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**Connoisseur**

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**BERNARD BERENSON**

**A life in the picture trade**

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**BERNARD BERENSON**

**Formation and heritage**

**440pp. Villa I Tatti: The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies. Paperback, £29.95 (US \$40).**

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Oscar Wilde gave Bernard Berenson one of the first copies of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which the young man read overnight. He subsequently told Wilde “how loathsome, how horrible” the book seemed; evidently, the story of the secret bond between a handsome young man and his festering portrait touched a nerve. It also seemed to prophesy the uneasiness the older Berenson would feel about the disparity between his aims as a scholar and the Faustian bargain he struck to make money from art dealers and their clients. For over half a century, he used connoisseurship to establish the contours of Italian Renaissance painting, writing with great sensitivity about artists as diverse as Lorenzo Lotto and Piero della Francesca. He popularized the concept of “tactile values” and the life-enhancing nature of great art. A refugee from the Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia, Berenson transformed himself into a work of art, holding court at his villa outside Florence where aristocracy and the intelligentsia clamoured to visit; yet he judged himself a failure.

*Bernard Berenson: A life in the picture trade* appears as part of a series called Jewish Lives, a heading that would probably have puzzled its subject. The book makes good use of family papers that were unavailable to Ernest Samuels, whose definitive biography appeared in two volumes between 1979 and 1987. It throws light on the family’s origins as the Valvrojenskis, who immigrated to Boston from what is now Lithuania in 1875, when the young Bernhard – he

dropped the “h” during the First World War – was ten. His father was a peddler, whose relationship with his eldest son was always strained. At Boston Latin School and subsequently Harvard, the young Berenson began his ascent. A gift for languages and rabbinical studies seemed to point towards a university career, but Berenson wanted more from life than being “an ill-paid professor”. Harvard gave him entry into a world of aestheticism and financial support from wealthy patrons, who set him on his European travels and the study of art. Rachel Cohen writes with insight about Berenson’s ambivalence towards Judaism, which followed him throughout his life. He became an Episcopalian at Harvard and a Catholic after settling in Italy, and like many secular Jews of that period, he took pains to distance himself from the stereotypical Jew of literature. Cohen quotes a rather chilling passage from a review article on contemporary Yiddish literature, which Berenson published in 1888, where he refers to “the puzzling character of the Jews . . . . Their character and their interests are too vitally opposed to our own to permit the existence of that intelligent sympathy between us and them, which is necessary for comprehension”. Even in hiding from the Nazis in 1944, Berenson drafted an “Epistle to Americanized Hebrews” in which he proposed two stark alternatives for the future: “complete isolation or assimilation”. After his death, the Columbia art historian Meyer Schapiro, another refugee from Lithuania, accused Berenson of “a short-lived conversion that helped to accommodate him to a higher social milieu”. This distancing of himself from his heritage is understandable, given the casual anti-Semitism of patrons such as Isabella Stuart Gardner or later friends, among them Edith Wharton, and clearly there was an element of it in his reception by Harvard grandees such as the art historian Charles Eliot Norton, who dismissed Berenson as having “more ambition than ability”. Norton’s jibe rankled with Berenson until the end of his life, even though he got his revenge on his detractors by living well. Cohen’s book is less helpful when dealing with the central issues of Berenson’s life, his writings and his achievements as a scholar and connoisseur. His four books on Italian painting, his essay on method, and his cataloguing of Florentine drawings of the Renaissance were extraordinary accomplishments, requiring a prodigious capacity for visual analysis and an almost total recall of works in an age before images were easily available. They, and his later volumes of reminiscences, were also informed by the nineteenth-century concept of *Bildungsbürgertum*, a classically grounded education as exemplified for Berenson by intellectual heroes such as Goethe, Jacob Burckhardt and especially Walter Pater; indeed, Pater’s *Studies in the Renaissance* stands behind much of what Berenson wrote about art, while his novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, could almost be called Berenson’s spiritual autobiography. Little of this is conveyed by Cohen, which means that the biography is rather two-dimensional. While many of Berenson’s pronouncements have passed into common currency, his writings on Lorenzo Lotto and Piero della Francesca still resonate today, even though his financial dealings with figures such as Joseph Duveen and his “orchestra” of adoring women have crowded out other aspects of Berenson’s life in some recent books. Nor, for that matter, was Berenson’s life simply spent “in the picture trade”, as Cohen infelicitously puts it. In fact, she quotes a refutation of just that idea in a letter of 1922 from Berenson to his lawyer about income tax and his necessary expenditure on a wealthy lifestyle: “I do not earn money by trade. I earn it by enjoying such authority & prestige that people will not buy

expensive Italian pictures without my approval". Even allowing for special pleading, the relationship between Berenson and the art trade is considerably more complex than the picture presented here.

Berenson hoped that his most lasting achievement would be his Florentine villa, its art collection and library, which he bequeathed to Harvard University at his death in 1959. In the past fifty years, Villa I Tatti has become a powerhouse of scholarly production on all aspects of Renaissance studies, and *Bernard Berenson: Formation and heritage* celebrates this achievement by examining the founder's intellectual achievements. Thoughtfully edited by Joseph Connors and Louis Waldman, the book stems from a conference held at I Tatti in 2009, and the range of papers published here is a testimony to the enduring fascination with Berenson.

The crux of Berenson's career came in the 1890s, when he was pulled in different directions by his ambitions as a scholar and his attraction to material success. Alison Brown's perceptive essay on "tactile values" documents the genesis of a concept widely associated with Berenson and provides an intellectual history of the ideas behind it. Through contemporary sources, she shows that "tactile values" encompassed much more than touch, including motor sensations and the psychology of perception. Brown demonstrates that several contemporaries and even neighbours in Florence were grappling with the same idea, stimulated in part by reading Nietzsche and Adolf von Hildebrand's *Problem of Form in Art*. It was Hildebrand's book and conversations with its author which informed Berenson's essay on the Florentine painters where he described them as "giving tactile values to retinal impressions". As E. H. Gombrich noted, it was a "pregnant phrase" summing up Hildebrand's argument in a few words; it was also a concept deepened by a reading of William James's *Principles of Psychology* and by the growing esteem in which his former professor held him. Subsequently, disputes with another neighbour, the combative essayist and aesthete Vernon Lee, led Berenson to shelve his plan for a "big book" on aesthetics in the late 1890s and follow the path of connoisseurship rather than art criticism. It was a choice that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

New evidence for Berenson's equivocal relationship with the art market is furnished here by Jeremy Howard, who publishes some revealing correspondence between Berenson and Otto Gutekunst of the famous firm of Colnaghi at the turn of the century. Together, they supplied most of the paintings bought by Mrs Gardner during a period in which the boundaries between museum officials, dealers and scholars were much more fluid than later on. Still, both Berenson and Gutekunst took pains to keep their collaboration – and its fruits – a secret. It would be Berenson's subsequent involvement with Duveen and his testimony at the notorious Hahn trial of 1923 which would "tear the mask away", in the jubilant words of a rival dealer, René Gimpel.

Mario Casari and Carl Brandon Strehlke offer thoughtful surveys of Berenson's engagement with Islamic and Asian culture. In college, Berenson studied Arabic as well as Sanskrit and Hebrew, preferring the former to the latter languages, which he likened to "biting on the trunks of trees". Inspired by a celebrated exhibition on Islamic art in 1910, Berenson bought Persian miniatures for a time and would continue to acquire books on Asian and Islamic culture for the rest of his life. His enthusiasm for the Middle East was eventually tempered by the experience of two world wars and their aftermath, as well as a secular

ambivalence towards a culture which he viewed as “predominantly imbued by religion and faith”, in Casari’s words. His engagement with Chinese and Japanese art appears to have been more conventional, and his collecting in this area culminated around 1914, much as did his acquisition of Persian art. However, the juxtaposition of gold-ground paintings with East Asian objects at I Tatti was avant-garde, and unlike the accumulations of knick-knacks and porcelain that cluttered so many Western collections of this period.

Berenson firmly believed in the science of connoisseurship, a “very precise and chronological joining” of attribution and authenticity, as he wrote in a letter to Paul Sachs. It would have been good to find here a paper on the positivist assumptions underpinning this belief, but David Alan Brown does provide interesting parallels between the connoisseurship of Berenson and Sachs. Berenson had an influence on the famous course in “Museum Work and Museum Problems”, which Sachs held at Harvard between 1921 and 1948. Whereas Berenson believed in a succession of gifted male protégés who learned from him in a continuous tutorial, Sachs’s course was less exclusive, focusing not only on works of art, but also on technique and scientific analysis, subjects that Berenson airily dismissed. Berenson looked to his protégés as possible successors, but the stimulus of visits to churches and museums with the elder man did not always compensate for the drudgery of working on revisions of his publications or forming part of the cult surrounding him in Florence. This was particularly the case with the first and most famous of the disciples, Kenneth Clark.

William Mostyn-Owen, one of the later *élèves*, was on close terms with both men and writes with discrimination about what united and divided them. While both drew inspiration from nineteenth-century figures, Clark favoured Ruskin more than Pater. Both believed in what Clark called “Moments of Vision” and the life-enhancing power of art. Clark, however, was receptive to authors and artists who never appealed to his mentor, and he craved a public in ways that mystified Berenson, who predicted Clark would become “un grand vulgarisateur”. Clark’s distancing of himself from Berenson may have been as much an Oedipal as a generational conflict, but late in life, he observed that while a few passages in Berenson’s works would retain their value, his writings nonetheless revealed an acute sensibility allied with great learning and intelligence. Indeed, the variety of Berenson’s interests and relationships bears witness to a remarkable individual, who, like Oscar Wilde, can be said to have poured all his genius into his life but only talent into his works