

In the current climate of the humanities in general and art history in particular, Bernard Berenson is a perfect antihero. Consider this statement from the foreword of what Berenson hoped would be his great theoretical treatise on the decline and recovery of the figurative arts.

In every instance we shall begin with the decorative elements, and while doing so we shall ignore the other elements whether spiritual or material, social or political. Nor yet shall our attention, except in a cursory way, be given to technical questions of why things happened, or with attempts at metaphysical or ethical explanation. We shall have our hands full studying the succession of changes that took place in the art phenomena of the twelve centuries above indicated. When they seem promising, we may glance at other fields, whether of place or time, to inquire if a like sequence of changes occurs there as well.<sup>1</sup>

Add to this manifesto of formalist methodology Berenson's unwavering defense of Western civilization and the classical tradition, his antidemocratic worldview, and his devotion to the rarified "fine art" object and his entire career becomes a perfect paradigm of the alleged evils and shortcomings of elitist art history. Furthermore, Berenson's lucrative involvement with the art market and his notorious pandering to the actual and would-be aristocracy of his day make him an object of intense curiosity, as well as loathing. For most of his long life and much of its aftermath, Bernard Berenson has been a man people love to hate.

Although Berenson has always aroused animosity in those for whom the sale of knowledge is an unimaginable crime and the exaltation of Western civilization an untenable position, he has been resurrected of late by others who would remind art historians that looking at art should be central to what they do.<sup>2</sup> Berenson's legacy to art history is that the object speaks to the viewer in a unique way,

and although he exaggerated the absolute priority of visual elements in the appreciation of art, a position he would come to regret, he never abandoned this belief. It is fitting that Berenson, who in his youth railed against the practice of reducing art to social, cultural, and political ideals, should be remembered in an age which again seeks its significance primarily in these things.

In reviewing the first volume of Ernest Samuels's indispensable biography of Berenson, Robert Hughes noted that since the end of World War II writing about Berenson had become a subgenre of American journalism.<sup>3</sup> Given the tremendous number of pages devoted to sorting out the Berenson myth, surprisingly little has been written about the influence of his general ideas. This is certainly due in no small measure to the exaggerated interest (regrettably, by both specialists and the general public) in the grandeur of his lifestyle and the financial repercussions of his personal conduct as an expert involved in the trade. Within the field of academic art history, where his impact has been most directly felt, Berenson's theoretical writings have failed to command serious attention. Aside from the usual accolades for his connoisseurship and his contributions to the systematic study of Italian art, Berenson's connection to twentieth-century art and criticism remains poorly understood and, in the main, undervalued.

Recent attempts to associate Berenson with an attitude toward art and history that current wisdom seeks to undermine have concentrated mainly on his activities as an expert and arbiter of taste. A persuasive case, for example, has been made for the fundamental relationship between connoisseurship as Berenson practiced it and the development of formalist art history. Also, studies that seek to ascertain the extent to which the business of attributing paintings has contributed to the commodity status of art in late bourgeois culture have assigned to Berenson a role of central importance.<sup>4</sup> Although Berenson's material wealth and his reputation rested on his undisputed skill as a connoisseur, it is widely known from his autobiographical writings that he remained largely dissatisfied with his

professional life. Berenson had hoped to be remembered as a man of letters or as an art theorist, and in his last years he repeatedly deprecated his reputation as a narrow specialist.

The reasons for this relative neglect of Berenson's general ideas are complex, but surely the most compelling is that, by his own admission, Berenson's intellectual development seems to have been arrested early in his career.

As an organism that took in and gave out, as an instrument, I was complete at five and twenty, and this instrument has worked and preserved its identity for more than fifty subsequent years, in the face of all the forces pulling and pushing, forward and backward. It has changed little if any, although much it dealt with has disappeared, and much that was not there has taken its place.<sup>5</sup>

While he admitted his estrangement from the modern age, Berenson could not resist the impulse to be censorious. Most of his late books, ostensibly concerned with art and theory, are thinly concealed indictments of what he regarded as the abysmal state of modern art and culture.

Berenson's interest in the theme of decline, so much in evidence during the second half of his life, was clearly stimulated by his perception of the twentieth century. He believed that the best approach to understanding a given epoch was through an age that mirrored it. Thus, the strong affinity Berenson sensed between the Italian Renaissance and the late nineteenth century of his youth kindled his desire to come to terms with the achievements of both. In similar fashion, his understanding of the fourth century as an age of barbarism and descent from an ideal culture was reinforced by his apocalyptic view of modern life.

It annoyed Berenson that he could not disengage himself from the present and bask in the celebrity of his old age. Very aware that his

social values were anachronistic, he became more or less resigned to his public image as a curious remnant from a forgotten age. But in matters of art he refused to grow old quietly.

My century, my own, is the 19th. I am and remain a mid—or at best a late Victorian—not Edwardian, let alone Georgian. I try to encounter the events of the day, but my attitude toward them, no matter how sympathetic and benevolent, is a 19th century one. On the other hand, towards the arts I am neither sympathetic nor benevolent but without understanding and therefore contemptuous and hostile. Yet while I grant that conceivably [*sic*] my feelings about events and ideals political are outmoded and I should accept those of today (in moderation), I can admit no such participation in the art of today, really of today alone.<sup>6</sup>

Berenson's frequent, vehement outbursts against modern art in his old age were disproportionate to the amount of harm it could have caused him. Surely he took it far too personally.

If Berenson overreacted to the changes that took place in twentieth-century art and criticism, it is in part because he bore a certain measure of responsibility for them. The serenity of his last years was disturbed by many things, not the least of which was an awareness that the cohesive theory of humanistic art he hoped to leave posterity was never realized to his satisfaction, and that what he left instead was an approach to criticism and aesthetics that anticipated, if it did not actually make possible, the modernist art he loathed. Berenson, normally quick to take offense when not given the credit he felt he deserved from other scholars, deeply regretted what the twentieth century would do with what he regarded as his ideas. He realized almost immediately the potential abuse of his early theoretical positions and spent a good deal of his remaining years correcting for this misunderstanding.

To grasp fully the significance of Berenson's ideas and their rela-

tionship to the broader currents of modern art and criticism it is necessary to examine his intellectual life in its totality; to consider him within the context of his long life. Few writers on Berenson have challenged his contention that "as a contributor to thought I doubt whether my death soon after fifty would have made the slightest difference."<sup>7</sup> Despite his insistence that he belonged to an age which ended with World War I, it is impossible to ignore that he lived more than half his life in the twentieth century and, as a result, had a chance, indeed was forced, to come to terms with the consequences of these ideas.

Berenson began his career in eager anticipation of a new artistic age and ended it haunted by the fear that he had witnessed, and perhaps helped to create, a tragic mistake. The one dimension of his legacy that remains largely unexplored is the process through which Berenson, who was receptive to the climate of change in which modernism took root, and who, because of his approach to criticism and aesthetics, was uniquely equipped to understand it, came to assume such a reactionary position. A close analysis of the works written at both the beginning and the end of his life, which include frequent comments on recent art, demonstrates that Berenson's hostility toward modernism was inconsistent with his critical methodology and to a certain extent his aesthetic theory. It has its roots, rather, in a profound resistance to the social, cultural, and political changes that threatened his way of life and, perhaps even more fundamentally, in his intellectual ambition.<sup>8</sup>

Although a great deal has been written about Berenson, his relationship to the modern age is rarely addressed. Be that as it may, it is almost impossible to imagine that there are aspects of Berenson's life or thought which remain "undiscovered." Ernest Samuels's exhaustive two-volume biography is as much a thorough history of Berenson's intellectual development as it is a chronicle of his life. The rationale for this study, therefore, is less a matter of disclosure than a shift of emphasis. Berenson's youthful interest in modern art was no secret, but it was subsumed under his prodigious work as a connoisseur of Italian painting. Similarly, the essential modernity of his

criticism has long been eclipsed by the enduring image of Berenson as a spokesman for classical humanism.

Because I examine both the development of Berenson's critical writing and the events of his life brought to bear on this development, my methodology necessarily combines text analysis with narration. My consideration of Berenson's biography is highly selective; while it leaves out a great deal, it brings to the foreground some aspects of his life that have remained fairly obscure. For example, in an effort to document the probable impact on his thinking of artist-friends such as Hermann Obrist and Egisto Fabbri, something which is generally neglected in the Berenson literature, I include a detailed account of these personal relationships. The correspondence between Berenson, his wife, Mary Smith Costelloe, and Obrist is largely unpublished and is here examined in depth for the first time.<sup>9</sup> I give less attention, however, to such authors long recognized for their contributions to Berenson's thinking as Walter Pater, William James, and Adolf Hildebrand, and to Berenson's celebrated (and well-documented) relationships with Bertrand Russell, Edith Wharton, and Vernon Lee (pseudonym for Violet Paget).

A comparable asymmetry could be said to exist in my analyses of Berenson's writings. His early essays on Italian art, affectionately referred to by his followers as "The Four Gospels," have been widely studied for their contribution to the historiography of Italian Renaissance painting. I make no attempt to evaluate them in this regard; instead I focus on the modernity of Berenson's critical methodology and the implications of his aesthetic principles for later art and criticism. Thus I consider his early writings for the first time strictly within the context of aesthetic modernism, rather than the usual frameworks of Renaissance art history or connoisseurship.

Although the late books were widely reviewed, they have never been studied systematically and only rarely are they placed in the broad context of Berenson's oeuvre. I do both and in doing so assume, contrary to the vast majority of opinion, that the last works are as significant as the first. Once again, it bears repeating that the cogency and accuracy of Berenson's historical observations are not

addressed here, but rather the shift in critical and aesthetic priorities attributable to his increasing political, social, and artistic conservatism.

Given the frequency with which Berenson referred to recent art in his writings, it would be impractical to attempt an exhaustive survey of his critical remarks. What I present must be viewed instead as a representative sample, a summary of his attitudes toward those modern artists and modernist styles about which he had the most to say. Berenson repeated himself a great deal, both in his diaries and in his critical essays; thus I condense his frequent and often random comments on modern art and culture into several fairly consistent lines of argumentation.

Finally, it should be noted at the outset that Berenson's critical language was at times incompatible with contemporary usage and could well have been a source of confusion in the understanding of his aesthetic theories. Especially relevant in this respect was his use of the words "decoration" and "illustration" to distinguish between the form and content of art. In the context of late nineteenth-century aesthetic theory and criticism, the term "decorative" was typically understood as a reproach, applicable to visual expressions somehow lacking in substance or significance. After the work of later formalist critics such as Clive Bell, both "decorative" and "illustrative" (narrative) can be understood as pejoratives in the consideration of modernist art. By "decorative," however, Berenson did not intend the mere reduction to superficial ornamentation or pattern but rather artistic properties in a more general sense. As categories, "decoration" encompassed the formal qualities of art while "illustration" referred to aspects of subject, or more specifically, to the nature of the representation.<sup>10</sup>

## **I. Appraising Berenson**

The great majority of art critics are people who adapt a different jargon from mine to expound ideas which were mine but which I discarded years ago.

1933



## Berenson and Early Modernism

The connection between Berenson's theoretical writing, modernist art, and criticism was noted early in this century. Period reviews of his volumes on the Italian Renaissance published between 1894 and 1907, tend to stress his modernity in terms of the method of scientific connoisseurship; but after World War I, both his critical sensibilities and his theories of art appreciation were being considered within the climate of early modernism. Carrado Pavolini's treatise on early modernist art, *Cubismo, Futurismo, Espressionismo*, published in 1926, suggests a relationship between Berenson's critical and aesthetic priorities and the search for a new reality and sense of the significant that occupied recent artists.<sup>1</sup> So prevalent was this perception of Berenson as a pioneer modernist that in 1939 *Time* magazine could state in a discussion of his theory of tactile values: "Naive tourists have consequently stood before masterpieces in the Florence Academy waiting for their palms to tingle, and some critics have unkindly laid on Berenson responsibility for later 'abstract' jargon."<sup>2</sup>

These sentiments continued to be expressed in the numerous appreciations of Berenson that appeared in the popular and art press after his death in 1959. An obituary in the *New Republic*, for example, noted that the "defense of a great amount of non-representational painting rests solidly on principles established by Berenson, but Berenson was the first to see that such puritanical application of principles ended by denying the very 'life enhancement' for which the principle existed."<sup>3</sup> By 1963 the American writer Sidney Alexander could make the extraordinary claim that "the entire abstract and non-objective movement in modern art is a grotesque overdevelopment of one limb of Berenson's aesthetics—his stress on 'intrinsic' values, the value of the work of art as contained entirely within itself."<sup>4</sup>

That modernism was a distortion of his ideas was a claim Berenson himself had made, and it was more often than not echoed by writers, such as Alexander, who shared his distaste for nonrepresentational art. It is worth remembering, however, that even the American art historian Meyer Schapiro, who was otherwise unsympathetic

to the notion that Berenson had done something to foster the development of modern art, conceded that Berenson's aesthetic "with its categories of 'Form, Movement, and Space,' and his stern insistence on the highest values of art, seems in the line of thought which produced modern painting."<sup>5</sup>

Schapiro also pointed out that Berenson's emphasis on the significance of form in painting paved the way for the later formalist critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry, an observation made frequently by Berenson's close friend, the British art historian Kenneth Clark, and one that warrants greater attention than it has received. Fry in particular occupies a position as progenitor in the history of formalist art criticism that arguably belongs to Berenson, when one considers the similarity of their ideas and Fry's dependence on Berenson during his formative years.

More recent investigations into the history and dominance of abstraction in twentieth-century art theory have similarly acknowledged that Berenson's ideas were of seminal importance to Fry. In Linda Nochlin's influential essay, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," Berenson is included, along with Fry and Bell, in the roster of antirealist critics who furnish modernism with its historical pedigree.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Paul Barolsky, in what is the most extensive discussion to date of Berenson's relationship to modernist criticism, argues that Berenson's emphasis on formal qualities and impersonality in art, which to a large degree derive from his reading of Pater, have earned him an important intermediary role in a critical tradition, rooted in eighteenth century neo-classicism, that looks forward to the work of T. S. Eliot and Clement Greenberg.<sup>7</sup> Although Barolsky exaggerates Berenson's influence, he correctly identifies him as a pivotal figure in the history of modernist criticism and as a theorist whose critical sensibility was determined by his experience of recent art.

### Berenson as a Theorist

Given the consistency with which Berenson's ideas have been related to the climate of early modernism, it is indeed curious how little systematic study they have received. Undeniably, Berenson made a much greater effort to assert himself as a humanist than as a theorist for the avant-garde, but this cannot account for the fact that his recognition in the latter context frequently amounts to no more than a passing nod. For an explanation it is necessary to examine the general terms in which Berenson's strengths and weaknesses, and his historical legacy, are typically discussed.

There is consensus, among his admirers and detractors alike, that although Berenson was an extraordinarily gifted connoisseur who brought to the study of art one of the finest sensibilities ever known, he had no gift for the formulation of complex theoretical arguments. Of this he was well aware.

The paradox is that I have a very low opinion of my abilities when I think of myself in the absolute, as it were, without comparing myself to others. . . . My thinking is saltatory, inspired, not logical. For which reason I am short of breath intellectually, and have little to develop and argue on any subject.<sup>8</sup>

An unmistakable air of false modesty hovers over much of Berenson's autobiographical writings, but one can only believe he meant this quite sincerely, for it is corroborated by many who knew him.

Only the most naive of Berenson's many observers, or those prejudiced by an unqualified admiration for his humanism, have insisted on the superiority of his intellect. That he was remarkably learned is beyond dispute, but, as many who have written on him attest, he was not a rigorous or systematic thinker. Individuals close to Berenson, such as John Walker and Kenneth Clark, repeatedly praised his memory and powers of observation but did not hesitate to point out that he had no capacity for abstract thought.<sup>9</sup>

Clement Greenberg admired Berenson as a critic, but he too noted that despite Berenson's desire to leave a philosophy of art for posterity, his aptitude was not for conscious reasoning and he had always been more of a sensibility than an intellect.<sup>10</sup> Unsympathetic reviewers of Berenson's late books were far less generous, accusing him of "hardening of the intellect" or maintaining that "outside his professional corner he had always been a second-rate brain-power, made impressive by large curiosities and the will to act on them."<sup>11</sup>

Berenson's own doubts regarding the rigor of his intellect were made clear by his legendary hostility toward philosophy. Although he counted a number of important philosophers among his friends, he was frequently dismissive of and impatient with their work. As Ernest Samuels correctly pointed out, whenever Berenson philosophized, it was as a pragmatist; Berenson felt William James was the only philosopher who had anything to offer that he could use. His diary entries indicate that he read a good deal of Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche, and his principle of life-enhancement has been associated with both, but there is very little evidence that his understanding of either was in any way profound. When he spoke of philosophers, it was typically to describe certain affinities he may have felt for their ideas, rarely to elaborate on specific concepts or arguments.

When introduced to Bergson in his youth, Berenson was immensely gratified to learn that the philosopher had read his books and had even expressed admiration for their sound thinking on aesthetics. But he admittedly struggled to understand Bergson's works and recalled with great embarrassment his inability to hold a satisfactory conversation with him.

He had read me, which made me happy, and remarked that much of my work was concerned with discovery and establishing identities. But what were identities and how did we recognize them? I remember looking at him fatuously, and answering that it was by comparing detail

with corresponding detail. Of course; but that was not what he had in mind, and I have never got over being ashamed at the puerility of my answer.<sup>12</sup>

He also had an uneasy relationship with the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce. Berenson, through his personal secretary Nicki Mariano, met Croce in 1926. He was unsympathetic toward Croce's theories of aesthetics, which he viewed as narrow and antiempirical, but it wounded him to think that Croce cared so little for his own theories. Although he admired Croce personally and realized the extent of Croce's influence on the intellectual life of modern Italy, Berenson resented his apparent lack of interest in what he felt or thought.

The philosophers with whom Berenson had the most personal contact, aside from William James, were Bertrand Russell and George Santayana. He was related to Russell by marriage, and Santayana had been a classmate at Harvard. For the duration of Russell's marriage to Mary Berenson's sister Alys, Berenson and Russell were close. They drifted apart, however, after the marriage disintegrated, and Berenson later regretted that personal factors had interfered with this relationship and had denied him Russell's stimulating companionship.<sup>13</sup>

It is well known that Russell took issue with Berenson's theory of tactile values and life-enhancement when first consulted about it by Mary Berenson.<sup>14</sup> One of Russell's chief objections was to Berenson's insistence on the universality of the empathetic response to art. He claimed that it may account for Berenson's pleasure, but not necessarily for that experienced by others who lacked his sensibilities. Russell clearly included himself as one of the latter and he was very conscious of his inability to appreciate art.<sup>15</sup> Russell attributed his lack of aesthetic sensibility to the fact that he had a poor visual imagination. In William James's theory of imagination Russell had found justification for what he regarded as a fundamental incompatibility between the capacity to think abstractly and the ability to visualize.

This could account, at least in part, for his failure to be impressed by Berenson, since Russell associated abstract thought with mathematics, which was his chief preoccupation.

The strained relationship between Berenson and George Santayana has also been well documented and was complicated by the fact that Santayana had applied himself to aesthetics with what Berenson thought were largely unsatisfactory results. In a 1912 letter Santayana described life at I Tatti as a "stream of distilled culture flowing over us continually in the form of soulful tourists and weary *dilettanti* who frequent this place."<sup>16</sup> It would seem from this remark that Santayana already saw in Berenson's situation the potential for sinking into a dangerously shallow intellectual life. By then, Berenson was involved with the art dealer Joseph Duveen and, as he himself claimed and as many others confirmed, this association may have had a decisive effect on his intellectual development.

Berenson's autobiographical writings are filled with expressions of regret about his decision to become an expert in the attribution of Italian paintings; he viewed this decision as a major deterrent to developing his general ideas into a significant theoretical treatise. Ostensibly he lamented the loss of his time and energy to the narrow task of attribution, but it is evident that connection with the trade affected his development in a far more integral way. In the opinion of many who knew him, the wordly aims encouraged by Berenson's involvement with the art market soon contaminated his intellectual goals. This view of Berenson has gained currency in the present climate of hostility toward his financial success, resulting in an unfortunate tendency to attribute all of his shortcomings to such involvement.<sup>17</sup>

### **Berenson as a Writer**

Berenson believed he was born to talk and to look, not to write. One of the great paradoxes of his career was that in the face of this he still

harbored a life-long ambition to become a writer. This drive to publish, which continued long after it was necessary for him to uphold his professional reputation, has been the subject of much speculation. Berenson seems to have been haunted by the conviction that writing, especially writing for publication, was the only way for him to legitimize his interests—interests that must have seemed, in the context of his Boston upbringing, perilously frivolous. Aesthetic contemplation was not a profession, and Berenson realized early, again from his experiences in literary Boston and Cambridge, that his credibility, livelihood, and, to a certain extent, self-esteem would depend on a reputation created and sustained by publication.

Despite Berenson's desire to become a literary presence, the vast majority of his publications are concerned with technical matters of attribution. His manifest inability to apply the rigor and logic that he brought to connoisseurship to the development of his general ideas might have been less of an impediment to his literary ambition were it not coupled with a debilitating sense of inferiority in regard to his powers of expression. If Berenson has failed to command serious attention as a writer of theory, it is in part because, as he well knew, he simply could not articulate his ideas.

Where I fall down utterly is not knowing how to arrange and develop what I want to communicate. I have failed to discipline myself, to marshall my arguments in the most effective, the most persuasive and most memorable way. . . . The result is that the few, the very few, ideas I have launched have but seldom reached the cultivated person, and then distorted by my failure to present them adequately.<sup>18</sup>

Berenson's habitual practice of telling his readers and correspondents what he was working on or what he had hoped to produce as a companion to the technical writing he published stemmed, no doubt, from this lack of faith that his writing skills would enable him to see

a project through to its completion. Although he was always eager to let people know what he was thinking about, he rarely succeeded in giving more than fragmentary shape to his ideas.

Berenson did not always feel this way about his writing. As an undergraduate he made regular contributions to the *Harvard Monthly*, and he embarked on his "grand tour" of Europe intending to become a literary critic, a plan he surely would not have made without some belief in his gifts as a writer. His confidence seems to have been eroded in no small measure by contact with his wife and her family. Kenneth Clark observed that Berenson's chief misfortune as a writer was to be surrounded by natural stylists; both Mary Berenson and her brother Logan Pearsall Smith wrote well and easily, and Mary Berenson, at least, convinced Berenson that he did not. In 1930, many years and publications later, she expressed to her sister Alys Russell continued astonishment at his rhetorical ineptitude.

It is an absolute mystery to me how he cannot at least say things in a straightforward manner and how he, who I know is so extremely sensitive to bad style in what he reads, crowds his pages with confused and ungrammatical sentences. The worst, or perhaps the best of it is that in the midst of all this dull writing, every now and then he strikes out extraordinarily original and suggestive ideas, any one of which would be enough for a historian or critic to seize upon and use as the basis for a whole treatise. He really does say things that nobody else says or thinks, and it seems a pity that they should be buried away like this under masses of detail and frightfully wearisome connoisseurship, and presented, when they are presented, in an insignificant and sometimes almost repulsive fashion.<sup>19</sup>

Mary Berenson clearly shared her husband's concern that his general ideas were fair game for appropriation by other writers better



equipped to develop them, a possibility that was made clear to them in an infamous episode involving the writer Vernon Lee.<sup>20</sup>

Berenson's desire to write theory was also seriously undermined by a clear preference for aphoristic expression and by his fundamental, if paradoxical, belief that writing about art interfered with the appreciation of it. In 1950 he wrote in his diary:

I enjoy epigrammatic and aphoristic writing. . . . Elaborate writing is the product of a convention to put through a dialectical process the flashes of intuition that inspire one. To me either an idea is axiomatic at first flash or it never comes home, no matter how much it is coaxed by blandishing arguments. If I was living up to my conviction I would put down all I have to say in a few sentences.<sup>21</sup>

Berenson was equally unfaithful to his belief that "art cannot be correlated with thought. That is why so little can be said about it—except by the people to whom it does not reveal itself."<sup>22</sup> This conflict between the cognitive and the aesthetic appeal of art can be seen throughout Berenson's entire career and is a central theme of many who write on his legacy.

### **Characterizing Berenson's Achievement**

Finally, any appraisal of Berenson's contribution to the study of art must necessarily address two fundamental questions: How can we best characterize his achievements, and how can we assess the role Mary Berenson played in them? Ultimately, these issues are related, for if Berenson is to be remembered strictly as a connoisseur, then unquestionably his wife is deserving of a large measure of his glory.

Samuels's biography of Berenson provides ample proof of Mary Berenson's status as a full collaborator in his professional life. She

was no mere assistant but an active participant, sharing in his discoveries, in the making of attributions, and in the writing of his publications. Evidence suggests that the essay for Berenson's first volume on Italian painting, *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance*, was largely written by Mary Berenson (then Mary Costelloe) and that his chief contribution was in editing and adding the lists. The publication would have borne both their names had her mother not feared the potential scandal of her daughter, who was then still married to the Irish barrister Frank Costelloe, being linked so blatantly with the young American who improperly occupied most of her time.<sup>23</sup>

If Berenson is to be granted a prominent place in the history of art theory and criticism, however, there is no reason to believe that Mary Berenson must also share in this honor. She considered herself a competent connoisseur but consistently deferred to Berenson when it came to the discussion of general ideas, crediting herself only with the ability to understand the concepts he originated. This feeling is most evident in her letters to the German sculptor and designer Hermann Obrist, with whom she had a brief affair and who probably made a substantial contribution of his own to Berenson's theories.<sup>24</sup>

In the summer of 1895, when Berenson was struggling with the essay on the Florentine painters, which contains the first statement of his theoretical principles, Mary Costelloe wrote to Obrist, pleading with him to join them in Florence so that he could act as midwife to Berenson's ideas. Her letter insisted that Berenson needed "manly resistance" to his thought, that what he met in her was a "mush of concession," causing him to advance slowly.<sup>25</sup> It is beyond question that Berenson's future wife, given the nature of their relationship, was being expedient in representing herself as his (and by implication Obrist's) intellectual inferior, an impulse she could not have escaped no matter how strident her feminist upbringing. There is, nevertheless, no evidence to contradict her stated perception that the role she played in the formulation of these ideas was secondary. It is tragically ironic that Mary Berenson, who denied herself the ability to originate thought, was the chief instrument through which Berenson's ideas were rendered intelligible to his readership.<sup>26</sup>

The matter of how best to characterize Berenson's achievements is not as simple as it would seem, although within the field of art history there is widespread agreement that his chief importance was in the realm of connoisseurship.<sup>27</sup> Essays on Berenson and connoisseurship, such as those by Sydney Freedberg and the important study by David Brown, have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the way Berenson's unique gifts worked in tandem with the traditions of Walter Pater and Giovanni Morelli to make of him the precision instrument on which his unrivaled stature as an expert rested. Berenson's strength as a connoisseur depended on the profitable interaction of late nineteenth-century aestheticism with the scientific method of attribution. As Brown put it, Berenson's aesthetic sensibilities served him as a connoisseur precisely because "the process by which he claimed to enter into the spirit of a work became, in practice, a careful scrutiny of it."<sup>28</sup>

Whether applied to appreciation or attribution, there can be no doubt that Berenson's visual memory, his sensitivity to works of art, and his dogged determination to come to terms with his response to them were his singular gifts and his most salient characteristics. But despite the importance of these qualities to the practice of connoisseurship, it has never been possible to define Berenson narrowly as a connoisseur, no matter how great his influence in that arena. Many of the obituaries that flooded the popular and art press in the years after his death stressed his humanism as much as his connoisseurship, and he is described as a critic or art historian as often as an expert. In a 1955 review of several of Berenson's late books, Clement Greenberg prophesied that posterity would value Berenson more for his criticism than his expertise, an astonishing notion coming from a critic whose own formidable critical apparatus was marshaled in defense of the kind of art Berenson spent nearly half his life discrediting.

What enabled a writer like Greenberg to value Berenson's criticism (which is of course inseparable from his connoisseurship) was their mutual emphasis on the importance of taste, artistic quality, and the priority of visual evidence. Greenberg was able to see beyond the normative standard that Berenson allowed his theory of aesthetics

to become, toward a critical methodology that, Greenberg believed, with philosophical refinement, could be broadly applied. That Berenson himself refused to see beyond it was his greatest failing as a critic. Greenberg faulted Berenson for his inability to formulate a theory that would serve as more than an "ad hoc means of praising specific works of art," and he had no patience with Berenson's dogmatic insistence on the canons of classical art that formed the basis of his aesthetics.<sup>29</sup>

Greenberg believed that Berenson was at his best, not in his theoretical generalizations, but when he articulated appreciations of individual works, and in this he was not alone. The wry comment by Gertrude Stein that "[Berenson] thinks he is great all the time but it isn't his mind; it is his moments of exquisite creative perception that completely expressed themselves" reflects an estimation that is nearly universal in the literature.<sup>30</sup> A consistent theme among Berenson's appraisers has been that he need not have regretted his decision to become an expert, because his time was most profitably spent in the formal analysis and criticism of individual works of art, not in the articulation of theory.

Berenson's theories of art and aesthetics, outlined in the essays on Italian Renaissance painting and elaborated in his last books, are now regarded mainly as curiosities, vestiges from another age that have no validity when applied outside the narrow range of art for which they were developed. Based on the principles of psychological aesthetics current in the late nineteenth century, these theories assume that human beings respond physically, or with a kind of unconscious self-identification, to certain formal elements in art, and they have proven to be useful and enduring guidelines for the appreciation of Florentine Renaissance painting. Their limitations became evident almost immediately, when Berenson insisted on applying them as a normative standard by which to judge value and quality in the figurative art of all ages.

The premise that we experience tactile values and movement as "ideated sensations" when we look at a painting is very limited as an