

In the Eye of the Beholder: Felony Hubris

Piermatteo d'Amelia, (1467-1503) a prominent apprentice of Filippo Lippi on the Cathedral of Spoleto is noted in the history of art as the first painter of the Sistine chapel ceiling.

In approximately 1880, Piermatteo Lauro de Manfredi 's painting "Annunciation" was removed from a monastic order's central altar in Amelia, Italy and placed on St. Francis' Portiuncula within the Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli, until it was audaciously smuggled out of Italy by Radcliffe art historian Mary Berenson, and her husband, Harvard art historian Bernard Berenson. The Berensons, with the help of an Italian intermediary, laundered the Annunciation through Colnaghi Gallery in London and into the United States to complete the sale to Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1880. This painting then experienced complete obliteration of its provenance including the artist's identity, at Gardner's Boston museum.

In a demonstration of sheer hubris, "The Handbook for the Collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum" relates this conspiracy narrative of looting, smuggling and laundering of the Annunciation painting from Italy in a false bottom trunk under cheap dolls as though it is a humorous anecdote, rather than a series of astonishingly arrogant, criminal acts.

This paper will contextualize the relationships between Isabella Stewart Gardner, the Berensons and Colnaghi Gallery and suggest that a close reading of the provenances in the Gardner Museum Collection reveal even further lapses of conscience in the collection as suggested by Mary and Bernard Berenson's independent epistolary confessions with Mrs. Gardner and others.