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Berenson and Connoisseurship – Who is Afraid of Art History?

Bernard Berenson belonged, as we all know, to the circle of the most distinguished connoisseurs of the Italian painting of the 14th–16th centuries, if we accept the notion of “connoisseurship” in its 19th-century sense, the epoch of Morelli, Frizzoni and Berenson himself.¹ In 1963 James S. Ackermann and Rhys Carpenter, the authors of a fine introduction to the issues of art history and archaeology, still maintained that two great catalogues prepared by Berenson, “The Drawings of the Italian Painters” (1903) and “The Pictures of the Renaissance” (1932), could be regarded as a very convenient starting point for the study of Italian painting.² Berenson was admired for his unusual, inimitable gift of seeing, his visual judgement eluding any rational explanations which was so strikingly described by Richard Wollheim, paraphrasing Cézanne: “Berenson is an eye only, but what an eye!” And John Pope-Hennessy called him emphatically “the most sensitive precise instrument that has ever been applied to the study of Italian art”.³

It is clear, nevertheless, that the influence of such a personality as Berenson's, went far beyond narrow territories of connoisseurship. Four tiny books, published in 1894–1907, devoted to Italian Renaissance painting, contributed very heavily to the completing of the “silent taste reform”,⁴ restoring full citizenship rights to the Quattrocento painters, even demanding that the paintings of Cosimo Tura or Piero della Francesca should be valued more highly than those of Raphael or Michelangelo, because the latter had lost from their range of vision the primal and primeval tasks of the art of painting – realizing “tactile values” and transmitting “life-enhancing values”, whatever this might have meant. The above-mentioned four essays came to

¹ Compare: MAGINNIS (1990), 104–117.

² ACKERMANN/CARPENTER (1963), 188, 207.

³ Cited from SUTTON (1987), 817.

⁴ On this issue, among many publications, see for example: KLENZE (1906), 207–274; – BORENIUS (1923), 264–268; – BRAND (1957); – HASKELL (1976); – GOMBRICH (2002).

be referred to, ironically, as Berenson's "Four Gospels". And so they were indeed; if one were to compare what could be poorly described as the "theoretical armoury" of those considerations on Italian painting with his ideas in "Aesthetics and History", published half a century later (1948), one would not be able to observe any difference in his theoretical concepts – "tactile values", "space-composition", "movement", "significant line" got stuck in the same places like truths revealed that could not be discussed any further. This obdurate theoretical conservatism on the part of Berenson meant that his ideas came to be of only minor importance, just like his views on the psychology of the perception of art forms after the Second World War. Yet the "Four Gospels" contributed to his fame and popularity as much as his relationships with the European establishment in the broadest sense of the word, such as his services to Isabella Stewart Gardner or his cooperation with the Duveen brothers, which was to bring him great financial success as well as never-ending accusations.⁵ There was no mere self-flattery in Berenson's remark that almost all Italian pictures that came to America "had my visa on their passports".

It cannot be denied that the akme of Berenson's popularity was in the 1950s, when he became the real seer of Settignano – President Truman paid a visit to him, and the photograph of Berenson taken at the I Tatti appeared in LIFE magazine. If a little frivolous comparison can be forgiven, the BB initials in these years were as easily recognizable as the BB – Brigitte Bardot – of the 1960s. A supposition may be ventured that Berenson's fame and popularity were a simple consequence of a fact that he never became an academic art historian, or a connoisseur in a strictly professional sense. What is more, he never wanted to become one of them. Berenson not only did not like academic art history, he also despised a certain profile of art history that he dubbed "Teutonic". This happened only after the massacres of the First World War. That Berenson violently rejected the art historical paradigm descending from Germany had its roots in his aesthetic attitude, shaped under the spell of English "aesthetic movement", as well as in the project of a cultured and civilized life that he elaborated. The enjoyment of art was to be an axis of such an existence.

One can be easily persuaded that Berenson's aversion towards modern art history equalled his aversion towards modern art.⁶ Berenson's character surely played a role here – his tongue was legendary, spiteful, even venomous. It is no surprise then, that modern art was given the name of "Unkunst", which is very telling, and modern artists were given such "tender" epithets as "contortionist", "distortionist", "difformist", "inflationist", "deflationnist", and so on. Sometimes, it should be noted, it was even worse; Josef Strykowski was bestowed with the title of "Attila of art history". This strong dislike that

⁵ On this see: SIMPSON (1987), but his severe accusations seem to be untenable; compare: FREEDBERG (1989), 7–16.

⁶ On this see CALO (1994).

Berenson had for modern art was partly caused by his conviction that art qua art should not be allowed to trespass beyond the borders of representation and visible world, and that the representation of the human figure was the most perfect subject and a test of artistic capability at the same time. This, as it were, pseudo-Renaissance dogma, with its invectives hurled without measure against modern art, brings to mind associations with Hans Sedlmayr's manifesto "Verlust der Mitte". And although no other than Meyer Schapiro admitted that Berenson's unflagging admiration for antique perfection placed him somehow close to the adherents of heroic nudity, such associations would be superficial only.⁷ In Berenson's writings one can find neither the gloomy catastrophism of Sedlmayr, nor the quasi-religious aura wrapping Sedlmayr's critique of modern art. It can be said, to avoid any misunderstanding, that they both found something else in the heritage of "romantic art metaphysics".

Let me recall, then, some well-known facts. Berenson's conception of artistic form had a physiological-psychological base, and the conceptual vocabulary used by him came from the writings of Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Adolf von Hildebrand. The most important notion, that of "tactile values", set not only the aim and quality of Renaissance painting, especially in Florence (Firenze), but also the "modus" of organizing the world depicted, operating at the level of both every-day experience and artistic experience, and linked to the problem of perception of space and three-dimensionality of human figures and objects in the world. Berenson writes: "painting is an art which aims at giving an abiding impression of artistic reality with only two dimensions. The painter must, therefore, do consciously what all we do unconsciously – construct his third dimension. And he can accomplish his task only as we accomplish ours, by giving tactile values to retinal impressions".⁸ Fulfilling this task is a condition of achieving "an abiding impression of artistic reality". But such a perception cannot be realized without putting into motion the haptic imagination of the beholder. This is how it comes to the co-operation of artist with beholder in the process of grasping the monumental figure of Giotto's Madonna: "Our eyes scarcely have had time to light on it before we realize it completely – the throne occupying a real space, the Virgin satisfactorily seated upon it, the angels grouped in rows about it. Our tactile imagination is put to play immediately. Our palms and fingers accompany our eyes much more quickly than in presence of real objects, the sensations varying constantly with the various projections represented as of face, torso, knees; confirming in every way our feeling of capacity for coping with things – for life, in short".⁹ One can mention here in passing that in historical perspective "tactile values" and "coping with things" are a kind of a psychological transcription of Vasarian formulas that resounded like a refrain. Berenson owed to him much more

⁷ SCHAPIRO (1961), 57–65.

⁸ BERENSON (1968), 63.

⁹ BERENSON (1968), 70.

than he would be ever ready to admit. But, in an ironical comment made by Michael Baxandall, Vasari spoke about pictures, Berenson always about his own feelings and sensations.¹⁰ It is obvious in the end that the real aim of painting is to express "life-enhancing values". Berenson never fully explained what these "life-enhancing values" were supposed to mean. He understood them possibly as a go-between, a bridge connecting the area of sense perception, endowed with a certain vitalist character, with a quasi-mystical moment of unity with nature through art, with the moment of freeing oneself from the flow of time. To this peculiar experience Berenson gave various cryptic descriptions, willingly using Goethe's words: "Dahin! Dahin!"¹¹

Naturally, this sounded perfectly in accord with the image Berenson had of himself – as a keeper of humanistic traditions. In the utopian-historical perspective all that was born in the area of the Mediterranean: art works, the way of feeling nature, the style of being, the whole oikoumene, in short, built the dream of Berenson's "House of Life". The "House of Life" is a totalizing cultural project in which art and poetry have a deeply humanizing effect on a man, allowing him to walk over the boundaries of ethnic, national and cultural prejudices – "tribal" behaviour in Berenson's vocabulary. Quite in the spirit of Schiller, although without his proposed ethical obligations derived from Kant's practical philosophy, culture is to heal the wounds done by culture itself. For Berenson culture becomes also a synonym of freedom, and its condition is something close to erasing old, harmful identity. This is a characteristic report by Berenson of a meeting in international society, plenty of which can be found in Berenson's memories: "Bernhard and Mary relished the fact that they were part of 'a civilization' that brings together: a Spaniard-Creole [Countess Serristori], a Russian Jew [Bernhard], a Pole [Count Rambelinski], and a Philadelphia Quaker [Mary] and enables them to pass three days together in perfect harmony, agreeing upon pretty nearly every subject".¹²

Berenson's "House of Life" is an attempt to broaden the concept of Walter Pater's House of Beauty, so that it could embrace all aspects of living. The very expression has a curious genealogy since it comes from the religious moralizing of Bunyan's writings, an obligatory reading for any pious man in Great Britain. Thanks to Charles Lamb it became part of the artistic literature of the Victorian era. The "House of Life" is an imagined world of culture, a large room where the most eminent works of the human mind stay side by side, pointing mutually one to another. The task of any human being is to deepen continuously the consciousness of historical connections with culture, untiringly experiencing the aesthetic moment given to us in a "short interval" of time. The critic's aim becomes then fully distanced but possibly the most

¹⁰ BAXANDALL (1988), 122.

¹¹ Compare: BERENSON (1991), 102.

¹² SAMUELS (1979), 384.

meticulous analysis of his own sensations and feelings on seeing a picture or listening to a piece of music. And only this really counts in life.¹³

Although Pater became an object of derision, his convoluted prose described as “perfumed” and additionally blamed for its apparent amorality, Berenson followed him faithfully. It is true that he was not received at Pater’s seminar, but to the end of his life he preserved his conviction that life was worth living with art above all, experiencing its productions according to Pater’s prescription – to perceive art works in a manner similar to the detached perception of music, surrendering to its power of expression. The fragment on Botticelli shows this at best: “Look, for instance, at Botticelli’s ‘Venus Rising from the Sea’. Throughout, the tactile imagination is roused to a keen activity, by itself almost as life-heightening as music. But the power of music is even surpassed where, as in the goddess’s mane-like tresses of hair fluttering to the wind, not in disorderly rout but in masses yielding only after resistance, the movement is directly life-communicating. [...] imagine an art made up entirely of these quintessences of movement-values, and you will have something that holds the same relation to representation that music holds to speech [...]”.¹⁴

The postulate that the products of visual art should have musical qualities was well known to romantic art theories; it presupposes two points: first, the purity of perception and, second, the immediacy of expression. Here, one might suppose, lie the causes of Berenson’s deep reluctance to interpreting art works according to the paradigm proposed by Panofsky or other art historians espousing a similar methodology. In Berenson’s catalogue of enemies Panofsky took a very eminent position; iconography Berenson re-christened into “icononsense”, Panofsky became “a Hitler of art study”.¹⁵ Berenson was convinced that historical erudition, the presentation of the broadest possible cultural context, and the disentangling of symbolic riddles and mysteries, are the worst threat, in that they annihilate real, authentic contact with art. An entry in Berenson’s diary from 1955, four years before his death, can be seen as his aesthetic confession, as his life-long credo: “What do they [i.e. art historians] want? That the work of art should remain unenjoyed and serve only as a ‘cadaver’ for anatomizing, or as subject matter for meta-physics, Freudian interpretations, or as a stimuli for Re-search?”¹⁶ This citation irresistibly brings to mind a famous sentence by William Wordsworth: “We murder to dissect”. But now it is obvious, I suppose, that aesthetic epicureanism of Berenson, deeply immersed in the post-romantic theory of art work, freed from, as Berenson would say, “meta-physics”, was a direct and thorough contradiction of the practices used by a connoisseur. A connoisseur has to

¹³ See: COURT (1983) 16–22; – SUTTON (1964), 176–182.

¹⁴ BERENSON (1968), 110, 112.

¹⁵ SAMUELS (1987), 402–403.

¹⁶ BERENSON (1963), 390–391.

treat the work as an atom, he has to isolate and autonomise those elements that are functional from the point of view of vestigial analysis, so to speak. A connoisseur, at least in Berenson's eyes, is interested in the cutting up of a work considered to be a symptom of authentic psychological activity of a painter – and this is self-evident, since a connoisseur strives to make attributions. The case of “Amico di Sandro” shows clearly that the isolation of particular aspects of an artwork in the context of biographical continuity and the typical traits of a personal style may lead to the temptation of inventing of a non-existent artistic personality. Yet for Berenson himself such a model of connoisseurship seems to be insufficient – although he himself tried to systematize the elements forming the structure of a work. This structure does not consist simply of the shape of a palm or hand, a profile of an ear or winding of draperies. It arises due to the mastering of tactile values or significant line, due to the capability of restraining emotions (Piero della Francesca) or of confining oneself to the pure architectural tectonics of a picture (Antonello da Messina).

It can be said that for Berenson an impassive, cold connoisseur, analyzing form like an entomologist, will stay blind for authentic artistic values if they do not possess this capability to awake within themselves tactile imagination and to arouse the feeling for an art work as a whole. And, vice versa, the enjoyment of “life-enhancing values”, if not helped by the historical consciousness of a connoisseur, will be an empty gesture; the universe of pure, perfect form qua form has only hypothetical, potential existence, and always is to be rooted in a concrete artistic biography and stylistic stance. The cult of the fragment, characteristic of the connoisseur, and the vitalistic aesthetics of fullness, are the heritage of a post-Romantic art theory, filtered through Victorian sensibility and an adoring respect for sheer architecture of forms of Quattrocento painting. But for the romantic religion of art Berenson substituted his vision of pure, impersonal form; where the romantics detected the presence of transcendence, Berenson preferred to speak of something numinotal, always in a close, immediate relationship with life conceived as a totality of experience. When in one of his letters Berenson chided Millard Meiss that “Sie sind ein ‘Warburgianer’ geworden”,¹⁷ he also meant this loss of vital connection between art and life. It remains an open question as to whether one can be a connoisseur today, or an eager believer in the Paterian ideal of the musicality of the visual artwork. Berenson seemed to be both at once, without feeling any inner tension or contradiction. But then one would have to be another Berenson.

¹⁷ This quotation after: WUTTKE (1996), II, 645.

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Streszczenie: Berenson i znawstwo – kto się boi historii sztuki?

Bernard Berenson był jednym z najsłynniejszych i najważniejszych koneserów w dziejach historii sztuki; przyczynił się wydatnie nie tylko do rozwiązania wielu zagadek atrybucyjnych, ale też do gruntownej zmiany smaku w pierwszej połowie wieku XX. Dzięki jego tzw. Czterem Ewangeliom zakończył się długi okres, kiedy to uprzywilejowane miejsce w dziejach sztuki renesansowej przyznawano malarzom Quattrocenta.

Najważniejsze osiągnięcia Berensona w zakresie znawstwa były wynikiem przede wszystkim jego niesłychanej subtelności, doskonałej pamięci wzrokowej i przenikliwości w analizowaniu form dzieł sztuki. Teoretyczne podstawy jego własnej wersji znawstwa, choć podejmował próby ich wyjaśnienia, nie ujawniają źródeł jego dokonań albo wpływów, jakie zyskał w życiu publicznym. Berenson z podejrzliwością i rosnącą niechęcią obserwował postępy nowoczesnej historii sztuki. Wydaje się, że przyczyną tego była niezgodność postawy estetycznej Berensona – ukształtowanej pod wpływem tradycji estetyzmu angielskiego, kontynentalnej psychologii sztuki oraz jego własnego postrzegania dzieł sztuki – z teoretycznymi propozycjami akademickiej historii sztuki, która podkreślała rolę historii w objaśnianiu dzieł. Poza tym w kręgach historyków sztuki zjawiskom estetycznym przypisywano zupełnie inne miejsce. Strach Berensona przed historią sztuki pokazuje w sposób symptomatyczny problemy i wątpliwości, z jakimi borykali się krytycy i historycy sztuki pod koniec XIX i w pierwszej połowie XX stulecia.