

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Gregory Maguire Artist Audio Walk

October 2019

This Artist Walk was produced by Sandy Goldberg of sgscripts.

To start this walk, go to the green elevator doors on the First Floor of the New Wing. Stand in front of them, facing the Historic Building.

Select STOP 130 and press play to enjoy. Gregory will guide you around the Museum in these rooms:

Palace 1st Floor

East Cloister, North Cloister, Courtyard

Palace 2nd Floor

Second Floor Landing, Raphael Room, Little Salon, Tapestry Room, Dutch Room

Hello. I'm Gregory Maguire; I'm a novelist. I write books for adults and for children. My best-known work is *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, which has become a very noisy Broadway musical and is shown all over the world. Thanks for joining me on this walk around the Gardner Museum, a place that's been—and still is—a huge inspiration for me. I was Artist-in-Residence here in 1994; actually, I'd say "Writer-in-Residence." I've been coming here regularly ever since. We're beginning in the open glass area that's part of the modern wing of the Museum. Position yourself so that you're near the transparent staircases. Just beyond, ahead through this glass channel—what I think of as an umbilical cord—is the bricked-in secret treasury of the Gardner Museum. Let's go through it now. As we do so, we're moving from the sense of openness and transparency, to the world of secrets of the heart.

When you enter the brick area—before the archway—look at the first display on your right. I'm transfixed by the row of faces that are perched above some sort of watering trough. I don't know its date or where this carving is from. It looks to me like it's from the late Middle Ages, but I'm not going to be an art historian on this walk with you. What I'm going to do is to comment on figures and characters that arrest my attention.

These five faces are opening their mouths in expressions of, I dare say, at least surprise, if not perhaps, some sort of horror. Maybe they were spigots, and water was intended to pour into the trough below. But when their mouths are dry and water isn't coming out of them, why do these characters seem astounded by what they have seen, what they—and we—are about to see next? The one on the far right has lost part of its chin, so it looks like it's turning into a cat. I love the pattern in the arch above the faces too. It's like frosting—like something a baker could do with a butter knife.

Let's move ahead slowly now. We'll look at the Courtyard in just a little bit, but first, we'll be stopping ahead, at the wall on your right. As you make your way, the music you're hearing is from the original cast recording of the Broadway musical *Wicked*, composed by Stephen Schwartz. I was working on my revisions to the novel that the play is based on while I was living here for a month, as Artist-in-Residence. We'll use the music as our 'soundtrack.' It's music for enchantments.

In this corridor, go past the open iron gates on your right. Just past them, there's a panel with four carved animals. Very often, when a character or creature pulls my attention, it's because of some sort of transformation that they're in the middle of. This is who we are as living creatures: constantly changing from one moment to the next. Art freezes the instant of change, so we can examine it. That's what we'll do on this walk.

I can't help but stop at these creatures, which I think are symbols of the Christian Four Evangelists. Their eyes are empty now—maybe there were glistening jewels in them at some point? Now these hollow sockets look like penetrating stares. The animal on the upper left has something to do with St. Mark, I think. It's a lion with wings, clutching the holy book in its claws. The creature next to it is a winged ox. Below the ox is a rooster—with a long tail of some sort of mammal. The fourth creature seems to be a stag who has not reached the moment of transformation. I look at these creatures, especially the top two with the books, and I'm reminded of the ways that books themselves welcome readers, and young viewers who are looking at pictures, into transformative moments. Indeed a museum is an open book, and it too is welcoming you to exist in a transformative moment. To change from an earthly lion, to a winged lion. To become something new.

And speaking of transformative moments: turn now to the garden Courtyard. Every time I'm here, I'm surprised by it. Every time. It's a vertical column of light. The four tall Australian tree ferns, and the columns, echo the verticality of the space in general. The windows all around its walls are like a kind of a ladder. Every rung has a different grip. It makes me feel as if I could move upwards into that light.

Now, let's move around the Courtyard. If you want to spend a few more moments here, just use the pause button on your device. You can do that anytime during this walk. When you're ready, turn left, and go around the corner. There are benches with red cushions along the wall. And in the middle of this corridor, facing the Courtyard, there's an archway. Holding up that archway, at the base of each column, is a lion. They're a fantastic set, a mismatched pair. In Isabella Stewart Gardner's time, the door opposite

the lions—behind you if you’re facing them—was the Museum’s grand entrance—used for special occasions. So these lions framed the visitor’s first glance inside. The lion on the right has pinned a man down. The captive is reaching out a hand and gripping onto the beast’s breastbone. The man’s expression looks not unlike the expression of the five faces that we saw on the way in: the rounded mouth, the wide open eyes, the sense of alarm. I notice that the other lion, the one on the left, appears to be aware of what’s going on. He’s got a small creature under his paws, and it looks to me like he’s going to chastise his mate on the right, and say, “C’mon, give that human being another chance at life.” We don’t know. At any rate, the death has not happened yet. There is a possibility of life ahead. The story can work out in more than one way.

Let’s move on now. I’m going to meet you at the top of the stairway that you’ll find as you continue around the Courtyard. Take your time—pause this audio—and meet me at the landing just at the top of the stairs. You can ask for directions to the elevator if you prefer.

During and after my time living here in the Museum as Artist-in-Residence, I had dreams of this exact spot on this landing. Of floating about four feet above these beautiful black and ochre small tiles. I saw them the way, when you’re underwater, the light catches something: you think you see something, and then it disappears. Different kinds of beauty present themselves in fleeting, momentary glances. That recurring dream was the inspiration for my book *Confessions of An Ugly Stepsister*.

Move now into the room ahead of you from the landing. We’re actually going to pass through this room, and go into the next space; the one with the vibrant red fabric walls. It’s the Raphael Room. As you move into it, turn around and face the doorway you just passed through. To the left of the doorway, in the middle of the wall, is a large painting with two figures. It’s a scene known as the “Annunciation”—when the angel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary to tell her that she will bear the Christ child. Mary hears the angel in this moment—and is about to become impregnated by the bird-holy spirit flying in. We don’t see her transformation here, but boy do we sense it! It seems to reverberate in the

architecture! That deep hallway receding, the floor pattern echoing into space; and time. This painting is my own time-travel tunnel in a way—because about 25 years ago—when I completed my artist residency—I gave a talk at this museum and described this Virgin Mary in this transformative moment. Here I am all those years ago:

The first thing one notes about this painting is the human tenderness and sympathy superimposed on a setting of mathematical precision and control. Before she can blink she will be a Madonna, and her own will is exerted positively towards the notion in even less time than it takes to blink.

If you've ever reread a book from years before, you revisit your younger self in the same way. Have you transformed over those years? The transformation I look for in art, and in characters, is perhaps still something I'm searching for in myself. Another good reason to come back here again and again—to re-encounter what has been puzzling or rewarding in the past.

Now let's turn around, and move to the opposite wall—towards the other doorway. Meet me just to the left of the doorway: at that image of the rearing horse—with the curly-haired blond rider.

This is the fairy-tale turned Christian story of St. George and the Dragon. What attracts me to it at first is the glorious rendition of the rearing horse. And that barber pole spike that goes down through the gullet of the dragon, and out the other side. It's a really eerie and kind of creepy attack—and it looks as if it's going to be successful because the sword is about to descend with a devastating final whack. In this golden vision, I'm reminded of the verticality of light we noticed in the Courtyard. For a painting of such action to be so intensely vertical is kind of shocking to me. A horse isn't vertical, and a dragon isn't vertical, but they are made vertical in this stack of golden light by the urgency of the situation. There's not only a golden sky, but you can see in the background that there's a golden road down which St. George has come. He has taken the golden road to get to this moment of encounter. And now that I look at it I think the golden road separates, in a way, civilization on the hill on the left—with all its

verticality—and the wilderness on the right. What is it saying about the relation between the wilderness from which we came, and the civilization to which we aspire? I don't know the answer to that, but the road seems important to me because it too is a vertical snake going up toward the horizon. It's an echo of the curve of the dragon's neck.

I've been told that when groups of schoolchildren look at this painting, they often think that the little woman on the left is praying for the dragon! She's on the same side of the panel as the creature, after all. She's on her knees, and the dragon is about to be on its knees. Maybe for children the secret of this painting is that not everybody is convinced that killing the dragon is the right course of action. We can't know.

Now, look to the right, just over the doorway—there's another St. George and the Dragon! It's more evidently St. George because of his tell-tale shield with the white background and the red cross. Because we can't climb up on a stepladder and look more closely, it's hard to see why there's a pool of black surrounding the dragon's head. The little flag next to it is a pennant on the tip of the spear. The dragon's eyes don't seem to be opened so perhaps this is the spear's final thrust. We don't know if the dragon is dead quite yet, but its eyes don't have x's in them like they do in cartoons. I wonder about that black cloud; whether that's maybe the opening of a dark cave the dragon just crawled out of, or its blood. Or the atmosphere, the smell, of its death.

Stories about dragons long predate the Christian use of them as symbols of evil, or some threatening power to be defeated. In secular stories today, dragons are often still considered beasts of wildness, and of danger. But increasingly also figures of wisdom.

We'll move on out of this room now. When you're ready to join me, go straight through the narrow space just past the doorway—and into the next room beyond it, The Little Salon. It's got tables and chairs and looks set up for a party. I wanted to take you in here, because this is a room that visitors often pass. They don't know quite what to make of it. And I sort of agree. There's a lot of gold in here, huge mirrors, and a lot of angels. Turn and face the doorway you just came through. Now, notice the painting above the doorway. And the painting just to the right of it.

These paintings are in a way about eternity and insubstantial things: the lightness of angels. But anybody who's ever carried an actual baby for three blocks to the supermarket knows that babies are heavy. These painters manage to convey the striking impossibility that these babies can cavort and roll around and they'll never fall off the edge of a cloudy bolster. They're both heavy and light at the same time. How do the artists do that? That's astounding. Dreams of flying—like the dream I talked about earlier, with the tiles—those dreams are rarely about falling. They're about release; and about exploration and about pushing through to something new. And that's what I think these babies are doing. Now, turn to your left. We're going to go through the doorway ahead of you.

We're entering a very large gallery—the Tapestry Room. As you're moving into it, notice the feeling of the floor tiles under your feet. Depending on what shoes you're wearing, you might feel like you're walking on a stream bed. I can sense the variety in them as I walk—it's a sense of constant imbalance, of surprise. We'll be going the entire length of this room before we meet again. When you're ready, join me at the huge fireplace on the far wall.

Above this fireplace is another dragon painting. This time, the man vanquishing him isn't St. George—it's the Archangel Michael. But what kind of dragon is this? Its head looks like it was inspired by imagery from the Asian subcontinent—maybe India—with its tusks and its glaring bull-like eyes. Its breastplate is a human face. Where the nipples are, are the eyes. You have to look closely to see the nose, and what I think is a gaping mouth cavity. Again this looks like an aperture of shock and horror—maybe echoing back to those little carved faces we saw on our way in.

I notice that the two pairs of eyes on the devil-creature don't seem to lead to the eyes of the Archangel. Michael's eyes are actually rather bland. The demon's eyes instead lead us to all those glittering spots on Michael's armor.

They seem like dozens of eyes rising like bubbles of ginger ale. They're heavenly studs on his garment. But to me they are eyes—and the fact that there are so many of them is

the thing that convinces me that the artist wants us to believe that good will eventually conquer evil. Are we convinced?

From here, turn right. We're going through the nearby doorway now. Wind your way through the narrow vestibule. Now you're entering the Dutch Room. The Dutch weren't known for bequeathing us a bounty of fairy tales. No, what the Dutch gave us all these centuries ago was a sense of a prosperous middle class. The beauty of everyday humans. And all around this room, that's mostly what you see. Characters that we can imagine talking with, characters who inspire my own writing. However, it can't be denied that an oppressive feature of this room are the frames with nothing in them. They held artworks that have been stolen. On one wall are two large empty frames. Another, smaller, is at a desk. A transformation in this room is from the seen, to the unseen.

I'll leave you by looking at one more work in this room. To find it, position yourself so your back is to those two large empty frames—we do want to avert our gaze from the tragedy. With your back to them, the wall you're facing has a doorway. And just to the right of that doorway is a painting of a solitary man. In a feathered cap. One doesn't have to be embarrassed about going to the most dazzling painting in a room. And that's what this is, for me. It's a self-portrait by the young Rembrandt. He's twenty-three years old. He certainly presents himself handsomely—but he knows that his real beauty is the beauty of his talent. He's showing us what he can do: the textures of the velvet, the gold chain over his shoulder, that feather! He's showing off to us from the moment that he looked at himself in the mirror that he used to create this self-portrait—to this very moment, right now, that you're standing here looking into his eyes. I love his gaze. At the same time, it seems to me that it's a cutting gaze, which is to say, he's not going to be dishonest about whatever he sees. But it's also forgiving. By looking in the mirror as he's painting, he's kind of forgiving himself for being human. And he's going to give us what he has to see.

Let me go back to our theme of creatures in moments of change. Transformations. Mostly I've been talking about mythological change. About transformations that happen

through enchantment. But here the conversion is entirely human. And it's just as magical. We may wish we were angels or gods, fantastic creatures or enchanted animals—we remain humans, under the enchantment of art and story, ever changing into new, and, one hopes, richer versions of own very own selves.

Thank you for joining me. And thanks to my friends, David Stone of 321 Management, and to Steven Schwartz composer, for the use of the music from the original cast recording from the musical *Wicked*.