visual culture. Notable people were photographed again and again. But not Isabella.

Isabella was photographed often early in her life, but as her fame grew and photography became more widespread, she hid from the camera. She appears veiled or with her back turned; only a handful of snapshots show her face.

Although she sometimes posed for formal photographic portraits or to commemorate events with friends, she was remarkably camera-shy for such a famous person.

This section includes a large selection of the photographs of Gardner in the museum's collection, as well as two paintings of her

based on photographs and a group of newspaper clippings about her that she gathered and saved. These clippings often include images of her that have been manipulated or, in some cases, show someone completely different. Gardner seems to have had a complicated relationship with the camera's ability to capture likeness—possibly in ways she did not want.

Early Photographs

The most personal and intimate photographs of Gardner were taken early in her life. A tiny album includes images of Jack and Isabella around the time of their marriage; a candid shot shows her nuzzling her only child, Jackie, who died just a few months later. As she aged and her celebrity increased, Gardner would not allow herself to be photographed as regularly or in such revealing ways. The latest photograph in this section is from around 1888, when the Sargent portrait was painted. Isabella also made signed photographic copies of the portrait, like a personal trading card.

Dodging the Camera

Newspapers could reproduce photographs by 1880, but Gardner became more camera-shy as she became more prominent, which frustrated the press. An article from 1894 claimed to include the first photographic likeness of her, although it is actually a drawing, her back turned to climb into a carriage. For unknown reasons, possibly to protect her skin, she started wearing a veil in public. With this lack of reliable photography, the press started publishing images of women who were not Isabella to accompany articles about the famed socialite, civic leader, and museum founder.

Selectively Posing

Very occasionally, Gardner agreed to pose for formal photographs later in life. Two were taken by Adolf de Meyer (1868–1946), who would go on to become Vogue’s first official fashion photographer. Others show her alongside friends. She kept them in her private archive, a record of the networks of creative and interesting people she cultivated over a lifetime.

She allegedly selected one of the de Meyer portraits to be released as the “official” photograph upon her death—one of a series of elaborate instructions she left about her funeral and other memorial activities. Despite her best efforts, Isabella could not control her image posthumously, and the press doctored the image.

Why did Gardner engage privately with photography but resist its distribution? Possibly because, despite her famed boldness, she felt a sense of upper-class propriety about public display or an insecurity about her appearance. Whatever the motive, this

camera-shy behavior guaranteed that her eponymous museum—and not her personal image—anchored her legacy.

[For objects on the wall please see laminate nearby.]

[Photography Case]

Boston Post

(active Boston, 1831-1956)

**“Mrs. Jack’s Latest Lion: The Society
Leafer Chooses, Not a Man This Time, but
a Real King of Beasts”**

31 January 1897

Printed Ink on Newspaper

Henry Walton Swift

(American, 1849–1924)

**Isabella Stewart Gardner with her
dogs, Kitty Wink and Patty Boy, on the
Garden Steps of Green Hill, Brookline,
Massachusetts**

1905

Albumen print

Unidentified photographer

Isabella Stewart Gardner with Dogs

14 November 1912

Albumen print on card

Unidentified photographer

Isabella Stewart Gardner with Dogs

1910–1912

Gelatin silver print

Unidentified photographer

**Isabella Stewart Gardner with her dog,
Kitty Wink, on the Garden Steps of Green
Hill, Brookline, Massachusetts**

about 1896–1905

Gelatin silver print

Isabella Stewart Gardner (American, 1840–
1924)

Marcus Ward and Company (active Belfast,
Ireland, 1833–1899, manufacturer)

Guest Book, Volume VI

13 November 1900–22 July 1902

Bound album: photographs, ink, paper

The lack of portraits of Mrs. Gardner has often been a mark for comment. The little porcelain picture of her as a girl and the Sargent portrait are about all that there are in existence of her. She can never be induced to look fairly and squarely into the camera. It is true that she has been taken at various times in groups, but invariably the moment of exposing the camera coincides with some movement of Mrs. Gardner's so that the face is blurred.

—Unidentified Newspaper Account, 1894

"I am never photographed, unless by some Kodax fiend, who does it on the sly, & without my permission. I am sorry to disappoint you."

—Isabella Stewart Gardner to Edmund Hill, November 29, (1915)

Not all of Gardner's collaborations with artists were successful. Several months before Zorn completed his vivacious portrait of Isabella in Venice, he created an etching of his friend based on pencil drawings made in Boston.

The print depicts Gardner, then fifty-four years old, as a Renaissance queen. She sits in a throne-like chair, wearing a fur cape and a headpiece evoking a crown. The sheet includes a crest in the top left corner. While the press often described Gardner as regal, and she herself often claimed descent from the royal Stuart family, this image may have gone too far.

Zorn provided Gardner with dozens of copies of the print to give to friends and family—but almost all of them stayed in Gardner's possession, and more than thirty remain in the museum's collection. Gardner's decision not to distribute them suggests she was unhappy with the likeness.

Perhaps out of respect for Zorn, Isabella did not destroy these prints. Other artistic depictions were not so lucky. Archival

photographs show two paintings of Isabella whose current locations are unknown. Gardner appears to have disposed of the paintings herself, gifting them to family or placing them in some other unknown place away from public view.

[Top]

Unidentified photographer

Ludwig Johann Passini

(Austrian, 1832–1903, painter)

Ludwig Passini's "Isabella Stewart Gardner"

1892

Albumen print on card

[Bottom]

Unidentified photographer

Andreas Martin Andersen

(Norwegian, 1869–1902, painter)

Andreas Martin Andersen's "Isabella Stewart Gardner"

about 1888

Gelatin silver print

Anders Zorn (Swedish, 1860–1920)

Study for Isabella Gardner I

1894

Pencil

Anders Zorn (Swedish, 1860–1920)
Study for Isabella Gardner III

1894

Pencil

Six copies of
Anders Zorn (Swedish, 1860–1920)
Isabella Gardner

1894

Etching

Anders Zorn (Swedish, 1860–1920)
Print of canceled plate

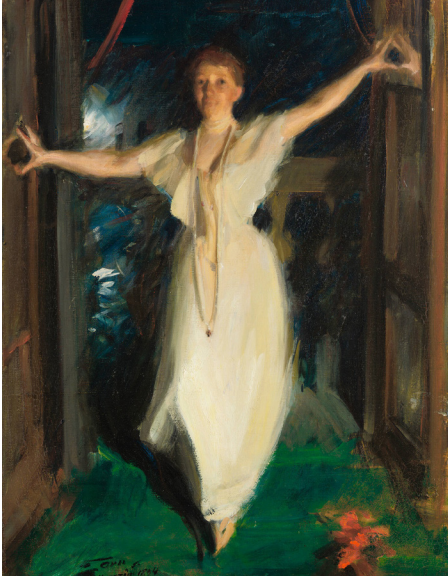
of Isabella Gardner

1894

Etching

Mrs. Jack Gardner, the queen of Boston
society, sat enthroned in state.

—**The Boston Post**, 1896



Anders Zorn (Swedish,
1860–1920)

**Isabella Stewart
Gardner in Venice**

1894

Oil on canvas

Jack Gardner recorded in his diary that, in October 1894, Isabella watched a fireworks display from the balcony of the Palazzo Barbaro in Venice. Returning to the room filled with guests, she threw open the glass doors and said, “Come out—all of you. This is too beautiful to miss.”

Zorn captured the exuberance of this moment. Gardner, in a white evening dress and her iconic pearls (featured in Sargent’s portrait and on view nearby), bursts toward us, inviting everyone to share her excitement. Zorn shows her as a woman of action and enthusiasm, providing a counterpart to Sargent’s majestic portrayal.

Come out—all of you. This is too beautiful to miss.

—Isabella Stewart Gardner, Venice, 1894

Unidentified Photographer

**Isabella Stewart Gardner and Emma Zorn
in a Gondola, Venice**

6 October 1894–4 November 1894

Albumen print

Hjalmar Klingvall

(Swedish, active Mora, 19th century)

Anders Zorn with Dog, Mouche

1894

Collodion print on card

Anders Zorn (Swedish, 1860–1920)

Study for Isabella Gardner II

1894

Pencil

Gardner and the Swedish artist Anders Zorn first met at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, when she bought his painting **The Omnibus** (1892, on display in the Blue Room) on the spot, and the two became good friends. Gardner also became one of Zorn's most important patrons.

The Gardners and the Zorns visited each other whenever the painter was in the United States. They also stayed together at the Palazzo Barbaro, a stately home on Venice's Grand Canal. The palace, owned by Boston's Curtis family, was a gathering place for a dynamic circle of artists and writers (including Sargent, Henry James, and Claude Monet), as well as wealthy lovers of Venice.

In his depiction of his friend, Zorn captured Gardner's vivacity and spirit, giving us a different impression of her personality than Sargent's 1888 portrait. The two paintings are the best-known images of the museum's founder.

Isabella Stewart Gardner

(American, 1840–1924)

John Lowell Gardner Jr.

(American, 1837–1898)

Salon of the Palazzo Barbaro, Venice

about 1897

Albumen print

Isabella Stewart Gardner

(American, 1840–1924)

John Lowell Gardner Jr.

(American, 1837–1898)

Hallway in the Palazzo Barbaro, Venice

about 1897

Albumen print

Isabella Stewart Gardner

(American, 1840–1924)

John Lowell Gardner Jr.

(American, 1837–1898)

Doorway of the Palazzo Barbaro, Venice

about 1897

Albumen print

Isabella Stewart Gardner
(American, 1840–1924)

Gondolier at a Landing on the Grand Canal across from the Palazzo Barbaro, Venice

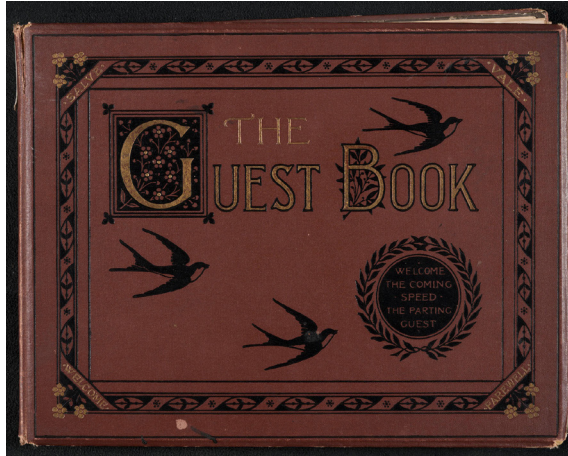
about 1897

Albumen print

A woman dressed in black came and looked around in my rooms. She stopped in front of my **Omnibus**, turned to me, pointed at the painting in question. ‘I want to have that painting. May I buy it?’ ‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘Who is Zorn?’ ‘I am.’ ‘Oh you! I feel that either we will . . . become enemies, or . . . very, very good friends.’”

—Anders Zorn (1860–1920), undated autobiographical notes

[Case]



Isabella Stewart Gardner
(American, 1840–1924,
compiler)

Marcus Ward and Company
(active Belfast, Ireland,
1833–1899, manufacturer)

Guest Book, Volume IV

2 September 1897–31 May
1899

Bound album:
photographs, ink, paper

Gardner maintained a series of guestbooks that she asked her visitors, friends, and family to sign. She used them as scrapbooks, pasting in photographs of her guests and occasionally herself. This volume records her time at the Palazzo Barbaro. She saw many people there, among them Anders Zorn and his wife, Emma. In these snapshots, the Zorns appear in gondolas alongside the Gardners.

Isabella Stewart Gardner
(American, 1840–1924)
View from a Gondala, Venice
1899
Collodion print

Unidentified photographer
**Isabella Stewart Gardner and Gaillard
Lapsley in a Gondala, Venice**
21 August 1897–1 September
Gelatin silver print

Isabella Stewart Gardner
(American, 1840–1924)
**Courtyard of the Palazzo Contarini della
Porta di Ferro, Venice**
1897 or 1899
Collodion print

Once [Isabella] was our house guest ... [and] we found one of her silk stockings. There was not a single space in the entire foot that had not been darned.... [I] rejoiced at her thrift . . . because in so many other ways she put her money to such splendid use.

—Elsie de Wolfe, interior decorator and friend of Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1935

Charles Frederick Worth (French, 1825–1895)

Garment Fabric Fragment

about 1885–1891

Compound satin silk with silver

James Notman

(Scottish-Canadian, 1866–1894)

Isabella Stewart Gardner Dancing with

**Randolph Appleton in the Music Room at
152 Beacon Street**

28 June 1891

Hand-colored albumen print

Mrs. Jack's jewels are to Boston what Mrs. Astor's are to New York. She has rubies, sapphires and diamonds of wonderful size and purity, several strings of flawless pearls, and one big pear-shaped pearl that a queen might envy.

—Unknown Newspaper Account from the 1890s

Isabella Stewart Gardner loved fashion. Like many wealthy women of her time, she was a frequent client of the House of Worth, the famous Parisian fashion house that pioneered **haute couture**, custom handmade gowns. The press frequently reported on and analyzed Gardner's wardrobe and remarked on her extensive and impressive jewelry collection, especially her famous pearls.

We can see hints of her fabulous wardrobe in the museum's galleries. Perhaps the most poetic example is in the Titian Room. There she repurposed one of her favorite dresses to make it part of an installation: fabric from one of her Worth gowns is installed just below Titian's masterpiece, **The Rape of Europa**. Most of her clothing, with the exception of the opera coat exhibited here, does not survive.

Charles Frederick Worth (British, 1825 -1895) for
House of Worth (Paris, 1858-1956)

Coat

late 1880s -1890s

Silk velvet with embroidery and beading

Gift of Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1923, Peabody-
Essex Museum

Gardner had most of her gowns custom-made in Paris at the House of Worth, where they kept her measurements on hand. In keeping with a revival of interest in eighteenth-century styles, this opera coat imitates a garment inspired by men's clothing that was worn by Marie Antoinette. Made of purple silk velvet with elaborate embroidery of metallic threads and glass beads, it is a glorious combination of Gardner's interest in both fashion and historic royalty. At the encouragement of a cousin, she donated it to the Essex Institute, now part of the Peabody Essex Museum; it is one of the only extant garments that we know belonged to her.



Purchased from Boucheron (Paris, established 1858) between 1870 and 1900; divided and restrung after 1921

Isabella Stewart Gardner's Pearls

Anonymous Lenders

Isabella was renowned not only for her gowns but also for her jewelry. Long ropes of pearls were popular among wealthy society women, and Gardner wore hers throughout her life. She bought them from the Paris jeweler Boucheron between the 1870s to the 1890s, and they feature prominently in both the Sargent and Zorn portraits. In 1921, three years before her death, Isabella split the pearls into seven different strings to be distributed to friends and family. Two of those seven strings are on display here. Also on display is the receipt for the pearls, only some of which had been acquired by the time Sargent painted the portrait.

Maison Chappelle Cordonnier,
(established Paris, 1815)

Pair of Purple Satin Slippers

about 1900

Satin, silk, and leather

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston
Gift of Miss Claudia Potter, Perkins Institute
for the Blind, 1954

Unidentified maker

Hat

late 19th century

Silk, metal, linen, buckram, velvet

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston
Gift of Rebecca Gardner Campbell, 2002

[Visitor Response Station]

How do you see Isabella?

We invite you to write or draw your responses here and share them in the guestbook reproduced on the wall above.