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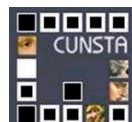
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Mary Berenson and the Art of Seeing: Travel, Method, and the Making of a Modern Art Historian

Michele Amedei*

Abstract

In the historiography of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century art criticism, Mary Whitall Smith Berenson (1864–1945) has long occupied an ambiguous position: acknowledged, occasionally cited or praised, yet rarely granted full intellectual agency. Often overshadowed by her husband, Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), she has been depicted as a collaborator, assistant, secretary, or gifted amateur. Recent archival research, especially by Ilaria Della Monica and Tiffany L. Johnston, shows such views to be reductive. Mary's notebooks, diaries, and correspondence at Villa I Tatti allow her contributions to be reassessed on their own terms and invite reflection on how art-historical authority was shaped and gendered in this period. This essay examines Mary as an art historian formed through travel, close visual study, and disciplined notetaking, highlighting her significant contributions to Morellian connoisseurship and the often asymmetrical, yet intellectually active, nature of her collaboration with Bernard Berenson.

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Tra la fine dell'Ottocento e i primi decenni del Novecento, Mary Whitall Smith Berenson (1864–1945) occupò una posizione ambigua nella critica d'arte: pur riconosciuta, fu a fatica considerata una vera protagonista della disciplina, tanto da essere spesso vista come collaboratrice, assistente o dilettante di talento al fianco del marito, lo storico dell'arte Bernard Berenson (1865–1959). Ricerche recenti, in particolare di Ilaria Della Monica e Tiffany L. Johnston, hanno mostrato quanto queste letture siano riduttive. Quaderni, diari e corrispondenze conservati a Villa I Tatti permettono di riconsiderare il suo contributo in autonomia, evidenziando le forme di autorità nella storia dell'arte e le dinamiche di genere. Sulla base di questi documenti, il lavoro indaga Mary come studiosa formatasi attraverso il viaggio, l'osservazione diretta e l'annotazione sistematica delle opere da lei indagate in diverse aree d'Italia, rivelando il ruolo significativo da essa ricoperta nella *connoisseurship* morelliana e in un lavoro collaborativo, spesso non paritario, accanto a Bernard Berenson.

1. *Early Life and Intellectual Formation*

Mary Whitall Smith was born in 1864 into a prominent Quaker family in Philadelphia¹ (Fig. 1). For decades, scholars have underscored her upbringing in a conservative environment as a source of conflict, repression, or constraint. Yet such interpretations, based primarily on the retrospective tone of her letters, risk flattening the complexity of her early intellectual environment. Her family was not merely conservative; it was also cultivated, international in its networks, and engaged in social and intellectual reform. Mary's mother, Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911), was a major religious writer and a figure of transatlantic influence. These familial networks help explain why, even in adolescence, Mary found herself immersed in philosophical readings and literary experimentation that transcended the boundaries of traditional Quaker life.

Her formative years at Smith College and later at Radcliffe College – where she studied psychology and philosophy – further sharpened her intellectual rigor. These early academic pursuits, though not directly connected to the visual arts, cultivated habits of close observation, analytical reasoning, and self-discipline that would later undergird her work as an art historian. They also introduced her to a broad set of debates – philosophical, psychological, aesthetic – that shaped late-Victorian thought. It was in this milieu that she met the Irish barrister B.F.C. “Frank” Costelloe (1855–1899), whom she married in 1885 and with whom she settled in England. Their household soon became a social hub for expatriate Americans, Cambridge intellectuals, and the Anglo-American avant-garde. Mary bore two daughters, Rachel (1887–1940) and Karin (1889–1953), and entered the London social world with a mixture

¹ For biographical information on Mary Berenson, see Strachey, Samuels 1984, Della Monica 2017, 2019 and Johnston 2019.

of curiosity and ambivalence. Although the marriage eventually deteriorated, the intellectual exchanges of these years – including readings in aesthetics, discussions of moral philosophy, and conversations about art – formed a crucial prelude to her later scholarly development.

2. *Encountering Bernard Berenson and the Making of a Scholarly Partnership*

Mary first met Bernard Berenson around 1888 in Cambridge, where he was pursuing literary studies. Their paths crossed repeatedly, both in England and Italy, and their affinity was intellectual as much as personal. It is tempting, in retrospect, to read their early interactions as the prefiguration of a collaboration: two young Americans in Europe, each intellectually restless, each drawn to the cultural magnetism of Italy. Yet their formation proceeded along different, though converging, lines. Bernard's education – steeped in classical literature, philology, and the emergent language of aestheticism derived from Walter Pater (1839–1894) – gave him a vocabulary of pleasure, sensation, and interpretation. Mary's intellectual tools were more analytical, shaped by philosophy and psychology rather than by poetic impression².

It was travel that ultimately fused these distinct trajectories. Their shared journeys to Italy in 1890 and 1891, undertaken at a time when Mary's marriage was disintegrating, catalysed a shift in her sense of purpose. Italy offered her not merely aesthetic delight but a new mode of study, one rooted in sustained looking and intellectual independence. The diaries – and, even more so, the far less studied notebooks (Fig. 2) – of this period reveal a burgeoning confidence: she was beginning to conceive of herself not simply as a traveller or a dilettante, but as a scholar³.

The fact that Mary published under her birth and married name, Whitall Costelloe, or the pseudonym "Mary Logan" until her marriage to Bernard in 1900 has at times obscured her authorship, contributing to the persistent misattribution of ideas and stylistic traits to Bernard alone⁴. But the couple's collaboration, especially in the 1890s, was far more reciprocal than previously assumed. Most recently, Ilaria della Monica (2017 and 2019) as well as Tiffany L. Johnston (2019) demonstrates that Mary contributed in a meaningful and sustained way to the research and composition of volumes such as *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance*, published in 1894. Consequently, theirs

² On the formation of Bernard Berenson, see Samuels 1979 as well as Connors and Waldman 2014; for Mary, see Johnston 2019.

³ See Della Monica 2019.

⁴ See, as instance, Logan 1895a and 1895b; Whitall Costelloe 1895.

was a partnership forged through shared labour – shared reading, shared travel, shared notebooks. Their intellectual exchanges were not those of master and disciple, but of two minds working together to reshape the practice of art history⁵.

3. Morelli, the “Scientific Method,” and the Reorientation of Art Historical Study

To understand Mary’s methodological orientation, one must situate her within the broader context of late-nineteenth-century art history. Giovanni Morelli’s (1816–1891) writings – particularly, *Le opere dei maestri italiani nelle gallerie di Monaco, Dresda e Berlino* (1886), *Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei; die Galerien Borghese und Doria Panfili in Rom* (1890) as well as *Italian Painters. Critical Studies of Their Works* (1892) – were central to the methodological debates of the period. Morelli proposed a taxonomy of artworks grounded in the minute analysis of recurring anatomical details, treating these stylistic markers as evidence of authorship. His technique, influenced by contemporary developments in scientific naturalism, physiology, and comparative anatomy, represented a radical departure from the rhetorical, moralizing, and often anecdotal histories that dominated the field⁶.

Mary and Bernard both approached Morelli’s writings with evident enthusiasm, yet Mary’s notebooks disclose something more than admiration: they document a sustained attempt to translate Morellian principles into practice through the disciplined, corporeal act of drawing. For Mary, the Morellian method was never simply a technique of attribution; it constituted a rigorous pedagogy of vision, a means of training the eye to register formal distinctions with increasing acuity. Her sketches of hands, ears, and gestures in the 1892 notebooks from Brescia, Cremona, Bologna, Marche, and Umbria – clearly inspired by Morelli’s meticulous study of anatomical details in works such as the 1890 *Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei*, published under the pseudonym Ivan Lermoloeff⁷ (Figs. 3–6) – serve not as decorative appendices but as analytical instruments: exercises in visual memory, experiments in comparative differentiation, and preliminary stages in the construction of typological categories. Morellian analysis is evident throughout the notebooks by Mary preserved at I Tatti with remarkable clarity. She systematically juxtaposes sketches of analogous details drawn from different artists, annotating

⁵ For the collaboration between Bernard and Mary, see Johnston 2016.

⁶ For a study of Morelli’s life and method, see Anderson 2019 and Angelini 2020.

⁷ Lermoloeff 1890, pp. 98–99.

correspondences, divergences, and stylistic anomalies. During the abovementioned visit to Cremona in 1892, for instance, Mary classified hands not only according to formal or stylistic criteria but also in relation to gesture and iconographic function – categories she labels “hope,” “supplication,” “benediction” (Fig. 6). Such taxonomies reveal her sophisticated awareness of the intersection between form, expressive content, and meaning. For Mary, classification was never a merely taxonomic enterprise; it was an interpretive practice that sought to understand how forms signify.

Mary’s 1895 article, *The New Art Criticism*, articulates this intellectual shift with striking clarity. In it, she argues that the first duty of the art historian is classification based on direct observation of artworks, not on documents or inherited traditions⁸. This emphasis reflects a broader epistemological transformation: the emergence of connoisseurship as a systematic, quasi-scientific discipline.

4. *The Travel Albums and Notebooks: A Laboratory of Observation*

Mary’s Italian travel albums as well as notebooks preserved at Villa I Tatti, are the most compelling evidence of her methodological sophistication⁹. The documents, particularly those created during journeys between 1891 and 1910, constitute a hybrid genre: part travel diary, part sketchbook, part visual archive, and – most importantly – a laboratory for the cultivation of an art-historical gaze. They vary in size and purpose: small, pocket-sized notebooks (Fig. 2) were intended for immediate, on-site notations, containing quick sketches of compositional structures, observations on colour harmonies, and lists of comparative features. Larger, more formal albums were assembled later, often with Bernard’s participation, and include elaborated sketches, transcriptions of earlier notes, and marginalia that testify to a dynamic intellectual dialogue.

Each album’s title page contains valuable metadata: itineraries, dates, companions, and destinations. These peritexts reveal a network of relationships that positions Mary within the cosmopolitan art-historical culture of her time. Her 1899 trip to Siena with Roger Fry (1866–1934), which we know thanks to the valuable list of attendants she provided on the front page of the album titled *Siena and the Neighbourhood*, places her within the early formation of British Post-Impressionist discourse. Mary journey to Siena in 1902 with Leo Stein (1872–1947) locates her within the Parisian conversations surrounding modern-

⁸ Logan 1895a.

⁹ Some of these documents (particularly the diaries) have been studied recently by Ilaria della Monica (2019).

ism, collecting practices, and the rising stature of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). Taken together – and supplemented by the trips recorded in the visitor registers of the major museum in central Italy, where Mary, often without Bernard, appears frequently during the 1890s and the early twentieth century alongside Carlo Placci (1861–1941), Geoffrey Scott (1884–1929), and Ralph Curtis (1854–1922) – these episodes reveal the remarkable breadth of her intellectual networks and the depth of her exchanges with key cultural figures of the time¹⁰.

In addition to these significant ancillary materials, Mary's meticulous drawings of works by Giovanni Bellini, Luca Signorelli, and Lorenzo Lotto – scattered across her albums and diary pages – are striking for their exceptional precision and analytical clarity most likely derived from a self-taught drawing training. They reveal not simply skill but sustained analytical concentration. Her 1892 sketches of Bellini's *Pesaro Altarpiece* (Fig. 7) record iconographic details later altered or removed – evidence not only of her attentiveness but of the value of her drawings as historical documents. Mary's multiple attempts to capture the *Madonna dell'Assunta* during a visit to Celana (Bergamo) in 1893 (Fig. 8), show her grappling with the problem of extreme foreshortening, a difficulty she confronts repeatedly, adjusting lines, recalibrating proportions, and re-evaluating shadows (Figs. 9–10). These sketches are both exercises and arguments: they demonstrate visually how stylistic traits are embedded in form.

The question of how authorship was distributed between Mary and Bernard Berenson – one of the most complex scholarly issues regarding her work – can be illuminated through careful study of the notebooks as well as albums preserved at I Tatti. Their working relationship was profoundly collaborative in the 1890s, a period in which both were developing their methodological approaches and producing their earliest art-historical texts. Bernard's later prominence often retroactively obscured Mary's contributions, partly because of gendered assumptions about authorship and partly because much of her work circulated in formats – particularly journals, letters, and unpublished drafts – that were less likely to be preserved or cited.

Yet evidence from the notebooks indicates that Bernard drew extensively on Mary's drawings, notes, and comparisons when preparing his own publications. This reliance in no way diminishes Bernard's intellectual originality;

¹⁰ See, for example, the register of the Museo Civico in Sansepolcro, where Mary is recorded together with Geoffrey Scott on 4 November 1911 (Sansepolcro, Biblioteca Comunale Dioniso Roberti, *Registro dei visitatori del Museo Civico*). See also the register of the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Siena, where Mary appears, among other entries, on 10 October 1911 in the company of Bernard and Ralph Curtis (Siena, Archivio Opera Metropolitana, *Registro dei visitatori*, nos. 2721, 3077, and 3078). Finally, the register of the Museo Civico in San Gimignano shows that on 28 June 1907 Mary visited the museum together with Carlo Placci (San Gimignano, Biblioteca Comunale, *Albo dei Visitatori del Palazzo Comunale di San Gimignano*, vol. II, no. 2628).

rather, it calls for a reassessment of their partnership, as partially explored from different perspectives by scholars such as Ilaria della Monica and Tiffany L. Johnston. Consequently, Mary was not merely an assistant; she was a co-producer of knowledge. Her notebooks were not ancillary to Bernard's method; they were integral to its formation. In this perspective, the notebooks also reveal another dimension: the tensions inherent in the collaboration. Mary's marginal notes sometimes contradict Bernard's assertions; in others, his revisions refine or correct her observations. The intellectual dialogue embedded in these annotations reveals a complex scholarly relationship in which both partners contributed actively to the elaboration of ideas.

5. Conclusion: Reassessing Mary's Place in Art History

To restore Mary Berenson to the intellectual history of art is not simply to add another figure to an existing canon. It is to reconsider the very nature of connoisseurship and the role of collaborative scholarship in shaping the discipline. Mary's notebooks challenge the assumption that connoisseurship was a solitary, authoritative, and masculine pursuit. Instead, they reveal a method grounded in dialogue, shared labour, and sustained empirical study.

Moreover, Mary's work complicates the binary often drawn between "scientific" and "aesthetic" approaches to art. Her analyses, though methodical, were never devoid of aesthetic sensitivity. Her drawings, for all their analytical function, retain a palpable sense of admiration. Her travel descriptions – even in their most systematic form – betray moments of wonder. She was, in this sense, both a scientist and a humanist, both a classifier and a reader of images. Her legacy invites a broader reconsideration of the hidden labour integral to art-historical practice: the notetaking, the sketching, the comparing, the traveling, the quiet hours spent in dimly lit chapels. Such labour has often been undervalued or rendered invisible in accounts of the discipline's formation. Mary's notebooks bring it to light.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. *Mary Whitall Smith*, c. 1885-1886, from B. Strachey and J. Samuels J. *Mary Berenson: A Self-Portrait from Her Diaries and Letters*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984



Fig. 2. Sketchbook by Mary Berenson from her trip to Umbria, 1897–1898. Settignano (FI), Biblioteca Berenson at I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence

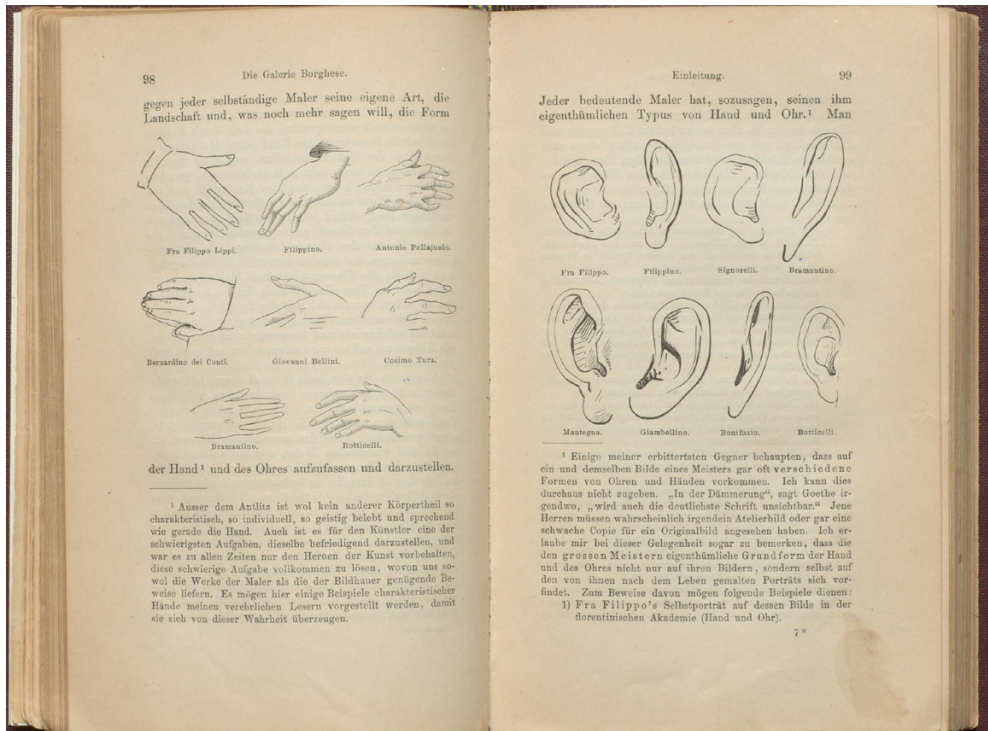


Fig. 3. I. Lermolieff [Giovanni Morelli], *Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei. Die Galerien Borghese und Doria Panfilii in Rom*. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1890, pp. 98-99

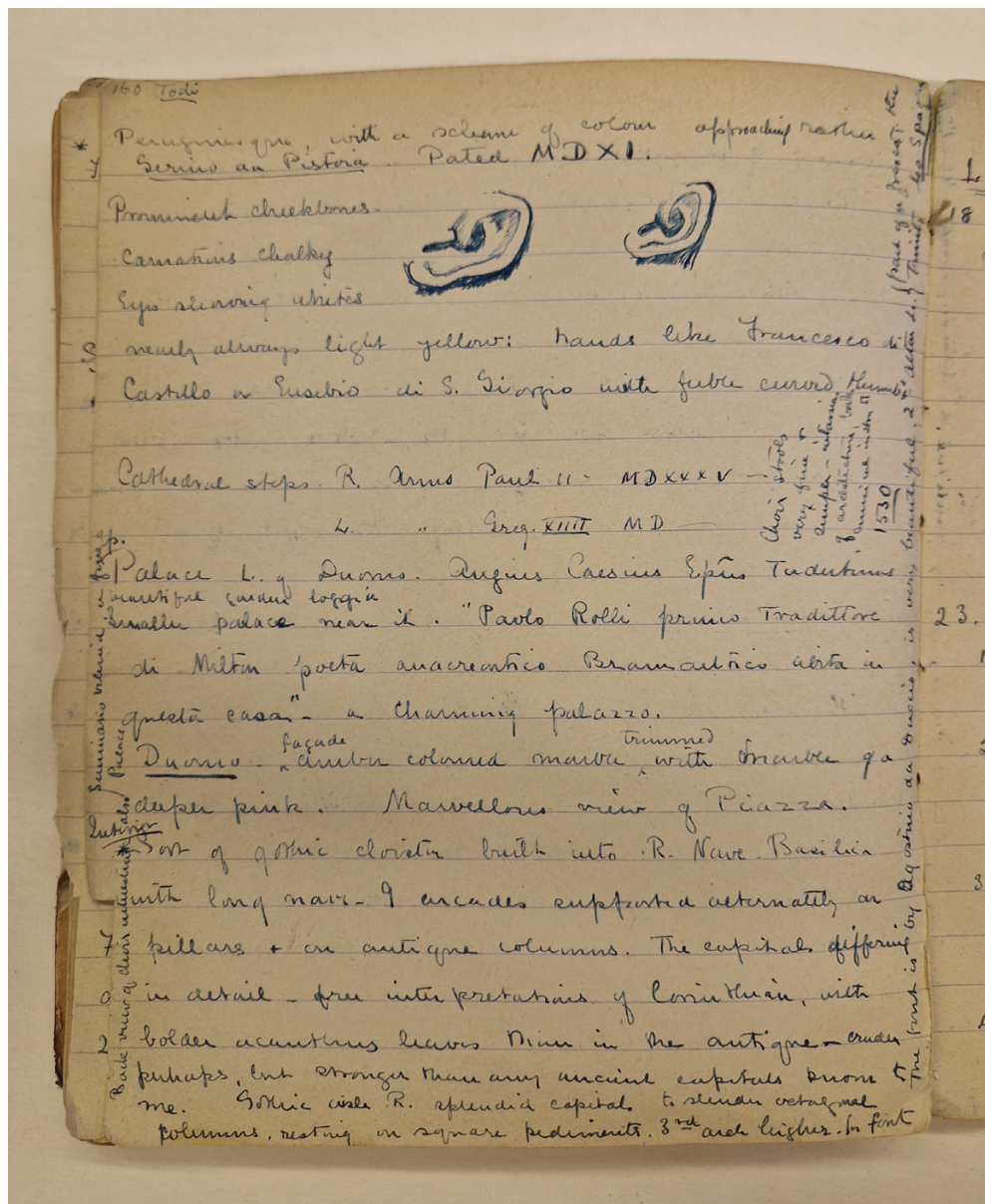
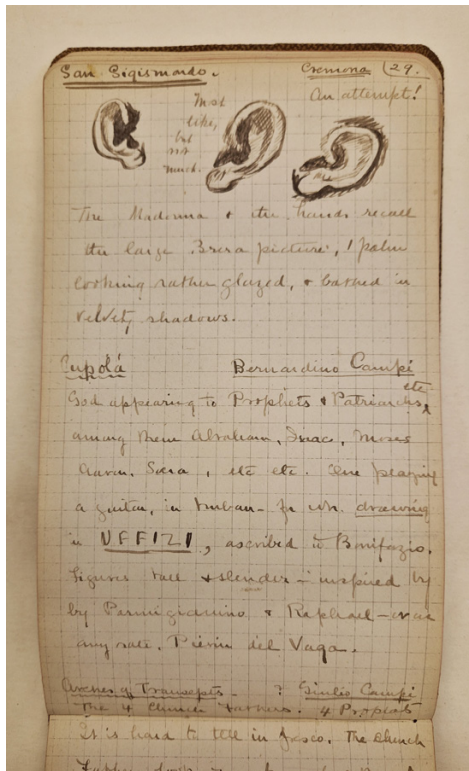


Fig. 4. Mary Berenson, *Study of ears* from the 1892 travel to Todi, Urbino and other cities, f. 160. Settignano (FI), Biblioteca Berenson at I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence



Figs. 5-6. Mary Berenson, *Study of ears and hands* from the 1892 travel to Brescia, Bologna and Cremona, Vol. VI, f. 26, 27. Settignano (FI), Biblioteca Berenson at I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence

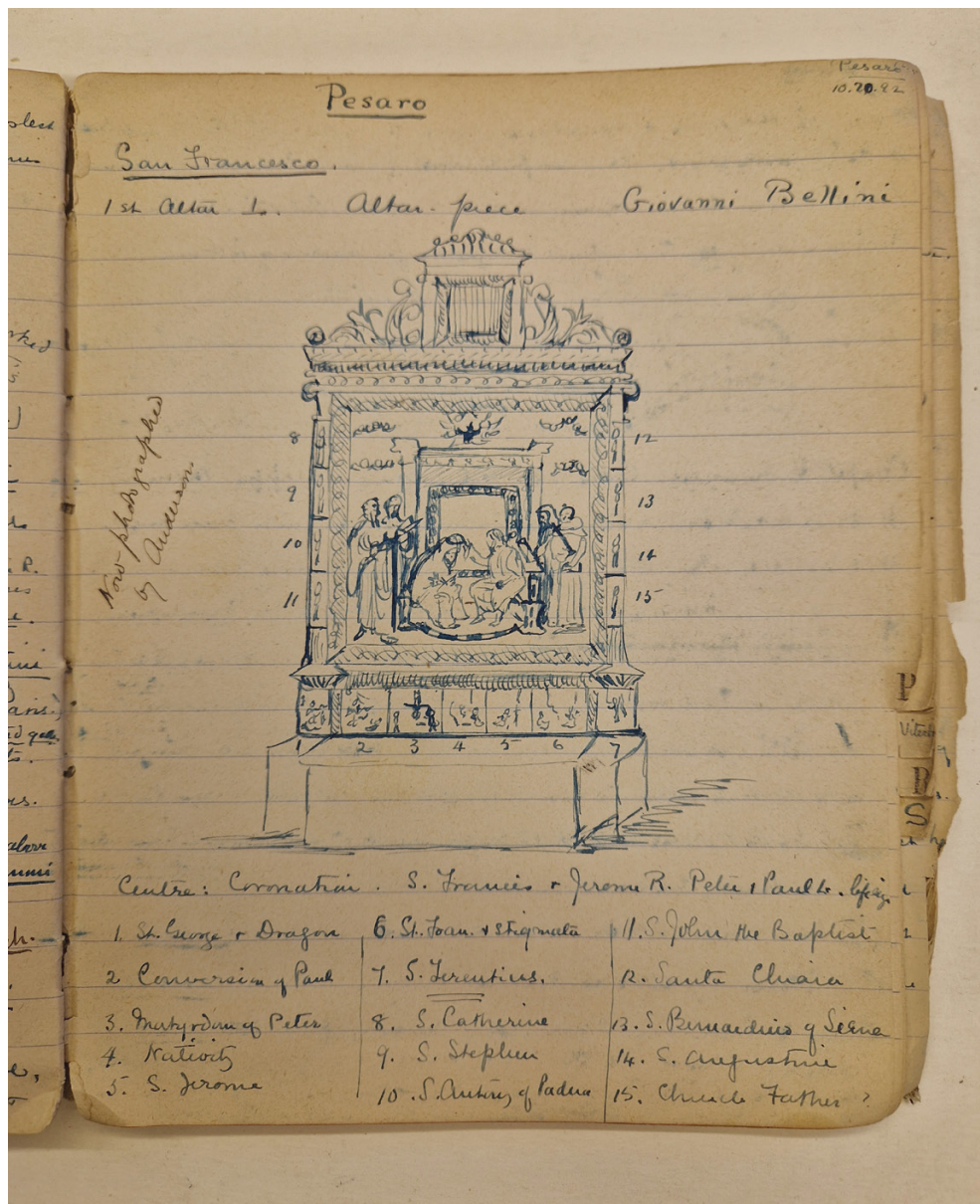
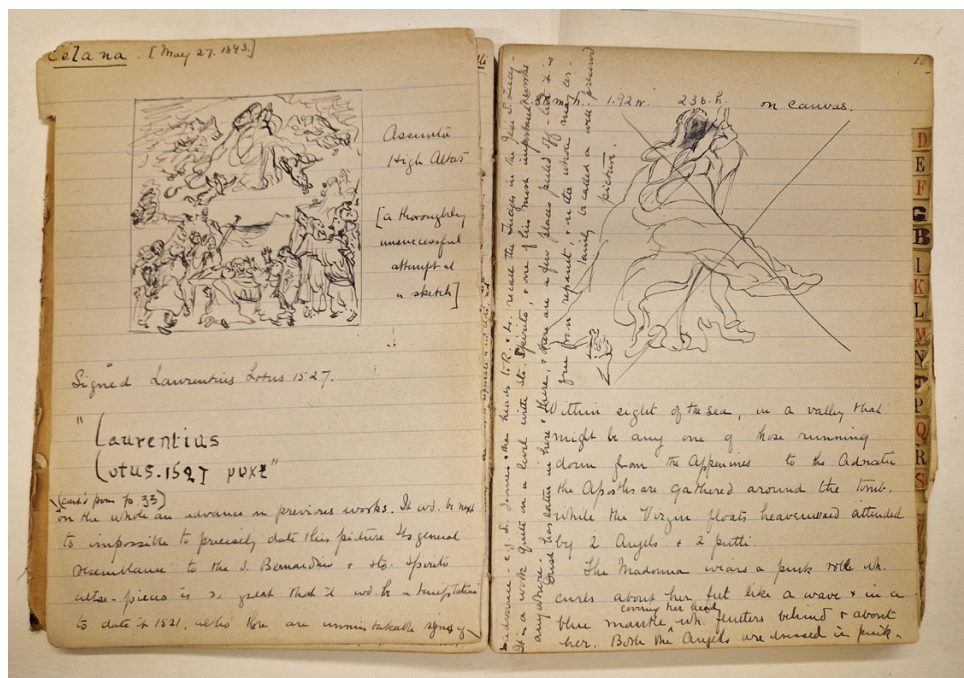
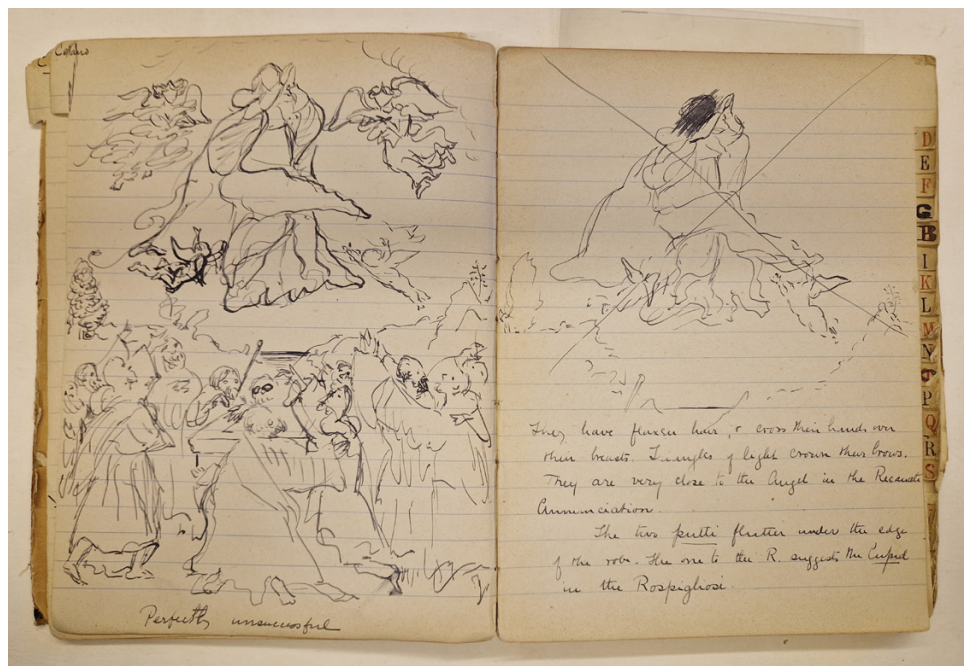


Fig. 7. Mary Berenson, *Study from the Pala di Pesaro by Giovanni Bellini* from the 1892 travel to Todi, Urbino and other cities, f. 123. Settignano (FI), Biblioteca Berenson at I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence



Fig. 8. Lorenzo Lotto, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1527, Celana (BG), Church of Santa Maria Assunta



Figs. 9-10. Mary Berenson, *Study from Lotto's Assumption of the Virgin in Celana* from the 1893 travel to Sedrina, Bergamo and other cities, ff. 9-10, 11-12. Settignano (FI), Biblioteca Berenson at I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence

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