

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Audio Guide
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Producer: Sandy Goldberg, sgscripts

Stops and speakers:

New Wing

1st floor

Stop 1	Introduction to Isabella	Peggy Fogelman
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Historic building or Palace

1st floor

Stop 101	Courtyard	Christina Nielsen
Stop 102	Spanish Cloister	Christina Nielsen
Stop 103	Chinese Loggia	Michelle Grohe
Stop 104	Yellow Room	Pieranna Cavalchini
Stop 105	Blue Room	Casey Riley
Stop 106	Macknight Room	Pieranna Cavalchini

2nd floor

Stop 201	Early Italian Room	Nat Silver
Stop 202	Raphael Room	Christina Nielsen
Stop 203	Short Gallery	Nat Silver
Stop 204	Little Salon	Steve Locke
Stop 205	Tapestry Room	Christina Nielsen
Stop 206	Dutch Room	Christina Nielsen

3rd floor

Stop 301	Veronese Room	Nat Silver
Stop 302	Titian Room	Nat Silver
Stop 303	Long Gallery	Christina Nielsen
Stop 305	Gothic Room	Christina Nielsen

Stop 1: Introduction to Isabella

Before you begin: Who was Isabella Stewart Gardner?

Hello, I'm Peggy Fogelman, the museum's Director, and I'm so glad you're here today. Before you begin your visit, let me tell you a bit about Isabella Stewart Gardner and her vision for this museum.

Who was Isabella Stewart Gardner? At a time when expectations for women in Boston society were quite rigid and traditional, Isabella was a radical visionary with a civic purpose: to give a diverse public the experience of art in every form.

She was raised in a prosperous family in New York City. At age twenty in 1860 she married Jack Gardner, of the socially prominent Gardner family in Boston. Together, they traveled the world—visiting Europe, as well as many countries including Egypt, Cambodia, and Japan. Isabella's favorite place was Venice, Italy, where she visited many museums and houses that inspired her.

Isabella believed that art has the power to change lives. She dedicated herself to collecting the best works she could find and personally arranging them in a very unique way. When you visit the museum today, you will experience Isabella's vision. In keeping with her legacy, it's displayed just the way she intended, and it's dedicated, in her words, for: "the education and enjoyment of the public, forever."

I'll take a minute to orient you: The glass-enclosed section of the building, with the front door, is the museum's new wing - by the Italian architect Renzo Piano. It opened in 2012. Its transparency is meant to be a signal of welcome: to you, and to the community around us – and to create connections between art, and landscape. As you'll soon see, Isabella created her original building around a centralized courtyard that blooms all year long. We call her building "The Palace". You'll enter it through a glass corridor that's part of the new addition.

The exterior of Isabella's "Palace" is plain, undecorated brick. It's not 'palace'-like at all. At the time her building was going up, just around the year 1900, the Boston press wondered: "What is Mrs. Gardner building?" She wanted it to be a surprise. It's really a unique museum: very personal in terms of its collections, and the way they're displayed. It's an immersive place that will probably feel very different from other museums you've visited. The whole museum is Isabella's work of art. I am awed by the bold thinking and determination it must have taken to create this extraordinary place—something Isabella did on her own, and at a time when women didn't even have the vote!

This tour takes you on a journey through each of the rooms marked on the map. My colleagues will point out some of our favorite objects, and tell stories about Isabella Stewart Gardner herself. I think you'll be surprised too. Enjoy!

Stop 101: Courtyard

I'm Christina Nielsen, Curator of the Collection – but before I tell you about this fabulous courtyard, I'll keep quiet for a moment. Just begin to soak it in. Move forward along the edge of it, or even around it – especially if there are other people clustered at the beginning. Take a seat on one of the stone benches if you like.

The music you're hearing is from Mozart's 'The Magic Flute.' Isabella Stewart Gardner had an orchestra playing this piece on the opening night of her museum. When I have people with me who are visiting for the first time, I tell them to look at the courtyard from bottom to top. I think it shows Isabella's journey through time. The bottom level is like an ancient sculpture garden. In the middle is a Roman mosaic. That mosaic has an electrifying image of a head of Medusa at the very center. She's a mythological creature whose gaze could turn men to stone. Now let your eyes take in the ancient Greek and Roman sculptures surrounding it. They're all female statues. Isabella was a champion of "female causes." She said that women's education was the key to the 20th century.

Looking upwards, the pink stucco walls, and the windows, recall a Renaissance palace in Venice, Italy. Isabella had a love affair with Venice. She had a house there, and she wanted to bring some of the magic of a place where buildings seemed to float on water, filled with beautiful things, to America, a young country that she said was in need of art. That was her mission.

Now, about the plants: you might be surprised that every one of them is growing in a pot! In order to protect the works of art, there's a UV (ultraviolet) light filter over the skylight – making it impossible for plants to thrive here. So, many of the plants are replaced every week. And then, about every six weeks, the entire horticultural design is changed. The glass roof was part of Isabella's original design; it was cutting edge technology at the time.

Before you move on from the courtyard, I want to make an important point: this building was never Isabella's house. That's a common misconception. She always meant it to be a museum. She did, however, create a small apartment for herself on the top floor. Look up and imagine her leaning out of one of those upper-level windows and shouting—as she did—to the workman below; exact orders for every tiny detail.

By the time this building was complete, she was in her 60s. It was the year 1902: the dawn of a new century. She spent the next year installing her collection in it. In her will, she wrote that nothing in the way she installed it could be permanently altered. So what

you're experiencing today is Isabella's vision. And part of that vision is the lighting—which many visitors first experience as a bit low, compared to the bright lights that are common in museums today. Just take a few moments to let your eyes adjust, and Isabella's vision will reveal itself...

Stop 102: Spanish Cloister

Let's move towards that huge painting under the scalloped arches, at one end of the room. Doesn't it feel like it's pulling us in? And do you hear that music? It's Isabella's favorite flamenco record, and it was a gift from the artist who made this painting: John Singer Sargent. The dancer swirls her skirts and stamps her feet as the men sing and play guitar. The shape of the dancer's shadow against the wall has always reminded me of a whirlwind. Sargent titled the painting 'El Jaleo' – which means... 'The Ruckus'!

Sargent and Gardner were close friends. He was one of the contemporary artists she promoted; in fact, he sometimes used one of the galleries upstairs as a studio. Her friendships with artists is one of the important stories of this museum. So is her relationship with music. I think that all those instruments in the painting must've delighted her.

If you're up close to the painting, take a few steps back from the alcove.

The arches over the painting, and the columns holding up the arches, relate to Spanish architecture. Take a few steps further back, and look at the wall on your right. It's embedded with hundreds of gorgeous patterned tiles. They're from a Mexican church.

Everything around the painting is part of Isabella's installation. As you begin your journey in the museum, it's important to know that Isabella designed it as an immersive environment. She didn't leave writings about why she put certain things together, or set up the rooms the way she did. But she did say that she wanted to create an emotional response, rather than an intellectual one. She wanted to give her visitors a unique museum experience. That's why there aren't conventional labels in this museum. She wanted you to find your own meanings.

Turn around now, so your back is to the painting, and start making your way slowly towards the other end of this long space. Feel the uneven stones under your feet. Let your eyes bounce around. There's so much to see in every space of the museum, and it's impossible to take in every detail. So let me give you some advice: In each room, spend a little time 'zooming in', looking closely at something that captures your immediate attention. Then move back and consider it in relationship to things that are near it, or what it's facing across the room. You'll start to see relationships - maybe ones that were Isabella's intentions, or maybe ones that have come from your own experience. That's the personal kind of response Isabella wanted you to have.

Stop 103: Chinese Loggia

Welcome to this long, narrow space, the “Chinese Loggia.” I’m Michelle Grohe, the museum’s Curator of Education, and I wanted to show you why this is one of my favorite galleries in the museum. It’s a transitional space, between the interior, and the outdoors. That’s what ‘loggia’ means: an enclosed terrace. But it’s also a transition between cultures. Let me show you what I mean: position yourself so that you’re somewhere in the middle of the space; maybe near the steps you took up into it. Face the wall of windows. Now turn your head to the left – and look at the far end. There’s a Medieval Madonna and Child statue there. Now turn your head the other way. Near that end, there’s a large Buddha carving, on a base. I think Isabella placed these two largest objects in this gallery – one Christian, one Buddhist - facing each other so that they could be in visual dialog with one another. And now look beyond the Buddha: at the very end, she installed a mirror! That places you – your reflection – within that cultural conversation.

Let’s move towards the Buddha. It was made for a Chinese emperor, around the year 500. The huge inscription on the base tells us that. The larger figures flanking the Buddha – with the crown, to the left, and the one on the right, missing its crown - are Bodhisattvas. Those are enlightened beings who choose to remain on earth to help others.

I like to show visitors the back of this carving too. Move around it to take a look: towards the bottom of the main part are dragons with wings. Wonderful creatures! The carver included the clouds that dragons fly in, as patterns on their bodies. They’re supposed to be ferocious guardian figures, but I find them kind of sweet. Children who visit this gallery love them.

Did you notice those stairs behind you? During Isabella’s lifetime they led to a private space that she used for meditation. She called it her ‘Buddha Room’. Above the stairs, in corner on the right, is a seated figure. It has a masculine face and chest, but the clothing and jewelry are female. It’s a 12th century Bodhisattva of Compassion – a deity which is often shown with gender fluidity. It’s to teach us that compassion is both male and female.

Now, let’s turn and move slowly towards the Madonna statue. On your way, go to the second set of windows after the doorway. On the windowsill, there’s a sculptural fragment - without arms or legs. It’s a torso of an ancient Roman god of the forest. He’s presenting an abundance of fruits. It’s one of the very few objects in the museum that

Isabella's husband Jack bought. It always makes me smile because it looks like the god is presenting a bouquet of flowers. Jack bought it as a gift for Isabella.

Now let's move to the Madonna statue. As she's nursing, she grasping her baby's foot. On the underside of the baby's robe you can see that there's a lot of the original paint remaining. It helps us see how lifelike this statue would've looked in a French church, in about the year 1300. Any mother in that church would've been able to relate to this loving, human vision of Mary.

Just to the right of the statue, peer through the glass, into the next space. A Spanish knight, carved in alabaster, is laid out before us. It's as if he's on his deathbed. I love the detailed textures: including the ribbons on his shoes. And that chain mail!

Isabella created this small chapel as a memorial to her son Jackie, who died when he was two years old. When she died in 1924, age 84, her body was laid out for viewing alongside the knight.

Stop 104: Yellow Room

Hello, I'm Pieranna Cavalchini; as the museum's Curator of Contemporary Art, I wanted to be the one to show you around this room because it's filled with art of Isabella's own time. For her, it was contemporary art. Music, and musicians, are definitely a theme here too. Let's start at the long low case that's on the same wall as the doorway into the room.

The painting above the case, in the middle, is a portrait of the composer and violinist Charles Martin Loeffler, a great friend of Isabella's. John Singer Sargent made this painting as a birthday gift to Isabella, because she was such a fan of Loeffler's music. That's the music we're using for our 'soundtrack' in this room.

In the case just below Loeffler's portrait is a plaster cast of his hand. He's holding the neck of a violin. This case is filled with Isabella's 'musical momentos'. In the right hand side, there are different versions of a program for a concert she hosted. There's one with spectacles and a blue book. Another has a bird. It really says something to me that she would spend the time to make different designs for the same concert, for individual guests.

To the right of the case, move to the painting that's next to the window. As the lovers kiss, an angel with huge wings is playing a musical instrument. At first glance you might think this is a Medieval work. But it's late 19th century! It's an example of a British style of the time known as 'Pre-Raphaelite'. Keep this painting in mind, and for a contrast, turn directly around. The painting next to the window on that wall is my favorite in this room. It's mostly blue-grey in tone. It's by James McNeill Whistler. Look slowly at it; as your eyes adjust you'll see more of the landscape. Whistler was part of a different art movement of the time, whose slogan was 'art for art's sake'. The idea – ridiculed by the Pre-Raphaelites – was that art doesn't have to convey any narrative. Like music, painting can exist purely as a sensual experience. It's fascinating to me that Isabella placed these two works from competing art movements of her time directly opposite each other. They're quite literally 'facing off.'

The last painting I want to show you in this room is by Henri Matisse. To find it, as you're facing the Whistler, turn right. There's a short wall in front of you, with a door. On the upper right corner of that wall is a painting with a bright blue sky. There's an arching plant in the foreground. Matisse's wife is sitting in the shadows, in a patterned kimono. Isabella didn't buy this work. A friend gave it to her, to encourage her to appreciate Matisse as a new artist. As she got older Isabella bought less art because she was

creating a fund to support the future of her museum. It allows this truly unique place to be what it is today. With everything preserved correctly. And still a home, and a beacon for, contemporary art.

Stop 105: Blue Room

Hello, I'm Casey Riley; as Consulting Curator, I work with Isabella Stewart Gardner's personal archives. And this room is full of objects that reveal her personal relationships. Many of the paintings on the walls were created by her closest friends. She installed these alongside decorative arts, furniture, and textiles, as well as letters and photographs from her friends. Throughout the museum, she delighted in connecting her everyday life with extraordinary objects.

Now, turn towards the wall with two windows. Between the windows, there's a wall jutting out. Just in front of it, there's a metal lantern hanging from the ceiling. It's in the shape of a boat. Let's meet there; pause your device if you need time to maneuver your way over.

I wanted to point out something just under that boat lantern. Do you see the little round portrait, in the ornately carved frame? It's Isabella! I thought you'd like to meet her face-to-face. Her friend Anders Zorn drew this in Venice—see how her blue eyes sparkle! I think it captures her legendary charisma. Now, facing Isabella's portrait, move just slightly to the left, just around the half-wall. There's a case there, under the large painting. We have to keep it covered because Isabella's mementos inside are sensitive to light. She arranged her cases very carefully: curating her life alongside her collection of art. Lift the cover, and you'll see a photograph of a young man in profile, with long, curling hair. He's Bernard Berenson, one of Isabella's art advisors. She supported Berenson's education when he was quite young, about the age pictured here; he later became a close friend. Isabella had a number of expert advisors - critics, art historians, and dealers - who helped her to amass her collection.

Now, look at the photo of the woman in this case, in the right corner. Her hair is neatly coiffed, and she looks determined. She's the social reformer and champion of women's rights, Julia Ward Howe. We can't always make specific connections between what Isabella put in a given case and a nearby work of art. But I do see a connection here! With that big painting on the wall just above it! It shows us newly emancipated, unchaperoned women, on public transportation in Paris.

Now, replace the cover if others aren't looking in the case, and I'll point out one more thing in this room. From this painting, turn to your right and look across the gallery. You'll see a low bookcase near the doorway. That bookcase is filled with volumes by authors Isabella knew personally. You'll see bookcases throughout the museum. Collecting rare books and manuscripts was Isabella's 'gateway' to collecting art.

In addition to works by friends, Isabella filled the Blue Room with contemporary art of her own time. She was a keen supporter of living artists – and musicians. You can find more examples of this in the room next to this one, called the Yellow Room.

Stop 106: Macknight Room

Hello, I'm Pieranna Cavalchini, Curator of Contemporary Art. I love this room because to me it's the place where I can most feel Isabella's presence. She put things in here that were all about her friendships – especially with artists. During the later years of her life, it functioned as her office. Her desk is here, between the windows. It's so lovely to her personal things still on it. She named this room for her dear friend, the artist Dodge Macknight. There are many works by him in this room. If you turn to the wall to the right of her desk, you'll see one over the doorway. It's a watercolor of the Grand Canyon. On his travels, he often advised and assisted Isabella with her collecting.

Isabella was a great supporter of women artists – and writers – of her time. Next to the doorway is a bookcase. Inside the bookcase are works by some women writers of her acquaintance. You can peruse the titles if you like. The bronze bust on top of the bookcase is by Anna Coleman Ladd. She's a really fascinating sculptor because her work crossed boundaries into the medical sphere. During World War I, she was a pioneer in making facial prosthetics for wounded soldiers. We can see her sensitive rendering of the face of her female subject here.

Next to the bust is a portrait of a woman enveloped in white. It's Isabella. John Singer Sargent made this watercolor late in her life, after she had a stroke. Looking closely at it, it always seems to me like she's looking beyond: beyond death. There's something eternal about her shrouded pose. Sargent himself stayed in this room from time to time, because it also functioned as a guest room for visiting artists. Today, the Museum continues to support contemporary artists through a unique Artist in Residence Program. Like Sargent, artists are invited to stay in the Museum, now in apartments located in the New Wing.

Oh, and just a quick mention of the small space you'll enter if you go through the doorway underneath that watercolor of the Grand Canyon. It's full of quirky objects, including Isabella's travel journals. It's a kind of three-dimensional scrapbook. She called it her 'Vatichino' – or 'little Vatican'.

Stop 201: Early Italian Room

Hi, I'm Curator Nat Silver, and in this space I feel transported to Italy during the 1300s and 1400s, the early Renaissance. Move into the center of this room, and let your eyes take a sweep around. There's a profusion of Christian devotional paintings with gold backgrounds. They would have glittered in the candlelit churches of the time - to evoke heaven on earth. Position yourself with your back to the big fireplace. To the right of the doorway you're facing, is a non-Christian masterpiece. That very large, semi-nude figure, is Hercules. The only clothes he's wearing is the skin of the lion he's killed as one of his labors, or tasks. He's carrying the club he used to do it. The artist Piero della Francesca made this as a wall painting – or fresco - for his own home. See the way Hercules stands with his hand on his hip? Try it yourself! For me it feels like a confident, stylish swagger. I think it's an appropriate kind of image that an artist with many accomplishments already under his belt would've created for his own décor, as a kind of stand-in for himself.

At this time in Italy, people celebrated Roman, pagan heroes, like Hercules as well as Christian ones. We'll find an Early Christian hero – also on a big scale – by looking past the doorway and turning to the wall on the left. Move to the huge panel painting with a pointed top that's almost touching the ceiling. It's between two windows, and it has hanging panels of cloth extending in front of it.

This is St. Anthony. He was a hero to Early Christian hermits because he's the founder of western monasticism. He also founded a monastic order. The long thin staff he's holding is actually a crutch. Anthony was considered to have healing powers, and most of the hospitals in Western Europe through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were dedicated to him. The throne he's sitting on is covered by a magnificent piece of silk cloth. It's embroidered with all sorts of animals and vegetable patterns that are just so wonderful! I think Isabella must've thought so too – because look what she placed underneath the painting. That textile is a deacon's garment - from about the same time as the painted version - with similar patterns.

Now I want to show you a painting in this room that's easy to miss - and I wanted to make sure you didn't – because it's one of my favorite works in the collection. Move to the window to that's to the far left of St. Anthony – the one without the table and chair in front of it. Now, turn to your left. Do you see that narrow section of wall, with two paintings? We'll look at the one on top. It has two episodes within the painting, divided horizontally. Across the bottom we see the Virgin Mary laid out on her deathbed, shrouded in blue. She's surrounded by the Apostles. The artist Fra Angelico has

brought these figures to life. The man at Mary's feet, dressed in pink, grabs hold of the poles sticking out her support. He points to the man positioned at Mary's head as if to say 'Are you ready to lift?' There's a sense of imminent movement. And then, in scene, above it, the Virgin is now spiraling up into heaven, with the movement of the angels around her. To the accompaniment of the music that they're playing on their instruments. Quite a performance! Isabella often placed her favorite paintings next to windows, for better lighting. That's why it's here in this corner.

As you move out of this corner, I have one more thought to share: Before Isabella made this her Early Italian Room, it was her 'Chinese Room'. You can still see some Asian objects here. There's one I especially like, which is just to the right of the Hercules fresco. On the windowsill, you can find a little pigeon!

It's a Japanese roof tile. The bird is peering into the courtyard, enjoying the view. It's one of the small, humorous touches Isabella tucked into her spaces. She always wanted to surprise us.

Stop 202: Raphael Room

I'm Christina Nielsen, Curator of the Collection. As we move into this room, it's like we're transported to an Italian noble home, in the period known as the High Renaissance. The first impression you might have is ... the color red! It's very red. The museum has just recently completed a total renovation of this room, and the objects in it – bringing it back to Isabella's original, very bold, vision.

Let's start by moving towards the set of three pointed windows that look out into the courtyard. In front of them, there's a large marble bowl, on a pedestal. Two animals are perched on it. This object encapsulates a theme of the room: which is the rediscovery of Roman and Greek antiquities in the Renaissance. The bowl itself is ancient Roman – but the animals aren't. Look inside the bowl to see where Renaissance artisans cut out a piece of marble on each side to attach the 17th century animals. The bowl is the Renaissance imagining of antiquity; just like this room – and this building – are Isabella's imagining of a Renaissance palace.

Now, facing the windows to the courtyard, turn to your left. Move toward the large horizontal painting that's just to the right of the doorway you're facing now. It's by the great Italian master, Sandro Botticelli – and it's one of the most action-packed paintings in the museum. It depicts The Tragedy of Lucretia, which was a famous story in ancient Rome, that was popular in the Renaissance. In the section on the left you see the virtuous wife Lucretia, dressed in green. Her hands are up as she's spurning the advances of the son of a Roman tyrant. He tells her that if she doesn't sleep with him, he will kill her and her male servant - and leave their dead bodies together, as if they had been having an affair. She concedes to avoid the disgrace to her family.

On the other side of the painting, to the far right, she's drooping over, collapsed in grief, as she tells her family what happened. In the center of this almost stage-like space, we see her dead body, with the dagger from her suicide sticking out of it. According to the story, Lucretia's death inspired the overthrow of the tyrannical ruler, and led to the founding of the Roman Republic. I feel as though I can almost hear those soldiers cries of grief as I look at their gestures.

The format of the painting – and the subject matter of the virtuous woman – tell us that this painting was probably made for a Italian noblewoman's bedroom. Isabella bought the painting at the same time as the wooden chest she placed beneath it. It's a wedding chest. A bride would use it to bring her prized possessions to her new home. Peek inside...at that gorgeous 18th century Italian guitar.

This guitar is too delicate to play, but, coincidentally, there's another guitar by this same maker in the collection of the MFA (Museum of Fine Arts), Boston – and that one can be played. That's the music you've been hearing in this room. Lovely, isn't it?

Now, let's move along the same wall that Lucretia is on, to the left. At the other end of this wall, next to the window, there's a man dressed in red.

This is the painting Isabella named this room after – and a work that she really triumphed over being able to acquire. It was the first painting by the great Italian master of the High Renaissance – Raphael – to be brought to America. Quite a coup! It's Raphael's portrait of his friend, Count Tomasso Ighirami, who was known as a great orator and writer. He worked in the Vatican Library. Tomasso had one weak eye, and in this pose he's looking up, skyward, as though he's getting divine inspiration as he's writing. The position somewhat masks his eye condition.

Now, turn around. Let your eyes sweep around this room. It's one of the clearest examples of how Isabella conceived of entire rooms as works of art. The textiles add a variety of sensual textures. Throughout the room, there are all sorts of thematic layers and visual conversations. Let me show you just one more. Go back towards the marble bowl with the animals on it. To the right of the bowl, just past the windows, there's marble foot on top of a cabinet. And now look just to the right – facing the foot is painting of the Madonna and child. The infant Jesus gazes up at his mother as she... cradles his foot! It's a usual gesture of motherly love which clearly resonated with Isabella. I think she placed the marble foot next to it so we'd notice it too.

Stop 203: Short Gallery

Hi, I'm Curator Nat Silver. Here in the Short Gallery I'll try to keep it 'short'- but it's a challenge because there are so many wonderful things here! You may have entered through any of the doorways, so to get oriented, move towards the window. As you're approaching the window, look to the wall on your left. Near the ceiling is portrait of Isabella. She's wearing a hat with a netted veil, and holding a book. This captures her passion for books, and reminds us that she collected books and manuscripts, before she began collecting paintings. There's another portrait of her nearby – you can see it by turning directly around. That's her in the painting, the woman wearing white, with her arms outstretched. Her friend, the artist Anders Zorn painted her in Venice. She's wearing a tremendously long string of pearls, which was her signature piece of jewelry. Over her shoulder we see a flash of fireworks. She's stepping back into the house, from a terrace overlooking the Grand Canal. She's welcoming you into her world, her museum; which is a vision inspired by Venice. The painting just to the left, the man in profile, with a hat and cane, is a portrait of her husband Jack. Moving a bit to the right of the painting of Isabella, you'll see a bookcase. These were her art history books. When it came to art, she was largely self-taught. Across the bottom shelf are volumes of 'The Renaissance in Italy'.

Moving past the doorway, there's a series of wooden panels. This is a treasure trove of drawings. Each panel is four layers deep. I want to show you one work in particular. Open the first panel on the left, next to the doorway. Within the first layer, on the left side, look at the work that's second from the top. We see Mary supporting the dead body of Christ in her lap. It's a magnificent image by... Michelangelo! For me, the details are so intensely moving, and so indicative of Michelangelo's own intensely religious belief. He draws this moment after Christ's death on the cross, with Mary looking up, as if asking 'why?' Above Mary's head he writes a passage from Dante: "they do not know how much blood it costs." It's such a profound image of physical loss, and emotional suffering.

If you open the panels behind the Michelangelo you'll find a cluster of works on paper by Matisse. Explore all the panels. Isabella designed them this way so that you can make your own discoveries. In 1990, the Gardner Museum was the site of a terrible theft. The thieves stole a number of drawings by the 19th century French artist Edgar Degas from these cases.

Stop 204: Little Salon

Hi, I'm Steve Locke; I'm an artist who deeply loves this museum. I've been an Artist in Residence here, and I've also taught at the Massachusetts College of Art. When I've brought my students to this museum – which I have, often – I always spend a lot of time with them in this room in particular. Let me show you why.

From wherever you are, turn to the wall with the two sets of windows. Move towards the windows on the left. Do you see that cut-out figure standing there in front of it, on the floor? She's next to the fireplace. She's holding a little dog, and a fruit basket. She's a fire screen. That notion that a painting isn't necessarily a thing on a wall is essential to Mrs. Gardner's collection. It's such a great lesson for art students. Look at the woodwork on the walls, for example. Each corner of the room has curving panels. Other tall panels are in between. They all have wonderful arrangements of three-dimensional sculpted, carved flowers and vines, set against painted versions of the same thing. A lot of the furniture in the room is both carved and painted too.

The whole room has this immersive feeling, as if we're inside a single work of art. So much of the visual effect here depends upon copying something natural, and re-creating it an over-the-top and unnatural way. And then we notice: the tapestries! Each one depicts a formal garden. Like the flowers on the walls, the gardens in the tapestries show us nature as intentionally constructed, and managed. The arrangements of the garden plants in formal gardens are consciously artificial.

That idea of prizing aesthetics over nature has a lot to do with the sensibilities of Mrs. Gardner's circle of friends. Aesthetes, or 'confirmed bachelors', as many of the men among them were called at the time. As a gay man, this sensibility resonates with me historically. And I see it throughout her collection. That's one of the things that I love about this museum, and why I think it's so valuable for art students, for everyone really: the lack of traditional labels allows each of us to project ourselves – with our own backgrounds and ways of seeing – into its world. And to use this museum as our own source of creative inspiration.

Stop 205: Tapestry Room

You might have an immediate sense of the difference of this big space, from the rooms you've just come through. It's less like an art gallery and, to me, more like a European noble hall. The walls and ceiling are wooden panels.

Isabella created this room to house the set of monumental tapestries all around you. At the time these were made, tapestries – intricately woven from fine silk threads – were the most expensive art objects of their day. They were considered far more important than any painting or sculpture. They also provided insulation on cold walls – and they could be rolled up and carried from one sumptuous interior to another.

To get you oriented in this space, from wherever you are, stop and notice that one end of this huge room has a fireplace. The other doesn't. Let's meet at the end without the fireplace. Remember, you can always pause your device if you need more time.

Now, with your back at the wall at this end of the gallery, stand so the table with the red cloth is in front of you, and you're facing the fireplace at other far end of the space. Now, look immediately to your left. That's the tapestry I want to show you. It's one of a series of five tapestries about an ancient Persian King, Cyrus the Great, that's in this room. Cyrus is the young man in the center, wearing very fashionable red tights, held up by ribbons. He's gesturing to the man who approaches him, holding a dead rabbit. Inside the rabbit is a secret letter to Cyrus, encouraging him to revolt against his grandfather and seize control of the Persian Empire. Instead of looking like a Persian king though, Cyrus is wearing the height of European fashion during the time this was made: the 16th century.

Now, move past the window to the right of this tapestry. We're going to the nearby painting of the fashionable woman, above the desk. We know that Isabella loved and collected textiles; and she was surely was taken with this woman's outfit. What a headpiece! Her green robe is edged with pearls. You know, this portrait has always reminded me a little bit of Isabella herself. The subject of this portrait – a woman not only fashionable, but fiercely determined – must've appealed to her. This is Saint Engracia, an early Christian martyr. She's holding a tall palm leaf, symbolizing martyrdom. In her other hand – despite the calm of her face, and the emphasis on finery – she's holding the spike that was driven through her skull when she wouldn't denounce her belief.

From this painting, turn to your right. We're going to the wall across the room, towards the windows looking down into the courtyard. On that wall, go to the right of the windows. There are four cases, covered with cloths. Of these four cases, look at the first case on the left. Lift the cloth to see another collecting interest of Isabella's: Islamic manuscripts.

The page on the left has to do with engineering. It dates from the year 1354, and it records a design for a "candle clock." The page next to it – with the plants and charming birds – is an Arabic translation of an ancient Greek medical text. It was a guide to medicinal plants. The other three cases here also have Islamic manuscripts, including illustrations from the great Persian epic poem, the Shahnameh. Take your time perusing them, and when you're ready, let's meet at the fireplace at the other end of the room. Pause your device until you're in front of the fireplace.

The painting above the fireplace depicts Saint Michael, trampling over a demon. You can see the demon splayed out across the bottom of the painting, under the saint's feet. I really love how the Spanish artist, Benabarre, created such an imaginative hybrid creature. You can see its webbed feet. On its stomach is a second face, in red – with a gruesome yet comically smiling expression. This painting is a good example of how the meaning of an artwork can change over time. Some viewers today are troubled by the fact that the demonic figure has both black and red skin tones. And it raises, for them, troubling questions about historical representations of race.

Now, imagine the painting with a roaring fire in the fireplace beneath it! It's like Isabella's little joke; as if the fires of hell from which the demon came, are just below him. In fact, Isabella alluded to this herself, in a funny story of how – and why – she bought this painting:

As the story goes, Isabella found out that this painting was for sale, but the Deputy Director of the Harvard Art Museum got to it before she could. When she heard, she invited him to dinner - in this very room! Imagine them sitting at the dining table that's on the other side of the piano. During the course of the meal she pointed to the then empty space above the fireplace. She said to her guest "I understand you've recently bought a 15th century Spanish painting. Wouldn't it look marvelous over my fireplace?" Then, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, she picked a knife up off the dining table and jokingly implied that she might use it as a weapon if she needed to! Needless to say, he let her buy the painting.

Stop 206: Dutch Room

Come into the center of the room, and move towards the two long tables. Find a comfortable spot anywhere around, or between, them. Even though Isabella had a passion for all things Italian, it's with Dutch and Flemish art that she first made her mark as an art collector. That's what we see in this room. What we also see in this room is evidence of a collector's worst nightmare. Turn towards the wall that has two large, empty frames.

These frames held two of the thirteen works which were stolen in 1990. They were both paintings by the beloved 17th century Dutch master: Rembrandt. The paintings were cut from their frames during the robbery. The one on the left was a double portrait of a man and his wife. The one on the right was the only seascape Rembrandt ever painted. The absence of these paintings means that Isabella's original vision for this room isn't complete. I'll come back to this in a minute.

Now, look at the large portrait on the wall between them: the man in armor. It's by the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens – who ushered in a looser style to 17th century painting. For example, look at the reflections off his dazzling armor. Rubens painted those reflections with such big, bold strokes! The subject of this portrait is Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel. He's depicted as a general, but he was actually quite an unsuccessful military strategist. But he was one of the great art collectors of his time! Rubens's depiction of him in armor is probably referring to triumphs in collecting, rather than on the battlefield. And that must've been part of the appeal to Isabella; a portrait of a fellow collector. And to add to Isabella's triumph in getting it, it was the first major painting by Rubens to enter an American collection.

Now, turn directly around, to face the opposite wall. Above the doorway, there's a sculpture of a man riding a horse. Just to the right of it, move towards that young man in the feathered cap. He's looking straight out at us. This is a wonderful Rembrandt painting that is still here. It's a self-portrait the artist made at the age of 23. At that time, he was trying to make a name for himself. He's showing off his talent to prospective clients – with dramatic lighting, and so many different textures! Over his shoulder he has a jeweled chain, which captures the light with fine detail. I love how that the shadow is obscuring half his face. It invites us to look closer; and to wonder what he's thinking...

This painting is the work of art which really began this museum. Isabella had made a number of important purchases before this painting, but she kept them at her home. Acquiring this Rembrandt gave her the idea of a museum. She wrote in a letter about

the kind of collector she was now going to be; writing, quote: 'From now on I cannot afford to go after second rate works of art, I must only have first rate works of art.'

She certainly succeeded in her mission. She so carefully arranged conversations between works of art on the walls. As you look at this portrait of a young man, think about how Isabella carefully positioned him across the room from two paintings which he painted later in life. She's having this young man look out, across the room, and see an illustrious future stretching out before him. This robs us all of Isabella's complete vision.

Let's turn away from young Rembrandt now. With your back to this painting, next to the windows, there's a desk and chair a bit to the right, just ahead of you. There's another empty frame, another stolen artwork. It's the museum's missing Vermeer painting.

I'm going to show you one more object in this room; something you might not have noticed on your own. Move ahead from the desk and the empty frame, toward the tall painting of a man wearing the red cape. To the right of that painting, there's a tall wooden cabinet. There are three shelves inside. On the middle shelf, look for the tallest object. It's in the shape of an ostrich. Do you see it? If you look closely under its wing, you can see that the silver body is formed around an actual ostrich egg. It's from 17th century Germany. At the time, the egg would have been as highly prized as the fine silver around it! Because ostriches were such giant birds found only in Africa, Europeans considered them 'wonders of nature'. Objects like this were popular in European private collections that were sometimes called "cabinets of curiosities." They were precursors to museums. Having something from one of these early European collections surely appealed to Isabella's view of herself as a collector – and to the idea of forming her own museum filled with the most wondrous objects she could find.

To learn more about the story of the theft, there's a book called 'Stolen,' on the bench near the courtyard windows. There's also a feature about it on the museum's website.

Stop 301: Veronese Room

Hi, I'm Curator Nat Silver. I always think of this space as capturing Isabella's passion for the city of Venice. In Isabella's time, many Bostonians had a 'thing' about Venice – and copied its style of architecture -- because they felt a kinship with another city whose wealthiest families also had made their money in overseas trade. Look up! The ceiling painting is by Paolo Veronese. This room is named for him. In Isabella's time, he was the most popular artist associated with Renaissance Venice. For the best view of this Greek mythological scene, move near the doorway opposite the fireplace, and look up from there. Above us, in the clouds, angels fly in to put a crown of flowers on the woman clothed in blue and gold. She's Hebe, cupbearer to the gods. My eyes are always drawn to all the vibrant and luxurious textiles in the painting – which Venice was famous for, and for which Isabella really had a passion too.

Moving towards the center of the room, we get a sense of Isabella creating this space around different kinds of luxurious items made in, or traded through, Venice. The walls are covered with panels of embossed, painted and gilded leather. In Isabella's time, they would have made the walls sparkle, because the parts that appear as a sort of dull gold, or blackened – like around the fireplace – are thin sheets of silver leaf, now tarnished. They're really impossible to restore because of their delicacy.

Just to the right of the fireplace, there are two paintings. The one on the top shows famous St. Mark's Square, as it looked in the 18th century. Then, as now, the heart of Venice. The painting includes the city's political and religious headquarters and its most important church. Moving to the right, past the window, is a corner-cabinet filled with handmade lace. Isabella collected some really whimsical designs. For example, on the panel on the left, towards the bottom, there's a wonderful peacock. It's standing amidst oversized, fantastical plants. Don't forget, you can always pause this audio if you want to look a bit more; if you do that here I'm sure you'll spot some other creatures.

Now, look past the two sets of windows to the right of this lace cabinet. Tucked into the next corner of the room is a desk – with a chair pulled up to it. You can move around the table with the plates and cups – which Isabella included like a stage-set – to get a better view of the chair in particular. I wanted to point it out because it's a gondola chair. In Isabella's elderly years – when she was so sick – she was carried around the museum in this chair.

I like to think that, as she was carried along, she was imagining herself floating along the watery canals of Venice...

Stop 302: Titian Room

Hi, I'm Nat Silver, Associate Curator of the Collection, and I'll be taking you around this room. Italian Renaissance Art is my specialty, and this room has some of the museum's most important Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces.

Move toward the middle of the room and look at the furniture on the platform. You may be surprised that I'm pointing out these chairs as some of the masterpieces. They're a set from a Roman Renaissance palace, and each of them features a combination of visual effects of the furniture makers' art. The intricate wood frames, covered in gold, simulate the appearance of gilded bronze. The beautifully painted flowered panels on their backs are carved to appear puckered all along the edges. That's to imitate the look of animal skin. Isabella placed these prized chairs on a platform, with a beautiful carpet, conveying a sense of a stage, set to receive honored guests.

Now, look for the wall with the rectangular windows that look out onto the street. Between two of the windows you'll see a chair and a small table, with a painting on it. A sign that you're moving to the right place is the little vase of flowers on the table.

This was one of Isabella's favorite paintings. It's an unusually tightly framed view of Christ carrying the cross. By having Christ look directly at us, the artist, Giovanni Bellini, makes us feel part of Christ's pain. Peer in closely and you can see tears on his cheek. Isabella bought this painting soon her husband Jack, died. This table is memorial to him. In the vase she always kept fresh flowers. It's a tradition that the museum continues to this day.

Now look past this painting on the wall ahead of you - at the huge painting of a woman with bared legs. This masterpiece by the artist Titian is considered the finest Italian Renaissance painting in America – and the reason Isabella named this gallery the "Titian Room." The ancient myth that inspired the painting, in a nutshell, is this: The king of the gods, Jupiter, falls in love with Europa, a princess. In order to trick her into becoming his lover, Jupiter takes the form of a playful bull. Europa, delighted by the tame animal, places a crown of flowers on its head. At that moment, the god springs into action, carrying her off across the ocean. There's an immediacy to Titian's depiction: the splash of the water, and the red cloth waved in the air, signaling panic. But do we get a sense of an abduction... or a seduction?

When the painting first arrived from Europe into Isabella's possession, she wrote about it rapturously. My colleague Christina Nielsen will read a passage to you:

CHRISTINA NIELSEN: I am too excited to talk. I am breathless about the Europa. Drinking myself drunk with Europa, and then sitting for hours, thinking, and dreaming about her. Every inch of paint seems full of joy.

Isabella also created an amazing installation for the painting just underneath. On the table to the left, there's a bronze statuette of a boy with wings, blowing on a horn. You can tell from the little base under his feet, that he was meant to be standing upright. But Isabella turned him sideways, so his pose would match the winged baby in the corner of the painting. And did you notice the fabric panel with all the tassels? That was from one of Isabella's favorite evening gowns. I think she's making a visual link between the tassels, and the tail of the bull above.

Now, move to the right along this wall. Just on the other side of the doorway is a portrait of a standing man, wearing black. It is by the great Spanish artist, Diego Velázquez. You may be wondering why there's a Spanish painting is in a room full of Italian works of art. Well, another theme of this room is European aristocracy; and this is a portrait of the Spanish King Philip IV. Isabella Stewart Gardner was fascinated with royalty. In fact, she tried unsuccessfully to link her own family roots to Mary Stuart, also known as Mary Queen of Scots. In this portrait, Phillip is dressed in formal court attire. We know from historical sources that, when anyone came to Philip IV's court to request a favor, the king would indicate his readiness to hear them by removing his hat and placing it on a table, as we see here.

Now let's look at the sculpture next to Phillip – this wonderful bust in dark bronze: a portrait of the pope's banker. It's by Benvenuto Cellini, who, in addition to being a leading sculptor, was also the pope's goldsmith. We can see his skill in fine metalwork in the incredible handling of the details here. In particular, I love the contrast of all the textures in his clothing, with the strong curls of his impressive beard.

I want to show you one more thing in this room, that's quite different. To find it, go back towards the close-up painting of Christ on the desk, with the vase of flowers. Near to it on that wall, look for the two low, matching wood cabinets, both painted yellow. These little chests look like they have drawers on the fronts. But the front of each one is actually a solid door that swings wide open. Inside there are ... chamber pots! For going to the bathroom. Having them in this room reminds us that Isabella loved to mix high, and low. And always, to surprise us.

Oh, and a note that this room has, I think, the best view down into the courtyard. From here, the mosaic in the center of it – the Medusa – is facing us.

Stop 303: Long Gallery

This narrow space is called the “Long Gallery” - for obvious reasons. There are many cases lining it, which contain rare books, letters, and personal objects related to artists and writers – as well as to presidents and royalty. The gallery includes objects from a lot of different times and places.

I wanted to point out just a couple of things that are at the opposite end of this space from the stained glass window. Meet me at that end of the Long Gallery when you're ready.

Face the rectangular window at this end of the gallery. On your left, look for the painting of the Madonna, dressed in blue, holding the baby Jesus. A lovely young man – an angel – is with them. The work is by Sandro Botticelli, the Italian Renaissance master of delicate forms, and diaphanous fabrics. Just look at that transparent veil on the Madonna's head! And now look at what Isabella placed just underneath the painting: that wonderful piece of Islamic glass. It's a section of a 14th century mosque lamp. Its transparency – and the elegant gold and blue decorations – are perfect companions to the painting. In fact, the pseudo-writing on the Virgin's gown was inspired by inscriptions on Islamic imports into Italy, like this glass lamp. The pairing is an example of the way Isabella loved to make cross-cultural combinations. Look for those kinds of connections in this gallery, in particular.

Giving a tone of devotion to the space, is the huge stained glass window at the other end. It's from Soissons Cathedral, in northern France. Take your time moving towards it – and, when you approach it, you'll see that the area just in front of the window is actually a small consecrated chapel. Isabella was a devout Anglo-Catholic, and, in her lifetime, she used this little chapel for religious services. There's still one held here every year. It's on the date of Isabella's birthday: April 14th.

Stop 305: Gothic Room

I'm Christina Neilsen, the Curator of the Collection. Now we're in the 'Gothic Room' – named for the period of late Medieval art and architecture. The room is mainly devoted to religious art. No matter what direction you entered from, I think that the overall impression you're met with, is the play between light, coming through the round Gothic window, and the darkness of the ceiling and walls. And presiding over the space, from one of the corners of the room, is a life-size portrait of Isabella. In that wide gilded frame, she's sort of animating the room with a golden presence. Move towards her. She looks rather pleased, her mouth slightly open, as if in a kind of welcome. This portrait caused a scandal, however, when it was first shown at a private club in Boston, in the 1880s. For Victorian era Bostonians, all that radiant flesh was quite shocking. The overall approach was too modern. And yet, the painting seems to really belong in this room of medieval art! - with her figure pressed up to the surface against a background of pattern and decoration. And she's standing in front of a medieval textile; which is on display in the Long Gallery. The pattern gives her a kind of secular 'halo' and a crown! In front of the painting, she placed a large choir book – making the assemblage appear as an altar. Her signature accessory – the long pearl necklace with a ruby – is around her waist.

Do you remember the painting you probably saw on the first floor – of the flamenco dancer, near the garden courtyard? This is by the same artist, John Singer Sargent. He sometimes used this room as a studio.

Now, look to the right of the portrait – at the set of four tall, narrow windows. Just in front of the windows, there's a table covered in red cloth, with two paintings, back-to-back on it. Move to the painting that's on the side of the table facing Isabella's portrait. This wonderful Virgin and Child is by Simone Martini – a master of late Medieval painting. I wanted to point out one detail: it's in the lower right corner of the painting. Do you see that kneeling woman? She's the donor of the painting, the person who commissioned it for a church, in about the year 1325. I can't help but think that Isabella placed this work – facing her portrait – because she identified with this female art patron. And, they're both dressed in black.

Now, move around to the other painting on this table. This is such a rare treasure. It's one of just a handful of Giotto's works in North America. Giotto was the first Italian Renaissance painter that portrayed psychological realism in devotional works. To foreshadow the crucifixion, notice how the arms of the baby Jesus are opened wide. But with one hand he's grabbing at the facial hair of the man holding him – as babies do!

And with the other hand he reaches out – in a truly baby-like way – to his mother. The center of the painting is essentially empty. This work dates the same decade as the painting by Simone Martini – the 1320s. But Giotto’s somehow feels so modern.

Now, turn directly around from the Giotto painting. Move toward the wall ahead of you. Hanging on the middle of that wall, between the courtyard windows, there are three panels of figures, joined together. The figures on it come out of the surface, three-dimensionally. It’s a German Gothic altarpiece; but the divine personages are depicted as altogether human – and charmingly so. In the center we see the Virgin Mary, with her mother, who’s wearing the white head covering. The toddler Jesus between them is so squirmy! Toward the bottom, one woman breastfeeds, while another baby drinks from a German tankard; looking maybe a bit...drunk? Isabella knew a good joke when she saw one, as we’ve seen in a number of places in the museum.

I want to point out one more thing in this room. Turn around from the altarpiece, and look at the long table in the middle of the room; the one that’s covered with a cloth. At the end of it closest to you is a long metal object. It has the head of a bull, with curving horns, and hollow ears that stick out wide. It’s a weapon: a Persian mace. I couldn’t miss showing you this because it’s one of my favorite objects in the collection. When the person wielding it swung it around, the mace whistled! It’s a kind of psychological warfare, to intimidate opponents.

And it’s also a reminder of the fact that there’s so much to see in every room of this museum. Take your time and find things that delight you. That is, in the end, what Isabella wanted most.

STOP 302: ALT Titian Room (when Titian's Europa is off view)

Hi, I'm Nat Silver, Associate Curator of the Collection, and I'll be taking you around this room. Italian Renaissance Art is my specialty, and this room has some of the museum's most important Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces.

Move into the middle of the room – and you may be surprised that I'm pointing out these chairs as some of those masterpieces. They're a set from a Roman Renaissance palace, and each of them features a combination of visual effects of the furniture makers' art. The intricate wood frames, covered in gold, simulate the appearance of gilded bronze. And the flowered panels on their backs are carved to appear puckered all along their edges, to imitate animal hides, pieces of leather. Isabella placed them on a platform, conveying a stage, set to receive honored guests.

Now, look for the wall with the rectangular windows. Between two of the windows you'll see a chair and a round table, with a painting on it. A sign that you're in the right place is the little vase of flowers on the table. This was one of Isabella's favorite paintings. It's an unusually close-up view of Christ carrying the cross. By having Christ look directly at us, the artist Giovanni Bellini makes us feel part of Christ's pain. Peer in closely and you can see tears his cheek. Isabella bought this painting soon after her husband Jack died. She created a memorial to him at this table. In the vase she always kept fresh flowers. It's a tradition the museum continues to this day.

Now, let's move to the wall ahead of you. To the right of the doorway there's a sculpture – a wonderful bust in dark bronze. It's a portrait of the pope's banker, by Benvenuto Cellini, who, in addition to being a leading sculptor, was also the pope's goldsmith. We can see his skill in fine metalworking in the incredible handling of the details. I love the contrast of all the textures of his clothing, with the strong curls of his impressive beard.

Just to the left of this bust is a painting of a standing man, wearing black. It's by the great Spanish artist, Diego Velázquez. You may be wondering why there's a Spanish artist in this room full of Italian paintings. Well, another theme of this room is European aristocracy; and this is a portrait of the Spanish King Philip IV. Isabella Stewart Gardner was fascinated with royalty. In fact, she tried to connect her own family roots to Mary Stuart, also known as Mary Queen of Scots. In this portrait, Phillip is dressed in formal court attire. When anyone came to Philip IV's court to request a favor, he would indicate his readiness to hear them by removing his hat and placing it on a table next to him, as we see here.

I want to show you one more thing in this room. To find it, go back towards the close-up painting of Christ on the desk. To the left of it on that wall there are two low, matching wood cabinets, painted yellow. These little chests look like they have drawers. But the front of each one is a solid door that swings open. Inside there are...chamber pots! For going to the bathroom. Having them in this room reminds us that Isabella loved to mix high, and low. And always, to surprise us.

Oh, and a note that this room has, I think, the best view down into the courtyard. From here, the mosaic in the center of it, the Medusa, is facing us.