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**CHRISTINA NIELSEN** brings the timeless legacy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum to life



**THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER** Museum is one of Boston's true masterpieces. More than a jewel for visitors, it's a treasure trove. "It is a window to the past," says Dr. Christina Nielsen, curator of the collection and director of program planning, "and in some ways feels like a time capsule, like you've traveled back in time and can see and experience the vision of a creative individual who lived in a very different era."

A recent Boston transplant, Nielsen moved here from Chicago with her family this past April, and is quickly making herself at home. "We keep having these amazing experiences here. The Charles River, the ocean, the mountains nearby, the American history everywhere you look—what's not to love?" As curator, Nielsen spends her days exploring the rich history of the museum and the extraordinary legacy of its founder, Isabella Stewart Gardner. Mrs. Gardner was known as one of the foremost female patrons of the arts, a bold personality who garnered attention for her fearless lifestyle. "Everybody has their own favorite story about Mrs. Gardner," Nielsen says. "Sometimes it's hard to distinguish the myth from the truth, and in some ways I think she would have appreciated that."

In her will, Mrs. Gardner requested the permanent collection not be significantly altered in any way (hence the empty frames

left as they stand after the infamous, unsolved Gardner heist in 1990). The museum building, built to evoke a 15th-century Venetian palace, houses three floors of rooms and halls, each wholly unique and arranged by Mrs. Gardner herself. "It's extraordinary to me that she collected almost 3,000 years of art history in just a few decades," Nielsen says. "And the way that she put the collection together in the galleries is truly inspiring. She placed works of art from different times and places in close proximity so that visitors can make connections in a way that they can't in more traditional 'white wall' museum settings."

Nielsen's biggest challenge is deciding what she loves the most about her job. "A number of people have asked me what my favorite work of art in the collection is. And that's impossible to answer. My dark secret is that I have a

**ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM**

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number of favorites—in every room!" Still, we had to know—with so much to learn, so much to explore, what's one thing no one can afford to leave without seeing? "The Courtyard. Everyone who sees it for the first time just stands there, looks around and says 'Ah!' It's one of the most magical architectural spaces in the world. You can't help but feel inspired by it when you're there." —*Samantha DiMauro*