Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Wallace Foundation Qualitative Study Report



Jessica J. Luke, Ph.D.
Jeanine Ancelet, M.A.
Erin Johnson, B.F.A.

Institute *for* Learning Innovation

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Institute *for* Learning Innovation
3168 Braverton St. Suite 280, Edgewater, MD 21037 t: 410-956-5144 f: 410-956-5148 www.ilinet.org
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Executive Summary

In June 2010, the Gardner contracted with the Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI), a Maryland-based, non-profit research and evaluation organization, in order to augment the results of a large-scale, Wallace Foundation-funded quantitative study. Specifically, ILI was asked to conduct a focused, qualitative study that would provide in-depth data about local visitors' long-term perceptions of their Gardner Museum experience. Semi-structured, retrospective interviews were conducted with 31 museum visitors, months after their Gardner experience. Key results include the following:

- **MOTIVATIONS**
  Study participants demonstrated a range of motivations for visiting the Gardne, but most prominent were those classified as *social facilitators*, meaning the main agenda for their visit was to spend time with, and build meaningful memories with, others in their group. This finding is in keeping with results from the S. Radoff and Associates survey (2010) which showed that most visitors said they came to the Museum to show it to family and/or friends.

- **MEMORIES**
  Study participants were easily able to recall multiple aspects of their museum visit. Specifically, visitors' memories fell into one or more of seven categories, including art and architecture, personal feelings, service and amenities, atmosphere and mood, external conditions, conversations with others, and the life and history of Isabella Stewart Gardner. Perhaps more important than the memories themselves are what the memories suggest about the nature of the Gardner experience – that it is multi-dimensional (visitors recalled multiple aspects of their visit), that it is highly salient (visitors were quite detailed in their memories), and that it is strongly connected to the art work (most prominent were memories relating to art and architecture).

- **BENEFITS**
  To better understand visitors' perceptions about benefits from their visit, ILI researchers replicated questions from the S. Radoff and Associates questionnaire. However, results suggested potential reliability issues with these questions, and so the data were analyzed emergently to identify trends and patterns in visitor-perceived benefits. Specifically, visitors talked about gaining new knowledge and understanding; about feeling personally and spiritually connected; about enhancing their creativity and feeling inspired; about social outcome; and about being transported from their daily routine. While many of these outcomes are similar to the S. Radoff and Associates experience statements, many are not. It may be useful for Gardner staff to continue to test the reliability of these outcomes with visitors in order to truly capture the ways in which people feel they benefit from the Museum experience.

- **ROLE OF THE ARTWORK**
  When asked directly about the role that the art work played in their museum visit, more than half of the participants said it was one of the main reasons that they came to the Gardner. Taken together, these findings clearly point to the saliency of the art within the Gardner experience. At the same time, however, for about a third of the study participants, the art was either not the most important aspect of their visit or it was equally important to the house and garden. Clearly the Gardner experience is different for different people – while the art work may feature prominently for many, it may be less prominent for others which has implications for how the Museum chooses to message the experience.

- **PERCEPTIONS OF THE GARDNER**
  Study participants' perceptions of the Gardner were exactly what staff expected – most often, people thought of it as a personal and intimate; as a place that inspired tranquility and introspection; and as a place of beauty. However, it is important to note that as with the other questions pursued in this study, participants offered multiple perceptions of the Museum. This confirms the notion that the Gardner experience is multi-faceted for visitors, comprised of various dimensions from aesthetics to emotions to social connections to the art work.

Taken together, results from this study suggest the presence of a Gardner gestalt; they suggest that museum visitors may see the Gardner experience as a combination of critical dimensions, from the art and architecture to the courtyard and garden to the legacy of Isabella herself. We hope that the data from this study have helped to shed some light on the nature of that gestalt, and will prove useful as Gardner staff continue to message the experience to current and future Museum visitors.

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Introduction

In preparation for the opening of their new building in 2012, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Gardner) is investigating strategies for building and diversifying its audience, with a special focus on engaging younger adults and local visitors. With funding from the Wallace Foundation, the Gardner contracted with S. Radoff Associates to engage in a large-scale, quantitative study of museum visitors from February 2008 through January 2010. The purpose of the S. Radoff study was to assess year-to-year changes in visitor demographics, experiences, motivations, and desires to return or recommend the museum, as well as to identify opportunities to build and engage new audiences, particularly those under 35 years of age.

In June 2010, the Gardner contracted with the Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI), a Maryland-based, non-profit research and evaluation organization, in order to augment the results of the large-scale, quantitative study. Specifically, ILI was asked to conduct a focused, qualitative study that would provide in-depth data about local visitors' long-term perceptions of their Gardner Museum experience. This qualitative study was designed to answer six overarching questions, identified by Gardner staff and ILI researchers:

1. How do visitors reflect upon their motivations for coming to the Gardner?
2. Months after their visit, what do they remember most about their museum experience?
3. What do they value most about their Gardner experience?
4. How do visitors feel they benefited from their museum experience?
5. What role did the artwork play in visitors' experience?
6. What are visitors' long-term perceptions of the Gardner?

Methods

Semi-structured, telephone interviews were conducted with museum visitors months after their visit to the Gardner Museum. Study participants were sampled from a list of visitors who completed an on-site questionnaire as part of the S. Radoff Associates study between February 2009 and January 2010, and who agreed to be contacted for follow-up questions. A total of 266 visitors provided contact information on their questionnaire. This number was narrowed to 77 visitors when Gardner staff decided to focus this qualitative study specifically on local Boston visitors. (Results from the S. Radoff Associates study suggested that only 25% of Gardner visitors are locals, and that only 8% of that 25% are from Boston proper. Staff decided that by better understanding their motivations and perceptions, they could more easily message to and ultimately engage this audience.)

ILI researchers contacted all 77 visitors either via email or telephone, and invited them to participate in the study. Each visitor was contacted three times. Thirty visitors did not respond to three invitations; 16 either declined to participate or had contact information that was no longer valid (e.g., email bounced back, phone was disconnected). The remaining 31 visitors were interviewed between August and September 2010. Interviews lasted from 20-45 minutes. Interview questions focused on visitors' memories of their visit, perceptions of the museum itself, and feelings about the benefits of their museum experience (see Appendix A for the interview guide). All study participants were given a thank

you gift in the form of a $25 gift certificate to the Museum's café, as well as 4 admission passes to the Museum.

ILI researchers took detailed notes during interviews, and those notes were analyzed according to coding rubrics, created through inductive and deductive approaches depending on the question. Inter-rater reliability was conducted to ensure the accuracy of coding. Coding rubrics are in the appendices.

Findings

Description of the Sample

All of the participants live in the greater Boston area. Most were female (n=25). Participants' ages ranged from 21 to over 65; fifteen were under the age of 35; nine were between the ages of 35 and 54; and 7 were over the age of 55. In terms of museum visitation, 6 participants said it was their first time ever to the Gardner; 10 said that while they had visited the Gardner in the past, it was their first visit of the year; and 15 said they had visited 2 or more times that year. All but 2 of the study participants came to the museum as part of an all-adult group. Most said they visited with friends, family (brothers, sisters, cousins, mothers), or significant others. Two participants visited with professional colleagues and three people could not remember the specific visit in question, and therefore did not answer the question.

1) How do visitors reflect upon their motivations for coming to the Gardner?

Research has shown motivation to be an important predictor of visitors' museum experience (Falk, 2009; Falk, 2006). Thus, study participants were asked in interviews to describe why they came to the Gardner on the day in question. Responses were analyzed using an adapted version of Falk's (2009) framework of motivational identities (revised and expanded by Judy Koke and education staff at the Art Gallery of Ontario). (See Appendix B for the coding framework.) While visitors typically come to a museum for more than one reason, ILI researchers coded responses for a dominant motivation only.

As shown in Figure 1 below, study participants demonstrated a range of motivations for visiting the Gardner. Most prominent were those classified as *social facilitators*, meaning their main agenda for the visit was to spend time with, and build meaningful experiences and memories with, others in their group. When talking about their reason for coming to the Gardner, these visitors said things like:

> *I get together with a friend 3-4 times a year…it's time that we can have an opportunity to embrace ourselves in the moment and have time to talk.*

> *My sister came to visit from Japan and her area is art. I have been to the Gardner many times, but I came [that day] because of her, just to accompany her.*

> *I was meeting a friend from class. It was a nice way to meet and brainstorm what we could do together.*

The high number of social facilitators supports findings from the large-scale quantitative study conducted by S. Radoff and Associates, which showed that most visitors said they came to the Museum to show it to family and friends (Radoff & Associates, 2010).

Six participants were considered *experience seekers*, or people who seek out interesting things to do in their community and often visit on the recommendation of others. These people explained their motivation for visiting as follows:

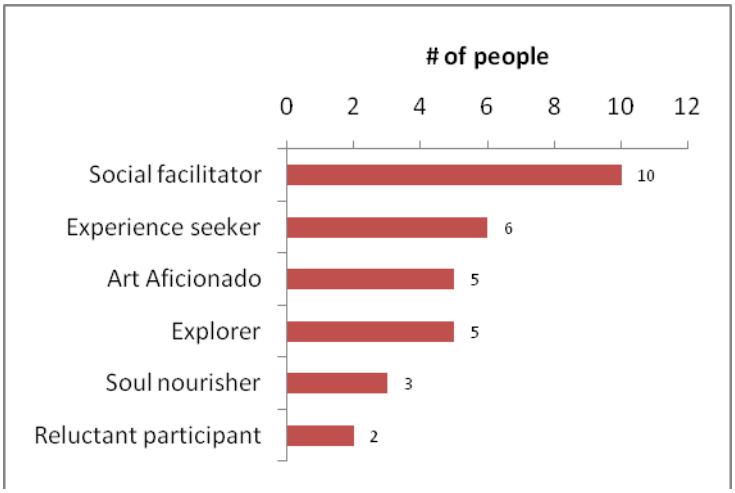

Figure 1: Visitors' motivations for coming to the Gardner (adapted by Koke et al. from Falk 2009).

My friend suggested it and her sister had gone and she said it was her favorite art museum in Boston. I love art and I hadn't heard of the museum before.

I had heard about [the Gardner] over a number of years and just had heard people complement the art and I was curious to see it having seen some other more well-known, or better attended, museums in town.

I had never been and had been living in Boston for about six months and it was my friend who really wanted to go and we all thought 'that's something none of us have done before.' We'd heard it was interesting and if I am going to live in Boston, people are going to ask me about it.

There were equal numbers of *art aficionados* and *explorers* in the sample (n=5 each). Both motivational identities are similar in that there is an emphasis on learning and discovery; however, the *art aficionados* tend to seek out specific, often expert or advanced-amateur level knowledge, whereas *explorers* tend to seek new experiences and follow whatever sparks their curiosity and interest that day. Some of their exact motivations follow:

I am a member and teach at the museum school. I think I came for a talk or something. I don't go to see the collection that often because I've seen it many times. I go for something or take my students there for a specific reason. – Art Aficionado

We love to visit. We want to build a familiarity with the Gardner. My husband and I are both artists. He is a poet and I am a visual artist and we want to get to a point where we assimilate the imagery – we are serious about getting to know it. – Art Aficionado

The location is good and it's an interesting place. The history of it is cool. It's a fun place to explore. – Explorer

Just a personal interest and we had the day off. Wanted to see some of the exhibits and the paintings and how they were displayed. [My boyfriend] was really interested in the garden and to see the architecture. - Explorer

Three study participants were classified as *soul nourishers*, or people whose primary purpose for visiting the museum was to engage in self-reflection, contemplation, and rejuvenation. The following are quotes from *soul nourishers*:

I can sit beside the courtyard, the stone steps… I can sit and read there. It's very quiet and the plants and the light. The whole thing makes me very quiet and light. My mood is very happy there.

We really needed to get out of the office and it's a beautiful place to escape to. I love going during the week when it's not as crowded. Especially in the winter, it has a beautiful indoor garden. You can pretend that it is not winter outside.

Finally, 2 participants fell into the category of *reluctant participants*, or people who came to the museum only because a person in their group wanted to visit. These people said things like: "It was the request of my sister-in-law" and "My girlfriend has a museum studies degree and wanted to visit."

It should be remembered that the sample size for this study was small and targeted, and that the study was not designed to generalize to all local Gardner visitors but rather to develop grounded hypotheses about these visitors' perceptions. It is highly possible that in a larger, more comprehensive study of motivations, the distribution across the Gardner visitorship would look different. For comparison purposes, a recent study at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Koke, 2010) shows that their audience is predominantly comprised of soul nourishers and explorers. In a study of 599 AGO visitors, results suggested the following distribution of motivational identities:

31% Soul nourishers;
30% Explorers;
14% Art aficionados;
9% Experience seekers;
9% Social facilitators.

2) Months after their visit, what do visitors remember most about their Gardner experience?

Participants were asked what they remembered most about their visit to the Gardner. Most were easily able to answer this question, with the exception of three participants who said they visit so often they were unable to isolate just one experience. In those cases, participants were asked to reflect on a "typical" Gardner visit. In order to ensure that all aspects of participants' memories were addressed, multiple questions were posed. For instance, participants were asked what they remembered doing that day, how they felt that day, and, finally, what they remembered most about their experience at the museum. Responses to these questions were analyzed in aggregate, using a coding rubric to identify emerging trends. (See Appendix C for coding rubric.)

Visitors' memories of their Gardner experience fell into one or more of seven categories:

1. Art & architecture
2. Personal feelings
3. Service & amenities
4. Atmosphere & mood
5. External conditions
6. Conversations with others
7. Life & history of Isabella Stewart Gardner

On average, participants discussed memories from at least 4 different categories. *Art and architecture* was the most frequently mentioned, with 27 participants remembering something about the artwork and/or architecture from their visit (See Figure 2). Nineteen of these participants specifically referred to the central courtyard and garden. Another 19 recalled general types of art or particular rooms within the home (usually the "Dutch" room and/or the stained glass), while 18 participants remembered a specific work of art, such as the Isabella Stewart Gardner portrait or the *El Jaleo*, both by John Singer Sargent. Other memorable objects included the historical letters and Isabella's personal correspondence.

Personal feelings were the second most recalled memories. Twenty-five participants described how they felt while in the museum that day. Of those 25 participants, more than half (n=14) described feeling calm and relaxed during their visit. Another 8 recalled feeling like they "were in [their] own home."

Strongly associated with visitors' personal feelings were recollections of mood and atmosphere. The contrast between the open and airy courtyard and the darker, more austere galleries was a noticed, and often welcomed, dichotomy. Visitors described the overall museum, and courtyard in particular, as "beautiful." Some visitors were able to recall specific sensory moments, such as the sound of water falling, the color of the flowers, and the sight of shadows casted against the stones. In contrast to the courtyard, some visitors remembered the galleries and other interior rooms as being dark. While most of these visitors said they understood the need for low lighting, some still saw the darkness as a drawback, explaining that the low lighting limits their ability to view the artwork. A few people also recalled the Gardner as an austere, serious, or academic place. Certain rooms, particularly the Dutch Room, coupled with the dim lighting and strict security appear to kindle that perception. Because many of visitors' recollections of feelings and mood strongly related to their overall perceptions of the museum, some of these topics are discussed in greater depth later in the report within the section related to visitors' perceptions of the museum.

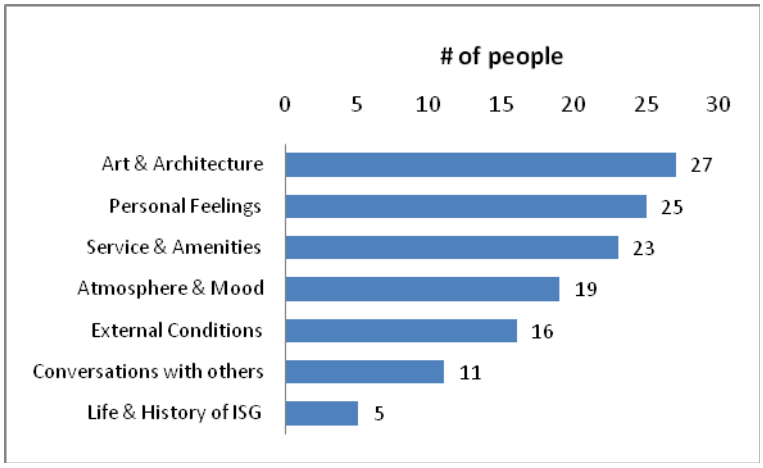

Figure 2: Visitors' memories of their Gardner experience.

Memories related to service and amenities (n=23), and those related to external conditions (n=16), were also common. Participants remembered how they arrived at the museum, what the weather was like, how many people were in the building, what the overall service was like, and what, if any, programmatic tools that they used (e.g. audio or gallery guides, tours, interactive). First-time visitors tended to focus their memories more on orientation and accessibility issues, like finding their way around or not having in-depth labeling for the artwork.

Approximately one-third of the sample (n=11) recalled having conversations with others in their group and/or museum staff. Some visitors remembered specific conversations about the artwork, while others recalled just having the opportunity "to catch up" with old friends or loved ones. Finally, a few participants (n=5) remembered specific facts about the life of Isabella Stewart Gardner and/or the

history of the museum. One person remembered details of Isabella's will and another was personally moved by the patron's personal battle with loss and depression.

3) What do visitors value most about their Gardner experience?

Study participants were asked to describe what was most valuable or meaningful about their experience at the Gardner on the day in question. Responses were coded and analyzed according to an emergent rubric developed by ILI researchers (see Appendix D). Only 20 participants responded to this question; 6 people were not asked the question due to time constraints in the interview, and another 5 people said they were not sure how to answer it or opted not to respond.

Figure 3 shows that half of those who responded (n=10) said what they valued most was being able to socially connect with friends, family, and loved ones. This finding is in keeping with the fact that many study participants reported visiting the museum with others that day, and reported being motivated to visit by a social agenda. For some, most valuable was the opportunity to share their own interests with and/or learn about the interests of others in their group. Others enjoyed watching loved ones do and see things that make them happy. Some of their direct comments follow:

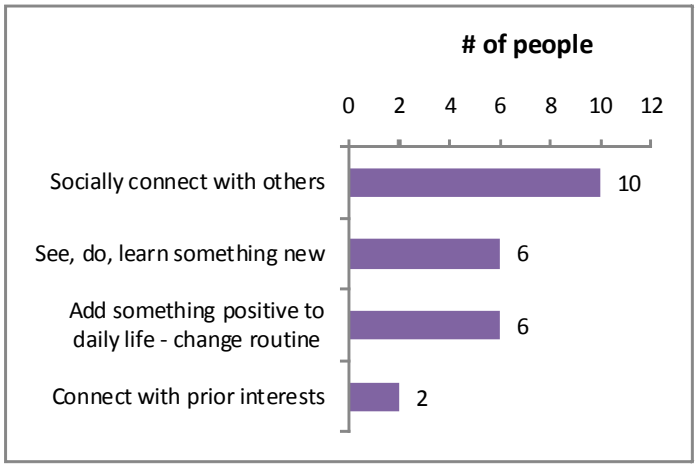

Figure 3: What visitors valued about their Gardner experience.

Seeing my granddaughter enjoying the art and the surroundings as much as she did… To see her in the process of looking at real art was a pleasure because she just enjoyed every minute of it

It is nice to share a cultural experience with someone that you normally don't get to share with. My boyfriend never went to a museum before. So for him, being able to share that was important because I go so many times and talk about it and culture and art is important to me. So being able to see different things that I've only talk about and experience those things with me and understand was important.

My sister was very happy and that made me happy. She thought it was worthwhile to be there. She had heard so much about it in Japan.

Being with the people I was with and getting to show them something that I am really into and having them like it too.

Other ways participants valued their experience at the Gardner included: 1) having the opportunity to see, do, and/or learn something new (n=6); 2) doing something that adds a positive element to daily life and provides a welcomed break from routine (n=6); and 3) finding something that relates to their hobbies and interests (n=2). Participants who appreciated doing and seeing something new, often talked

about how they particularly enjoy the idea of returning to the Gardner multiple times and discovering something different each time. Some examples of those responses follow:

Whether I'm eating there or visiting or seeing a painting I've seen before and noticing something new – it's not boring. Even though it's peaceful and stately, it isn't paralyzed in a time. It's still current… it keeps my interest.

I enjoy finding something new, something I haven't seen before.

There is so much to see in there and even if you think you've seen everything, there is always more. *There is always something new to discover*.

Some participants valued their experience at the Gardner because it added something joyful and positive to their daily lives and normal routines. These people described how the Gardner provides a welcome change in environment, being starkly different from Boston's modern cityscape and cold winters. Others valued being able to focus on something other than work and felt that looking at and appreciating art is a rewarding way to pass the time. Some of these responses follow:

When you go in you feel that you're in a different world, especially since outside you are in the hospital district. Inside, you drop 100 years.

I get really stir crazy in the winter. I need green space – outside it's snowy and depressing and I need that connection to nature.

Seeing something like the Gardner is a chance to have an uplifting experience. It adds something to my daily life. Everyday life can get really routine unless you add things to it that are more enriching and you don't necessarily have to be productive, but just appreciating something.

Just the peace – The sense of taking a deep breath and getting away from work and appreciate something other than work.

Finally, two participants talked about ways they were able to connect with existing interests or hobbies at the Gardner. For example, a lawyer said he appreciated learning about the legal situation surrounding the Gardner will and heist. He mentioned that usually law is boring, but that he could imagine that it would be much more interesting to him if he practiced law related to his interests in art and culture. Another person said that she sketches as a hobby and that visits to the Gardner are inspiring in that respect.

4) How do visitors feel they benefited from their Gardner experience?

The large-scale quantitative study of Gardner visitors conducted by S. Radoff and Associates asked them to rate a series of seven experience statements on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being "it describes my experience completely" and 5 being "it doesn't describe my visit at all." These statements were as follows:

- I learned something new at the museum today;
- I felt personally connected with the art while at the museum today;

- The experience was intellectually enriching;
- The experience was emotionally fulfilling;
- The experience helped me feel spiritually connected;
- The experience took me away from my routine;
- I experienced art in a different way today.

In addition, visitors were asked to select the statement that best described their experience. To better understand visitors' long-term perceptions of these experience statements, ILI researchers replicated these questions during the interview, asking participants to again rate each of the statements again using the same 1-5 scale, and to identify which statement best described their experience that day and why.

First, participants' ratings were compared to their earlier ratings of the same statements on the questionnaire. As seen in Table 1 below, participants' ratings in interviews were generally higher than their ratings on questionnaires (except for two of the seven ratings). This could be a result of social desirability, whereby participants felt compelled to tell interviewers what they wanted to hear; although the fact that they rated the spiritually connected statement quite low suggests they were not afraid to say what they thought there. It could also be a result of memories generally becoming more positive over time.

Table 1: Comparison of experience ratings (% who rated statement a 1 or 2 on 5-point scale)

Statement	2009 Questionnaire	2010 Interview	Significant Difference
…took me away from my routine	85%	97%	Y
…was intellectually enriching	79%	93%	Y
…experienced art in a different way today	73%	89%	Y
…learned something new at the museum today	72%	97%	Y
…was emotionally fulfilling	70%	79%	N
…felt personally connected with the art	63%	87%	Y
…helped me feel spiritually connected	41%	38%	N

Second, responses were analyzed according to which statement participants said "best described" their Gardner experience. As ILI researchers analyzed these responses, we uncovered some potential reliability issues with the experience statements.

For 10 of the 31 study participants, the "best" statement was *I experienced art in a different way*. However, when asked to explain why that statement best described their museum experience, participants offered a variety of explanations, suggesting that they interpreted this statement in a variety of different ways. Four people talked about how the personality of Isabella is infused into the presentation and history of the artwork and how that creates a unity and narrative around the art that is unique from other museums with more encyclopedic collections. The remaining five people offered varied explanations. One person said that the personal nature of the collection allowed him/her to imagine what it would be like to live in a "fancy home with art like that." Another person explained that the diversity of artwork keeps his/her interest and attention as it allows "a really wide range of ways to experience art." Along similar lines, one person said that it was the diversity of perspectives that made the art experience unique that day. For this person, seeing how different artists, as well as other people in his/her group, interpret the meanings of objects presents opportunities to interpret one's own values

and perspectives. Being able to look at something in a new way was also important to another visitor who described how an interaction with a security guard led to a new discovery and way of looking a particular piece of art. Finally, one person said that viewing art in the Gardner that day was "refreshing" and "rejuvenating" – a reminder of the importance of art in one's life.

For the remainder of study participants, it was equally difficult to see patterns in their selection of which statement "best" described their Gardner experience. Most participants would select a statement but then provide a rationale that oftentimes did not relate to or directly conflicted with that statement. For example, three people who selected *the experience was emotionally fulfilling* interpreted that outcome in very different ways. One person talked about learning something new, another person talked about inspiration and creativity, and yet another talked about having the ability to focus deeply on the art and live in the moment. The same degree of variability was found among other statements as well, suggesting that outcomes are more complex and nuanced than previously thought.

Rather than continuing to analyze participants' selection of which experience statement best described their visit, ILI researchers took a more emergent approach, coding responses for visitors' intended message about outcomes. (See Table 2) Since visitors were asked to interpret existing outcomes, rather than propose new ones, it is important that these data be thought of as emerging rather than conclusive. Had visitors been given the opportunity to propose entirely new outcomes, it is possible that even more would have been suggested. In addition, the goal was simply to articulate all of the communicated outcomes, not to identify the frequency with which these outcomes were mentioned. In future studies, ISGM staff may want to test these outcomes to ensure visitors understand and interpret statements in a consistent way, and confirm whether emerging outcomes reflect the experiences of the larger Gardner visitorship.

Table 2: Emerging outcome statements

Concept Category	Outcome Statements
Knowledge & Understanding	I learned something new about art/architecture/history/ISG
	I learned something new about others in my group
	I changed my perspective about something
Personal/Spiritual	I felt personally connected with the art
	I saw the connection between nature, people, and art
	It was easy to live in and focus on the present moment
	I engaged in self-reflection and inner looking
	I experienced an eureka moment or moment of bliss
	I felt relaxed and at peace
Creativity & Inspiration	My creativity was stimulated and I felt inspired
Social	I enjoyed spending time with my friends and loved ones
Experience	I experienced something different from my daily life, routine, or career
	I felt like I was transported to a different time, place
	I got to do see/do something unique

5) What role does the artwork play in visitors' experience?

Study participants were asked directly about the importance of the artwork to their experience at the Gardner. As shown in Figure 5, almost two-thirds of respondents (n=18) indicated that it was very important to them, and one of the main reasons why they come to the Gardner.

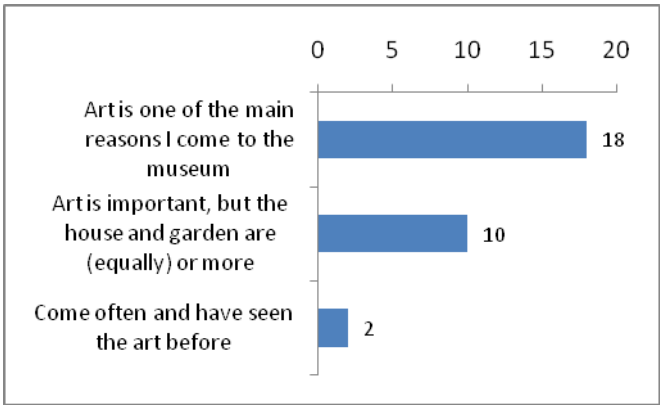

Figure 5: Visitors' ascribed importance of the art work.

When asked this question, many visitors responded quickly and excitedly, using words like "very, very" and phrases like "that's big!" One person commented that "Without the art, there is no museum" and another said "It's very important given that I went there to see the art." In addition, many visitors spoke eloquently about their favorite pieces and/or about the importance and quality of the collection as a whole. Some of these comments include:

It's always fun to look at art pieces, like good novels that you read again and again to discover something new. Sargent's portrait of Gardner, you can always stand in front and never get tired.

I love to look at the Botticelli - sometimes I don't even look at the other things around it. Sometimes I just want to take it all in.

The El Jaleo is marvelous to me. Talk about a religious shine - I run right in and pay my respects right way! Also, the Sargent water colors… I'm not a huge fan of the Rape of Europa, but some of them. I love Zorn.

I know it doesn't sound like it is, but it really is very important. I particularly like the Art of Devotion, the collection that you can't always see really well.

Very important, it is not just the [paintings]. There are also many other things, decorative, personal memorabilia, letters, photos, personal objects. You lift a curtain that protects them from light to see them. You are seeing part of someone's life.

The collection has amazing pieces that are rare to find of that quality in the US. So to have it at your finger tips is a luxury. She traveled the world to get all that, and since I can't do that, it's nice to have that accessible by the T.

I think that's why you go there. I don't know, it wouldn't be nearly as interesting, you're walking through centuries of different kinds of art, a table from this century, something portraying this feeling, costumes, those clothes from that century, they transport you to all these corners of the globe and different eras.

Approximately one-third of study participants (n=10) indicated that while the artwork is important, the house and garden are equally, if not more, important. Some of these participants were more likely to view their visit holistically, wrapping the art, architecture, and history into one, saying things like:

[The art] is pretty important, but not the only thing. [The art] would be less appealing if it weren't connected to [Isabella] or not connected to the building that it's displayed in.

Some of it doesn't interest me so much. I'm not into tapestries, but I love the painting of Isabella in the black dress. I can remember in art history class studying Michelangelo and then seeing sketch by him. The story of that room is interesting because there are such notable works there. It has that feeling of experiencing part of art history.

If I take it as the paintings, then it's of medium importance. If you take it as the architecture… if I take it as, all the furnishings and then it would be very important. Nature is much more important than looking at paintings to me. But the furniture shows how rich people live, much more interested in that than the paintings.

It's nice, but I like more the little objects and the letters in the case…

Artwork is important, but the house and garden take a bigger role…The first attraction is the garden and the house and the interior design part and the art comes second.

I think that being in a peaceful oasis is more important. I don't always go through the galleries.

Finally, two visitors said that they come to the Gardner very frequently and have seen the art many times. One of those visitors said: "I think because I've been there so many times in my life – it's not that they are secondary, that's for sure. It's just that I don't focus on them because I've seen them."

Another approach to assessing the importance of the artwork to visitors was to examine the entire interview transcript, and the degree to which study participants, unsolicited, mentioned art in their responses to other questions. It is interesting to note that while many participants mentioned the art when talking about what they did at the Gardner, and what they remembered about their Gardner experience, fewer mentioned it when talking about why they visited the Gardner that day, how they felt that day, and what they valued most about their experience. Two possible explanations are: 1) participants assume that coming for the art is a "given" – meaning, they think it is obvious that they come to an art museum for the art and so do not mention it as part of their motivation, value, and so on; 2) participants fell prey to social desirability, a phenomenon that involves telling the interviewer what she wants to hear.

Gardner staff were interested in knowing whether there were differences between first-time visitors and frequent visitors in regards to how they viewed the importance of art. ILI researchers did not find any evidence of such differences between these two groups.

Staff were also interested in study participants' reactions to the Artist in Residence exhibitions, and their perceptions of the contemporary space. Unprompted, a few visitors did recall seeing a contemporary exhibition while at the Gardner. One person specifically remembered a contemporary exhibition that focused on the phases of the moon. Others did not go into detail about a specific theme, but did mention seeing a "special" or "temporary" exhibition. Overall, visitors that mentioned contemporary art

had mixed feelings about its inclusion at the Gardner. Whereas a few people saw the Artist in Residence program as positive, progressive, and in in keeping with Isabella's mission to support contemporary artists, others saw it as disrupting and intrusive to the largely classical and historical collection. Feelings about the new extension were similarly mixed, with some greatly anticipating a more traditional and modern juxtaposition, and others anxious that it will detract from the existing building. The following comments highlight visitors' views about contemporary art at the Gardner:

I'm thinking about the recent gallery they put in [Artist in Residence. In previous eras, when [Isabella] was alive, she was commissioning famous artists, like Emil Zorn and Sargent. There were people who were alive and working, so she was aligning herself with contemporary art, but now when you go, you feel that you have gone to another place. I think the new contemporary gallery is fantastic. The Gardener would fade away otherwise. It would be stuck. There would be almost nothing to make you go back.

I wanted to say something quickly about the temporary exhibition room; I think that is really, really important, trying new stuff. I love the fact that they have the mythology, the empty frames even thought its tragic. People love the story, something good out of something horrible, the gothic lore. I also think it is vital to keep that moving. It's exciting and bold. Did you see that exhibit, Isabella Stewart's sketch books, slides, digital images? That was wonderful. There was this amazing theater group (Macbeth? Sleep No More?), Lincoln School. Thrilling new concept, anything, that is the kind of, the kinds of new things the Gardner should consider, things that connect with the old but touch on the modern approach. I'd love to see some Shakespeare play next to that fire place.

It's an amazing collection of not only beautiful pieces of art work but also historical pieces. I also think that the Artist in Residence piece, that room that is always contemporary is an interesting continuation of the history, to see the continuing process and development and artistic culture.

One visitor, who viewed a temporary exhibition about the phases of the moon, said that it helped her experience art in a different way. She explained how the more modern exhibition combined with the traditional classical paintings and architecture gave her *"a really wide range of ways to experience art"* and that the variety kept her attention and interest.

The new addition, now they are thinking about building more on. They are not allowed to change the art she put up. I remember the newer exhibit, I got upset. Going to the new part, I didn't feel that it matched the tone. New contemporary art is just the opposite of the art I just saw. It is upsetting the whole... It's just one piece of new art amidst all this classic art. It's neat that they support artists, just a little weird.

One visitor discussed the Bodenmuseum and how recently a glass building was added on to the older, original building. She described this museum as being *"the best of both worlds, older and contemporary,"* and said that is what she hopes the Gardner will be more like, following the new addition.

When talking about the artwork, one visitor explained that he/she is not *"completely attracted by the new extension."* She expressed hope that the Gardner maintains an atmosphere that fits with the original building. She added that she has noticed the new inclusions of contemporary works at the Gardner and that *"every time there is one, I smile and skip by very quickly."*

6) What are visitors' long-term perceptions of the Gardner?

A key goal of this study was to identify the diverse ways in which local visitors perceive of the Gardner and their experience at the museum. Study participants were asked several questions related to perceptions, including: 1) What three adjectives would you use to describe your overall museum visit to someone? 2) How would you describe the Gardner to a friend or co-worker who has never been? and 3) How is the Gardner similar to or different from other art museums you have visited?

To analyze participants' responses to the question "What three adjectives would you use to describe your overall visit to someone?" ILI researchers used word cloud analysis through an online software program known as "Wordle." A word cloud is a visual depiction of the range and frequency of words found in any given dataset; the larger the word, the more often it appeared within the data. Figure 6 below illustrates that when describing a visit to the Gardner museum, study participants most frequently used the words *beautiful, interesting, unique, eclectic, enjoyable*, and *relaxing*.



Figure 6: Visitors' descriptions of a visit to the Gardner (using Wordle)

To analyze participants' responses to the question "How would you describe the Gardner to a friend or co-worker who has never been?" and "How is the Gardner similar to or different from other art museums you have visited?" ILI researchers performed an emergent content analysis to identify categories of responses. Figure 7 below illustrates these various categories. Each is then discussed in more detail, with the most frequently mentioned perception first and the least frequently mentioned last.

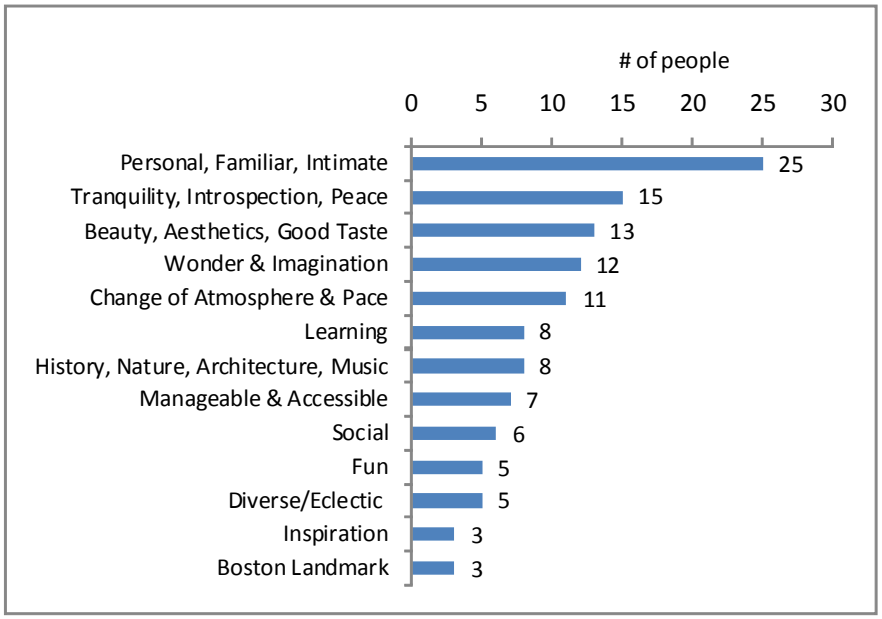

Figure 7: Visitors' perceptions of the Gardner.

A Personal, Familiar, & Intimate Place

Almost all of the study participants (n=25) perceived the Gardner as being personal and intimate. Participants linked these feelings with the fact that the collection was amassed by one person and hung according to her eccentric taste. The fact that the museum was Isabella's home also seemingly contributed to participants' feelings of intimacy, as did the mood and atmosphere of the museum. Participants acknowledged that there are seemingly fewer crowds, no white walls or high ceilings, and less noise and echoing. These factors gave them the feeling that they could find a quiet, private space of their own despite being in a public building. Visitors also acknowledged that the personal nature of the Gardner allowed them to approach the art in a different way, often opening more doors for them to create their own narratives and engage in free association with the artwork. The fact that the collection does not change also contributed to feelings of familiarity and intimacy as visitors can return to find the same familiar pieces, as they would if returning to their own homes. The following represent a hand-full of visitors' descriptions of the Gardner as personal, familiar, and intimate:

[The Gardner] is such an intimate space. The MFA is immense. It is overwhelming. It's not peaceful there.

[The Gardner] isn't as big and overwhelming as most museums. There are smaller rooms and when I go in I see a lot of people sketching and drawing. It's like you can be there among a bunch of people but still feel alone.

You don't feel like one of the masses in there – that is a huge difference – it's a small museum with a small amount of people and it's more personal because of size.

Because [the Gardner] was someone's home it is more personal. It isn't those cold hallways like in other museums.

It's set up like a home and it makes you feel comfortable and you can walk around. Other museums are so much larger and you have to whisper and it echoes. In the Gardner you don't have the echo effect.

In a little area, there is a door with char from a fire - she bought that from a Venetian home that caught fire. I think that is cool. It brings it down to real life. I like to know where she collected, where things came from. That black sooty part from a fire is one reason it's so personal.

I love the personalness the most. Often the art is not labeled, so you have to dig deeper to find out about where it came from, who the artist was, when the work was produced. What I like is that I stare at the painting more. In other museums I get hung up in the blurb on the wall, but at the Gardner, I really can get lost in the work. I love looking at how she decorated the walls, the leather panels, the room, the one with the Hercules, you don't see things like that in most museums, with the lace, you don't see that hanging next to paintings. It is very personal space, personal for her and personal for those who go too. You can't help but be caught up in her vision of the things she collected.

[The Gardner] is a different way to experience art. You approach it not as formal. It's a mismatch of stuff and you're not looking at it as necessarily as a quiet or reverential way - it is a different context. I mean they have really incredibly famous and important artworks, but it's not like if you go to the Louvre where people come to pay respects and say you seen it. At ISG you approach [the art] at a more intimate and personal level and you approach it on your own terms.

It's nice to have that place to go that is unique and not so impersonal like the MFA, more of an experience than just the art. The MFA feels like more of a corporate business, where you don't know how it began like you do with the Gardner. [At the MFA] the pieces are there because of a business transaction, things are set up by committees, there's more advertising. The MFA is bigger, just a standard museum. You could go to an art museum in a different county and it would be the same.

The Gardner is great because of the way that the contents are displayed. It's more unconscious… the fact that it was her therapy, her living process, her personal thing. That comes across to me as something that is unconscious…I like that I am in this home space, and I am not being directed…it induces free association.

[The Gardner] is much more intimate. Much more – it's more welcoming. It's like walking into a home and looking at art and the gardens and just enjoying the surroundings as much as the art. It's not high ceilings – it's welcoming.

Gardner staff wanted to know if those visitors who perceived the museum was not crowded were visiting on weekends or weekdays. Unfortunately, this variable was not collected as part of the written survey and so it's not possible to answer this question. If still interested, Gardner staff may want to test visitors' perceptions of crowd levels as part of a future study.

A Place of Tranquility, Introspection, Peace (of mind)

A number of study participants (n=15) perceived the Gardner as a place where they can go to find peace and quiet – a place where they can engage in introspection. This quality appeared to be linked with the perception that the Gardner is also a personal and intimate space. It is much easier to ease into relaxation and inward thinking in a place that feels safe, intimate, and familiar. It is perhaps also easier to settle into reflective thinking in a place where there are fewer crowds and less noise and where you can locate a place to "be alone." The presence of the inner courtyard and gardens also seemed to contribute to the perception of the museum being a place of peace and relaxation. Participants referred to the sounds of the garden and fountains as being soothing, and the beauty of the space helped them to find inner peace and quiet. In some instances, participants talked about how they were able to live in the moment while in the museum and focus deeply on the art, gardens, sounds, and overall beauty. Some of visitors' descriptions of the Gardner as tranquil, introspective, and peaceful follow:

It's calming. It's a very mindful experience. It carries over [to the rest of the day].

I can sit beside the courtyard on the stone step. I just sit and read there. It's very quiet and the plants and the light, the whole makes me very quiet and light. My mood is very happy there… The courtyard is very special. It's not very busy. You have a clear view - you don't have to think too much - just what is around, the plants in the courtyard. You can sit in [the Gardner] and clear your mood and make yourself quiet.

I love gardening and I find that the gardens provide a unique sense of calm and pleasure when you enter the space... It's an enclosed city garden, a walled garden, but it's has something in bloom regardless of the season, it's always pretty, you experience it with your nose as well as your eyes.

Something about [the Gardner] is peaceful… I think it's like when you have that feeling of vacation, "I need to get out of here," recharge and relax, time that is to yourself. It's important and nice.

In law school I've become very jaded… I'm looking at problems all the time - everything is unpleasant. We get paid, but everyone is pissed off and we're supposed to remove our emotions and analyze the situation. There is no room for spirituality in that setting… For two years I lost my, not lost it, but was doing law too much, and felt 'wow, I need to bring back some of my spirituality.' [At the Gardner] this is art. I tried not to look at dates. To some extent I shut it down and put the law away and tried to experience [myself], [I'm] a pretty good guy sometimes.

[The Gardner] is somewhere where people can go and think and not necessarily and go and have to make a decision or make a judgment or do something and with the garden inside that sort of creates a peaceful atmosphere where you aren't pressured to do anything right away.

[There is] so much hustle and bustle in this world and there's just not the intimacy and love between neighbors. You go in [to the Gardner] and it's just such a calming effect and you think how can we have that world outside when there is so much beauty inside, when this is possible for everyone. It's just a wonderful feeling. It's a way from your everyday world, spiritually, beautifully, all of the things that describe happiness and joy.

Peacefulness is being in the moment. The flowers do that and the music does that. And that is what I take from it. The paintings around there, but that is not the first thing you see unless you go immediately to a gallery, first treat of the day is the garden. As soon as you go in, it's a peaceful existence, even though there are tons of people. In the internal terrace, it feels like I have been taken away to another place and time… I have time to listen to my inner-self and my thoughts. Just to get in that special place that allows you to do that.

A Place to Experience Great Beauty, Aesthetics, and Good taste

Almost half of participants (n=13) described the Gardner simply as beautiful. Participants perceived the beauty as being infused throughout the entire museum – in works of art, in the architecture, in the blooming flowers. The beauty and serenity of the Gardner were seen as a welcome contrast from cold, winter days or the ubiquitous cityscape. Some examples of visitors' descriptions of the Gardner as a place of beauty, aesthetics, and good taste follow:

The architecture is so detailed, so beautifully constructed.

[The Gardner] is so calming and pleasant and lovely… It's beautiful, a cultural reliquary.

With the garden in the middle of the art and with art inside the garden and looking up to the top floor with performances and music echoing in the garden – [these are] all charming details. Also we were quite surprised that near the exit they restored some of the Chinese elements, exhibits are mostly European, then you see some of the oriental elements, very interesting and beautifully balanced.

It's beautiful…Some of the art we saw was gorgeous.

It's beautiful, the sunlight inside is so nice.

I think she [Isabella] was a genius at creating sanctuary, a shrine. She knew about texture. The atmosphere the lace, rust, stone, painting, textures.

Often we don't have a lot of beauty in our day to day life, everything [at the Gardner] is so beautiful - the structure itself, particularly the courtyard and the light streaming in on Rembrandt's self portrait, and the softness of the Gardner. Sometimes when I am there, just the quiet is beautiful.

I would just say [the Gardner] is exquisitely beautiful. It's like a collage and it's an unusual setting… It is very elegant and when you go in it is very beautiful.

It's such a beautiful space when you enter, especially on a gloomy day.

A Place for Wonder & Imagination

Some study participants (n=12) perceived the Gardner as a place of wonder and imagination – a place where they could imagine life at a different time and explore and uncover hidden mysteries. The

Gardner sparked many creative associations for participants – with most saying it felt like an old castle or European mansion. The small, dark rooms and intricate passageways gave some participants the sense that they were on an adventure, exploring new corridors and uncovering hidden secrets as if they were children. Other factors that seemed to contribute to heightened feelings of imagination included the artwork itself and the history of Isabella's life and personality. Some imaginative quotes include:

You don't feel as though you walk into a museum. [It's like] walking into a European aristocrat castle.

[The Gardner] is like this old mansion of an eccentric rich person. There was a different feel… We discovered a lot… it was a bit of an adventure. It sort of feels like a mansion with the inner courtyard and all the walls covered with art. That's what it is, a giant house covered with art. You turn the corner and it is a chapel and you turn another corner and it is a kitchen. It is like the combined experience of visiting an art museum and visiting an old castle. You never know what's around the next corner and the castle and maze like feel makes it seem like an adventure. It sort of felt almost childlike – sort of like a mystery.

The difference is that it's such a quirky place, and that's what I like about it. You can find nooks and crannies, amazing details, things that you missed before, there's always something new to find.

[The Gardner is] my secret place, even though I tell everyone about it. The building feels like lots of nooks and crannies - that helps with the crowding. It's not a huge room with tons of people - even if it was busy you could find your own space. There is this one part, 2nd floor, a passage, an old door you have to squeeze through. You feel like you're in there alone, you can pretend you live there.

I would say that it is a really nice space to get in touch with, or get in touch with a different time in Boston.

If you haven't been there, if you've traveled in European countries, the textures and stone and marble, tapestries, wood, bronze, it's a lot more physical textures. It just feels like you are in living history… you are stepping back in time. At night you can't see the rest of the world as easily, and with the subdued lighting. When you go in, the famous painting, the Sargent, you see it at the end of a stone corridor, and to the right of that, is a cloistered setting, with garden in the middle, and you just know you've been transported to another world.

I feel like I'm in the Renaissance – feel like I'm in a castle or something and it has a great feel to it.

It is an imagined atmosphere, going back to that period of time and the stained glass windows and the mystery of the unknown - that is very inviting in a positive way. The mystery… not who she was, but what had occurred there.

A Place for Learning

Eight participants perceived the Gardner as a place where they could learn something new. Four people used the word "educational" to describe the museum. As a returning visitor, one participant said that she enjoys learning something new each time: "I can look and learn and see things that I may not have

seen before or haven't thought about in a while." This same participant called the Gardner a "treasure trove" and place to "learn about the history and visual culture of the world." Another study participant said that having so many different types of art juxtaposed in one room allows for more opportunities to compare and contrast.

A Place to Experience More than just Art – History, Nature, Architecture, Music

Another eight people perceived the Gardner as a multi-dimensional experience offering visitors access to art, history, architecture, music and nature. These participants were most likely to perceive the Gardner as a cultural experience, rather than just an art museum. One person explained, "The Gardner is more of an experience than just looking at paintings. It's more holistic, less clinical." A few people specifically described the historical importance of the building, saying it helped them to imagine living in that time and that it was a good representation of American history. Finally one person said he liked that when you visit the Gardner, you also get to enjoy nature and listen to music.

An Experience that is Manageable & Accessible

Some visitors (n=7) perceived the Gardner as being accessible and manageable – more so than larger museums like the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The small size of the museum meant that study participants could "see it all" on one visit and also have less choices to make in regards to where to go and what to see. Some participants who self-identified as enjoying art, but lacking knowledge, found the museum to be more accessible and welcoming than other museums. Again – these feelings were linked to the fact that the paintings were hung according to the wishes of one person and were represented on the walls of a real house. This seemed to allow visitors to approach and access the paintings outside the realm of art history. Some ways in which study participants described the Gardner as manageable and accessible include:

It was quicker than MFA, something I could take in an afternoon. It was more palatable. I could take in nice art without walking through such a big museum. It's a more compact space and I didn't have to stand in long lines.

The Gardner is a more approachable scale. Even the youngest member of our group who wasn't into art and museums said, "I really like that, it wasn't normal" the size, scale, scope, art, it's more approachable.

I like the size. It's more manageable, you can wander through and get to all the spaces in a few hours and I notice different things every time I am in there. It's not as overwhelming in terms of the size and quantity of art.

I would say that it's easier to visit in one day… more manageable… I never studied art.

There is something of interest to everyone.

A Place to Share with Others

Almost all of the participants in this study said they visited the Gardner with others, so it is not surprising that some (n=6) talked specifically about the museum as a good place to bring friends, family, and colleagues. Especially for local visitors, the Gardner is perceived as an interesting place to take people who are visiting from out of town. In some ways, knowing about such a "unique," "beautiful," and "hidden" space allowed locals to demonstrate their insider-knowledge of Boston. The Gardner seemed to fill social needs on a variety of levels. Some reported using the space as a place to stimulate interesting conversations about the art and history, while others said they used the intimate setting to learn more about each other and connect on a deeper level. Some comments reflecting the Gardner as a social place include:

[The Gardner] is a neat place to take people for the first time and tell them stories about how nothing can be moved.

I've taken people who have never been to a museum in their life before… When I take my niece from Florida or a new friend that I've been helping with some problem, the quietness and talking in the of the café. It's small and, honestly, the quality of the food.

[The Gardner] is something to do for a date with a girl that is into that kind of stuff… it's different from a restaurant where I have to lead the conversation…[at the Gardner] each engages in different and the same observations, you don't have to do much. It's definitely passive. You can hold hands if you want and just look at stuff - look at different things but be engaged, come together to see the same thing.

I think it is so beautiful I want to show everybody…. It's a nice environment to bring someone who you are working with professionally. It is a serious place. It's got a nice atmosphere, but not too stuffy and it's a beautiful place- people are always wowed by it.

My surrounding are very important to me when I'm spending time with someone I care about… there is baroque music, being able to stroll at your own place, just sit and chat.

A Place to Have Fun

A few study participants perceived the Gardner as a fun and enjoyable place. They said things like, "It's fun," "It's got a fun vibe," and "It's a fun place to explore." As most people select leisure-time experiences that they perceive will be enjoyable – this finding is not particularly surprising, although it is always a positive thing to hear.

A Place Filled with Diverse Art Representing an Eclectic Personality

The Gardner was seen by many study participants as a place with a unique collection that is strongly linked with Isabella Stewart Gardner's quirky nature. Five participants in particular focused on the diversity of artwork within Isabella's collection:

I think the museum itself is different – a collection of one woman's and the people she was surrounded with. The very focused nature of that is special, but I think that the different

types of art from Europe, from the renaissance and middle ages, is something you don't see all together. You can see how different artists play off different things from different regions, can compare pieces from that region, and books you've read about it. It is its own world, really special quality.

Put it all together, you let your baggage go, you're looking at the art and architecture, which is stylistically interesting, very different feelings from room to room. People can find what they are looking for there.

Unique. I am a hotel concierge, so I recommend those museums, that is how I describe to the guests, "diversified collections and unique."

Atmosphere – felt academic, I am an academic dork, so that was good. What is the word… privileged, elite feeling, more than other museums, in my opinion amplified. It is someone's name Isabella Gardner, instead of the museum of this or that, permeated throughout. The fact that each room is arranged in rooms, it is as if you could live there, dining room of art from all over the world - eclectic and elite ... an interesting time… interesting, eclectic, something different.

That it's got an eclectic collection. Somewhat… now what is the word? One woman collected it and she was generous and built it with the idea that she would share it with posterity.

A Place for Inspiration

Just a few people (n=3) saw the Gardner as a place where they could find inspiration and stimulate their creativity. Two people described the Gardner as "inspiring" without further explanation, and another person explained how art is a good balance to her career in science, saying: "Visiting the Gardner serves an inner need to feel creative and be inspired."

A Boston Landmark, A Source of City Pride

Linked with the perception that the Gardner is a good place to take others, some participants especially talked about museum as an important landmark in Boston. These people said things like: "It's one of a kind, Boston wouldn't be the same without it," and "It's a real landmark in Boston – a valuable resource and respectable museum in the area." Another person perceived the Gardner as being a hidden gem of Boston, making those who visit "better than everyone else."

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gather rich, qualitative data describing visitors' long-term perceptions of their experience at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Study participants had no trouble reflecting on their visit; even months later, they remained enthusiastic about their museum experience, and offered detailed memories about it. Looking across the data, results provide insight into several aspects of the visitor experience.

1) How do visitors reflect upon their motivations for coming to the Gardner?

Study participants demonstrated a range of motivations for visiting the Gardner. Responses were analyzed using an adapted version of Falk's (2009) framework of six motivational identities (revised and expanded by Judy Koke and education staff at the Art Gallery of Ontario), including *social facilitator*, *experience seeker*, *art aficionado*, *explorer*, *soul nourisher*, and *reluctant participant*.

Most prominent amongst study participants were those classified as *social facilitators*, meaning the main agenda for their visit was to spend time with, and build meaningful memories with, others in their group. This finding is in keeping with results from the S. Radoff and Associates survey (2010) which showed that most visitors said they came to the Museum to show it to family and/or friends. This finding is also in keeping with how Gardner staff conceptualize visitors' motivations; staff have long suspected that Gardner visitors are largely driven by a predominantly social agenda.

Granted, this study's sample is small; it would be interesting to further investigate post-hoc motivational identities from a larger sample of visitors. It would also be interesting to compare Gardner visitors' motivations with visitors to other art museums, nationally and internationally. For example, results from the Art Gallery of Ontario suggest that their visitors come for different reasons – mainly for soul nourishment and exploring, and less for social facilitation.

2) Months after their visit, what do they remember most about their museum experience?

Study participants were easily able to recall multiple aspects of their museum visit. Specifically, visitors' memories fell into one or more of seven categories, including art and architecture, personal feelings, service and amenities, atmosphere and mood, external conditions, conversations with others, and the life and history of Isabella Stewart Gardner.

Perhaps more important than the memories themselves are what the memories suggest about the nature of the Gardner experience. First, visitors did not just remember one aspect of their visit – rather, they recalled multiple aspects of it from the social to the emotional to the subject matter, suggesting that memories of the Gardner experience are complex and multi-faceted. Second, visitors' memories were neither general nor vague – rather they were detailed, specific, and emotive in nature. Visitors described particular feelings that emerged in particular galleries. Their memories appeared to be vivid and lasting, suggesting a certain saliency about the experience itself. Third, visitors' memories were strongly connected to the works of art. Gardner staff have long questioned whether a similarly powerful social experience could be created at a local coffee shop – in other words, what is it about the Gardner experience that makes it unique? Results from this study would suggest that while many visitors do in fact come to the museum to enact a social agenda, their memories of the experience are predominantly related to the art work itself. This finding again hints at the complexity of the Gardner experience, and points to the importance of the context, and the art work in that context, for the overall museum visit.

3) What do they value most about their Gardner experience?

Not all study participants were able to articulate what they valued most about their Gardner experience. It may be that the phrasing of the question was challenging. In particular, participants may have struggled with the task of identifying what they valued most, given that visitors' memories of their experience clearly point to a complex and multi-faceted experience with various "value" dimensions. Or it could be that visitors simply do not think about their museum visit in terms of "value." Either way, study results do not provide clear answers to this question. However, results do suggest that for many visitors, there may be a strong social component to what they value most about the Gardner experience. This finding again fits with the dominant theme cutting across all the data, namely that visitors come to the Gardner for a social experience and they highly value the social nature of that experience. This is an area that Gardner staff would be wise to investigate further, in order to tease out in more depth how the social experience at the Gardner compares to other social experiences in people's lives.

4) How do visitors feel they benefited from their museum experience?

To better understand visitors' perceptions about benefits from their visit, ILI researchers replicated two questions from the S. Radoff and Associates questionnaire. The first question asked study participants to rate a series of seven experience statements; the second question asked them to indicate which statement best described their Gardner experience. Results from the ratings were generally in keeping with participants' questionnaire data. However, results from the second question suggested serious reliability issues with the experience statements. Too often, participants selected a statement and then provided a rationale for their selection that did not relate to or directly conflicted with that statement.

As a result, ILI researchers took a more emergent approach to analysis of the data from this question, seeking to articulate the range of outcomes communicated by visitors themselves, rather than trying to categorize those outcomes within the statements provided. Looking at the data in this way allowed us to see a very different set of responses to potential benefits from the Gardner experience. Specifically, visitors talked about gaining new knowledge and understanding; about feeling personally and spiritually connected; about enhancing their creativity and feeling inspired; about social outcomes; and about being transported from their daily routine. While many of these outcomes are similar to the S. Radoff and Associates experience statements, many are not. It may be useful for Gardner staff to continue to test the reliability of these outcomes with visitors in order to truly capture the ways in which people feel they benefit from the Museum experience.

5) What role did the artwork play in visitors' experience?

Unsolicited, study participants frequently referred to the art work when describing their Gardner experience. This is not surprising, given that most of the sample was very familiar with the museum (25 people had been there at least once before, and most had been multiple times.) When asked directly about the role that the art work played in their museum visit, more than half of the participants said it was one of the main reasons that they came to the Gardner. Taken together, these findings clearly point to the saliency of the art within the Gardner experience. At the same time, however, for about a third of the study participants, the art was either not the most important aspect of their visit or it was equally important to the house and garden. Clearly the Gardner experience is different for different people – while the art work may feature prominently for many, it may be less prominent for others which has implications for how the Museum chooses to message the experience.

6) What are visitors' long-term perceptions of the Gardner?

Study participants' perceptions of the Gardner were exactly what staff expected – most often, people thought of it as a personal and intimate; as a place that inspired tranquility and introspection; and as a place of beauty. However, it is important to note that as with the other questions pursued in this study, participants offered multiple perceptions of the Museum. This confirms the notion that the Gardner experience is multi-faceted for visitors, comprised of various dimensions from aesthetics to emotions to social connections to the art work.

Taken together, results from this study suggest the presence of a Gardner gestalt; they suggest that museum visitors may see the Gardner experience as a combination of critical dimensions, from the art and architecture to the courtyard and garden to the legacy of Isabella herself. We hope that the data from this study have helped to shed some light on the nature of that gestalt, and will prove useful as Gardner staff continue to message the experience to current and future Museum visitors.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. As I mentioned earlier, we are interviewing people who visited The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in the last 12 months and who, as part of their visit, filled out a survey and agreed to answer some follow-up questions. The purpose of the interview is to understand what visitors remember about their visit and what their visit has meant to them. Your feedback will help The Gardner Museum to better market itself to potential local visitors.

I have a series of questions that I'll ask. The interview will be fairly informal, so please feel free to ask for clarification at any point. I will be taking notes as you talk, so my apologies in advance for any pauses while my fingers catch up! Your comments will remain anonymous, meaning that neither your name nor any other identifying information will be attached to what you say. With that in mind, please be as honest as you can; we truly want to know both positive and negative memories.

Any questions before we get started? Okay, let's begin.

Visit Experience

I want you to think back to the day that you visited The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. It was [insert date.] Take a minute to recall as many details as you can about your museum visit. How did you get to the museum? Who were you with? What was the weather like that day? How did it feel when you first walked into the museum? Are you remembering all of this?

Okay, I'm going to ask you some specific questions to get at some of these memories.

1. Tell me *who you were with* that day when you came to the museum.

2. Tell me *why you decided to come to the museum* that day.

3. Tell me what you *remember most* about your visit to the museum that day.

4. Tell me *what you did* in the museum that day.

5. Tell me *how you felt* in the museum that day.

Now that we've talked about some of the specifics of your visit, let's talk more broadly about what it meant to you.

6. As you think back to [insert date], how would you describe your overall museum visit to someone, a friend or a neighbor for example? I'm interested in the *adjectives* you would use to describe it, so tell me what words first come to mind.

7. What was *most valuable (meaningful?) about your experience* at The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum that day?

8. What did you *like least* about your experience that day?

9. Different people have different experiences when visiting museums. I'm going to read you 7 statements, and for each one I want you to tell me *how well it describes what you remember of your experience* that day. We'll use a scale from 1-5, where 1 is "It describes my experience completely" and 5 is "It doesn't describe my experience at all." Are you ready?

    a. I learned something new at the museum that day.
    b. I felt personally connected with the art while in the museum that day.
    c. The experience was intellectually enriching.
    d. The experience was emotionally fulfilling.
    e. The experience helped me feel spiritually connected.
    f. The experience took me away from my routine.
    g. I experienced art in a different way that day.

10. Which statement *best* describes what you remember of your experience at the Gardner Museum that day?
    Probes: Why does that statement best explain your experience? Help me understand what that statement means to you, e.g., What does it mean to have an emotionally fulfilling experience? Why is that important? What is it about the Gardner that results in that experience for you?

11. Many people describe their experience at The Gardner Museum as very personal in nature, for example saying the museum is like a sanctuary for them or that the museum takes them away from their everyday routine. What do you think that means? How important was this personal or emotional connection for you during your experience? Locals vs. tourists?

12. How important was the artwork to your experience at the Gardner Museum?

Perceptions of the Museum

We've talked a lot about your specific experience at the Gardner Museum on [insert date]. My last few questions are more generally about the museum itself.

13. Imagine that a friend or co-worker asked you to tell them about the Gardner Museum – they've heard of it before, but have never been and don't know anything about it. What would you say?

14. How is the Gardner Museum similar to and different from other art museums you've visited?

15. What type of person do you think the Gardner Museum appeals to most, and why?

Closing Comments

Those are all of my questions. Thank you so much for sharing your personal memories and experiences with me. Your thoughts will help the Gardner Museum staff to continually improve the nature of the museum experience.

Appendix B Motivational Identities Coding Rubric

Identity	Description	Examples
Experience Seeker	Seeks experiences that are new and diverse. Visit places that are perceived as being important institutions; often visit on the recommendation of others. Visitors tend to see the experience as holistic, rather than just focused on art.	*Recommended by a colleague; Heard great things about architecture; Touring Boston; Heard it was a unique art museum; heard about it for years – well-known museum in town*
Facilitator	Seeks experiences where they can engage in meaningful interactions with others. Value places that stimulate conversation and enjoy learning about others and their interests, perspectives.	*Time we can have an opportunity to embrace ourselves in the moment and have time to talk; Granddaughter's request;*
Soul Nourisher	Seeks experiences that support quiet, personal and emotional reflection. Enjoy being able to learn about oneself and experience moments of peace and relaxation.	*Enjoy sitting in the garden and reading – my mood is really happy there; Feel like I'm going home for lunch – so serene and relaxed.*
Art Aficionado	Seeks experiences that support the increase of knowledge and understanding of art. Often prefer to talk with staff or other visitors about art and attend special programming like talks, lectures, and other specific events.	*I'm a member and teach the museum studies program – bring my students here to teach about art; Been a few times before and wanted to go back with perspective of research done on ISG*
Explorer	Seeks experiences where discovery and exploration are encouraged. Value diversity in terms of artwork and other offerings and often seek to learn or discover something new.	*Fun place to explore; Great way to spend the day – see old favorites and discover something new; curious about how the art was hung and the heist*
Reluctant Companion	Might not seek this particular experience if alone, but are going because of a friend or loved-one. Since there is not a personal motivation to visit, expectations are generally lower and more focus is placed on creature comforts like accessibility and orientation.	*Request of sister-in-law; Girlfriend is a museum studies person and wanted to go*

Appendix C Memories Coding Rubric

Master Code	Sub Code	Examples
External Conditions	Weather	Cold and wet; beautiful fall day; raining cats and dogs
	Transportation	We walked from the MFA; we took the Metro; we arrived in a taxi
	Health & Physical Comfort	I was hungry; I just had a surgery; I was cold
Service & Amenities	Crowd levels	There weren't very many people
	Staff friendliness	Security was tight; staff was friendly
	Orientation	Couldn't find bathroom; remember being lost
	Accessibility	Labeling wasn't clear; couldn't get close to objects
	Amenities	Shop was out of something; no café
	Programming	Used the gallery cards; interactive; attended an event
Artwork	Specific artwork	Flamenco dancer, portrait of ISG, letters to famous people
	Arrangement	Wasn't arranged by type or period; hung how ISG wanted it
	General art	Different rooms, Dutch room, Chapel, collection of portraits
Architecture	Courtyard & Garden	Enjoy the courtyard; beautiful views into the garden
	Other architecture	Love the fountain under the stairs; the rod iron; the building
Atmosphere & Mood	Beauty & Aesthetics	So beautiful; lovely place
	Uncanny	Different; strange; weird
	Dark	Dark
	Open & Airy	
	Serious, austere	It is a serious place; the rooms were very austere
	Sensory	Shadows casted on the stones; warmth of the building after being outside
Personal Feelings	Awe & Wonder	
	Curiosity, Adventure, Mystery	Curious about things – childlike; like a mystery
	Intimate & Personal	Felt like I was in someone's house; Feels like going home for lunch
	Calm & Peaceful	Relaxed, peaceful
	General positive	Enjoying myself; content; happy
	Transported in time, space	Felt like in another time; you can pretend you live there
Conversations with others	N/A	Nice spending time with someone; Friend I was with really enjoyed the marriage chest
Life of ISG	N/A	Fact about the interaction between the will and the stuff in curation; Finding out that she was depressed

Appendix D Values Coding Rubric

Master Code	Examples
Socially connect with others	It was very nice to share a cultural experience with someone that you normally don't get to do. It was a good shared experience
See, do, learn something new	It is a place that you can go and never get enough of it – you go and go again. (…) There is so much in there and even if you think you've seen everything there, there is always more. There is always something to discover.
Add something positive to daily life - change routine	Just the peace. The sense of taking a deep breath and getting away from work and appreciate something other than work. Seeing something that is a chance to have an uplifting feel to it (…). It adds something to my daily life.
Connect with prior interests	I might be a lawyer. It is not always fun, but maybe I could be a lawyer for a museum for stuff I like, like art.
Not sure/can't remember	I'm not sure I can't say one thing or another
Not asked	This question was skipped / left unanswered

Appendix E Additional Trends

The Unchanging Nature of the Gardner's Collection

Visitors tended to be split on their reactions to the fact that most of the Gardner's collection will never change. Many people found the idea of revisiting the same artworks many times to be comforting –as something that adds to the feelings of intimacy, familiarity, and coziness. Some of these people also saw the unchanging nature of the collection as creating opportunities to go further in-depth and explore and discover something new each time. In opposition - some visitors indicated that they would be less likely to view the artwork multiple times, and if they did return to the Gardner, it would be for a specific reason, such as research or to participate in special events. These opposing viewpoints are captured in the following quotes:

Set collection creates sense of familiarity and allows for in-depth discovery

I notice different things every time I am in there.

It's fun to go back to the Gardner – there is always something new that I find. I go to different places and revisit places. There is so much to see and so much information.

I love the letters. I don't care how many times I've read them. I pick up the George Washington letter or Abigail Adams! I guess it's almost a fetish.

There are these pieces that are very meaningful to me. I can look and learn and see things that I may not have seen before, or seen but haven't thought about in a while. And I can go back to see them because it always has the same work up. It's enjoyable to find an old friend, to learn something and look closely each time. That can create a relationship with the piece. That's the real strength of the museum.

I look from every opening in the courtyard and see something new every time. I noticed the urn that is laying down. I hadn't noticed that in forever!

I remember feeling that I keep wanting to go back. You feel like you can understand it better because you know what will be there, even if it is slightly different. It's a place where you keep going back because it still feels familiar.

Set collection drives specific visits

I don't go to see the collection that often because I've seen it many times. I wouldn't just go there without a purpose; I'm not that type of person. I go specifically for something or to take my students there, usually for a specific reason.

If I went back again, I wonder if I would have to do the same audio tour? I would see that as a negative. I wouldn't go back if not because the other stuff wasn't as accessible.

In many ways, you visit just once because it's restrained in its exhibition. So I wouldn't offer to take someone more than once, unless it was for a special performance or event.

I wouldn't go back to the Gardner by myself again. I am not the kind of person that likes to do the same thing twice.

My impression is that the collection is set and I guess they aren't brining in outside stuff, meaning that you would be going back to see the same pieces so it can be rewarding, but also has drawbacks. I am hoping to come back to some of the events.

Arrangement of Artwork: Personal Touch verses Group Consensus

Most visitors enjoyed the fact that the Gardner collection was amassed and hung according to the wishes of one, eccentric person. They saw this as a major contrast to other museums whose collections are generally amassed over time by groups of art collectors, curators, and trustees. Some of these quotes include:

The way that they are arranged to just how Isabella Stewart Gardner wanted them, not in sequential or thematic order… I love that.

I really like that they lived with it, instead of like in other museums where it's hung by other people who are experts. You can see how people were intimate with the art.

I really felt like I was in someone's home rather than just a museum. It was cool and you could appreciate the way she felt about art and why that was important to her and it's sort of like a gift from her in a way, which was probably her intention.

There is more of a character to it than other museums. It's that it's the founder's character, it's their unique vision, it's different than with other museums when the staff changes, or the group decides.

It's nice to have that place to go that is unique and not so impersonal like the MFA, more of an experience than just the art. The MFA feels like more of a corporate business, where you don't know how it began like you do with the Gardner. [At the MFA] the pieces are there because of a business transaction, things are set up by committees, there's more advertising. The MFA is bigger, just a standard museum. You could go to an art museum in a different county and it would be the same.

At [other art museums] it is a cooperation of different people to present art to the public. This [Gardner] is mostly one person who did this for our viewing pleasure. It's much more personal, as opposed to "public education."