

Nicole Williams (Mentor: Dr. Lee Torda), “Reading The Gardner: Viewership, Readership, and Public Art.”

This research project investigates the relationship between viewership, the role of a viewer in a museum, and readership, the role of a reader with a novel, using the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum. The Gardner, for the purposes of this project, should be understood as a text – constructed through the joint and critical work of readers/viewers and the museum. Both of these actions require the same critical moves and interpretive movements to make meaning from the text. After an ongoing ethnographic study of the museum examining gallery exhibits, listening to lectures and visitors, exploring the history of, and identifying the role of Isabella Stuart Gardner as “author” to this text, it became clear that the Gardner Museum provides a more challenging and rewarding experience for viewers. Research of both museum theory and visual rhetoric helped prove that the setup of the Gardner exhibits, which required work on the part of the viewers, was the most conducive for learning. After considering reading theory and the work of theorists Eagleton, Rosenblatt, Iser, Sontag, and Smith a similarity between reading written texts and the texts of museums became apparent. In both cases readers and viewers have to work to fill in gaps and blanks in the text using their own knowledge to make meaning from what they are reading or viewing. In turn readers acquire more knowledge from texts that they put work into. Thus, it can be asked why is it more art museums aren’t arranged in the style utilized at the Gardner which emphasizes a broader learning experience.

Reading the Gardner: Viewership, Readership, and Public Art

During my senior year of high school I participated in Advance Placement studio art, which was a college level course that required the preparation of a portfolio to be sent off to the College Board for grading. Part of the AP program portfolio required what is called a concentration, where you create about ten pieces of work that revolve around a central theme. That theme could be a medium or a subject matter. I spent an entire summer thinking about what I could choose for a subject. The crafting of an idea is half the fun of creating art. The only limit placed upon me was that of my own imagination. I wanted my concentration to be something creative that would showcase my ability to make decisions and my command of a variety of media. Most importantly, I wanted to give the judges something to look at that would be out of the ordinary and allow them the opportunity to interpret a meaning on their own. I was most interested to see the reaction to the topic *The Journey of Trash* which I had chosen.

I picked through a lot of garbage cans that year. I would set up these barrels of trash still life's in the art room. I arranged tissues, empty shampoo bottles, and soap boxes. I had to leave little notes at the end of the day so the janitors wouldn't throw out my art. I made a trip to the janitorial staff to take pictures of mops and barrels. I photographed the dumpster outside my work when I was throwing away the garbage, and, at one point, I even chased a garbage truck around town.

The most memorable moment of that year was my field trip to the town dump. My teacher and I hopped into her little black convertible and drove fifteen minutes from

school down to the town dump. The dirt road that led up to the main land fill area was wet from the recent rain. I was afraid we were going to get stuck, but she insisted that we go up. The smell of decaying and rotten food filled our noses as we made our way up to the land fill. There were sea gulls everywhere ransacking the garbage for lunch. I took my photographs of the dump landscape and left as quick as I could get my teacher to move. Although, at times, picking through trash was disgusting, I was excited with my concentration project because I had taken individual elements and turn them into my own little masterpieces. Most importantly, I was intrigued with the idea of having them on display for others to ponder over them and discover a meaning of their own.

Perhaps my obsession with the act of interpreting and creating, which was the driving force in my art work, came from my love of reading and the searching for meaning I did between the pages of my favorite books. Growing up, I devoured books like they were food. In third grade I discovered the book *The Secret Soldier: The Story of Deborah Sampson*. It was a true story about a young woman who disguised herself as a man and enlisted in the American Revolution. I read it over and over and over again. Then when I was done, I read it again. In fact, I read it so many times I could recite the first pages from memory: “Deborah’s mother looked down at her five sleeping children. She had not slept all night...” I had the book out from the library so many times that no one else could get their hands on it. When I was a child I loved the book because it depicted a strong woman role model for me to look up to. I could understand the struggle Deborah endured and knew that I would be able to conquer anything that came into my own path. As an adult now, I look back upon the pages of *The Secret Soldier* and see a woman who saw an opportunity to attempt to make a better life for herself. Deborah

became the commander of her future, and it is that control she had that captured my interest. A control that exhibit myself through out my own interests of reading and art.

I spent a lot of my time at the Middleboro Public Library when I was growing up. Mom would bring us every summer to sign up for summer reading at the library. For every hour that I read, I got a sticker on my name card that hung on the wall. When I had ten hours, I earned a coupon good for free visits to museums and fun parks. I would check out twenty books at a time, the maximum number allowed by the library for a child, and return them, all read, the next week. Whole afternoons would pass as I sat on the porch trying to figure out the latest *Boxcar Children* mystery or laughing at the crazy housekeeping tactics of *Amelia Bedelia*. I spent all my time soaking up the pages of my books, and, at the end of the summer, I always had the most stars.

But I didn't read so I could get the passes, because I never used any of the ones I got. When I immersed myself in the pages of a book, I was in my own world far off from anything occurring in reality, a world in which I could study things and decide what I wanted to about what I had discovered. A world where no adult had to tell me what to do or what to think. It didn't matter if I was reading in a roomful of twenty screaming children or a room all to myself because I was intently focused on the world within the pages of my book. I would pretend to be Deborah Sampson and wonder what it would be like to pretend to be a man or, as I got older, figure out what happened to the elders of society in *The Giver*.

As I continued to high school I delved into the required reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Old Man and The Sea*, *The Scarlett Letter*, and *Julius Caesar*. Here I learned how to explore books in a different way paying attention to themes, style, and characters

in depth and I brought this knowledge with me to college. Throughout the last four years I have been able to explore a variety of texts that have opened my eyes to an even bigger world than I could have imagined back when I was busy with *Amelia Bedelia* and *The Boxcar Children*. Studying the work of reading theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser has taught me how when reading I use my own personal background and knowledge to interpret what I read. For this reason certain themes and arrangements in novels capture my attention more than others. For instance, the novel *Edgar Huntly* by Charles Brockden Brown is written with multiple points of view and moves back and forth between time and place. This kind of novel, which asks the reader to be very active and conscious of what is occurring, holds my attention more so than a novel with linear movement. These kinds of ideas are something that I never thought about as a child, but I was aware that I liked to read books that spurred my imagination.

In my mind both creating art and reading are similar activities. Both interests have granted me the power to create and control what I do. As an artist I choose my subject and design my composition. Likewise I control how I interpret the texts I read and what knowledge I take from them. Throughout my college career I have focused on my admiration of reading and writing but didn't cast my art interests too far off. Art and reading captivated me because they gave me power and control over what I was interpreting, and as a result I acquired knowledge of a breadth of subjects. Upon visiting the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston last year I realized that the idea of having control over interpretation was a powerful tool for learning for her as well. Gardner had the sole decision-making power of making the decisions regarding the planning, building,

and arranging of her museum. With this power she created a space where visitors could exercise their own power in interpreting and learning.

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It was a cold and windy January day as I stepped off the Green Line T at the Museum of Fine Arts station. As I pulled my scarf closer around my neck, I pushed my way around the bodies covered in North Face ski parkers and Ugg boots that were all heading to the large MFA building off to my right. I had a different agenda. The directions on the website had said to walk down Louise Prang St., but which way was that? I silently yelled at myself for not printing out the directions. Taking a guess, I walked over the trash littered train tracks, crossed the street, and walked left. I hadn't gone more than three feet when I found myself on a corner with taxi cabs, T buses, and Nissan Maximas whizzing by in each direction. With the faint sound of ambulance sirens ringing in my ear I looked up and saw a street sign that read Louis Prang St. Luck was on my side as I hurried down the sidewalk, crossing the street at the next intersection, wind blowing in my face and the sound of music from Rent coming through my headphones, and saw the large sandstone colored building looming from behind a brick wall. The entrance to the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum was facing the sidewalk and required passing through an iron fence with an open gate that was open to reach it.

I pushed open the double glass doors and was greeted by a young girl behind a counter. Reading the price board above the desk I presented her with my student ID and five dollars. After tucking away my receipt and grabbing a map off the desk, I moved toward the next doorway where a security guard dressed in a dark suit searched through my bag, and told me I would have to check my coat around the corner.

Peeling off my layers I made my way to coat check, completely distracted by the courtyard I passed along my way.

The organization utilized by Gardner in her museum requires interaction from the visitor and exemplifies the importance of the “critical visitor” who is held in high regard in modern museum theory. New theories of museum practices emphasize the need for visitors to be active and engage themselves with museum surroundings. Margaret Lindauer, who specializes in museum studies, discusses, in her article *The Critical Museum Visitor*, the steps a critical viewer should engage in when attempting to learn from a museum.

A critical viewer, after choosing an exhibit, needs to become aware of what they are expecting from the exhibit. Lindauer suggests in the article “...consciously describe your expectations, hopes, and assumptions” (204). Lindauer also stresses the need for visitors to pay attention to how their own personal background can affect their experience at the museum. These questions should be addressed before attending the exhibit. For instance, a visitor should know if they have any biases that may be relevant to the way in which they view an exhibit. In my own case, having never been the Gardner Museum before, I had no preconceived images to disrupt my initial reactions. However, I had done some research on the history of the museum and was aware of its conception by Isabella Stuart Gardner.

Landscape, according to Lindauer, plays the next essential role in viewing and critical thinking at the museum. When examining landscape, visitors should take into account the community in which the museum resides. What does it look like? Is it a big city? Is it a small town? Then consider the landscape of the museum itself, both inside

and out. What is the architectural structure of the building? Is it functional? Is it flamboyant? What kind of a message is it trying to convey? In other words, what a viewer sees on the exterior of the museum can affect the message a visitor receives from the interior. The Gardner Museum rests, as I have already said, on the outskirts of the hustle and bustle of downtown, along Boston's Fenway.

As for the interior of the museum, the critical viewer pays attention to how exhibits are installed. Is the museum public and organized in a typical gallery fashion? Or is it the arrangement collective like a private house museum? These observations are clues as to how to make sense of the exhibits. For instance at a house museum like the Gardner, the installations are about the relationships between the objects and not just the objects individually. The house museum arrangement is a tip to the visitor to pay special attention to the exhibits as a whole and to question the relationships between the objects. I have made numerous trips to the museum and continue to study the exhibits closely, looking for answers to that question.

The entire courtyard was bright with natural light that filtered in from the glass sky lights above it and, despite the harsh weather outside, there were lush green plants on just about every inch of stone and granite. The walls glowed a peach color and the sound of water trickled through Chinese fighting fish fountain statues at the head of the courtyard. The fountain sat just below the double-sided staircase that leads from the courtyard to the second floor. Balconies hung off the second and third floors, with marble columns around the entire space. In the middle of the space sat a tiled mosaic with a depiction of Medusa in the middle. My eyes darted about in amazement. I had never seen such architecture in person before. The details in the balconies, the statues

from centuries ago, and the lush gardens all combined to give Bostonians a taste of nineteenth century European High Society. Retreating from the glowing courtyard I turned down a hall near the exit, quickly left my coat with a young girl, and took a swing through a small room off the hallway.

The room was dim, lit only by a soft yellow glow. The walls were covered with paintings, some portraits and other landscapes, on every side and around every corner. Along one wall there were cases that held old letters, written to Gardner, in penmanship that was too difficult to decipher. I could tell the letters were from long ago because the paper was tinged yellow. Looking at the letters and paintings together I started thinking that Gardner was preparing to tell me a story. A story that was just as much about her own life as it was about art. My thoughts were interrupted by an older, chubby woman with grey hair, wearing a badge around her neck that identified her as a museum worker. She came over and asked, "Did you just get here or have you already been through the museum?" Upon hearing that I had just got there she told me to be sure I went to the information booth to borrow a guide book before going up into the galleries. She explained that nothing was labeled and that I wouldn't know what anything was without a guide.

Interestingly enough that is exactly why I was visiting the museum. Through the reading of numerous articles¹, The Gardner Museum website², and a biography of

¹"Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum." Knowledge Center. The Wallace foundation. 7 Dec 2005 <<http://www.wallacefoundation.org>>. Ozernoy, Ilana. "The Art of The Heist." U.S. News and World Report 139(2005): 42-44. Steinhaus, Rochelle. "Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum." Hidden Traces. Court TV. 7 Dec 2005 <<http://www.courtTV.com>>. Stewart, Arlene. "Feasting At Isabella's Table." Victoria 12(1998): 82-86.

² The Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum. 7 Dec 2005 <<http://www.isgm.org>>.

Gardner³ I learned about the history of the museum as well as it's prestigious founder. The art and collectibles within the museums walls all come from the private collection of Isabella Stuart Gardner and her husband, John Gardner (Jack for short), which they gathered using their wealth over the years.

Mrs Jack, as she was known by the other Boston debutantes, gave birth to a son John Lowell Gardner III, Jackie as his parents called him, on June 18, 1865. Never had two parents adored a child as the Gardners did Jackie. They paraded him about to their friends whenever they got the chance but the happiness wouldn't last as long as they hoped. After a brief illness Jackie, at the age of only two, died on March 15, 1865. To add to the Gardners' pain, Jack's sister Harriet died during child birth later that year. Depression overtook Mrs. Gardner as she locked out the world and grew weaker by the day. On the suggestion of her doctor, Jack Gardner packed up his wife and boarded a ship, setting sail for the first of many voyages to foreign lands. This was just the first of numerous trips over the couple's lifetime in which they collected art masterpieces, statues, sculptures, books, and other antiques.

Gardner and her husband had always discussed turning their collection into a museum. As their 152 Beacon St. apartment was growing much too small for their many treasures, and after her husband died suddenly on December 9, 1898, Mrs. Jack sprang into action. Now that Jack Gardner was gone his wife carried out his idea and, "Purchased a lot of land 100ft. by 150ft. on the Back Bay Park to build the museum upon" (Tharp 212). Gardner hired Willard T. Sears as her architect and insisted that

³ Tharp, Louise Hall. Mrs. Jack: A Biography of Isabella Stuart Gardner. 2. New York: McIntosh and Otis, 2003.

plans for the museum begin immediately. Gardner had a vision of exactly how she wanted her finished museum to look, down to the last detail.

Sears had his hands full as he discovered that Gardner was a very demanding woman with high standards. Sears was instructed to build the façade of a Venetian Palace turned inside out, so Gardner could plant flowers in the courtyard that would bloom all year. Her lists of changes and expectations grew longer as time passed and the building commenced. She wanted a garden on the outside of her home and there was no room for one, so the building had to be made narrower in the front. The stair case had to be reassembled twice because she wanted a particular rise, as to make one feel as though he or she was flying while descending. With each of these changes new drawings had to be made. Then, to slow the building process even more, Gardner refused to allow certain things to be done without her presence. For example, she insisted on advising on the installation of the columns, but “there were too many columns to set in one day, however, and Mrs. Gardner said she would not be back until the following Friday and that no columns were to be set while she was away” (Tharp 230).

At one point Gardner even traveled to New York to take a look at a theater building project to see how to best achieve the right sound for her music room. She insisted the walls be plastered for the perfection of sound quality and even painted them herself. Gardner climbed a ladder in the courtyard and, “splashed pale terra-cotta pink-some yellow, a dash of white. Miraculously, she achieved the effect of old Venetian walls under an Italian sky. Things were brought her as she called for them- a big brush, a sponge, some water” (Tharp 236). Gardner wasn’t finished though: it was now time to deal with her enormous collection.

Gardner moved into her fourth floor apartment at Fenway Court on November 18, 1901, and her real work began. She spent the next two years arranging her collection of priceless work within the walls of Fenway Court. An author and an artist both work to construct text and, although they have no control in deciding what the reader of the text will take from it, they choose the words or elements that make up that text. In the case of a novel the author chooses the theme, characters, and words. Theorist Louise Rosenblatt says, “the artist using the medium of words must, like other artists, make his appeal primarily to the senses if his desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions” (48). Similarly the artist decides what he or she will paint, draw, or sculpt, then chooses the materials and colors for the project. Isabella Stuart Gardner can be thought of as the author of the Gardner collection. She personally composed and installed each of her exhibits throughout the building; the resulting relationships of art and space should be considered a text.

Gardner arranged her collection in a way that she thought would be most effective to the viewer. The style she implemented in her private museum is what is known as a house museum setup and could be compared to the arrangement of a living room. Currently the Gardner is one of only six art museums in the world that use the house museum arrangement. The other five include “Musée Condé” in the Chateau Chantilly near Paris, the Wallace Collection in London, the Huntington Art Collection in Pasadena, the Frick Collection in New York City, and Dumbarton Oaks in Washington D.C. (Higonnet 135).

According to museum theorist Andrew McClellan, this organization involves “thematic arrangements that disobey normal sequences of school and period and new

contextual approaches to nonwestern and religious art” (xvii). Gardner didn’t pay attention to classifying according to genre, artist, or date, but rather paid attention to shape, color, and light. In this way the Gardner Museum is an intimate space in which viewers can experience art in a different way than at a traditional museum.

In her biography about Gardner entitled *Mrs. Jack*, Louise Hall Tharpe writes:

“The Raphael Room and the Dutch Room were the glories of the second floor. From the Beacon Street Parlor came red brocade to cover at least part of the Raphael Room Walls. There was more to match or harmonize in boxes sent home from Europe. Around the doors, along walls at chair rail height, up corners and at the ceiling line ran a delicate white meander pattern—a vine cut from wood...Any decorator would have told her (Gardner) that it was impossible to combine antique Italian brocade with this French-inspired modern trimming. But any unprejudiced observer would have to admit that the effect was good. (239)

Gardner did things, such as combining unheard elements like Italian and French furnishings, that no one else dared to do. Gardner left the labels out of her collection, unlike traditional museums, because she thought visitors shouldn’t like something based on who it was attributed to, but rather that they should pay attention to each work and decide what they thought of it on their own.

She dared visitors to think for themselves when they came to her museum.

The Titian Room on the third floor was Gardner’s favorite room of all those in her home, housing her greatest masterpiece, Titian’s *Rape of Europa*. After the painting finally arrived from Europe Gardner sat in the Titian room and admired the work for hours. She wrote in a letter:

I am breathless over the *Europa*, even yet! I am back here tonight... after a two days' orgy. The orgy was drinking myself drunk with *Europa* and then sitting for hours in my Italian Garden at Brookline, thinking and dreaming about her. (Goldfarb 118)

I climb the marble staircase to the third floor, passing through the dark blue and gold of the Veronese Room where the angels in *The Coronation of Hebe* by Paolo Veronese dance across the ceiling, into the Titian Room glowing with afternoon sunlight from the courtyard. Immediately I am immersed in a sea of burgundy and gold which I associate with wealth.

The Titian Room is always buzzing with visitors. On an April afternoon, as I wander within the room's burgundy walls splashed with sunlight, I watch a guard in a dark suit hasten toward a tour guide as she enters with her group from the Long Gallery. The man is an older gentleman with a beard that matches the few white hairs that still cling to his head. He maintains a serious and almost intimidating expression at all times. Pointing toward the tour group already in the corner he motions the petite woman toward the exit. There were already about twenty five people in the room before the second group entered, and my guess is that more than one tour group can't be in a room at once.

As the second group crowds near the exit I make my way over to the first tour group that is gathering in front of Gardner's favorite *Europa* and listening intently to their tour guide. A young woman with dark hair pulled back from her face, wearing a long skirt and sweater, points to the painting and explains, "You see how the tail of the bull here is not straight and leads the eye directly to Cupid?" She goes on to discuss how *Europa's* body appears as if it is about to fall off the bull into the water and she also

points out how Titian painted in a circular pattern, as all the elements of the work are in a circle.

The guide then talks about the elements surrounding the masterpiece and why Gardner installed them that way. My eyes glance beneath the painting as I hear the guide mention that hanging below the painting is a piece of green fabric with a tassel pattern that was once part of a dress belonging to Gardner. She had placed the textile there to reflect the green color in the water of *Europa*. The woman points out how a ceramic plate decorated with a blue wave pattern that rests on the table mimics the waves crashing on the shore in the Titian. She also points out a sculpture, called a putto, sitting next to the plate that is resting in the same position as the body of Europa. Listening to the guide I realize that the object surrounding this painting are not there just for a pleasing color display. The sculpture, fabric panel, plate, and other objects in the arrangement are positioned to help the visitor understand the painting better. By mimicking colors and positions the objects help reinforce and point out the details in the painting that a viewer might miss. Finally, the young woman said Gardner installed the painting in this location on the wall, near a window, so the morning sun could illuminate it each day.

I had already learned the high importance of light in this museum during a lecture I attended back in February. On that afternoon I sat in the Tapestry Room, named so for its embroidered masterpieces that cover just about every inch of wall space, on one of about 200 dark wooden chairs arranged in rows. The large room reminded me of a medieval banquet hall used for large functions and elaborate dinner parties. As my eyes squinted through the dim lighting to identify what the tapestries around me consisted of, museum volunteer Mita Fenton, an older woman about 5'7" with sandy brown hair

flecked with gray and dressed neatly in slacks, a black sweater, and sneakers of the same color, approached our group of about 15 in the back corner of the long dark room. (It was a free public talk so people came and went as they pleased). Along the wall to the left there were windows covered with transparent shades, which allowed minimal light through. Additional light found its way into the room through the small openings that offered a view of the courtyard to our right. I got the feeling that Gardner was trying to keep the light as dim as possible in the room but, at that moment, I wasn't sure why. Fenton's talk was mainly a biographical sketch of the life of Gardner which was spoken in such a clear and exact tone, without note cards of any kind, that it felt like it had been given a hundred times before. However, Fenton began her talk with some advice for all the museum visitors, discussing the role light played within the walls of the Gardner.

Listening intently while jotting down Fenton's name in my notebook I watched her walk over to a painting displayed adjacent to the windows on the left. She began, "Now that your eyes have had a chance to adjust to the light, look at this piece. This is St. Engracia dated 1375 by Bartolome Bermejo." Fenton points out that Gardner has positioned this piece by the window to pick up the light. If you follow the light through the painting you can see that it moves the viewer through the hairstyle, impressive details of the throne where she sits and each fold of St. Engracia's gown. The light throughout the museum in Gardner's time was candlelight, and the candles were set so that if a visitor followed the rays of light throughout the museum, they would miss nothing important. Today the museum is, of course, lit with electrical lights, but these lights are dim, similar in strength to candle light, and are positioned the way Gardner positioned her candles. There was my answer. The lighting throughout the rooms of the museum varied

to direct the attention of visitors to particular objects that Gardner highlighted. That is why the Tapestry Room was so dark with the exception of the light cast over some paintings by the windows.

Gardner wanted to educate her museum visitors and expose them to all the great cultures in the world that she and her husband were able to visit. When visitors come to the Gardner they are not just able to view masterpieces from renowned artists such as Rembrandt, Sargeant, and Botticelli, but they also step into rooms that hold unique collectibles from a variety of cultures. Visitors are able to see collections of original manuscripts, tables and chairs from Italy, France, and a handful of other countries, and , among other things, classic architecture of Spanish and Venetian design. To walk through the Gardner is like taking a voyage across the seas. It is this mixing of genres and elements that engages visitors and allows them to learn about cultures other than their own.

It is a difficult task to promote learning in an art museum. According to Falk and Dierking, authors of *Learning From Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, in order to intrigue a potential learner, a museum exhibit must present a certain challenge to the visitor as well as require skills in line with those of the visitor. In essence it must offer enough to capture and hold a viewer's attention. Not every exhibit will interest every visitor at a museum; instead visitors must freely choose what they want to look at, and if they want to learn from it. The exhibits picked are, "ones that interest the visitor and provide appropriate levels of intellectual, physical, and emotional challenge" (Dierking 25). The kinds of exhibits that generally ask a visitor to do work to make meaning are commonly found at Science and Children's Museums. For instance

the Museum of Science in Boston has numerous hands on exhibits to help visitors, including an entire room where there is nothing but hands on experiments to learn about sounds, bones, and dinosaurs, among other things. Interactive exhibits promote learning and help viewers to commit facts and ideas to memory. Art museums tend to be a different experience because touching the collections is forbidden. Gardner tried to find an analogy to the interactive exhibit by asking her visitors to do work with her collection.

As I moved throughout the museum I participated in the kind of interactive work that Gardner had promoted. After exiting the lecture in the Tapestry Room I found myself in the Dutch Room among portraits of many important European figures including Mary Tudor and Queen Isabella. This room is dark, but the few fixtures and the sun from the courtyard provide enough light to view what was important just as Gardner, via Fenton, suggested to me. On the same wall as the doorway leading to the Tapestry Room, on the opposite end, hangs a portrait by Anthonis Mor of Queen Mary Tudor, whose face depicts a serious and strong composure but is softened by the light of the museum. She wears a dress of a deep green and rests upon a chair of red satin with gold embroidery.

Beneath this painting is a sofa, and to the right sits a chair of the same red satin and gold embroidery as in the painting. Again the color pattern of red and gold combined with the portraits of royal figures gives me a sense that Gardner is identifying with the wealthy figures who rank high in social class. From the portrait of Queen Mary Tudor the light grabs the viewer's attention around the corner, passing another painting, and landing on a portrait of a young boy who stands draped in a cape of red satin. Three chairs of the same color rest below. In this corner Gardner uses light to guide the viewer through important paintings, but she has also set up an installation that is pleasing to the

eye and emphasizes the color red yet again. Upon careful inspection I found that similar colors and embroidery patterns linked the paintings together. The furniture within this room, a sofa and chairs with intricate red and gold embroidery, reflect upon the lifestyle of those in the paintings. Lavish furniture could only be afforded by those of a particular high class ranking. By placing these expensive objects next to the portraits not only does Gardner provide a visually pleasing color palette, but she also helps to explain to visitors the class and lifestyle of those in the paintings. Each element of the displays in this room come together to speak this story and in this way the masterpiece is the entire exhibit, furniture and all, not just the paintings. .

As I continue through the dark walls of the Dutch Room I notice the same types of pleasing visuals occurring elsewhere. Along the courtyard wall hangs one of Gardner's prized possessions, a purchase which, according to her biography, compelled Gardner to open the museum. The painting is labeled, one of very few labels in the museum, *Rembrandt self-portrait 1629*. In the painting Rembrandt is wearing a robe adorned with gold details that match the color of the intricately carved frame that holds the portrait. Beneath this portrait, just to the right, sits a dark brown chest carved with the same intricate designs as those embroidered on Rembrandt's robe. On each side of the chest is a chair upholstered in the same gold as the paintings frame. None of these pieces are connected to each other beyond the aesthetic qualities they share. Further, perhaps the most resonant feature of the room is not even the artwork itself: the light that envelops the face of Rembrandt, light that Gardner worked entire collections around and allowed to guide architectural decisions for the building, draws the viewer's attention directly to Rembrandt's face—a fact that Rembrandt himself would have appreciated.

On the far end of the courtyard wall, to the left of the door that leads back to the staircase, there is a portrait similar to the example that Fenton used of St. Engracia. The painting (I discovered after looking it up in the guide book after I went home) is of Isabella Clara Eugenia, Archduchess of Austria, dating to 1598 by Frans Pourbo II. The light illuminates the face of the Archduchess as well as the intricate details on her gown. As I admired the work a couple, probably in their late thirties, came up behind me to look. As I stepped aside I heard the man, who was neatly dressed in khakis and a dress shirt, say to the woman, also well dressed but wearing heels that looked rather uncomfortable, “look at the details in that painting.” The painting rests in a large bronze frame that is adorned with carvings of vines, flowers, and two cherubs that sit at the top of it, along with a large column on each side. Below the portrait of the Archduchess sits a chest carved with flowers and vines similar to those on the frame. Here it is clear that visitors are being drawn to the details. Perhaps this is due to Gardner’s focus on using other objects, like she did in the *Europa* exhibit, to draw attention to details.

Multiple elements like those Gardner used for her installations wouldn’t be found together in a public art museum, and that is what makes the experience of the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum unique. A public art museum can be thought of as a traditional art museum in its set up. The characteristics that would constitute traditional museum design include classification among genres and time periods, as well as labels for each piece. In the introduction to the book *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* McClellan explains that, “In the modern era, the rational classification of art has entailed the separation of art types and media, high from low, western from non-

western, and organization by nationality, or ‘school’, and historical period” (xvii). The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is an example of the traditional museum.

At the Museum of Fine Arts, whose building can be seen from the front entrance of the Gardner Museum just to the right across the Fenway, there is no blending of different genres, time periods, or geographic locations within exhibits. Enter through the Huntington Avenue front door and off to the right there are Roman, Greek, and Egyptian collections; each collection divided separately from the other. To the left there is Islamic, Korean, and Japanese, also divided accordingly. To the back of the museum there are Mid-20th Century American paintings which lead to other American works of different dates grouped by time period in each room. There is 18th Century American Colonial Arts, Early 19th Century, American Folk Art, Mid 19th Century, Late 19th Century, and Early 20th Century. Head upstairs and the large European collection is divided amongst many different rooms. How? By time period, of course, and there is a label at each entry way notifying the viewer of the century the contents inside came from.

This system can have its benefits. For instance, on a recent visit I was able to go directly to the paintings of Monet and Renoir housed in the Impressionist room on the second floor and to the Contemporary American Collection beyond the lower rotunda without having to spend time going through the Egyptian or Chinese works that didn’t interest me. In a large space, where there is so much to be seen, this can help visitors move through the process quickly so they can see everything they want to. At the same time, though, they are missing out on the chance to make meaning from viewing different types of works juxtaposed together as they are at the Gardner. There are no pieces of fabric hanging next to paintings because they complement one another or chairs with

upholstery that coincides with that in the painting above it. Each work is hung separately distinct of what is around it. Gallery lights shine directly on each piece equally, giving no importance to one thing over another. Walls are painted with flat, neutral tones so as not to distract from the works.

Perhaps the most significant difference at the MFA and most other typical museums is the use of the traditional label. Each piece at the MFA has a label that gives its title, artist, medium, and size. I visited one of the special exhibits entitled *Degas to Picasso* which looks at modern works. I moved within the flat gray walls with the bright spot lights directing toward the canvases around me and couldn't help but notice my eye consistently drifting to labels, some rather large with as many as 25 lines of text, next to each painting. After the usual information there was a paragraph that discussed what the painting was about and what the artist was trying to attempt. I moved to the next one and found the same thing. In contrast, new museum theory stresses that, "object labels start with concrete visual information and extend to no more than 50 words" (Lindauer 213). Private museums, such as the Gardner, use no labels or labels with very little text like that proposed in new museum theory. The labels used at the MFA prohibited me from trying to make any separate meaning from what I was viewing. Each label was so large that my eye was immediately drawn to it and as a result I read the museum's interpretation of the painting before I even had the chance to analyze it. Then I found myself looking for the interpretation written on the label, instead of attempting to make my own.

Back at the Gardner there are more than enough opportunities to make meaning, connections and interpretations. The Early Italian Room on the second floor is currently closed while the collection undergoes preservation and new lighting is installed, but I

have visited it many times before and find it a very intimate space. Walking to the wall on the right of the stairwell I see a large rectangular painting with a blue background labeled *Pessollino (1423-1437) Cassoni Panels*. The museum guide book explains that this is one of two panels (the other hangs on the other end of the wall), originally the decorative front panel of a *cassoni* chest that held the valuables of an Italian family. This particular panel is called *The Triumphs of Fame, Time, and Eternity* and was painted by Francesco di Stefano. Glancing to the case below the painting, I lean in closer to get a better look at the jewels inside it. There are a number of beads on the left of the case that appear Chinese in style and contain colors that are all visible in the *Cassoni Panel* above. There are blues and warm tones of pink that reflect within both items. The case also contains a table cloth the same shade of blue as the background of the painting and the two chairs to the left of the case and two to the right are upholstered in this blue.

Another installation on the wall opposite the doorway I entered through grabs my attention with glimmers of golds. The main focal point is a large painting (*Saint Elizabeth of Hungary* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti) set above eye level, high on the wall. It looks to be an altar piece, one of two in the room, because its frame is large, gold, and comes to a point at the top. Below the painting rests a large piece of furniture with gold candlesticks on each side. While standing in front of the exhibit I realize that there are fabric panels that hang on each side of the area so no other works can be seen through my peripheral vision. A similar pattern and texture exists within the candlesticks, fabric, and altar piece.

The Early Italian Room may be small and feel rather crowded with the combination of furniture, art work, and other collectibles, just like in all of the galleries of

the Gardner, but color, arrangement, and light guided my eyes through the aspects of it. The small space also works because it creates a very intimate atmosphere, similar to that of a chapel, which is suitable for the numerous religious works on display in this room. Again the experience was different than the MFA because it is about all the elements together rather than individual works. Looking at the *Cassoni Panel* in combination with the case of beads and the chairs around it is different than just looking at the panel alone. It becomes more about understanding why the items are together rather than just about one piece of art.

When viewers put in work and make meaning from an exhibit it is what museum theorists Falk and Dierking call a flow experience. The flow experience satisfies museum visitors' thirst for knowledge. Visitors are left with a sense of accomplishment which encourages them to continue searching for meaning from other exhibits (Dierking 25). That is exactly the feeling I had when I made the connections between the items in the Raphael room and their reflections upon the standing in society of those depicted in the portraits hanging on the walls. I was excited that I had understood the challenge Gardner had presented me with. I felt like I was back in my high school art class layering together my acrylic paints to paint the perfect flower. I was in charge of the process of interpreting and composing.

As I sought to make meaning at the Gardner I realized the experience was very similar to the interpretations I make when reading. I dig through the pages of a novel, pulling out bits and pieces of information, trying to make meaning. I pay close attention to some characters and discard others. I make lists of themes that interest me in a novel and focus in on them while casting others aside. As a reader I am in charge of the text and

of what I chose to do with the material I take in, just as I am in charge of understanding the exhibits at the Gardner. The author of a text has put the elements all together for the reader but it is the reader who decides what to do with them. Understanding the reader's role in literary theory is a study that has recently emerged (Eagleton 64). Literary theorists have at times focused their studies on the author and what he or she was trying to accomplish. Theorists also examined texts and focused on the meaning from them. Strangely enough theorists often opt out of focusing on the fact that without readers to interpret texts there would be just books sitting on shelves. Theorist Rosenblatt says, "A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (24). Before this time literary theorists never took into consideration that the making of meaning lay on the shoulders of the reader. In essence texts are pointless without readers to rummage through their pages and make sense of them.

What readers do with texts is to infer from their own knowledge to fill in gaps and blanks in texts. Eagleton refers to this process as reception theory (64). With reception theory, "The text itself is no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of knowledge into meaning" (Eagleton 66). The process of inferring meaning from a text is how a reader communicates with it. When a reader infers meaning from a text, or an art exhibit, they do so based on their own knowledge and that means that each interpretation will be different, because each reader has their own personal set of beliefs and knowledge that make up the background which they will use to infer meaning. According to Rosenblatt, the reader, "must draw on his past experience with life and language as the raw materials out of which to shape the new experience

symbolized on the page” (25). In other words the reader relates what they read on the page to their own life and interprets using what they know from their personal life. Since each reader has different values and experiences each interpretation of a text will be different.

Reception theory is applicable to more than just written texts. Its ideas lend nicely to museums as well and the role of the critical museums visitor, which involves examining the written aspects of the exhibit. A critical viewer should consider how much is said and how much is not said in writing. Lindauer suggests, “Read between the lines. Whose knowledge is presented? What is explicitly asserted and what is implied or unspoken...To whom does it speak and for what purpose?” (213). These kinds of questions provoke emotions about the exhibit and help to give an understanding of its purpose and theme. Because the Gardner Museum relies very little on the written word, it’s visitors must ask a lot of questions about the *theory* behind Gardner’s exhibits and follow the steps of a critical museum visitor.

In the Raphael Room, a large room of crimson and gold off the Early Italian Room, there are more installations to be interpreted. Three paintings hang on the wall in the northwest corner depicting The Madonna and Child. The one that hangs to the far left is *Madonna and Child with a Swallow* by Pesellino from about 1440-1450. According to Goldfarb, “The Madonna, resembling a noble classical matron, seems lost in thought, meditating on the sorrows, also indicated by her red robe, that her son must endure for humanity’s salvation”(73). Resting on the floor below the paintings are three tables, a long one centered between two shorter ones. On each side of the long table is a chair, and on top of each table is a candlestick that rests on a red table cloth. The candles provide

the feeling of an altar in front of The Madonna. I noticed that the red of the table cloth is the same shade of red worn by the Madonna in each of the paintings. So it is my guess that Gardner chose a red table cloth to reflect the red in the paintings and draw the focus back to the sorrow felt by the Madonna.

Of course it is highly doubtful that visitors self-consciously follow the steps of the critical visitor, checking them off as they complete each one. It is a lot of work to ask a visitor to do such a thing. However, the Gardner uses the visual to evoke questions from its visitors so that they subconsciously follow the steps of the critical visitor. In the book *Picturing Texts* the authors, who focus on the study of visual rhetoric, explain that, “In addition to thinking about the immediate and broader contexts, you also need to read with an eye for intertextuality, the way the texts build upon and consciously refer to other texts” (Faigley 16). The Gardner asks that visitors build upon each object that they examine and decide why things are relational to one another. The idea of building upon the visual messages speaks back to reading theory and the building upon gaps and cues in the text.

Gardner has also in a sense altered images and played with texts in her exhibits to send a particular message to the visitor. In this instance Gardner can be thought of as a photographer or artist who is choosing a composition. She has chosen what objects make up her exhibits, what ones to leave out, and the ways in which to display them. It is similar to the altering of photographic images with modern technology. For instance, former Soviet Union President Joseph Stalin altered historical photographs. Stalin altered a photo from 1940 depicting himself and three other men, one of which was a man by the name of Yezhov, walking down a street. He had Yezhov removed after he had him

executed to death by firing squad (Faigley 321). Stalin's goal was to remove any remnants that the two were in fact at one point friends. In both cases images are being played with to send a distinct message to the viewer. Sometimes that altering is successful in attracting the attention of a critical viewer, and other times, it is not.

From what I have seen over the past months, there are those who visit the Gardner with the mindset that it is a typical museum; they simply come to look at the great masterpieces that call it home. Still there are others that meander through without guidebooks, open to all Gardner has to offer as a unique, one of a kind experience. They learn to appreciate the museum in the way I have come to.

On a visit early this summer I was walking through the Tapestry Room and noticed two women juggling guide books and maps, long, black, telephone-shaped audio guides pressed to their ears. The women were both about 5'5" and looked to be in their 50's, wearing cropped pants, blouses, and walking sneakers. Standing in the back of the room I busily read a sign informing visitor that the Early Italian collection is being stored in the Tapestry Room while the room is closed and notice the two women by the windows glancing from their books up to the walls. Clearly they were searching for something. After a few moments the two women stop in front of the *St. Engracia* painting and press their audio guides to their ears. After they are finished they move on to the next room, the Short Gallery, which I entered moments before them. They stopped to look at nothing else along the way.

As I flipped through the cases of pencil drawings on the right side of the room, just to the right of the entryway, one of the women says to the other, "What room is this? It must be the Little Salon." Not convinced with her guess, she asked the guard who is

seated in a small chair near the other door way. “This is the Short Gallery,” answers the petite dark haired woman in an unidentifiable accent. The two women go back to their books and press their guides back to their ears as they move to the painting of Gardner in Venice by Anders Zorn, hanging on the opposite end of the wall where I continue to peruse the drawings. A minute or so passes and the women move out of the corner having looked at nothing else.

They were so wrapped up in finding the pieces that the audio guides and maps point out as masterpieces that they didn’t look at anything installed around or with them. To these women it would make no difference if the paintings were hung singularly like at a typical museum. Of course, there is nothing wrong with what these two were doing considering it is what is done at most museums across the world; it is just not what Gardner intended to happen in her museum. The women were not active in the experience of interpretation of the installations, making meaning, and trying to find connections in what they were viewing. Instead they admired works only at their face value.

On that same summer afternoon I noticed a family, an older balding gentleman with silver hair, a middle-aged woman of Asian descent who could possible have been his wife, and a young dark haired girl, about fifteen, who moved throughout the museum at a slow pace, admiring everything closely, without guides of any kind. I first came across them in the Short Gallery while the two women viewed the Zorn painting, and I watched them yet again in the busy Raphael Room. As I stood on one of the small balconies peering through the rays of sun into the courtyard, the family examined the *Tragedy of Lucretia* by Boticelli. Turning around to leave the balcony I saw the silver

haired man and young girl bend down to get a better view of a painting that lay across the front of a chest which sits on the ground beneath the Boticelli. I saw the family again upstairs on the third floor where they walked down the Long Gallery and lifted the cloths that cover the display cases that line each side of the narrow room, examining the letters and books displayed in each. The family was interacting with the museum and trying to make meaning.

I am sure Gardner would have happily befriended the family of three, as they were making their own meaning as she had wished. But was either of these groups doing anything wrong? Maybe not. The two women simply felt they got more out of the museum by studying the masterpieces, while the family enjoyed the whole experience of the museum. Each group had their own beliefs that guided them through their viewing and reading of the text of the Gardner. However, according to reception theory, those that worked to make meaning on their own learned more. The family at the Gardner didn't bother with maps or audio guides that colored their views and told them what to think. They took the text as it was and built connections based upon what they were given. They engaged in the steps of a critical viewer and examined and questioned the landscape of the museum.

As readers continue to infer and make connections with a text, they are building knowledge. Making meaning from a text involves building up knowledge as you read through it or, in the case of a museum, walk through it. Eagleton writes:

Reading is not a straightforward linear movement, a merely cumulative affair: our initial speculations generate a frame of reference within which to interpret what comes next may retrospectively transform our original

understanding, highlighting some features of it and back grounding others.
(67)

For instance when readers are working with a text, they are dealing with themes, characters, setting, and plot. If a character is introduced on page four and is not spoken of again until page fifty-four, the reader needs to remember what they learned about the character back on page four. A reader needs to cue up that knowledge and bring it back into the frame of what they are working with. Readers then have to decide what parts of a text are important on the journey to making meaning and what parts they don't need to consider at that moment. For instance in the novel *Edgar Huntly* by Charles Brockden Brown, the reader is introduced to the character Saresfield for the first ten or so pages of the book and then he is gone. There is no explanation of where he went or what happened until he reappears again some 200 pages later. What's a reader what was I to make of that? The author had introduced the character thoroughly at the beginning of the book, and the reader had to revert back to that knowledge to understand his reappearance later. A similar situation occurs in the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Here the author continuously moves back and forth between multiple story lines, which requires the reader to remember the details of each one even if a particular situation hasn't been talked about in 50 pages.

A reader also needs to be aware of what is said in a text and what is implied or left out. According to Iser, "what is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light" (34). The blanks between what is revealed and what is not work as a tool for readers to create meaning. Sometimes theories are developed by readers in the opening pages of a text. For example in a murder mystery readers may

think they know who committed the crime in the first ten pages but, as they read on and pay attention to small blanks, realize that character could not even be a suspect. The readers have to always be aware of everything they have read throughout a text and be capable of accessing that information when needed. No information can ever be completely discarded.

Similarly, at the Gardner Museum visitors have to keep track of all information, just as readers of a text do. I constantly learn new things or see new things each time I visit. Recently I noticed that in the Gothic Room, on the third floor of the museum, the top of the wall all the way around the room is adorned with miniature portraits. Somehow I had missed those paintings each time that I had previously visited. So now the room had more to it that I had to think about. There were all the things I had seen prior to this recent discovery and these new paintings to add along with that knowledge. Reading is a constant movement back and forth; it is a process of intellectual growth. The mind is challenged to decide what is important, what is not, and what those important elements mean. So to with the Gothic Room's furnishings: the small paintings on the very top of the wall help to break up the dark wooden rafter ceiling and dark browns of the room. Gardner has drawn attention to the architecture of the room that is above eye level by using the paintings to lure the eye up.

Building knowledge, making connections, and filling in gaps in a text results in learning new knowledge that could not have been gained otherwise. When readers are asked to do work with a text they receive more information from it. The same can be said of museum visitors who learn more from an exhibit in which they are asked to participate. Eagleton says of this kind of work that asks for participation from the reader:

Rather than merely reinforce our given perceptions, the valuable work of literature violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes for understanding. (68)

A reader that puts work into a text will be rewarded with meaning from that text. That meaning is developed only through stages of building knowledge while working with the text. The key though is for the work to be put in. If a reader has no interest in a particular work, or no knowledge of the subject, he or she will not be able to find that meaning. Also there are simply some readers that won't be willing to do the work. I constantly passed visitors at the Gardner, such as the two women, who are not putting in the work to get the most meaning. I myself have read books that I have no interest in and don't bother to engage in the effort to develop meaning. It is the readers' choice whether or not he or she will attempt to make meaning. But that is the choice of the reader and that is the point of the whole argument of reception theory and free-choice learning: the reader has been presented the opportunity to learn.

Today more and more Americans are visiting museums in search of new information. Falk and Dierking write, "Today...somewhere between two and three out of every five Americans visit a museum at least once a year" (2). Museum theorists Falk and Dierking argue that Americans are realize the important role museums can play in their lives if they choose to participate in the learning process. Of course this learning can only occur if the museum exhibits are set up to challenge the visitor. A museum like the Gardner does more than simply motivate visitors to participate; it *requires* them to. When visitors can interact with an exhibit and it engages them intellectually, they are more likely to remember it. Thus, their experience stays with them beyond the length of

the trip and becomes a part of their working theory of the world, a working theory made richer for interaction with the remarkable text of the Gardner.

In recent years curators have begun to implement elements of the private museum into their installations. Theorist McClellan acknowledges:

Lately we have come to recognize what has long gone unseen, namely that public museums are also the product of individual choices and curatorial vision, and we now find curators acknowledging authorship of installations (in the form of signed wall labels) and museums experimenting with alternative, in some cases pre-modern ordering systems. (xvii)

He goes on to state that, “ironically, private collections like Gardner’s, once the embodiment of everything rejected by the large survey museum, have become a model of sorts for progressive installations” (xvii). It has taken almost a century for museum curators to embrace a new concept for museum organization. Perhaps they have realized that Gardner, who implemented the house museum style in her own museum over a century ago, was right all along when it came to immersing people into the world of art. In her article “Museum Insight” Anne Higonnet says, “class, gender, nationality, and race” play a role in the construct of private museums (135). Having these elements within the Gardner result in museum visitors that leave not only with a better understanding of art, but also with knowledge pertaining to the social construct of the world they live in.

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