

Translating Dante

Isabella Stewart Gardner's Museum as *Paradiso*

In: [Religion and the Arts](#)

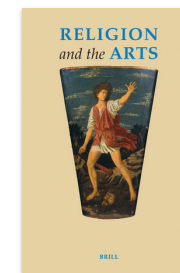
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Abstract

Isabella Stewart Gardner's museum (Fenway Court) owes its distinctive character to the influence of Dante Alighieri. Gardner's interest in the Italian poet originated in a context of late nineteenth-century Boston's enthusiasm for his writing and her personal quest for a meaningful life's work. As a student of Charles Eliot Norton, a member of the Cambridge Dante Society, and a collector of rare editions of *The Divine Comedy*, Gardner became apprised of issues surrounding literary translation. When she began to study visual images inspired by Dante's poetry and to acquire European masterpieces, she was poised to conceive a variation on this practice. As a visual translation of *Paradiso*, Fenway Court was not an illustration of a classic text but rather a conversion of a spiritual idea of love and beauty from one art form to another. In creating a museum for public education and enjoyment, Gardner exemplified Dante's moral concept of free will and evoked his poetic vision of heavenly beauty.

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