

Crivelli Shines at the Gardner

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Courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

One of the galleries at *Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice*.

Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice **Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston** **October 22, 2015 – January 25, 2016**

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum of Boston, on the heels of last year's outstanding show of sculptors' drawings, has mounted another brilliant Renaissance exhibition: "Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice." This monographic presentation, the first in the United States on the fifteenth-century painter, introduces audiences to an artist who may be unfamiliar, but quickly captivates.

"Ornament and Illusion" proves to be an apt title for the show. One is immediately struck by the almost excessive amount of gold found in Crivelli's work, which shimmers in contrast to the galleries' deep teal walls. The Gardner's recently conserved *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* is the focal point of the first portion of the two-room show, which brings together four of the six surviving panels from Crivelli's Porto San Giorgio altarpiece. *Saint George*, easily the most enthralling of the four paintings, glistens, an effect heightened by the elaborate frame in which it is presented. On the opposite wall are two painted fragments from the altarpiece with the large *Virgin and Child Enthroned* at the far end of the room. For reasons that remain unclear, the altarpiece panels are not displayed side-by-side and the placement of the *Virgin and Child* is uncomfortably distant from its companions. While this configuration has some benefits, and does serve to emphasize the museum's *Saint George*, many viewers would have appreciated the opportunity to enjoy the paintings in closer proximity to one another.



Carlo Crivelli, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, 1470, gold, silver and tempera on panel, 37 in. x 19 in. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (Courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston).

The large space of the exhibition's main room is partially divided by two short walls, creating intimate spaces for viewing Crivelli's works. The paintings are grouped thematically with sections such as "Virgin and Child" and "Dramatic Backdrops," which allow one to become better acquainted with Crivelli's unique style and technique. One section contains two paintings of the dead Christ, both of which have great emotional impact: in each we perceive the pain and anguish expressed on the faces of those around Christ. Tucked away in another corner are two interesting surprises. The first, a seemingly nondescript piece of fifteenth-century cut velvet, is an almost exact match to the pattern of velvet painted by Crivelli in an adjacent work—a very clever and informative pairing. Nearby, a drawing of Saint Peter, the sole surviving drawing by Crivelli, hangs beside a painting of the same subject.



Carlo Crivelli, *The Dead Christ with the Virgin, St. John, and St. Mary Magdalene*, 1485, tempera on panel, 35 in. x 21 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Anonymous Gift and Julia Bradford Huntington James Fund, 02.4 | Photograph © 2015 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

The exhibition succeeds on many levels. For some, the show will afford exposure to a painter who holds an important position in Renaissance history. For the art historian, to see so many works (23 paintings) by Carlo Crivelli gathered in one place is a rare treat. As noted by the curators, Crivelli is often overlooked despite his importance to 15th century painting; with “Ornament and Illusion” they aim to rectify this situation. The accompanying catalog, edited by Stephen Campbell, along with an informative exhibition website, provide even greater insight into this innovative artist. On the whole, the Gardner Museum should be congratulated, and one wonders what enlightening exhibition the city of Boston can look forward to next.

[*Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice*](#) will be on display at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston until January 25, 2016.