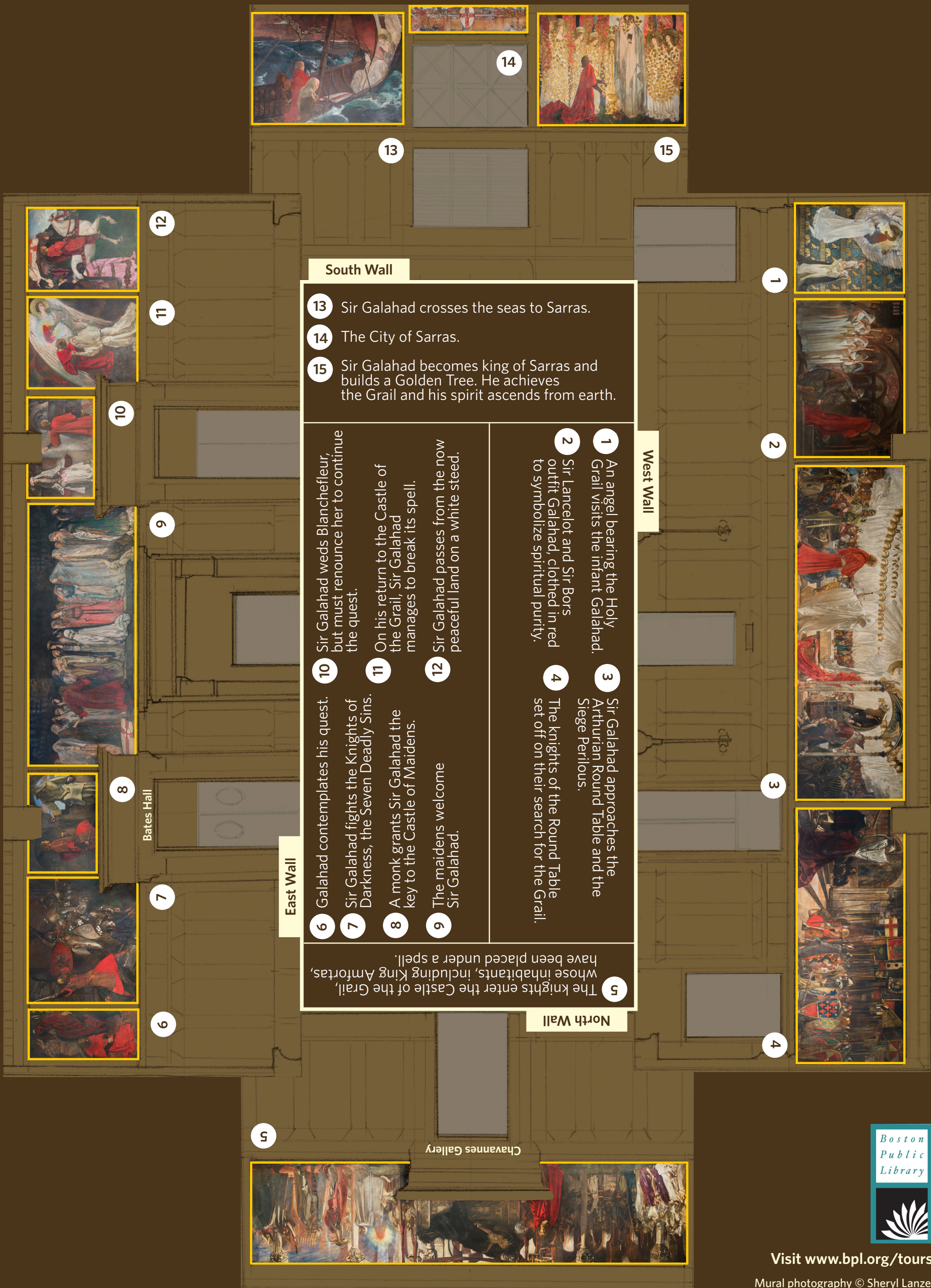


Abbey Room Murals

The Quest and Achievement of the Holy Grail

Works by Edwin Austin Abbey, installed 1895-1901



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ABBNEY AND THE COMMISSION

Today, the McKim Building functions as the research library, while the adjoining Johnson Building holds the Central Library’s circulating collections. Originally, patrons requested their books through the card catalog in Bates Hall and could wait for their items in this, the Book Delivery Room.

This space is now known as the Abbey Room, named for American artist Edwin Austin Abbey (1852-1911). When architect Charles Follen McKim and sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens approached Abbey for the commission, the young artist had already established himself as an illustrator for the popular *Harper’s Weekly* magazine, but he had comparatively little experience working in oil paint.

With some coaxing, Abbey agreed to take on the ambitious project, ultimately deciding to depict Sir Galahad’s quest for the Holy Grail. Abbey may have drawn upon several versions of the Grail legend for his BPL murals. Most library patrons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries would have been familiar with Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s famous take on the tale, *Idylls of the King*.

GALAHAD BECOMES A KNIGHT

The mural cycle begins in the far right-hand corner of the room, as you face the large central windows. In this first panel, an angel presents the infant Galahad with the Grail hidden under a cloth, telling him that it is will be his life’s duty to achieve it by becoming the ideal knight.

The cinematic sequence of fifteen panels moves from left to right, with Galahad shown in a red robe throughout, symbolizing spiritual purity.

In the panel above the doorway opposite the fireplace, Galahad passes before King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table to approach the Siege (or seat) Perilous. Legend states that anyone who sits in this seat but the chosen knight—he who is fated to find the Holy Grail—will die instantly. No man had yet survived this feat. But Galahad, the young and pure knight, takes the challenge, sits, and survives.

ACHIEVING THE GRAIL

In the next panel, the Knights of the Roundtable set forth on their search for the Grail. In the long panel above the main doorway, the Knights attempt to free King Amfortas and the Castle of the Grail from a spell, which has rendered the inhabitants spiritually dead.

Through the next panels, Galahad’s trials continue as he frees the Castle of Maidens, the Virtues, from the Seven Knights of Darkness, the Seven Deadly Sins. In the panel above the fireplace, Galahad is granted entrance to the Castle, where the maidens welcome him.



Edwin Austin Abbey at work in his studio, c. 1890

Sir Galahad weds one of these maidens, Blanchefleur, but must leave her on their wedding night in order to remain a virgin knight and complete his quest.

On the far wall, Galahad crosses the seas on Solomon’s ship, guided by an angel, to reach the City of Sarras.

In the final panel, Galahad becomes King of Sarras and builds a Golden Tree. Shown surrounded by the tree’s gilded leaves, he achieves his life’s mission: the Holy Grail. The Grail is rendered in three dimensions, a method called “raised relief” that Abbey may have learned from studio partner John Singer Sargent. Hundreds of examples of raised relief can be found in Sargent’s murals on the third floor of the library.

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

Other notable features in this room include the ornate fireplace carved from rouge antique marble and its sturdy doorway columns, rendered in green-flecked levanto marble.

The adorned ceiling is modeled after that of the library in the Doge’s Palace in Venice.

As the library’s circulating collection today operates from the 1972 Johnson Building, the Abbey Room now holds frequent events, and has served as a location for film productions.

Please return the mural guide to its holder when finished.