



# ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, ACCESSIBILITY &  
INCLUSION (DEAI) REPORT

JANUARY 2024 – JUNE 2024







# DEAI COMMITMENTS

*The Gardner is an inclusive Museum that welcomes everyone. We believe that including multiple perspectives as well as respect for differing views and lived experiences expands our thinking and strengthens our organization.*

*We recognize the circumstances of race and class in our country as integral parts of the story of our founder and the creation of the Museum. We embrace the challenge of exploring, interrogating, and acknowledging the sometimes difficult narratives embedded in our institutional history and artworks.*

*We invest in the continued relevance of the Museum through rigorous scholarship and the mindful conservation of its objects. We amplify the historical significance of the Collection while engaging it to examine the ongoing issues of importance in our society.*

*We emphasize learning and continuous improvement and commit ourselves to sharing the goals and reporting our progress to our community on a regular basis.*

## **LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

*The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum resides on the homelands of the Massachusetts Tribe, who belong to this place and continue to regard these lands and waters as sacred.*



# INTRODUCTION

*Diversity, Equity, Accessibility & Inclusion (DEAI)* is one of the four institutional values articulated in the Gardner's [Strategic Plan](#). In 2020, the Museum established both board and staff teams to focus on the ways we manifest this commitment throughout the institution. Trustees and staff are deeply engaged in this work; in the authentic, ongoing expression of inclusive values and expanded perspectives; in the embrace of community voices and marginalized stories; and in gratitude for our audiences' participation and feedback. This report is intended to acknowledge progress while recognizing continued opportunities for organizational transformation. It includes highlights from the second half of fiscal year 2024 (January through June of 2024), and represents the ongoing integration of DEAI into the fabric of our organizational culture.

## RESEARCH AND LEARNING

The Gardner Museum is committed to ongoing research about our founder and our collection—including our living plant collection and our material and historical legacy—and to sharing our learnings with visitors. We seek to explore complex histories and uncover their relevance to our equally complex present. Given the overall Eurocentric nature of the Permanent Collection, non-Western objects have been historically understudied; the Museum seeks to redress that knowledge gap and bring new insights to the public.

### Contemporary

Planning is underway for Haitian visual artist and former Gardner Artist-in-Residence Fabiola Jean-Louis's upcoming exhibition, *Waters of the Abyss: An Intersection of Spirit and Freedom*, opening February 27, 2025. The Contemporary team has been working closely with Jean-Louis on the final pieces and continues to engage in reading and research about Haitian culture. Related programming will include "Fabiola Jean-Louis—Making Art at the Intersection of Spirit and Freedom" on February 27, 2025; a Studio Workshop with Fabiola Jean-Louis in April 2025; and a commissioned dance performance by Gardner Museum Artist-in-Residence Jean Appolon in May. *Waters of the Abyss* will welcome visitors to explore issues of spirituality, resistance, memory, and more; our long-term relationship with Jean-Louis will help us deepen engagement with the Haitian American population in Boston. Contemporary has hired Carl Damas, who is of Haitian heritage, as the architect of record for the exhibition. With the addition of Jean Appolon, we are watching the relationship between the three Haitian creatives flourish.

## Collections

In an effort to examine other exhibitions that endeavor to make the past present and learn more about the socio-historical and cultural context of Isabella Stewart Gardner's life, Collections team members toured the Museum of African American History and Meeting House in Boston's Beacon Hill. During the tour, they learned more about Black Boston histories (including those at and around the time of Isabella), and connected with colleagues at the institution to learn more about opportunities to collaborate and uncover these contexts and histories within our own collection.

In addition, the Collections team joined a meeting with the Museum's Interpretation team and their partners at the Perkins School for the Blind to learn more about digital accessibility and receive feedback on screen reader navigation for the online collection.

In late January, we hosted our 2024 Consulting Curator of Islamic and South Asian Art, Dr. Yael Rice, at the Museum. Dr. Rice examined approximately 100 objects and provided valuable material, stylistic, and cultural information that is being incorporated into each object's record, including additional context, comparable objects, and updated cataloging information. Dr. Rice also provided translations for various Arabic inscriptions on our objects. In addition to examining our objects, Dr. Rice wrote a blog post about the [cenotaph in the West Cloister](#).

Meanwhile, the Museum's **Archives Finding Aid Project** continues to progress. Between January – June 2024, enclosures from Isabella's travel albums, which were previously undescribed, have been inventoried and recorded in our database. Cataloging has begun to provide greater access to this material.

Finally, the department hosted a meeting on accessible pdfs and visual descriptions with Amber Percy, a consultant to arts organizations wishing to provide greater access for visitors and audiences who are blind/low vision. The meeting focused on getting feedback on the experience of using a screen reader to access exhibition text pdfs and collection visual descriptions on the website. As a result, we deepened our understanding of how visitors use screen readers to navigate object-focused elements of the website, modified formatting of accessible pdfs of exhibition text for improved experience, and renewed our commitment to describing the collection visually.

## Conservation

Conservation continued to work on the **Asian Art Access Project** by coordinating photography of Asian objects located in the elevator passages, installing new glazing in cases to increase visibility, and continuing to work on new case design and fabrication for the Rear Hall, which will display Asian objects that are typically off view. The team also supported the visit from the consulting curator for Islamic and South Asian Art.

Notably, Jessica Chloros, the Gardner Museum's Objects Conservator, completed her Fulbright Fellowship project, "Increasing the Accessibility of 2D Works of Art for Museum Visitors with Blindness and Partial Blindness," during the first half of 2024. Chloros formed relationships and collaborated with partners both internal and external to the University of Dundee, Scotland as she utilized technology and traditional art-making processes to create multi-sensory representations of 2D works of art from the Gardner's collection.

On the learning side, Conservation team members attended DEAL-related talks at the American Institute for Conservation's annual meeting, which included a presentation by our new Associate Textiles Conservator, Anna Rose Keefe, and her former Rhode Island School of Design colleagues: "Nizhónígo Hadadit'eh: Mounting Diné Textiles For Exhibition."

## Horticulture

The Horticulture team continued to research and write ethnobotanical snapshots. Led by Jenny Pore, this research has been shared at every opportunity through blog posts, seminars, tours, and comment card responses. The latest research resulted in "queering the Courtyard" by incorporating pansies, violets, and lavender into the summer Courtyard displays. The companion blog post, "[The Spirit of Violets](#)," explores queer flower symbolism throughout history.

# EXPANDING ACCESS AND REACH

## Marketing and Communications

Marketing has started to build back an internal team. Part of the work included an inventory and assessment on how DEAL is integrated in our campaigns, communications, messaging, and vendor selection. Prior to December 2023, an outside agency navigated across all the Gardner Museum platforms and designed much of the advertising and marketing assets used for branding and exhibition promotion. Now, although the team works with vendors and freelancers for special projects, the majority of the work is handled internally. The current, full-time marketing team is 67% BIPOC and since December 2023, the department has actively sought out BIPOC vendors, graphic designers, photographers, and videographers to assist with special projects. That list started at zero and now has grown to include over 40 contacts. During that time, 100% of the photographers, graphic designers, and videographers the Marketing department hired were BIPOC or BIPOC-led.

The Marketing department hosts monthly meetings for team-building exercises and brainstorming for upcoming campaigns, ensuring that our work aligns with the diversity and cultural aspects of the current or upcoming exhibitions. During these meetings, the team also discusses special audiences we'd like to reach through advertising and promotion. Marketing carefully tailored campaigns for *Raqib Shaw: Ballads of East and West* and the summer exhibition *On Christopher Street: Transgender Portraits by Mark Seliger* with decisions around where to advertise in order to reach new audiences. That work can be broken down to following areas: diversifying promotions and reaching new, underserved audiences; utilizing diverse podcasts and running geo-targeted spots in New England and New York City; and developing tailored messaging geared towards more diverse and younger audiences across organic and paid digital advertising.

## Gift at the Gardner

Gift at the Gardner aims to amplify businesses that are owned by underprivileged groups, locally-owned and/or fair trade, utilize sustainable production practices, and/or who fiscally support DEAI-focused initiatives and charities. Above all else, the gift shop aims to move away from—where possible— overseas mass-produced goods with ambiguous or unknown production practices.

Between January – June 2024, Gift at the Gardner has added 25 new vendors to our product assortment that align with these values:

- Nine identify as BIPOC-owned
- 15 are independent, small-batch makers
- Four utilize ethical, fair-trade production practices
- Nine are sustainability-focused
- Four donate profits to charities supporting the environment or underprivileged groups
- For the Summer 2024 exhibitions, the Gift at the Gardner featured eight new businesses owned and operated by transgender, nonbinary, and queer individuals

## Education, Public Programming, and Interpretation

During the period of January – June 2024, the Education department continued to work with educators, community leaders, artists, and more to bring teaching and learnings to people from various parts of the Greater Boston area.

In January, the Gardner Museum opened the exhibition *Lynching Tree* by Steve McQueen in the Fenway Gallery. As part of the exhibition, the team developed memory cards as a physical takeaway that included responses from community leaders to the photograph by McQueen. Visitors were encouraged to take these cards and add their own emotions or questions once they viewed the photo in the gallery. Contributors included Reverend Dr. Gloria E. White-Hammond, Dr. Karilyn Crockett, and Dr. M. Lee Pelton who co-curated the exhibition with Peggy Fogelman, *Norma Jean Calderwood Director* at the Gardner.

That same month, the Gardner welcomed over 180 visitors to the sold-out “Reckoning with History: Art, Landscape, and Memory” panel discussion organized in connection with our special viewing of Steve McQueen’s *Lynching Tree*. This powerful and probing conversation brought together artists, scholars, and community leaders Steve Locke, Karilyn Crockett, Margaret Burnham, and Sara Zewde with co-curator Pelton as moderator. The conversation explored the ongoing impacts of racial violence, how we can become more aware of landscapes across the country as sites of dispossession of land, genocide, and enslavement, and how McQueen’s work can call us to attend to and bear witness to our collective history and continued inequalities in our present.

In these six months, the team produced a number of other programs including: “Raqib Shaw in Conversation with Pieranna Cavalchini;” “Canon, Canyon, Cannon: All Black Everything;” “The Larger Landscape Conversation: Queering Public Spaces;” “Dancing Across Borders with Preeti Vasudevan’s *Stories by Hand*;” “The Larger Conversation: Memory and Migration;” and “Canon, Canyon, Cannon: Futurity.”

In April, the Public Programming Team hosted the poignant and beautiful “Dancing Across Borders,” a night of dance and conversation inspired by *Raqib Shaw: Ballads of East and West* featuring an abridged version of Preeti Vasudevan’s *Stories By Hand* followed by a talkback on questions of identity, immigration, culture, and belonging with Vasudevan, local pastry chef Soheil Fathi of La Saison, and Pieranna Cavalchini, *Tom and Lisa Blumenthal Curator of Contemporary Art*. During “The Larger Conversation: Memory and Migration,” they dove deeper into questions of immigration, diaspora, home, and belonging.

In June 2024, timed with the opening of the summer exhibitions, the team produced a sold-out panel discussion during which the exhibiting artists discussed portraiture, the ethics of photography, and taking pictures of trans, nonbinary, and queer people with care and humanity. That same month, they hosted a Queer Community Night celebrating the summer exhibitions and Pride Month with performances by the iconic House of Calypso and DJ Rayvino.

Ongoing collaboration with The Theater Offensive, our inaugural Community Organization-in-Residence, included program and interpretation planning for the Summer 2024 season in which trans and queer artists, advocates, and thinkers were invited to give feedback on the exhibition *On Christopher Street*. Together they continued to innovate, experiment, and engage new and expanded local audiences with a range of summer programming that incorporated LGBTQIA+ voices.

The interpretive platforms for *On Christopher Street: Transgender Portraits by Mark Seliger; Portraits From Boston, With Love*; and Hakeem Adewumi: *Possession of A Recalcitrant Dream*, 2024 included collaboration with The Theater Offensive in the form of two roundtable discussions and platform concepting. The *On Christopher Street* interpretive platforms took form in a number of ways including:

- Introductory text and theme panels
- Labels featuring quotes from portrait sitters, excerpted from existing interviews
- Five theme panels by community contributors: Neon Calypso, Tre’Andre Carmel Valentine, Paul Glass and Charles D. Evans, Jo Michael Rezes, and Matisse Dupont
- Archival case with theme panel, labels, and key term definitions

The *Portraits from Boston, With Love* platforms included:

- Introductory text and labels
- *Community Voices Phone*, in collaboration with Crystal Bi: artists in the exhibition and people in their portraits were invited to leave short voicemail messages in response to the prompt: “Where do you feel like your fullest self?”
- Large print labels
- A frequently asked questions document
- Art Wall in collaboration with Crystal Bi, extending a prompt from the phone in *Portraits From Boston, With Love*: Imagine a place where you feel like your fullest self
- In-gallery activity in collaboration with mica rose
- Queering the Museum by taking up space, and spreading love through letters

The team is also responsible for Free First Thursdays, which include live music and DJ performances, tours and spotlight talks, artmaking, workshops, and other experiential activities featuring diverse local artists. Themes for these have included Infant & Pregnancy Loss Awareness and connections between local advocates and healers and Isabella’s own story; freedom of expression and Sneaker Culture; and mental health and healing.

Additionally, the department held four **Access Studio** workshops for visitors with disabilities led by artist and educator Takiyah Harris, who is deaf. These workshops facilitated in-gallery exploration and close looking followed by experimentation and discovery in the Education Studio in ASL with spoken English interpretation. The team offered bilingual Spanish and English options for students participating in Thinking Through Art and hosted students from the Horace Mann School for the Deaf.

## Development

The Development department focused on diversifying the Gardner Museum's audience during the winter and spring of 2024.

The second annual **Velvet Party** was held on January 17, 2024. Tickets sold out weeks ahead of the event. The Events team identified and engaged *Boston Magazine's* Best Fashion Designer of 2023, Melina Cortes-Nmili, a local fashion leader originally from the Dominican Republic. We also engaged with a diverse group of musicians, including DJ BackSpin, Frederick Woodard, and Walter Sickert and the Army of Broken Toys. Because of these artists' followings, involvement, and social media presence, we were able to broaden our online and in-person audiences for this sold-out, cutting-edge event. The team is looking forward to continuing this work in the next fiscal year as a signature event for the Museum.

The Membership Team worked to engage **Under 30 Members** through a number of new initiatives. The team regularly hosted Under 30 member-exclusive meet-ups during Free First Thursdays and Member Appreciation Days and Nights where Under 30 members could gather and enjoy networking activities, games, and a free beverage.

In addition, the **Museum Pass Program** has increased usage year over year. This includes an increase in attendance from Boston Public Library branches. The first official non-library member of this program, The Salvation Army Ray & Joan Kroc Corporate Community Center of Boston in Dorchester, joined in the spring of 2024. This was a result of an initiative to grow membership across the greater Boston area with special attention to diversity.

## EXHIBITIONS, PROGRAMS, & COLLABORATIONS

Peggy Fogelman, *Norma Jean Calderwood Director*, with co-curator Lee Pelton, President and CEO of the Boston Foundation, of the exhibition *Steve McQueen: Lynching Tree*, engaged leaders of the Black community. These conversations tied to the interpretation of the work included a planned panel conversation, co-led by the Gardner's Board in discussions of this country's history of slavery and the importance of memory and repair, and helped plan community viewings during non-public hours, among other exhibition-related activities.



# MUSEUM LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

The Board of Trustees and its Board of Advisors embrace a vision of inclusion that supports all forms of diversity, and are committed to creating a culture driven by shared DEAI values. Museum leadership continues to establish and build relationships with candidates for its Board of Trustees and Board of Advisors, aiming to diversify these groups authentically and respectfully over time. Currently, 38% of the Board of Trustees identifies as BIPOC, and we are committed to taking the steps to further increase our BIPOC representation.

During the first half of 2024, the DEAI Board Task Force participated in their own **Creating an Inclusive Community** training facilitated by trained Gardner Museum staff. In our efforts to promote an engaging and respectful work environment, the Gardner Museum requires all team members to partake in this training.

In February 2024, during the Board of Trustees meeting, Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, joined as a guest speaker to engage with the Board and senior leadership about DEAI. Dr. Jackson discussed how Trustees can be further involved in their communities, how art institutions are part of the civic infrastructure, and some trends other art institutions are seeing post-pandemic.

## TOWARD A DIVERSE WORKFORCE AND EQUITABLE WORKPLACE VALUES

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is committed to inclusive hiring practices to ensure that our staff reflects the diversity of our community. As of the publication of this report, the demographics of the Gardner Museum staff, all positions, is 27.6% BIPOC, up from 24% at the end of the prior fiscal year.

In Finance, the department onboarded a new team member and re-oriented the entire team on our Strategic Plan core values. To foster team connection and share safe space, each member of the Finance department shared a cultural activity or tradition that is important to them. In addition, the team engaged with materials on “Hood Classics” movies and their legacy in Black culture and American film history. They also engaged with some American Alliance of Museums materials on accessibility and evaluated software options to replace Concur along accessibility lines. The team continues to focus on accessibility as they make updates to the Finance Intranet site and resources.

As previously stated, in our efforts to promote an engaging and respectful workplace at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, we require that all staff, volunteers, and board members participate in our “Creating an Inclusive Community” training. This was formerly known as the “Implicit Bias” training and was refreshed with the collaboration of the Inclusive Community Trainers (employee representatives from across the Museum), the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, and the Museum’s Senior Leadership Team. This name change is to acknowledge that the training includes more than just implicit bias. This refresh also supports connections between DEAI and the overall work of the Museum so that the sessions are a roadmap building towards our DEAI commitments.

While the training still focuses primarily on race, we now discuss intersectionality and acknowledge other forms of power and oppression.

## MUSIC PROGRAM

During this period, Music staff attended two conferences dedicated to DEAI goals in the classical music field. In January, George Steel, the *Abrams Curator of Music* attended SphinxConnect in Detroit, organized by the Sphinx Organization. It is the largest and longest-standing global convening dedicated to excellence and inclusion in classical music. In June, Julia Harbutt, the Artistic Administrator attended the second classical music convening held by the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. In March, the Music department furthered our relationship with the Sphinx Organization by welcoming back their Sphinx Virtuosi ensemble to present a concert entitled GENERATIONS, which showcases the beauty and tradition of excellence inherent in classical music created and performed by Black and Latinx composers for many generations. We were thrilled to welcome (again) our community partner Project STEP to this concert with free tickets and host a private Q&A session between the Sphinx Virtuosi performers and Project STEP's students, teaching artists, and parents. We also welcomed one of our long-time collaborators, Boston-based Castle of our Skins, for a concert entitled ROOTS, which explores the origins of inspiration and the anchors from which creativity is born through highlighting music from the African diaspora. We also continued our practice of commissioning original music during this period. Each concert of our hugely popular "Schubert's Last Piano Sonatas" series with Jonathan Biss contained one original work by an established or emerging Black composer, two of which were co-commissioned by the Gardner.