

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Steve Locke Artist Audio Walk

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This Artist Walk was produced by Sandy Goldberg of sgscripts.

Palace 1st Floor

STOP 110 Yellow Room

Palace 2nd Floor

STOP 210 Raphael Room

Palace 3rd Floor

STOP 310 Veronese Room, Titian Room, Long Gallery

Palace 1st Floor

Yellow Room

Hi, I'm Steve Locke; I'm an artist who deeply loves this museum. I've been an Artist in Residency here, and I've taught at the Massachusetts College of Art. I *often* bring students to this museum because I find it a place of endless inspiration. I want to share it with you, on this walk through a few of my favorite spaces. The Yellow Room isn't one of the big, formal galleries of Mrs. Gardner's museum, like the ones upstairs. But I love this room. Let me show you one painting as we get started: as you entered, there was a short wall facing you. Move around the corner of that short wall. Now look at the painting on the upper right of that wall. It's a colorful scene with a light blue sky, and *lots* of patterns! It's by Henri Matisse. When I first moved to Boston, for college, I came to look at this painting over and over again. I *swooned* over it. And you know what? It wasn't until decades later – when I *lived in* this museum for a month as an Artist-in-Residence – that I noticed that there's a *person* in the painting! Matisse's wife is sitting in the shade. She's wearing a kimono that he bought for her. I like that Matisse paints her as if she's just another pattern – so that we *don't* see her at first. When Mrs. Gardner acquired this painting, it was *contemporary art*. In fact, a lot of the art on the museum's first floor was contemporary to her time. She *always* supported contemporary artists. I'm so grateful to her for that. And I think that this Matisse is a great example of how she wants us to *look, throughout* her museum. To look not just at the surface of things, but for a little bit longer than you normally would; to make discoveries.

The yellow walls in this room are another example. They're not wallpaper. They're fabric. Because of the way the fabric holds and reflects light, this space feels different as you're moving through it. We're spoiled by electrical light today, the even-ness of it, how it sort of *neutralizes* everything. Typical museum lighting also *directs* our attention towards certain objects. But Mrs. Gardner created a place where we're meant look for relationships *between* things. And for little moments of transition. For example, I love that transition between the fabric on the walls, and the baseboards near the floor. Do you see that narrow edging there? And now look at the window that's just to the left of

the Matisse painting. There's this wonderful transition between the type of stone that's on arch *over* the window, and the other kind on *base* of the arch. You have these two materials talking to each other. I think that the core of sculpture is where things touch, where materials shift. The adjacencies, I call them. That concept is so important to me as an artist. And Mrs. Gardner was a master at it.

Lots of visitors, when they enter this room, walk right past that big cabinet next to the doorway. Did you? I love it – it's so massive, and yet holding such delicate things. Sometimes it's hard to see what's in the cabinet when this room is crowded, but take it from me: to my eye, what unites so much of what she put inside it, is the use of gold. It has a relationship with the gold on all the *frames* in this room. If you're here on a sunny day, the light hits the china, and the whole cabinet seems to shine - as if it's a light source for the room. There's something that's so over-the-top in that choice of presenting china as a source of light. She's making something *unnatural* stand in for the natural; *improving* on nature. Keep that idea in mind as you move out of this room, and get another view of that crazy-magnificent garden courtyard. Move out there now, and even if you're familiar with the courtyard, take another look. And think about the fact that those are all *potted* plants. There's nothing naturally growing in the ground! I'll say this about the whole museum: Mrs. Gardner gives us an *immersive* world in which things are presented in the most extreme version of what they could be.

Oh, and the music you're hearing? It's a concerto by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. He's my favorite Bach and I really don't think he gets enough attention. Anytime I hear this music, I'm transported to memories of being in this museum. We'll use it as our soundtrack as we're making our way. If you've started your tour with me here on the first floor, I'll meet you on the 2nd floor, in the Raphael Room. After that, when you get to the third floor, I have a walk that begins at the top of the stairs, in the Veronese Room, and takes us through two other galleries.

Palace 2nd Floor

Raphael Room

STEVE LOCKE: Hi, I'm the artist Steve Locke. Maybe you already joined me in the Yellow Room downstairs. I was an Artist-in-Residence at the Gardner Museum in 2015. That meant I got to live here for a *month*. It was a gift of time. And looking. Looking in a really *deep* way. During that time I always had – and *still* have - such an *emotional* response to *this* room in particular. With even one quick sweep of your eyes, you can see that it's filled with images of mothers and children. My mother died in 2004 and I find a tremendous amount of maternal compassion in this gallery.

The Madonnas you see here are not untouchable, heavenly Virgins. They're protectors of children, tender and fierce: all these different ways of thinking about what your mother does for you, or what your mother could do for you. The star of the room, for me, is by the sixteenth century painter Raphael. But it's *not* the most famous Raphael in this room. From wherever you are, turn towards the fireplace, and the tall, narrow windows looking out onto the street. Now, look to the wall on your right. In the corner next to the window, is a painting of a man dressed in red. He's gazing upwards. That's a portrait of Count Tomasso Inghirami, and it's the Raphael painting this room is named for. This *is* a pretty terrific picture, but I wanted to show you the painting that's on the *small desk*, just in front of it. It's also by Raphael. Peer in closely. The Virgin Mary is holding her dead child. Imagine your body doing what she's doing. Think of how much force Mary must use to keep holding him. She's supporting all of his dead weight. For me, it's an image of the *emotional* weight of that gesture, that heartbreaking maternal moment.

I'm 55 years old as I'm recording this, and I miss my mother every day.

Now, as you're looking at the little Raphael, turn to the wall on your left. Between the windows, within the red wall fabric, look for some *crowns*. Give your eyes a moment to adjust, and you'll start to see them. They have initials above each crown: the letters M-R-A. Do you see them? There's one example just to the left of the candelabra. The

letters stand for “Maria Regina Angelorum.” That means “Mary, Queen of the Angels.” By choosing this fabric, Mrs. Gardner creates a presence of *divine motherhood*. When I think about it, there's a tremendous sadness in that choice. Mrs. Gardner mourned the loss of her own motherhood. She lost her almost 2-year old son to illness, and she suffered two miscarriages.

The great thing about being in this room is that you can cry and no one thinks that you're crying because you're sad. They think that you're overwhelmed with this magnificent gallery – which I am; but I do think of my mother when I'm here. Goodness, she would have loved this place.

I'll leave you with that thought, here on the 2nd floor. If you're heading upstairs I'll meet you on the third floor, beginning in the Veronese Room, and we'll continue through two other galleries. I hope you'll come along...

3rd Floor

Begin in Veronese Room

STEVE LOCKE: Hi, I'm artist Steve Locke, just introducing myself in case you're starting your tour with me here on the third floor. I'm showing you some of my favorite spaces in this museum. The more you look, the more you're going to see, in *this* room in particular. Starting with the walls: They're covered with embossed and stamped leather panels. They're spectacular, just fabulous. Mrs. Gardner collected them from a number of different countries. Let your eyes adjust, and you'll start to see the subtle differences, and the intricate paintings on some of them. Pause your device if you want to take some time to do that.

For me, there's a story with all the different kinds of *chairs* in this room. Let me show you what I mean: From wherever you are in this room, move towards the tall windows looking out into the street. Now look to your right. I wanted to point out the chair that's at that desk in the corner. Notice the shape of it – with all its curving lines. Its shape is similar to the big sedan chair behind you, across the room. It looks like a booth. To me, these two chairs feel like a visual *pairing*: *and* they present very different ways of sitting. The chair at the desk is for writing, for creating. The sedan chair, for being carried. Which is the more powerful seated position?

And now look at the *mismatched* chairs Mrs. Gardner arranged around the table near the desk. She's showing us that a chair isn't just a piece of furniture. It's a thing with legs, and arms, just like you are a thing with legs and arms. She's creating social relationships with these chairs: maybe male and female, maybe who is serving, and who is being served. As an artist it gets me thinking about the meaning that comes from what is next to what, what is across from what. And then once you see that, you start to look for it *everywhere*. That's one of the gifts of this museum, for me as an artist: by finding my own resonances between objects, I bring that way of thinking and looking to my work. And to the way I make my way through the world.

I thought that I'd mention that the domestic furnishings in this room are one of the things that confirm a *misconception* that a lot of people have about this museum. These galleries weren't Mrs. Gardner's home. She created this place to *be* a museum. But when I was Artist in Residence, I *did* live here - in a small apartment just for visiting artists. I'm eternally grateful to Mrs. Gardner for her support of artists of her time, which the museum continues today. So much so that I can't bring myself to call her "Isabella." To me, she's always "Mrs. Gardner."

Now position yourself so that your back is to the fireplace. We're getting ready to move into the next room. Move through the doorway... And into the next room.

Titian Room

The thing that I love about *this* gallery is the way that it feels like a space for heads of state. The chairs in the middle of the room seems set up for a meeting, not socializing. Unlike in other rooms, there's no domestic bric-a-brac on these tables. If you sweep your eyes around the room, you'll see a number of portraits of regal, aristocratic people. They *present* themselves in ways to convey their *importance*. From the doorway you just passed through, turn to the wall on your left, move to the part of the wall between the first and second windows. It has a huge velvet textile on it, with an elaborate coat-of-arms. On either side are fabulous frames. Each frame has an arching top. Look: she put textiles inside them! We frame things that are important. That's her signal that textiles are as important as the portraits of kings and noblemen in this room. Oh, I could do a whole tour just about the textiles in this museum! Textiles are often ignored because they're considered a "female" art. They're a key to understanding this museum.

Now, turn around; we're heading directly across the gallery. Move towards the openings onto the *courtyard*. Find a comfortable place at any of them. And take in that courtyard. Breathe deeply. Just take it in. From here it's easy to understand why *so many* visitors *claim* that they used to be able to go *into* the courtyard, and walk on those gravel paths. They complain, and ask why they can't do it now. But they *never* could! The feeling of immersion in this environment is so complete from up here, that it's easy to understand

that false memory. Of course you imagine that you *were* in it. I think Mrs. Gardner planned it that way: so that the spaces *provoke* us to place our bodies inside of them. In order to claim them as our own.

From here the central mosaic down below – with Medusa’s head – is facing us. The sight of the female monster Medusa was said to turn men to stone. Next to Medusa, just a bit closer to us, is a stone sarcophagus. When I first started coming here, I thought it was an ancient *bathtub*. But I later learned that it was a tomb for a child. Nearby, there are a number of Greek Goddess statues. To me, the courtyard is a statement of female divine power.

Long Gallery

Now we’re moving on. Turn left and head towards the doorway. The next space is where I spent a *lot* of time during my month-long artist residency here. It’s called “The Long Gallery” – for obvious reasons – and it’s one of my favorite spaces in the museum. As you enter, turn around and look at the doorway you just passed through. I wanted to show you what’s just to the *right* of that doorway - that image in blue and white ceramic. It’s by the 16th century sculptor, Della Robbia. He specialized in this kind of ceramic relief. The two angels stand on a floor that has a grid, like tile - implying that they’re in a real, architectural space. And they’re under a carved, arched ceiling. There’s a white curtain, then that blue, which is *some* sort of space. Where does the door lead to? It’s not a physical place. It’s a spiritual place. The blue seems to recede even more when we notice that it’s the same color as the walls in this room! And that’s no accident. Mrs. Gardner first encountered this particular shade of blue at an art dealer’s home in Italy. It’s now a museum. And she *hounded* the people there for a correct color sample. She was relentless. Finally she got it. It turns out that this blue is *very* deeply pigmented, and contains a lot of silicate. That gives the color its unusual depth. Now move a little further on in this space – and notice how many white sculptures she placed here. Against the blue of the walls, it’s suddenly like we’re in a Della Robbia! A spiritual space - which is what this gallery is. The way that your own body is moving through space is different here too; the floor is tile instead of wood, as in the previous gallery. At the far end, as

you look ahead to the stained glass, you see bits of that blue broken up into *light*. Mrs. Gardner is telling you that you're in a different kind of space now. It's a space for contemplation. That's one of the reasons why I love it here.

As you move towards the stained glass, you're passing cases filled with letters. Stop and have a look. Most are correspondence *to* her, or collected by her, from artists, musicians, writers, heads of state: anyone she admired. She was a prolific letter writer. But we don't have hardly *any* of the letters *she* wrote. That's because she asked her correspondents to *burn* her letters to them. Most did as she asked. I wonder if I would've been able to say no...

She never wrote about why she placed things the way she did in this museum. Some people find that surprising, or frustrating. But really, I think that's a *gift* to us. To find meanings for ourselves. So I'll leave you here with this thought: I'm an auto worker's son from Detroit, Michigan. I have nothing at all in common with Mrs. Gardner. Nothing in terms of our demographics or experience. But I share her vision. You can't tell me that this museum isn't a space for me. I come here and I experience it in my own way. And so this notion that it's only for people who know about art, or people of European descent, or people who are this or that? No. Anybody with eyes. It's for us.