



Henry Walters and Bernard Berenson: Collector and Connoisseur

Stanley Mazaroff

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Collecting Italian Renaissance paintings during America's Gilded Age was fraught with risk because of the uncertain identities of the artists and the conflicting interests of the dealers. Stanley Mazaroff's fascinating account of the close relationship between Henry Walters, founder of the legendary Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, and Bernard Berenson, the era's preeminent connoisseur of Italian paintings, richly illustrates this important chapter of America's cultural history.

When Walters opened his Italianate museum in 1909, it was labeled as America's "Great Temple of Art." With more than 500 Italian paintings, including self-portraits purportedly by Raphael and Michelangelo, Walters's collection was compared favorably with the great collections in London, Paris, and Berlin. In the midst of this fanfare, Berenson contacted Walters and offered to analyze his collection, sell him additional paintings, and write a scholarly catalogue that would trumpet the collection on both sides of the Atlantic. What Berenson offered was what Walters desperately needed—a badge of scholarship that Berenson's invaluable imprimatur would undoubtedly bring.

By 1912, Walters had become Berenson's most active client, their business alliance wrapped in a warm and personal friendship. But this relationship soon became strained and was finally severed by a confluence of broken promises, inattention, deceit, and ethical conflict. To Walters's chagrin, Berenson swept away the self-portraits allegedly by Raphael and Michelangelo and publicly scorned paintings that he was supposed to praise. Though painful to Walters, Berenson's guidance ultimately led to a panoramic collection that beautifully told the great history of Italian Renaissance painting.

Based primarily on correspondence and other archival documents recently discovered at the Walters Art Museum and the Villa I Tatti in Florence, the intriguing story of Walters and Berenson offers unusual insight into the pleasures and perils of collecting Italian Renaissance paintings, the ethics in the marketplace, and the founding of American art museums.

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