

“In the Eye of the Beholder”: A Convicting Correspondence

The tradition of popular epistolary novels such as Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, and Henry Fielding's *Pamela* established a technique whereby the action of the story takes place in one location and is narrated in letters to another. The Epistolary permits the outsider to directly interpret the action of the story in the first-person letter and when addressed to a close friend or relative it is in earnest and truthful as in the case of the Apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians or the Ephesians. Such letters when compared and written in the same time scheme suggest a truthful and ongoing history.

In the case of Isabella Stewart Gardner, a famous art collector and socialite, Bernard Berenson, a self-styled art connoisseur and his wife, Mary Costelloe Berenson, their individual letters provide the tangible proof of their regular experiences in knowledgably buying and selling fakes as well as participating in conspiracies of stolen and smuggled paintings. Many of the stolen and smuggled goods were placed by Mrs. Gardner in her collection in her Boston home.

This paper presents the exact epistolary evidence concerning the provenance of paintings stolen and illegally smuggled from Italian churches, the taunting and fawning by the Berensons and what they really thought of the collection they sold to her and profited handsomely.

Piermatteo Lauro Manfredi d'Amelia, (1467-1503) a native of Umbria, Italy and prominent apprentice of Filippo Lippi on the Cathedral of Spoleto is noted in the history of art as the first painter of the Sistine chapel ceiling.

This history begins nearly four hundred years after Piermatteo Lauro de Manfredi's painting of the Annunciation was placed above the altar of Convento della SS. Annunziata, Amelia

(Umbria). On September 29th, 1860 at the order of the High Commissioner of Umbria, Gioacchino Napoleone Pepoli, a commission was organized by to make a census of all the monuments and art in Umbria which was already taking place by the clergy in the churches and religious associations of Perugia. The artist and archeologist Mariano Guardabassi from Perugia, who also served as the archeological excavation inspector of the area was selected along with Luigi Caratolli and Giambattista Rossi Scotti were directed to catalogue all the art and antiquities in the region. Because of their work three manuscript volumes were presented to the Accademia di belle arti di Perugia. From this study Mariano Guardabassi published a volume, “l'Indice-guida dei monumenti pagani e cristiani riguardanti l'istoria” in 1872 and he died in Perugia in 1880. (Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani - Volume 60 (2003) accessed at [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mariano-guardabassi_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mariano-guardabassi_(Dizionario-Biografico)) 07.19.2018.

After the publication of the Guardabassi's “Index and Guide” in approximately 1880, Pier Matteo Lauro de Manfredi 's painting “Annunciation” was removed from Santissima Annunciata's central altar in Amelia, (Umbria) Italy and placed on St. Francis' Portiuncula within the Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli, in Assisi, (Umbria). It was replaced with a poorly executed, contemporary Annunciation.

Our evidence is in the actual letters written by Bernard Berenson, Mary Costeloe Berenson, his wife, and Isabella Stewart Gardner, founder of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. Since they have been accepted into the respective archives, we have no reason to doubt authenticity. In addition, they refer to negotiations for purchases discussed by all three participants.

The letters of Bernard Berenson and Mary Berenson are held by the Houghton Library at Harvard University, and have been published. The letters of Isabella Stewart Gardner are held by the Museum that still bears her name, and some of this correspondence has been published by the Gardner Museum itself.

June 8, 1899: Mary Costelloe Berenson's Diary entry dated June 8, 1899 presents the first inkling that the Berensons may have a dishonest streak. Mary states: "We called the *Antiquario* beside St. Mark's and found more excellent Sieneese forgeries, which gave us some doubts about—most of Bernhard's pictures!! The *Antiquario* confessed they were forgeries, and we offered him a hundred pounds if he would show us the man who did them.... By hook or crook, we must get to the bottom of it. If Bernhard's pictures are forgeries, then of course it is clear his science--- and no one's can distinguish. As to beauty—they are lovely! But there are too many of them."

Oct.4.1899, [San Domenico?] In Mary Berenson's entry to her Diary: "We have run our forger to earth—but a very easy matter it was—for "he" is a rollicking band of young men, cousins, and friends, who turn out These work in cooperation, one drawing, one laying in colour, another putting on The dirt, another making the frames, and some children with a big dog guarding over the pictures that were put in the sunshine to "stagionare" ("weather") ...Their chief is Federico Ioni..."

: Nov. 12, 1899, Mary writes home to her to Family

(from town of Fiesole) "The great excitement of the day was a telegram from an agent I sent down to Umbria to look up a splendid painting I heard was secretly for sale. He suddenly wired

that if I could send him twelve hundred pounds at once, he could snap up the picture...so I had to
 rush to the bank..."

Nov. 14. 1899, Mary writes to her daughter Ray Costelloe (A noted feminist and social activist):
 "Found a telegram from my picture Agent saying that as he had taken a false name, he could not
 draw out the money I sent him."

Nov.17, 1899, Mary to Hannah Whitall Smith, (her mother, a noted Quaker and social activist)
 from San Domenico: "The Agent went to Assisi taking his own packer and restorer. Secretly,
 inside the Monastery they were able to make a case for the picture, and glue down a little
 blister." "...and wait until midnight and then drive away in a cart with the picture out of the old
 Papal States (whose laws are very strict about exporting works of art) and get on the train at
 some Tuscan station. No one in Assisi was to know they had gone, except of course the friars. It
 is a fearful plot... Quite exciting as the life of a *smuggler* of old in the caves on the coast."

November 23, 1899 San Domingo Mary Berenson to her family: "Since I wrote, I have seen the
 picture. It is hidden away in a back-upstairs room in order to have the cracks fixed. It is a
 perfect beauty, one of the very best pictures painted in the fifteenth century and worth a very,
 very great deal. I am enchanted with it and hope to grow quite rich by it"

March 15, 1900, Mary Berenson to her family: "Did I tell you my invention for getting the
 PICTURE (Annunciation) out? We had a huge trunk made with a false bottom in which the
 picture was safely packed away. To explain, the size and shape of the trunk I had a lot of dolls
 made and Signor Galiardi went as a commercial traveler in the doll trade. They were though,
 cheap and worthless dolls. The famous dolls were left in Paris...But it was risky business."

Confirming the conspiracy, Bernard Berenson writes to Isabella Steward Gardner for whom he “found” pictures for her collection.

May 5, 1900: Bernard Berenson to Isabella Gardner, from Perugia”

“And now I get your charming note in response to my cable about the adorable Annunciation. Yesterday I looked at the empty spot over the Porziuncola near Assisi where it used to hang.

“.... And the price was perfectly reasonable. It did not occur to me that you could not raise this money. I have kept the picture for you till now on the shadow of a hope.... So, if a way should meanwhile have opened to you, and you find by the miracle that you can buy the Picture, you might cable, and if the picture isn’t sold, I will see that you have it.”

June 14, 1900: Bernard Berenson letter to Isabella Gardner: “Private property of a Franciscan Monk (?) sold to Colnaghi and they carried it to London.”

(Writer note: For anyone NOT familiar with the Franciscans, this religious order exercises a vow of poverty and chastity in the spirit of St. Francis and “Franciscan Rule.”)

November 7, 1900: Isabella Gardner’s letter to Bernard Berenson re: purchase of the Raphael Christ Deposition from the Cross, “Also, can it be smuggled, Do you think, so that I may get it here now, as soon as possible without any duties?”

Mary Berenson’s letter dated 1920:

“We went out to see Mrs. Gardner today. She will soon die, and she must know it, but she is unchanged in her egotism, her malice, her attachment to detail, to nonsensical things. All of this, in the days of her vitality, when it seemed as if she couldn’t grow old and die, were actually, part

of her charm. But now it is purely pathetic, and a little ugly... But the worst of all is that her great Palace, in spite of the marvellous pictures in it, looks to our now enlightened eyes like a junk shop. There is something horrible in these American collections in snatching this and that away from its real home and hanging it on a wall of priceless damask made for somewhere else, above the furniture higgledy-piggled from other places, strewn with *objets d'art* ravished from still other realms..."

This last entry was taken directly from the *Introduction*, page xvii to the Gardner Museum Collection Handbook, "Eye of The Beholder: Masterpieces from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum" published in June 2003.

This is the way the Radcliffe educated Art Historian and Mary Berenson and her second husband, Harvard art historian and founder of the *I Tatti* Art History Research Center, which he eventually bequeathed to Harvard memorialized their benefactor, Isabella Stewart Gardner.

Berenson was, as described in the words of legendary Harvard Professor Charles Eliot Norton, an "Intellectual Arriviste with more ambition than ability," Berenson is especially remembered for his relationships with Colnaghi Gallery in London and working for Duveen, certifying artworks with his "system," which was also previously maligned in mention by Mary Berenson.

When the Annunciation did arrive at the Gardner Museum, after it was audaciously smuggled out of Italy by a man working at the direction of Radcliffe art historian Mary Berenson, and her husband, Harvard art historian Bernard Berenson with the knowledge of Isabella Gardner herself it experienced a complete obliteration of its provenance including the artist's identity, at

Gardner's Boston museum. Until the original contract for creating the Annunciation, signed by Piermatteo Lauro Manfredi d'Amelia was discovered in the archives of the Cathedral of Santa Maria degli Angeli of Assisi, the Annunciation was whimsically referred to as the "Master of the Gardner." We need not also forget that the Raphael "Deposition from the Cross" also in the remaining collection of the Gardner was smuggled into the United States in a conspiracy memorialized in correspondence between Gardner and Berenson.

In a demonstration of sheer hubris, "The Handbook for the Collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum" relates this conspiracy narrative of looting, smuggling and laundering of the Annunciation painting from Italy in a false bottom trunk under cheap dolls as though it is a quaint and humorous anecdote, rather than a series of astonishingly arrogant, criminal, acts against Italian cultural patrimony as well as the United States Government.

Under Italian law the Annunciation would be considered smuggled as well as stolen. The United States recognizes that title to stolen property can never be passed, even in good faith transactions, which this is certainly not. Efforts by the People of Amelia to request the loan of the Annunciation from the Gardner Museum have been summarily dismissed. This is not at all surprising. Perhaps it will not be the end of this story.