

The Art of Scandal: The Life and Times of Isabella Stewart Gardner

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An intriguing portrait of an eccentric and passionate woman who compiled one of the finest art collections in America is set against a backdrop of late nineteenth-century Boston society and examines her personal life, marriage, interest in art, and many accomplishments.

Henry James fictionalized her, John Singer Sargent painted her, Bernard Berenson advised her. But art collector extraordinaire Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924) was more than a rich socialite who lucked into friendships with the leading cultural figures of her day. Boston historian Douglass Shand-Tucci convincingly claims her as a pioneering multiculturalist--her famous museum in Fenway Court enshrined Asian art as well as that of the old masters--and a rebel who befriended Jews, homosexuals, and other outcasts from Victorian society. Shand-Tucci's highly colored, romantic prose aptly evokes his fiery, willful, egotistical subject. Douglass Shand-Tucci is a historian of American art and architecture and New England studies. His most recent book, *Boston Bohemia, 1881-1900*, was one of five 1996 Winship/PEN New England Award finalists for best book of the year by a New England author. He lives in Boston's Back Bay at the Hotel Vendome, a place much frequented by both Isabella Stewart Gardner and John Singer Sargent.

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Strapless. The subject of John Singer Sargent's most famous painting was twenty-three-year-old New Orleans Creole Virginie Gautreau, who moved to Paris and quickly became the "it girl" of her day. A relative unknown at the time, Sargent won the commission to paint her; the two must have recognized in each other a like-minded hunger for fame. Unveiled at the 1884 Paris Salon, Gautreau's portrait generated the attention she craved but it led to infamy rather than stardom. Sargent had painted one strap of Gautreau's dress dangling from her shoulder, suggesting either the prelude to or the aftermath of sex. Her reputation irreparably damaged, Gautreau retired from public life, destroying all the mirrors in her home. Drawing on documents from private collections and other previously unexamined materials, and featuring a cast of characters including Oscar Wilde and Richard Wagner, *Strapless* is a tale of art and celebrity, obsession and betrayal.

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