Bernard Berenson and “Tactile Values” in Florence*
Alison Brown

For me, the most vivid impression of reading The Italian Painters of the Renaissance in the 1950s was Berenson’s use of the words “tactile values” to describe the life-enhancing achievement of Florentine painters. I soon understood that “tactile” did not mean what I initially thought it did, when adjured by Berenson to look at Botticelli’s Venus Rising from the Sea in order to have my “tactile imagination . . . roused to a keen activity.” It was not Botticelli’s nude Venus, I learnt, but Giotto’s sober Madonna, “satisfactorily seated” upon a “throne occupying a real space,” that best represented these values.¹ What follows is my attempt to describe how the concept was born in Florence and how quickly it was adopted by expatriates and their children, as it was by me many years later, as an emblem of Berenson’s achievement among a wide lay public.

The change that came over painting at the end of the nineteenth century has been described as “nothing short of revolutionary,” for whereas everyone “had supposed that painting was a ‘visual art’”—the painter being “a person who used his eyes, and used his hands only to record what the use of his eyes had revealed to him”—along came someone who “began to paint like a blind man,” his still-lifes being like things that have been “groped over with the hands,” and his interiors needing to be circumnavigated with caution as the spectator finds himself “bumping about these rooms.” This painter was not a Renaissance artist, nor was the writer describing him Berenson: the artist was Cézanne and the writer R. G. Collingwood, writing about Cézanne in The Principles of Art in 1938. But Berenson then enters Collingwood’s narrative as the person who discovered that, when we approach the Italian painters looking for “tactile values,” we see that they yielded the same revolutionary results. “When Mr Berenson speaks of tactile values,” Collingwood wrote, “he is not thinking of things like the texture of fur and cloth…. he is thinking . . . not of touch sensations, but of motor sensations, such as we experience by using our muscles and moving our limbs.”²

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¹ Berenson 1952a, 44, 67, pls. 107, 204; earlier editions are referred to below at note 6.

² Collingwood 1938, 144, 146–147.
Movement is closely related to tactile values, as we shall see. According to Berenson’s own late recollections (in his *Aesthetics and History*, written during the war and published in 1950), his ideas about movement came to him when “one morning, as I was gazing at the leafy scrolls carved on the door jambs of S. Pietro outside Spoleto, suddenly stem, tendril and foliage became alive and, in becoming alive, made me feel as if I had emerged into the light after long groping in the darkness of an initiation. I felt as one illumined.” And since then, he went on, “everywhere I feel the ideated pulsation of vitality, I mean energy and radiance.” Recalling this incident in his diary in 1949, he said that this “almost dramatic revelation” was essentially what he had called “movement” in his *Italian Painters*. It was similar to the more gradual “eye-opening” that happened to him in the Brancacci Chapel, where one day, having for some time regarded frescoes as narrative, he became consciously aware of “tactile values, of bulk, of the third dimension.” Contrasting the gaiety of the Masolinos and “substantiality” of the Masaccios with the “flimsy, tissue-papery Filippino Lippi,” he exclaimed: “Surely I might have been directed to look for tactile values and movement instead of having to stumble on them, although that perhaps was great fun.”

This is somewhat disingenuous, to say the least, since the tactile revolution was under way some years earlier, as the response not only to impressionism and the discovery of photography but also to new intellectual stimuli: the evolutionary psychology of thinkers like William James (post-Darwin and Freud), and the German philosophers Hegel and especially Nietzsche, whose book *The Birth of Tragedy* was very fashionable at the time. We know, as well, that Mary and Bernard were reading and copying extracts about “muscular and tactual sensations” from books like Edmund Gurney’s *Power of Sound* in 1892, around the time when Mary recorded an enthusiastic encounter with sculpture on their visit to Spoleto: “Quarrelled—or rather, were cross. The door of San Pietro is splendid.”

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3 Berenson 1950, 68–69.

4 Bernard Berenson, diary, 28 February 1949, in Berenson 1962, 279; cf. Berenson 1949, 127–128, where Berenson calls his experience of color in Assisi “a revelation almost as rejuvenating as the one I had years before with regard to form and movement while facing the facade of San Pietro at Spoleto.”

5 Bernard and Mary Berenson, journal, 1888–93, Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti—The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (hereafter BMBP) (entry for 14 November 1892); Mary and Bernard also visited Spoleto on 3 May 1893—“4 hours of Rapturous enjoyment” (ibid.). On Gurney, see Samuels 1979, 152–153. On the theory’s earlier roots in English empiricism, see Gombrich 1960, 15 (quoting George Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision* [1709], that all our knowledge of space and solidity must be acquired through the sense of touch and movement).
But although Berenson may have had his illuminating experience of movement in 1892 or 1893, tactile values were certainly not part of his vocabulary when he was writing *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance*, which was published by Putnam’s in 1894 as the first of his four volumes on Italian painting (they were all published together in 1930 by the Oxford University Press as *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, and then republished in 1952 by Phaidon in the edition in which I first read them). In the 1894 volume on Venice, Berenson contrasted the Venetians’ popular and colorful paintings and their “delight in life” with the Florentines’ inability to distinguish painting from sculpture and architecture, being “already too much attached to classical ideals of form and composition, in other words, too academic, to give embodiment to the throbbing feeling for life and pleasure.” By the time he was discussing the Florentines in his second volume, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, published by Putnam’s in 1896, he had found new terms in which to describe their achievement, “tactile values” now replacing form to describe “the more static sources of life-enhancement,” as he later put it, whereas “movement” referred to “the various communications of energy.”

So we have a period of two years between 1894 and 1896 in which to trace the birth of these three interrelated concepts: tactile values, movement, and life-enhancement. Using both Bernard’s library and Mary’s journal, we can reconstruct quite accurately the books and the people who influenced Bernard’s thinking in this period, especially the German sculptor Hildebrand, the German philosopher Nietzsche, and the American psychologist William James, with a small input from a clever, critical Englishwoman, Violet Paget, better known as Vernon Lee, to whom I shall return in conclusion for a final assessment of “tactile values” within Berenson’s circle of expatriates and their children.

First of these influences was Adolf von Hildebrand. With his friends, the painter Hans von Marées and the art critic and collector Konrad Fiedler, Hildebrand wanted to return to a theory of form that was neither a priori nor purely impressionistic. When Bernard and Mary met him in the 1890s, he was living in the former convent or friary of San Francesco di Paola in Florence, below

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6 *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* was published by Putnam’s in New York in 1896, followed by *The Central Italian Painters* in 1897 and *The North Italian Painters* in 1907, each with a valuable “Index” of places and painters that Berenson later published separately, together with many illustrations, as *The Italian Pictures of the Renaissance* (the two volumes on Florence were published in 1963). On Berenson’s disinterest in aesthetics at this time, see note 56 below.

7 Berenson 1952a, 7–8.

8 See “The Decline of Art” (the final section of *North Italian Painters*), Berenson 1952a, 199–200.

Bellosguardo (in which he had initially lived with von Marées and Fiedler), “a beautiful villa on the other side of Florence,” as Mary described it in 1897, “with his lovely, lovely wife and a huge family of daughters and one little son”; he was, she thought, “the greatest living sculptor.”

Bernard had met Hildebrand three or four years earlier, possibly in 1893, certainly in April 1894, when he visited Hildebrand with Carlo Placci a year after the publication of Hildebrand’s small but influential book on art theory.

In this book, _Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst_ (translated as _The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture_), Hildebrand as a sculptor reacted against impressionism and the “so-called positivistic conception of Art” that found truth “in a casual appearance or form of an object,” as though we saw things two-dimensionally as a newborn child sees “in the first few hours of life when ideas are first beginning to develop.” This, he wrote, was a tendency that had been “fostered through the discovery of photography.” But as “we cannot strip off our ideas at will [since] it is just by the aid of these ideas that we see,” he re-established their importance not by returning to Hegelian or Platonic idealism but by appealing to our memory of touch and movement. These memories, or mental images, were essential in solving what he defined as “the problem the artist has to solve,” or “THE REAL PROBLEM IN ART,” as Berenson wrote in capitals in the margins of his copy of the first 1893 edition of _Das Problem der Form_: that is, the problem of how to create a sense of space or three-dimensionality on a flat surface. The artist, Hildebrand said, does it by using form and movement to create space and depth, improving on nature by unifying it and animating it, which not only vitalizes us but provides us with the source of our aesthetic enjoyment of a work of art. His relief of Lisl von Herzogenberg playing the organ well illustrates how he used solid form and movement, as well as architecture, to create space and three-dimensionality on a flat frieze surface.

Form (or tactile values) and movement—as well as vitality—are key concepts in Berenson’s _Florentine Painters_ and in his later _Aesthetics and History_, in which he attempted to sum up his

10 Mary Berenson to her children, 24 March 1897, in Strachey and Samuels 1983, 69. On Hildebrand’s wife Irene and their six children, see Brewster 1994, 86–100, and also Mary Berenson, journal, 1894–95, BMBP, 32 (4 April 1894).

11 Ernest Samuels refers to a 1893 meeting (unreferenced) in Samuels 1979, 230. Mary Berenson, journal, 1894–95, BMBP, 32 (4 April 1894): “Carlo Placci took Bernhard to call upon the sculptor Hildebrand. Miss Paget told me their story.”

12 Hildebrand 1893, 29–30, and 1907, 43–44.

13 Hildebrand 1893 (I Tatti copy), 43–44.
aesthetic theory in a sort of glossary that includes these three terms. His debt to Hildebrand has already been recognized by Ernst Gombrich in a couple of deft pages in his *Art and Illusion* (repeated by Samuels in his biography of Berenson). In them Gombrich describes how, when Berenson wrote “his brilliant essay on the Florentine painters,” he “formulated his aesthetic creed in terms of Hildebrand’s analysis,” with his “gift for the pregnant phrase” summing up the whole of Hildebrand’s argument in the sentence, “the painter can accomplish his task only by giving tactile values to retinal impressions.” Berenson’s quite heavily annotated copy of Hildebrand’s *Das Problem der Form* in the I Tatti Library bears Gombrich out in showing how carefully Berenson summarized relevant parts of its argument in the margins in English, noting especially (as we have seen) what “das Problem” was and the topics described above. His comments show that he approved of Hildebrand’s attempt to better nature by unifying forms within a relief, writing in the margin: “that is the real reason why Gothic is so disturbing to the eye & fine antique or Romanesque or Renaissance so soothing. In Gothic little or nothing is done for the peace of the eye, which is left to wander about like a bird lost in a church.” And he enthusiastically wrote “BRAVO” in capitals in the margin where Hildebrand refers to the superstitious regard of the uncultured mind for placing statues in the dead centre of squares instead of setting them against flattened landscapes to suggest their form—an opinion that was a matter of contention with Vernon Lee, as we shall see.

Hildebrand’s ideas must also have been in Berenson’s mind when he wrote to Mary from Berlin in July 1895, just after his main writing burst on *The Florentine Painters*: “Even if our primary sensations of space be three-dimensional (which I would not deny), the third dimension in precise form must largely be the result of tactile and locomotor sensations.” And I like to think that there is also an allusion to what Hildebrand wrote about children’s art and primitivism in a letter Mary wrote the previous year to her children in England—then nearly seven and five years old—thanking them for their drawings and telling them, perhaps a little dauntingly, that “there is this very funny thing, that all little children, no matter what race they belong to or where they live.

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16 Hildebrand 1893 (I Tatti copy), 82 and 101.

17 Bernard Berenson to Mary Berenson, Berlin, 31 July 1895, in Berenson 1962, 83–84.
. . all draw almost exactly alike. Funnier still, even grown-up people . . . used to draw just like this, and indeed you still find peasants and savages drawing in the same way.”

What we know with certainty is that Hildebrand’s book was the subject of heated debate in November 1895, when Mary and Bernard “dined at Miss Paget’s and discussed sculpture, apropos of Hildebrandt’s ‘Problem der Form.’” According to Mary’s journal, Vernon Lee went on to protest “violently . . . that a statue should be not composed like a bas-relief, or a series of bas-reliefs, & said that to her the great artistic quality of a statue was that it compelled you to walk around it”—an opinion from which Mary and Bernard dissented, as Bernard’s comments in Das Problem der Form suggest he would have done.19 The following April, when The Florentine Painters was in proof but not yet out, Bernard “dined with the Hildebrandts & greatly enjoyed them,” Mary reported, and since “he and Herr Hildebrandt not only seemed to think alike on all subjects but had actually struck out [i.e. produced] the same phrases . . . it was,” Bernard had said, “almost embarrassing [sic].”20 Perhaps it was a little embarrassing. The key ideas Berenson was reflecting on in the summer of 1895, “tactile and locomotive sensations,” clearly owed much to Hildebrand. Mary, in fact, admitted this in the course of her correspondence with Vernon Lee over the plagiarism charge in 1897; and some time later, in 1913, when Roberto Longhi asked Berenson what he owed to Hildebrand and his close friends Fiedler and von Marées, Berenson merely replied—“with a half-truth”—that Fiedler was only a name to him, without ever mentioning Hildebrand.21 Nevertheless, it was—as Gombrich says—Berenson who vivified these ideas in The Florentine Painters in 1896, in his clear summing up of how as children, we unconsciously learn about depth from touching and grasping things and moving our muscles: “Psychology has ascertained that sight alone gives us no accurate sense of the third dimension. In our infancy, long

18 Mary Berenson to her children, 7 April 1894, in Strachey and Samuels 1983, 55.

19 Mary Berenson, journal, 1895–96, BMBP, 36 (29 November 1895, a passage titled “Vernon on Aesthetics”). Vernon Lee’s views were repeated in the article “Beauty and Ugliness,” first published in The Contemporary Review (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1897, 35 and 38 [note]), that was the cause of their quarrel (see note 59, below), but were revised when it was republished in Beauty & Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1912, 219 and note)—she now walked around statues of the “pre-Lysippian (Hildebrand) type . . . to find the points of view; but once . . . found, I stop.”

20 Mary Berenson, journal, 1895–96, BMBP, 96 (17 February 1896).

21 See Brown 2005, 199, discussed more fully below. See also Iamurri 1997, 77: “I got a book of his [Fiedler’s] name some twenty years ago, but I am sure I never got ahead the first page.” Longhi was referring to Benedetto Croce’s article, “La teoria dell’arte come pura visibilità (Von Marées, Fiedler, Hildebrand)”: ibid., 77 and note 69.
before we are conscious of the process, the sense of touch, helped on by muscular sensations of movement, teaches us to appreciate depth, the third dimension, both in objects and in space.” The function of the artist is to “rouse the tactile sense” in order to create what Berenson later called the “ideated sensations” that communicate vitality and life-enhancement to a work of art.  

Although Hildebrand had talked about “vitality,” the concept of life-enhancement probably came from another source: Friedrich Nietzsche. As we know from Mary, Bernard was reading Nietzsche in 1895, after “enjoying” Hegel’s Aesthetics and what she calls William James’s “Philosophy of Art” the previous year. In March they were both reading Nietzsche. Having finished The Death of the Gods, Bernard had embarked on Thus Spoke Zarathustra, while Mary was “still plodding along in” Beyond Good and Evil. By May they had reached The Birth of Tragedy, which Mary reported “is the best thinking on aesthetics from our point of view—the really psychological—that Bernhard knows.” What he valued in Nietzsche, she wrote on 17 May, was that Nietzsche “consistently hates all that makes against life & loves all that makes for it.” Since this was only two days after “Bernhard began his Florentines” (before admitting a day later that he despaired of writing about them, “because he no longer enjoyed them as a school”), it may well have been Nietzsche who helped to break his writer’s block. For only nine days later, Mary wrote that Bernhard had “deserted the theory” that art’s purpose is to “Uplift!” or “broaden” life. Instead, he “suddenly broke out in praise of the Degas on the mantelpiece as ‘the greatest of all works of art’. ‘Why ?’ . . . A good deal of hesitation & feeling round, and at last the right reason hit on the head, because it conveys life directly.” “Effects of space & composition belong to architecture & are rightly called ‘architectonic.’”—she continued—“But painting can communicate life—livingness—itself. This is the purely aesthetic artistic standard of art.” “Neither Maud [Cruttwell] nor I looked half so much alive as Degas’ ballet girl bending down to tie her slipper,” she reflected.

22 See Berenson 1952a, 40, and Berenson 1950, 63–67.


24 Mary Berenson, journal, 1894–95, BMBP, 103 (12 March 1895), 124 (15 May 1895), 125 (16 May 1895: “after tea a little talk about aesthetic emotion. It began with Bernhard’s wail that he could not write about the Florentines”), and 128 (17 May 1895); on “Nietzsche’s ‘Wertschätzungen,’” cf. 132 (26 May 1895). The titles of Nietzsche’s books are cited in German; cf. Samuels 1979, 209. See also Berenson to Senda, 8 March 1895, BMBP (248), describing Nietzsche as “a singularly paradoxical, conceited, involved German” whose real merit was to shake all new orthodoxies and in doing so to sweep out “many a corner untouched by a broom for many & many a year.”
poignantly, before returning to Nietzsche with the comment that his “‘Wertschätzungen’ [“criteria of excellence”], which are all reducible to the criterion whether it makes for or against life, have helped forward Bernhard’s ideas.” Berenson then incorporated Degas into The Florentine Painters by comparing his achievement with Leonardo da Vinci’s mastery over the art of movement in the unfinished “Epiphany” and with his stimulating and convincing tactile values in the “Monna Lisa.”

During June Berenson wrote the chapter on Masaccio that was crucial to his concept of tactile values. As he explained in The Florentine Painters, he never saw Masaccio’s Brancacci Chapel frescoes “without the strongest stimulation of my tactile consciousness. I feel that I could touch every figure, that it would yield a definite resistance to my touch.” That month, he told his sister Senda that he was “nominally . . . writing on the Florentine painters, but really my absorbing interest is to know why, to find out the secret of our enjoyment of art.” “Some day,” he went on, “I hope to get there. In my heart of hearts I think I am already farther on the way than any one has ever been before.” Two weeks later he told Senda that he had never felt so busy, thinking of nothing but his book: “never have I enjoyed myself more”; Mary agreed that Bernard’s period “of grappling with the Book” was “one of the happiest and most growing months of our lives,” as the two understood more and more about “the ‘why’ of real art enjoyment.” Later that summer, Berenson experienced another revelatory moment after Mary left him in Germany on her way to England. “Recall the summer of 1895,” he wrote in his Sketch for a Self-Portrait. “You had the Florentine Painters behind you. You were a wanderer in Germany. You were alone, you had no company but your thoughts.” And what he thought about was his vision for a lifetime’s work, three books on “ideated sensations,” “life-enhancement,” and “portraits.” This vision indicates the importance of the new direction his work had taken after this summer completing the Florentine Painters—even

25 Mary Berenson, journal, 1894–95, BMBP, 130–132 (26 May 1895: “the essence of essences is to be a sheath, an envelope of just ‘plain life’ . . . [Maud and I] were not sheaths of aliveness as the painter made that figure”) and 132–133 (continuing, “although Nietzsche, while railing against any such intention, is in fact very hygienic, while Bernhard’s beating his brains to find the kernel of the artistic element in the work of art”).


27 Berenson 1952a, 50, pl. 139.

28 Berenson to Senda, 2 June 1895, BMBP (253), in Samuels 1979, 229.

29 Berenson to Senda, 19 June 1895, BMBP (252); Mary Berenson, journal, 1894–95, BMBP, 140 (17 June 1895).
though he then allowed himself to be “seduced” (as he put it) into writing about Florentine
drawings instead, which led him down the path of connoisseurship rather than art criticism.  

Berenson had told his sister in June that psychology, not philosophy, would provide the
answer to why we enjoy art. Later that year, in a discussion over lunch “about Aesthetics” (starting
from Vernon Lee’s “remark that her remarkable system was ‘pure Metaphysics—and Psychology’,
evidently confusing, as most people do, the two points of view”), Bernard carefully explained why
“most people hop from the Metaphysical into the Psychological without realizing the difference,”
he himself being “the first person”—according to Mary—“to be fully aware of the difference and to
determine to keep unwaveringly to the psychological.”  

Although, as we have seen, both
Hildebrand and Nietzsche contributed to Bernard’s psychological approach to aesthetics, it was a
third person whose influence was perhaps more pervasive. This was Berenson’s old teacher of
psychology at Harvard, William James, brother of Henry, the novelist. To James, Berenson later
said, he owed “eternal gratitude,” since before he had reached his twenties, James had made him
understand through his writings that “in order to liberate oneself from metaphysic one had to be
immersed in it and study it thoroughly.”  

By his own admission, Berenson got only “mediocre”
marks in psychology at Harvard, and his future brother-in-law, the philosopher Bertrand Russell,
was very critical when hearing about his ideas from Mary during her summer visit to England in
1895.  

But Berenson’s heavily annotated copy of the second (1893) edition of James’s dense two-
volume Principles of Psychology shows that he had read it carefully, perhaps in response to
Russell’s criticism and suggestion that he re-read it in July, even though it still left his ideas “in a
muddle.”  

In October he wrote that psychology was “more and more absorbing” him, and he urged

30 Berenson 1949, 36; cf. Berenson 1962, 84 (commenting to Mary from Berlin on 3 and 5 August
on aesthetic pleasure and “that almost unconscious element . . . at the bottom of real pleasure in
art”). Samuels apparently fails to mention this moment of insight when in Germany (Samuels 1979,
229, 231–233).


32 Morra 1965, 227. I am indebted to Mario Casari for introducing me to this book for its interesting
reference to Berenson and Vernon Lee.

33 See Berenson 1949, 81, and Samuels 1979, 231–232.

34 See James 1893 (I subsequently quote from the 1893 edition annotated by Berenson in the I Tatti
Library) and Samuels 1979, 233.
For Berenson, *The Principles of Psychology* was fruitful in providing a theoretical basis for many of his already formulated ideas, as we can see from his marked passages on tactile perception, on motor types, on sensation, on the mind and the will—as well as on the importance of habit, which Patricia Rubin has suggested may well have influenced Berenson’s own lifestyle.36 The will was especially important, not only for Berenson’s personal philosophy—as we shall see—but also for its role in his and James’s aesthetic theory. For among the emotions that are released by ideas grasped and stored up in the mind, James included aesthetic emotion “pure and simple”—that is, “the pleasure given us by certain lines and masses, and combinations of colors and sounds,” which is entirely sense-based (“an absolutely sensational experience”). This emotion caused what Edmund Gurney called “the stirring of the hair—the tingling and the shiver” when listening to music (quoted by James in a note that Berenson marked with an asterisk), which is then transformed by the will into energy and action.37 According to this theory of emotion, the mind acts simply as a selective agency, or “a theatre of simultaneous possibilities,” from which it chooses ideas like flowers gathered from our experience to help us “towards a better route for survival”—just as an artist “selects his items” to create the unity and harmony that makes works of art superior to works of nature.38 The markings in Berenson’s copy of *The Principles of Psychology* show how well James’s theory of art tied in with Hildebrand’s to provide an underpinning for the theory of tactile values.

Yet the influence of William James on Berenson was not limited to this one difficult book alone, as we can see from Berenson’s references to James’s other writings—especially *The Will to Believe* and *The Energies of Men*—and from his many fond reminiscences of his teacher throughout his later life. In January 1941, for instance, he recalled that, “at Harvard I preferred the conversation of James, of Toy, of Climer, of Wendell, to that of fellow-students,” these men being also the professors whose writings, he later recalled, influenced him “while at college.”39 (Mary, too, knew

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35 Mary Berenson, journal, 1894–95, BMBP, 195 (24 October 1895), quoting Bernard Berenson to “Michael.” “Michael Field” was the pseudonym of Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper.

36 Rubin 2000, 208.

37 James 1893, 2:468–469. This suggests that Mary is referring to *The Principles of Psychology* when she talks of Bernard and herself reading James’s “Philosophy of Art,” or “Philosophie de l’art,” in March 1894.

James at college, during the time she was at “The Annex” [later Radcliffe], and it is interesting to note that when she was lecturing on art at the Colony Club in New York in 1909, she listed him, not Berenson, as one of the four influences who started “The New Art Criticism.”

Berenson’s own affectionate memories of James include his manner of teaching, how he was “sitting lightly, almost swinging on the corner of his desk, holding forth in his zestful, engaging, amusing way” when “suddenly a sarcastic Puritan popped up from his bench and cried out: ‘Mr James, to be serious for a moment’ . . . Roars of laughter in which the Professor joined greeted the impertinence.”

“William James used to say,” he recalled on another occasion, “‘Come, let us gossip about the universe!’”; “William James used to say that every gush of feeling should be followed by adequate action, or (he implied) the feeling turned to poison”; “William James used to say to us as youngsters that we did not know whether we were worth ten dollars only or ten thousand. I feel today as uncertain,” Berenson wrote in 1951. And so on. Still other reminiscences came from walks together in Rome and Florence, where James hated being hemmed in by Florentine walls: “It was churlish to deprive one of the view. It made him mad.”

James, one has to admit, was also maddened, waspishly, on this visit to Florence in 1892–93 by “these people” who were “all eaten up with contempt for each other’s blunders, blindnesses, perversities and ignorances.” And although he found Berenson “very interesting,” even “a genius” (as he wrote on the same day to another friend), he described Berenson to a Harvard colleague as having “a noble gift of the gab, perceptions, dazus and learning, and good visual images” but also “terrible moral defects, I imagine—keeps me off by his constant habit of denunciation of the folly of everyone else and the pretension to the only right and objective knowledge.”

Mary, too, had her

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40 Mary Berenson to Gardner, 31 January 1909; see Strachey and Samuels 1983, 149: “Morelli for Connoisseurship, Milanesi for History, William James for Psychology and Pater for Aesthetics.”

41 Berenson 1949, 50.

42 Berenson 1952b, preface (February 1947), 10; Berenson 1964, 67 (16 March 1948); ibid., 234 (27 October 1951), cf. Berenson 1949, 46. Other reminiscences recall James saying “I run after interruptions,” James on Georges Santayana and James on “the business of philosophy”: Berenson 1964, 27 (27 July 1947), 276 (28 September 1952), and 321 (14 October 1953).

defects. For “that rare and radiant daughter of Pearsall Smith of Philadelphia,” now “older, more political and harder . . . but still very handsome,” was “quite infernal when she gets on the subject of art history, which is now the serious occupation of her life”; this was a feeling that Mary reciprocated, by finding her heart “filled all day long with hatred & bitterness on account of James and his twaddle about Art.”

Despite all this, James had a pervasive influence on Berenson’s personal philosophy, or what Berenson called his “house of life.” Proposing this “house of life” in 1946 as an alternative to the extremes of nihilism and Catholic or Communist dogmatism, Berenson wrote in his diary:

Why not rather admit that there is a formative energy in our make-up that drives us to the formation of a society, with its hierarchies, its morals . . . its arts, its sciences, its religions, all tending to make a House of Life in which we each of us can find a home? It is essentially William James’s “Will to believe.”

Some years earlier Berenson had already marked with five crosses a passage in James’s Principles of Psychology (which later recurs in his Will to Believe), describing how the will, by acting as if something were real, makes it real. The crosses suggest the importance that the idea had for him, as an aspect of his belief in the ability of the will to create reality and value by its strength and persistence. He returned to what he meant by “will” in his Sketch for a Self Portrait:

It is not libido but what Nietzsche meant by der Wille zur Macht, what William James meant when he invented the phrase “the will to believe.” Alois Riegl with his Kunstwollen—the

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45 James to Child, in ibid., 366, and to Royce, in ibid., 364, 402, to whom James describes Mary, “erst Mary Smith of the Annex,” as collaborating “platonically” with Berenson on a catalogue of Lotto. See also Bernard and Mary Berenson, diary, 1888–93, BMBP (Mary’s entry for 6 January 1893); cf. Mary Berenson to Pearsall Smith, 14 January 1893, in Strachey and Samuels 1983, 51: James “will not look at anything except as an illustration of his a priori theories about art . . . What can you think of a man’s intellectual method when he applies it only in spots?”

46 Bernard Berenson, diary, 10 December 1946, in Berenson 1962, 261.

47 James 1893, 2:321; see also James 1896, 29: “there are cases . . . where faith in a fact can help create the fact.” On Carlo Placci’s death in 1941, Berenson described in his diary how he had “in all innocence” lent Placci The Will to Believe shortly after it was published (with unfortunate results); see Berenson 1952b, 32–33 (14–24 January 1941).
will to art, the imperative in taste, the style which imposes itself on society at a given moment, and from which nobody ventures or even wishes to depart.\textsuperscript{48}

And two years before he died, in 1957, he reverted to the same definition in order to explain his aesthetic theory to Prentice Towsley:

\begin{quote}
History tells me that Value in every field is a matter of “Will To”, as Schopenhauer perhaps first used it, as Nietzsche used it in the Will to Power, as William James used it in the Will to Believe, as Riegl used it in the Will of Art. It is a matter of urges which takes hold of people in a given moment. If it lasts long enough it is called Ethics in the field of ordinary life, Aesthetics in the various realms of art.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Closely associated with this “urge” is the “formative energy” required to raise our level of energy beyond what we think possible, which is achieved through “excitements, ideas and efforts,” but especially through the will. This was the theme of James’s “spectacular and controversial speech” to the American Philosophical Association in 1906 on “The Energies of Men,” one of several speeches by James that Mary, Bernard, and Nicky Mariano read together in the dark days of the war, a faint pencil note in the copy of it in Berenson’s library recording that “M.B. read to Nicky and B.B. Nov. 8 1942, Settignano.”\textsuperscript{50} A month later Berenson listed the speech in his book \textit{One Year’s Reading for Fun (1942)}, where he agreed “entirely” with James urging people to go on beyond what they thought was possible, though confessing that after doing this himself when he was forty, he had a nervous breakdown and now had to stop in time when he felt fatigue approaching.\textsuperscript{51}

As a philosophy for life, James’s emphasis on the will was foreshadowed by what he wrote to a friend as a young man, that “we can, by our will, make the enjoyment of our brothers stand us in the stead of a final cause” and, knowing that “enjoyment on the whole depends on what individuals accomplish,” be able to lead an active and happy life, adding to “the welfare of the race

\textsuperscript{48} Berenson 1949, 50.

\textsuperscript{49} Berenson to Towsley, 12 July 1957, in Berenson 1962, 377.

\textsuperscript{50} James 1911, 229.

\textsuperscript{51} Berenson 1960, 158 (9 December; between 14 and 20 December he read James’s \textit{Pluralistic Universe}, which he said he did not recall reading before: 160, 162). On the speech, see Bordogna 2008, 265.
in a variety of ways." It is also close to the ideas that Berenson expressed in his Diaries for two decades, from 1941 until 1958, the year before he died: his “house of life,” his “faith” (not in the Church but “in the certainty that life is worth living . . . confidence in life as worth while, confidence in humanity . . . zest . . . enjoyment of the individual human being as a work of art”), his pleasure in viewing works of art as a religious experience, even after nearly seventy years, as he says, of growing familiarity with them. In the present context, it also reflects the ideas that Berenson wrote about in Aesthetics and History: tactile values, now defined as “representations of solid objects when communicated . . . in a way that stirs the imagination to feel their bulk, heft their weight . . . to grasp, to embrace, or to walk around them”; movement, called “the manifest indwelling energy that vitalizes the delimiting outlines of an artefact,” a “vital energy,” accompanied by “an ideated tingling on and in my own skin”; and life-enhancement, “the ideated plunging into a state of being, or state of mind, that makes one feel more hopefully, most zestfully alive; living more intense, more radiant a life . . . reaching out to the topmost peak of our capacities.” And here we should remember how he described Pollaiuolo’s Hercules Strangling Antaeus in The Florentine Painters in 1896: “As you realize the suction of Hercules’ grip on the earth, the swelling of his calves with the pressure that falls on them, the violent throwing back of his chest, the stifling force of his embrace . . . you feel as if a fountain of energy had sprung up under your feet and were playing through your veins.”

Such a subjective response to art does not, perhaps, constitute an aesthetic theory.

Expressing the hope that Mary would provide, as a sequel, “an aperçu of what Mr Berenson’s system exactly is,” Vernon Lee admitted to Mary in 1932 that she herself had failed to discover it; she wrote that despite having read “I think all his books, I have not succeeded in piecing it together & have been too shy to ask a voce.” Among the “most poignant of my regrets” that run through Berenson’s diaries is his failure to write the book on “Aesthetics . . . Style . . . Value” that Towsley asked him about in 1957: “You ask if I have ever written on these matters. No, but I have touched tangentially on them in the second part of my little book on Aesthetics and History. I fear all this


53 Berenson 1952b, 322 (21 July 1944), cf. Berenson 1962, 238; see Berenson 1964, 336 (24 February 1954), on going in his youth to see “an art museum, a building, a famous landscape, with reverence . . . it was more like a religious experience.”

54 See Berenson 1950, 60, 67–68, 129, and Berenson 1952a, 61, pl. 166.

will be very disappointing.” A decade earlier, when the English scholar and diarist Roger Hinks discussed *The Italian Painters* with Berenson on a visit to I Tatti, Berenson admitted that his sensibility (unlike Hinks’s) had not changed at all over the last forty to fifty years, and that the book he was writing as his “last word on the subject,” *Aesthetics and History*, “differs hardly at all from my first words on the subject.” Vernon Lee herself has been partly blamed for Berenson’s failure to produce the book he was planning on the “Science of Art Criticism” due to the fallout from their quarrel over plagiarism, to which it is unnecessary to return here. Their disagreements were not about tactile values, which she always accepted and acknowledged as Berenson’s own original idea. In the article “Beauty and Ugliness” that was the source of the plagiarism charge, she acknowledged in a note that “in his remarkable volume on Tuscan painters (1896), Mr. B. Berenson has had the very great merit, not only of drawing attention to muscular sensations (according to him in the limbs) accompanying the sight of works of art, but also of claiming for art the power of *vitalising*, or, as he calls it, *enhancing life*”—although, she went on, this was for “a different and more intellectual reason” than her own. This must refer to their differences over movement and empathy, for whereas Bernard—according to Mary—attributed life-enhancement to the perception of “tactile values” and “movement,” Vernon Lee and her friend Kit Anstruther Thompson suggested that it was “all due to breathing”—or, as Henry Brewster more irreverently put it, that “the sense of form proceeds from the lungs and not as Mrs Costello maintains, from the knee pan.”

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56 Berenson to Towsley, in Berenson 1962, 377, cf. 201, 265, 292, 296; Berenson 1964, 229–230. In *One Year’s Reading for Fun* (Berenson 1960, 37), Berenson says he tried to read Bosanquet’s *History of Aesthetic* in 1892 but it bored him because it was “so remote from and so irrelevant to my curiosities of that time,” and similarly that he had failed to read Volkelt’s *Aesthetik des Tragischen* until 1942; Berenson 1952b, 85–86, cf. Berenson 1964, 22–23 (on Wölflin).

57 Hinks 1984, 133. See also note 70.


59 Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1897, 225; see also her review of *The Florentine Painters* in *Mind* 5, no. 18 (1896): 270–272, in which she approves of “tactile values” but not of “notions of self-conscious ‘Wille zur Macht,’” the Nietzschean concept that she vigorously attacked in “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power’” (Lee 1904, reprinted together with her article “Professor James and the ‘Will to Believe’” in Lee 1908, 161–231).

60 Mary Berenson, draft letter to Vernon Lee, September–October 1897, BMBP, and Henry Brewster to Ethel Smyth, 4 November 1897, in Brewster 1994, 301, both cited in Brown 2005, 199. In his review of “Beauty and Ugliness,” Dugall S. McColl writes that “their object is to prove . . .
Brewster leads me back to my circle of polemical expatriates and the longer-term influence of “tactile values” on them. Although “H. B.” no longer lived in Florence, he was intimate with them all, with the Berensons, to whom he was introduced by Vernon Lee; he was a friend, too, of Henry James, and of course a close friend of the Hildebrands, to whom he became related through the marriage of his son Christopher to Lisl Hildebrand. As an essayist and an acute observer of the social scene in Florence, Brewster provides us with an interesting reflection of the art debate raging among his friends in the 1890s in his book *The Statuette and the Background*, written between 1892 and 1896 (the latter being the same year in which *The Florentine Painters* was published). In it, one of the characters, challenging the idea that art has a moral purpose, says that eyes have nothing to do with art, which is to do with “forms and colours”: “We may talk for hours, or write volumes, about the reason for the beauty of this statue and that picture—it is all by the side of the mark,” because “only those who have in some degree the power of abstraction in their eye, recognize the artistic effort when they see it.”

This is a statement with which, I think, Brewster’s future relative Adolf Hildebrand would have agreed and whose ideas it surely reflected.

Although Brewster was a friend of Henry James rather than his brother William, we know that in 1890 he had sent William—through Henry—an earlier book of his on *The Theories of Anarchy and of Law*, which raises in dialogue form the wider issues of belief, skepticism, and Nietzschean egotism underlying the aesthetic debate. William’s interest in Brewster’s book is revealed by the many underlinings and comments in the margins of his copy (now in the Houghton library at Harvard) which anticipate his own interest in anarchy and pragmatism. Vernon Lee, too, admired this “subtle and . . . cosmopolitan” book and wrote a critical appreciation of it that was republished in her *Gospels of Anarchy*, a volume of collected essays that was in turn admired by William James—despite his earlier hostility towards Lee—as “both a masterly and a good minded

that the apprehension of Form depends on various organic changes in the body . . . the chief of them being respiration and the muscular tensions that go to make up the sense of balance . . . this [William James’s well-known theory of emotion] the ladies are assuming”: McColl 1931, 304–305.


production." So although he was not a member of this Florentine circle, William was closely connected with it and with its polemics, especially after his 1892–93 visit to Florence.

As we have seen, William James was not an ardent admirer of Berenson at that time, nor of "the sort of historic philosophy of painting" that Berenson was planning, which James said he lived "in hopes of growing into." Yet by 1898, when he received his copy of *The Central Painters of the Renaissance*, he was "entusiasmé [sic]": "You’ve done the job this time, and no mistake . . . so true psychologically," he wrote to Berenson. "Of course, I like particularly what you say of habits of visualizing etc. in their connexion with taste. I think your ‘life-enhancement’ and your ‘tactile values’ are ultimate analyses of the effects you have in mind . . . I am sure that you are on sound lines." And only two months later, when describing to his wife the pines and cedars in California, he wrote, "they are beauties . . . and the tactile values (as Berenson would say) suggested by their true rotondity, make them beautiful in the extreme.” Less beautiful but equally tactile were Rome’s "inconceivably corrupted, besmeared & ulcerated surfaces”; well disproving “that beauty is all made up of suggestion,” he wrote to a friend in 1900, “their ‘tactile values’, as Berenson would say, are pure gooseflesh” (a pleasing variant on “tingling,” if not quite what Bernard had in mind). A generation later, in 1954, it was William James’s son, another William, an artist, who wrote admiringly to Berenson: “Dear BB. You have to let me address you thus because that is how I am accustomed to refer to you!” He wished he might discuss drawing with Berenson, because, he wrote, “it is the basis of everything when it includes the depth as well as the other two dimensions. I think that is what you referred to by ‘tactile values’.”

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65 James to Berenson, 15 June 1898, BMBP; see also Mary Berenson, journal, 1898, BMBP, 53–54.


67 William James Jr. to Berenson, Tipperary, 27 May 1954, BMBP. James adds that he is staying with the daughter of Violet Ormond, John Sargent’s youngest sister: “The house is full of interesting painting.”
The next generation of Hildebrands also wrote admiringly to Berenson. It was in the middle of the Second World War, in 1943, that Lisl, herself an artist like the young William James, wrote to Berenson after discovering “with immense delight your little book on Italian Renaissance.” Saying how much she had missed by not knowing it existed, she went on to refer to the great discussions and disagreements they had had when BB visited them. “What delighted me particularly,” she wrote, “was to see that you are not or were not then, at all a relativist as you pretended to be in our conversations. You do believe in an unchangeable [sic] truth in art in this book . . . The book is itself life-enhancing.”

Lisl may have been wrong in thinking Berenson was not a relativist, but her letter is valuable for reminding us of “the conversations” that these polemical expatriates enjoyed with each other. It also reminds us of the value of Berenson’s *Italian Painters* as a guide for English-speaking tourists such as Edith Wharton, who recalled in 1934 how she began to feel “almost guilty for having read Pater and even Symonds with such zest” before Berenson’s “first volumes on Italian Painting” were published, through which “lovers of Italy learned that aesthetic sensibility may be combined with the sternest scientific accuracy.”

By then, the vogue for Berenson’s “tactile values” had spread outside these Florentine circles. The initial reception was not entirely favorable. E. M. Forster had a dig at “the tactile values of Giotto” in *A Room with a View*, published in 1908, where Lucy’s enthusiasm for them is portrayed as symptomatic of the English “Baedeker-bestarred” approach to Italy; and in 1930 Roger Hinks had another dig at both Berenson and Forster in a letter to a friend, in which he expressed his surprise and delight at finding *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* lasting so well, despite initially seeing in it nothing but “‘tactile values’, ‘life-enhancing’ and all those other bits of B.B. talk” that, he said, immediately brought *A Room with a View* to mind. In Italy itself, older art historians like Pietro Toesca and Adolfo Venturi responded guardedly to the publication of the last of the four volumes of *Italian Painters* in 1907. It was the young Roberto Longhi and Lionello Venturi who first appreciated Berenson’s “valori tattili,” and they were followed, after the first impressionist exhibition in Florence in 1910, by avant-garde critics who adopted his structural

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68 Brewster Hildebrand to Berenson, 16 November 1943, BMBP; she must be referring to the first (1930) edition of *The Italian Paintings*. On Lisl, see Starr Brewster’s introduction to the catalogue *Natura e bellezza* (Brewster Hildebrand 2007, 5–7), which has an uncorrected version of this letter on pp. 82–83.

69 Wharton 1934, 141.

70 Forster 1978, 9 (introduction), 35, 43, 46, cf. 144 on the Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in Mr. Emerson’s library. According to Oliver Stallybrass, Forster read Berenson’s *Florentine Painters* in 1907, commenting: “Oh so badly written” (ibid., 237). I am indebted to Robert Cumming for alerting me to Forster’s “‘tactile values of Giotto,” and subsequently for sending me an extract from *Pictures and People* (Hinks and Royde-Smith 1930, 112–113).
comparisons between Degas, Cézanne, and Italian Renaissance artists as a useful model for interpreting French post impressionism. The English neo-Hegelian philosopher R. G. Collingwood praised Berenson for the same reasons, as we have seen. Referring to what he called “the Cézanne–Berenson” approach to painting as a tactile experience, Collingwood stated in 1938 that “every one who takes any interest in Renaissance painting nowadays is Mr. Berenson’s pupil.” This was only intermittently true after the war. As well as regretting his failure to write his anticipated book on aesthetics, Berenson also felt a “pang” in 1946 that his name appeared in footnotes but not in bibliographies, and the following year, after hearing from his publishers that there was no sale for *The Italian Painters*, he commented that “in America as well as in England nobody wants to read me.” Yet far from being “all but forgotten,” both his name and his sales were revived after the new Phaidon edition came out in 1952, when I first read him.

So, despite these fluctuations, Berenson’s concept of tactile values lives on, not as part of a scientific or idealistic theory of art, perhaps, but as a vindication of the value of art within the new sense-based, pluralistic universe that William James and nearly all my hillside expatriates inhabited—Vernon Lee, Brewster, and not least, the Berensons themselves.

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71 See Iamurri 1997, 69–90, referring especially to Ardengo Soffici, Emilio Cecchi, and Berenson’s friend Carlo Placci; I am indebted to Louis Waldman for extending my interest into this period through Iamurri’s article. Berenson refers to Cézanne in “Central Painters,” which came out in 1897 (Berenson 1952a, 122), reverting to him in 1938 (and in the previous year to “tactile values (the sense of form)’’); see Morra 1965, 246 (December 1937), 268–269 (November 1938).

72 Collingwood 1938, 146.

73 Bernard Berenson, diary, April 1946, in Berenson 1962, 265; Berenson 1964, 10–11 (24 March 1947), cf. note 56 above; Samuels 1987, 544.
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