Isabella Gardner placed her portrait by John S. Sargent in the most prominent corner of the final gallery of the museum. Most of the other objects displayed here were made in Europe during the late medieval period, around 1300 to 1500. Her painted presence emphasizes her role as creator of the museum.

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Two Large Altars

Saint Thomas Receives the Virgin’s Girdle
Unknown Italian (Liguria) artist, about 1485
Painted and gilded wood

Altar of the Holy Kinship
German (Saxony), about 1510–20
Painted and gilded lindenwood

Each of these altarpieces is remarkably complete for its age, and together they demonstrate different forms of church altar decoration.

On the left is a polyptych (many-paneled painting) showing Saint Thomas receiving the Virgin’s girdle (a kind of belt). According to legend, Thomas was the only witness to Mary’s assumption into heaven, and Mary dropped her girdle so that he would have proof of the event.

The Altar of the Holy Kinship, between the windows, depicts the extended family of Christ. Mary, his mother, and her mother, Saint Anne, are seated in the center, holding the Christ Child; below are the two half-sisters of Mary with their six children, five of whom became apostles. The figures above in the central panel represent male relatives, with God above them. In the wings are four female saints. Representations of the Holy Kinship became popular in the late medieval period, when an emerging middle class defined their place in society through familial and political connections.

In the style of Lucas Cranach the Elder
German, 1472–1553
Adam and Eve, 16th or 17th century (?)
Oil on wood

This puzzling painting was one of the first works by an old master that Isabella Gardner purchased. She bought it in 1892 as a painting by Lucas Cranach, but since then scholars have disputed that attribution. Some say the figures may have been painted by Cranach; others feel they are too sweetly portrayed and must be by another, less-talented artist. Also, no other known Cranach paintings include such large areas of sky or landscapes that appear to recede into space, as this one does. Is this a painting begun by Cranach and then finished or reworked by a student or assistant? Or is it by a later imitator?


3. Adam and Eve. In the style of Lucas Cranach the Elder (German, 1472–1553), 16th or 17th century (?). Oil on wood.


6. Armchairs. Central Italian, about 1600. Walnut, with modern upholstery.


8. Field of Flowers (Millefleurs). Flemish, early 16th century. Tapestry; wool and silk, assembled from many fragments.


11. Plaques from a Processional Cross. Italian (Venice), about 1300. Silver, with remains of gilding. On iron lectern, French, 13th or 14th century.

12. The Trinity with Saint Catherine and a Bishop Saint. German, about 1500. Wood.


14. Two Plates. French (with fleurs-de-lys) and German. Brass.


18. Refectory Table. Italian, 16th century. Walnut.

  On the table: wood and leather, iron, and lead Boxes, French and Italian; iron Bolt; Candle Snuffer; Door Knocker; wood and mother-of-pearl Casket, Indian, 17th century; cast-iron Bull’s-Head Scepter, Iranian, late-19th century; Sermons of Johann Nider, German, about 1476–78.


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The east wall of this room is dominated by three large architectural elements. Similar objects throughout the museum add much to the overall ambience of the galleries.

**Tambour.** French, about 1500. Wood

The tambour (French for “drum”), or vestibule, may have enclosed a stairway. Woodland scenes on the panels include strange, hairy-legged wild men, which were thought to ward off evil and intruders.

**Fireplace.** Italian (Venice), 16th century. Stone

The stone fireplace has a conical hood like medieval wall fireplaces, which were vented through the ceiling rather than through a flue buried within a wall or chimney.

**Choir Stalls.**

Italian, 15th–16th century. Wood

Wooden choir stalls became standard furniture in churches about the mid-13th century. Placed on the sides of the chancel, in front of the altar, they were used by the clergy during Mass.

2. Tambour (screen for indoor porch or stairwell). French, about 1500. Wood. The bottom section of the tambour is made of two panels of a 15th-century French chest.


11. Magus (one of the Three Wise Men from the Bible). German, early 16th century. Painted wood.


15. Pennant, with coat of arms of Pope Clement VIII. Spanish (Almodóvar del Campo), about 1592–1605. Silk velvet, with linen and metallic yarns.


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Sargent painted this portrait in December 1887 and January 1888 at the Gardners’ home, 152 Beacon Street, Boston. Gardner appears as an iconic, almost religious, figure: her symmetrical posture is rigid, her arms and the strand of pearls circle her body, and the patterns on the textile behind her suggest a crown and halo.

Perhaps because of this unusual presentation, critics and viewers were shocked when the portrait was exhibited in Boston. Isabella’s husband was not pleased, and asked that it not be exhibited again. As a result, this room was closed to the public during Isabella Gardner’s lifetime—but visitors could get a glimpse of the portrait from the hall at the top of the stairs.

This painting depicts the moment when Simeon and the prophetess Anna (at the right) recognize the infant Jesus as the savior. The Christ Child reaches across the altar towards his mother in a natural gesture. Giotto’s ability to create believable space within the picture and his skill at depicting emotion made him one of the most famous artists of his time.

Isabella Gardner set the painting on a table, perpendicular to the window to get good light for viewing, with a chair placed as if a visitor could sit and contemplate the work. This arrangement occurs in other galleries, helping to focus attention and break up large spaces in the museum.


3. The Landlord and the Woodcutters. Flemish (probably Tournai), about 1510–20. Tapestry; wool and silk


5. Peasant’s Chair. Italian (Alps), 18th century. Wood

6. Virgin and Child, about 1325. Simone Martini (Italian, about 1280–1344). Tempera and gold on wood

7. The Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple, about 1320. Giotto (Italian, about 1267–1337). Tempera and gold on wood

8. Dante Chair. Italian, 16th century, with later restorations. Walnut

9. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. German (upper Rhine or Swabia), about 1490. Lindenwood

10. Two Canopy Supports: A Bearded Friar (left); Virgin and Child with Saint Anne (right). French, about 1400. Wood. Built into the sides of a modern throne.

11. The Education of the Prince of Peace. Flemish (probably Tournai), about 1525–50. Tapestry; wool and silk

12. Savonarola Chair. Italian, 19th century, with 16th century arms. Walnut

13. Table. Italian, 19th century; marble top perhaps 17th century. Wood and pink cippolino rosso marble

14. Processional Cross. Italian (Venice), about 1450. Gilded copper, on a wood core


16. Dante Chair. Italian, 19th century, in style of 16th. Walnut

17. Chandelier. German (Bavaria), 16th century. Antlers and painted wood

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John S. Sargent
American, 1856–1925

**Portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1888**
Oil on canvas

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1. **Coat of Arms of the Pisani Family.** Italian (Venice), 19th century. Iron
2. **Dominican Nun.** Italian, 17th century. Painted terracotta
3. **Saint Agnes.** Italian (Spoleto?), about 1325–50. Painted and gilded wood
4. **Credenza.** French, 19th century, in the style of the 15th century. Wood
5. **Candelabrum.** Spanish, 16th century. Wrought iron
6. **Six Stained-glass Windows:**
   - Upper pair commemorates the marriage of A. Lienhard Jöchl (left) and Dorothea Hungerhausen (right). Austrian, about 1480–90
   - Four below from Milan Cathedral. Left to right: The Vision of Saint John, about 1420; Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples, about 1480–90; two scenes from the life of Saint John of Damascus, after 1480
7. **Wheel Window.** Probably Italian, 15th century. Wood
8. **Angel Candelabra.** Italian, 15th century. Painted and gilded wood
9. **Virgin and Child.** Austrian or Northern Italian, about 1425. Painted and gilded wood
10. **Armchairs.** Northern Italian, early 17th century. Wood
11. **Chest: Virgin and Child, with Saints Claude, John, Barbara, and Nicholas.** French, about 1525. Walnut
12. **Candelabra.** Probably German, 19th century. Brass
14. **Angels holding Candlesticks.** Italian, 17th century. Painted and gilded wood
15. **Gabled Shrine with the Virgin and Child.** Italian (Veneto), 1450–1500. Painted and gilded wood
16. **Armchairs, with Crest of Albergotti Family of Arezzo.** Italian (Tuscany), about 1600. Gilded walnut
17. **Torchère.** Spanish, about 1400. Iron
18. **Credenza.** French, 19th century, in style of the 15th century. Oak
19. **Bust of a Woman.** Italian, 19th century. Painted and gilded plaster
20. **St. Agnes.** Italian (Aquila), about 1315. Painted and gilded wood