



Sprigge and Berenson

Citation

Wisner, Melanie. 2002. Sprigge and Berenson. Harvard Library Bulletin 11 (3-4), Fall-Winter 2000: 88-90.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42669208>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

SPRIGGE AND BERENSON

Sylvia Sprigge (1903-1961). Papers, ca. 1947-1959.

Acquired in April 1999 on the Louis J. Appell, Jr., Fund for British Civilization in the Harvard College Library (1996) and the Amy Lowell Fund (1952). *98M-52

IN JANUARY 1945, WAR CORRESPONDENT SYLVIA SPRIGGE DELIVERED A VOLUME of poems to a striking and elderly bearded man in a village outside Florence. This was her first meeting with Italian Renaissance art historian, critic, connoisseur, and collector Bernard Berenson. In spite of wartime shortages that prevented the most basic hospitality, Berenson extended a sincere invitation to Sprigge to visit again. She did, frequently, and they corresponded for the rest of his life.

The Houghton Library acquired the papers of Sylvia Saunders Sprigge (1903-1961) in April 1999. Five linear feet of papers, photographs, printed material, and clippings document not only the insightful and gossipy relationship between Berenson and Sprigge but also Sprigge's career as poet, translator, journalist, and biographer.

Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), born in Russian Lithuania to Jewish parents, emigrated to Boston at the age of eleven. He attended Boston Latin School, Boston University, and Harvard (class of 1887), after which he left America

Photograph of (from left) artist Renato Guttuso, Bernard Berenson, and Sylvia Sprigge. Marking shows Sprigge cut out for the version of the photo used in her biography of Berenson. *98M-52, box 3. Reduced from original (which is a photograph of a photograph) 6 3/16" x 4 1/2".



permanently, aside from short visits. His legacies to Boston and Harvard are rich: the Renaissance collection of Isabella Stewart Gardner is largely his work, and Villa I Tatti, Berenson's home in Settignano, Italy, from 1910 to his death, was bequeathed to Harvard as a scholarly center for Renaissance studies.

The correspondence between Berenson and Sprigge is the animated core of the collection: between 1947 and 1959, there are a thousand letters from her in a charming upsloping hand and seven hundred, legible with difficulty, from him (fortunately accompanied in many cases by Sprigge's typed transcriptions). The letters range widely across international politics, cultural and social affairs, aesthetic philosophy, and the work of individual writers and artists. As Italian

Aesthetic appreciation
Artistic analysis

40 roomed house
17 men + women servants
3 librarians 50,000 ools
2 secs.

1889

1888-9
William James
walks all winter
with BB in hills
scraping from
nervous breakdown
- all winter all winter
to walk.

Last
last time
used telephone 1920.

"Modern art
inspiration through dissipation"
BB knew all about Modigliani's hashish
Utrillo's drunkenness - Picasso's long
foorish silences with tragic in the
happen, flannery cubism -

Someone (Nga Djette's daughter)
who compared him to Grand Lama of
Tibet smiled - Ich habe gelacht und
gelacht.
like Hannali Kuhl - Paula Djette
talk of his spiritual fondly words he
contemplates

On Bibliography
Alfredo Mezio in Mondo
Aug 2 1955
"Compared with the bibliography
of other art historians... which
are like proper reserve reserves with
special rates reserved for specialists, BB's
might be called an Italian designed
& planted in an Italian way.
Mezio likes his
"brilliant & familiar
made professors call it
a superior dilettantism"
Cruce compared it
to de Sanctis' History of
Literature

He moves as
lightly as a
oblongly
(Carla Djette)
He never chatters
In preface to Italian
painters - without
verbal arts
musical arts
our words wd be
a jungle -

Autograph manuscript page from Sprigge's notes for articles and biography. *98M-52 box 4. Reduced from original sheet measures 8" x 10".

correspondent for the Manchester Guardian, Sprigge met scores of political movers and shakers; Berenson entertained a continual stream of visitors to I Tatti. The letters provided each with refuge from a busy life. There are also letters from mutual friends including Carlo Sforza, Mario Praz, Diana Menuhin, Hugh Trevor-Roper, R. C. Trevelyan (the poet who occasioned Sprigge's introduction to Berenson), M. A. De Wolfe Howe, Ralph Barton Perry, and W. G. Constable.

Sprigge's pre-Berenson life is here in letters from her crowd in and around Abinger in Surrey. This neighborhood was for a time unusually rich in writers, artists, and musicians, and a periodical sprang up in their midst, edited and published by Sprigge and R. C. Trevelyan. The more or less monthly *Abinger Chronicle* was a "small and happy venture" in wartime that saw thirty issues from 1939 to 1944 before the band scattered (Houghton is fortunate to hold a nearly complete run). E. M. Forster, Max Beerbohm, and William Rothenstein wrote Sprigge to submit material for the magazine; the papers contain a galley of a short piece by Beerbohm, corrected in his hand, and letters from all.

A *London Times* reviewer wrote of Sprigge's 1960 biography: "The writer on Berenson must feel at home in five languages; in a wide, though not exhaustive, span of the visual arts; in philosophy; in history; in criticism; in every aspect of living at the most civilized pitch. In fact, Mrs. Sprigge has taken on an immense task, and acquitted herself most creditably in it." Sprigge was not at first inclined to write a biography, and Berenson was even more reluctant to be the subject of one; in the end, Sprigge was persuaded by publishers, and Berenson agreed but insisted the book not be published during his lifetime. The papers include the biography in all stages, from long journal entries to manuscript, typescript, and photographs for publication. The book went to press with barely enough time to record in a postscript the fact of B.B.'s death in October 1959.

Collections related to Berenson and I Tatti are found in at least seven other Harvard libraries; this archive will enrich the picture of both the personal and the professional Berenson. At least five monographs, and many more articles, have been written on Berenson, I Tatti, or both in the last ten years. Beyond offering new insights into twentieth century art criticism, connoisseurship, and intellectual life, these papers are sure to generate further research on Berenson, his remarkable home, and his enduring friend and biographer, Sylvia Sprigge.

MELANIE WISNER is a Manuscript Cataloger in the Manuscript Department, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.