

ARTFUL BOSTON: EXPLORING THE CITY'S CREATIVE SPIRIT

Art, beauty and bohemian decadence—there's a reason why Boston is dubbed "the Athens of America". Eva Mackevic takes a two-day crash course in the city's cultural offerings

The Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston



IN THE LOW-LIT GALLERIES of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Erica E Hirshler, the senior curator of American Painting, is my guide through a mesmerising journey of art, history and fashion. The air is filled with the allure of bygone eras, as luxurious evening gowns, opera cloaks, and walking dresses twinkle in the light. Staring at us from the grand golden frames are the once-wearers of these dazzling ensembles—silent witnesses to a time, immortalised by the masterful strokes of John Singer Sargent.

We're here in Massachusetts to delve into the fascinating life and work of the turn-of-the-20th-century's best-known portraitist, and explore the city's history as a global arts centre. When bringing his subjects to life, Sargent didn't just record what appeared in front of him; he directed a production, creating carefully planned images to be passed down through generations. His artistic prowess garnered unprecedented demand, with people vying for the opportunity to be painted by him, willingly surrendering to his unwavering wishes—a process likened by one writer to “being punched in the ribs by a king.”

BEING PAINTED BY SARGENT WAS LIKENED TO “BEING PUNCHED IN THE RIBS BY A KING”

The exhibition we're here to visit, “Fashioned by Sargent,” is a collaborative effort between the MFA and Tate Britain, revealing the artist's groundbreaking role as a stylist. Sixty paintings, rare loans and works from the Tate and MFA collections come to life, complemented by a display of period dresses and accessories, many of which are reunited with their wearers for the first time. After its Boston run, the exhibition will come to London's Tate Britain on February 22.

As we step into the room where the star of the show hangs, Erica gives us a grin and says: “Just as a portrait is a performance, an exhibition is a performance. You'll get why I saved the best for last.” Right there in front of us is the infamous

Madame X [opening page]. She's the image of Virginie Gautreau, an American socialite who was the toast of Paris, known for her striking looks and bold fashion sense. Erica points out: “When Virginie Gautreau entered the room, she *glided*. She was described as ‘black as spades and white as milk,’ and she certainly knew how to make a statement.” But when the painting first went public, it caused quite the stir—people weren't ready for its overtly sexual nature at the time. Erica tells us that at the big Paris art



(Above) The courtyard at the Isabella Gardner museum;
(Right) Sargent's *Lady Agnew*



show, the critics had a field day, calling it all sorts of names. Now, *Madame X* spends most of her time at the Met in New York, and it's not every day she goes on a trip. That's why having her here in Boston—and later in London—is such a momentous occasion.

With the minutes ticking down until I have to depart, I hurry back into the heart of the Museum of Fine Arts. The lobby is bustling with art lovers and visitors, buzzing even on a workday morning. I get swept up in the museum's diverse worlds—from the golden relics of ancient Egypt straight through to the bold strokes of America's modern artists. I pull myself away, the

stories of Sargent's sitters still swirling through my mind. There's so much more to explore, but the next chapter of my journey is calling.

A SHORT STROLL from the gallery, through the heartbeat of Boston's



The Lenox hotel at Christmas

busy streets in the crisp December air, and I find myself stepping across the threshold into another world entirely—the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. After a delicious lunch of butternut squash salad and a hefty hit of caffeine at the gallery's cafe, I'm swept away into an opulent Italianate universe. Here, Isabella Gardner, the museum's namesake and a visionary of the 19th century, once curated her life among these very walls.

Known for her nonconformist fashion and insatiable zest for knowledge, she crafted this space into a personal sanctuary of art. Preserved by her own command, not a single frame has shifted since her death in 1924. The museum collection boasts masterpieces by Rembrandt, Titian

NASTURTIUMS ARE HUNG FROM THE BALCONIES EVERY YEAR TO CELEBRATE ISABELLA GARDNER'S BIRTHDAY IN APRIL

and Raphael as well as medieval stained glass, all nestled within a warren of spaces that feel like a secret handshake with history.

The museum's soul, however, lies in its courtyard. Visible from virtually any gallery in the building, it's a serene spot that instantly transports you to Italy. Lush ferns, shrubs and palm trees share this space with stunning ancient Roman sculptures, and the highlighted plants change here every month: from orchids in the winter to the cascades of orange nasturtiums in the spring. The nasturtiums—one of Isabella's favourite flowers—are hung from the balconies every year to celebrate her birthday in April.

Returning to The Lenox, my home base for the remainder of my stay, I take a moment to appreciate this boutique hotel's old-school elegance. It's like stepping onto the set of a classic Christmas film. The warm glow of the fireplace and the twinkle of the tree lights invite a sense of nostalgia and warmth in the downtown of the bustling city. Downstairs, the City Bar



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is already in full swing, filled with the buzz of early holiday cheer. Up in my room, it's just me and a nightcap from the bar, cosying up with a book on Isabella Gardner that I picked up during my museum visit. Her story, a series of daring choices and life fully lived, feels like a riveting biography of a modern-day rock star. As I tuck into the plush bed, I can almost feel the cool calm of her Venetian courtyard soothing me into a gentle nap.

THE NEXT MORNING, sun's barely up and I'm already out the door, Harvard-bound. But first things first, a breakfast pit stop at the iconic Fairmont Copley Plaza. This place isn't just a hotel; it's a Boston landmark that oozes old-

world glam. The hotel restaurant, OAK Long Bar + Kitchen, is one of the city's hottest food spots, and I'm lucky enough to get a table this morning. I opt for the classic eggs Benedict that are nothing short of superb, and a green smoothie that jolts me awake more effectively than any caffeine hit.

The lobby of the Fairmont is a portal to another era. Once the site of the original Museum of Fine Arts, it's now a grand vestibule where the echoes of history reverberate off the opulent

walls. Here, amid the Italian marble and crystal, is Cori, the hotel's beloved Labrador, holding court as if she were the guardian of all this grandiosity. And then there's Joe Fallon, part concierge, part "Cori's personal assistant," as he jokes, who regales me with tales of Hollywood royalty who have graced these halls. "Anne Hathaway and Kate Hudson were here filming *Bride Wars*," he says proudly, while showing me around the beautiful ballroom and tossing the ball to Cori. "Kate Hudson would play the

piano in Oak Bar when she had downtime between filming." Joe's been with the hotel for 19 years now, and knows its every little secret, like, for example, that John Singer Sargent kept rooms here in the

1920s and even painted some of his portraits here.

I bid Joe and Cori farewell and jump in a taxi to get to my next stop—the Harvard campus in Cambridge, a mere 15-minute drive from the vibrant heart of Boston. The sun is generous today, casting a warm hue over the historic campus. Harvard, renowned for its academic prowess, also possesses a tranquil charm, especially here, within its oldest quarters.

The green spaces of the campus are serene and almost pastoral. Squirrels

THE ARTWORKS TAKE YOU FROM THE MEDIÆVAL ERA TO THE BOLD IMAGES OF THE MODERN AGE





(Above) The serene grounds of Harvard Yard; (Right) Joe and Cori

scuttle across the lawns, engaging in their daily antics, indifferent to the ebb and flow of campus life around them. I pass the venerable Memorial Church with its soaring spire, the grand library that I recognise from numerous films and series, and the bronze statue of John Harvard himself—a staple photo op for tourists.

Yet, it's the Fogg Museum that really pulls me in. An art gallery that's been open to the public since 1896, it's the oldest and largest of Harvard's three art museums. Everyone associates this university with academic excellence, but few are aware of just how impressive its art collection is. Inside, it's like a walk through time. The artworks take you from the medieval era all the way to the bold images of the modern age.



The museum's layout encourages a leisurely pace: you might find yourself drawn to a small, intricate sketch that captures a moment of everyday life in medieval Europe, or standing rapt before a vast canvas that screams of the bold innovations of the Impressionist era. It's the kind of place where you can lose track of time, meandering from room to room, each filled with masterpieces by the likes of van Gogh, Renoir and Picasso. Students and art



Charles Street

lovers sit, sketchbooks in laps, trying to capture the essence of the masters, while guided tours wander through.

AS MY ART-FILLED visit in Boston nears its end, I decide to take a break. It's nice to soak in all the creativity, but sometimes you just need to step out and enjoy the simple things. Taking a leaf out of the locals' book, who are ever so keen to share the ins and outs of their beloved city, I take a walk down Charles Street.

This street has a rhythm all its own; it's where the old and new of Boston shake hands. I'm enjoying the easygoing pace of daily life here, when an impeccably dressed lady steps out of a deli, her suggestion of the "really good" salt beef sandwich tempting me to step inside. And she's right; it's the kind of sandwich that tells you about

the place without a single word. The boutiques here are a far cry from cookie-cutter stores; each window is a showcase for the city's talent,

offering up handcrafted jewellery, artisanal treats and vintage finds. It's here, in a tiny shop, that I discover a small bottle of handcrafted perfume to take back home—it's understated, sophisticated and utterly Boston.

Leaving this city, there's a pang of longing as I think of all the things I've yet to see, the lobster rolls yet to be devoured, and the conversations with locals yet to be enjoyed. But that's the thing about Boston; it's a city that feels like it's always waiting to welcome you back home. ■

Sargent and Fashion will be at the Tate Britain from February 22 until July 7, 2024. For tickets, visit tate.org.uk