Sargent's El Jaleo
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John Singer Sargent, El Jaleo, 1882, oil on canvas (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston)

*El Jaleo* is housed within the quirky Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a Gilded Age art collection that serves as a window into the eponymous collector’s life and unique aesthetic taste. In order to view the painting, you must pass by the sunlit faux-Venetian courtyard and into the shadows of the first floor’s Spanish Cloister. Here *El Jaleo* hangs at the end of a long hallway, its immense size (over 7 by 11½ feet) almost fully covering the far wall of a dark niche. Its mildly claustrophobic and somewhat out-of-the-way physical location lends the striking oil on canvas one of the most intimate settings for a work of art on display in an American museum.

The scene portrayed is a dynamic one: a group of musicians provides the rhythm for a lone flamenco dancer who performs for an audience of clapping listeners. It is a snapshot of a specific point in time: the apex of the dance, a moment rife with energy and sensual drama. The footlights cast haunting silhouettes on the rear wall; the raw passion of the dance is palpable. The stark contrasts between murky shadow and dazzling illumination allow the painting to visually pop—a phrase that is often used in describing art but rarely so aptly. Due to the loose, frothy brushstrokes, there isn’t the sense of a true illusionary space, yet the light (and hence the vitality) of the scene seems to emanate outward from within the work, as though *El Jaleo* commands a life of its own.
El Jaleo’s precocious artist, John Singer Sargent, painted the artwork in 1882 at the young age of 26. Both the painting and its creator are evocative of the times, reflective of the nineteenth-century American fascination with, and inherent dependence upon, foreign cultures for both technical training and artistic inspiration.

Though labeled an American artist, Sargent was actually born in Florence to a Philadelphia family and traveled throughout his youth and career. In the late 1800s this type of background became the rule rather than the exception, with expatriate Americans taking advantage of the more accessible education opportunities abroad. Beyond the official state écoles (schools), private Parisian ateliers (studios) led by renowned artists offered instruction to admitted American students; Sargent studied under one such teacher, Charles Émile Auguste Durand, aka Carolus-Duran. The competitive annual salons (exhibitions) were another draw for foreign-born artists and these venues could win a painting great critical acclaim, as did the Paris Salon of 1882 for El Jaleo.

It was not uncommon for works at the salons to depict exotic subject matter, and Sargent’s admiration for Spanish music and culture was a continuing theme throughout his career, notably resurrected for this 1890 portrait La Carmencita (Musée d’Orsay, Paris).