
From the Instructor

Katie Griswold's essay "Down the Street and Around the World: An Exploration of Everyday Exoticism in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum" was written in the fall of 2012 for a WR 100 seminar focusing on the history of travel writing in the West. It was submitted for the first assignment in the course, in which I asked my students to visit the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and use their close readings of that space to help them evaluate an ongoing scholarly conversation about the historical relationship between "wonder cabinets" and museums. Katie's detailed and thoughtful observations during her time at the ISG led her to employ uncanniness as a critical optics for conceptualizing this relationship anew. Katie's essay, reproduced here, not only met the expectations of my assignment in exemplary fashion, but it also contributes quite significantly to an ongoing scholarly conversation revolving around the perception and display of otherness in our contemporary culture.

— Daniel Hutchins

WR 100: Travel Writing: Genre, History, and Politics

From the Writer

My original assignment was to visit the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum and relate it to two scholarly articles I received in class. I predicted I would be disappointed with such specific parameters, but my expectations were blown away when I entered the museum. The sheer number of rooms was astonishing, and each room's contents were increasingly intriguing. I got lost in painted ceilings and ancient statues for most of that day. I scribbled down my first and second impressions of each room, and took note of which objects drew most visitors' attention. Gallery attendants divulged interesting background information, which I also wrote down. Once my notes were completed, I remember thinking I had looked at everything in the museum but had still seen only a tiny part of what it was.

My essay became an attempt to look further into the true nature of the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum. Rather than wandering in halls, I wandered with my mind. I compared the mystery of the Gardner museum to more clearly organized collections I had seen and to the chaotic wonder cabinets in my secondary source material. A conversation with a classmate yielded more insights and alternate perspectives. Did our discussions bring us to an understanding of the Gardner museum, or only to deeper questions? I toyed around with my fragmented ideas and tried to string them into a cohesive argument about the nature of ordered collections. I glued my thoughts together as I wrote, and allowed the paper to be more free-form and visually based than my usual style. Like a wonder cabinet, this final paper is clear in some ways and disorganized in others. My hope is that my essay inspires readers to take a second look at local museums and find something extraordinary in everyday surroundings.

— Katie Griswold

KATIE GRISWOLD

Prize Essay Winner

DOWN THE STREET AND AROUND THE WORLD: AN EXPLORATION OF EVERYDAY EXOTICISM IN THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

Stepping into the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum is like entering a foreign country. It is a space immediately familiar, composed of recognizable objects from periods in history and culture, yet it is also entirely unknown. In here, the institutions of chronology and geography are thrown aside in favor of Idea, of Mood, of Statement. In the Spanish Cloister of the Old Palace entrance, Buddha sits across from the Virgin Mary, who stands next to the naked torso of some Grecian hero, while African panels and Mexican tiles serve as an intricate backdrop. In the same room, a Moorish-style archway carved in stone frames the enormous *El Jaleo*, a painting by John Singer Sargent. The title translates to *The Ruckus*, which I first assumed must be a reference to the intersection of so many cultures and timeframes in one space. But somehow, eclectic as it is, the entranceway feels impeccably composed and soothing. The objects in the shadows never overcrowd the eye, and the collision of cultures only serves to emphasize their common stylistic details. Instead of chaos, I see order and peace.

This must be the result of Gardner's careful design of the building itself and her deliberate selection and placement of every object on display. Though she passed away almost 90 years ago, her museum is precisely the way she left it and must remain so in order to remain open, according to her will. As such, the museum not only pays homage to "the intermingling of cultures across continents," but also honors the particular artistic lens through which one woman viewed her planet (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). It suggests that Gardner thought things were imbued with

meaning not only because of what they are, but also where they are and who they are with.

Gardner's unique vision was probably inspired by her unusual life for a woman of her time. She was born in New York City on April 14, 1840. She met her husband, John Lowell Gardner, Jr., while she attended private school. They later moved to his hometown of Boston, Massachusetts. The two shared a love of travel and cultivated friendships across the world. Gardner herself had a great passion for the arts and formed close bonds with renowned artists including John Singer Sargent, Okakura Kakuzo, and Francis Marion Crawford. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum was then founded out of the collection of more than 2,500 pieces artwork she acquired in her lifetime. The building mixes "paintings, furniture, textiles, and objects from different cultures and periods among well-known European paintings and sculpture" with the intention to create a unique and intimate experience for all visitors who come there (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum).

The museum is not only atypical in its layout, but is also unusual in its manner of educating visitors. Although we can read brief descriptions about the major themes and pieces in each room of the house, many smaller objects are left unlabeled and require the help of a museum guide for identification. Much of the time, visitors are left to create their own interpretations about the intentions of Gardner's organization. Does her design breathe familiarity into foreign ideas or add a layer of mystery to our own culture?

The strange organization of the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum reflects larger questions about the cultural purposes of collections discussed by Steven Mullaney, author of "Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance," and countered by Amy Boesky in "Outlandish-Fruits: Commissioning Nature for the Museum of Man." Though the authors agree that museums act as cultural guides intended to expand our worldview, they debate as to whether seventeenth-century European collections of curiosities, or "wonder cabinets," are museum prototypes which fill the same niche, or, because of their lack of explanations, are intended only to baffle audiences. In some aspects, the essays discuss whether strange collections are organized to be understood, or if pure astonishment is their primary objective.

Through authors' scholarly discussion, we can explore the possibility that the Isabella Stewart Gardner collection fulfills a purpose beyond order vs. disorder or speculation vs. understanding. Through deliberate planning, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum brings a sense of the uncanny to our own culture and encourages us to see previously understood concepts with fresh eyes. It serves not only to clarify new ideas with which we may be unfamiliar but also to make seemingly established concepts less certain. By juxtaposing the well known and the mysterious, the Isabella Stewart Gardner brings a sense of astonishment to both. In this way, it exemplifies the qualities of both wonder cabinets and museums. Mullaney and Boesky's insights on both institutions therefore shed light on our desire to learn and be amazed.

Although Mullaney's primary goal is to examine the methods of Shakespearian performance techniques in Elizabethan England, he opens his work with several examples of that culture's fascination with unknowns. Mullaney uses the phenomenon of wonder cabinets to demonstrate that audiences of the time wanted to be dazzled and mystified by collections rather than to be educated and demystify them. He considers the wonder cabinet to be a disorderly collection of "things on holiday, randomly juxtaposed and displaced from any proper context," where items from various cultures are made stranger still by their proximity to other foreign objects (42). He considers then that the modern museum was not able to arrive until the ideas behind wonder cabinets were destroyed and replaced with a desire for cataloging and providing explanations for the unknown.

Boesky's work draws different conclusions than this part of Mullaney's essay. Her text focuses primarily on museums as a cultural institution in history, whereas Mullaney only uses wonder cabinets as an example of Elizabethan era audiences' desire to be astonished by unfamiliar concepts. Unlike Mullaney, Boesky interprets wonder cabinets as an earlier form of the modern museum and states that both institutions ultimately educate by revealing previously unseen patterns within collections. Although modern museums have a more obvious structure for classification, Boesky argues, wonder cabinets still hold a certain type of order in disorder. Boesky sees wonder cabinets as a reflection on what holds society's interest, which thus becomes an education unto itself. Boesky discredits Mullaney's argument that they represent randomness and chaos,

and posits that all collections are “allegories of classification” and inherently have some form of organization and significance (309). To Boesky, an object without explanation is not only itself. It takes its symbolic meaning from the way we perceive it; it is defined by our understanding. New connections are automatically created between objects when we put them together because this changes how we understand them in context. Mullaney does not take this idea into account in his essay and assumes we are unable to understand, only to marvel, without a given explanation.

However, Mullaney and Boesky seem to agree that a museum’s goal is to add to a population’s knowledge and give new perspective to ideas through the arrangement and display of physical objects. Whether wonder cabinets fit into this definition is undetermined. Even if wonder cabinets lacked any formal explanations, they pulled objects out of their natural habitats to be mentally poked and prodded. In modern-day museums, audiences question the world through more methodical means. Is disorder versus organization the only thing that separates the two? Or do they have completely different intentions, with one to inspire fantasy and one to dissolve illusions?

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum seems to provide support for both sides of this conversation. On one hand, Gardner’s creation was made with a deliberate order, and therefore presumably a deliberate message. On the other hand, that message was never expressly stated, and instead leaves visitors of the museum to personally interpret the mood each room creates. Like a wonder cabinet, items from clashing cultures and time periods are thrown together. But in contrast, those items do not imply chaos and instead suggest a highly sophisticated method of stylistic organization. Does this mean the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum supports Boesky’s view on ordered chaos as a cultural commentary or Mullaney’s ideas about “things on holiday” that exist without need for explanation? I argue it is both and neither. In Gardner’s museum, the wonder cabinet phenomenon is not entirely dead. The organized collection intends to inform us about far-off cultures while it simultaneously distances us from Western World concepts that audiences from Gardner’s time would have understood well. It delivers no single message but invites us to develop a unique and personal viewpoint from the eclectic mix of items on careful display.

When placed in another context, objects from our culture can appear in a different light, almost as if they belong somewhere else. The Blue Room at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum makes an everyday living space feel mysterious and unearthly. The objects there would not be remarkable in a customary Victorian bedroom, although the artworks are skillfully made examples of classic and neoclassic styles. The paintings are mostly realistically detailed portraits or landscapes, common subjects and styles for the Victorian period. However, the traditional art strikes viewers as peculiar because of the way it is arranged. On every inch of vertical space hangs a painting, which creates an unending wall of imagery that dwarfs the tiny chairs and bookshelves that sit close to the floor. The room is illuminated by nothing but a small amount of natural light, so every painting dribbles the same dusky shade of blue onto its neighboring objects. The soft blue fog swallows everything, including visitors. The resulting feeling is both tranquil and eerie, as if the room itself might be asleep, or dying, or fading into ether. This is no longer a customary Victorian era living room; it is an alternate reality. In this room, the way objects are arranged strongly affects our perspective.

In Mullaney's wonder cabinets, recognizable objects become strangers as well. When "kings mingle with clowns," the hierarchy of culture is upended and we view society in a different way, similar to how Gardner's museum alters our associations with traditional Victorian paintings (42). It is then that the objects and ideas of our own time become "known but in a certain sense unaccountable, alien yet recognized as such" (Mullaney 67). We understand our surroundings in the sense that we have previous experience with them, but we are bewildered by our new contextual perspective. Things common in our culture can also take on new meaning through the eyes of others, such as the way observers of the Elizabethan wonder cabinet perceived fireflies. In Mullaney's essay, they are described as orbs that "glow at night instead of lights, since there is often no day there for over a month" (40). This must have seemed astounding to visitors of the cabinet's time, but to me the description seems laughable. I was unaware that my home state followed a different solar cycle and that people of the past were forced to rely on bugs in order to see. But despite the description's inaccuracies, it does make me reflect on the beauty of a thousand glittering lights on summer nights in the woods. The insects do possess an almost magical

air about them, like there is something unattainable hidden in each flickering pattern. Through Mullaney's second- or third-hand description, I realize that my daily surroundings can be seen through fresh eyes.

However, the opposite idea may also be applicable. Taking objects from our own cultures and placing them with things of other periods can emphasize their similar characteristics, thereby helping us to better understand them all. An example can be found in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's cool, cavernous Tapestry Room. High ceilings, delicate furniture, and finely detailed wall hangings and manuscripts emit a sense of refinement and power. At first glance, the room seems identical to halls of castles or monasteries in Renaissance Europe, filled with traditionally ornate portrayals of Christianity. However, upon closer inspection, I found that these religious works cover a span of more than 300 years (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). More surprising still, the room contains Egyptian scrolls from the fourteenth century and earlier that seem right at home with Renaissance and Victorian interpretations of Christianity. It appears that the portrayal of religion in Gardner's time fits seamlessly together with religious motifs of the 15th and 16th centuries, and even goes along with artwork from Egyptian cultural traditions. These pieces are separated by a vast expanse of time and space, but in the Tapestry Room they sit harmoniously together. This would suggest to people of Gardner's time that religious artwork, and perhaps religions themselves, are universally familiar and knowable entities. History and geography are not barriers to our understanding, but the majesty found in the formal Tapestry Room still holds visitors in awe. This demonstrates how wonder and explanation can exist simultaneously in museums like the Isabella Stewart Gardner. When they coexist, the alien and the everyday can challenge our usual perspectives on culture and context. A visit to a local museum can then feel like a trip to a foreign land, and the most exotic country can feel as recognizable as home.

Perhaps this leads us to further questions: What is the goal of drawing connections between the familiar and unfamiliar? How would we change if our identities were shaped not by ourselves, but by outsiders who perceived us? When we as a society or as individuals bring together a collection, especially an extensive one like Gardner's, are we trying to make

an unknown culture more similar to our own, or are we trying to make our known world strange to us through new perspectives?

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KATIE GRISWOLD is studying environmental science with a minor in marine science in the College of Arts and Sciences class of 2016. She hails from the Washington DC metropolitan area, where museums are free and plentiful. The essay is dedicated to her mother and father, for showing her the Smithsonian collections and raising her with an appreciation for art. Katie also thanks Dr. Daniel Hutchins for introducing her to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Phoebe Horgan for lending inspiration and a pencil.