

Collaboration and Correction: Re-examining the Writings of Lucy Olcott Perkins, 'a lady resident in Siena'

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In the first years of the twentieth century, the American art historian Lucy May Olcott (1877–1922) was an established authority on Sieneese art.¹ Her collaboration with historian William Heywood (1857–1919) on their *Guide to Siena: History and Art* (1903), her marriage to scholar of Italian art Frederick Mason Perkins (1872–1955), and her residence in Siena placed her, briefly, at the centre of a network of researchers, connoisseurs, and dealers whom Robert Langton Douglas (1864–1951) termed the 'old Sieneese gang'.² As such, Olcott was briefly in a unique position: a writer of 'readable' texts, 'carefully studied' but 'written *con amore*', undertaking collaborative research in the company of fellow connoisseurs such as Perkins, Mary Berenson (1864–1945), and Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), with unparalleled access to historic sites and the Berensons' growing photography collection.³

This article seeks to re-examine Olcott's contribution by embracing the networks and collaborations that brought such rigour to her research, while also exploring the tastes, instincts, and circumstances that kept her writing valuable for its 'directness and simplicity' (R.H.H.C., p. 261).

¹ Lucy May Olcott, later Lucy Olcott Perkins, published under several different names throughout her career. This article refers to her as Olcott throughout; the footnotes indicate the pen names she was using at the time.

² George H. Edgell's obituary of Robert Langton Douglas recalls Douglas's reminiscences about the 'old Sieneese gang'. It is unclear if this is Edgell's phrase or one he picked up from Douglas. See George H. Edgell, 'R. Langton Douglas', *College Art Journal*, 11 (1951), p. 134; Edward D. English, 'Medieval and Renaissance Siena and Tuscany c. 1900: Civic Life, Religion and the Countryside', in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 281–96. For Frederick Mason Perkins, see Fausto Nicolai, 'More Than an Expatriate Scholar: Frederick Mason Perkins as Art Adviser, Agent and Intermediary for American Collectors of the Twentieth Century', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 28 (2016), 311–25.

³ R.H.H.C. [Robert H. Hobart Cust], review of William Heywood and Lucy Olcott, *A Guide to Siena: History and Art*, *Burlington Magazine*, 2 (1903), 260–61 (p. 260); Machtelt Brüggem Israëls, 'The Berensons "Connosh" and Collect Sieneese Painting', in *The Bernard and Mary Berenson Collection of European Paintings at I Tatti*, ed. by Carl Brandon Strehlke and Machtelt Brüggem Israëls (Florence: Officina Libraria, 2015), pp. 47–69.

It is difficult to separate Olcott's output as a scholar from her personal life, which, as Arielle Kozloff remarks, had 'all the makings of a tragic adventure novel'.⁴ Olcott spent the last eight years of her life in an asylum, and she seems to have suffered from mental illness throughout her life: her letters suggest that she had long periods of inaction, perhaps due to depression. Perkins also suffered from mental illness and this put a strain on their short marriage. After Olcott's death Perkins married a British art historian, Irene Vavasour-Elder. The silence that surrounds Olcott's later years, which, as David Sox has speculated, may have as much to do with her dealing as with her mental illness, is balanced by the thorough, collaborative research and dedication to Sieneese art that grounds her scholarly output.⁵ Biographical circumstances both enabled and limited her reach, audience, and opportunities as a writer.

The 'old Sieneese gang'

From around 1900 an increased scholarly interest in Siena resulted in numerous books, articles, and guidebooks about the city, its history, and its art. These works included Heywood's *'Ensamles' of Fra Filippo: A Study of Mediaeval Siena* (1901); *The Pavement Masters of Siena* (1901) by Robert H. Hobart Cust (1861–1940); Douglas's *A History of Siena* (1902); *The Story of Siena and San Gimignano* (1902) by Edmund G. Gardner (1869–1935); and Olcott and Heywood's collaboration, their *Guide to Siena*, for which Heywood wrote the first part, an account of Sieneese history, and Olcott the second, a history of Sieneese art.⁶

Olcott had studied at the Normal School (now Hunter College) in New York, graduating in 1897 (Kozloff, p. 3). While travelling in Italy with

⁴ Arielle P. Kozloff, 'History of the Egyptian Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art', in Lawrence M. Berman with Kenneth J. Boháč, *The Cleveland Museum of Art Catalogue of Egyptian Art* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), pp. 1–29 (p. 4).

⁵ Until Kozloff's account of Olcott's Egyptian dealings, David Sox's brief article was the only biographical notice of Olcott. Sox presents Olcott as a mysterious and tragic figure: 'poor old Lucy'. He relies heavily on the letters of Mary Berenson, in which she presents Olcott to Isabella Stewart Gardner as a 'man hunter'. See David Sox, 'The Strange Case of Lucy Olcott Perkins', *Apollo*, 394 (1994), 43–44; *The Letters of Bernard Berenson and Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1887–1924, with Correspondence by Mary Berenson*, ed. by Rollin van N. Hadley (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

⁶ William Heywood, *The 'Ensamles' of Fra Filippo: A Study of Mediaeval Siena* (Siena: Torrini, 1901); Robert H. Hobart Cust, *The Pavement Masters of Siena (1369–1562)*, Handbooks of the Great Craftsmen (London: Bell, 1901); Robert Langton Douglas, *A History of Siena* (London: Murray, 1902); Edmund G. Gardner, *The Story of Siena and San Gimignano* (London: Dent, 1902); William Heywood and Lucy Olcott, *Guide to Siena: History and Art* (Siena: Torrini, 1903).

her mother, she met Perkins, who was already resident in Tuscany as he finished his monograph on Giotto for the British publisher George Bell.⁷ After Olcott and Perkins became engaged in 1900, and settled at 16 Via Belle Arti in Siena, they regularly entertained the ‘old Sieneſe gang’: Cust, Heywood, and, occasionally, Douglas, who took rooms near the Porta Romana while he was researching his own *History of Siena*.⁸ Olcott and Perkins also became increasingly close to the Berensons.⁹ As Machtelt Israëls has shown, the Berensons, Olcott, and Perkins regularly collaborated in research, writing, and dealing during these years, with Olcott and Perkins acting as the Berensons’ agents in Siena, keeping them informed about artworks coming up for sale.¹⁰ Scholarly disagreements between Douglas and Cust, and Douglas, Berenson and Perkins, played out very publicly in the first issues of the *Burlington Magazine*.¹¹

Olcott’s *Guide to Sieneſe art*

Heywood and Olcott’s *Guide* was for the most part positively reviewed. The *Athenaeum* praised it for being ‘at once minute and accurate’, equally useful for ‘a cursory visit or a prolonged study of Siena’, though the reviewer noted that Olcott had no ‘striking originality’ beyond a severity towards the later Sieneſe artists.¹² The *Manchester Guardian* criticized Heywood’s part and

⁷ Frederick Mason Perkins, *Giotto* (London: Bell, 1902).

⁸ Denys Sutton, ‘IV: Sena Vetus’, *Apollo*, 206 (1979), 271–87 (p. 271). At the time of publication, the Frederick Mason Perkins archive at Assisi is inaccessible to all except the archive’s supervisor, Fausto Nicolai. Nicolai informed the author in conversation that the archive holds personal correspondence between Olcott and Perkins, unavailable at the time of publication. This correspondence may yield new insights into the couple’s collaborations when the archive is made accessible to external researchers.

⁹ Letters from Lucy Olcott to Mary Berenson are held in Florence, Villa I Tatti, The Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, Biblioteca Berenson, Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, BB/BMBP 88.31. All subsequent references to letters from Olcott to Mary are from this archive and shelf mark and will be identified by date, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁰ For example, in 1903 Perkins was commissioned to negotiate for the Palmieri-Nuti brothers’ paintings on behalf of Brauer, a dealer based in Florence and Paris. Olcott to Mary Berenson, 13 August 1903 and 26 October 1903.

¹¹ For these disagreements, see Denys Sutton, ‘V: The Discovery of Sassetta’, *Apollo*, 206 (1979), 288–93; Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Helen Rees Leahy, “For Connoisseurs”: *The Burlington Magazine* 1903–11’, in *Art History and Its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, ed. by Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 231–45; and Israëls, ‘The Berensons “Connosh”’. See also Tiffany Johnston’s article in this issue of 19.

¹² The reviewer also disagreed with Olcott on a couple of other points, including her attribution of two of the Lorenzetti frescoes at San Francesco to Ambrogio

took issue with Olcott's negative discussion of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's allegorical frescoes, asking 'would she say the same of some of Mr. Watts's finest allegories?'.¹³ Despite, or perhaps because of the competition between the different factions in the 'old Sienese gang', Heywood and Olcott's *Guide* was favourably reviewed by Cust for the *Burlington Magazine* as the leader among its competitors, namely Douglas's *History* and Gardner's *Story*. Cust's ongoing feud with Douglas may have affected his assessment of Heywood and Olcott's *Guide* as 'infinitely the best of the three' (R.H.H.C., p. 261). The *Guide*'s popularity was attested by the 'rapid and complete disappearance' of the first three editions.¹⁴

Olcott's contribution on Sienese art was structured in two parts. Introductory essays outlining the history of Sienese painting, sculpture, and architecture precede the 'Itinerary', which groups the monuments and artefacts of the city into organized, highly detailed schedules. In these first essays, Olcott argues that the 'extreme conservatism' of the art of Siena should be connected to the 'conservative nature of the Sienese people' (*Guide* (1903), p. 175). Her brief history of Sienese painting followed the assessment given in Heywood's history of Siena in the first part of their *Guide*, namely, that Siena and its art experienced a decline in the second half of the trecento, from which it never truly recovered.

Nonetheless, Olcott was an important voice among contemporary Sienese art scholars who were attempting to reinstate the Sienese quattrocento as an important era in the art of the city; Berenson's and Douglas's contesting claims to the discovery of Sassetta were just one example of this new movement, as noted above. Indeed, her preference for this generation over later artists like Sodoma and Beccafumi was noted, with some criticism by Cust (R.H.H.C., p. 260). Here and in her later work, Olcott reserves particular praise for Neroccio di Bartolommeo Landi and Francesco di Giorgio Martini, citing Berenson's statement that the former was 'Simone come to life again' (*Guide* (1903), p. 187). More unusually, Olcott is sympathetic towards Sano di Pietro: in her *Guide* she describes him as 'one of the most charming and winsome of artists; [...] the very embodiment of religious sentiment [...] always delicate and light on tone' (pp. 185–86). By contrast, contemporary scholars like Douglas had dismissed Sano di Pietro as 'a weaker artist, an unvirile, but sometimes charming reactionary' and 'a

Lorenzetti, believing them to be the work of Pietro Lorenzetti. See 'Fine Arts', *Athenaeum*, 11 June 1904, p. 758.

¹³ George Frederic Watts (1817–1904) was still revered for his Symbolist and allegorical paintings. See 'Short Notices', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 July 1903, p. 4.

¹⁴ Enrico Torrini, 'Preface to the New Edition', in William Heywood and Lucy Olcott, *Guide to Siena: History and Art*, 4th edn, rev. by Frederick Mason Perkins (Siena: Libreria Editrice Senese, 1920), p. xiii. Henceforth, this edition will be referred to as '*Guide* (1920)' and the first edition as '*Guide* (1903)'.

pious and commercially successful painter'.¹⁵ Olcott made Sano di Pietro a subject of particular study, as evidenced by her later contributions to *Rassegna d'arte*, discussed below.

Olcott's *Guide* also contained a number of new attributions. Notable among these discoveries is her reattribution of the *Blessed Agostino Novello* altarpiece to Simone Martini (Fig. 1). This work, previously attributed to Simone Martini's brother-in-law Lippo Memmi, was then still displayed at S. Agostino, the Augustinian convent in Siena (*Guide* (1903), p. 277). Perkins's later annotations to the *Guide* note that Olcott was among the first to attribute the Chigi Saracini *Adoration of the Magi* to Sassetta; Douglas's *History of Siena* predated Olcott's *Guide* by a year in publication date, but Olcott had made the discovery herself 'contemporaneously with Mr. Langton Douglas' (*Guide* (1920), pp. 255–56). Olcott paid particular attention to the correct accreditation of attributions. In February 1903 she wrote to Mary Berenson to seek permission to give Perkins's name to some:

Would Mr. Berenson be willing that the S. Francesco 'Vanni' be accredited to Mr. Perkins? Mr. Berenson told him, years ago, that he might publish the picture as his own discovery



Fig. 1: Simone Martini, *Blessed Agostino Novello* altarpiece, c. 1325, tempera on wood, 198 × 257 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena. Wikimedia Commons.

¹⁵ Robert Langton Douglas, *Exhibition of Pictures of the School of Siena and Examples of the Minor Arts of That City* (London: Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1904), p. 17.

should he find out who was its author. Please be quite frank about this as of course Mr. Berenson was the original discoverer. I am mentioning Mr. B's name, especially, in regard to the S. Pietro Ovile 'Vanni' and the beautiful P.F. in the Rifugio, and of course in many other ways. (28 February 1903)

In this way, particular recent discoveries could be highlighted; in the Ritiro del Refugio she noted the 'mysterious and deeply impressive work [...] ascribed by Mr. Berenson, and with good reason, to Pier Francesco Fiorentino' (*Guide* (1903), p. 286). However, no works attributed to Andrea Vanni were connected with either Berenson's or Perkins's name, probably in anticipation of the forthcoming article on that artist in the *Burlington Magazine*, the results of collaborative work by Berenson, Olcott, and Perkins and published under Perkins's name.¹⁶ Indeed, Perkins was not explicitly mentioned in connection with any particular discovery or new attribution in Olcott's *Guide*.

In 1916 the publisher Enrico Torrini commissioned another new edition of Heywood and Olcott's *Guide*. After Torrini's death and the subsequent collapse of his publishing house, this new edition was published by Libreria Editrice Senese in December 1920. Olcott had intended to update and rewrite the entire volume, but as she was 'prevented from carrying out her intention' by then residing in an asylum, the responsibility for this volume was handed to her then ex-husband, Perkins (*Guide* (1920), p. xiii).

Perkins's corrections, annotations, and notes are copious. Some consist of updates to the location and attribution of works that had been moved and published in the decades since Olcott's work first appeared. For example, Pintoricchio's frescoed ceiling in the Palazzo del Magnifico, described by Olcott as 'very charming but to be seen only with difficulty' (crawling between the false and original ceilings), was removed by the dealer, framer, and forger Icilio Federico Joni (1866–1946) and sold to the Metropolitan Museum by Herbert Horne in 1914.¹⁷ Perkins notes this in his 1920 additions to Olcott's *Guide*, remarking that the frescoes had 'recently been cut out and sold, in open defiance of governmental regulations and official inspectors'.¹⁸

¹⁶ F. Mason Perkins, 'Andrea Vanni', *Burlington Magazine*, 2 (1903), 309–25.

¹⁷ *Guide* (1903), p. 260. For Joni, see Gianni Mazzoni, *Falsi d'autore: Icilio Federico Joni e la cultura del falso fra otto e novecento* (Siena: Protagon, 2004). For Horne, see Ian Fletcher, *Rediscovering Herbert Horne: Poet, Architect, Typographer, Art Historian, 1880–1920* British Authors Series, 3 (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1990).

¹⁸ *Guide* (1920), p. 300, note b. In 1921 the twenty-two ceiling panels, transferred to canvas, were installed in their own gallery at the Metropolitan Museum. See Bryson Burroughs, 'A Ceiling by Pinturicchio from the Palazzo del Magnifico in Siena', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 16 (1921), 3–10.

However, many of Perkins's corrections are unnecessarily jarring, providing indefensible criticism not only of the *Guide*'s content but also its register. When Olcott notes Jacopo della Quercia's *Vision of Zacharias* as 'a vigorous work, although somewhat poor in composition' (*Guide* (1903), p. 261), Perkins remarks that 'we find it difficult to account for such a restriction regarding the quality of this composition, which appears to us an excellent one' (*Guide* (1920), pp. 302, 317, note a.). Perkins is particularly critical of the general introductory essay, noting that Olcott's argument was now outdated thanks to the developments in recent scholarship, that had, for example, brought new appreciation for the late-trecento artists (p. 201, note a.).

An expertise in 'Unknown Masterpieces'

Even before the *Guide* had been published, Olcott was put forward for further monographs relating to her field of expertise. In November 1902 Mary Berenson wrote to the art historian Corrado Ricci on her husband's behalf, to recommend Olcott as a possible author for a work on Siena in the Bergamo Storico-Artistico series. Olcott had been living in Siena for three years and was 'fully competent to give you a satisfactory book on that town'. Mary Berenson supported this suggestion with a caveat that Olcott could draw on guidance from both Berenson, who could look over the manuscript, and Perkins, who was writing on Sieneese art after completing his Giotto monograph.¹⁹ This did not come to pass, but Olcott was invited to help install the textiles for Ricci's monumental *Mostra dell'antica arte senese* (1904).²⁰

By 1903 Olcott was in conversation with the Parisian publishers Calmann Lévy about a book on 'Unknown Masterpieces of Italian Painting in Italy', in which she intended 'to reproduce masterpieces of little-known (to the public) artists, and also a few works that are almost inaccessible', including works in the Berensons' own collection.²¹ Olcott solicited Mary's advice for choosing the illustrations for this work, as she was concerned that some of her choices were 'by masters too well known' or 'somewhat inferior in value'. Several of her selected paintings she had not seen in person, and had never been photographed before, which she regarded as

¹⁹ Mary Berenson to Ricci, 17 November 1902, Ravenna, Biblioteca Classense, Fondo Corrado Ricci, 2942/II. S. R. 2. 1. 13. My thanks to Maria Alambritis for this reference.

²⁰ Corrado Ricci, *Il palazzo pubblico di Siena e la mostra d'antica arte senese* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'arti grafiche, 1904), p. 77.

²¹ Olcott to Mary Berenson, 13 August 1903.

a great asset: ‘the greater number of works never photographed [...] the better.’²² This material was never published in this form.

By 1904 Olcott’s reputation as a leading scholar of Sieneese art is attested by her contributions of several artist biographies to the third volume of *Bryan’s Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*. George C. Williamson, the volume editor, remarked that ‘Miss Olcott, a lady resident in Siena’ had given ‘special attention’ to the biographies of Ambrogio and Pietro Lorenzetti, Vecchietta, and Simone Martini, which were ‘one of the best groups of articles in the volume’.²³ The choice of longer biographies for these trecento Sieneese artists reflects the scholarly interests of an earlier generation of scholars; Matteo di Giovanni, for example, received a shorter entry with no official author (III, 305). Olcott’s essays for *Bryan’s Dictionary* make use of archival documents and biographies by Lorenzo Ghiberti and Giorgio Vasari, but they are also unusually precise in their discussion of works’ physical histories. Her assessment of the many frescoes once given to Pietro Lorenzetti is meticulous in its account of their restoration: the fresco of Madonna and saints at San Francesco is described as ‘much repainted’ and ‘although given to Luca di Tommè, is, or at least was, also by his hand’ (III, 248).

From 1904 to 1907 Olcott also published a number of articles in the recently founded *Rassegna d’arte*, then under the directorship of Francesco Malaguzzi Valeri (1867–1928) with Guido Cagnola (1861–1959). Olcott’s articles accompanied the first reproductions of unpublished paintings that she had intended to include in an ‘Unknown Masterpieces’ volume. These paintings had been ‘discovered’ in the area surrounding Siena and, with the exception of a Brescianino from the church of S. Lorenzo a Bibbiano in Buonconvento, they all reveal her interest and expertise in the Sieneese quattrocento.²⁴ Correspondence between Olcott and Mary Berenson would suggest that many of these ‘discoveries’ had been made with Olcott’s husband. On 26 October 1903 she reported that they had ‘found many interesting pictures’ on a ten-day cycling trip, including one which should ‘go in among the unknown masterpieces — an exquisite picture by Benvenuto di Giovanni’, only ‘equalled’ by the Benvenuto di Giovanni at Volterra. This discovered painting was almost certainly ‘una deliziosa *Annunciazione*’, which Olcott published in *Rassegna d’arte* in May 1906.²⁵

²² Olcott to Mary Berenson, 7 September 1903. See Tiffany Johnston’s article in this issue of *19* for further examples of Mary Berenson aiding other scholars.

²³ *Bryan’s Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*, ed. by George C. Williamson, 5 vols (New York: Macmillan; London: Bell, 1904), III, pp. v–vi.

²⁴ Lucy Olcott, ‘Un dipinto inedito del Brescianino’, *Rassegna d’arte*, 4 (1904), 56–57.

²⁵ Lucy Olcott, ‘Una “Annunciazione” di Benvenuto di Giovanni’, *Rassegna d’arte*, 6 (1906), 73–74 (p. 73).

In May 1904 Olcott wrote the notice for five previously unpublished paintings by Matteo di Giovanni. It is likely that she saw these paintings, then in various churches and in the collection of Count Emilio Tolomei, in the company of Perkins, who, she noted, would be writing on Matteo di Giovanni in more detail in his forthcoming book on Sieneese art.²⁶ Yet the article is undoubtedly her own in its simple, elegant profusions: she describes the paintings as ‘the most beautiful creations of an artist who at all times fascinates both the mind and the eye’.²⁷

Her most significant article in this group for the *Rassegna d'arte* is undoubtedly her longer article on a painting ‘attributed to Salvanello’, which had been exhibited in the *Mostra dell'antica arte senese* in 1904. The painting had been traditionally given to an all but unknown thirteenth-century artist; more recently, Cavalcaselle had suggested it was close to Giovanni di Paolo, and Berenson had given it to the Sieneese quattrocento school, but the light and viewing conditions in the church of S. Cristoforo made it impossible to go much further. However, after seeing it in the 1904 exhibition, Olcott argued that it was clearly the work of that most gracious pupil of Sassetta, Sano di Pietro, as it exhibited his ‘spirit’, detailing, simplicity of architecture, and colouring (*Fig. 2*).²⁸

During these years, Olcott and Perkins remained relatively dependent on the Berensons for opportunities to review and publish, and for access to contacts, photographs, and artworks. They both wrote frequently to Mary, asking her to find them commissions for articles and reviews in the *Nation*, *Burlington Magazine*, and the *Century*; Olcott also offered to write some articles for publications like the *Ladies' House Journal*, which were better paid if less scholarly in tone.²⁹ Olcott recognized, however, that such commissions were difficult to get as ‘neither Mr. Perkins nor my name is one to conjure with — as an advertisement’ (13 December 1903). The Perkins’s budget was small, and Olcott would leave Perkins to travel, teach, and research, in order to support them both, but was occasionally forced to return to care for him, as he suffered from a nervous condition.³⁰ Their marriage came under strain, however, and in 1904 Perkins was arrested in Siena; Douglas reported that Perkins had threatened to murder Olcott and kill himself, believing that Olcott had committed adultery.³¹ Olcott fled to

²⁶ Lucy Olcott, ‘Di alcune opere poco note di Matteo di Giovanni’, *Rassegna d'arte*, 4 (1904), 65–68, with four reproductions.

²⁷ ‘Le più belle creazioni di un artista che in ogni tempo affascinò e la mente e l'occhio’ (‘Di alcune opere’, p. 66), my translation.

²⁸ Lucy Olcott, ‘Un quadro attribuito a Salvanello’, *Rassegna d'arte*, 4 (1904), 141–42 (p. 142).

²⁹ Olcott to Mary Berenson, 24 September 1903, 13 December 1903.

³⁰ In August 1903, for example, Olcott came back from her research trip to look after Perkins who had been unwell. Olcott to Mary Berenson, 13 August 1903.

³¹ Douglas to Wilhelm von Bode, 19 August 1904, Berlin, Zentralarchiv, SMB-ZA, IVNL Bode 1532/5.



Fig. 2: Sano di Pietro, *St George and the Dragon*, c. 1440–70, tempera on panel, 140.5 × 123.5 cm, Museo Diocese, Siena. Saliko, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

the United States before her husband's release from the asylum. Writing to Mary Berenson on the Atlantic crossing, she explained that she intended to continue her research, as such work would 'help me more than aught else [...] if I can avoid it, I don't intend to give up the subject I love' (2 August 1904).

Sharing knowledge at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

In December 1905 Olcott applied to Henry W. Kent (1866–1948), the assistant secretary of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, arguing that the museum would benefit from having a specialist educator on its staff.³²

³² Olcott to Kent, 7 December 1905, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives (MMA), P4195 Lucy Olcott Perkins.

Separated from Perkins, Olcott was urgently seeking paid museum work to provide herself with an income. Soon after, she was approached by Edward Robinson (1858–1931), then the assistant director, to take responsibility for planning, acquiring, and organizing a new collection of photographs, to complement the books in the museum library, at the instigation of Roger Fry (1866–1934).³³ Fry was then curator of European painting at the museum, and he held Olcott in high regard, writing to his wife that she was ‘really intelligent about pictures; having been Europeanized, she understands’.³⁴

Olcott’s new role drew on her expertise in working with the Berensons’ photographic collection and the collection made for the University of Chicago. She wrote two articles on the acquisition and possible uses for photographs in the museum’s *Bulletin*.³⁵ She noted that the photographs are particularly useful for examining the ‘quality of the finish’ and ‘effect of living surface’ of sculptures represented only in plaster cast form; suggested that the photographs are also useful to compare artists and mediums beyond the museum’s displays; and she explained her ambitions to elucidate unfamiliar new acquisitions by arranging ‘special exhibits of photographs corresponding in detail to the particular exhibit in the Recent Accessions Room’ (L.O.P., p. 163).

Alongside this role, Olcott continued her work on Italian Renaissance art, shifting her attention from the ‘unknown masterpieces’ found in the province of Siena to the lesser-known works in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum. In 1907 she wrote an article on the Metropolitan’s Italian paintings for the *Scrip*, a small monthly arts journal, owned and edited by Elisabeth Luther Carey (1867–1936), the *New York Times*’s first art critic.³⁶ This article, her last publication on ‘the subject she loved’, demonstrates her versatility in writing for different audiences, in this case, her American readers. She also chose to discuss a portrait by Sebastiano del Piombo, then recognized as ‘an authentic a likeness as exists’ of Christopher Columbus, and she noted the ‘vigour’ and ‘physical force’ of

³³ Letters from Olcott to Robinson, 9 May 1906, MMA, P4195; memo from Roger Fry: ‘A Suggested appropriation for the formation of a collection for photographs of pictures and medieval and Renaissance sculpture’, MMA, P5661.

³⁴ Roger Fry to Helen Fry, 16 March 1906, in *Letters of Roger Fry*, ed. by Denys Sutton, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), I, 258. Roger Fry had been part of the Berensons’ and Perkins’s circle before the near collapse of the *Burlington Magazine* in 1903. For Fry and Berenson’s relationship, see Caroline Elam, ‘Roger Fry and Early Italian Painting’, in *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry’s Vision of Art*, ed. by Christopher Green (London: Merrell Holberton, 1999), pp. 87–106 (pp. 89–98).

³⁵ L.M.P., ‘The Library Collection of Photographs’, *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 (1907), p. 126; L.O.P., ‘On the Use of a Collection of Photographs’, *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 3 (1908), 163–64.

³⁶ Lucy M. Perkins, ‘Some of the Italian Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum’, *Scrip*, 2 (1907), 239–44.

Piero Pollaiuolo's *St Christopher* fresco, which, in its 'very physical vitality ought to be sufficient to arouse a response from our American wealth of energy and life' (pp. 241, 244).

Olcott also gives particular attention to the museum's earliest Italian paintings, with a particular focus on Siena, 'that school which refused modernity, even in the *quattrocento*' (p. 242). Drawing on her earlier immersion in Siennese art, she assesses and reattributes a panel in the early Italian room to the Avignon school, noting that the head of St Giles is 'particularly French', the colours 'less brilliant' than the Siennese school, and other smaller details as 'distinctly not Italian' (pp. 242–43). This painting is now given to Miguel Alcañiz, a fifteenth-century Spanish artist (*Fig. 3*).



Fig. 3: Miguel Alcañiz, *St Giles with Christ Triumphant over Satan and the Mission of the Apostles*, c. 1408, tempera on wood, 151.4 × 100.3 cm. Gift of J. Bruyn Andrews, 1876. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Discussing Giovanni di Paolo's *St Francis and St Matthew*, she writes passionately about the perceived continuities and conservatism of the Sienese school:

We still have here much of the rhythmic grace of the greater men of Siena, men who, when they had finished their work, very early in the *trecento*, had so enchanted their fellow town-folk with lovely colour and sweeping line that nothing beyond Siena held charm to turn her artists aside. One is grateful that the real Sienese continued to work thus; they have left us subtle beauties and forms of loveliness of which we can never tire. (p. 242)

Even though she suggests that Giovanni di Paolo's figures were 'too pronouncedly caricatures as a rule to please', she argues that his work still 'gives us pleasure in colour and line' (p. 242).

Throughout this article, she returns to the pleasure that paintings can inspire, and the enjoyment that visitors can find in looking at particular works; words such as 'pleasure', 'pleasing', and 'pleasant' recur throughout. This emphasis again demonstrates Olcott's commitment to access and interpretation of artworks, as evidenced in her *Guide*, her earlier articles for the *Rassegna d'arte*, and her entries for *Bryan's Dictionary*, which she was able to further in her next role, as first 'Museum Instructor' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, educating schoolteachers about the collections and leading tours for visitors, which she held from autumn 1908 until summer 1909.³⁷ Olcott did not publish again after her article on the Metropolitan Museum's Italian paintings in the *Scrip*. It is possible that her position as the Berensons' private secretary (1909–10) and her later career as a private dealer and agent in textiles and Egyptian antiquities for the Metropolitan Museum, Brooklyn Museum, and Cleveland Museum of Art (1911–14), left no time for independent research and writing.³⁸

³⁷ Robert W. de Forest, 'Expert Guidance to the Collections of the Museum', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 3 (1908), p. 180; 'The Museum Guide', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 4 (1909), p. 156.

³⁸ Mary Berenson extracted Olcott from the Metropolitan, where she was having an affair with the assistant curator Bryson Burroughs. By 1911 Olcott had left the Berensons to work as a dealer. Her private clients included the American socialite, novelist, and model Rita Lydig (née Hernandez de Alba de Acosta, 1875–1929). See Mary Berenson to Gardner, 22 March 1909, 25 April 1910, 5 June 1910, and 28 October 1911, in *Letters of Bernard Berenson and Isabella Stewart Gardner*, ed. by van N. Hadley. Olcott had been present when Theodore M. Davis (1837–1915) found the tomb of Yuya and Tuya in 1905. Through this connection, Olcott seems to have developed her knowledge of Egyptian and Coptic art. She sold and gifted Coptic textiles and panels to the Metropolitan Museum in 1911, and in 1912 she was approached by Kent to acquire Egyptian antiquities for the Cleveland Museum of Art (Kozloff, pp. 1–7).

The clear divisions between the different phases of Olcott's career thus point to the freedoms and restrictions in which she worked. During her marriage to Perkins and her residence in Siena, her intimate connections with other scholars and her access to local sites enabled her to conduct research and publish under seemingly advantageous circumstances; a contemporary woman researcher working alone may not have experienced the same access to private collections and churches as Olcott working in the company of Perkins. In these earlier years of her career, Olcott's name carried significant weight thanks to the success of her *Guide*, which, as late as 1955, the travel writer Edward Hutton described as 'the best of all guide books to Siena'.³⁹

After the breakdown of her marriage Olcott lost both her access to the subjects of her research and the networks that had brought her into contact with publishers. Continuing her work alone from the United States was difficult. Her publications for the *Rassegna d'arte* from this period draw on earlier research, like her 1906 article on Benvenuto di Giovanni's *Annunciation*; her 1907 article on a fragmentary *Madonna and Child* by Sano di Pietro would not necessarily have required a visit to Bologna, but could have been written from a photograph or reproduction. Removed from her networks in Italy, she also sought out new platforms to continue her work, and her later writing indicates her continuing dedication to make lesser-known artworks better known to scholars and students alike, through publications, photographs, and teaching. Perkins, by contrast, continued to flourish in Italy, gaining a reputation for scholarship and expertise in Sienese painting. His corrections to Olcott's *Guide*, made while Olcott was incapacitated in the asylum, criticize her text as a work of scholarship, with little attention paid to its purpose as an accessible, 'readable' guidebook. Olcott's case thus raises further questions about the nature of husband and wife collaborations, and the privileges and limitations that such partnerships could bring to women writing art history in the early decades of the twentieth century.

³⁹ Edward Hutton, 'Mr. F. Mason Perkins', *The Times*, 21 October 1955, p. 13.