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New life and growth at the Gardner

■ GARDNER

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the theft, there's been a lingering sense among some who feel a personal affection for Gardner's personal museum that *their* Gardner is gone.

Yet at a time of sluggish growth and scrambling at many cultural institutions, the Gardner today is on a rebound. The storied museum, whose very premise is permanence, has moved to the vanguard of a cutting-edge, if controversial, American museum movement that places paramount importance on fiscal strength, marketing and audience development.

So strong is the Gardner's recent reputation in these areas that its development director, Susan Courtemanche, was just stolen away by New York's Whitney Museum; Jill Medvedow, the Gardner's contemporary curator, announced last month she's leaving to launch an arts-presenting program of her own.

The Gardner's operating budget has grown from \$2.3 million to \$4.6 million since 1990, the 64 percent increase driven largely by admissions, grants and contributions from Gardner trustees. The museum board, in days past among the stingiest in Boston, is now one of the city's most generous. Besides kicking in the funding to help balance the budget, trustees have quietly raised \$11 million toward a \$25 million capital campaign. Individual board members foot bills ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000 for special exhibits and programs.

The Gardner, which had no marketing budget as recently as 1991, spent \$300,000 on advertising and marketing this year. It was the first of several Boston cultural organizations to roll out a wrapped bus to advertise itself on Boston's streets — an advertising project that runs approximately \$20,000 over three months. As a small museum, it has spent big bucks on mass-market advertising, direct marketing and promotion.

In an effort to attract new audiences, it has installed a small exhibition space to showcase pieces from the permanent collection and contemporary work by its artists in residence such as Mona Higuichi, whose meditation on Korean "comfort women" is on exhibit now. The recently established contemporary arts and education programs, which each absorb some \$200,000 of the museum's budget, both won \$500,000 grants this year. The Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation funded the contemporary arts' program. The Pew Charitable Trusts contributed one of its much-sought-after awards to the museum's education effort.

The museum's marketing and new emphasis on education and the contemporary arts — particularly the work of video and installation artists — have prompted some eye-rolling among people who consider the programs gimmicky add-ons to the Boston's rare, turn-of-the-century muse-



Gardner director Anne Hawley: "Let's face it. Running a museum today is not heroic."

um. Gardner director Anne Hawley, who acknowledges that her own "passion is contemporary art," nonetheless dismisses the criticism, pointing to the past. "Isabella Gardner shared her creation with the living artists of her time. John Singer Sargent painted in the Gothic Room. Dennis Miller Bunker lived and worked here. All of this [contemporary programming] is historically rooted and connected to the founder and her sensibility."

As for marketing, Hawley says, look at the numbers. The people have come. Gardner visitorship isn't as high as it was in the 1970s, when admission was free and yearly totals sometimes reached 200,000. But since 1992, the last year for which the museum says reliable figures are available, the number of admissions for the galleries, lectures or concerts is up 35 percent to approximately 170,000.

The Gardner is close to finishing installation of \$6 million state-of-the-art climate-control program that's allowed it to shut down a heating-cooling "system" that consisted of two belching coal-fired burners, heavy curtains and windows. The curatorial staff is re-cataloging objects and rewriting museum guides.

Hawley and the museum conservation staff have cut deals with corporate sponsors and deep-pocket art museums such as the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles to clean and restore signature works such as Sargent's "El Jaleo" and Rembrandt's "Self Portrait" in exchange for exhibiting the pieces in short-term shows. In-house conservators are slowly restoring the furniture collection.

The revitalized Gardner has won accolades from some of the area's respected scholars.

"They are doing new exhibition and programming there, which I applaud — the shows they've had have been very bright," says Seymour Slive, Harvard's Gleason Professor of Fine Arts, Emeritus. "It would be preposterous for them to remain like an insect in amber and not change an iota."

"The Gardner has been going through a real renaissance under [director] Anne Hawley and [curator] Hiliard Goldfarb. It is more than ever one of Boston's biggest cultural assets," says Anne Higonnet, a Wellesley College professor and expert on the Gardner who eight years ago took the museum to court over a

plan to rip apart the museum's fourth-floor director's residence for offices.

Nonetheless, some insist the rapid movement in some areas is causing strain in others. Museum guards have earned a reputation for being abrupt with the galleries' visitors. The famous horticultural displays have tended to look tired and thirsty on weekends this fall. Concertgoers complain that the museum has upgraded the restaurant and expanded the gift shop, but has yet to improve the acoustics or seating for its concerts. Those standing-room-only music events now take place on an unraked floor in the Tapestry Room, which can accommodate only 300 folding chairs. Audience members grumble about sightlines and sound quality, and about having to stand in long lines to claim their coats from a makeshift cloakroom. Contents one frequent listener, "They just can't deal with the crowds."

By far the most serious charge leveled at the Gardner — and one that's typically uttered sotto voce and off the record in visual-arts circles — is that the newly thriving institution is forgetting its mission as an art museum.

"They're getting a lot of grants? Well, good for them. But let's remember that any institution can position itself to do that," says Craig Smith, director of Emmanuel Music, who performed his first concert at the Gardner in 1967 and has been a regular museumgoer since. "This museum has a really fabulous art collection. There is nothing quite like it in America. No one else has a Pierromatteo d'Amelia; nobody has a Titian like that. They have a responsibility to show this art so you can see it, and it is too damn dark in there, particularly on the second floor. They've got the only authentic Piero della Francesca in America and you can't see it! The technology exists now to light them in a safe and adequate way."

Irritating to Smith, too, are the labels, or lack thereof. Botticelli's "The Tragedy of Lucretia" and Titian's "Europa," two of the museum's wonders, have no explanatory text accompanying them. The only description of the paintings is in a gallery guide available for \$2 (on top of the museum's \$7 admission).

"The fact they have those paintings means they have a duty to care for them and show them in an adequate and accessible way," Smith says. "High culture is in enough dan-

ger in this country without the people in charge of keeping it focusing their attention someplace else."

Days of debt and disrepair

It's been close to a decade since a local TV reporter, spanning the visual splendors and raving over the riches of the Gardner Museum, paused toward the end of a taping to ask the late Rolin Van Hadley, then director, if the museum had any needs.

Hadley knew at the time that the house museum in the Fenway had slipped into a double bind of debt and disrepair. That Isabella Gardner's \$3.7 million endowment, left to pay for the operation and upkeep of the creation she called Fenway Court, barely covered half its costs. That priceless paintings were peeling, and indigo silk used to cover the walls in the Blue Room was failing to gray.

Hadley knew, too, that the board of trustees, then made up of seven men who served by virtue of kinship or family ties to Jack and Isabella Gardner, had just spent \$500,000 on a plan to put up a much-needed new wing for conservation and visitors' services, then abandoned the project once they realized it would cost \$7 million to \$10 million, some of which they'd have to raise themselves.

But Hadley was a keeper, not just of a collection, but of a Brahmin tradition that never talked about money or acknowledged need. Looking straight at the camera, he told the reporter the Gardner could use a new restroom and a place to put coats.

Partly in response to what became known among some at the Gardner as "the cost-track interview" and partly because the trustees realized, as one put it at the time, that the collection "was going to rot" the board acknowledged in 1988 that dramatic change was needed. It voted to enlarge the board's size and makeup.

As current trustee Arnold Hiatt, Stride Rite chairman and a key change agent at the Gardner, recalls, "There had been a high level of complacency among Brahmins who were custodians of the will of a woman who lived a long time ago and were deeply committed to maintaining the status quo. At the same time, they knew the place had been neglected and that they couldn't live within the endowment income. They knew they needed a more activist board, includ-

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