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# The Glamour of Exotica and Erotica: The Travel Writing of Isabella Stewart Gardner

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**Abstract**

This article explores the travel writing of Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924), a Boston socialite who, over the course of nearly thirty years (1867–1895), toured the world and documented her trips through journals, albums and extensive correspondence with confidants such as novelist Henry James. It argues that because of its transgressive elements, specifically its depiction of nineteenth-century taboos such as the exotic, erotic and macabre, Gardner's travel writing provides significant, yet complex, insight into the art collector's life, even though like her museum, it is carefully curated. Moreover, this article underscores how, on one hand, such travel writing served as a counternarrative to rigid Victorian social and cultural codes, while on the other, it provided women like Gardner with a problematic discursive space to negotiate orientalist and imperialist authority and power.

**Keywords**

Isabella Stewart Gardner, Nineteenth Century, Travel Writing, Counternarrative, Neurasthenia, United States

## Egzotik ve Erotiğin Cazibesi: Isabella Stewart Gardner'ın Gezi Yazıları

**Öz**

Bu makale, neredeyse otuz yıl içerisinde (1867–1895) dünyayı dolaşan ve gezilerini günlükler, albümler ve romancı Henry James gibi sırdaşlarıyla gerçekleştirdiği yoğun yazışmalar biçiminde belgeleyen, aynı zamanda Boston sosyetesinin renkli simalarından biri olan, Isabella Stewart Gardner'ın (1840–1924) gezi yazılarını inceleyecektir. Makale, bir sanat koleksiyoneri de olan Gardner'ın gezi yazılarının özellikle 19. yüzyıl tabuları olan egzotik, erotik ve ürkütücü—alışılmışın dışında—öğeleri yüzünden onun yaşantısına dair karmaşık bir içgörü sağladıklarını ortaya koyar, tıpkı Gardner'ın titizlikle düzenlenmiş müzesi gibi. Buna ek olarak, yazarın eserlerinin katı Viktoryen sosyal ve kültürel kodlara bir karşı anlatı olarak hizmet ettiğinin ve kendi gibi kadınlara oryantalist ve emperyalist otorite ve gücü tartışabilecekleri sorunlu bir söylem sağladığının altını çizer.

**Anahtar Kelimeler**

Isabella Stewart Gardner, 19. Yüzyıl, Gezi Edebiyatı, Karşı Anlatı, Nevrasteni, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri

After the death of her only child, Jackie, from pneumonia on March 15, 1865—just a few months short of his second birthday—followed by a miscarriage that ended her hopes of having another child, and the death of her sister-in-law in childbirth, Isabella Stewart Gardner became seriously ill, delirious with fever for four days. It seemed like she would be the next Gardner casualty, but her husband, John "Jack" Lowell Gardner, Jr., the son of a prominent Boston Brahmin family, kept a constant vigil by his wife's bedside and, against the odds, Isabella Gardner pulled through. However, by the following year, she had not regained her strength, and her family and circle of friends feared that she would become a "sofa invalid" for the rest of her life (Tharp 37–38).

Dr. Henry Jacob Bigelow, a leading physician and professor of surgery at Harvard University, was summoned numerous times, expressing that he could not cure "Mrs. Jack," as Gardner was nicknamed by Boston society, because there was nothing "organically wrong with her" (Tharp 38). According to Bigelow, she was suffering from mental collapse with psychosomatic symptoms, or neurasthenia as the medical profession was beginning to call it in the post-Civil War era. A socialite himself—and one of Gardner's many admirers—he played to her vanity instead, teasing out the core of her psychological malaise. Rather than prescribing the "rest cure," which was becoming increasingly popular for women in Gardner's situation, Bigelow challenged prevailing medical therapeutics and tailored his treatment for this specific patient, whom he knew professionally and socially. As Louise Hall Tharp notes, "Reverting to a custom of previous generations, Dr. Bigelow prescribed a journey for health" (38). Desperate to try anything to bring his wife back to life, Jack Gardner took leave from the family business, thinking that a change of scenery would do them both good. He made all the arrangements, and "in the spring of 1867, an ambulance called at 152 Beacon Street [and] Mrs. Jack was brought downstairs on a mattress, placed in the ambulance, driven to the dock and carried on board ship" (Tharp 38).

Enfeebled, Gardner did not even have the strength to walk, let alone board a cruise ship. However, "there was drama in this departure and Isabella must have felt a stirring of interest and pleasure," suggesting that she may have, at least partially, been performing the role of the "sofa invalid" to her advantage (Tharp 39). When the Gardners arrived in Hamburg, Germany in June, neither a mattress nor an ambulance was required, as Gardner had regained her energy and enthusiasm. They traveled on to Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Russia, Austria and France, where she acquired extravagant gowns by Charles Worth in Paris, returning to Boston several months later, "effervescent, exuberant, reckless, witty," and doing "whatever she pleased," especially with members of the opposite sex (Fisher 140). On the trip, she even began keeping the journals, photograph albums, and extensive correspondence that would characterize her life almost as much as her obsessive art collecting, which transformed her into an internationally renowned figure in that world, and one of only a handful of women before Peggy Guggenheim to take a serious interest in it. Her life's work eventually culminated in the eponymous Isabella

Stewart Gardner Museum, which has been a Boston landmark for over 100 years.

As Rosemary Matthews has argued, Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924) collected art during her extensive travels to Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and beyond as a way of "deferring her own death," after experiencing so many first hand, amassing objects "inextricably linked with her own life" that would eternally "stand in for her continued presence" (186). Ironically, for a woman whose personal motto was "*Pense moult, parle peu, écris rien*" (Think much, speak little, write nothing) (Holly 117), Gardner was a prolific letter and travel writer. As personal creations, this writing is just as much—if not more so—a physical manifestation, or extension, of herself as her art collection which, essentially, is an assembly of others' works. Gardner's travel writing is thus a crucial component of the narrative of this very complicated woman, who resisted being identified through men (Mrs. Jack), choosing, instead, to build a monument to herself.

Over the course of numerous domestic and international trips spanning almost thirty years (1867–1895), Gardner compiled twenty-eight journals, photo albums, and countless stacks of letters, corresponding with some of the most prominent intellectuals of her time, from novelist and close friend Henry James to art expert Bernard Berenson, who guided many of her most significant purchases (Lucey 187–188; Riley 49). Gardner spent her final years destroying much of this communication (i.e., "write nothing") in an attempt to curate the narrative she presented to the world after her death and, as biographers have speculated, to bury the skeletons of extramarital affairs and other scandals. However, her journals and albums, created as personal records and later shared with friends and the public, remain (today they are housed in the Gardner museum archive).[1]

As this article will argue, these travel journals and albums are a reflection of Gardner, both as a woman and as a historical actor vying with the various social threads of Gilded Age America, especially its rigid, prescribed gender roles, even for women of her social status. What emerges from the journals is a potent counternarrative of self-expression, self-construction, and self-representation created by an extravagant and sensual woman who was fascinated by the grotesque, macabre, and taboo—or what I call the glamour of exotica and erotica—particularly when it concerned orientalized others. Her journals and

albums not only chronicle her lavish transnational travels, but also exchange one politics of the body (her own) for another, allowing her to assert a level of control and power abroad—visually, aesthetically and discursively—that was inaccessible to a woman, even of her social standing, in the United States.

**The World of Isabella Stewart Gardner**

The daughter of David Stewart, a wealthy New York merchant and importer of linen and iron, Isabella Stewart Gardner was born into the privileged nineteenth-century American elite, but never entirely belonged. Rebellious, outspoken and always pushing the boundaries of traditional gender roles, she was educated by private tutors until her parents sent her to France and Italy in her teens to immerse herself in European languages and cultures. It was during her education abroad that she encountered other wealthy American families, including the Gardners, whose daughters Julia and Eliza she had befriended in Paris. During a trip to Boston to visit Julia, Isabella Stewart met John Lowell Gardner, Jr., or Jack, Julia's older brother, whom she married in 1860 (Mckinzie 10–12). After honeymooning in Washington, DC, they returned to Boston, and for the first two years of her marriage, Gardner lived with her in-laws. She became a shadow of her former self under the control of her mother-in-law, Catherine Peabody Gardner, who expected her daughter-in-law to follow in her footsteps. Adhering to such rigid social conventions and gender codes—which restricted her behavior and limited her activity to the private sphere and its endless domestic demands—became problematic for free-spirited Isabella Gardner, who began a gradual decline that left her incapacitated and unable to function. She tried to escape her situation by visiting family in New York as often as possible. However, this behavior pushed the boundaries of acceptable conduct for a married woman who, in the elite Boston world she inhabited, was merely considered an extension of her husband's family (Shand–Tucci 15).

As Rosemary Matthews explains, "The society that Gardner became part of when she married was ruled by conventions that she found hard to accept. She tried to subjugate herself to its demands and to fit into a conventional and submissive role, but her attempts failed partly because she was childless and partly because her complex character demanded some deeper fulfillment" (184). The losses she experienced in 1865 and 1866, in quick succession, only exacerbated

her underlying restlessness, which was eventually diagnosed as neurasthenia (Goldfarb 6), an ambiguous "catch-all" disorder that rose to prominence after the Civil War (1861–1865). Mostly affecting middle and upper-class Americans, it was allegedly caused by over-stimulation or "over-civilization" brought on by American social and cultural superiority, industrialization, urbanization, and the stimuli that accompanied them. Neurasthenia "had many names, among them 'nervous prostration,' 'nervous fatigue,' and 'nervous exhaustion,'" and was "a distinctly modern condition that occurred as Americans began to shed their traditional lifestyles," especially traditional gender roles (Schuster 696, 701). White Protestant men of the middle and upper classes who rejected the role of "breadwinner" and women, like Gardner, who did not adhere to what historian Barbara Welter calls the "cult of true womanhood"—purity, piety, domesticity, and subservience to the patriarchy—were often diagnosed as neurasthenic. Gender non-conformity purportedly led to the nervousness behind neurasthenia, which manifested itself through countless symptoms such as corporeal wasting, insomnia, lethargy, fatigue, headaches, hearing, speech and digestive problems, anxiety, palpitations, neuralgia, uterine irritability, nightmares and various obsessive, compulsive, phobic, manic and depressive states (Schuster 695–697, 701).

With all their suffering, neurasthenic women understandably "neglected" their domestic and marital duties, creating a chicken-and-egg scenario of which came first—their ailment, or a rejection of socially constructed expectations which precipitated their diagnosis. Treatment for neurasthenics such as Sarah Butler Wister (mother of author Owen Wister), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (feminist author and activist), Winifred Howells (daughter of author William Dean Howells), Alice James (sister of Henry James), Edith Wharton, and Jane Addams, among many others, came in the form of the "rest cure"—a therapeutic regimen that was devised and prescribed by American physicians Silas Weir Mitchell, Edwin H. Van Deusen, and George Miller Beard for "severe" cases: i.e., neurasthenic women who could not take care of themselves and their families. The rest cure involved weeks of bed rest, a "calming" dairy-based diet, and isolation from all stimuli—including visitors and anything remotely intellectual. In short, this "cure" involved constant monitoring to ensure complete obedience to physicians, nurses, and caretakers; in other words, it created a controlled domestic environment that would facilitate the relearning of female gender roles

(Schuster, 695–696, 700–702, 708–709). However, while neurasthenic women were told to rest, neurasthenic men such as Walt Whitman were told to "Go West": to "engage in prolonged periods of cattle roping, hunting, rough-riding and male bonding" in order to claim a rugged pioneering masculinity by rejecting the effeminizing forces of city life (Stiles 32). Male patients given the "West cure" included not only Whitman but Owen Wister, artists Frederic Remington and Thomas Eakins, and future president Theodore Roosevelt. Neurasthenic therapeutics were gendered, and "both cures existed to reinforce 'proper' sexual behavior," emphasizing the "biological differences between men and women" (Stiles 32).

According to the emerging medical wisdom of the time, Gardner's gendered loss (motherhood) required a gendered diagnosis (neurasthenia) and a gendered treatment (the rest cure). However, Gardner was not prescribed the rest cure, but rather the travel cure, which was becoming increasingly reserved for men. Biographers such as Louise Tharp and Stephen Birmingham have both written about the possible reasons for this. Tharp suggests that Dr. Bigelow's diagnosis and therapeutic course may have been the result of his personal knowledge of Gardner's proclivities (the rest cure would never work for restless person), and his status as a medical traditionalist who prioritized older treatments (travel for depression) over newer ones. In Chapter Six of *The Grandes Dames*, Birmingham argues that Gardner may have cultivated a neurasthenia diagnosis as a means of resisting the gendered expectations of Boston. In other words, she was resisting oppressive norms and codes through illness, which gave her a way to bypass rules and regulations. This, he speculates, may be the reason why she was prescribed the travel cure and was almost instantly cured when she left "stagnant" Boston for "passionate" Europe. She had grown tired of the never-ending doting and care showered on her as a "stylish invalid" and was ready for a new role—that of the moneyed aesthete bohemian. This would also allow her to negotiate power within her limited world, but in a much more entertaining and self-indulgent way; for example, treating seasickness with champagne and British biscuits rather than the harsh drugs of the period (Vigderman 11).

Interestingly enough, Birmingham's theory not only places Gardner's travels and travel writing into context—the glamour of the exotic and erotic always held sway with her, and therefore was not out of character in any way—but also reinforces observations made

by feminist historians such as Regina Morantz-Sanchez. As Morantz-Sanchez notes, in Gilded Age America, the "'medicalized body' allowed women a significant form of breathing space empathically sanctioned by the scientific authority of the physician" (299), which also explains the relationship between Gardner and Bigelow perfectly. "Although the doctor-patient relationship often appears imbalanced," she adds that "these women are never completely without agency…One form of resistance involved using the dominant medical culture's tendency to construct women as weak for purposes not originally intended." In other words, savvy women like Gardner "could use diagnosis and treatment to achieve respite from too much responsibility" (Morantz-Sanchez 303), even parlaying it into a lifestyle. Moreover, for Gardner, "invalidism resulting in tourism, expatriatism, or medical exile" (Fisher 140) was a liberating escape from everything she detested about her life in Boston.

For the next thirty years, Gardner would always be on the move, and after that, too consumed by her museum and her agenda to care about social expectations. That she could fund trips to Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and beyond, and construct a monument to her extensive travels, was undoubtedly a function of her class status. That she was able to deploy the tools of the patriarchy (e.g., the medical profession) against the patriarchy itself, and thrive, is certainly remarkable. Within this context, her journals and albums function as a counternarrative to the prevailing medical discourses and practices of the time concerning the female body and its illnesses. They challenge masculinist authority, control, and therapeutic directives geared towards women that limited their physical mobility, intellectual freedom, and erotic desires.

Moreover, collectively, Gardner's journals and albums also advance specific personal and artistic goals, which in this case also includes subverting the norms and codes that governed travel and consumer acquisition for women. Her tourism and its documentation transcend the boundaries that inscribed the lives of elite women, opening up new worlds, both to Gardner and her circle of family and friends, who corresponded with her and reveled in the countless objects (e.g., artwork, photographs, books, musical scores, furniture, tapestries, textiles, ceramics, utensils, flowers, plants, silver, and decorative architectural elements) that she brought back from her travels. Her exotic travels and life writing made a powerful statement to members

of her world: that she refused to surrender to social, medical or cultural dictates, creating, instead, a life on her own terms, by taking her body and its future into her own hands.

Gardner's journals also serve a therapeutic function as "scriptotherapy" (Henke xii–xx), a form of life writing that allowed her to cope with trauma and make sense of it by endowing her travels, observations, and purchases with meaning that could heal and compensate for her losses. Her journeys, both literal and figurative, contributed to the reconstruction of her fragmented identity as a woman after motherhood had become impossible by providing her life with a new purpose: self-discovery through art collecting, and self-narration through curated storytelling. However, like Gardner herself, her travel writing is far more complicated, and by no means a simple (self-re) presentation of the image she wished to convey to the world. Instead, it is a reflection of its time that exposes an orientalist fascination with the exotic and the erotic, especially the body and skin. Through the course of her narratives, Gardner—the liberal, bohemian aesthete—develops her own imperialist corporeal politics, which involves exchanging the scrutinization, examination, and categorization of her own "civilized" upper-class white Anglo Saxon Protestant body—which was under the constant watchful surveillance and disciplinary gaze of elite Boston society—for that of non-white "uncivilized" others. In other words, in her journals and through their accompanying photographs, Gardner engages in the same oppressive practices to which she was subjected, and in the process, asserts social, cultural, racial, economic and gendered power to which, despite her privileged status, she had little access as a woman in the United States.

**Isabella Stewart Gardner's Travel Writing**

After returning from her 1867 trip to Europe, Gardner channeled her energies away from maintaining social conventions and towards pursuing her own pleasure, adopting the motto *C'est mon plaisir*, which is today inscribed over the entrance to her museum. As Fisher states, the motto "hinted at its embodiment of transgressive as well as innocent pleasures and desires—implying French-inflected willfulness, imperiousness, pleasure, and passion" (139–140), all of which seem to describe Gardner from this point onwards. Everything was now "of interest to her. She had an insatiable impulse to explore life," in all its taboo and grotesque forms, and "to curate beauty" (Lucey 188). Moreover, Gardner had "a forceful geographical imagination, in the

often imperialist modes of the late nineteenth century" (Fisher 133). As Anne McClintock explains,

> For centuries, the uncertain continents—Africa, the Americas, Asia—were figured in European lore as libidinously eroticized. Travelers' tales abounded with visions of the monstrous sexuality of far-off lands…. long before the era of high Victorian imperialism, Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination—a fantastic magical lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears. (22)

Gardner, who spent part of her formative years in Europe, certainly operated in the European mindset when it came to the "porno-tropics." While the travel journals from her next trip in 1874 and 1875—this time to Egypt, the Holy Land, Turkey, and Greece—include sketches of architectural details and purchased photographs whose designs would eventually make their way into her Boston home Fenway Court (Tharp 47), they mostly focus on her "enchantment with the land of Cleopatra—its dreamlike colors, its silent desert, its camels and donkeys, its storied past, and its people who seemed to have [stepped] out of the 'Arabian Nights'" (Lucey 188). Her sensual and orientalist depiction of this part of the world becomes even more apparent when compared to the journals kept by her husband on the same trip. While Isabella Gardner wrote lush accounts of the distant lands she visited and the exotic people she encountered, conflating the "geographical and psychosexual in the predominant orientalist mode of the period" (Fisher 136), Jack Gardner inscribed line-a-day entries and other brief notes in his pocket diary, mostly concerning expenses, their itinerary, and other practicalities (Fisher 141; Tharp 48). "Convivial but hardly a romantic," he "focused on such things as the distances they covered each day on their Nile travels and the troublesome fleas in their hotel in Cairo" (Lucey 188).

It was during her visit to Egypt that Isabella Gardner started keeping a journal in earnest. She began her entries on December 10, 1874, off the coast of Alexandria, which was ablaze with the colors of the Egyptian sunrise. As she describes,

> When I went on deck in the morning…I knew it was a dream for never had I seen such color as was the sea.

> There was no word for it—and on the horizon was a low stretch of sand and moving palms. I felt that it was Africa and from that moment everything was interest and enjoyment…we lingered to watch the mass of screaming, scrambling Arabs, men, and boys, each more determined than the other to secure his prey. The next day we went to Cairo where the dream only became more colored with Eastern glow…The people had stepped out of the Arabian Nights which were no longer tales we had read…we had truly come aboard and forgot ourselves. (qtd. in Tharp 48)

As Gardner conveys, Egypt was an exotic land where one could "forget herself," which she increasingly did, on numerous levels, as she traveled around the world. No longer constrained by Bostonian social conventions, she was able to discover and explore new dimensions of life—from food to clothing, to artwork, to rituals—that would have normally been inaccessible and incomprehensible to most Americans. A few days later, she visited the pyramids, where she broke away from the group to, as she expresses in her journal, "lie on the sand near the Sphinx with the silent desert beyond and on every side—and the pyramids a little away from me—then solemnity and mystery took possession and my heart went out to the Sphinx" (qtd. in Tharp 49). The beauty of this overwhelming experience, however, did not prevent her from making one of the countless suggestive comments she would make about the attractiveness of the locals—especially the men and boys—who were always an essential part of the exotic backdrop. Always remarking on their physiques, clothing and general deportment, she adds, "The women are but rarely handsome, but the men almost always" (qtd. in Tharp 49).

They traveled south on the Nile onboard the *Ibis* which, as Gardner describes in her journal, was decorated with exotic "eastern rugs, couches, plants and awnings…The crew, with their turbans and many-colored robes, squatted in a circle around their lurid, flickering fire, cooked their coffee and chanted their low, weird songs to the tapping of the tarabooka [sic]" (qtd. in Tharp 49). Like an artist, she illustrated her journal with watercolor sketches of ancient ruins, lotus flowers, wind-blown moonlight palms, papyrus reeds, sailing ships, lavender skies, and reddish-gold water at sunset, often while sitting alone on deck where, as Gardner remarks, she allowed her "thoughts

[to] fly away with the many white-sailed caiques [sic] that floated out into the fading light" (qtd. in Tharp 49). The locals, who Gardner also describes in orientalist terms, contribute to her reverie. She comments that in Memphis, "the donkey boys seemed as happy as the most favored children of the sun could be," while, by the oases, "the graceful women came and went" with "water jars on their heads" (qtd. in Tharp 50).

In the 1870s, archeological excavation was emerging as a serious science, and the great finds of Ancient Egypt had yet to be discovered, let alone be organized and cataloged; thus, many sites were in a state of disarray. As Gardner conveys in her journal, it gave her "quite a dreadful feeling to see scraps of mummies lying about" among "old brick fortifications" (qtd. in Tharp 50). Nevertheless, she felt the need to include this disturbing scene in her journal, suggesting her fascination with the macabre, which will be discussed later. In this mysterious land, she even forgot Christmas Eve, which was perhaps part of the strategic self-forgetting, selective amnesia, and re-membering these exilic trips enabled. Instead, completely immersed in the foreign environment, she fantasizes about an alternative reality in her journal: "I lay upon the couch with the fragrance of frankincense stealing over me, the wake of the moon was a foot path by which my thoughts went straight to Cleopatra" (qtd. in Tharp 50). The day after Christmas, they "passed a curious old convent" but, as she notes, "long before we reached it, the monks swam out to us, begging. I hope they were as innocent of sin as of clothes," juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, which she did often, by stressing the eroticism of the scantily clad men, even in the context of a religious ritual (qtd. in Tharp 50).

In mid-January 1875, purchased photographs begin to appear in Gardner's journals, pasted alongside quotes from travel guidebooks, poems, watercolors, sketches, ticket stubs, pressed flowers and leaves, itineraries, invitations, pamphlets, paper flags, menus and other ephemera (Brister 16). Taken by professionals and procured by travelers like postcards, these commercial photographs complemented her journals, which were fast becoming cut-and-paste albums. As Fisher explains, "Gardner had a long history of fashioning scrapbooks—a medium common among genteel female Victorians—variously incorporating quotes, extracts, photographs, newspaper clippings, and other personal mementoes." However, in this context, Gardner deployed the journals/albums "to map intimate, emotional terrains" and to document her "imperialist exploration." Specifically,

she "melded emotional and erotic experience with ethnographic and geographic documentation, creating personal exilic geographies that she would eventually archive" at her museum (Fisher 141). Gardner particularly liked collecting photographs of art, architecture, and monuments—especially temples and other religious structures, once again contrasting the sacred and the profane in the process. She also favored natives in their everyday attire, such as a Hamburg flower girl, a Scandinavian peasant, or Asian aristocrats, reinforcing her interest in the intersection of local color and local bodies (Brister 220). Moreover, the pictures in Gardner's journals are unusual for yet another reason: they do not include any of the traveler herself in an age when a woman of her social status was expected to have at least one taken in every country she visited, usually in a studio and sometimes in indigenous clothing (Rhodes 83–84).

While, to a certain degree, commercial photographs render Gardner's journals less personal, as Anne McClintock argues, in the context of the era's colonial travel by white westerners to the East, these images represent an exotic, and erotic, intimacy—a type of panoptic surveillance that allowed outsiders to capture glimpses of individuals and events usually reserved for insiders (122). Fundamentally, such photographs transformed Gardner from spectacle into spectator, providing her with a gaze that changed her role from object to subject, and granted her "male" voyeuristic power which she did not have as an elite Bostonian woman. Whether they were images of nearly-nude sumo wrestlers in an embrace, tattooed natives, geishas in service, or of Burmese women smoking cigars—which Gardner was inspired to do later on in life—they were seductive souvenirs of cultural imperialism (McClintock 123).[2]

Such photographs were also consumer fetishes that granted westerners like Gardner the authority and ability to capture, define and categorize the East, especially "the secret interiors of the feminized Orient," which underscored the connection between mysterious lands and sex (McClintock 124–125). Most of the objects and people in these photographs were posed, so this alleged "authentic" art form was based on artifice and spectacle. Nevertheless, her authority was reinforced by the verbs of surveillance and voyeurism found in Gardner's journals, particularly in the captions that accompanied the images (she watched, saw, and looked). While money provided her with "economic mastery" over the native populations she visited, the photographs

gave her a voyeuristic control of spectacle, or what McClintock calls "pornographic mastery"—a "private" source of pleasure in her personal diary (126, 129). As Fisher speculates, Gardner's "aestheticism, orientalism, bohemianism, and exoticism" may have even "articulated thwarted sexual desires. Like other Gilded Age expatriates, migrants, and travelers, Gardner needed transnational exile to approximate and construct sociosexual freedom, to nourish unconventional desires" (140), and perhaps even to act on them.

At this point, their sightseeing—and Gardner's journals—became more intense, with, as Gardner describes, excursions via "felucca, *men's arms* [my emphasis], ferry boat and donkey" (qtd. in Tharp 50). They were trailed by little "Hassan, aged 4" and "little Fatima" to whom, as Gardner notes, she gave "a necklace of red and gilt beads and her eyes lighted and her teeth shone" (qtd. in Tharp 51), highlighting the "benevolence," or white woman's burden, that always accompanied the female colonial traveler. While visiting the town of Assouan (Aswan), Gardner does not remark on the antiquities or animal skins for sale, but instead is thrilled by the exotic "live, tiny monkeys," and grotesque "poisoned spear heads for sale" (qtd. in Tharp 51). As she recounts in her journal, the island of Philae is "entirely covered with the ruins of temples," and in the moonlight, she allegedly sees "the ghouls" of the Arabian Nights (qtd. in Tharp 51).

In the spring and early summer of 1875, the Gardners made their way across the Ottoman Empire, from Egypt, through the Holy Land, Lebanon, Syria and into Turkey. They disembarked in Smyrna (Izmir), where they waited for a ship bound for Piraeus, Greece. In her journal, Gardner describes Smyrna as "hot and dirty," where she was "wretchedly—not seasick." There, she indulged in her favorite dessert, vanilla ice cream, which was available in such an allegedly "uncivilized" place, and then headed to Greece. They toured Athens on foot, rising early to explore the ancient and modern sides of the city, which at times were difficult to disentwine, even in the nineteenth century. As she conveys, at the Temple of Theseus, they saw "coffee tables in the open air, clustered around the ruins," and workers eating breakfast sitting "between the pillars of Jupiter Olympus" (qtd. in Tharp 56). After their trip to Greece, they returned to Turkey. Gardner described Constantinople (Istanbul) as "beautiful and very like New York"—but only from a distance. She found Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya) disappointing and, as she articulates in her journal, many of the local

customs, such as putting her parasol down as a gesture of respect while passing the Sultan's palace, "strange" (qtd. in Tharp 57). She remarks that the Sultan's jewels—his diamonds, rubies, pearls and emeralds—were all she had "dreamed of," but adds that she was happy to be finally traveling home. On their return trip, the Gardners stopped off in Paris in mid-August to find the city greatly changed compared to their previous trip in 1867. Napoleon III was dead, Empress Eugénie was in exile in England, and their palace, the Tuileries, was in decay. Anyone with the means could haul away parts of the palace for personal use, and Charles Worth, the fashion designer who had designed gowns for Gardner during their last visit, and was a close confidante of the Empress, had absconded with wagons full of statuary for his garden—an activity that perhaps inspired Gardner to return to Europe and imperialistically loot its treasures for Fenway Court (Tharp 57–58).

In 1883 and 1884, the Gardners toured Asia, visiting Japan, China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Burma (Myanmar), Singapore, Indonesia, and India, among other locations. According to Mari Yoshihara, Gardner's interest in Asia "took place in the context of America's imperial enterprise in the Asia-Pacific." While she "was fascinated by the cultures and arts of each country she visited, to her Asia was clearly a spectacle" (21). In Osaka, Gardner attended a sumo wrestling match, where she was seated next to a Japanese man who, like the sensual flesh she witnessed during this display, was also a source of delight. As she expresses in a letter to Maud Howe written in Kyoto in August 1883, "I was immensely amused by a man in the box next to us—his beautiful clothes were carefully laid aside on account of the heat and there he sat, smoking a most beautiful pipe with nothing on but a waist cloth and a European straw hat…[but] we didn't even notice his want of clothes, as everybody is almost always in that undress" (qtd. in Goldfarb 10). She adds:

> This man [sitting next to me] was intensely interested to know which wrestlers I thought would win and asked me each time. Once I couldn't form any idea, so he coached me and said it was a sure thing for the small lithe man against a huge great fellow, so I interested myself properly in the little one—and when he threw the big one most cleverly and wonderfully…I clapped my hands and called out. Please don't be shocked, dear, at all these dreadful proceedings. (qtd. in Carter 62)

Gardner was clearly titillated and delighted by this David and Goliath battle, and especially by the sight of exotic flesh—that of the Japanese man sitting next to her as well as the sumo wrestlers themselves—who were subjects of her orientalist travel writing and "objects of her American gaze" (Yoshihara 21). Although her close friend novelist Henry James admired Gardner's travels in Japan and India, he also voiced disapproval in their correspondence, maintaining that she spent too much time "dallying with the Orientals" (qtd. in Fisher 138). At times, James objected to—as he put it—her "wild and wandering" travels (qtd. in Zorzi 247) and "subversive itineraries," which transgressed almost every social and cultural boundary imaginable (Fisher 134).

After three months in Japan, the Gardners traveled to Southeast Asia, spending most of their time in Cambodia and Indonesia. As Henry James and other correspondents suggest in their letters, "Gardner pushed the boundaries of nineteenth-century norms for women," especially in terms of geography: she was one of the first westerners—and perhaps the first western woman—to visit the ruins of Angkor Wat in 1883 (Fisher 133). The idea of visiting Angkor Wat first appears in a travel journal Gardner began in Shanghai. As Tharp elucidates, the ruins, "deep in the Cambodian jungle, had been only recently uncovered. Except for Siamese and Cambodians, very few people had even visited Angkor and some who went there never returned. Marco Polo mentioned the place but did not visit it," and Gardner was delighted by the idea that she would "surpass Marco Polo" (Tharp 90). On the way to Angkor Wat, she attended a royal boat race hosted by the Cambodian king, who made an appearance. "Small and nice-looking," Gardner notes in her journal, he wore "plain black clothes tight to his throat. A sort of Scotch cap of black silk with a diamond buckle on one side of it, a large emerald pendant and a belt with a diamond clasp. Also chains" (qtd. in Tharp 91). While the king stood in stark contrast to "the dreadful French women in cheap finery," Gardner was not particularly impressed, especially when he made a *faux pas* that even she, for all her open-mindedness, could not forgive. As someone who was unfamiliar with the American class structure, the king mistook Mary, Gardner's maid, for a dignitary—a mistake that the French women, gaudy or not, would have never made. Conflating all whites he met into one social category—much like Gardner did with the non-white locals she encountered—the king, as Gardner recounts

in her journal, "went up to [Mary], shook hands [and] invited her into the boat" (qtd. in Tharp 91). In the process, he engaged in a relatively innocent occidentalism that serves as an interesting counterpoint to Gardner's patronizing orientalism. Afterwards, they traveled to Angkor Wat on elephants, and dined on duck, pâté, and champagne. However, Gardner "almost became one of those who never return": she narrowly missed an elephant stampede that could have ended her life (Tharp 94). The next morning Gardner, while being fanned by a scantily clad Cambodian boy, celebrated their "narrow escape" with more champagne, this time at breakfast. The following day, she indulged in exotic activities within the safe confines of the palace of the French Protectorate, where she ate her first peacock and stroked a tiger cub (Tharp 95). Later in life, she would become (in)famous for such eccentric behavior, petting lion cubs at the Boston Zoo, taking them out for rides in her carriage and, decked out in fur, walking them on a leash (Tharp 197).

In Java, Indonesia, Gardner was particularly impressed by the semi-nude men, describing their torsos and sartorial choices in her journal. In the capital Jakarta, she witnessed a prince who, while visiting the emperor, stopped "at the door to take off his jacket" and, as she remarks, "was quite right, being much better looking in his brown skin" (qtd. in Goldfarb 11). Gardner's politics of skin did not stop with the locals, however. She even noted that the white imperialists who had settled in the region—namely the Dutch—had "gone native," appropriating indigenous clothing and blurring the lines between civilized/uncivilized, colonizer/colonized, and white/non-white. As she comments in her journal, they wore "the strangest clothes since Eden. The men in pajamas, the trousers made of fantastic sarongs and the women (ladies?) in sarongs, no-heeled slippers, loose white jackets (absolutely nothing else) and hair down their back" (qtd. in Tharp 96), all of which would have been a scandal in prim and proper Europe but acceptable in the exotic, erotic hinterlands. Always relishing any opportunity to participate in (either direction of) the fetishistic gaze, the following day, Gardner adopted this local custom, abandoning her layers of stifling clothing for a light wrap that would make the heat and humidity more tolerable. In fact, as she expresses in her journal, she visited some shops in a "white loose pongee wrapper and no hat! And it didn't seem at all strange" (qtd. in Tharp 96). She continued her racial, ethnic, and cultural cross-dressing at the opera, where she

wore a pongee wrapper and ornaments in her hair, which must have been particularly liberating to a nineteenth-century woman who was accustomed to restrictive corsets and form-fitting dresses.

As Fisher summarizes, in Gardner's travel journals, "geography more than personal reflection or confession catalyzed sexual exploration and resolution; transnational exile gave Gardner freedom to aestheticize and romanticize such urges, also keeping them safely ethnographic" (140). While in Egypt, Gardner wrote in her journal of the "beauty of the men and oh their gorgeous clothes!...What graceful languor and what perfect postures, as they lean against a deewan or a wall,'" gazing at their figures much like one would contemplate, and objectify, an ancient Greek or Roman marble statue of the male form in a museum (qtd. in Fisher 140). Moreover, while leaving Burma she suggestively comments: "Goodbye to the country of men with tattooed legs and with skirts open down the front" (qtd.in Lucey 199). This politics of the skin, with its "unabashed pleasure" for male bodies and voyeuristic power, continued in India, where the men were, as Gardner states, "as handsome as gods" (qtd. in Fisher 140). Although, we are to assume, such "encounters were romanticized, imaginary flings as opposed to actual sexual liaisons," in the Gilded Age, such "expression[s] of female desire" were "transgressive and disruptive," even in theory, in the safe confines of a travel journal. When the married, middle-aged Gardner flirted with young men in Boston, "dire social consequences often accumulated quickly." However, "when she traveled abroad, flirtation and erotic appreciation resulted in liberation" (Fisher 141).

Gardner was particularly interested in the way that women lived around the world, and was quick to compare and contrast their lives with her own, not out of feminist solidarity, but rather to underscore, fetishize and delight in the exotic and erotic transgressiveness of their physical appearance, traditions, rituals, and spiritual practices. She often noted the color and textures of their environments, their social and cultural roles, and how they were treated, especially by men. She was excited by the polyandry practiced in the Indian Himalayas, where women married multiple men. Aroused by the idea, she praises the practice in a letter written to a friend in Boston: polyandry "seems to have a glorious effect on the women. Such great strapping creatures, red cheeks, covered with silver and tourquoises [sic] and much painted, and as merry as larks. One splendid specimen sat, selling her wares, with four husbands in a row behind her" (qtd. in Lucey 198).

Gardner, on the other hand, was appalled by Indian arranged marriages because they contradicted her view of heterosexual romance. As Lucey conveys, "During the spring 'marrying season' [Gardner] encountered a score of newlyweds on the street in a single day. The husbands, in yellow, walked ahead of the brides, who wore red; their long gowns were tied together….[She] noted that some of the brides were 'small enough to be carried'" (198), suggesting that they might have been, at the very least, malnourished and underdeveloped, or possibly child brides.

Gardner also displayed a morbid fascination with the macabre and grotesque, especially funeral rituals, corporeal punishment, and executions. She derived voyeuristic pleasure and power out of many aspects of life abroad, including those that played with the boundaries of the sacred and profane and mortality and immortality. Moreover, she engaged in thanatourism, or dark tourism, long before it became an industry. While cruising the Nile, the Gardners stopped to watch a funeral procession. In her journal, Gardner notes "a superb looking woman at the funeral, who leaned on a long sword and was a very Judith," the "Old Testament widow who saved Israel by beheading their enemy's commanding general" (qtd. in Lucey 194). In India, she once again engaged in funereal voyeurism when she stood by the Ganges and witnessed the Hindu cremation ritual in its various stages. While, as Gardner describes, some "corpses [were] brought in on stretchers, toes sticking up cold and stiff," others came on the verge of death, for "It seems that to die in the Ganges ensures Paradise." Still others were waiting "for a disengaged funeral pyre," or already ablaze, "with Pariahs watching them and now and again shouting to the Hindu God" (qtd. in Lucey 199).

Observing grief and suffering, and the death and disposal of others, clearly calls one's own mortality into question. However, as Lucey suggests, in Gardner's case, it might have been a voyeuristic healing mechanism that allowed her to make sense of her own tragedies. It may have also reinforced her sense of power and superiority, for she sought immortality through the art she collected, which she believed would add beauty and purpose to her (after) life. Moreover, a notable hint of sadistic pleasure ran through Gardner's pursuit of the "exquisite forms of punishment meted out around the world," which included "hangings in the American West, whippings by policemen on the docks of Hong Kong, chaining criminals to ancient gates in China, and

crucifying those condemned to death in Canton." In fact, in China, the Gardners even "toured the 'Execution Ground,' saw crosses leaning up against a wall, and…met the executioner" (Lucey 191).

Gardner clearly challenged the biological determinism, separate spheres ideology, and severe gender and class restrictions that defined the Gilded Age, and in the process, proved to the medical profession and society at large that a woman could cure herself of neurasthenia not through the rest cure but, albeit with ample time and money, through traveling and writing about it. She saw more of the world than most women of her class, who would have traveled to Europe at least once in their lives, but hardly ever to Asia. Initially, Gardner journeyed with her husband, but she always determined the itinerary, especially what would be seen and purchased (Mckinzie 70–71). While this "rescued her from her depression, her various disappointments and scandals, and her social restrictions in Boston" (Fisher 139), her later solo international trips provoked criticism, even from the more liberal members of her social set. Gradually, Jack Gardner fades into the background of Isabella Gardner's travels abroad, becoming the mere financer of the network that she created. Eventually, she would eclipse him totally, achieving a measure of immortality through her museum as well as Henry James's novels: Isabella Gardner inspired Isabel, the protagonist of *Portrait of a Lady* (1881); Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* (they even wore their long strand of pearls in the same way: twice around the neck and down the front); Mrs. Gareth in *The Spoils of Poynton*; and Charlotte Stant in *The Golden Bowl* (Mckinzie 19–20; Goldfarb 75). Others have claimed that *The Golden Bowl's* Adam Verver, "who greedily buys up all the great masters of Europe to fill his own museum in American City," represents Gardner (Brister 219). Moreover, a dahlia bears Isabella Gardner's name, and the "highest peak in Okanogan County, Washington [is] named Mount Gardner and the range extending north-northwest [is] called the Isabella Range" (Saarinen 55). In fact, she became so popular in Europe that newspapers prioritized the details of her trips over American presidential elections (Mckinzie 25).

However, Isabella Stewart Gardner was also a woman of contradictions. While on one hand she was a bohemian aesthete who flaunted convention and derived pleasure from the exotic, erotic, macabre and taboo, on the other she was a woman who demanded and exerted control, both at home and abroad (Lucey 178). She spent her later years burning her papers, selectively destroying chunks of

her correspondence with the intention of shaping her image from beyond the grave. Consequently, what remains today is at best the impression she wished to create. She relished shocking the world, yet she simultaneously curated her self-representation—that is, what future generations would know, and not know, about her. Over the years, her obsessive desire to be remembered on her own terms, and her very specific will, have invited speculation about whether or not she had something to hide (Vigderman 9–10). As her will stipulates, everything on display at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum must be an object Gardner herself collected; nothing can be added, and no elements of the collection can be changed or (re)moved. Any violations of the terms of her will initiates the self-destruction of her museum, forfeiting its contents to the Trustees of Harvard University for sale at auction (Tharp 312–313; Holly fn. 9, 159–160). Unlike Gardner, who thrived on travel, movement and reinvention, her museum is frozen in time, eternally static in form and content, for modifying it means destroying it and the legend of its creator.

## Notes

[1] Significant portions of Gardner's travel writing (i.e., her journals and albums, as well as letters possessed by her correspondents which she could not destroy) have been transcribed from the original, handwritten primary sources and published in numerous secondary works for easier public access. I make use of some of these works, such as Tharp, Goldfarb, Carter, Lucey and Fisher, among others, in this article.

[2] Many of the photographs featured in Gardner's journals and albums can be accessed on the Internet. The most fascinating—of Burmese women seductively smoking cigars—can be seen here: http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/gallery/journeyseast?pg=3 Photographs of sumo wrestlers and teahouse women can be observed here: http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/gallery/journeyseast?pg=2

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