

The “Barbarous Barbaro”:

Art, Travel, and Exoticism in
Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Museum

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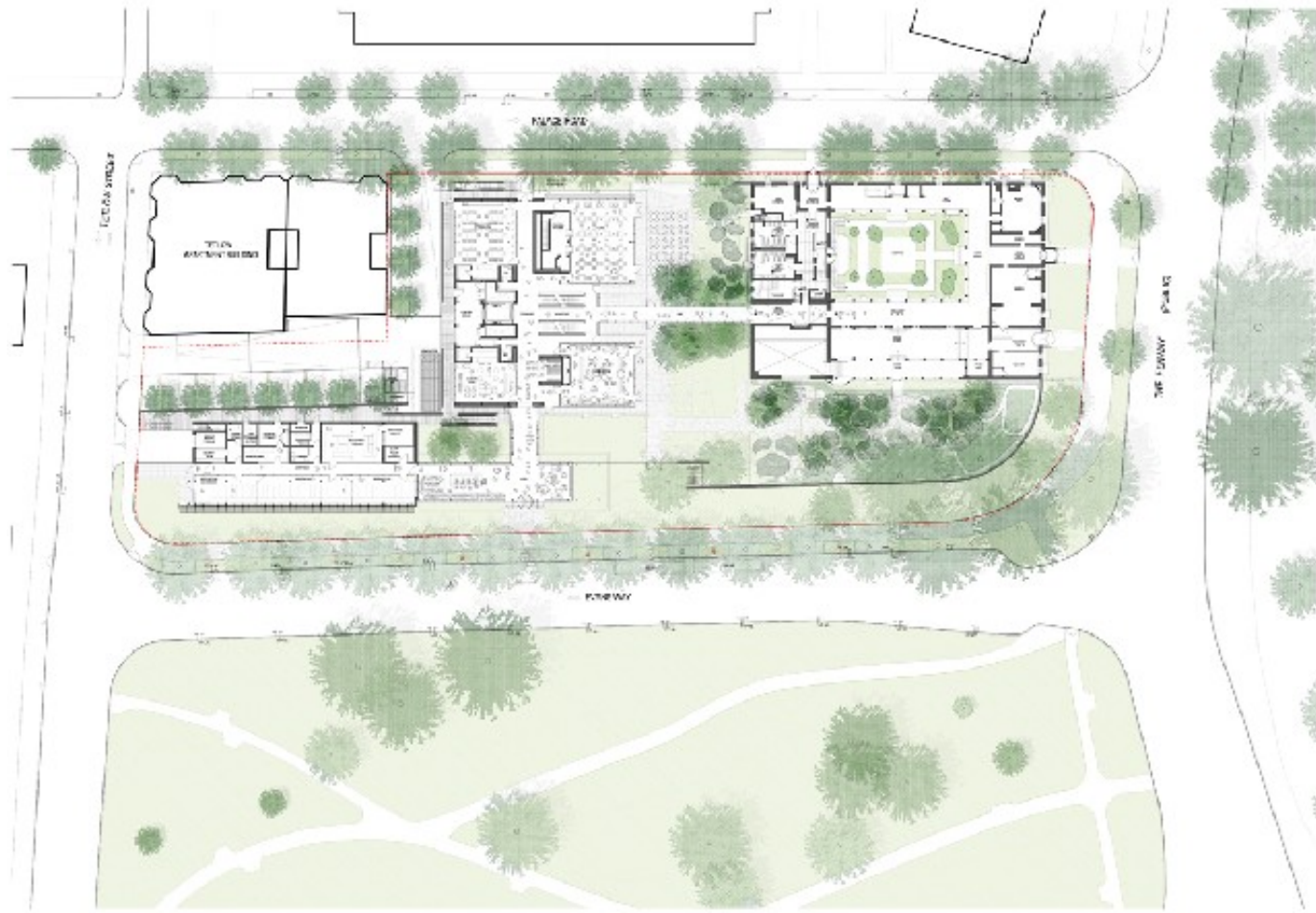
The Gardner Museum's New Wing

constructed 2005-2012

architect: Renzo Piano (b. 1937)



The Gardner Museum, New and Old
(The “historical building” is on the right)



The mysterious attraction of the Gardner



Small, private “house” art collections

- Mauritshuis, The Hague (1822)
- Soane Museum, London (1837)
- Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan (1881)
- Gardner Museum, Boston (1903)
- Barnes Collection, Philadelphia (1922)
- Frick Collection, New York (1935)





Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924). Photograph from 1906.

Legends of "Mrs. Jack"

Portraits by John Singer Sargent (1889) and Anders Zorn (1894)



“Boston’s pre-cinema star”

—Bernard Berenson

“No woman in Boston has been so much discussed, both privately and publicly, as Mrs. John L. Gardner; indeed, here is a case of a woman’s reputation having been made entirely by the papers. Mrs. Gardner is now always before the eyes of the public. All her movements are heralded in the press, and she is treated almost as England treats royalty.”

“Boston society consists of fossilized conventions; Mrs. Gardner has not failed to spurn them. Boston society consists of antique genealogical distinctions and exclusive standards; Mrs. Gardner has not failed to break down social barriers and evidence her belief in society as a vehicle for the cultivation of art, music, and intellectuality and to create a social renaissance. Beyond her wealth and her social position, she has exercised a certain personal hypnotism in the ranks of swelldom.”

”

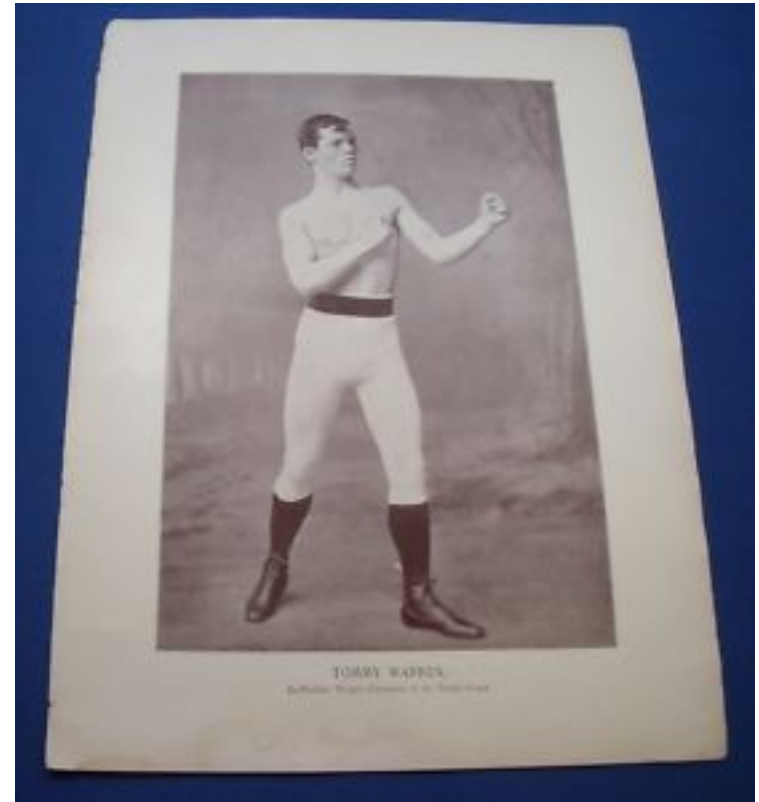
What
made
Gardner
iconoclas-
tic or
unconve-
ntional?

Flirtation



Gardner as “transgressive”

Interest in boxing and boxers



Gardner as “transgressive”

Interest in Spanish cabaret

Geraldine Farrar in *Carmen* (1915); Sargent’s *El Jaleo* (1882)



Gardner's tastes for the exotic

John Singer Sargent, *La Carmencita*, 1890

William Merritt Chase, *Carmencita*, 1890



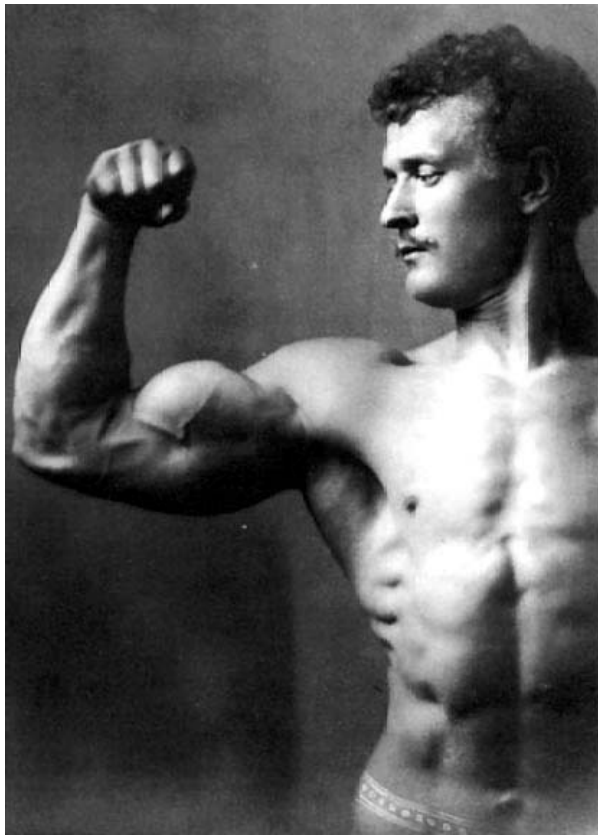
Carmencita

March 10-16, 1894

**Edison's Black
Maria Studio**

Gardner's "art of scandal"

Eugen Sandow
(1867-1925)



Francis Marion Crawford
(1854-1909)



Isabella Stewart Gardner's Empowerment

feminist scholarship since the 1990s

Gardner not as a “rich and eccentric woman” who created a “curious product” but as a figure of forceful intellectual and aesthetic capabilities who made an art collection spanning 2500 objects and 3000 years at all possible.

- Wanda Corn, Gardner’s “art matronage” (1994)
- Douglass Shand-Tucci, Gardner as forerunner of female architects and designers; also as a proto-feminist sexual modern (1997)
- Anne Higonnet, Gardner’s museum as a feminine domestic space; as a “self-portrait” (*A Museum of One’s Own*, 2010)
- Alan Chong, Gardner’s relation to Asia (*Journeys East*, 2009)

Gardner as traveler and geographer

Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924)

Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904) and his adoptive son Kalulu



The creation of professionalized *Geography*

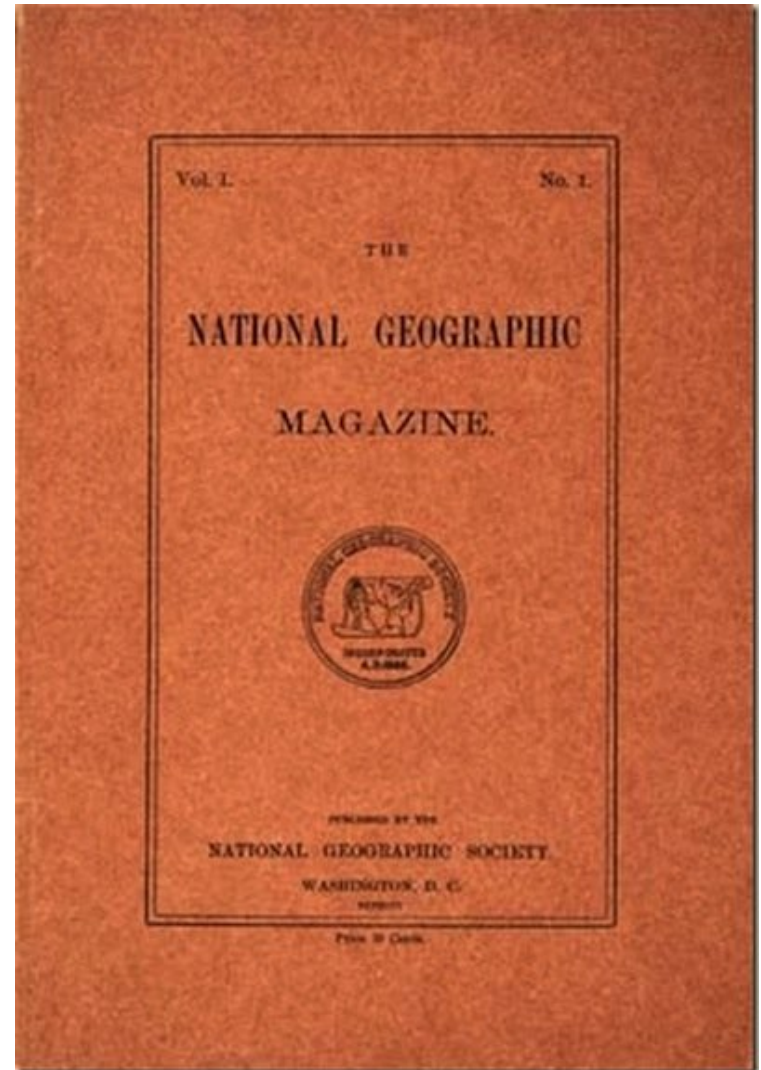
Gardner's lifetime: 1840-1924

Royal Geographical Society
(London), 1830

American Geographical Society,
(New York), 1851

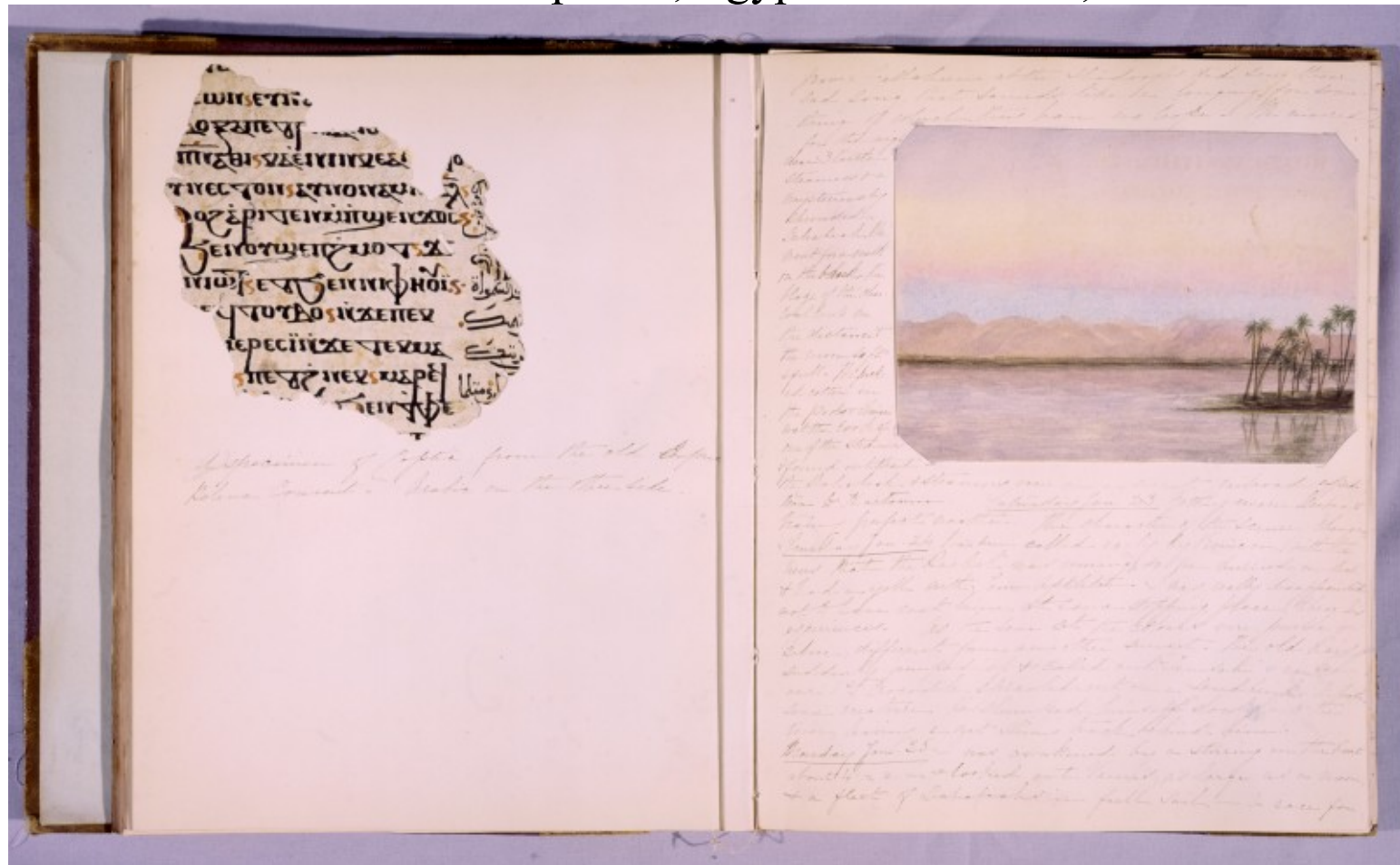
National Geographic Society
(Washington, DC), 1888

imperialist, orientalist, masculine



Gardner's Geography and Ethnography

Gardner's travel scrapbook, Egypt and Palestine, 1873-74



Gardner's breaking of barriers

Angkor Wat, visited 1883



Francis Marion Crawford



Exotic travel as erotic liberation

Gardner's photograph of gondoliers. Venice. 1890s



for Gardner's travels

1865, Europe: the loss of her infant son

1873-74, Middle East: spiritual journey, cure for depression

1882-83, Asia: aftermath of the Crawford embroilment

1889, Europe: escape from the scandal of Sargent's controversial portrait



Another nineteenth-century traveler

Henry James (1843-1916)



James's playful criticisms of Gardner's travels and sexuality

“Dear wild and wandering friend” (1899)

“as wild as you like things” (1890)

“How mysterious and complicated you are” (1889)

“Your journey to Japan and India is a *coup de genie*: won't you take me with you as your special correspondent—and companion? (I mean special-companion.)” (1882)

—James, *Letters*

James's not-so-playful criticisms of Gardner

“[T]his overwhelming, self-defeating chaos or cataclysm toward which the whole thing is drifting . . . the insane movement for movement, the ruin of thought, of life, the negation of work, of literature, the swelling, roaring crowds, the ‘where are you going?,’ the age of Mrs. Jack, the figure of Mrs. Jack, the American, the nightmare—the individual consciousness—the mad, ghastly climax or denouement.”

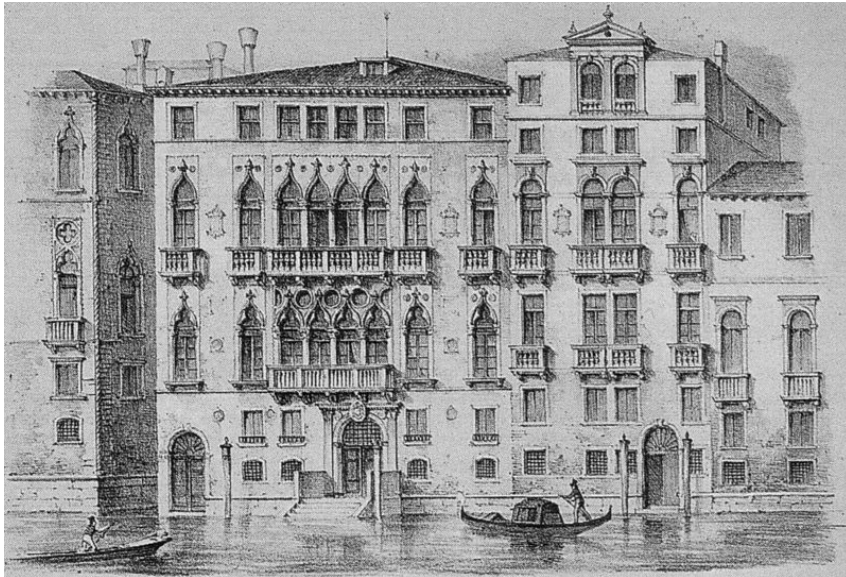
“The Americans looming up—dim, vast, portentous—in their millions—like gathering waves—the barbarians of the Roman Empire.”

—James, *Notebooks*, 1895

Palazzo Barbaro, Venice

15th and 17th centuries

purchased by Daniel and Ariana Curtis in
1884



Chicago Columbian Exposition 1893



Gardner's “barbarous Barbaro”

“The Palazzo Barbaro is divine, and divinely still: don’t make it spin round”
(1890).

“I figure you somehow—strange as is the association of ideas—at the remarkable Chicago—with a ‘building’—an infinitely more barbarous Barbaro—all to yourself. Won’t there be Federal buildings, & the States buildings, and then, in a category by itself, Mrs. Jack’s building?” (1893)

—James, *Letters*

WEIRD WALL SHUTS MRS. "JACK" GARDNER'S PALACE IN FROM THE WORLD
AND CAUSES SPECULATION AMONG THE CURIOUS WHO WATCH IT GROWING

**Imposing Structure in the
Back Bay Secluded
from the World.**

WHIM OF A WOMAN.

Reasons for the High Brick Bulwark About the Big House a Mystery.

The weather was not conducive to being at home in the old town as being well suited to "peace" in the foreground, the town that "Mrs. Jock" has left, the "house" of the past, the "house" which overlooks the town of the past.

[illegible]

It was the first time that the "Soviet Union" had been mentioned in the same breath with the "United States" in a public statement by a high-ranking official of the Soviet government. The statement was made by the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Gromyko, in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City on September 24, 1959. Gromyko said that the Soviet Union was "willing to discuss the question of the peaceful coexistence of peoples of different social systems" and that the United States was "willing to discuss the question of the peaceful coexistence of peoples of different social systems". This was a significant development in the Cold War, as it suggested that the two superpowers might be able to find a way to coexist without resorting to nuclear war.

It is this vision of a better world, which we have achieved by building the world we live in, that has inspired the authors of this book. It is a vision that is not only a goal, but a reality. It is a vision that is not only a goal, but a reality. It is a vision that is not only a goal, but a reality.



TWO VIEWS OF THE MYSTERIOUS WALL BEING BUILT AT "S. JACK" GARDNER'S PALACE.

Boston Herald, June 1901

James's improved vision of Gardner and her museum

Gardner's "*palais-musée* is really a great creation. Her acquisitions during the last ten years have been magnificent; her arrangement and administration of them are admirable, and her spirit soars higher still. Her spirit is immense, and proof against time and fate. It has greatly 'improved' her in every way to have done a thing of so much interest and importance—and to have had to do it with such almost unaided courage, intelligence and energy. She has become really a great little personage" (1905).

—James, *Letters*

Gardner Museum as Jamesian “high culture”?



Feminist scholars' view of the Gardner Museum



Christine Guth:

The Gardner Museum shows “resistance to Eurocentric systems of art history.”

Anne Higonnet:

“Gardner so often flouted such artistic hierarchies, and so often with the signs of a particularizing femininity and domesticity, that she seemed to be pitting the authority she fashioned for herself against the universalizing, hierarchical, and masculine authority of art history.”

Gardner's traveler's sensibility

Lush exoticism, orientalism, and
cosmopolitanism: a traveler's "fantasia"

Provocatively mingled Asian objects

Imaginative geographical juxtapositions

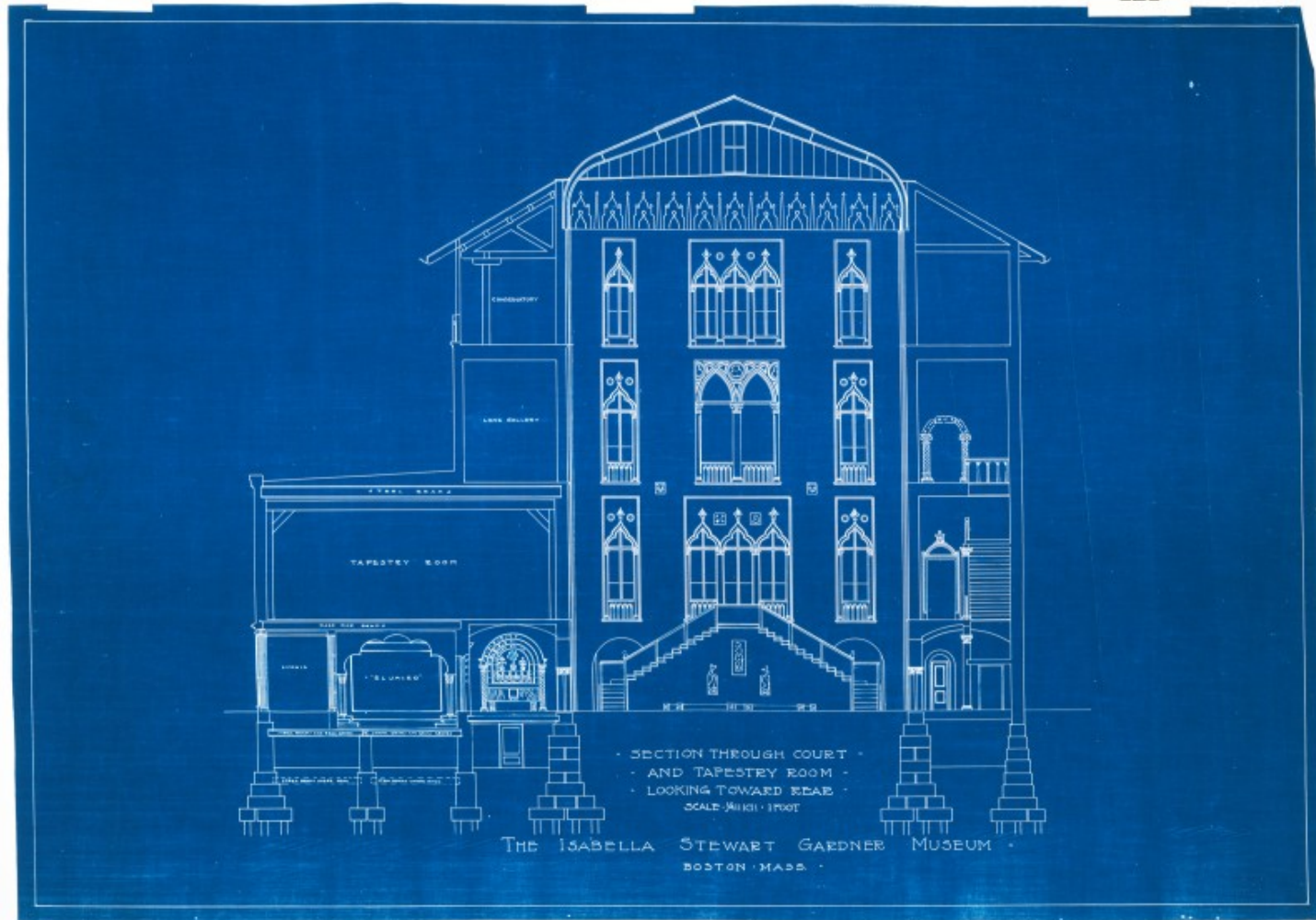
"Scenography" (Victorian theatrical
technologies adapted for exhibitions:
"diorama" effects)

Open-ended, non-didactic museum



Gardner's 1914 Reinstallation

Willard Sears's elevation plan 1014



Chinese Loggia, 1926



Chinese Loggia, looking toward the Spanish Chapel



Sargent's *El Jaleo* inside a Moorish arch, Spanish Cloister



Albums, Scrapbooks, and Journals

Gardner's travel scrapbook, Japan, 1883

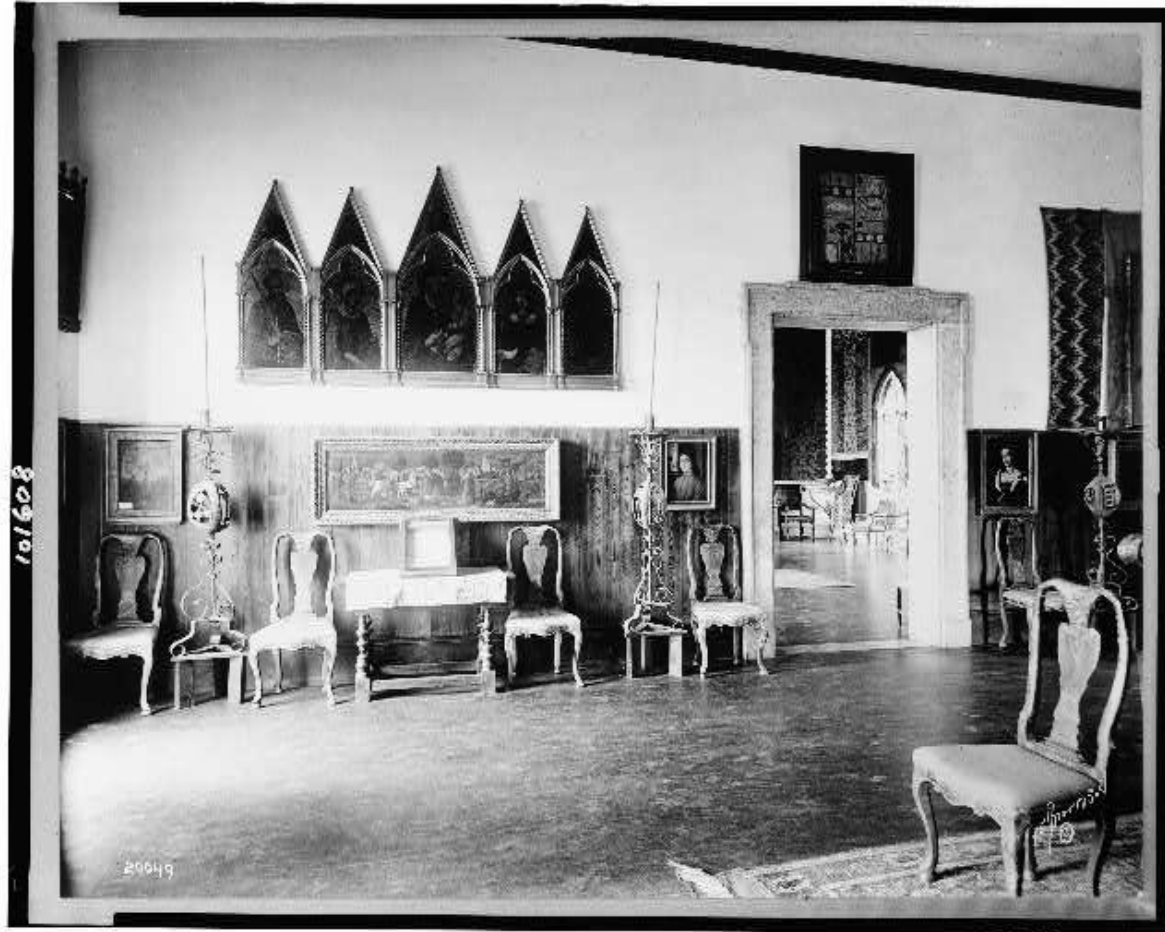


Gardner's Italian and Japanese Gardens

Japanese Garden, Green Hill, Brookline, 1905

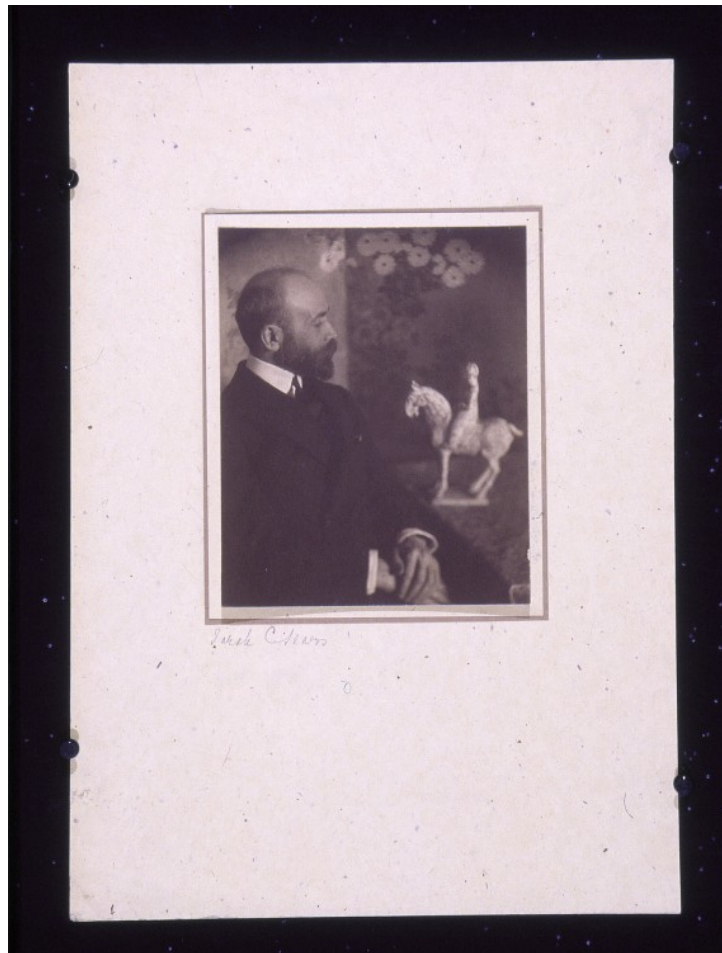


Gardner's Room Arrangements



Art Collection by Proxy

Bernard Berenson (1865-1959)



Construction of Fenway Court, 1899-1901

Willard T. Sears in the courtyard of Fenway Court, c. 1900



Gardner on a ladder at Fenway Court, c. 1900



Scenographic Venetian theme

“Something Venetian in character”—Corinna Smith

“Yes, we are in Italy! Or at least, Italy has come to us”—1904 visitor



Gardner's installation of her collection, 1902, 1914

Titian Room and Yellow Room



Gardner's installation as embodying her travels?

Album from Japan, 1883



Chinese Room (photo from 1961)



Museums as Grand Tours

André Malraux, *Le Musée Imaginaire* (1947)



19th Century Developments in Art Museums

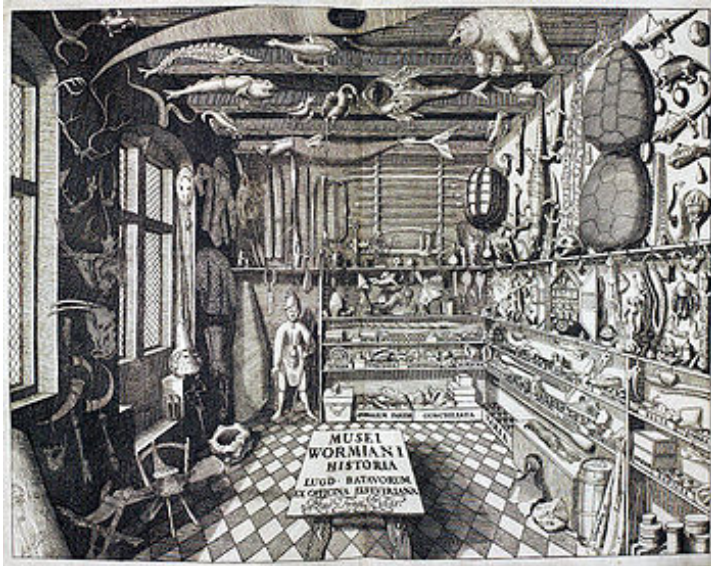
Cabinet de curiosités

Wunderkammer

Kunstkammer

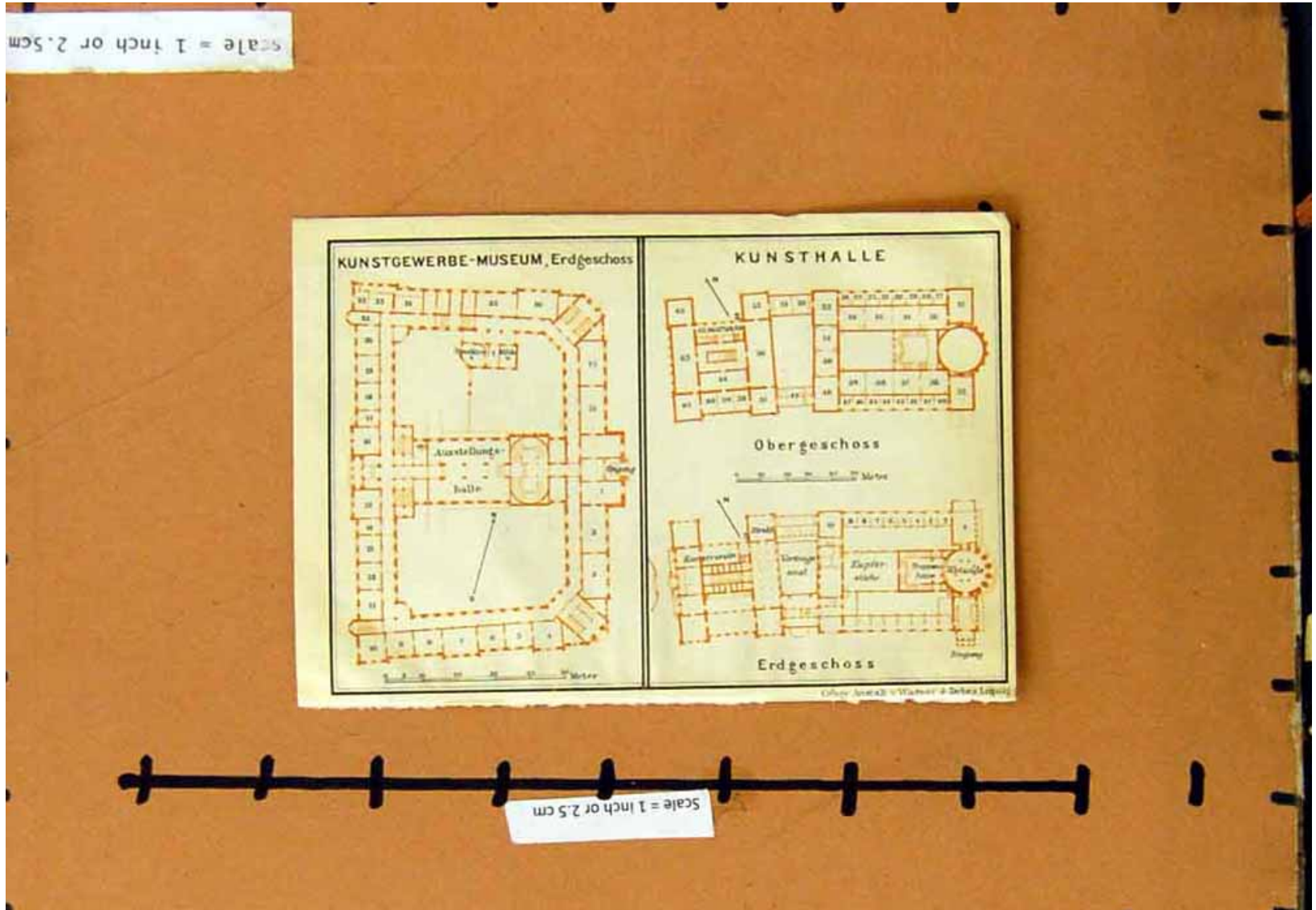
Rationalized , professionalized art
museums

(original MFA, Boston)



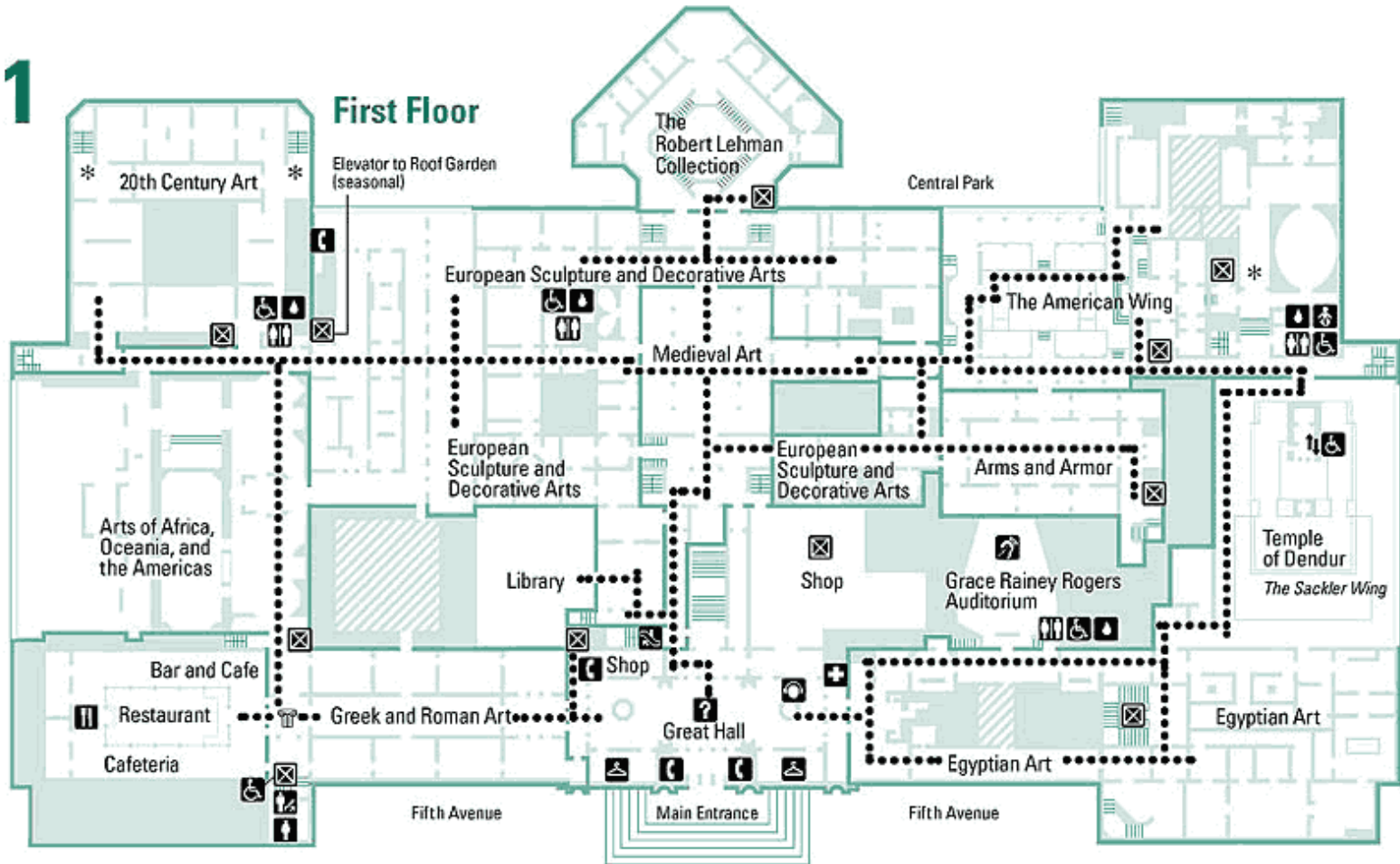
Rationalized floor plans

Chronological, taxonomic, didactic arrangements



1

First Floor



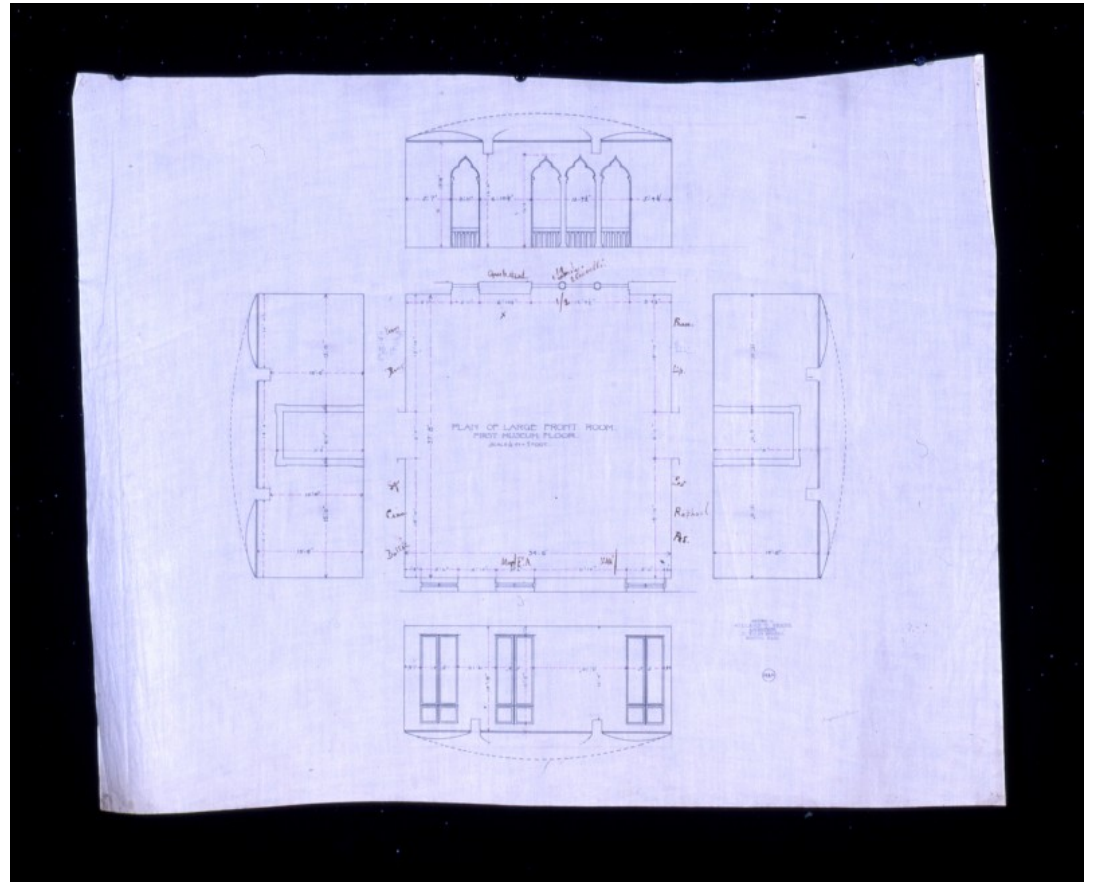
Museum Floorplan

Schools: Early Italian
Room, Dutch Room

Masters: Raphael Room,
Titian Room, Veronese
Room

Whistler-style Themed
Rooms: Blue Room,
Yellow Room

International Rooms:
Little Salon, Gothic Room



Christine Guth: “The ordering of space does not require unidirectional movement; passage through the museum can unfold along a variety of routes.”



Itineraries

Paul Clemen:

Fenway Court provided an instructive and pleasant tour “through the centuries and the leading art countries.”

William James:

Gardner’s museum offered an “avalanche of masterpieces in a perfect setting, created for them at the price of [Gardner’s] superhuman struggle and self-sacrifice.”





Exhibition at the Gardner Museum, winter 2020

John Singer Sargent's black model Thomas McKeller



Boston's Apollo (catalogue)

Our Wellesley people Nikki Greene and Lorraine O'Grady

