

*Palaces Eternal and Serene:
The Vision of Altamura and Isabella Stewart Gardner's Fenway Court**
Robert Colby

The 8 December 1907 edition of the *Boston Herald* claimed to have solved the mystery of a new building at Isabella Gardner's Fenway Court: "STOREHOUSE BUILT COSTLY AS PALACE." It went on to explain how the building was erected to house works of art for which there was no room in the museum that had been completed only four years before. Its curious and monumental design, the paper noted, was based on that of a monastery. Like most everything at Fenway Court, the whimsical structure with its baroque detail, austere walls, and oversized trellises was the subject of intense speculation, although its chief practical function was to house carriages and motorcars.

Gardner died in 1924, and over the course of the twentieth century the building fell into disrepair. The once-high walls were incrementally lowered and the trellises dismantled, leaving the impression of a stand-alone outbuilding: "the carriage house." In July of 2009, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum demolished what remained of the structure in order to build a new addition.

In its original design, the building referred to Altamura, an aesthetic utopia that was the subject of an essay conceived of by Bernard Berenson, Mary Smith Costelloe, and Logan Pearsall Smith.¹ "Altamura" appeared in 1898 in the trio's self-published "little periodical," the *Golden Urn*, and described the yearlong liturgy of a fictive English monastery dedicated to "St. Dion" in an indeterminate Italian locale. The essay outlines a new religion, expressing the full measure of aestheticism's philosophical potential as Epicurean materialism that was yet possessed of a transcendent dimension.

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¹ Smith, Berenson, and Smith Costelloe 1898.

There was, in fact, a real Altamura in southern Italy, and in 1978, Rollin Hadley discovered in the Gardner Museum archives a postcard Berenson sent to Gardner of an imposing ceremonial archway there. This was the source of and catalyst for the new structure which was to be the final stage of Fenway Court's exterior.² In this way, the real Altamura (which Gardner had never visited) came to stand in for the fictive Altamura. As an example of the transformation of an idea into form, the creation of the new building is a compelling demonstration of the means by which Isabella Stewart Gardner gave shape to her particular vision.

The purpose of this article is to provide documentation on the building, its origins and construction, and to examine the culture in which the ideas it represented took shape and how these may inform our understanding of Gardner's project to build her unusual museum. In so doing, the article also amends the scant attention in the scholarly literature on Bernard Berenson to Altamura.³ Archival material presented here for the first time suggests that "Altamura" was a manifesto for a philosophical religion embodying Mary, Bernard, and Logan's aesthetic ideals at a key moment in their overlapping intellectual lives.

No surviving documents detail the meaning Gardner attributed to the "carriage house" complex (or the main palace building, for that matter). Aside from the building itself, the only pieces of evidence to be found are mentions of the building's construction in the Fenway Court payment ledgers and in Gardner's correspondence with Berenson and with her architect, Willard T. Sears. In the payment ledgers the structure is referred to as the "garden house," which may have reflected its function as part of the walled garden, especially given the elaborate trellises that would have given continuity between garden and building and would have blocked the view of the encroaching urban fabric as new buildings went up in the surrounding area.⁴ But the most compelling feature was the exterior, the large portal

² Hadley 1978.

³ While there has been no examination of Altamura amongst Berenson scholars, it was fundamental to Meryle Secrest's understanding of Berenson's career and professional life in *Being Bernard Berenson* (Secrest 1979). In his biography on Berenson, Ernest Samuels describes Altamura as "an elegant and mellifluously phrased fantasy which burlesqued the life of exquisite sensation and lofty thinking of Bernard and Mary's Fiesole circle": Samuels 1979, 273.

with its dramatic elevation, whimsical baroque detail, and the anthropomorphic quality that softened its bold monumentality. Gardner also situated the portal off-center such that it was closer to, and more visible from, the Tremont Entrance of the Frederick Law Olmsted designed Back Bay Fens. This is the view recorded in a 1922 photograph where columnar maples and ivy soften its austere aspect and give it the appearance of great age. Though it was referred to in one letter as “the carriage house,” the portal itself was never used for carriage access to the building (carriages housed within entered and exited from either side). Nor was it intended as a storehouse as the *Herald* article had claimed.⁵ Given the elaboration of detail on the exterior, the structure can be considered as a facade to the entire complex when seen from the Tremont Entrance.⁶

Given the rear facade’s size and potential importance to the Fenway Court design, why did Gardner not include it in her original design for the building when she first had plans drawn up in 1899? When she began building the museum, she did not yet own the lots at the end of the block. These

⁴ For the building’s original payment documents, see below.

⁵ The street upon which it was laid out was never completed by the Fenway developers, and Gardner bought the land in 1913 to connect the main lot with five smaller lots she had bought in 1911. For the purchase of the five lots and the street, see Will and Codicil of Isabella Stewart Gardner, probated 23 July 1924 in the Probate Court of Suffolk County, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Boston, 1924 (hereafter Will and Codicil), p. 6. For Gardner’s purchase of the land marked out for the street in 1913, see Suffolk County, Massachusetts, Grantors Ledger, 1911–20, 163–164, citing plan 2781.541. As for the question of the original use of the building and the possibility of storage, a letter in the Gardner Museum archives shows that as a condition of permitting approval, the Boston City building department stipulated that “The interior of the building is not to be partitioned off, or finished; to have stairs and floors for storage.” Sears to Gardner, 26 June 1907, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Archives (hereafter ISGMA), Boston.

⁶ As part of his Boston Parks System project, Olmsted designed the Tremont Entrance (now truncated and known as Evans Park) as one of several access points to the Fens, the reclaimed land dramatically reconfigured between 1878 and 1895. For the history of the Fenway’s construction, see Zaitzevsky 1982, 54–57. The entrances acted as a transition from the urban environment into the more natural, meandering parklands. As seen on the original Olmsted design, the Tremont Entrance connected Huntington Avenue (then called Tremont Street from there to the Brookline town line) with the Fens. It was later closed off by a lot where the Massachusetts College of Art building now stands. In its original design, passers-by would have been afforded a good view of the large facade and, in certain respects, it may have appeared as a kind of monumental portal: it surely masked the rear of the palace building, the elevation of which was composed with none of the formality of the main facade.

two small lots, laid out according to the Fenway area's original development plan for Back Bay-style townhouses, were owned by Paul and Rachel Thorndike until Gardner purchased them on 22 March 1907.⁷ Gardner made at least one attempt within this restricted lot plan to create a building that would serve as a garden pavilion and carriage house. In March of 1903, less than three months after the museum's gala opening on 1 January, she commissioned her architect to "build the clock tower on the carriage house."⁸ A surviving drawing shows a four-story edifice flanked by forms evocative of ancient Roman aqueducts (though with pointed arches) and topped by a trellis that serves to shield the interior profile of the building from the outside and allow light to pass through. The elevation is adorned with an arcade, a clock and a pediment. Given that the exterior wall was to abut the two lots zoned for townhouses in the rear, the articulated facade is inward-facing. In addition to providing lateral access to a carriage, its chief function would appear to be that of a garden pavilion and to screen the view. This version was not executed, however. Only in 1907 did Gardner acquire the two additional lots, and three months later, building for the rear facade was begun.

The re-enchantment of the world and the career of Isabella Stewart Gardner

The compound of Fenway Court as Isabella Stewart Gardner imagined it can best be seen in a 1925 aerial photograph, taken a year after Gardner died. It shows the massing of the main building and, in the rear, the top of the floating facade attached on both sides to high walls that surrounded the garden, creating a kind of enclosed, noble precinct. Cypress-like maples growing up around the buildings further create the effect of a world apart.⁹

As a total work of art, the building can be understood as an expression of cultural "re-enchantment." Re-enchantment as cultural production has been defined as the transposition of transcendent meaning onto repurposed forms in the face of the loss of transcendent meaning

⁷ The date of the purchase of the two lots is recorded in Will and Codicil, 2.

⁸ Transcript, diary of Willard T. Sears, 7 May 1903, ISGMA.

⁹ The species has been identified as either a fastigiated Norway maple or Freeman maple. I would like to thank Corbin Harwood and Kyle P. Wallick for this information.

elsewhere.¹⁰ The entire Fenway Court project, its architectural forms and collections, can be seen as cultural re-enchantment in the form of romanticism, which, as Edward Tiryakian has suggested, was the chief mode of re-enchantment in the nineteenth century.¹¹ Romanticism-as-worldview (as distinct from, but growing out of, the romantic literary and artistic movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) shows a multivalent critique of modernity: of capitalism, industrialization and the destruction of the natural world, the new consumer culture, a conformist middle-class ideal, positivism, and the expansion of science into daily life. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have explored how romanticism functioned as an imaginative alternative to modern life.¹² A devotion to the past (such as the Gothic Revival), bohemianism and later dandyism, travel to and study of pre-industrial, exotic cultures, aestheticism's "religion of art," revived archaic religious practices, and aristocratic self-fashioning all became strategies of response or subversion to the ideals of modern, middle-class society. Romanticism-as-worldview represents one half of the dialectical nature of modernity, a process of disenchantment and re-enchantment, where cultural forms were reinvented and reinfused with displaced spiritual values.¹³ Ironically, the upper middle class who benefited most from the new capitalist structure could be those most susceptible to the charms of its alternatives. Isabella Gardner exemplifies this well: as the wife of John Lowell Gardner, wealthy financier and member of one of Boston's most prominent families, "Mrs. Jack" was yet *bohémienne*, exemplifying the late-nineteenth-century tendency of upper-middle-class women to adopt bohemian fashion and sensibility as a way of elevating themselves above the pragmatic, mercantile classes from which they had sprung.¹⁴

Collectively, post-Calvinist, bourgeois Boston manifested many strains of romantic culture that distinguished it from the ambient of other East Coast urban centers. Though a New Yorker by birth, and socially conventional in the years following her 1860 marriage, Gardner's transformation from

¹⁰ Schneider 1993; see also Elkins and Morgan 2009.

¹¹ Tiryakian 1992.

¹² Löwy and Sayre 2001.

¹³ Tiryakian 1992.

¹⁴ For the bohemian style as an expression middle-class self-critique, see Graña 1964.

eccentric lady of fashion in the 1870s to bibliophile, art collector, museum builder, and cultural arbiter in the 1890s was shaped by Boston's particular cultural offerings. These were informed by the extension of British romanticism in its three major phases: the romantic Christianity of the Anglo-Catholic movement, the Gothic Revival associated with John Ruskin, and the aestheticism of Walter Pater.¹⁵ Gardner was Anglo-Catholic, a member since 1870 of the Boston Church of the Advent, an outgrowth of the Oxford Movement.¹⁶ When the church relocated to its new neo-Gothic building on Brimmer Street in 1883, she and her husband donated an elaborate carved altarpiece, adding to it in 1890–91, including sculptural elements that featured Saint Isabella and Saint Elizabeth flanking the Crucifix.¹⁷ Gardner's allegiance to Anglo-Catholicism spilled over into an appreciation of Catholic ritual and church history. Gardner claimed descent from the Catholic Stuart dynasty and since the 1880s was a member of the Order of the White Rose, an organization dedicated to the dynasty's celebration.¹⁸ She possessed memorabilia associated with Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, including a prayer book inscribed with the martyred sovereign's name. It was even reported that she dressed as the tragic figure for Christmas Eve Mass in her private chapel.¹⁹ Fenway Court's two chapels are expressions of Gardner's religious devotion and its artistic and performative dimensions.²⁰ These expressions of romantic Christianity fused seamlessly with Ruskin's medieval revivalism, which was promoted in Boston by Gardner's mentor, Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1908), who had guided

¹⁵ For the relationship between these forms of British post-romanticism, see for example Fraser 1986.

¹⁶ For Gardner's religious life, see Lingner 2001. For a general discussion of Gardner's religious activity, see Shand-Tucci 1997, 129–145.

¹⁷ Both "Isabella" and "Elizabeth" are derived from the same name, Jezebel. Gardner's patronage of the Church of the Advent was discussed in Docherty 2000; I am grateful to Linda Docherty for providing me with a copy of her lecture.

¹⁸ See Shand-Tucci 1997, 129–132, and Lingner 2001, 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Docherty 2000.

Gardner's initial intellectual formation and book-collecting.²¹ Norton believed that neo-Gothic architecture, particularly Venetian Gothic, was particularly well suited to be the outward form of the new moral commonwealth to which Boston society should aspire.²² Fenway Court can be understood as Gothic Revival in a truer sense than the Ruskinian train depots that were cropping up throughout the Anglo-American world: it included the actual "stones of Venice" as architectural spolia. In addition, the public mandate of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, established "for the education and enjoyment of the people forever," may be understood as a Nortonian legacy, perhaps the best example of the patrician-sponsored civic education for which Norton fervently advocated.²³ Yet, this public-minded gesture of Bostonian institution-founding can be read simultaneously as a capital-liquefying exercise in aristocratic self-fashioning, creating a lasting monument to Gardner's self-styled regal persona, "Isabella of Fenway Court."

The architectural forms of Gardner's new museum, the palace building and rear facade, reflected the significance of Italy in her cultural imagination. As is well known, the main palace—built and installed between 1899 and 1902—was modeled on a Venetian palace turned inside out. For British and American travelers, pre-industrial Italy (or rather, its pre-industrialized regions, such as Venice) was a place of picturesque, imaginative retreat. In the 1880s, the Gardners traveled frequently to Venice and gravitated to the circle of Anglo-American expatriates (which included Henry James) that frequented Palazzo Barbaro, recently purchased by the Curtis family of Boston.²⁴ Seen through the lens of romantic imagination, the Barbaro represented the miraculous survival of an otherwise lost Venetian past, borne like an ark into the modern era. The strength of the Barbaro's evocative power, and the means of its preserved cultural memory, lay in its largely intact interiors that distinguished it from its despoiled neighbors. Rosella Zorzi has explored how this vision was given epistolary and literary shape

²¹ For Gardner's relationship with Norton, see Carter 1925, 93ff.

²² Dowling 2007, 57–67.

²³ Will and Codicil, 3.

²⁴ See the essays in Chong 2004.

by Henry James and the means by which it was later given physical form in Fenway Court itself.²⁵

In the *American Scene* (1907), Henry James concluded the Boston chapter with an allusion to Fenway Court, which he had visited in 1904, just a year after its completion. In contrast to the “new” Boston, with its Chicago-style high-rises—“the horrific glazed perpendiculars of the future”—it was at Gardner’s museum “that one feels the fine old disinterested tradition of Boston least broken.”²⁶ In its accumulative aesthetic and richly historicist architecture, Fenway Court was a counterpoint to the new, modern Boston. Like Palazzo Barbaro, Fenway Court was to be an abode and repository of history, its interior fixed by Gardner’s will and never to be altered or amended.²⁷

The final stage of Gardner’s cultural evolution was aestheticism, which showed itself in her eclectic interior installations. In this, Gardner was one among several Gilded Age female patrons, such as Catherine Lorillard Wolfe, who favored the “artistic,” aesthetic style of interior decoration.²⁸ Adherents of decorative aestheticism, such as Wolfe, prized domestic objects of diverse cultures and periods for their visual qualities and delighted in compelling juxtapositions to create interiors of widely eclectic style. While aestheticism in Britain offered middle-class consumers an expression of taste that could elevate their social standing, in America, it was the style favored by members of the Gilded Age elite.²⁹ By the early 1880s, the “artistic style” was firmly established in the fashionable Back Bay circles of which the Gardners were a part.³⁰ While domestic decoration as cultural production was aestheticism’s high-end consumerist manifestation, Gardner was surely aware of the origins of the movement as the heightened response to art as sensation, famously exemplified by Walter Pater’s 1873 *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Aestheticism located art’s significance out of time, in the

²⁵ Zorzi 2004.

²⁶ James 1907, 245–246.

²⁷ Will and Codicil.

²⁸ Macleod 2008, 87–91.

²⁹ For aestheticism in America, see Stein 1986.

³⁰ For the aesthetic interior ca. 1880, see *Artistic Houses: Being a Series of Interior Views of a Number of the Most Beautiful and Celebrated Homes in the United States* (New York, 1883–84).

immediate present, as the inspiration for quasi-mystical experience. Gardner's experience of aestheticism as a "religion of art" eventually took the form of a devotion to Asian art in the early years of the twentieth century, accelerated by her close association with Okakura Kakuzo (Okakura's famous *Book of Tea* was keyed to a Western aesthetic sensibility).³¹

Jonathan Freedman has defined a more philosophically informed version of aestheticism that I believe Gardner aspired to: "a more highly valued mode of esthesis . . . a life [lived] in the spirit of art, as a generous, ennobling, and tragic spectacle . . . an aestheticism of imaginative freedom."³² Gardner's understanding of this version of aestheticism would have been shaped not only by Walter Pater's *Renaissance* and the culture of aestheticism that grew up in Boston in the 1880s, but also by Pater's later novel, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (1885). *Marius* exemplified philosophical aestheticism and included an alluring historicist dimension. Reading *Marius* in 1886, Gardner wrote an appreciative (now lost) letter to Pater, whom she had met socially in London earlier that year.³³ He replied with a cordial note to insert into her copy of the book. Tellingly, she included *Marius* in her self-compiled 1906 *Choice of Books from the Library of Isabella Stewart Gardner, Fenway Court*; it was the only work by Pater so included.³⁴

Marius offered a historical vision of the past that was the ideal setting for the pursuit of sensation raised to philosophical significance. The novel tells the story of a young Roman patrician who considers a series of philosophical stances—Stoic, Christian, Epicurean—in what may be considered Pater's intellectual and psychological autobiography.³⁵ *Marius* appreciates and supports members of the early Christian community in Rome—to the extent of dying in place of one of the

³¹ For Gardner's Asian travel and Asian art collecting, see Chong and Murai 2009.

³² Freedman 1986, 398.

³³ Pater to Gardner, 1 October 1885, ISGMA. In his reply, Pater acknowledges her initial letter, which no longer survives, and thanks her for her praise of his work. He had learned "from our charming host of two months ago" that she desired a piece of his writing to "put into *Marius*," suggesting that they had met earlier in a social setting.

³⁴ Gardner 1906, 53.

³⁵ Hughes 1975.

Christians as a pseudo-martyr—all the while remaining an Epicurean. The Epicureanism offered in the novel is a philosophical defense of the pursuit of sensation that resembles ancient Epicureanism in its cultivation of the human senses and existential experience, and yet is deeply moralistic. The Epicureanism Marius adopts—a “noble” version of Cyrenaicism, where the pursuit of sensation and experience leads to aesthetic perfection—is claimed not to oppose the old morality, but is defined as “an exaggeration of one special part of the whole.”³⁶ (The novel has been fruitfully described as a response to the criticism of Pater’s amoral “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*.³⁷) *Marius* affirms the value of Christian virtue while proclaiming the ultimate good of sense experience.

In what reads like a statement of core Aesthetic doctrine—echoing the famous life analogy of the “hard, gem-like flame” from *The Renaissance*—Marius’s religion of experience is described as “the pleasure of the ideal *now* . . . certain moments and spaces of [the Cyrenaic’s] lives were high-pitched, passionately coloured, intent with sensation, and a kind of knowledge which, in its vivid clearness, was like sensation . . . they apprehended the world in its fulness, and had a vision, almost ‘beatific,’ of ideal personalities in life and art.”³⁸ But here, the pursuit of sensation in the “ideal *now*” was balanced with the cultivation of memory to remedy “the sinking of things into the past.”³⁹

Could [Marius] but arrest for others also, certain clauses of experience, as that imaginative memory presented them to himself! In the grand, hot summers, he would have imprisoned the very perfume of the flowers. To create—to live, perhaps, a little beyond the allotted span, in some fragment even, of perfect expression—was the form his longing took, for something to hold by and rest on, amid the “perpetual flux.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Pater 2008, 172.

³⁷ Vogeler 1964.

³⁸ Pater 2008, 172–173.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

To aestheticism's search for sensation is here added the desire for permanence in the face of change. In *Marius*, permanence is found in the "religion of the villa" that begins the novel and foreshadows its conclusion. Marius's philosophical progress begins with a description of this religion of the hearth and its site in the family villa, *White Nights*: a "religion of usages and sentiments rather than of facts and beliefs, and attached to very definite things and places.... Deity is in this Place!"⁴¹ As Pater describes in the early chapter about the villa, this "severe and archaic religion" was to be the protagonist's ultimate belief system, guiding him through his philosophical peregrinations and in the end providing him with the strength to endure martyrdom.⁴²

Marius offered attentive readers like Gardner a "religion of sensation" that was also a religion of place and history. *White Nights* was a domicile that embodied its own philosophy and religion the domestic sphere as sacred space. Gardner may have had cause to ponder many of these themes as she considered plans for her unusual museum.

Gardner's intellectual formation was shaped by the overlapping expressions of British romanticism as they were present and culturally relevant in Boston during the period between 1870 and 1900: Anglo-Catholicism, the Gothic Revival, and Pater's aestheticism (as informed by *Marius*). Gardner of course was not alone in this path of cultural evolution: Berenson and Logan Pearsall Smith were also protégés of Charles Eliot Norton as students at Harvard and discovered Pater in the 1880s, making aestheticism into a vocation and new religion.⁴³ Berenson set off to Europe in 1888 with a copy of *Marius* among his belongings.⁴⁴ Mary could recite lengthy passages by heart and considered it "the instrument of her conversion."⁴⁵ The trio of expatriates would use the Epicurean philosophy of Pater's

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴³ Berenson describes Pater's influence on his intellectual formation in many later writings. See for example the diary entry dated 2 October 1956, published in Berenson 1963, 452. For Pater's influence on Logan Pearsall Smith, see Smith 1938, 206–208.

⁴⁴ Simpson 1986, 51.

⁴⁵ Parker 1959, 103.

novel as the touchstone of their own aesthetic religion when they came to write “Altamura,” as discussed in more detail below.

Gardner began seriously purchasing art in the early 1890s with the proceeds of an inheritance left by her father.⁴⁶ As a collector, her activities are generally described as those of an advanced Gilded Age patron of the arts in the company of her much richer New York counterparts: America’s first real collector of Old Master painting, to be followed by the likes of J. P. Morgan and Henry Clay Frick.⁴⁷ Though supported and encouraged by her husband Jack, Berenson was Isabella’s chief collaborator when she began to collect in earnest. Gardner had known the young man of promise when he was a student at Harvard in the 1880s; he was a frequent visitor to her Beacon Street townhouse salons. Gardner’s Boston was the world of learning and cultural achievement that was to be Berenson’s antidote to his impoverished upbringing in the immigrant quarter. No doubt the vision of a living culture witnessed in her drawing room had presented the possibility of cultural distinction as vocation. Gardner and other members of her circle supported Berenson in a postgraduate study year in Europe after he failed to receive one of Harvard’s prestigious travel fellowships. Berenson wrote Gardner frequently in those first years abroad, letters filled with surprisingly introspective revelations and self-analysis as he attempted to articulate his aspirations for a literary career. The letters suggest a keen sympathy and close confidence between the two, despite their age difference, with Gardner acting as a mentor and mirror reflecting Berenson’s hopes for distinction. After a hiatus of several years, Gardner and Berenson re-established their friendship in the mid-1890s. With the publication of *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* in 1895, Berenson had emerged as a professional connoisseur in the new scientific manner of aesthetic criticism and, at the same time, had begun advising Americans buying art in Europe. Gardner was by then collecting art but was aware of her need for assistance in navigating the world of the Old Master trade. Gardner was to be Berenson’s first major client. In their lengthy correspondence he was frank (if not always honest) about the schemes he was concocting for new acquisitions, but he combined business with an exalted form of flattery, addressing her not infrequently

⁴⁶ For an outline of Gardner’s career as a collector, see Chong 2003, ix–xviii.

⁴⁷ Saltzman 2008.

as “Lady Isabella.”⁴⁸ Such rhetoric reveals the delightful fiction that lay at the heart of the pursuit of art. Berenson’s job was not only to identify works of art suitable to his clients, but to cast over them a kind of magic spell: their purchase was to have a transformative and elevating effect. Berenson’s perpetual stream of banter, gossip, and business details maintained a generally intimate tone, but one that he would drop with a flourish to strike the pose of the courtier and engage with Isabella’s regal persona. As preceptor and mirror of Gardner’s princely self, Berenson was a sounding board for his client’s ideas about a private museum.

In 1896 Isabella and Jack initiated plans to tear down the Beacon Street townhouse where they had lived since 1861 and rebuild it as a museum, to include living quarters on the top floor; to this end they engaged the architect Willard T. Sears.⁴⁹ In a letter to Berenson dated 19 September 1896, Gardner describes her hopes for the new enterprise: “I think I shall call my Museum the Borgo Allegro. The very thought of it is such a joy.... But don’t you agree with me that my Museum ought to have only a few [works of art], and all of them, A. No. 1.s. Or do you think otherwise?”⁵⁰ This is one of the few, but among the most explicit, surviving comments Gardner made about the museum, and it shows how she was trying out different ideas leading up to the final concept and inviting feedback from Berenson. Following the death of her husband in December 1898, Gardner asked Sears to design a building for a new location.⁵¹ Land was purchased in the newly reclaimed “Back Bay Park” (the Fenway).⁵² For her new project Gardner chose a different guiding spirit from that which she had invoked in relation to the “Borgo Allegro.” Instead of the museum of masterpieces alone, her palace building was to be a marvelous fusion of art, architecture, and romantic, cloistered atmosphere. Altamura should be included

⁴⁸ For the multi-dimensional nature of Berenson’s relationship with Gardner, see for example Chong 2003, xi–x.

⁴⁹ Transcript, diary of Willard T. Sears, 1 September 1896, ISGMA. I am grateful to Kristen Parker for providing me with this reference.

⁵⁰ Hadley 1987, 66.

⁵¹ Carter 1925, 171–172; transcript, diary of Willard T. Sears, 30 December 1898, ISGMA.

⁵² Carter 1925, 174.

among the many strands that, woven together, may be said to form the inspiration for Fenway Court.

On 31 July 1898, five months before she would begin plans for her new museum, Berenson wrote to Gardner from the Northumberland home of Sir George Trevelyan; the letter was infused with the ethos of worldview romanticism as re-enchantment.⁵³ Berenson had just journeyed from the “magic cloister and enchanted gardens” of Cambridge. There he had talked “deeply of metaphysics and poetry and frivolously of politics,” thus proclaiming dandy ideology in the elevation of the non-utilitarian over the pragmatic. The letter begins with Berenson asking if Gardner had received the latest installment of the *Golden Urn*. “Read the account of *Altamura*. You are the only person in the world who could really live it—indeed you do already. Should anything like it be ever realized upon earth you must be our first visiting monarch.” Berenson’s effusive imperatives show the slippage in agency that was suggestive of his and Gardner’s mutually enhancing enterprises in these years. Gardner’s reply to Berenson’s letter has not survived, but in his next, dated 13 August, Berenson begins by thanking her for the “charming acknowledgment of the *Golden Urn*. I was sure you at all events would appreciate it, and of course you have.”⁵⁴

Given Gardner’s evident enthusiasm, Berenson’s response leaves open the tantalizing question of what share *Altamura* had in Gardner’s thinking about her museum project when she began it several months later. Certainly the question of *Altamura* problematizes Berenson’s role in his chief patron’s enterprise to build a personal museum. While the history of their relationship has traditionally focused on Berenson’s capacity as art buyer and pseudo-courtier, he may have had a more significant role in giving philosophical shape to Gardner’s museum. (In the mid-1890s, Berenson had not fully committed to the path of professional connoisseur and was still pursuing aesthetic philosophy as intellectual vocation. *Altamura*, as I will discuss below, may have served as the repository of these interests.) To what extent, then, was Fenway Court a manifestation of *Altamura*: “high walls” to enclose a realm of the eternal present, where history and art could be experienced as religion?

Palaces against the skies: The vision of Altamura and the Berenson circle

⁵³ Hadley 1987, 146–147.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

“Altamura” was published in 1898 in the third and final number of the *Golden Urn*, the periodical Logan Pearsall Smith, Mary Smith Costelloe, and Bernard Berenson had created in 1896 to publish essays, lists of “sacred pictures,” and a treasury of evocative literary excerpts.

By the time they wrote “Altamura,” Bernard and Mary had successfully established themselves as leading critics of Italian Renaissance painting with countless articles and reviews as well as Berenson’s monograph on Lorenzo Lotto and the three volumes on Venetian, Florentine, and Central Italian Renaissance artists. Berenson had begun to earn considerable sums assisting Americans entering the hunt for Old Master paintings, chief among them Gardner herself. Widely published and widely known, Berenson and Mary had carved out an imposing position in the Anglo-American circle in Florence, in the literary marketplace, and in the Old Master trade. While the couple would not marry until 1900 following the death of Mary’s first husband, Frank Costelloe, they lived in adjacent villas and pursued their mutually enhancing enterprises together.

In the mid-1890s Berenson, was deeply engaged with philosophical and metaphysical speculations.⁵⁵ Around 1895, he was moving in the direction of aesthetic philosophy, and yet chose the path of the professional connoisseur and further engagement with the marketplace.⁵⁶ He later looked back on these years with heightened nostalgia when he came to write his *Sketch for a Self-Portrait* in 1948.

Recall the summer of 1895 . . . Your mind worked as never before and, shame, never since. You had visions, clear, detailed visions of what you should do for years and years to come—a lifetime, in fact. Remember, you mapped out one book on ideated sensations, and another of life-enhancement, and a third on the portrait. Instead of accepting this revelation as the light to guide you for the rest of your days, as the Pisgah sight of your promise, you let yourself be seduced into undertaking a work of the Drawings of the Florentine Painters. How could you be so easily lured away from the path that divine guidance had opened and lit up

⁵⁵ Samuels 1979, 236.

⁵⁶ See Alison Brown’s contribution to this exhibition.

for you?⁵⁷

In *Sketch for a Self-Portrait*, the decision to abandon philosophical inquiry and become an expert connoisseur is dramatized as a fall from grace.

The magical world—Spengler’s happiest phrase—is a fairy world. I dwelt there for my first thirty years. It was hard to abandon it, to be driven out of Paradise even as our first parents were. Like them, as described by our sublimest poet, heir of all that is most noble and majestic in Israel, in Greece and in Rome, I looked back often and with what homesickness and heartsickness! But there is no return.⁵⁸

Written in 1897 and published in 1898, “Altamura” may have functioned for Berenson as a place to imagine pure aesthetic and philosophical pursuits at the moment when he was beginning to be drawn away from them, though it emerged out of a close collaboration between himself, Mary, and Logan.

After Mary’s marriage to the Irish barrister Frank Costelloe, the Smith family moved with the newlyweds to London, arriving in 1888. Logan went up to Oxford, enrolling at Balliol College and graduating in 1891. After a sojourn in Paris, where he wrote his first published work, *The Youth of Parnassus and Other Stories of Oxford Life* (1895), Logan moved to Venice in 1896; there he took one of the two apartments behind the unfinished facade of Palazzo Venier on the Grand Canal. He would soon begin making frequent trips to Florence to stay with Mary, and from there he would join Bernard and Mary in their travels. Following in the footsteps of his friend and literary role model, Henry James, Logan cultivated the leisurely life of a man of letters, supported by an annuity and generous remittances from his parents. Though he would eventually become a fixture in London literary circles as a superior stylist and discerning critic, in the 1890s he was still seeking to make his mark. His tastes were still much shaped by aestheticism, as he had drunk deeply from the Paterian well while at Oxford. “Altamura” has traditionally been ascribed to Logan with Berenson’s collaboration, but as we shall see,

⁵⁷ Berenson 1949, 39.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

Mary too may have played a significant role in its inception.⁵⁹

“Altamura” describes an imagined English monastery in the remote mountains of Italy dedicated to “St. Dion.”⁶⁰ Most of the essay is given over to a description of the sect’s elaborate liturgy. The purpose of Altamura’s religion was revealed in the first page of the essay: to “render holy all human experience,” a sentiment reflecting a core tenet of aesthetic doctrine.⁶¹ Its elaborate year-long ritual was a hymn to life’s consecration, filled with pagan rites, pious disillusionings, and hopes for redemption. Altamura’s calendar begins in March, celebrating moral sentiment and the “God of the Deists . . . ‘l’éternel Géomètre’, the Benevolent Creator of Broad Church Theology.”⁶² The following months chart an archetypal life cycle: youth and dawn (April); young love and innocent passions (May); action and power (June); their rewards in rank, pomp, and beautiful ladies (July); pastoral retreat (August); elegy (September); pagan pleasure (October); and death (November). The final three months (December, January, and February) are given to contemplations of the soul and the search for salvation, and are dedicated to pity, art, and religion and metaphysics. “Altamura” described a comprehensive philosophy that affirmed life in both its materialist and cosmic dimensions.

The name Altamura itself conjures a fortress-like association of “high walls,” a world of cloistered refuge from profane reality. The inhabitants of Altamura did venture forth on “pilgrimages” to visit “sacred pictures,” just as Berenson and Mary ventured forth on their perpetual journeys around Italy to look for Renaissance paintings: a list of “Sacred Pictures” composed the balance of the volume of the *Golden Urn* in which “Altamura” appeared.⁶³ The books the Altamurans read are the books that

⁵⁹ The essay appeared in the third volume of *The Golden Urn* without authorship, but appears to have been originated by Logan Pearsall Smith. In the Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers at I Tatti, a typed manuscript of the article is ascribed to Smith in Mary’s handwriting. Berenson wrote in a later diary entry that the original idea had come from him and the two had written it together. Smith later re-edited it and included it in his collection of essays, *Reperusals and Re-Collections* (Smith 1936, 78–84), without acknowledgment of Berenson’s contribution.

⁶⁰ Smith, Berenson, and Smith Costelloe 1898, 99–107.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Bernard, Mary, and Logan read and frequently included in their digests of “sacred texts” that otherwise made up the contents of the *Golden Urn*: Wordsworth, Theocritus, Virgil, Blake, Herrick, Keats, Marlowe, Milton, Arnold, Pater. In addition to the romantic authors, others reflect the values of worldview romanticism in the nineteenth century. The inclusion of Arnold and Pater is the only indication that Altamura was conceived as a present reality. The concluding paragraph of the essay reveals “Altamura” to be a place of imaginary retreat from modernity and the flight from utilitarian pursuits:

Freed from that narrow, feverish grind of passions and activities which is called “Life,” the Dionites derive a richer and more wonderful sense of self-conscious existence from the contemplation of Nature, the mountains, the stars, the changing moons and seasons; from the study of their sacred books, and the devout worship of those great forces and persons and works of art in which the spirit of Being has been most splendidly manifested.⁶⁴

Experience of nature and time, guided by the rhythm of the seasons, offers the basis for a more self-aware experience of life, contrasting the “feverish grind” of modernity, a kind of somnambulist, unconscious state of unregulated urges and passions. For the Dionites, “sacred” books and art are among those matters infused with the “spirit of Being,” an expression of aestheticism as the religion of re-enchanted art. In keeping with worldview romanticism, Altamura offers a vista into the past through historicist imagination: “From their mountain thrones they see spread before them all ages and epochs, and the echo of contemporary disturbances comes but faintly to their ears. Ancient Greece and Rome are indeed as near to them in spirit as modern cities.”⁶⁵

Seen from the lofty heights of Altamura, the view of the world is a kind of phantasmagoria of past cultures, a vision that rivals the din of modern life. This may have performed a therapeutic function for the authors. The sect’s doctrine was the famous dictum from Book II of Lucretius’ *De*

⁶³ Ibid., 107

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

rerum natura: “Nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere edita doctrina sapientum templa serena.”⁶⁶ *Otium*, the life of detached and leisured contemplation, is the basis of the sect’s philosophy. The concluding line of “Altamura” reveals the purpose of philosophical pleasure: “by real and devout enjoyment, the burden of the world’s joylessness can be, in some mystic way, abated.”⁶⁷ In keeping with Berenson’s philosophical pursuits in the mid-1890s, the Dionites’ chief longing closely echoes Arthur Schopenhauer’s belief in the power of art and nature to relieve anxiety and mental pain. In the final volume of his monumental work, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer invoked Epicureanism to explain the value of pleasure as escape: “the peace always sought but always escaping us on the . . . path of willing . . . the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will.”⁶⁸ For Berenson, who had long sought out a path in life that would elevate him above the sordidness of daily existence, pleasure in art and nature could be a path to psychological emancipation as well as distinction.

In the late nineteenth century, “Epicureanism” was a byword for aestheticism generally, but the trio’s aesthetic philosophy seems especially inspired specifically by Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*. In an 1897 letter defending his aesthetic pursuits to a friend, Berenson called himself not only an “Epicurean” but a “new Cyrenaic,” a reference to the precise sect of Epicureanism that Marius adopted.⁶⁹

Altamura’s St. Dion, a sanctified incarnation of the pagan god Dionysus, echoes the seemingly paradoxical identity of Marius, the Epicurean as presumed martyr-saint. In *Marius*, Pater describes how the Cyrenaic and Christian saint are nearly indistinguishable: “it may be thought that the saint, and the Cyrenaic lover of beauty, would at least understand each other better than either would understand the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 99. “Nothing is more welcome than to hold the lofty and serene positions well fortified by the learning of the wise.” Translated in Carus 1908, 41.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁸ Schopenhauer 1969, 196.

⁶⁹ Samuels 1979, 278.

mere man of the world. Stretch them one point further, shift the terms a little, and they might actually touch.”⁷⁰

What for Pater was a carefully defended philosophy was for Berenson and his circle the makings of a program of life. They had transferred a visionary ideal to the blueprint for an experiential reality. Newly arrived in Italy in 1896, Logan seems to have acted as a catalyst for the vision of Altamura and the literary journal in which the essay would appear. While living in Venice, Logan appears to have originated the title and most likely the concept of the *Golden Urn*. In October of 1896, Logan wrote to his sister a letter that captures the picturesque tone in which the periodical was conceived.

With a wood fire and an easy chair and Pater’s beautiful “Gaston de Latour” to read, I have rather enjoyed these autumn rains. You can be really melancholy in Venice in the autumn, and real rich melancholy is a much harder thing to find than Happiness, which can be won any day by a well-digested dinner and a game of whist. I mean to write some autumnal prose to be published in the “Golden Urn”—doesn’t thee think that a good name for our paper? “In Golden Urns draw light” (Milton) could be the motto.⁷¹

“Altamura” originated the following year in the summer of 1897. In a letter dated 4 June, Logan, who again appears to have initiated the idea, wrote to Mary:

I want to write for the next Golden Urn an account of our religion as if it already existed “among the remote romantic Italian mountains,” and I want a name to call it by. I thought the name of some place “The Purple Order of _ _” what would be a good name? Was there

⁷⁰ Pater 2008, 171.

⁷¹ Smith to Smith Costelloe from Venice, 10 October 1896, Houghton Library Manuscripts Department, 2005 M-4, Logan Pearsall Smith Papers (hereafter LPSP) (Unprocessed), Box 1, Folder: “Typed Copies of Letters to Various.” The Milton quotation comes from book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, in the section describing the creation of celestial bodies.

any saint Pagan and Catholic enough—in the true sense of Catholic? Here is a motto for us from Flaubert[:] “Inclinons-nous devant tous les autels.”⁷²

Logan’s intriguing reference to “our religion” suggests that “Altamura” was an earnest attempt to describe a new gospel. The letter shows that Logan conceived of the pagan-Catholic saint soon to be called “St. Dion.” The quotation appears in Flaubert’s correspondence with Madame Roger des Genettes, in which the novelist exhorts her to cast off the memory of the Catholic orthodoxies of the Ancien Régime and join him in bowing “before all the altars.”⁷³ As a principle of aesthetic doctrine of the worship of all life experience, Flaubert’s sentiment finds expression in Altamura’s opening paragraph: “a Religion interpreting and rendering holy all human experience.”⁷⁴

As Berenson would later explain, the idea for “Altamura” came from a visit Logan and Berenson made to Monte Oliveto Maggiore near Siena in February of 1897. Monte Oliveto Maggiore was a Benedictine monastery that Berenson had frequented in the early 1890s, and was a catalyst for his Catholic conversion in 1891. He first went there to study the frescoes of il Sodoma and became enchanted with the life of the monastery, the kindly abbot who would eventually receive him into the Church, and the well-stocked library. His loss of faith in the following years did not keep him from returning often throughout the decade. While there, he would make frequent visits to a large abandoned building nearby, called “il Monistero.” As he wrote in a later autobiographical sketch:

I used to go there often and at one time toyed with the idea of buying it and of living there with a few choice spirits in a sort of Thélème. I went there at least once with my brother-in-law Logan Pearsall Smith, and out of this came the sketch concocted by us together about Altamura,

⁷² The letter is inscribed “High Buildings,” dated 4 June, and can be dated to 1897 as Logan describes the completion and decoration of his new home which had just been readied for his return from Italy in that year. LPSP, Box 4: “LPS Letters 1897–99.”

⁷³ Flaubert 1991, 72.

⁷⁴ Smith, Berenson, and Smith Costelloe 1898, 99.

printed in the first number of the *Golden Urn*.⁷⁵

Berenson had brought Smith to Monte Oliveto in February 1897 during one of his frequent picture-hunting tours. The monastery's associations for Berenson seem to have transferred readily to his traveling companion. In a letter to his mother, Logan described the experience:

Little walled towns on the tops of mountains, with great palaces built there in their native hamlets by Popes and Princes, monasteries in almost inaccessible places, with great halls and cloisters, and white robed monks who entertained us delightfully and gave us cells to sleep in—it was all wonderful, and the harnessing up of the old ram-shackle wagon in the frosty morning light, and the driving on through the [illegible] sleepy dusty morning hours, reminded me very much of camping out. Only instead of game and waterfalls we were hunting for old pictures. The excitement is just the same and our hearts beat when we stopped our carriage and went into some little unknown church which might (and often did) contain some splendid picture.⁷⁶

The countryside Logan describes is the countryside of the traveler whose eye has been trained to see the world through an aesthetic lens. Churches, palaces, but especially pictures are the new sources of delight instead of waterfalls, the erstwhile goal of the traveler in search of the picturesque. The hunt for pictures was part of Berenson's regular itinerary for seeking out any and all paintings during his frequent travels throughout Italy. For Logan, however, it was one among several picturesque elements—art, landscape, and architecture all flowed together in a general romantic vision of Italy. In a

⁷⁵ Thélème was Rabelais' Epicurean revision of monastic community in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. 'May 1st Siena, Monte Oliveto Maggiore after eighteen years. [Returned to] Monistero, the huge brick building on the Maremma road, a couple of miles out. I used to go there often, and at one time toyed with the idea of buying it and of living there with a few choice spirits in a sort of Thélème. I went there at least once with my brother-in-law Logan Pearsall Smith, and out of this came the sketch concocted by us together about Altamura, printed in the first number of the *Golden Urn*.' Berenson 1963, 74.

⁷⁶ 27 February 1897, Villa Rosa, LPSP (Unprocessed), Box 4: envelope inscribed "Feb 27, 1897 Mother."

similar letter to his father, Logan writes:

[We] climbed up into some of those mountain towns that one sees in Italy from the railway, and found beautiful churches and palaces and pictures. One night we passed in a great old monastery, way up in an almost inaccessible place among the mountains—an enormous, almost deserted monastery with only three monks left, who entertained us in a most friendly way. The next morning we started out at sunrise, and drove through a most beautiful remote romantic country hunting into all sorts of country churches for pictures that had never been known before.⁷⁷

Monte Oliveto and the “remote romantic” countryside seems to have worked a kind of spell on Logan. A sense of discovery attends these immediate reflections, a discovery of a new geographic landscape and a newfound spiritual landscape within: “our religion . . . among the remote romantic Italian mountains.”

The architecture of Altamura, described as a “monastic palace,” may have been inspired in part by Monte Oliveto itself, with its multiple courtyards and Renaissance frescoes.⁷⁸ The imaginary Altamura was said to have comprised “great halls, colonnades, and terraces, once the mountain court of the princes of Orsara.”⁷⁹ The Altamurans came to possess the court and made it their convent, but preserved many of its original appointments. The notion of a “cloistered court” was a fitting visual form to express the pietistic, aristocratic vision of Altamuran sanctuary.

Altamura also provided the model for an ideal social type. In a passage in her 1898 diary, Mary describes a luncheon visit by Arthur Galton: “the nearest to an ‘Altamuran’ we have ever come

⁷⁷ Logan Pearsall Smith to Robert Pearsall Smith, 1897 (“Friday”), Villa Rosa, Fiesole, LPSP, Box 4: “LPS Letters 1897–99.”

⁷⁸ Smith, Berenson, and Smith Costelloe 1898, 102.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

across.”⁸⁰ Galton, whom Berenson had met in 1887, was a fixture of aesthetic Oxford when he returned to study classics after abandoning his vocation as a Catholic priest.⁸¹ Walter Pater had praised him in print as “a lover of our [that is, English] literature at once enthusiastic and discreet.”⁸² Galton was apparently disenchanted with modern society, and preferred life in the country with his dachshund and his Tacitus. As a historian, a moralist, and a critic, Galton’s literary taste and prolific if disinterested studies recommended him as an ideal embodiment of Altamuran ideals. As represented by Galton, aesthetic Oxford (and the Cambridge of the “magic cloister and enchanted gardens”), which had so enthralled Berenson, may have provided the living model for Altamura’s atmosphere.

As a place of imaginative retreat, Altamura offered Bernard and Mary an antidote to the poison of personal attacks, in particular an 1898 novel by Berenson’s fellow Harvard graduate, Robert Herrick, called *The Gospel of Freedom* and based on their controversial relationship and aesthetic vocation.⁸³ Herrick had met up with Berenson in Paris (where the novel begins) in 1892, and later in Florence in 1895 (where it ends). To Berenson’s alarm, the author ploughed much of their actual conversation into the novel in order to create the character of “Simeon Erard,” a clever son of immigrant Jewish parents from New Jersey who, with the help of wealthy benefactors, had abandoned his impoverished family to study in Europe. In the novel, the Smith clan (called the “Anthon of St. Louis”) also featured heavily; the pretext of its underlying moral about the possibilities and perils of the emancipated modern woman was Adela Anthon Wilbur’s flight from her first husband, a sympathetic Chicago tycoon. Logan appears in a particularly withering portrait as a self-effacing, literary hanger-on. Herrick’s real target, in fact, was aestheticism itself, and the novel aims at an acute critique of the “aesthetic type” figured as the unappetizing foil for the ideal of vigorous, pragmatic American manhood.

⁸⁰ Mary Berenson, diary, 6 June 1898, Villa I Tatti, Fiesole, 40. I am grateful to Jeremy Boudreau for alerting me to this reference and to Ilaria Della Monica for sending me the full citation.

⁸¹ For a sketch of Galton, see Marwill 1988, 28–29.

⁸² Pater 1889, 8.

⁸³ The episode is discussed in Samuels 1979, 267–269. Herrick had succeeded early in his career as a novelist in a firmly moralistic mold and took up a position in the English Department at the University of Chicago.

In a diary entry dated May 1898, Mary writes: “I read a book by Mr. Herrick of the Chicago University of which Bernard is the hero and I the heroine—a book in which we are both represented as loathsome reptiles. I was angry about it at first and then laughed—but in rather a sad way.”⁸⁴ The next entry continues the same thread: “Berenson laughed at it too, but the American point of view does make us sick. We consoled ourselves reading the third number of the *Golden Urn*.” Retreating behind “high walls,” Altamura was a refuge from the “American point of view,” modernity in its middle-class utilitarianism, rationalism, and moralism.

Altamura’s visionary quality was the subject of an anecdote Logan recounted in an 1899 letter to his sister about a precocious young cousin of Berenson’s then studying at Harvard who had come to Florence to visit his uncle. Smith made sport at the young man’s expense when he discovered him looking at a map of Italy for Altamura. “He thinks it would be pleasant for a while there, and says he would like to visit it, though he could not stay long, as it is not real life.”⁸⁵ The young man mistakenly believed Altamura to be an actual place, but also stood in judgment over its aesthetic philosophy, offering, to Logan’s dismay, an echo of “the American point of view.” Logan’s response registers the private world Altamura represented. It was only for the initiated.

High walls: Altamura and Fenway Court

As the letters Berenson sent to Gardner in 1898 suggest, the vision of Altamura resounded with Gardner at a key moment in her thinking about a new museum. The celebration of art in the essay’s final section might have been particularly alluring. Found in the liturgical months that pertain to the soul’s search for redemption, the realm of art is a visionary world, a lofty retreat from the profanity of modern, daily existence:

January is given to art; and in the dark days of winter, when this world is blackened with

⁸⁴ Mary Berenson, diary, 29 May 1898. I am grateful to Ilaria Della Monica for alerting me to this reference.

⁸⁵ Logan Pearsall Smith to Alys Smith, 18 March 1899, Il Frullino, via Camerata, Florence, LPSP (Unprocessed), Box 4: envelope inscribed “March 18, 1899, Alys.”

frost or dimmed with fog, the Altamurans conjure up that other world, sun-gilt, eternal and serene, which, little by little, man has constructed out of, and above, the infamy and chaos of his existence; that world of temples and palaces against still skies, of landscapes and splendid cities, where magnificent human persons sit clothed in splendour, listening to music, or to noble verse discoursing tales of antique destiny.⁸⁶

“Altamura” contains an earlier passage that might have been even more alluring to Gardner. It comes in July, “the month of Rank, Pomp and Riches,” halfway through the Altamuran calendar:

July too is the month of Beautiful Ladies—not the flower-like maidens young men adore, but the queens of arts and years, who dwelt in palaces, and wearily listened to the half-sincere adulations of kings and princes. Helen, Thais, Phryne, Lesbia, the Queen of Egypt, Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Magdalen, Lucretia Borgia, Caterina Sforza, Isabella d’Este, all are now remembered; their altars and statues are heaped and crowned with flowers; and songs, once pedantically penned by princes and Court poets, are sung in their honour.⁸⁷

While Altamura was open only to the initiated, in July great ladies and monarchs were permitted entrance to the outer courts:

And only in this month is the law relaxed which so rigidly excludes the outside world from Altamura: profane feet are, of course, never allowed in the inner cloisters, but in the lodges certain great ladies of the world are allowed to sojourn, and entertainment is made for visiting monarchs.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Smith, Berenson, and Smith Costelloe 1898, 106–107.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

When Berenson wrote to Gardner in 1898 with the promise that she would be “our first visiting monarch” he was surely echoing this section, establishing himself as the gatekeeper to Altamuran paradise and courtier to Isabella, a latter-day “queen of arts and years.” Gardner is well known for her own identification with the illustrious women of history, among them Isabella d’Este and Mary Queen of Scots. It is hard not to see the kind of exemplary persona Gardner cultivated reflected in this passage: Isabella of Fenway Court.

Since at least 1903, the year Fenway Court opened, Gardner had been intent on constructing a garden pavilion/carriage house in the rear of the complex, but had not settled on a design that would fit well with the lot as it then existed. In 1906, she visited Berenson in Florence for the long-anticipated visit to his villa, I Tatti. Immediately after returning to Boston, Gardner began plans for the rear facade. That Berenson and Gardner had been corresponding about the project is clear in Berenson’s letter dated 5 January 1907, about the laying of the first stone for the “new building.”⁸⁹ On 22 March, Gardner was able to purchase the two remaining lots at the end of the block, which allowed her to reimagine the project with an exterior-facing facade.⁹⁰

On 4 May 1907, Berenson sent Gardner a postcard showing the Porta di Bari and the Piazzale Unitá d’Italia in the Apulian town of Altamura where the Berensons were touring. He jotted on the back: “This is the real Altamura—delightful—all the same.”⁹¹ The casual tone suggests that Altamura had remained a topic of conversation since 1898—they would surely have had occasion to speak about it when Gardner visited Berenson in Florence the year before. (Berenson had also taken Gardner to Monte Oliveto Maggiore in 1899, only a year after “Altamura” was published.⁹²) Though it does not appear that Berenson intended to suggest by his postcard that Gardner use this as a model for the new building about which they had already been corresponding, she clearly saw how it could serve this purpose and wasted no time in having the image of the Porta di Bari turned into a design for the new

⁸⁹ Hadley 1987, 392.

⁹⁰ The date of the purchase of the two lots is recorded in Will and Codicil, 2.

⁹¹ ISGMA. See Hadley 1978.

⁹² For Berenson and Gardner’s trip to Monte Oliveto, see Samuels 1979, 335.

building. By 26 June, within a mere eight weeks of the date of Berenson's postcard sent from Italy, Gardner had commissioned and signed off on blueprints and, through the offices of her architect, had them submitted to the permitting board, secured the necessary permits, and hired a contractor.⁹³

Early photographs of the complex show a design of enormous physical presence. The massive structure invokes Altamura in its literal meaning as "high walls" and is imposing in a way that the front of the palace is not. It is possible that Gardner was advised against building a wall up to the full height without the structural support provided by the shed roof of the central facade; instead, the rest of the elevation was completed with a trellis flush with the top of the building and angled to match the shed roof. Ivy was used to achieve the look of a contiguous wall as seen in a photo taken in 1922. A nearly identical drawing to the one cited above shows the same elevation of arcade, clock, and pediment, but its structural form is close to the version as finally built with its shed roof and distinctive capped piers. The stepped buttresses (a different solution to the structure problem of the high walls) are of course different from the trellises of the final design, but the drawing may represent an attempt to include the evocative interior from the earlier 1903 version. Financial or permitting considerations may have prevented Gardner from realizing the project as here proposed, but the drawing shows how the carriage house may still have been imagined as a garden pavilion, which may offer another explanation as to why it was called the "garden house."⁹⁴

In addition to providing architectural resolution to the building complex, I suggest that the structure memorialized the vision of Altamura. The large and impractical nature of the building (the trellises alone cost \$4,000) and the speed with which Gardner set about implementing its design signals its meaning beyond practical function.⁹⁵ It would be one among several commemorative gestures at

⁹³ Sears to Gardner, 26 June 1907, ISGMA.

⁹⁴ The first payment, probably referring to the large trellises: "15 Nov. 1907 C. F. Letteney for carpenters work done upon garden house and wall at F[enway] C[ourt] \$4,000." The second, the payment to the architect, 16 December: "Willard T. Sears for professional services rendered in the construction of a garden house and wall upon a new lot of land added to Fenway C[ourt], \$2690." (The new lot was purchased 22 March 1907, and extended Gardner's holdings to the entire block.) Ledgers 1900–07, Ledger 2, 24, ISGMA.

⁹⁵ For the cost of the building, see note 94 above.

Fenway Court—the Yellow Room as an ode to James McNeill Whistler; the installation of the Buddha Room to include remembrances of Okakura Kakuzo⁹⁶—but the size and visibility of the rear facade may further suggest the predominant significance of the ideals Altamura represented in the entire Fenway Court project. Berenson’s influence on Gardner, however, is complicated by Gardner’s early influence on Berenson at a key moment in his education. Their relationship can best be understood as one of mutual reflection, a kind of double mirroring of aspiration through cultural endeavor. Each sought in the other a realization of a dream that required the other to achieve. Given the scale of the building as a commemorative gesture, “Altamura” may indeed have reflected shared ideals that took shape in the entire project for Fenway Court, introduced as they were in the very months before Gardner began her museum project. Not only did she delay construction until after she had purchased all the parcels of the large lot, but it would appear that she held back until she found a form that would suitably embody Altamura.

If Palazzo Barbaro, the model of Fenway Court’s palace architecture, can be seen as the preservation of an idealized past, the vision of Altamura offered a sympathetic image of cloistered retreat. Like the Venetian palace seen through the romantic lens of American expatriates that sojourned there, the walls of Altamura formed the boundaries of a world outside of contingency and set above the sordid reality of modern existence. But Altamura also suggested a program of life where all experience was celebrated and art and nature were infused with transcendent meaning. While the exact purpose of the structure—more floating facade than actual building—may yet be fruitfully debated, I believe it is useful to consider it a representation, the outward form of an inward reality, revealing to the initiated and concealing from the uninitiated the enchanted world behind its walls.

⁹⁶ For the commemorative nature of the Yellow Room and Gardner’s relationship with Whistler, see Docherty 2008. For the Buddha Room and Okakura, see Chong and Murai 2009, 40–41.

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