

Something old, something new: The Gardner Museum



In January 2012, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum unveiled the most ambitious project undertaken for the Museum since it opened in 1914.

The two main objectives were preservation of the original Venetian palace and construction of a new building that would enhance the Museum's ability to offer performances and educational programming. Both goals required extraordinary planning, creativity and technical expertise.



Functionally, the new building provides 70,000 sq. ft. of additional space, including a three-story performance center; a 2000 sq. ft. special exhibition gallery with an adjustable translucent ceiling; conservation labs, offices, support areas, and apartments for the Museum's Artist/Scholar-in-Residence program.

But it's the form of the Gardner's new wing that's the real achievement. Architect Renzo Piano has linked Boston's Evans Way Park and the Palace's brilliant, flower-filled courtyard with an enclosed

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glass corridor that is essentially a series of greenhouses. MASCO had coordinated and raised funds for a timely renovation of the Park with three of its members, neighboring institutions, community groups and public officials.

Piano's vision incorporates copper and colorless glass that connects outside to inside. The structure has been called "crisp, light and transparent"; it has given the Museum the specialized, 21st century performance and exhibition spaces it needed in a way that melds with the sensibilities of the existing building.

True to the vision

Having new, purpose-built facilities for its many concerts and lectures meant that the Tapestry Room could be restored to its original function as a gallery. For three generations, the Tapestry Room has been the main venue for the Museum's popular programming. Now, working from photographs showing the room as it stood between 1915 and 1926, curators and conservationists have returned it to the way it looked when Mrs. Gardner last saw it.



Specifically, the room includes two full tapestry cycles, both Flemish, created in the 16th century. The first shows scenes from the Story of Abraham, the second, scenes from the life of Cyrus the Great. The Tapestry Room is considered one of the finest grand tapestry halls in the United States. Now that the stage has been removed, it's possible to get a close look at the enormous, 15th century French fireplace. Until the restoration began, the Museum's own conservationists hadn't had an opportunity to closely examine that medieval masterpiece. Under 400 years' worth of grimy residue, they found a striking composition and delicate carving.

The room also holds Benabarre's, *The Archangel Michael*, painted circa 1470, a collection of chairs upholstered in 18th century painted leather; and many other textiles and art objects. Subtle lighting enhancements have been made in order to afford visitors a better view and protect the collection.

A local event with global significance.

Although she could hardly anticipate the recent changes, Mrs. Gardner would recognize that her intention that the Museum should remain a place to learn and experience has been respected. The Gardner's evolution has been managed with restraint, but also with a sense of responsibility to Boston as it is today.

To that end, the new wing, which incorporates sustainability features such as daylight harvesting, a geothermal well system and water-efficient landscaping, will be LEED-certified by the United States Green Building Council. Sustainability is a major focus for MASCO members.

To put the Gardner's latest achievement in perspective, remember that the Museum is simultaneously part of the Fenway, Olmsted's Green Necklace, Boston's cultural community and the Longwood Medical and Academic Area. It has fulfilled its responsibilities to all of them, as well as to the thousands of art lovers from all over the world who visit it every year.

