

GABRIELLA BERNARDI with a contribution by SPYROS KOULOURIS and preface by MASSIMO BERNABÒ, *Bernard Berenson and Byzantine Art: Correspondence, 1920–1957 (Medieval and Early Modern Europe and the World 3)*. Turnhout: Brepols 2022. 697 pp. – ISBN 978-2-503-59671-6

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The same man who wrote *Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894–1907)¹ also studied ‘the millennium between Diocletian & Giotto’ (p. 111) but did not live to finish a ‘huge work’ on late antique and medieval art which he wanted to call *Decline and Recovery* (pp. 226, 229).² GABRIELLA BERNARDI has now put together a volume that presents his thinking about it. BERNARD BERENSON’s previously unpublished draft for an op-ed about the Church of San Marco (pp. 531–533) is followed there by two scholarly articles reprinted in facsimile (pp. 534–571). Pp. 435–471 reproduce forty-eight of the approximately four thousand photographs of Byzantine objects and architecture that BERENSON received from various sources.³ BERNARDI has also transcribed some two hundred and fifty letters he exchanged with students of Byzantine and western medieval art: Arthur Kigsley Porter, Edward Waldo Forbes, Ernest Theodore DeWald, Pietro Toesca, Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, Gabriel Millet, and many more (pp. 71–433).

1. Published in the Soviet Union as Живописцы итальянского Возрождения. Moscow 1965, with a preface by VIKTOR LAZAREV (on whom see pp. 416–417, 487–488, and 517 in the book under review).

2. Two fragments appeared as B. BERENSON, *The Arch of Constantine, or the Decline of Form*. London 1954 and IDEM, *Decline and Recovery in the Figure Arts*. In: DOROTHY MINER (ed.), *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*. Princeton 1954, pp. 25–29. See further pp. 26–28 in the book under review. Compare also the title of EDWARD GIBBON’s famous *opus* *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789).

3. The most curious of these show two pieces reportedly found in Constantinople and not locatable at present (pp. 213, 450–453). One is a large, probably sixth-century signet ring with two busts, a cross, and the word ΥΓΙΑ (‘health’): cf. GARY VIKAN, *Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium*. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990) pp. 145–163. The other is a small twelfth-century reliquary which contained, according to the dodecasyllabic inscription Ἀπὸ τῆς ζώνης τῆς Θεοτόκου, a shred from the Virgin’s girdle: cf. ANDREAS RHOBY, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst* (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-Hist. Kl., Denkschriften 408 / Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung 23). Vienna 2010, pp. 149–309. The fourteenth-century icon described on p. 443 as being of ‘uncertain date and current location’ is actually at the National Museum in Belgrade (inv. 2316).

BERENSON was also in touch with prominent collectors or antique dealers such as Dikran Kelekian (1867–1951), Robert Woods Bliss (1875–1962), Antonis Benakis (1873–1954), and Prince Paul of Yugoslavia (1893–1976). Thirty-eight biographical entries (pp. 473–502) supply background information about his contacts, and a set of portraits shows some of them looking very handsome (pp. 503–528).

It is hard to overestimate the amount of archival research BERNARDI has done and the linguistic competence required of her (while BERENSON always wrote in English, many of his correspondents used French, Italian, or German).⁴ Since BERENSON kept most of the letters addressed to him but made no carbon copies of his own replies to them, BERNARDI had to search through other scholars' *Nachlässe* at eleven separate institutions in Europe and the US (p. 18). Her labour has resulted in a carefully organised, amply annotated collection that is pleasant and instructive to read.

The letters are not lined up chronologically but grouped (despite being numbered consecutively for ease of reference) into small clusters of inter-related ones. Some are touchingly personal: '*Caro Amico, di tutte le cose care che ho lasciato a Firenze, e che séguito a rimpiangere, una delle più pungenti, nel desiderio, è quel viale di cipressi che mi conduceva alla Sua porta*' (p. 366).⁵ (BERENSON was a charming man and a gracious host.) Many were once accompanied by printed material of some sort: '*Je voulais lire votre article avec soin et je ne regrette point ma peine : il est fort beau. | Nous avons trouvé dans la lettre un chèque de cinq cent soixante seize francs représentant le prix de ces épreuves. [...] Si vous désirez recevoir d'autres photographies de notre Collection, soyez assez aimable pour m'en aviser*' (pp. 360–361).⁶ A few discuss actual works of art: '*Mit Grabar und Lassus vollkommen einig, dass die Frühdatierung von Morey der Fresken von Castel Seprio einfach unmöglich [ist]. Mit Ikonografie allein lässt sich eben solch eine Frage nicht lösen*' (p. 257).⁷ On those rare occasions when BERENSON gave his own opinion, it transpires that he knew very little about Byzantine painting. A characteristic passage, the longest of its kind in the correspondence edited by BERNARDI, refers to an eighteenth-century Greek icon at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco (inv. 51.11):

4. I doubt BERNARDI's claim that 'Bernard Berenson was a native German speaker' (p. 21): Yiddish and German are two related but separate languages.

5. TOESCA to BERENSON (10 February 1926).

6. MILLET to BERENSON (27 November 1923 and 19 August 1924).

7. VOLBACH to BERENSON (11 November 1950).

Let me congratulate you on having acquired it. I agree with all you tell me about it. I can say authoritatively that it is ultra-Adriatic and I venture to add, not of Metropolitan, or Cretan, or Cypriot origin. I should incline to looking for its origin in the Balkans, perhaps in Epirus, Macedonia, or Southern Serbia. – But I have not discussed the possible date of your find. Orthodox works of art were considered like the hymns, as these are sung without change through the centuries, so the paintings and other works of art. Yet your findings all hold, and I agree that it is not likely to have been executed after 1300. The original composition may go back centuries. (p. 332)

The impression is confirmed by BERENSON's study of several paintings that are now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.⁸ In 1921, he described two of these (inv. 1937.1.1 and 1949.7.1) as '*capolavori venuti dalla stessa Constantinopoli*' and '*opere greche intorno al 1200*' (p. 565). While no one accepts his dating anymore, some scholars still think the works may be Byzantine.⁹ VIKTOR LAZAREV, however, associated them with Sicily.¹⁰

Then there are the paintings supposedly forming a triptych (inv. 1937.1.2) which, BERENSON declared in 1920, 'I venture to attribute to Cimabue. Yes, to Cimabue!' (p. 536). We all make mistakes, but few of us do it with such pomp and confidence: 'I will not waste time displaying my acquaintance with the Dugento painters of Tuscany, big and little, to dismiss in the end their claims to the authorship of this picture' (p. 546). The three panels are currently attributed to the Tuscan artist Grifo di Tancredi.¹¹

So one must not expect from the BERENSON whom we encounter in this volume lessons in method or expert opinions about Byzantine art. His correspondence is not enlightening but evocative – it evokes a lost time¹² of *alta civiltà* and *eletta spiritualità* (p. 7) when cultured people with a com-

8. His two articles are reprinted from their first editions on pp. 534–571 of the book under review. They were also republished, in English and with better-quality illustrations, in: B. BERENSON, *Studies in Medieval Painting*. New Haven 1930, pp. 1–30.

9. See most recently MANUEL CASTIÑEIRAS in: THOMAS BOHL (ed.), *Cimabue. Aux origines de la peinture italienne*. Paris 2025, pp. 108–111.

10. VIKTOR N. LAZAREV, *Storia della pittura bizantina*. Turin 1967, p. 347n.177. In 1951, VOLBACH mentioned in a letter to BERENSON the original Russian edition of this work: '*Haben Sie eigentlich schon das ausgezeichnete Buch von Lazareff über die byzantinische Malerei? Und dazu so billig. Nur lesen kann ich nicht*' (p. 259).

11. MIKLÓS BOSKOVITS, *Systematic Catalogue of the National Gallery of Art: Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. Washington 2016, pp. 177–188.

12. In 1922, BERENSON was reading Proust (p. 74).

mon interest would trade offprints, photographs, and personal news by post and pay each other the occasional friendly visit: ‘I like to think of the picture that you give of yourself taking your walks in the beautiful woods of Settignano, and I am looking forward to the day when I may come again to Florence’ (p. 150).¹³ External events seldom affected that charmed circle: ‘The library has received nothing for six years from any western country’ (pp. 168–169).¹⁴

Luigi Marangoni ‘told me the main piers of the church [San Marco] are in alarming state, & that if they crumble the whole fabric will go. I confess that troubles me more than any of the war victims’, BERENSON informed Ranuccio Bianchi-Bandinelli in 1946 (p. 318). The most charitable interpretation of these chilling words is that the man who wrote them did not quite know what had been going on in the world. ‘At my age’, he added (being eighty-one at the time), ‘it would be wiser to retire from actuality’. Research on the history of scholarship is useful because it makes us reflect on our own worth as scholars and – which is not the same thing – as human beings. Do we understand what goes on in the world? Are we prepared to do something about it? Or have we embraced Mr Berenson’s values?¹⁵

Keywords

historiography of Byzantine art

13. FORBES to BERENSON (19 February 1941 [!]).

14. BERENSON to FORBES (14 July 1946).

15. MEYER SCHAPIRO, Mr. Berenson’s Values. In: IDEM, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*. New York 1994, pp. 209–226. This short article, first published in 1961, is not listed in BERNARDI’s vast bibliography (pp. 580–637).