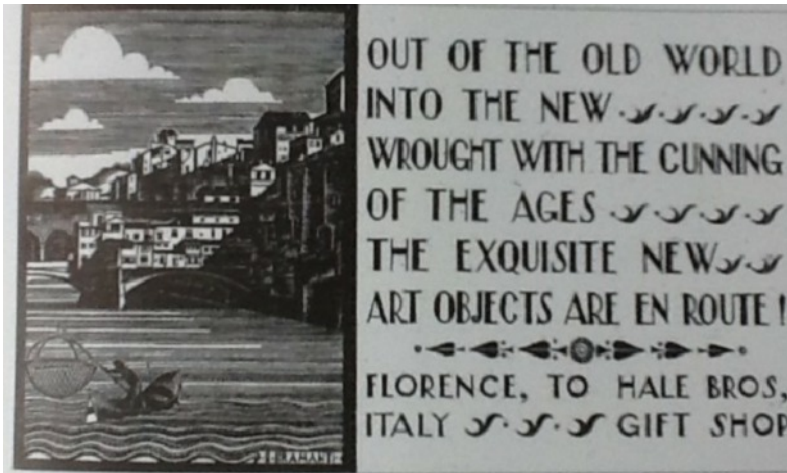


# The Demand for Renaissance Masters and the Tradition of Art Forgery in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

## *Background Notes*

Dr Antonia Whitley - 22 April 2015



This is a 1929 wood engraving by Bruno Bramanti showing a view of Florence and the Arno river with the Ponte Vecchio in the distance. It was commissioned from the artist by a US department shop, that sold works made by Florentine craftsmen.



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Here are *some* of the pieces that make up the story I shall attempt to tell today. The lives of the following characters, and many others, fused as a result of a particular mix of circumstances....

## **The American Socialite, Art Collector and sometime dupe: Isabella Stewart Gardner**

**Portrait (detail) by John Singer Sargent (1888)**



A wealthy American socialite from a prominent Boston family, Isabella Stewart Gardner, was a philanthropist and patron of fine art. In fact, she was one of the greatest Italian Renaissance art collectors in America. The museum, named after her, at Fenway Court, Boston, which houses her collection, has been described as one of the finest compact art collections in the world. It includes Titian's (The Rape of) Europa (1560-62), Gentile Bellini's A Seated Scribe (c.1479), Raphael's Pietà (c.1503), and many others.

## **The Taste-Maker and Fortune Hunter: Bernard Berenson**



**Photographed at his home, Villa I Tatti, in 1903**

Described by Thomas Hoving as “the flamboyant and amoral art historian”, Bernard Berenson was to the outside world at the beginning of the 20C the undisputed authority on Italian Renaissance art. Blessed with a discriminating eye and an exceptional memory, his judgements on art became legendary. Under this cover, however, it has been established beyond any doubt, that he was actively involved with art dealing, both as a principal and as an ‘expert’, entering into secret business partnerships with various art dealers to ‘authenticate’ works of art. When they sold at auction, he got a cut, which made him a very wealthy man. He helped Isabella Stewart Gardner, a lifelong friend, to acquire, from 1895, nearly 70 works of art, which formed the nucleus of her collection.

## **The Faker:**

**The leading figure among the counterfeiters was  
Icilio Federico Joni (1866-1946)**



**Photographed in his studio c. 1909**

Born in Siena in 1866, Icilio Joni was a gifted artist who made a career specialising in the copying of Renaissance and other Sienese masterpieces. Additionally, he invented 'other works', which he purported were by a variety of old masters. His repertoire was extremely varied and, for a while, he even fooled Berenson... until the latter had had sufficient exposure to recognize distinctive and repeating traits in the artist's work.

While Joni was the leader of 'the school of fakers', and Siena was the epicenter of this faking activity, what was produced in his and their workshops ended up in just about every major museum, gallery and private collection in the world.

## The Quest for 'Renaissance' Objects

The popularity of the Renaissance style in America is illustrated by one of many so called marriage-chests or 'cassone', carved in the Renaissance style by a Florentine craftsman around 1890.



## The Quest for 'Renaissance' Paintings

**Madonna and Child with Two Angels** tempera and gold on panel in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York.

John Pope-Hennessy, (1939) attributed it to a painter close to Sassetta (active from 1423-1450) whom he called the Castelli-Mignanelli Master.

It has since been shown to have been painted by Umberto Giunti (a student of Joni).

