When Bernard Berenson began his university studies, he was eighteen years old, and his family had been in the United States for eight years. The Berensons, who had been the Valvrojenskis when they left the village of Butrimonys in Lithuania, had settled in the West End of Boston. They lived near the North Station rail yard and the North End, which would soon see a great influx of Eastern European Jews. But the Berensons were among the early arrivals, their struggles were solitary, and they had not exactly prospered. Albert Berenson (fig. CC.I.1), the father of the family, worked as a tin peddler, and though he had tried for a while to run a small shop out of their house, that had failed, and by the time Berenson began college, his father had gone back to the long trudging rounds with his copper and tin pots.

Berenson did his first college year at Boston University, but, an avid reader and already a lover of art and culture, he hoped for a wider field. It seems that he met Edward Warren (fig. CC.I.16), with whom he shared an interest in classical antiquities, and that Warren generously offered to pay the fees that had otherwise prevented Berenson from attempting to transfer to Harvard. To go to Harvard would, in later decades, be an ambition of many of the Jews of Boston, both the wealthier German and Central European Jews who were the first to come, and the poorer Jews, like the Berensons, who left the Pale of Settlement in the period of economic crisis and pogroms. But Berenson came before this; he was among a very small group of Jewish students, and one of the first of the Russian Jews, to go to Harvard. He eagerly accepted Warren’s patronage. When the admission was settled, he went out with his sister Senda Berenson (fig. CC.I.4) to purchase reproductions for his new college room. Suitably for the future expert in Italian Renaissance painting, one of these showed a fresco by Correggio of Diana of Parma. The image bore a motto that would have appealed to the struggling young romantic: “IGNEM GLADIO NE FODIAS,” “You will not poke out the fire with the sword.”

In the autumn of 1884, Bernard Berenson entered the gates of Harvard Yard, a boyish, serious student, in a worn suit. Still closely tied to his Jewish family, he was determined to pursue a course of study that had at least something in common with the yeshiva training he, and his father before him,

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* Excerpted, with slight revisions, from the first two chapters of Rachel Cohen, Bernard Berenson and the Picture Trade, Yale University Press, forthcoming.

1 For a consideration of the Jewish communities of Boston and their several relations to Harvard see Sarna, 2005, 13-14, and Sarna, Smith, and Kosofsky, 2005 more generally.
had broken off. He immediately enrolled in courses involving the comparative study of languages, including advanced Hebrew, and of ancient civilizations. Professor Toy (fig. CC.I.15), who taught Arabic, and Professor Lanman (fig. CC.I.8), who taught Sanskrit, were both enthusiastic about their new pupil, with his fantastic memory, great precision in careful comparison, and gift for acquiring, and using, languages. Berenson’s early published writings for the new *Harvard Monthly* displayed impressive erudition. A study of the works of Tolstoy, a writer only just become available to English-speaking readers, was followed by a careful biographical reconstruction of the course of Mohammed’s career. These works show Berenson beginning to become the sort of scholar he and his professors admired, at work on mastering the two geographical regions and civilizations with which he felt the most affinity: the Semitic Near East and Russia.

But other currents were also at work in his undergraduate project of self-definition. Berenson, already devotedly reading Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold, felt the pull – and here he was subject to the guidance and insistence of cultivated Boston – toward the literature of England, the art of Italy, and toward Christianity. Nitza Rosovsky, author of the *Jewish Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe*, estimates that, in 1886, altogether “perhaps a dozen Jews had graduated from the college.” But Berenson was not to be counted on such a list – in the fall of 1885, his second Harvard year, Berenson converted to Christianity and was baptized at the Trinity Church in Boston. The conversion, however, was sign more of tension than of resolution. In his third and last year at Harvard, he was engaged in what seemed opposed pursuits. While living at home and completing a long manuscript that seems to have been his senior thesis, on the subject of “Talmudo-Rabbinical Eschatology” (cat. BB.IV.1), he was also writing a short story about aesthetic dilettantes, taking Charles Eliot Norton’s famed courses in the history of art, and hoping to obtain a traveling fellowship to study literature and art, especially works then hardly to be seen in the United States, the extremely Christian paintings of the Italian Renaissance.

All his life, Bernard Berenson was a person whose capacity for metamorphosis approached that of the moth. In this early period of change are visible certain patterns – in his relationships to religion,

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2 *Harvard Monthly* articles by Bernard Berenson are included in this exhibition.

3 Rosovsky 1986, 8.

4 The handwriting in this recently discovered manuscript corresponds to that of Berenson’s during his senior year of college (1887). According to Berenson’s Harvard grade report (cat. BB.II.4), Bernard received a 95 on his “Thesis in Semitic.”
to women, to art, and to money – that would repeat throughout his career. Berenson’s transformations were always accomplished at the cost of great struggle, especially over writing. Periods of grave self-doubt and self-recrimination were hidden below an ever-glossier surface. The outcome of the struggle – the new project or self-definition – almost always resulted in a deeper involvement with the study or sale of Italian pictures. Again and again, Berenson’s personal transformations would coincide with changes in the trade with which his life was so deeply entwined.

The Harvard of the mid-1880s was a place of new intellectual developments and curricular reform. President Charles William Eliot had introduced a system of electives, disparaged by the old guard but delightful to the students, including, most significantly for Berenson, studies in the new field of art history. Still, certain limitations remained. Attendance at chapel, for example, would stay compulsory until 1886. And, in general, Harvard presumed that its students were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male, and not too terribly worried about making a living. Among the students, Berenson kept rather to himself. He had two associates who were also dark-eyed, foreign-seeming, and socially somewhat marginal, and these were Charles Loeser (fig. CC.I.9) and George Santayana (fig. CC.I.12). Loeser, who was also Jewish, came from Brooklyn, where his father was a wealthy dry goods merchant, but the son had been educated in Switzerland. He would become a serious art collector, and an important early patron and colleague of Berenson’s; their eventual break would lead to long years of bitter rivalry. The future philosopher Santayana was raised in the old Boston family of the Sturgises, but, unlike his half-siblings, his father had been a Spaniard; he was Catholic, dark, aesthetical, and, like Berenson, found a second home at Harvard to which he clung, hard. For Berenson, Harvard was an anxious pinnacle of achievement, bestowing on him a status he coveted while constantly threatening to take it away.

Loeser, Santayana, and Berenson were all members of a literary club at Harvard called the O.K. There is a picture of the membership, arranged solemnly in two upright-sitting rows, but with Berenson, small and eager, on a little hassock toward the front. The severe Anglo-Saxons in their well-cut suits seem many years the senior of Berenson, with his childish face, and the long pre-Raphaelite curls he then affected. Berenson later said that it was a mark of distinction among a certain set to be “one of the longhair grands,” but his biographer Ernest Samuels went carefully through the class

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5 See Parri’s essay on Loeser and Santayana (cat. BB.III.10).
picture of 1887, remarking that “only one other student…ventured the Florentine look of a Pre-
Raphaelite poet.” Finishing his portrait of Berenson in this era, Samuels concludes: “A classmate who
used to see Berenson cross the Yard recalled that, small and frail in body, he gave the impression of an
ascetic, an impression which was heightened by a certain delicacy and sedateness in his walk.”

Berenson, Santayana, and Loeser were all drawn by aesthetics and literature, fields which, at
Harvard as in Boston, had long been the purview of gentlemen at leisure; the three were grateful to
their more broad-minded professors, like Barrett Wendell and William James (fig. CC.I.7), who did not
scorn their ambitions or tastes. Barrett Wendell’s English 12, with its daily “theme,” spurred students to
write and to write creatively. The students who hung around Wendell’s office together founded the
*Harvard Monthly*, of which Berenson became editor-in-chief in his senior year. William James had
begun teaching the material that he would develop into the *Principles of Psychology*, published in
1890; both his lectures and the later book were to exert a powerful influence on Berenson’s ideas about
aesthetics in the four short books he wrote about Italian Renaissance paintings in the 1890s and after
the turn of the century. Perhaps more important still, the kindness and encouragement of James were
things Berenson invoked as a source of comfort and hope even in the diary entries of his last decade.
Berenson – precocious, intellectual, and both over- and under-confident – remained one of those young
people who has his social life more among the professors than the students.

This, then, was the background against which Berenson made what can be understood as a
double-conversion: to Protestantism in 1885 and to aesthetics in 1886. One writer seems to have had a
significant impact on Berenson’s view of, and relation to, both religion and art, and this was Walter
Pater. Writing to Isabella Stewart Gardner (fig. CC.I.5) in 1888, the year after his graduation, Berenson
described how in college Pater’s *The Renaissance* was known to him “almost by heart. Many a
midnight in coming home I would take it up, and meaning to glance only at a passage here or there,
would read it from cover to cover.”

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6 Samuels 1979, 33 (cat. BB.III.2), quoting Bernard, diary, 16 August 1945, Bernard and Mary
Berenson Papers, Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti—The Harvard University Center for Italian
Renaissance Studies [hereafter BMBP].

7 Samuels 1979, 33.

8 Samuels 1979, 33.

9 Bernard would have taken James’s class on “Logic and Psychology;” see James 1988, xlviii-xl ix. For
the impact of James on Bernard’s aesthetics, also see Brown’s essay (cat. BB.III.4).
Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* was first published in February of 1885; Berenson fastened eagerly upon it. *Marius* is the allegorical tale of a young Roman aesthete and secretary to Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Long devoted to Epicureanism, he gradually, and in large part as a matter of sensibility, converts to the new religion of Christianity. In the book, the scenes of Marius’s religious experiences make the deepest impressions on the reader. Some of these are pagan, and some Christian, but all take place in beautiful, spacious surroundings, built by the wise and sensitive to offer a place of aesthetic spiritual contemplation.

If Berenson looked in Boston for an atmosphere like those that sustained Marius, the place which would immediately have suggested itself was Trinity Church. Completed in 1878, by the architect H.H. Richardson, who designed it specially for his friend, its rector Philips Brooks, Trinity Church was hailed as an architectural marvel and became the central congregation for the fashionable Back Bay. It was decorated with commissioned stained glass windows which remain a famous attraction; several were designed by Edward Burne-Jones, the noted pre-Raphaelite painter, and in the years immediately before Berenson began attending, many of John La Farge’s most impressive glass creations were there installed. With its unusually large, square central space, its dappling of colored light, and the fine, dynamic preaching of Philips Brooks, Trinity was just the sort of place a young Marius of Boston would have sought out. On 22 November 1885, Berenson was baptized by Philips Brooks at Trinity Church.

There is no record of what his family thought of his decision; Berenson himself remained uncertain about it, even a little bewildered. Six years later, contemplating another conversion, to Catholicism, he would write to Mary Costelloe, the woman who was soon to become his lover and would later be his wife, about what had happened:

I meant it all so well; and somehow it turned out so ill. In a way being baptized into the ‘Episcopal Church’ by Phillip Brooks simply killed all religious strivings for the time. I don’t know how this came about. Much was my own fault I am sure. I had seen that Christ was the postulate of any rational scheme of the universe, so I wanted to take Him up, but He would not be taken that way, and somehow I did not care, and soon I began to think it was all blague [a joke, a trick].11

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Berenson’s later conversion to Catholicism would seem to have been in large part motivated by his desire to be closer to Mary Costelloe, but if there was a woman who motivated the Episcopalian conversion, no name has come down in the record. There were, however, women, in the plural, and they were the women who held sway in the realm of culture. As Ernest Samuels points out, “[t]hanks to his conversion, Bernhard was cordially taken up by some of the ladies from the fashionable Back Bay. He discovered that churchgoing, like culture, generally was chiefly a woman’s province.”  

One of the feminine sanctuaries Berenson found was at the home of Grace Norton, around whom gathered a refined circle of people interested in art and literature. Grace Norton was the sister of Charles Eliot Norton (fig. CC.I.11), who was perhaps the single most forceful intellectual influence on Berenson in his years at Harvard, and whose negative impression of Berenson was to have a permanent effect on Berenson’s career and choices. At the beginning, however, Berenson was all optimism with regard to the Nortons, and sometimes took his sister Senda to Grace Norton’s, wanting her to have the social advantages he was gaining. He held “society” in the highest regard, and would later write to Senda: “I can not impress you too much with the idea that you must not lose an opportunity to see people who are in society even if that be of the outer rim.”  

The Nortons of Shady Hill lived far from society’s outer rim. Among the bluest of Boston’s bluebloods, Grace and Charles Norton descended from a long line of ministers; their father had been a powerful Unitarian preacher and a professor of sacred literature at Harvard. When Charles William Eliot asked his cousin to come and lecture at Harvard, Charles Eliot Norton became the university’s first professor of art history. Art history had, in general, not been considered an academic discipline prior to this time, but a matter of craft and technique to be taught by painters to other painters. The era of systematic scholarship, and in particular of the study of Italian work, had begun in part with the work of Norton’s close friend John Ruskin, in books like The Stones of Venice (1851-1853) and The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849), and, in the German universities, with, among others, the Swiss scholar Jacob Burckhardt, and his The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (published in English in 1878). Norton would be Ruskin’s literary executor – the brilliant Ruskin considered the younger Norton to be “my first real tutor” – and Norton was an early member of the American vanguard in his advocacy for Italian work.

12 Samuels 1979, 39.

13 Bernard to Senda, 18 February 1888, BMBP.
Along with his other projects, Norton gave a series of Dante lectures for greater Boston which Boston attended with pious diligence. Isabella Stewart Gardner began reading her way through the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* under Norton’s guiding eye in 1878, and he helped her to begin one of her first collections, that of manuscripts and autographs – two bound editions of the *Divine Comedy*, from 1481 and 1508 were among her purchases.\(^{15}\) It is not known for certain where Isabella Stewart Gardner and Bernard Berenson met, but biographers frequently assume that the occasion was one of Norton’s Dante lectures and that Norton himself effected the introduction.

Part of what Berenson loved in the drawing rooms of Back Bay was that there the realms of art and culture – realms to which he had formed passionate, and largely solitary, attachments – seemed to be natural tastes and ones rather to be encouraged than repressed. After many lonely years reading in a cold attic room on Minot Street, it was a relief and a pleasure to find others who wanted to talk of Michelangelo. This had only recently become the case. The Americans, eventually zealous converts, had at first been slow and resistant to things Italian. Even in the 1860s, for example, James Jackson Jarves, pioneering collector and early American devotee of Ruskin’s enthusiasm for Italy, had been steadily and completely balked in every attempt he made to bring his glorious collection to the attention of Boston and New York.\(^{16}\) Jarves had a close friendship with Norton, to whom Jarves dedicated his *Art Studies: the “Old Masters” of Italy* (1861). But even Norton had not been able to persuade the Boston elite to acquire Jarves’s pictures, though these were offered for a pittance. Now, however, in the 1870s and 1880s, as the railroads swelled their bank accounts, and steamships grew safer and speedier, Boston’s upper classes began to go to Europe with greater frequency. Boston had always looked to England for cultural guidance, and, in England, throughout the mid-nineteenth century, interest in Italy had been steadily increasing; more and more travelers made the journey there, and more and more English writers made Italy their subject.

Norton’s Italian taste was formed by certain of these writers, like Ruskin, and it was taste of an earlier generation than Berenson’s, which may be part of the reason why Norton and Berenson never became close. What Norton loved best in Italy was what was to his mind, the powerful moral uplift of Dante and of Italy’s medieval gothic architecture. As Linda Dowling has written perceptively in her

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\(^{14}\) Vanderbilt 1959, 59, quoting Ruskin 1907, III, 79.


\(^{16}\) See Steegmuller 1951.
book on Norton, “the knowledge that mattered most to Norton was always ethical knowledge in an embodied form.” Norton saw in the medieval period the last great era of spiritual unity and well-being. In Norton’s art history courses the Renaissance was the unhappy termination of the Middle Ages. There was a joke current among Harvard undergraduates that Norton had died and was just being admitted to Heaven, but at his first glimpse staggered backward in aesthetic despair, exclaiming “Oh! Oh! Oh! So Overdone! So garish! So Renaissance!” “Norton,” Berenson commented drily years later, did what he could at Harvard to restrain “all efforts toward art itself.”

By the time Berenson arrived at Harvard, Charles Eliot Norton and Italian art history had become not only an established, but an august, presence on the campus. Norton’s lectures drew as many as four hundred students. In his senior year, Berenson enrolled both in Norton’s Dante course, and in the two semesters of his art history course. The cosmopolitan world that Norton evoked in his lectures was in striking contrast to Berenson’s own living circumstances. After his first year, due to insufficient funds, Berenson had returned to living with his family in the crowded house near the rail yard, where his mother, Judith Berenson (fig. CC.I.3), cooked for regular paying diners to help make ends meet. Although his father was resolutely secular, his mother still kept to her faith. Berenson must have been acutely aware of how far this home was from a life spent contemplating prohibited Christian icons. Determined to find his way into this world of culture, Berenson looked to Norton for guidance. In the winter break of his senior year, he wrote to Norton, “the feelings I have had in hearing you speak are like those that come to one when a dear friend speaks to one of the things that are nearest and dearest to both of them.” He wanted Norton to know, “how large a part of my consciousness you have become.” If Norton replied to Berenson’s confidences there is no record of it.

There had once been something startling and new in Norton’s Italian tastes, but now he was engaged in defending his idea of culture against even newer ones. Norton labored in the service of an idea of the Anglo-American gentleman which he saw to be at odds with the bustle and advancement, and what he thought the cravenness, of the American business age. One student of his noted in her

17 Dowling 2007, 125.
18 Vanderbilt 1959, 134.
19 Samuels 1979, 412, quoting Mary Berenson’s diary of 26 November 1903, after a call paid on Norton.
20 Samuels 1979, 50, quoting Bernard to Norton, 23 December 1886.
diary of the day’s lecture in Italian 4, “the dear old man looks so mildly happy and benignant… while he gently tells us it were better for us had we never been born in this degenerate and unlovely age.”

Norton was ever a complex mixture of the progressive and the reactionary. A public intellectual, in his younger days committed to the education of working people, he ran one of the country’s first night schools, but he was also a sometime supporter of the repressive anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party. He praised an article in the *North American Review*, written by a close friend of his, which deplored the new power of “the immigrant races,” and their “rush into the forum… and libraries,” and which drew the stark conclusion that under the “ruthless touch,” of these new immigrants, it was impossible that “many gifts and graces will not be obscured, many arts will not be lost, many a great ideal… will not vanish from the earth.” Apparently, it was this side of Norton that was active when Berenson entered the room, for he took an immediate and injurious dislike to the young man. “I cannot forget,” Berenson wrote, still wounded more than sixty years later, “that when still an undergraduate at Harvard, Charles Eliot Norton said to Barrett Wendell who repeated it, ‘Berenson has more ambition than ability.’ Norton never changed his mind.”

The decision about what line of work to pursue was for Berenson, as it is for all seniors in college, a matter of preoccupying interest. Should he continue in the scholarly work on ancient languages and civilizations for which he was praised, and which was recognizable to his family and their neighbors, or should he follow the pull of his taste for the beautiful? The pull was very strong – but to follow it would be another kind of exile, and exile always had both its draw and its terrors for him.

In the manuscript “Talmudic-Rabbinical Eschatology” (cat. BB.IV.1), believed to be Berenson’s senior thesis, are detailed the beliefs of Russian Jews on Talmudic questions: how many kinds of fire are there in hell, how many angels sit about your body after death, what are the mnemonics for remembering your own name in the forgetfulness that comes after death, what is the meaning of the 800,000 trees that occupy each corner of Paradise, what was it that Rabbi Chaiah “repeated in concert with his sons”? The whole is carefully footnoted with chapter and verse. It is a fine specimen of biblical scholarship, done with sober objectivity and no hint of the disparagement or self-distancing


22 Vanderbilt 1959, 109, citing Godkin 1870, 419.

23 Berenson 1949, 52.
that would later arise in Berenson’s writing about Jews when it was directed toward a gentile, non-
scholarly audience. Only at the manuscript’s end does Berenson sound the wistful note that would
become typical for him in all the unpublished notes he made to himself about Jewish life and culture.

How long these beliefs will continue it is hard to say…. [A]ll the superstitions, no matter how
hoary, all the legends, all the mythology, so plentiful among them, is fast dying, and may even
before the next century be practically extinct. To the student of comparative mythology, folk-
lore, and legends, the Russian Jew may yet yield a rich harvest, provided it be begun early
enough.

Berenson’s work in this domain was much admired by his professors. When he came to apply
for the Parker Traveling Fellowship in March of his senior year, his professors in ancient languages
wrote eagerly of him. David Gordon Lyon (fig. CC.I.10), professor of Hebrew, described Berenson as
“a man of unusual ability and brilliant promise;” Crawford H. Toy, with whom Berenson had studied
Arabic, added, “His natural gifts and his attainments appear to me to be uncommonly excellent…. His
reading is enormous without being superficial. He combines in a very unusual way acquaintance with
Eastern and Western literatures.” (cat. BB.II.4)

Berenson was certainly drawn to university life. Even four years later, and far from the
university world, he would still write to Mary Costelloe, “unhappily there is something of the earnest
student, of the would-be scholar in me, so much in fact that I must ask myself the question seriously
whether the “ultimate professorship” in a remote University would not be the sort of thing into which I
should fit naturally.”24 Why did he open this question with the word “unhappily”? Did something
prevent him from taking up this profession “into which I should fit naturally”?

The first Jewish professor was hired at Harvard in 1888, a year after Berenson had graduated;
Charles Gross taught medieval history. Jewish faculty were subsequently added in Slavic Languages
and Literatures, in philosophy, and in economics. However, as a Jewish student writing on “The Jews
at Harvard” in 1892 noted ruefully, although “three members of the present Faculty are of Jewish
descent… [n]ot one is a professing Jew.”25 All had felt the pressure to convert, and one of these
professors regularly attended the First Parish Church in Cambridge. Jewish graduate students at

24 Bernard to Mary, 6 November 1890, BMBP.
25 Adler 1892, 69.
Harvard in the early 1900s were routinely told that they might be able to teach if they could find a Jewish donor to pay their salaries. A list of what Harvard’s other Jewish alumni, contemporaries of Berenson, chose as professions is instructive. In an informal survey conducted in 1892 of the forty-one Jewish graduates up through the class of 1890, we find: “seventeen have entered or anticipate law, ten are in business, three physicians, ten teachers, one engineer....”

There were no Jewish faculty members as role models when Berenson himself was a student, and, in his first years out of college, not much sense that a desire to be part of a university could be anything but an unhappy one. Jews were most acceptable in disciplines where they might be presumed to have specialized knowledge – in Slavic languages, or in Hebrew. Had Berenson wanted to continue the sort of work he did in “Talmudo-Rabbinical Eschatology,” he could have attempted to do graduate work in Germany and to hope that something would become available for him in a “remote University.”

But increasingly Berenson found comparative philology to be “a fact-feeding, uncultivating system,” as he wrote in a story called “The Third Category” (cat. BB.IV.20), published in the Harvard Monthly in the fall of his senior year. The first piece of his which dealt directly with painting, this story suggests how exciting art history seemed by contrast with the academic work Berenson had been doing. It was, the story’s narrator points out, at “lectures in certain art courses where the handsomest men of the college used to congregate as if by unconscious attraction. Very gods, many of these men seemed to him—gods in the beauty, and strength and majesty of youth, whom he gladly would have worshipped, and with a fervor equal to any he had felt.” Erotic excitement, imitative desire, religious fervor, all seemed to congregate in art history class.

But Berenson must have sensed that, difficult as it would be to become a professor of Hebrew or Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations, to teach art history in the university was, even for a converted Jew, next to impossible. Art history, as Charles Eliot Norton understood it, was not a discipline for the pushing immigrant classes with “more ambition than ability.” And this attitude toward Jewish scholars would remain characteristic of the field of art history more generally. It would be another twenty-nine years before a Jew, Paul Sachs, would enter the art history department at Harvard, and he, having left the family business of Goldman Sachs with a secure fortune of his own, entered through the back door by beginning to work at the Fogg Museum. Berenson would later negotiate the bequest of his Villa I

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26 Rosovsky 1986, 30

27 Adler 1892, 69.
Tatti to Harvard through Sachs, with whom he had many decades of lively correspondence and shared students. He may have taken some satisfaction in the fact that Sachs eventually purchased and lived in Norton’s old home at Shady Hill. But Berenson in college had no independent fortune with which to back his own art historical studies. He needed help; in particular he needed the Parker Traveling Fellowship on which he had set his heart.

Berenson asked Norton to join his professors of Arabic and Hebrew in recommending him for the fellowship. Norton refused. Berenson, in a much more tenuous position than he had hoped to be, tried to explain in his application that “[a]rt prevails in this programme because it is there where I feel myself weakest.” Berenson may not have done himself a service in the tone of his application. It does, in places, seem self-justifying and over-confident and his daunting variety of goals may not have endeared him to the fellowship committee. Comments like, “It was quite natural, however, that I should find Boston University insufficient for my needs….I have given a fair summary of my college work which never, in reality, meant anything to me compared to the reading I was doing….Few men sleep less and devote themselves to their true interests more than I do….” may well have seemed to the committee to support Norton’s view of Berenson’s ambition, with its undercurrent of the stereotype of the ‘pushing’ Jew. Still, Berenson had a stellar record and excellent references. His biographers are united in speculating that, because Berenson wished to study art, the absence of a recommendation from Norton was a significant factor in his being denied the fellowship. Norton was Harvard’s only professor of art history and the embodiment of much of Boston’s intellectual culture; his unwillingness to help certainly seems to have represented for Berenson a definitive rejection from the pursuit of an institutional career in the study of art.

In Berenson’s mind, his conflict with Norton was partly a generational one, and the change between generations was represented for him by Walter Pater. Pater, though himself a thoroughly proper and conservatively-dressed man, stood, as certain icons of the 1960s and 70s would do a hundred years later, for long hair, sexual freedom, and self-cultivation. No book had meant more to Berenson than Pater’s *Renaissance*. But when he took the book to Charles Eliot Norton, he was rebuffed. Both Berenson and his wife Mary Berenson told versions of this anecdote so many times that none is reliable, but the repetition suggests that the stories mattered a great deal to Berenson. In one version, told by Mary Berenson, Charles Eliot Norton, with a firm pat on Berenson’s shoulder, said,
“My dear boy, it won’t do,” adding “I don’t like the book. It’s a book you can only read in your bathroom.”

As with any generational conflict, no single factor suffices as explanation; rather a whole web of changing mores – changing ideas about the individual, and about religion, aesthetics, and sexuality – lay behind the mutual hostility of the parties. Norton and Ruskin took for granted a certain Christian stance as a moral backdrop for studying paintings. But between Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* and Pater’s *Studies of the Renaissance* had come Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*. The possibility that modern man might be morally rehabilitated by an infusion of medieval religion seemed to Pater and his followers much more remote.

These new devotees of fine art “for art’s sake,” were understood by many to be homosexual, possibly a better word would be ‘queer’ as we now use it. In the reported reactions of Norton, there may be detectable a current of American masculine disparagement for the aesthetical soft touch. Berenson was cagey about whether he ever had any intimate experiences with “the handsomest men of the college… very gods [they] seemed to him,” but he frequently spoke of his “delight in the beauty of the male.” This undercurrent of his personality allied him with the Edwardians and against the Victorians. Berenson and his sister Senda frequented not only Grace Norton, but a young crowd of arch-medievalists, who had what in “The Third Category” he called “the delightful touch of Bohemianism.” The group included the poet Louise Imogen Guiney and the future architect Ralph Adams Cram, and was later referred to as the Boston Bohemians. In their medievalism, unlike that of Norton, the Middle Ages were a land of the imagination where an individual could roam free. This Bohemianism stood for aesthetic, religious, and sexual liberation. It was certainly true that Berenson would lead an unconventional sexual life. He lived in adultery for many years before marriage, had a great many affairs and overlapping partners, and eventually settled into his most stable configuration with both a wife and mistress sharing his home. That he managed to make this all seem dignified, aristocratic, and “old-world” rather than revolutionary and Bohemian had in large part to do with the


29 Samuels 1979, 64, quoting a 1906 letter from Bernard to “Deborah,” Baroness Léon Lambert, née Rothschild.

30 On Boston Bohemianism and its idea of the Middle Ages see Melnick 2007, 6, quoting Louise Imogen Guiney, “To emigrate to some hamlet that smells strong of the Middle Ages, and put cotton wool in my ears, and aiming out clear from this very smart century.”
wealth and erudition which provided the setting for his actions. None of it, however, belonged to Charles Eliot Norton’s conception of the moral uplift of the study of art history.

Both the glories Berenson saw in the new aesthetic conception of life, and the criticisms Norton expressed for what he felt was a preference of style over substance found their way into the story Berenson published in his senior year. Berenson always worked out new versions of himself in writing, and “The Third Category” is a blueprint of the relationships he would have to art, women, and himself in the next decade of his life.

In “The Third Category” (cat. BB.IV.20), Berenson’s typical aesthete belongs, necessarily, to the Christian world, and is called, tellingly, “Mr. Christie.” Mr. Christie is an entirely self-centered being, “far more fond of accurately defining his relationships to people than he was of those relations, or the people themselves... He found no room in the universe for another than himself.” After several years abroad, Mr. Christie now wanders around Harvard and Cambridge in search of sensory experience and erudite delectation. Encountering women, Mr. Christie constantly exclaims to himself things like, “What would not Watts or Burne-Jones do... to study this perfect pre-Raphaelite picture.”

In Mr. Christie, Berenson mistrusted, and perhaps delighted in, his own too-aesthetical self.

For Mr. Christie, as for Berenson, looking at paintings with women was a supreme sensual experience: he “knew no greater pleasure than to look with [Miss Rosalys Storer] at some drooping, poppy-saturated pre-Raphaelite sketch, or at a drawing of the divine Sandro Botticelli.” With “Miss Senda Vernon,” whose name, and “rich olive” complexion were so like that of his sister, he read “the old French poets...while she sat bending over her guitar.” (In life, Senda was a good musician, and Berenson for years had his heart set on her becoming a professional.) And with Miss Cecily Grampian he has the strongest experience of all. Not that he falls in love with her, but he begins to educate her. He brings Miss Grampian into contact with the church; “he thought Christianity the greatest work of art in the world,” and, furthermore, “he could not see how in the long run he could bear to live with a woman who could not appreciate Fra Angelico’s frescoes, or Raphael’s Sistine Child.” But for him the church is but another kind of aesthetic experience, and when she becomes devoted to the work of the church, and takes the Christian spirit of self-sacrifice seriously then he is at a loss and cruelly cuts off all contact with her.

Over and over, Berenson would educate his mistresses, taking them into the churches of Italy to raise their aesthetic awareness. The presence of women stimulated his powers of thought and talk, but he seems to express his worries about his relations with women when he says of Mr. Christie, that, “[h]e could not help feeling that hers was a much more real, more living, more intense soul than his
own. He saw now how easy it is for an inferior nature,— and he had to confess himself inferior,— to rouse a superior one from deathlike slumber.” In Berenson’s view, women were more self-sacrificing and more likely to be part of the wide moving world — he saw his mother and sisters this way, and would imagine his lovers this way — whereas the role of the scholarly man or aesthete, a role he also felt uncomfortable about, was to be selfish and concerned only with what he would later demand for himself, “purely artistic enjoyment.” He needed a woman at each stage of his life, but he was always capable of quickly dropping her, or of turning on her completely.

It seems possible that when Berenson decided to give up Talmudo-Rabinnical Eschatology in favor of “drooping, poppy-saturated pre-Raphaelite” sketches, the woman he felt he was turning his back on was his mother, Judith Berenson. Alone in the Berenson family, she continued to be devout and to keep to her familiar world. His sisters might follow him into the lands of culture, but his mother never would. And perhaps his doubts about this choice account for the contemptuous tone he takes towards Mr. Christie. When Berenson formed a new self, he did so in part to leave behind old circumstances in which he felt self-critical, but it was never possible to leave behind the self-criticism itself. Sometimes self-contempt seemed to increase precisely as he moved toward a life he felt he ought to have rejected, or which seemed to have rejected him.

In the spring of his last Harvard year, denied the traveling fellowship, but increasingly desirous of immersing himself in European culture, Berenson floundered. But then, as would so often be the case in his future life, capital came to his rescue. A small committee of people, including Edward Warren, Thomas Sergeant Perry, and, most generously, Isabella Stewart Gardner, banded together to give Berenson seven hundred dollars, enough for a year’s study in Europe. Private wealth, not institutional scholarship, was willing to make a place for the young man, and patronage, with all the bounty and servility it implies, was thus solidified as the mode through which Berenson would gain access to culture throughout his adult life. If he was not to have Judith Berenson any longer, he would have Isabella Stewart Gardner.
Bibliography


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