

# BERNHARD BERENSON<sup>1</sup>

BY LOUIS GILLET

SINCE the death of Morelli, Mr. Bernhard Berenson is the greatest *connaisseur* of Italian art. I purposely use this old word, which is unfortunately being replaced by a more ambitious term. It signified that a person had knowledge and good taste, knew what he was talking about, and perceived his own relation to those matters. I do not believe that Mr. Berenson asks for higher praise. For a good forty years he has lived in Italy, and there is not a province, not an obscure corner, not an Apennine village with some church fresco in its wall between Friuli and Sicily, which this assiduous pilgrim has not visited with his devotions. On top of this, he knows the museums and collections in both Europe and America better than anybody else in the world.

The first time I met him was on the deck of the 'Provence,' headed for New York, where the author of *Italian Painters* was going to examine various new additions to the art galleries in his own country. He never failed to make this voyage every two or three years. When he studied a subject he never hesitated to take the train from Berlin to London or from Warsaw to Madrid to get closer to it or to verify it in some way. As for the treasures of private collections, however jealously guarded, they held no secrets for him. Who can say that he knows Titian if he has not seen the marvels of Bridgewater House and Giorgione, if he has not stood wrapt in dreams before his 'Tempesta'

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in the Giovanelli Palace? Who really understands the charm of Sieneese paintings who has not seen Sassetta's little panels of the life of Saint Francis of Assisi belonging to the lamented Emmanuel Chalandon in an hotel of the old Rue de Bourgogne?

For the last twenty years Mr. Berenson has installed himself just outside of Florence in the delightful Settignano countryside, among smiling hills looking out on this eternally adolescent horizon. It is impossible not to dwell on the Italian charm of this ravishing dwelling-place, which has been given the singular name of *i Tatti*, which I am told is the familiar diminutive of a Christian name of one of its old proprietors. It is a simple square structure two stories high, quite unpretentious — one of those *settecento* houses built at the time when Italian style was almost frugal. Its only ornament is its delicacy and the elegance of its proportions. It is one of those houses to which one is tempted to apply Michelangelo's description of the church at Carnacco, which he called 'the beautiful peasant woman.' There is no ostentation or display. We see a flat-tiled roof, like a gardener's hat, and a façade, scarcely more than a peaceful kind of face, looking out on this garden which owes all its beauty to the slope of the terraces that it overlooks and to the orderly arrangement of everything below, where the valley slopes away and hills rise up further in the distance with divine lightness, skipping ever like young sheep.

The interior is full of that peace that the Italian house of to-day inherits from the old-fashioned villa with its atmosphere of a cloister. There is no *capharnaïm*, no trace of bric-a-brac — simply a few fine tables, each set apart, arranged the whole length of corridors. These represent golden minutes in their owner's existence.

I should like to depict him in his splendid library, the most beautiful of its kind, in the midst of his books and his thousands of photographs, in this empire which he shares with the most devout and enlightened of collaborators, Mrs. Berenson, so well known too under the name of Mary Logan — she is the sister of that impeccable stylist who wrote *Trivia*. There her husband writes and spends half of his life correcting notes, classifying and revising his judgments, talking, receiving his friends. He travels the rest of the year, appearing at regular intervals in Rome, Vienna, Cairo, Constantinople, and almost every year in Paris and London during autumn or spring.

Once upon a time he was a young American in love with Italy. It is true that he loved it without ever having seen it, just as knights in books become devoted to an unknown beauty simply through hearing of her reputation. He was a pupil of William James, the author of those famous studies in *Principles of Psychology*. And, in truth, the Italy that he loved was only a dream. It was the world of his desires, seen through the eyes of his adored masters, Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold, those English Parnassians who paid homage to Italy's cult of beauty during the height of Victorian bourgeois conventionality. There is an Italy of poets that plays a rôle in Northern literature which we never see in our Latinized countries. In those parts of the world they need to feel the contrast between themselves and a land of romantic

dreams and youthful pleasures. Goethe's Mignon is such a creation, wild, with streaming hair and bare feet, leading the poet like a fantastic homesick Antigone, an ardent, sad child singing his song. It is the Italy of Childe Harold, of Keats and Shelley. What destiny urged these two swans to leave their silver island and die in the country of Horace and Vergil? That homesickness reaches far back, that desire to escape. The greatest English poets felt it. Shakespeare put this charming fever into his work, and he created an Italy of his own, the scene of the most beautiful love stories, an Italy of the heart, a kingdom of sorrow, voluptuousness and fancy, where Beatrice, Jessica, Juliet, and Desdemona live forever.

The young American developed his dream in this atmosphere, and to him too came the call of the siren in a voice that spoke to him sweetly of beauty and inspired him with disgust for vulgar interests. While a young man, he had decided that he would not be one of those unfortunates who waste their days in getting rich, and that at all costs he would lead a noble life of the spirit. In 1885 he escaped to Paris. The two years that he passed there were decisive. It is impossible to describe the baseness of our country during that period of humiliation. Defeated, France took her revenge — conquered, she achieved the spiritual conquest of the world. The old sage, Renan, was the oracle of Europe, and made the majesty of intelligence respected from his chair in Hebrew at the Collège de France. The young foreigner was intoxicated by his courses. In the Louvre this young man found the residue of centuries, the rarest treasures in the world, and with the masterpieces of Greece and Italy before him art touched his heart and opened his eyes.

He saw many other things, the same things that were enchanting at almost the same moment the illustrious George Moore, the inimitable author of the *Confessions of a Young Man*. He arrived in time to take part in this extraordinary spectacle of the creation of an art and a complete renovation of his customary way of looking at things. In certain ateliers and artistic circles prodigious work was under way. Corot and Manet were about to die, but Degas, Claude Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, were every day inventing new formulas, laying down more and more audacious lines of research, dissociating form and tone, breaking conventions of design and color, subject and composition, and apparently changing the fixity and certitude, the stuff and substance, of the way people were used to looking at the world. With these bold masters things were seen only under new lights; but their powerful pieces of visual analysis were no sooner achieved than other painters began to do exactly the opposite thing. Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Gauguin, and others began to recompose what impressionism had decomposed. Apart from all these groups, Puvis de Chavannes brought to life old legends in fresco, and Carrière depicted the human tenderness of the world within, while Rodin in sculpture seemed a second Donatello. I do not know whether our traveler took all this in at once, but it came back to him later, when he was in Florence. Clearly Degas had given him the artistic key of a Pollajuolo.

Thus equipped, he thought that he was ripe for the journey that he had promised himself for so long, and at the age of twenty-three he set out for Italy. To enjoy it as much as possible, he made the journey on foot, like pilgrims of an earlier day. He wanted to approach his mistress slowly, to see her from afar, to enter step by step into her

atmosphere and her friendship. Thus he arrived at Venice, and remained there for two months. But it was a disappointment. He had dreamed too much, and no longer recognized his dreams. He had no very clear idea of what he wanted, and found himself a little lost when he arrived in the regions of his imaginings. Passionate and cerebral, the child of poets and philosophy, he cultivated all these fevers, ideas, and sensations at once, and his ideal was to unite them. He dreamed of formulating a universal theory of criticism, a general system that could be applied to all products of the human spirit, and at the same time he tried his hand at poetry and novel-writing. In a word, he was a very restless, presumptuous young man. Suffering from both pride and humility, discontented with himself, doing nothing worth while, and seeking to escape from his distress by means of new emotions and experiences, his state of mind led him from Venice to Greece, then to Berlin, and on to Madrid. Before he was twenty-five he had already embraced almost the whole history of art, without following any method, but only his impulses, and he recognized that this was to be his domain.

He spent three years more in the same way, and it was not until 1893 that he wrote *Painters of Venice*, the first of his four books; the last, on painters of Northern Italy, did not appear until 1908. To-day Mr. Berenson is quite severe on his first work; he does not recognize himself in this essay written at the age of twenty-eight. I agree that there are marks of youthfulness about it, but they are not without charm, and the author's doctrines can only be weakly perceived. They become more solidified in the second volume, on Florentine painters, which appeared in 1895. But from the first essay to the last I enjoy Mr. Beren-

son's elegance, style, conciseness, and his direct psychological method, his way of understanding a work of art and defining it as a rapport between the artist and the soul of the spectator.

This was a great novelty. At the end of the last century, when Mr. Berenson began to reflect and write, there were only two methods of studying art — the Hegelian style, propagated by Germans, whose principal apostle was Taine, and the chartist method, followed by scholars of the school of Rumohr, Gaye, and Milanese, which fortified all judgment with applications of texts of the period. The devotees of the first method pretended to explain everything by a general covering of the subject. Before speaking of the picture they described its surroundings, its race, its moment. They made an enormous circuit and learnedly exhausted everything they knew about the subject, after which they declared that the problem was solved, although they may not have said a word about it. What is there to be said for a method which places a painting by starting on a trip around the world, which demands to know everything and insists that the critic be as wise as God himself? If Venice explains Titian, why was there only one Titian at Venice? The second method, apparently more modest, ignores these metaphysical questions, and replies by digging up copies of lawsuits, birth and death certificates, contracts, dates, and signatures. It feels that it is more positive, and is in reality as far away from the subject as the other. Both are the refuge of blind men, and one can practise them without ever looking at a picture.

In Mr. Berenson's case one preoccupation dominated all others. It was the problem of art, the problem of its nature and its particular functioning. This functioning, to speak only of plastic arts, seemed to him to play an

immense rôle in life. He had defined man as an artistic animal — that is to say, the only living creature that has built up a system of representations, a universe of images, a world independent of reality, a mass of plastic creations, that are called art.

This phenomenon, similar to the creations of language, plays a scarcely less important part in our lives. Who knows to how great a degree we are capable of seeing in the world anything but a disordered series of occurrences? If it were not for the unconscious recollections of a hundred works of art, life would be an incoherent dream, a distressing nightmare. Works of art suggest something calm, rhythmical, and restful. Who knows how much our view of a countryside is not unconsciously formed by the views of artists? Should we see mere trees if Corot had not got up early to see them? Should we be able to distinguish different people's features if the portrait painters of the Renaissance had not shown us how to decipher characters and construct a face? The proof of this is easy. Simple people, sailors, and soldiers who travel in foreign countries, uneducated in the eye and spirit, see nothing. They have not become accustomed to forming an æsthetic image of things. There is nothing more common than to encounter people who have been to China and see no difference there. As for Negroes and the so-called savages which we ordinarily think of as primitive, they are, on the other hand, 'old-fashioned gentlemen,' as the painter John La Farge once said to Paul Bourget. Their souls are muscle-bound, they are confined in their habits, fetishes, and taboos. Their art is just the opposite of naïveté. It has none of the freshness of childhood, but represents only routine and decadence. It is not youth, it is decrepitude.

The rôle of art is so important to us

that we can hardly be said to have an existence apart from it. How powerful is its influence on the idea that we make to ourselves of beauty! What a part it has played in the shaping of our religious sentiment! It has often been shown that art is the expression of the ideas of an epoch. It is much more true to say that art creates these ideas. This recalls Whistler's joke to a friend who was looking at a twilight on the Thames and said, 'It looks like one of your pictures.' 'Yes,' replied the painter, 'nature is beginning to notice me.' This statement contains a great deal of truth. Life imitates art more than art imitates life.

This important and frequently misunderstood fact was just the thing to exercise a disciple of William James. Mr. Berenson began by putting the terms of the problem the other way. Far from attempting to explain art by outside causes and making it the product of its time, he considered it the original element, an independent factor that is subject to special conditions and laws and that influences ideas more than they influence it. He considers it far more a cause than an effect, and in the first of his books one rarely runs into allusions to contemporary events, to historical narratives, moral or economic considerations, or to all that picturesque history borrowed from memoirs of the time that made up nearly all of Taine's criticism and filtered down through him to innumerable imitators. The artistic fact is sufficient to itself. It develops of its own accord, with scarcely an accident, without any interventions from outside, like the proof of a theorem. What is the nature of this fact? What does it consist of? How can it be recognized? In what way does it affect our soul? To answer these questions is the object of Mr. Berenson's work. The history of art offers him the same subject that he

felt when he arrived in Venice, so eager for both imaginings and ideas.

But of all art the history of the Italian Renaissance offers the critic the most definite field of complete development. Even Greek art, in spite of its superiority, is not so good an example. For one thing, it is further away from us. Many masterpieces are lacking, or are known to us only in imitations. Mediæval French art is only just beginning to be explored, and it is surrounded with anonymousness; the lack of any system of chronology makes it difficult for us to become interested.

And though Flanders, Spain, Holland, all have their moments of genius, none of them offers anything much from the intellectual point of view. Rembrandt, Vermeer, Rubens, and Velásquez exhaust in themselves all that their country has to say. What surrounds them, and especially what follows them, do not count. Desultory masterpieces of an El Greco or a Goya astound us, but they do not constitute a school.

On the other hand, the three centuries of the Italian Renaissance, from 1275 to 1575, offer a homogeneous development, a complete phenomenon. Since the time of Giotto, when the art of the painter was put in its right place in the frescoes of Assisi, until Michelangelo's prodigious effects in the Sistine Chapel, right up to the moment when his pupils fell back in their turn to mediocrity and conventionality, for six generations one idea evolved and explained itself, developed in its own way like a living organism rigorously following a definite principle. There is not a flaw or a halt in this process of creation; not a link is missing in the chain. Each generation adds to the one that went before its contribution and leaves it to the following one, which in its turn will provide further enrichment. It is as if one atelier were occu-

ped by father and son successively, all engaged on a single masterpiece.

The secret of this work was that it elaborated a language and grammar of form. The period was occupied in creating through the arts of design a series of representations, more eloquent than the things themselves, acting on our senses more strongly than physical objects, transmitting to us clearer and more lively impressions than our ordinary sensibilities are capable of. Pascal's statement about the vanity of painting because 'it made one admire copies more than originals' would be just only if art were photography. But it is something quite different from reproduction; at the very least, the reality that it reproduces is of an interior sort. It is the world of Titian, Raphael, Correggio, the spectacle of their dreams, the universe of their feelings, their desires, and their thoughts. It is something that we should have no idea of were it not that these masters bore witness so eloquently.

Let us be exact. A painter has to reconstruct form — and especially the human form, which is the most interesting of all — in such a way that a surface of two dimensions gives the idea of the third. In other words, he has to obtain with painting the effects of a bas-relief. It is what Rodin called the feeling for depth. Preoccupation with the model and the form was the leitmotif of Florentine painting, and was the chief problem to which the whole school devoted itself. We have to find the signs and values that the painter is depicting, that sow the seed of his idea into the soul of his spectator, obliging him to form a physical image as the painter does. That is what Mr. Berenson means when he speaks of tactile values.

This ingenious point of view is based on psychological observation. Mr.

Berenson imagines that the spectator is half in the work of the painter. He becomes a kind of collaborator. According to him, a work of art is a kind of reservoir of energy discharging itself into our nervous system, exciting our activity and putting us into a state of mind that the artist wishes to express. We enjoy a vigor and a feeling of superior sensibility without any expense of effort, and this exercise of unused faculties is the greatest of all pleasures. For a moment we feel like Michelangelo — or, to be more exact, the artist through his picture enters our body and plays on it like an instrument. Somebody identifies us for a moment with what is represented, and these representations have their effect on us. Muscular ideas of strength, laziness, violence, or voluptuousness flow through us. We share the existence of these supermen. We find that we are of heroic mould. By virtue of these values of form, energy, rhythm, and coördinate movement that lay hold on us and stimulate our nervous centres, plucking them like harp strings, we pass through a series of motionless gymnastics, we share a dream, we are actors in it, and find ourselves endowed with qualities and virtues that we never suspected we possessed. In this way the Chinese delight in noiseless concerts in which the musicians move their bows over the strings without any noise and seem to play on their flutes, the audience being enchanted by the imaginary music of the pantomime.

This curious artistic mechanism, whose principles I have stated here, bears remarkable fruit, and in the first place one notes with surprise that it leads to a sort of indifference to beauty. That is because this convenient term escapes, as genius does, any kind of definition. It does not lend itself to analysis. Many admirable works are devoid of the sensual charm and seduc-

tiveness that we usually call beauty. Mr. Berenson does not conceal his dislike of the simple arrangement of pretty oval faces of the Lombardy school. Luini, the old maids' favorite, occupies a sorry quarter of an hour, and is put far below Ambrogio Borgognone. And as for the literary content of a work of art, for what is called the subject, or the iconography, this he disdainfully designates 'illustration,' and attaches to it only secondary importance. It is clear that in his eyes this is one of the great weaknesses of the Renaissance art. This inheritance from the Middle Ages, this religious constraint that made artists subject to dogma and weighed them down with theological baggage, seems to him their greatest deficiency. It is this, according to him, which has prevented them from attaining the perfection of Greece. The Greek artist made his gods, and he made them appropriate to his art. Art was the *raison d'être* and the measure of religion. The Christian artist does not enjoy the same good fortune. Without arguing the matter, it can be said in reply that Christian art itself is largely inherited from Greek genius. The Hellenism of Antioch, Alexandria, and Byzantium survived intact until the dawn of the Renaissance. The Christ type is no less Greek than Apollo, and the scenes from the life of Jesus that surround Duccio's 'Maestà' at Siena are the children of Greek vases and frescoes.

In that ancient debate, almost as old as criticism itself, that tries to decide which Italian school of painting is best, the author of *Italian Painters* seems to take the side of Vasari, who gives the prize on almost every count to the Florentines. He was led to do this by the exigencies of his theory, for it is quite certain that during the hundred years from Masaccio to Michelangelo Florence led the procession. Italy owes

Florence a debt for her creation of an artistic language.

I believe that Mr. Berenson will not contradict me when I say that there is no single artistic formula. When he speaks of the essence of art, one must give these words a relative significance. Is the importance of the subject so great that one should sacrifice everything to it, as they did in Florence, and make verisimilitude the sole criterion of beauty? Ingres hardly thought so when he said, 'I do not care whether it turns or not.' It seems that this is also what Mr. Berenson really believes, in spite of his theories, at the bottom of his heart. No one has spoken more tenderly of Simone Martini, of Matteo di Giovanni, and of that divine Sassetta whose marvelous work he is describing the more enthusiastically because his pictures are absolutely unreal and entirely devoid of any sense of tactile values. As the author gains wider experience and his horizons extend, as he penetrates the Far East, the tapestry of Persia, Chinese paintings, Ajanta frescoes, and the great Byzantine art whose grandeur we are only just beginning to be able to measure, the short three-century episode known as the Renaissance seems to lose a good deal of its importance. Perhaps this naturalism that it inculcated into Europe no longer seemed like such an enviable contribution. It may be that Europe has paid dear for this ardent curiosity, this spirit of progress that tossed aside all conventions. Who can say whether even the Titans of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel are to rank with the Pantocrates and the Panagias of the old mosaics at Palermo and Cefalu as far as majesty and superhuman expressiveness are concerned? And surely the former have far less decorative value. Once more it seems that mankind was wrong to eat of the fruit of knowledge, and that in ex-

changing art for wisdom he made a bad bargain.

That is the point to which the author's latest reflections have led him, and to which he is trying to orient himself now. Like the author of *Divan*, this is the way he is going to crown his life work. I do not know, and he has not confided in me, what form the book that he is working on will take. I have seen him after a space of several years, coming back by preference to our old churches, to our ancient Burgundy, to Saintonge, to Provence and Languedoc. Twice in the last two years he has gone

to Egypt. In that country they think that he is going to try to write a book unraveling the threads of early Christian art, that marvelous fabric on which both halves of the world collaborated like two workers devoted to the same task.

If this book is ever written, it will contain the last word and testament of the author's theories of criticism. The evening is the measure of the day. It is in this work of final maturity that we shall find whether he has confirmed or altered his conclusions of middle life.

## CLAIRE FONTAINE

(From an Old French-Canadian Song)

BY ERNEST RHYS

[*Sunday Times*]

THERE runs a sky-clear stream,  
And a maple tree grows there:  
One day I stood beneath the branch,  
And the cool wind stirred my hair.

And in that leafy house  
Made by the maple tree  
A little mating bird there was —  
He sang most merrily.

I listened, and I said:  
'My thoughts, O bird, are sad;  
But thine are wing'd and light:  
Sing, then, more wildly glad!'

And first he sang two notes,  
And then he whistled three;  
And when I left the sky-clear stream  
I was as gay as he.

# MOTORS AND MOTORING IN ARABIA<sup>1</sup>

BY DOCTOR WOLFGANG VON WEISL

SUPERIOR people use a Dodge. The Ford is the lowest kind of car. It is like a donkey in cavalry. Any European riding in a Ford since 1925 has been 'out class.' Before that time he could be pardoned.

Nevertheless, this fact is true — a Ford can never be so bad that it cannot find a purchaser; and it goes — it goes well. I excavate from my storehouse of memory my recollections as an automobilist while I was in the capital of the Hejaz.

The Arabs had broken my car for me in an accident, and I sat in Ma'an waiting until the efforts of the mechanic who was there should put it to rights. At that moment a Ford, groaning under a load of six people, rolled past at about ten miles an hour, with its driver hanging out and shouting to me: 'Ten pounds! Ten pounds!'

I shouted back: 'Eight pounds!' My friend thought that the Arab wanted to sell me the car, but the fellow at the wheel shook his head and drove away still shouting his 'Ten pounds.' An hour later the Ford came by me again, with the same Arab hanging on to the running board, shouting: 'Ten pounds, eighty piastres!' An hour later he went by crying: 'Twelve pounds.' This raising of the price of a Ford was like the days of Caliph Harun-al-Rashid, that earlier inhabitant of the Hejaz. The owner sat on the edge of the car and his assistant on the running board. A man with a sheet of paper was

near the chauffeur, and the salesman jumped down to the ground to continue his bargaining. The automobile made the rounds of the oasis until sunset — a proof, the salesman said, of its dependability. At last I beat the price of the rattletrap down to about three hundred marks, and was later furious that I had not bought it simply because it had seemed too poor. For my own machine did not get repaired quickly, and on the next day I had to continue my journey to Akaba in another miserable Ford without lights, one that would go only thirty kilometres an hour, with broken springs and all the other indications of long service in the desert, and for three days' use I had to pay twelve pounds. From this the reader may gather that it is well not to buy a Ford at all if he would be elegant, but that it is at least better to buy than to hire one.

Good for Turkey, the Hejaz, and the Transjordanian provinces. If you come to a river or an empty river-bed and there is a bridge over the water, this bridge is a sign that there is a ford there. By going near the bridge or under it, nothing will happen to you, but do not use the bridge as a Hungarian friend of mine did.

'Listen what happened to me when my chauffeur went over the bridge itself. We were going home yesterday, and came to a river. There was a bridge there. The driver went over it, and lo and behold, the whole thing crashed and we fell into the water.'

The best roads that I have traversed

<sup>1</sup> From the *Neue Freie Presse* (Vienna Liberal daily), September 12