Inclusive Community Report

July 2025 – June 2026



ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

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INCLUSION IS OUR CULTURE

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.

Isabella Stewart Gardner established the Museum "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever" as an act of civic leadership. She involved herself in many social causes, partnering with community organizers and supporting women's education, for example. In carrying her legacy into the 21st century, we aspire to make our collections, exhibitions, and programs accessible and welcoming to the broadest possible audience, bringing people together for personal enjoyment and connection.

We value diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion as drivers of staff empowerment, innovation, and institutional excellence. We embrace the complex stories embedded in our history and artworks as we work together to reflect and advance these core values.

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

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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

FOR THE EDUCATION AND ENJOYMENT OF THE PUBLIC FOREVER: Inclusive Community Highlights

"That looks just like where I live!"

A Boston Public Schools student spoke those words while visiting *Allan Rohan Crite: Urban Glory*. Looking at a painting, the student recognized something familiar. For the staff member who witnessed it, the moment captured what the exhibition had hoped to do: honor Crite's love and dedication to his community while creating opportunities for visitors to make connections of their own.

What does it take to make more moments like that possible?

It starts with choices about whose stories we tell, whose knowledge we invite in, and how people experience and contribute to the Museum once they arrive.

Over the past year, those choices shaped work across the Gardner, from exhibitions and interpretation to education, accessibility, professional pathways, and community partnerships. Increasingly, we approached inclusion not as work pursued alongside our primary responsibilities, but as part of how we do the work itself.

This is the idea behind Inclusive Community. We want the Gardner to be a place where more people can recognize something of themselves, contribute what they know, build connections, and feel that they belong here.

Representation through Collaboration

Allan Rohan Crite: Urban Glory centered on a Black artist whose work was rooted in Boston and its neighborhoods. Gardner staff and co-curator Ted Landsmark, longtime community activist and professor at Northeastern University, worked with the Boston Athenæum and a group of Boston-based artists and community members who helped shape the exhibition's interpretation, layout and design, and approach to visitor engagement.

The collaboration affected both what visitors encountered and how we talked about it. One member of the group questioned the term "community label," feeling it could diminish the research and perspectives contributed from outside the institution. We began using "personal perspective label" instead, better reflecting the invitation to see an artwork through another person's eyes. Visitors added their own perspectives at a response station, sharing memories of their neighborhoods, reflections on spirituality, and stories about meeting Crite.

Boston Public Schools students brought their own experiences to the exhibition as well. Thinking Through Art, the Gardner's longstanding partnership with Boston Public Schools, uses art and student-centered discussion to strengthen critical thinking, observation, and collaborative learning. Teachers reported that students recognized Crite's painting, *School's Out*, from the program and were excited to see paintings of Boston on the Museum's

walls. Conversations turned to how neighborhoods change and the connections people carry with the places where they live.

Public programs created further opportunities to engage with Crite's art, faith, and legacy. *The History of the Black Madonna: Spirituals Made Visual* connected his depictions of Mary as a Black mother with the Gardner's *Black Glass Madonna*. On the final day of *Urban Glory*, visitors created personal altarpieces inspired by Crite's work, and later, the Boston City Singers Youth Choir filled the Courtyard with hymns that held special meaning for the artist.

Collaboration also extended beyond the Museum's walls. Our partnership with Pao Arts Center grew out of *Ming Fay: Edge of the Garden*, creating new opportunities to engage artists and communities in Chinatown. Through *Where We Meet: Imagining Gardens and Futures* at Pao, the Gardner and Pao collaborated on programming and a zine featuring newly commissioned work by Boston-based AAPI artists. We also held our first offsite programming at Pao, while the Gardner's Board of Trustees met there and participated in neighborhood experiences. Participating artists described the programs as "creatively fulfilling and emotionally refreshing" and said they expanded their networks with AAPI artists, deepened their understanding of community-identified needs, and strengthened their connections to Chinatown.

Together, these collaborations reinforced an approach to representation shaped not only by what the Gardner presents, but by who helps tell, interpret, and share its stories.

Designing for Access

The same collaborative spirit increasingly shaped our approach to accessibility, with teams working to anticipate barriers rather than respond to them after the fact. Across digital content, school visits, exhibitions, and public programs, staff considered early in the planning process how people with different abilities, languages, and learning styles would experience the Museum.

Thinking Through Art

75 Boston Public Schools teachers

3,000+ STUDENTS

Nearly **600** tours

In Thinking Through Art, that planning begins before students arrive. Staff and Museum Teachers worked with Boston Public Schools teachers before visits to understand their students' needs and prepare supports such as topic boards for nonverbal learners, multilingual vocabulary, and approaches for neurodiverse students and students with disabilities. Nearly 600 Thinking Through Art tours took place during the year.

Accessibility also shaped how visitors encountered art. For Visions of Black Madonnas, colleagues across the Museum worked with glass artist Trina Urrata Weintraub to create tactile, interactive experiences that invited visitors to explore the glassworking techniques used to create the Black Glass Madonna. The exhibition also highlighted the sculpture's treatment and its distinctive representation of people of color in European glass.

> "*The Museum field trips were definitely a positive and engaging experience . . . students knew what to expect at the Museum and were excited to go back again, knowing how amazing it is.*"
>
> —Boston Public Schools teacher

Partnerships helped us consider access from perspectives beyond our own. Through Access Studio, which provides facilitated Museum experiences for people with disabilities, regional partners helped evaluate how creative programs could better serve participants, while the Horticulture team explored the Living Collection through touch and other senses. Staff were trained on an approach to artmaking that adapts to each student rather than expecting the student to adapt.

Together, this work reinforced accessibility as an ongoing practice of listening, learning, and designing with people in mind from the beginning, rather than a checklist of accommodations.

Belonging through Connection

Creating a sense of belonging means helping people feel welcomed, connected, and part of the Museum. The Gardner Ambassador Program brings that idea to life by introducing college students to museum careers through hands-on experience, mentorship, and professional development. This past year, we welcomed the largest cohort in the program's history, with thirteen Ambassadors from Bunker Hill Community College working across Museum departments and contributing to projects throughout the year.

Ambassador Program

13 Ambassadors gaining experience across

9 Museum departments

1/3 of program gradutes hired into museum roles

50% of program graduates continuing their education at four-year colleges

For participants, the experience can make a career in museums feel more attainable. One Ambassador described the program as a critical first step, particularly as a community college student who knew they wanted to work in museums but did not know how to enter the field.

Pathways into museum careers also extended to Conservation. Through the Andrew W. Mellon Opportunity for Diversity in Conservation and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Intro to Practical Conservation program, undergraduate interns from historically underrepresented backgrounds gained hands-on conservation experience, mentorship, and exposure to the range of skills involved in caring for the Museum's collection.

The impact of these opportunities extended to visitors as well. During early elementary school tours, a bilingual Gardner Ambassador engaged students in both English and Spanish, helping children connect with works of art in the language most familiar to them. Students who had been hesitant to participate became more animated, and conversations expanded among classmates. As one educator reflected, "The children radiated joy and comfort as they connected in Spanish."

In this way, creating a sense of belonging for emerging museum professionals also strengthened their ability to create it for others.

> "*Part of the reason I took the step to return to school was because I learned about this opportunity.*"
>
> —Gardner Ambassador Program participant

Building Community

Community grows through relationships that deepen over time. During her residency at the Gardner, artist Jamie Diamond invited members of the Reborn community to be photographed with their babies among Madonna and Child imagery throughout the collection. One Reborn artist and mother accepted the invitation, spending the day creating portraits and sharing experiences with Diamond. She later returned with her husband and children for *The Motherhood Exchange*, where participants shared photographs and personal objects connected to motherhood.

The Neighborhood Salon created another way to build sustained relationships. Modeled on Isabella Stewart Gardner's tradition of artist salons, the program brings together Boston artists and cultural leaders, known as Luminaries, to exchange ideas, build creative networks, and help shape Museum programming. Current and former Luminaries valued relationships formed across artistic disciplines and with Gardner staff, while Free First Thursday created opportunities to connect with audiences through performance and dialogue.

The Gardner also served as a gathering place for the 2025 Boston Transgender Day of Remembrance vigil, organized by The Theater Offensive and hosted at the Museum. More than 150 people gathered in the Palace Courtyard to honor those lost to anti-Trans violence through a reading of names, music, and guest presenters.

Relationships also created new points of connection through music. In partnership with Project STEP, young musicians and their families attended a performance by Sphinx Virtuosi, giving aspiring orchestral musicians an opportunity to experience a world-class ensemble and see themselves reflected in the future of classical music. Thursday evening concerts also welcomed many first-time concertgoers, introducing new audiences to the Gardner's music program and the Museum.

Across these experiences, the Gardner created space for people to gather, return, build relationships, and deepen their connections to one another and to the Museum.

A Place to Return To

The student who looked at Crite's painting and said, "That looks just like where I live!" was one of many visitors who brought their own knowledge and experience to the Gardner this year. Children spoke Spanish with a Gardner Ambassador and joined a conversation they had hesitated to enter. A community college student began to see a museum career as something within reach. These moments happened in different parts of the Museum and through very different kinds of work, but each reflected an exchange between what the Gardner offered and what people brought with them. Their perspectives, languages, experiences, and ideas shaped the Museum in return. That exchange is at the heart of what Inclusive Community means to us: creating a Museum where more people can see themselves, contribute, build connections, and find a reason to return.