Art and Science of Painting Attributions: Bernard Berenson

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Art is naturally associated with collecting. The crucial issues for collectors of art are paintings’ authenticity and attribution. Attribution, i.e., determining the authorship, is complex and always involves a degree of uncertainty (1). Attributing a painting includes documentation of provenance as well as corroborations of historical circumstances of the period and the artist’s life. Today, authentication of paintings would also involve objective measures such as paint analysis, x-ray, and ultraviolet light examinations. A demonstration of changes and corrections made by the painter may, for instance, help to differentiate between an original and a copy.

The end of the 19th century was a time when art history emerged as a separate field. Also at this time the accumulation of wealth in the US increased the purchasing power of American collectors. The wealthy Americans became strongly interested in acquiring European paintings. This naturally involved a demand for expert authentication and attribution.

The person who played a central role in formalizing the processes of attribution was Bernard Berenson (1865–1955) (2, 3). He developed an observation-based method of attribution that made him the most sought after art connoisseur in Europe.

He was born Bernhard Valvrojenski in Lithuania and came to the US with his parents. He was educated at Boston University and then at Harvard, where one of his professors was Charles Elliot Norton, the first Harvard professor of art history. Berenson originally intended to become a literary man. After graduation he travelled to Europe, funded by several benefactors including a Bostonian socialist and collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924). The original purpose of his travel was to gather material for a book, but while in Europe he changed his mind and decided to devote his career to art.

He was particularly influenced by the writings of an English literary and art critic, Walter Pater (1839–1894) (4), an admirer of Ruskin and one of the pioneers of the Aesthetic Movement, and those of an Italian art historian, Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891), whose method of attribution he developed further (5). Morelli, who had studied medicine in Paris and for a time taught anatomy at Munich, based his method on close examination of a work of art, in preference to relying on historical documentation favored by earlier scholars. Pater on the other hand emphasized the subjective, individualistic approach to the assessment of artworks, regarding the critic’s impressions as essential.

Berenson’s method of picture attribution combined his extensive historical knowledge with detailed observation by an expert, and as such remained highly subjective (2, 6). Still, as some say, it was probably the most important attempt to formalize an approach to attribution since Giorgio Vasari in the 16th century. Berenson’s professional reputation was enhanced by a series of books that he wrote, including the Florentine Painters of the Renaissance (1896), Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance (1897), and North Italian Painters of the Renaissance (1907), as well as Venetian Painters of the Renaissance, written in 1894 in collaboration with his wife. His most important piece of writing turned out to be the Drawings of the Florentine Painters, published in 1903. These books combine a historical narrative and personal appraisal of the oeuvre of the Renaissance painters. They also, importantly, contain extensive lists of the works, which at the time became essential reference material.

When the book on Florentine painters was reviewed in Science magazine, Berenson’s idea of tactile values (the artist’s ability to include in a painting an impression of the form, which our mind accepts as real) was commended as a pioneering attempt to apply psychology to the interpretation of artworks, but his explanation of what determines our mental ranking of paintings was thought somewhat inadequate (7).

Berenson decided to stay in Italy where he and his wife Mary Whitall Smith first rented and then, in 1907, bought a villa called I Tatti on the outskirts of Florence.

For most of his life, Berenson provided advice on the acquisition of paintings to Isabella Stewart Gardner. He guided Gardner’s purchases for what became the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston (8). One of the most important was the Europa (also known as The Rape of Europa) by the greatest Venetian master of the Renaissance, Titian (Titiano Vecellio, 1488–1576), shown in Fig. 1. In
the letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner dated May 10, 1896, Berenson wrote that the Europa, a picture painted for Philip II of Spain, was “one of the few greatest Titians in the world.” He calls it “the finest Italian picture ever again to be sold” and writes about the “most poetical feeling and the most gorgeous colouring” of the painting (9).

Over the years, the visitors to Berenson’s home, I Tatti, have included directors and curators from the most important museums of Europe and the US. In fact, the villa and its exceptional library became Berenson’s most important legacy; he bequeathed I Tatti to Harvard University and it became the Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, active to this day (10).

Berenson’s method was at the time an important step forward in formalizing the attribution of paintings. Its inherent dependence on individual judgment makes one reflect on the—not always appreciated—complexity of transposing scientific methodologies into the arts.

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References


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