

Belle da Costa Greene, in Love with Islamic Book Art

When Belle da Costa Greene (1883-1950) died, her bequest to the Morgan Library included a small collection of Persian, Turkish, Mughal and Arabic miniatures. Belle was the first director of the Morgan Library, but what motivated her to collect Islamic book art? Was it her romantic relationship with Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) who also collected Islamic manuscripts (Fig. 1)? Did she associate the art with the exotic persona she created for herself by claiming Portuguese ancestry? Was she enticed by “Europe’s collective day-dream of the Orient?”¹ My research suggests all these factors may have played a role in shaping the collections of this remarkable woman.

Figure 1. Bernard Berenson admiring one of his Persian miniatures. Sarah Choate Sears, Bernard Berenson, c. 1909. Platinum print. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Montgomery S. Bradley and Cameron Bradley, P1984.58. © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Belle’s biographer Heidi Ardizzone believes Belle met Bernard in 1909 while he and his wife Mary were visiting New York. What started as a professional relationship, quickly turned romantic. Before returning to Italy, Bernard ordered a parting gift of the French edition of *The Thousand and One Nights* for Belle.² Bernard was known to woo women by reading poetry to them in French, and apparently used this approach with Belle as well.

The following year, Bernard and Belle met in London and traveled together to Paris, Munich and Italy.

The avant-garde ballet *Scheherazade* was playing in Paris. We do not know if the lovebirds attended the production, but Belle adored theatre, opera and ballet and years later associated the idea of living in Paris

¹ Kiernan, V. G. (1969) *The Lords of Humankind: Black Man, Yellow Man, and White Man in the Age of Empire*. Boston: Little, Brown.

² Samuels, E. and Samuels, J. N. (1987) *Bernard Berenson, the Making of a Legend*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 680.

with wandering the streets wearing “bells on my toes and breasts.”³ This erotic imagery mirrors the Oriental costumes worn in the *Scheherazade* production (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Ida Rubinstein as Zobeide in the 1910 Ballets Russes production Scheherazade. Photograph (1910). Digital copy retrieved [online](#). Unknown photographer for the Ballets Russes.

After Paris, Bernard and Belle went to Munich for the Masterpieces of Muhammad Art Exhibition (fig. 3) that included over 3,600 Islamic objects and 500 pages of manuscripts displayed in eighty rooms.⁴

Figure 3. Poster “Ausstellung München 1910. Meisterwerke Muhammedanischer Kunst- Musik-Feste” Design: Julius Diez. Colour lithography. 108 x 71.5cm. 1910| Munich, Münchner Stadtmuseum. Inv. Nr. P-B 1/84 (Photo: Museum).

A year later, Belle acquired several Persian drawings exhibited in Munich for Morgan’s collection from Charles Hercules Read (1857-1929).⁵ Indeed, Read may have started Belle’s collection. Before leaving Europe in 1910, Belle met Read in London and wrote to Bernard that she had received a [personal] gift of “two Persian 15th century drawings.”⁶

In 1912, Belle gave Bernard a three-volume tome commemorating the Munich exhibition and *The Miniature Paintings of Persia, India and Turkey* by F.R. Martin (fig.4).⁷

³ Ardizzone, H. (2007) *An Illuminated Life, Belle da Costa Green’s Journey from Prejudice to Privilege*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.

⁴ Shalem, A. (2010) *The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst"* Reconsidered. Middle East and Islamic Studies Brill Online Books: Brill.

⁵ Greene, B. d. C. to Read, C.H. September 30, 1911. *Saying Pierpont Morgan does not care to purchase the pearl carpet. Morgan Collections Correspondence, 1887-1948 (ARC 1310)* Pierpont Morgan Library Archives 150549.

⁶ Greene, B. d. C. to Berenson, B. October 12, 1910a. *I have also been given two Persian 15th century drawings. Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti.*

⁷ Greene, B. d. C. to Berenson, B. February 1, 1912a. *By the way I ordered a copy of the catalogue of the Munich Exhibition of Mohammedan Art for you. Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti.*

Figure 4. Leaf from the Read Persian Album, now part of the Pierpoint Morgan Collection. Persia, Qazvin ca. 1550. 378 x 241 mm. Plate 148. Sikander fighting with the Dragon. About A.D. 1550. The Miniature Paintings of Persia, India and Turkey by F.R. Martin, Plate 148.

These books appealed to Bernard's academic interest, but Belle's reasons for sending them were dual-purpose, as evidenced by a letter she sent upon learning Bernard was in Munich:

Oh! B.B. daarrling [sic], how I long to be with you in Munich and [for you] to ask me if I remember that night - I remember all of it. It seems almost incredible to my silly self that you can be in "our" pet places [sic], where we lived... without me. Do you remember...that one wonderful night in my room with the funny feather mattress as a blanket?⁸

On another occasion, Bernard gave Belle garments by the Venetian fashion designer Mariano Fortuny (1871-1949) (fig. 5).

Figure 5. Mariano Fortuny, Delphos Gown (detail), ca. 1910, The Red List.

Fortuny's father was an Orientalist painter inspired by Persian themes. Belle commented when wearing one of the gowns, "it was the most adorable feeling, it is so soft, clingy and makes me feel just like an Arab or Egyptian or Persian Cat!"⁹

Belle reciprocated by sending Bernard a photograph of a miniature portrait by Laura Coombs Hills (1859-1952) of Belle wrapped in a "wonderful glowing saffron" representing "one of [her] former incarnations - 'Egyptienne.'" (fig. 6.)¹⁰

⁸ Greene, B. d. C. to Berenson, B. September 16, 1912c. Oh! B.B. daarrling how I long to be with you in Munich. Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti.

⁹ Greene, B. d. C. to Berenson, B. October, 1910b. It was the most adorable feeling it is so soft, clingy and make me feel just like an Arab or Egyptian or Persian cat! Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti.

¹⁰ Ardizzone, H. (2007) *An Illuminated Life, Belle da Costa Green's Journey from Prejudice to Privilege*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.

Figure 6. Miniature Portrait of Belle da Costa Greene in in Egyptian Costume, ca. 1910 by Laura Coombs Hills. Watercolor on Ivory. 146 x 108 mm, oval. Bequest of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950. The Morgan Library and Museum. Accession Number: AZ164.

In 1912, Belle sat for Baron Adolf de Meyer (1868- 1946), a photographer known for capturing society women in exotic Persian and Asian costumes. In a letter to Bernard, Belle described the photo - “It is an all black costume and everyone says I look deeply, darkly mysterious in it (but not beautiful).”¹¹

The following year, New York was “flooded with Turkish [gentlemen]...all with very grand titles and very sensual faces” who attended fancy dress balls.¹² For one of the balls, Belle planned to wear a costume inspired by one of the Persian drawings in the Munich exhibition commenting to Bernard - “You would love it BB. It is flame colored and gold and bits of folly fur.”¹³

Belle, Mary and Bernard traveled together in 1914 to view the art collections of Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919) and Henry Walters (1848-1931). Afterwards, Belle placed an order with the London bookseller Quaritch for reference books related to Persian, Indian and Chinese art.¹⁴ Of the thirty-four books on the invoice, only three are listed in the Morgan reference collection. Ten of the books can be found in the Berenson Library including Griffiths’ *Paintings of the Buddhist Cave Temples of Ajanta 2* volumes 1896-7 (fig. 7). Perhaps, these books were gifts from Belle as well.

Figure 7. The ornate cover of The Paintings of the Buddhist Cave-Temples of Ajanta, Khandesh, India., 1896-7, 550 x 390 mm, The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland Library.

¹¹ Greene, B. d. C. to Berenson, B. February 27, 1912b. It is an all black costume and everyone says I look deeply, darkly mysterious in it. Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti.

¹² Greene, B. d. C. to Berenson, B. January 30, 1913. I am going to the Tiffany’s in a lovely Persian costume that I had copied from one of our earlier Persian drawings. Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Greene, B. d. C. to Quaritch, B. February 27, 1914. Miss Greene wishes a list of books or reproductions of Persian Art including books, Indian Art and literature, Chinese painting, bronzes and pottery. Morgan Collections Correspondence, 1887-1948 (ARC 1310) 149213.

Yet although Belle's interest in Islamic art was closely entwined with her relationship with Bernard, she continued to collect Islamic miniatures after their relationship ended. In 1915, the scholar Rudolf Meyer-Riefstahl (1880-1935) started visiting the Morgan Library and "instructing [Belle] ...in Persian manuscripts."¹⁵ He may have been the source of some of Belle's Turkish miniatures. In 1926, Belle added to her collection by purchasing leaves from a Qur'an and a book of Muslim prayers. These purchases were made without much forethought. Belle admitted she was "sorter [sic] drunk at the time" having spent the afternoon "rousing and sousing" with friends - intoxicated, but no longer by her love for Bernard.¹⁶

¹⁵Greene, B. d. C. to Berenson, B. March 3,1915. You must write me all that you know of Meyer-Riefstahl. He is over here and is instructing me pretty frequent In Persian manuscripts. Biblioteca Berenson., I Tatti.

¹⁶ Ardizzone, H. (2007) *An Illuminated Life, Belle da Costa Green's Journey from Prejudice to Privilege*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.

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- Letter from Greene, B. d. C. to Quaritch B. February 27, 1914. Morgan Collections Correspondence 1887-1948 (ARC 1310) Pierpont Morgan Library Archives 149213