

“C’est Mon Plaisir”

Nestled in the middle of Boston, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (ISG) is a modern-day sanctuary. The stunning aesthetics of the museum stand in stark contrast to the harshness of the city, giving visitors the feeling that they have entered another world. Opening in 1903, the ISG Museum has been a staple of Boston culture. Created by Isabella Stewart Gardner herself, the museum features a plethora of rare and prestigious artworks, as well as astonishing architecture and a vibrant garden. Curated by ISG, the museum is made up of her personal collection and put on display not in chronological order or by art period, but by Isabella's preference. Isabella stated that the creation of the museum was ““For the education and enjoyment of the public forever”” (Matthews). The philanthropic roots from which the museum was created align with Isabella's character. She had her motto, ‘C’est mon plaisir,’ a French phrase that when translated reads ‘It is my pleasure,’ carved into the brickwork above the front door at her museum. Her museum is a gift to the public, created in the aim of serving the community. After her death in 1924, Isabella stated in her will that the museum not be changed after her death, leaving her vision intact. To this day, the museum reflects her vision as it continues to serve the community. Through its philanthropic roots, the artists in residence program, and the dynamic nature of the museum, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum embodies is an embodiment of socially engaged art.

Socially engaged art was a concept introduced to me by Pablo Helguerra, in his essay titled *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. He initially defines socially engaged art (SEA) as “Porous” and “A working concept” (Helguera 2), but later, says that “Not only does each SEA project depend on a community for its existence, but such projects are, most people agree, community-building mechanisms”(Helguera 9). Socially engaged art is a concept that is in direct

relation to its surrounding community. . From my takeaway of Helguera's essay, I would define SEA as any piece of art that is fluid and aims to inspire social change within a community.

A big part of what makes the ISG socially engaging is the artist-in-residence program. The artists-in-residence program invites artists from different backgrounds and cultures to "Live, think and work in the Museum" (Gardner Museum). In this program, the artists create a piece is displayed in the museum and presented to the public. The program was invented by Isabella but has evolved into a more inclusive and diversity-driven project since her death. The artists-in-residence program often features elements of the community and highlights women and people of color. It promotes community upliftment and engagement, creating a socially engaging environment. Carla Fernandez's project, *Tradition is not Static*, is a perfect example of SEA at ISG. This exhibit explores the way people express themselves through their clothing as well as the artistry and significance behind textile creation. She weaves in her own experience within the traditional Mexican textile community and in doing so, brings a part of her culture to ISG. Visitors learn and reflect on their own community through her piece, leaving with an improved sense of cultural knowledge. The impact that Carla has on the community through her art is impactful, and adds to the socially engaging elements of the museum.

Another artist-in-residence program that has a socially engaging effect on the community is *The Living Room*. Created in 2000 by Lee Mingwei, a Taiwanese-American artist, *The Living Room* is an exemplary standard for SEA. When it was first created, it was an exhibit that modeled a living room, capturing the essence and warmth residing in those spaces. Community members were also invited to bring in their own collections and present them to an audience. The space was used to further the community and existed within the community, capturing the essence of SEA. Now, *The Living Room* has become a permanent installment at the ISG.

Although it is not the same, *The Living Room* still embodies the warm community aspect that it always has. Community members are still invited to share and use the space to present anything they would like, encouraging creativity and expression within the surrounding community. When I visited the Gardner, *The Living Room* was my favorite exhibit. When I first entered, I was immediately greeted by the sense of warmth that *The Living Room* is known for. The inviting atmosphere that the exhibit created was unlike any other I had witnessed at a museum. Sometimes, SEA is hard to define, but you can easily tell something is socially engaged when you see it, and I feel like *The Living Room* is a perfect example of this.

The Gardner Museum is also a very fluid place. Although Isabella stated in her will that everything be left untouched, there are still aspects of the museum that must change, like the courtyard. The courtyard is placed in the center of the museums and is a living, breathing piece of artwork. The statues and various art pieces that live in the courtyard are surrounded by plants and flowers that change each month (Gardner Museum). When I entered the museum, I was struck by the beauty of the courtyard. I felt the life that was present in the garden and was immediately aware that I was surrounded by a living piece of artwork. Change in flowers and plants within the courtyard is very socially engaging, as it embodies the fluidity of the definition. The courtyard helps to bring the ISG to life and through it, Isabella is brought to life through the expression of the plants and flowers.

Although the architecture and social projects are important, I would argue that the history of the artwork is equally as valuable to the socially engaging aspects of the museum. I personally am not well-versed in the art history world, but I was able to identify artists I had heard of like Vermeer and Rembrandt. The amount of pure history that the museum holds through its artwork is fascinating, leaving me daydreaming when I reflected upon the history and stories that each

painting held. The way that Isabella organized the art was fascinating as well. Instead of organizing them in chronological order or by style, she placed them in a way that told a story; it tells her story. The time and care that she put into the museum through its structure was clear making me think about the level of care she had for her community. Isabella is described as a philanthropist (Matthews), and I was able to experience her generosity firsthand when visiting the museum, as it was evident that she wanted to share the wonder that art holds. Her philanthropic personality is evident not only in the paintings, but in the museum as a whole. I had the feeling that I had been invited over to a friend's house when I visited the museum and was greeted with that same hospitality. From the architecture, to the courtyard to the artwork, to the security guards and the other guests, the atmosphere was impeccable and reminded me more of a social gathering than a museum. Isabella has created a masterpiece, composed of many tiny little masterpieces, all of which work together to create a socially engaging experience.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's rich historical roots, elaborate architecture, inclusive programming, and community partnerships collectively contribute to an environment where art is not merely observed but actively lived. By transcending traditional boundaries and fostering a sense of community, the museum exemplifies the transformative power of art in bringing people together. In doing so, it cements itself as a trailblazer in the realm of socially engaged art, offering a model for museums worldwide to embrace a more interactive and inclusive approach to cultural enrichment. I would sincerely encourage anyone to visit The Gardner themselves, as it is a museum experience unlike any other.

References

Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.

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