

Collectors and why they collect

Isabella Stewart Gardner and her museum of art

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Isabella Stewart Gardner had the words 'c'est mon plaisir' carved into the brickwork above the front door of her museum as a statement of her intention in forming her collection. Although superficially this may have been true, in this paper it is argued that subconsciously Gardner collected in response to losses experienced throughout her life. This theme is traced through her collecting of designer dresses by Charles Frederick Worth, costumes that allowed her to reinvent herself after the death of her only child, and through her collection of rare books that marked a time of intellectual development and renewal. It is argued that her losses led her to surround herself with painters, writers and musicians, thus forming a collection of young artists. The purchase of her first Old Master was influenced by the loss of her son, and the creation of her museum inextricably linked to the death of her husband.

ISABELLA Stewart Gardner (1840–1924) was a philanthropist, a collector of art and the founder of a highly original museum in Boston, Massachusetts. Although she stated that her collection of art was formed for her own pleasure and that she bequeathed it to the museum which bears her name, simply 'for the education and enjoyment of the public forever', it is accepted by critical theorists that serious collections often stand in for something else.¹ Gardner's impressive art collection not only 'stands in for something else' but also, through the unconventional nature and order of the exhibits (which, in accordance with the terms of her will, remain as she arranged them), provides a reflection of her fascinating life. This paper will trace a theme through Gardner's various collections, consider how and why she collected and discuss her role as one of the collecting 'giants' of her time.

The influences on Gardner's life that pushed her to become a collector can be divided broadly into three strands. The first concerns the rich and varied details of her life that were a consequence of her own choices, such as the many friends she made, her interests and her travels; the second covers external events over which she had no influence, namely the deaths of family and friends, and the social and economic climate in which she lived and the third relates to her complicated character. The following discussion will consider some of these details in the

context of existing critical theory about collectors and why they collect. Gardner's motivation and indeed her drive to collect will be shown to have been drawn from the whole spectrum between philanthropy and self-glorification, although I would argue that there was one single force underlying her role as a collector, and that this force was loss.² As a young child, Gardner was deeply affected by the deaths of her beloved grandmother and of her younger sister, and it is likely that her parents' decision to give Isabella the advantages of European schooling was partly in response to the loss of their other daughter. One aspect of her cultural education was provided by travelling in Europe with her parents, and at the age of sixteen she was one of a class learning Italian in Rome. She was later remembered by one of her classmates to have expressed the wish that 'if ever she inherited any money that was hers to dispose of, she would have a house, like the Poldi-Pezzoli Palace in Milan, filled with beautiful pictures and objects of art, for people to come and enjoy.'³ It would appear that the love of beauty and an ensuing desire to collect was awakened in Gardner at a very young age, although thirty-five years were to pass before her dream became a viable plan. It was in 1892 that she and her husband decided to collect works of art with the aim of creating a museum.

The society that Gardner became part of when she married was ruled by conventions that she found hard to accept. She tried to subjugate herself to its demands and to fit into a conventional and submissive role, but her attempts failed partly because she was childless and partly because her complex character demanded some deeper fulfilment. Descriptions of her during early married life conflict with other biographical information regarding her outgoing, energetic character and she was described during this period as 'an invalid' who often 'had to be carried'. She had one child who died in infancy (Fig. 1), and then a miscarriage. Biographical facts of her life are complicated by the social conventions of the period that did not allow pregnancy to be spoken of. A pregnant woman was described as 'not well' and a miscarriage was never mentioned; the euphemism of 'a nervous breakdown'

was often used instead. It seems hardly surprising that Gardner did indeed fall into a deep depression after these losses and it was only when her husband took her on a long holiday abroad that she recovered and began to regain the strength of character she had lost.

The story of a bereaved young woman going away to Europe and returning as a different character can be explained by understanding the connection between Gardner meeting the dress designer Charles Frederick Worth (1826–95) in Paris and beginning her first collection – beautiful gowns that showed off her shapely figure and shocked Bostonian society on her return to that city. Furthermore, the time spent in European cities visiting art galleries and attending concerts awakened her interest in cultural pursuits. Freud described the artistic objects he collected immediately after his father's death as a 'source of exceptional renewal and comfort', and it would seem that Gardner used the various collections she made throughout her adult life in a similar way.⁴

Where previously she had no place or occupation within society, her collection of outfits designed specifically for her allowed her to reinvent herself and to return to Boston with a new-found role as a leader of fashion. She disregarded social conventions, accepted that she could not have children and forged a new relationship with her husband, asserting her own authority. It seems that he respected and admired her for it. He was unusual too in that he did not make the demands on her that would have been seen as his right but tried to help her to find emotional fulfilment.

Over the next few years Gardner began to collect jewellery, including strings of pearls, diamonds and rubies, that she wore proudly and sometimes inappropriately, for instance diamonds attached to wires in her hair that wobbled dangerously with every movement of her head. In the context of Gardner's development as a collector, the question of her motivation here is important. Her love of beauty made her jewellery a source of comfort to her, since it formed a representation of being loved and valued, but it was also a wise investment and a method of displaying wealth and prosperity. Her first string of pearls was bought in London in 1874 when she and her husband were on their way to the Middle East, and it would appear that it was no coincidence that this collection was begun immediately after the death of her brother, David.

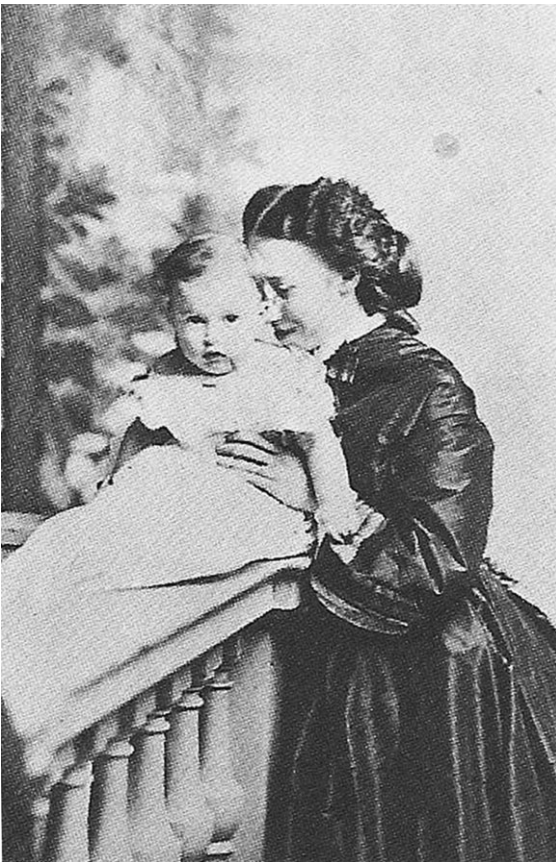


Fig. 1. Isabella Gardner and her son, Jackie, photographed c.1864. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

Another death in 1875 had a profound effect on Gardner's life. Jack's brother committed suicide and his three orphaned sons were left in Jack and Isabella's care. The boys were bright and Isabella took a great interest in their education, to the extent that her own intellect was challenged and she started to attend art history classes led by Professor Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1908) at Harvard University. Norton's consuming interest was in Dante; he showed Gardner his collection of various editions of Dante and suggested that she collect something other than designer clothes, bazaar bracelets or pearls.⁵ Under his direction she started collecting rare books and manuscripts which were later included in her museum. Although her motivation for this phase of collecting was linked with Gardner's intellectual development and therefore the renewal of her mind, it can be argued that because these books were very old but preserved in an extremely good condition, her pleasure in finding literary treasures was linked to their representation of permanence.

Cultural interests led to the widening of Gardner's circle of friends during the 1870s, to include writers such as Henry James (1843–1916), Henry Adams (1838–1918) and Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910). Her friendship with one young writer, Frank Marion Crawford (1854–1909), became too intense, and he departed abruptly for Europe in 1883 leaving Gardner to cope with another loss. Jack Gardner took his wife abroad, this time to the Far East and Japan and it can be seen that by this time a pattern had developed in Gardner's life whereby travel and acquisition both became antidotes to loss. Significantly for her development as a collector, on their return through Europe they stayed for several weeks in Venice where she immersed herself in Italian art, finding comfort and renewal through study of Renaissance artists and their work.

Isabella and Jack Gardner practised philanthropy long before they thought of founding a museum – by funding young impoverished artists and musicians and by providing opportunities for them through the cultural events they hosted. Through her philanthropy, Gardner developed her relationship with Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), which evolved into a highly significant partnership. Berenson helped her to acquire many of her most important works of art and his knowledge and contacts were invaluable in her journey towards becoming a great collector.

Their correspondence provides evidence of those acquisitions and gives insight into her motivation as a collector.

It was through her friendship with John Singer Sargent, begun in 1886, that Gardner started a collection of painters rather than their works.⁶ It seems that this collection helped her to renew her youth, as many of her artist friends were much younger than she was. Collecting animate and inanimate objects offered her distraction and a method of transference.

Both Gardner's varied interests and the breadth of her collection reflect her complex personality. Consequently, her motivation and drive to collect cannot be reduced to one theory, but are more accurately defined by psychoanalytic thought which goes beyond Freudian notions and suggests that a collector demonstrates a need to look for new experiences, form new relationships and gain self-confidence.⁷ This idea is reflected in Gardner's constant desire to travel and in her numerous relationships. Her personal stability was rocked by loss and most particularly by the loss of her child.

Through a detailed study of Gardner's collection, it can be argued that the images of the Virgin and Child in her museum are linked to Gardner's loss of her son. The many representations of this subject are out of proportion to other artistic subject-matter, and each one appears to have been chosen with regard to their humanity. Gardner sought out images of approachable and sympathetic young women, as opposed to the many distant, enigmatic or aloof representations of the Virgin. The most beautiful example amongst them is *The Madonna of the Eucharist* by Sandro Botticelli (1444–1510) (Fig. 2), although the most convincing evidence of my reading is *The Virgin of Mercy* by Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664) that hangs on the wall of the Spanish Chapel on the ground floor of the museum (Fig. 3). This was the first Old Master that Gardner bought, on a visit to Spain in 1888. It hung in her bedroom for many years before she placed it in the space that she dedicated to her son's memory with the words 'In Memoriam' carved on the wall nearby.

On this same visit to Spain, Gardner went through an experience that made her very aware of her own mortality. She was watching a religious procession move through the streets of Seville when she suffered serious chest pains: 'she turned so white – almost blue – that her husband, Jack thought she was going to die. It



Fig. 2. *Virgin and Child with an Angel*, early 1470s, Sandro Botticelli. Tempera and oil on wood, 85.2 × 65 cm. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

was an attack of angina ... but the intolerable pain left her just as a great crucifix was being carried by in the street.⁸

Leading up to this point in 1888, Gardner had been in mourning for one death after another. Her brother James died in 1881, Jack's parents died in 1883 and 1884, her own mother died in 1886, the same year that one of her friends and her nephew committed suicide. Her new awareness of her own mortality brought back memories of her greatest loss, the death of her child. It appears to be no coincidence that Gardner wanted to focus her attention on something else and her acquisition of the Zurbarán brought together the strands of her life that turned her into a serious and influential collector of art. Literary theory offers an explanation of how a collector can see her collection as a way of deferring her own death, and her collected objects take on a new meaning in her mind when she realizes these objects will remain after she is dead and stand in for her continued presence.⁹ From the very



Fig. 3. Spanish Chapel (Bohl, 1994), with *The Virgin of Mercy*, from the studio of Francisco de Zurbarán, *in situ*. Oil on canvas. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

beginning of Gardner's collecting years, each object in her collection was inextricably linked with her own life, a fact which resonates with a further important theoretical idea. Although a collection takes on a life of its own, it still reflects the life of its collector, to the extent that a collector often sees her collection as an extension of her own personality.¹⁰

In 1892, soon after the deaths of her own father, and another one of her close friends, Gardner completed her collection of jewellery with the acquisition of an Indian ruby of great value, after which she and her husband turned their attention to a new interest – collecting antique art with the objective of creating a museum. Although their Beacon Street house was soon overflowing with antiquities and paintings were hung on every wall, they told very few people of their plans. Gardner's sanctioned biographer Morris Carter wrote: 'Mr Gardner's interest in this important project was quite equal to his wife's, and it was definitely agreed between them that, if either one died, the other would carry it out.'¹¹

Venice was a centre for their acquisitions and over a long period they spent several weeks there every other year. The city was poverty-stricken at this time since many Venetian traditional occupations were no longer required, leading to the ready availability of antique wood and stone carvings, rich furnishings, tapestries and paintings at bargain prices. It was Jack Gardner who went around Venice searching out antiquities while his wife concentrated her attention on paintings. Richard Norton, the son of Charles Eliot Norton, acted as an agent for them, the artist Ralph Curtis offered support and advice, and they bought paintings through Berenson.

Over a period of ten years Gardner suffered several bouts of illness. In 1894 she was described as 'weak and thin' and spent some weeks in a spa town in Germany. During the winter of 1896–7 she experienced the same spasms of pain she had felt in Spain which were severe enough to make her feel afraid, although later in the year she felt well enough to travel back to Europe and to push forward their growing collection.¹² Art had become an obsession.

Although it was Isabella who had suffered ill health, in 1898 Jack Gardner became unwell and died suddenly. He was only in his early sixties and Isabella was devastated. Almost immediately, however, she turned her grief into action, commissioned an architect and set in motion a plan to build a museum in the style she and Jack had agreed together, using stones they had collected and brought from Venice. They had discussed at length where and how they would build it but had not come to any conclusion: Jack Gardner had wanted to buy land on the Fenway in Boston, which had been recently filled-in, but Gardner was resistant to this as it was out of town and she was in favour of extending their house on Beacon Street. After his death she changed her mind, and driven by her loss, bought the land Jack had wanted.

There is no record of how Gardner felt at this time, but she immersed herself firstly in plans for her museum and then in overseeing the building. She worked tirelessly, striving for perfection. She kept in close contact with Berenson and depended on him to acquire works of art for her, although she did herself make one further visit to Europe. Gardner and Berenson shared a common viewpoint on the importance of art in their lives and his expressed idea reflects her philosophy: 'Viewing great art can take us away from ourselves and give us, where we are under its spell,

the feeling of being identified with the universe, perhaps even of being the soul of the universe.'¹³ Particularly towards the end of her life, certain paintings in her collection became a source of comfort to Gardner and she used them as visual stimuli for meditation. It has been observed that she found healing at the intersection between art and religion.¹⁴

Isabella was unconventional, passionate and headstrong. Jack Gardner had been a steadying influence, supporting his wife, smoothing over difficulties for her and enabling her creativity. What began as a joint venture became Gardner's reason for living and although her determination and personal vision gave her purpose, as a woman on her own at the end of the nineteenth century, both the acts of collecting and of founding a museum were complicated by issues of gender.

Early theorists noted that the collecting giants usually exhibited qualities such as aggressive ambition or strong competitiveness; women who were successful collectors often demonstrated such masculine strains.¹⁵ Leaving aside a debate about the masculinity of ambition, Gardner's transformation from an invalid who had to be carried into a 'collecting giant' was linked to the fact that two of her leading characteristics were an 'iron will and immense ambition' as described by one of her closest friends, biographer Maud Howe Elliot.¹⁶

During the period that Gardner was collecting, women were believed to be consumers of objects and only men were serious collectors. Where women bought decorations because they enjoyed buying, it was men who collected with vision and to fulfil a philosophical idea.¹⁷ Although Gardner loved beauty and has been described as displaying femininity in the arrangement of her art collection, her vision and her philosophy defy the classification of a male/female divide.¹⁸ Her vision, observed by various members of her contemporary society, is borne out by Morris Carter who wrote: 'Her daring and self-confidence made possible Fenway Court, a citadel of peace and dignity and beauty, not the result of a sudden desire for collecting, which has become an American obsession, but the consummation of a long-sustained, slowly developed plan whose joyous execution proclaimed anew the triumph of spirit over matter.'¹⁹

Painter and Harvard art lecturer Denman Ross wrote to Gardner in 1911 about her museum saying; 'You are, not only the lover of art, and the Collector

but the artist, having built the house and having arranged all the objects which it contains in the order and unity of a single idea'.²⁰ Her own philosophy is stated clearly in her will in the bequest of her museum 'for the education and enjoyment of the public forever', thus fulfilling her ambition to enrich American cultural life and demonstrating one aspect of her role as a collector to be truly philanthropic.²¹

The conclusion that the death of Gardner's only child and her ensuing childless state was a precipitating force towards her progression into a 'collecting giant' is an idea that is corroborated by previous academic study on what impels an art collector to acquire works of art. Such study has revealed that collectors who leave a will keeping their treasures together as a collection believe that a part of their selves will live on into the future, immortalizing them in a way that is otherwise not possible. If a collector is childless, the collection often becomes a child substitute, perhaps taking on the importance of an only son who perpetuates his father's name.²²

The very careful wording of Gardner's will ensured that her collection not only remained intact but also arranged as she had ordered it, in an unorthodox and highly individual manner that expressed her identity, which is another common motivation for forming a collection. It is possible for a collector to find and to demonstrate her identity through a collection, and to feel that when her collection is complete, she is also complete.²³

Gardner undoubtedly saw her collection of art as an extension of herself. On occasions during her lifetime when her museum was open to members of the public she stood and watched like a hawk, ready to pounce if anyone went too close or touched one of her treasures. Her life and identity were woven into everything she owned to the extent that when she sold her Beacon Street house in 1904:

She took with her the interior woodwork which had been carved for her, the fireplaces, and whatever else she could, reproducing as nearly as possible in her private apartment at Fenway Court the rooms she had so long occupied. The new owner was persuaded to tear down the house and build a new one in its place but also to give up the number 152 and use the other number 150, to which the frontage was entitled. Thus Mrs Gardner, who craved continuity and the perpetuation of her personality, transported to the new location whatever intimate association she could and obliterated what must be left behind.²⁴

Further evidence of her collection expressing her identity is seen in Gardner's placing of her own portraits at strategic intervals throughout the museum, not

in accordance with any logical sequence but as a symbol of her own relationship to every era and every place represented through her collection. It has been noted that Gardner's museum is very closely linked to its creator, and although this can be interpreted as self-centred and shallow, it can also challenge visitors to try and understand the complex relationships between private experience and public history.²⁵ It seems clear that many collectors who have left intact collections bearing their names to famous museums have been influenced by a desire for immortality.²⁶ It has also been argued that the reason for founding a museum for a specific collection is the desire for long-term recognition by the collector, who creates an explicit memorial to their own name.²⁷

Whatever the underlying motivation behind Gardner's drive to collect, by naming her museum The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, exhibiting portraits of herself, acquiring paintings of famous 'Isabellas' from the past and decreeing that anyone named Isabella should have free entry to her museum for life, her museum both serves the purpose of a memorial and remains as a testament of her life. Although, it is possible that Gardner was driven by an urge for long-term recognition, another reading of her motivation is found in the following comment on her achievement: 'Mrs Gardner's certainty that her sensibility should be forever evident in the museum suggests a peculiar kind of intellectual humility more than vanity: that this should always read as one woman's view of things'.²⁸

Gardner was a law unto herself and the complexity of her character is reflected in the breadth of her collection and the depth of her many interests. She was also obsessive. When she became interested in music she created her own music room; when she and Jack inherited Brookline, a house outside Boston that had belonged to Jack's parents, she involved herself in improving the gardens; when she decided to grow irises, unsuitable flowers for a climate of extremes, she designed specially heated beds for them and won prizes from the horticultural club. She loved sport and games of all sorts, becoming in 1912 an avid fan of the Boston baseball team, the Red Sox. She attended a concert at Symphony Hall at the age of seventy-two, wearing a white band around her head with the words 'Oh you Red Sox' printed on it in red letters, astonishing other members of the audience. During this same period her husband's nephew was a member of the Harvard hockey team, and Gardner stood on the sidelines of every match cheering him on even when the temperature was well below freezing.

It is believed by some that extreme collecting by an individual may be associated with insanity, unless it is in the context of a museum, library or archive, when it is seen as a sensible cultural act.²⁹ Fanaticism is identical for all collectors who are thought to 'partake of the sublime ... by virtue of their fanaticism'.³⁰ Gardner was far from insane and yet her eccentricity and fanatical attitude to her many interests were synonymous with her success as a collector. In everything she did, Gardner pushed herself to the limit, a character trait that led her friend the historian Henry Adams to write to her in the latter years of her life: 'I envy you, who always, even at your worst, loved the game, whatever it might be, and delighted in playing it. How we others must bore you – old mummies – Henry James and me – who can see nothing in the game and only lunacy in the players.'³¹ For Gardner, collecting was like a game played with utter passion and she remained engaged in collecting people, new interests and works of art until she was forced into inactivity by old age.³²

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Notes and references

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- 2 Considered theories that can usefully be applied to Gardner's collecting history include collecting as a method of dealing with loss, as a substitute for childlessness, as a means of expressing identity and as a way of ensuring immortality. Critical theory that considers collecting in relationship to the gender of the collector is also relevant to an understanding of some of the challenges faced by Gardner.
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- 4 John Forester, "'Mille e tre': Freud and collecting", in Elsner and Cardinal, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 231–2.
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- 8 See Tharp, op. cit. (note 5), p. 138.
- 9 Mieke Bal, 'Telling objects: a narrative perspective on collecting', in Elsner and Cardinal, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 112–13.
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- 11 See Carter, op. cit. (note 3), p. 162.
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- 25 Anne Higonnet, 'Museum sight', in Andrew McClellan (ed.), *Art and Its Publics. Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Oxford, 2003), p. 135.
- 26 See Baekeland, op. cit. (note 22), p. 217.
- 27 See Pearce, op. cit. (note 10), p. 65.
- 28 David Carrier, *Museum Skepticism. A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (Durham and London, 2006), p. 123.
- 29 See the Introduction to Anthony Kiendl, *Obsession, Compulsion, Collection. On Objects, Display Culture and Interpretation* (Banff, 2004).
- 30 See Baudrillard, op. cit. (note 1), p. 9.
- 31 See Tharp, op. cit. (note 5), p. 289.
- 32 See Baudrillard, op. cit. (note 1), p. 9, quoting from Maurice Rheims in *La vie étrange des objets* (Paris, 1963).