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# INTRODUCTION

Captivated by the paintings, sculptures, and tapestries, many visitors to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum overlook the simple glass cases that fill its ground floor rooms (fig. 1). They contain an unassuming collection: what seem to be little more than piles of paper and historic photographs. Nonetheless, each letter, manuscript, photograph, and clipping presented in these galleries is as much a part of the Museum's holdings as its treasures of fine art. The papers, which belonged to Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924), the Museum's founder, represent her personal correspondence, as well as her collections of documents related to historical figures she admired. Some are arranged into thematic groupings, such as “Presidents and Statesmen” and “French Authors,” while others are displayed in cases dedicated to her closest friends and advisors, including art connoisseur Bernard Berenson and Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzō.

Gardner kept very little of her own writing—in fact, she had some of it destroyed—but the contents of the cases say as much about her as about the various other figures they illuminate. The papers Gardner preserved reflect her friendships, allegiances, and alignments with artists, writers, musicians, scholars, poets, and other personalities of her day, as well as with notables of the past. She curated these relationships—real and imaginary—as carefully as she did the masterpieces she acquired for her Museum. In addition, she gathered hundreds of newspaper clippings

about herself, tracing a public image often shaped by speculation and even featuring images of women who clearly were not her (fig. 2).

Gardner delighted in the splashiest articles. Whether verifiable truth, outright lie, or a mixture of fiction and fact, they dramatized the ways in which her life fell outside the boundaries of contemporary expectation (maybe this is why she collected them). In one instance—her outings in the late 1890s to Boston’s zoo, where she was granted the privilege of walking the wild animals, including a lion named Rex—she assembled no fewer than four reports from the press. The one that ran in the *Boston Sunday Post* was titled “Mrs. Jack’s Latest Lion: The Society Leader Chooses, Not a Man This Time, but a Real King of Beasts” and recounts:

On Monday last Mrs. [Jack] Gardner extended her special attention to a fine young lion, called Rex. . . . She sauntered about . . . with an immense yellow-eyed lion by her side, her hand resting on his neck and he swinging along as contentedly as though he had been under Mrs. Jack’s care every day of his life. Surprise



FIG. 1 The Crawford/Chapman Case in the Blue Room

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# THE LATEST WHIM OF AMERICA'S MOST FASCINATING WIDOW.

COURT YARD OF THE PALAZZO VECCHIO

Mrs. "Jack" Gardner Has Bought an Italian Palace and Will Ship It to Boston and Set It Up There as an Art Memorial to Her Husband.

HALL OF THE STUFA IN PALAZZO PITTI

MRS. JACK GARDNER.

Mrs. "JACK" GARDNER, Boston's latest society leader, who will arrive in New York this week on the Italian steamer *Palazzo Vecchio*, brings back from Florence a most extraordinary new whim. It is a set of plans and photographs of an Italian palace, which she is about to have transported across the Mediterranean and shipped out west to Boston with all its art treasures as a memorial to her late husband.

This gets outside all of Mrs. "Jack's" past performances, with which she is familiar in New York city, Isabel Stewart, has been conducting conventional Boston, the nearly nine years.

Last December her mother-in-law was back. Mr. John Lowell Chamberlain, of Boston, had invited all the mothers to his wife.

She promptly went into the most fashionable morning. But she really showed her deep sense by refraining from doing anything startling for nearly a year.

She went to Europe last June and sought recreation by visiting a Venetian palace for the number of days she had been away.

It was there that she formed the plan of having an Italian palace, with its treasures and class in design, and transporting it to her city.

After a month of anxious days she had her plans completed and her ship had been sent for the latest order in her project.

She had the palace built, being then the Florentine Republic, about four years ago.

This was the time when Florence was the seat of the Renaissance.

The first plan, designed by the famous architect, Brunelleschi, is one of the most beautiful and artistic. It was built during the Renaissance period, when the city was the seat of the Renaissance.

The second plan, designed by the famous architect, Michelozzi, is one of the most beautiful and artistic. It was built during the Renaissance period, when the city was the seat of the Renaissance.

being from the Palazzo Gardner.

The first plan is an example in the latter buildings of the splendid Renaissance style of the period in which it was built.

There are many beautiful and important features of architectural interest.

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There is a fine collection of art objects in the palace, which she is about to have transported across the Mediterranean and shipped out west to Boston with all its art treasures as a memorial to her late husband.

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## HOW TO MAKE SNAKES HARMLESS AND USEFUL.

THE following selection, by Howard Kelly and J. H. Brown, are making a study of the medicinal snake and how it is prepared as a powerful remedy.

The following selection, by Howard Kelly and J. H. Brown, are making a study of the medicinal snake and how it is prepared as a powerful remedy.

## HERE ARE SOME "DON'T'S" TO PREVENT COLDS

THESE are just starting upon the season in preventing, or in each small disease. In the winter these such things as prevent colds, and give out, or prevent colds, and give out, or prevent colds, and give out.

## YOU CAN NOW CALL UP A "DISTRICT HOUSEMAID."

THESE is a district service of house children or a work, or wait upon the family, and cook and serve the dinner, and so forth.

## THE HALL OF NIROE, PALAZZO UFFIZI

THESE is a district service of house children or a work, or wait upon the family, and cook and serve the dinner, and so forth.

Fig. 2 "The Latest Whim of America's Most Fascinating Widow," in the New York Journal and Advertiser, 17 December 1899, with a photograph (center) of an unknown woman

Jan 31 1897

## MRS. JACK'S LATEST LION

The Society Leader Chooses, Not a Man  
This Time, but a Real King  
of Beasts.

Mrs. Jack Gardner, whose penchant for the so-called "lions" of the human race has made itself manifest at odd times and in odd manners in the past, is now turning her attention to the four-footed members of the carnivorous family of that name.

Everyone who has any knowledge of Mrs. "Jack" knows without the telling that she is eccentric, and that she delights in setting the swirl circles in which she is a leader to talking over some abrupt departure from the humdrum of everyday society life. Although she is Boston's Mrs. Jack Gardner, she is equally at home in New York and Chicago and no big, gilt-edged event in either of the three cities is regarded as quite complete unless graced by her presence and enlivening influence.

Just what has turned Mrs. Gardner's fancy to the king of beasts does not appear. It may be that even the most distinguished lords of creation prove an acquaintance to be only of ordinary mortal clay, and that the office of entertaining and encouraging them has become monotonous. This is a question that only the lady herself can solve, and she is not given to disclosing the motives that move her. But she does not attempt to disguise her liking for taming coated

lions of the real kind, and as it in ways that few men, to say nothing of the gentler sex, would dare to do, just how far Mrs. Jack will have the courage to go in cultivating Leo's friendship cannot be conjectured, but there are those who say no surprise need be felt if in the near future she has the handsomest specimen of a Nubian lion money can buy, frolicking through her splendid house on Commonwealth avenue, just as average folks give a pet cat the run of the parlor.

MRS. GARDNER AT THE ZOO.

So far Mrs. Gardner's new passion has found an avenue of expression at the zoo in the old Public Library building. When that institution opened early in the winter she was among the first to inspect its collections of all that goes to make such complete and interesting. One of the baby lions was especially admired, and in a quiet way patted and pooted through the bars of the mother's cage. Then Mrs. Jack became an almost daily caller, the liking for the baby lions gradually extending to the dozen or more of all ages and sizes there. With some of them a real friendship resulted, and her coming began to be looked for by them with every manifestation of pleasure. One day Mrs. Jack wanted to take the two baby lions home. It did not seem within the range of possibilities at first, but when a woman's will and wit are combined, especially when that woman is Mrs. Jack Gardner, there are but few objections but what can be surmounted, and the two youngsters went in her carriage to Commonwealth avenue. The sensation created in the Gardner residence was a sublime one. No visitors were ever more warmly welcomed or

carefully looked after. For an hour Jack gave herself up to all her heart to the happiness of entertaining the pretty pair of cubs, and the parting was with reluctance on both sides. Since then Mrs. Gardner has watched the growth of the "babies" with increased interest, and many an extra tid-bit they and their mother have had is due to Mrs. Jack's solicitude for their welfare.

LED REX BY THE MANE.

On Monday last Mrs. Gardner extended her special attention to a fine young lion, called Rex. He is nearly three years old, about the size of a large mastiff and with every promise of being a magnificent specimen of his kind. He is a new comer, and Mrs. Gardner had been putting in a claim for his notice and good will for several days. At the time of her Monday call she took a sudden notion that she wanted Rex as a companion in a promenade about the building. Knowing him to be thoroughly tamed and fully to be trusted, Manager Bostwick consented, and Mrs. Jack had the felicity of doing what no other woman in the wide, wide world has ever done. She sauntered about old Bates Hall with an immense yellow-eyed lion by her side, her hand resting on his neck and he swinging along as contentedly as though he had been under Mrs. Jack's care every day of his life.

Surprise reigned among the spectators present. It is not every day that a woman in fashionable dress is seen under such conditions. The way before the two was quickly cleared, and no one ventured to dispute Mrs. Jack's right of possession to her new protege. The walk over, Rex was led back to his cage, while Mrs. Gardner took her carriage for home.



FIG. 3 "Mrs. Jack's Latest Lion," in the *Boston Sunday Post* (active Boston, 1831-1956), 31 January 1897

reigned among the spectators present. It is not every day that a woman in fashionable dress is seen under such conditions. The way before the two was quickly cleared, and no one ventured to dispute Mrs. Jack's right of possession to her new protégé. The walk over, Rex was led back to his cage, while Mrs. Gardner took her carriage for home.

A full-size illustration accompanied the article (fig. 3). In it, a gaggle of well-dressed spectators cluster nearby, staring agog.

Isabella Stewart Gardner was the consummate show person. Her legendary outing with a lion, the way it was reported in the popular press, and the fact that she collected articles documenting this exploit but left behind no first-hand account of the experience provide a succinct introduction to the complexities of writing her biography. First, while Gardner deliberately cultivated her outward image, few written records of her deliberations and decisions survive. Mostly what remain are her actions and quoted speech. Second, the public persona she created, in comparison to that she presented to close friends, heightened certain aspects of her interests and personality—often the more outrageous ones. The subject of stories ranging from taking jiu-jitsu lessons to wearing Red Sox gear to the Boston Symphony, she seems to have courted controversy and reveled in the waves of press coverage it stimulated. Nonetheless, this showmanship masked what we know was a fierce loyalty to and love for friends and family. She was a dedicated aunt to her three nephews, who lost both of their parents at a young age. Particularly after the death of their father—her husband's brother Joseph, who had outlived his wife—she threw herself into their education and care and raised them as her own.

The public flamboyance also masked private sensitivity and an empathy for those in need. However, these qualities are sometimes hard to capture because the first-person written record is so spare. While she carefully collected news clippings about herself and preserved them within her Museum, Gardner simultaneously erased records of her own reactions to her life experiences—from the daring, like walking Rex, to the tragic, including the death of her only child—and to the important political and social events of the day. She asked her friends to burn her letters, leaving to posterity few of her own thoughts—although her lengthy correspondence with her art advisor Berenson is a notable exception. Instead, she shaped her image through the careful curation of second-hand accounts. In addition, some of her own writings were apparently too precious for her to discard: these include two travel diaries assembled during trips abroad, a handful of inventories and lists of

works to be included in select spaces within the Museum, as well as a notebook from her first art history studies in 1883.

To see the world through Isabella's eyes, we rely on the copious visual evidence she left behind: her photographic travel albums, the Museum, and its collection. These are key sources for understanding her, though many mysteries remain. The scant written record of Gardner's thoughts and opinions provides just enough information to be tantalizing, yet not nearly enough to counter the rumor and guesswork consecrated in the earliest biographical accounts. Penned by Morris Carter—the Museum's first director, who had served as Gardner's secretary—and Louise Hall Tharp, they are, respectively, a hagiography and a gossipy critique. Most importantly, each book is a product of its time, Carter's published in 1925 and Tharp's in 1965, with little scholarly apparatus. Just as Gardner's idiosyncratic museum installations seem carefully designed to invite conjecture but remain stubbornly enigmatic, so too does her historical record.

The headline that appeared in the *Boston Sunday Post* about Rex the lion already hints at some of the problems endemic to the public sources, including Gardner's previous biographies, most recently *The Art of Scandal* (1998). They all persistently refer to her as “Mrs. Jack,” adopting her husband John Lowell Gardner Jr.'s nickname. In her own lifetime, despite being a larger-than-life personality who courted publicity, Gardner was often referred to by this moniker and publicly defined in relation to her husband. While Jack himself was rarely mentioned in accounts of Isabella's exploits, he remained omnipresent, and reactions to her were typically framed in reference to her relationships with men. The subheading of the *Post* article alludes to this fact: “The Society Leader Chooses, Not a Man This Time, but a Real King of Beasts.”

Born and wed into a hidebound upper class, within a deeply patriarchal society, Gardner frequently refused to conform to the norms of her gender and rank. Thanks in part to her wealth and determination, she was often able to push back against social expectations and became a subject of criticism in the popular press. Well into her advanced years, gossip columns were peppered with reports of her dancing and flirting with a range of men. Sometimes, it was implied, these interactions went beyond harmless fun and became full-blown affairs that violated Victorian notions of proper womanhood. The newspapers created the impression that Gardner was a frivolous woman; some even suggested she courted a degree of masculine attention not merited by her short stature, looks, and (later) age. In all of this, her husband fades into the background, relegated to funding his wife's whimsy—including her expensive art collecting habit. The secondary literature on Gardner

adopted the tone and tenor of these early accounts, perpetuating their implicit (and explicit) biases. As a result, a shadow of girlish frivolity and eccentricity (a word frequently found in the sources) lingers over studies of the Museum and its founder, minimizing her agency, contributions, and complexity as a historical figure and pioneering civic leader. The present biography provides a corrective introduction to Gardner's life, based on the best historical resources currently available—private accounts and documents, the contemporaneous public record, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum itself.

In updating our understanding of Gardner, it would be easy to go for a radical course correction and present her as a straightforward feminist and iconic female museum founder. That would, however, be misleading. Instead, this book seeks to introduce her life in all of its complexity, from passion to prejudice. It considers, for example, the origins of Gardner's wealth, whether her family owned enslaved people, and if her or her husband's family profited from trade with regimes of enslavement. It embraces the historical interpretation refracted in the many images and accounts of Gardner across the century since she passed away in 1924. In this new biography, we accept the ambiguity and frequent inconsistencies in her opinions and intent. Gardner, like all people past and present, often behaved in contradictory ways. She harbored many biases—racial, ethnic, and social—all decidedly out of step with our twenty-first-century sensibilities. She was also, simultaneously, a pioneering collector, a brilliant curator, a social reformer, and a visionary institution builder who created a Museum that awed visitors in her lifetime and continues to resonate with today's public, more than a hundred years after it was founded. This biography does not seek to resolve the paradoxes in her persona, opinions, and behavior but to enrich our understanding of her remarkable life by revealing them.

Our book follows a roughly chronological path and draws both on well-known sources about Gardner's life and on a wealth of previously uncatalogued and unpublished sources in the Museum's own archives. Many of the questions we seek to address emerge from our present-day visitors. How were Isabella and Jack able to fund the creation of this exceptional place? Was she a political progressive ahead of her time, or a conservative elitist? Why was the Museum arranged in such a particular way, and why are there no labels identifying the works of art? This book is not the last say on Isabella Stewart Gardner and her legacy. Rather, addressing these questions is just the beginning of a conversation about an accomplished woman who, for all her notoriety, remains a puzzling figure deserving of re-examination.



## INDEX

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Abbreviations:

App. = Appendix; Fig. = Figure;  
ISG = Isabella Stewart Gardner

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