

**CATALOGUE OF ITALIAN
PICTURES AT 16, SOUTH
STREET, PARK LANE, LONDON
AND BUCKHURST IN SUSSEX**

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Catalogue of Italian pictures at 16, South street, Park Lane, London and Buckhurst in Sussex by
Robert Benson & Evelyn Benson

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ROBERT BENSON & EVELYN BENSON

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COLLECTED BY

ROBERT AND EVELYN BENSON



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AT
16, SOUTH STREET, PARK LANE,
LONDON

AND
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PREFACE

THIS collection of Italian pictures, gathered together during the last thirty years in London, Paris, and Italy, represents the personal taste of its owners, Robert and Evelyn Benson, so far as their opportunities have permitted. Their pictures of the English school, consisting mainly of seventeenth-century portraits, landscapes by Gainsborough and Cotman, and works of Watts, Burne-Jones and Sargent, still await a catalogue.

They were inspired primarily by the example of two great collectors of the past generation, Mr. William Graham and Mr. Holford, of whom, and of one or two others, a few words may be said.

Mr. Graham could hardly resist any Early Italian picture, sacred or profane, provided it was reverent or true in feeling. With him conception was more potent than execution, and attributions were of secondary importance. Withal he considered it a duty to buy prudently. "Make up your mind," he said, "beforehand as to the value, and always put on a limit. Or, if it be a masterpiece and you want it badly, you may go up to double its market value, or even more! But be sure and think it out beforehand, and don't be carried away at the auction, nor rushed by a clever seller."

The capacity to plunge *coûte que coûte* for a masterpiece is one of the rarer virtues of the good collector. Not that

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Mr. Graham did not often buy schoolpieces; indeed, he owned many such, as was inevitable when so many Trecentisti and Quattrocentisti were, as they are still, unidentified and nameless. But one seldom meets with a picture bought by him that does not possess some attraction of colour, and interest of subject or treatment. After twenty-eight years' interval, *provenance* from his collection is a guarantee of quality and evidence of taste. He could recognize a picture in a window by a fleeting glance, and detect the work of a master under disguises of repaint and dirt which would have baffled most eyes. Italian masters and modern pre-Raphaelites were what he loved best, and in Italy he could be lured any distance by the promise of *cosa vergine ed intatta sul legno*. His collection consisted of about 600 pictures, of which 486 were dispersed at Christie's in 1886 after his death, and towards the end of the sale many, which would now fetch large sums, were either bought in by the family or sold at low prices. Fifteen out of the 114 pictures here recorded once belonged to him, including eleven of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, three of them primitives on a gold ground.

Another collector of the same generation, Mr. Charles Butler, could plunge on occasion, but was tempted by cheapness also. He knew his own weakness, and would humorously apologize as he bought his hundredth Madonna for an old song, saying: "It will do for my brother, the Dean—so nice in a clergyman's house!" But none the less he felt and appreciated any nameless Italian's sincerity, and accumulated over a thousand pictures of all schools till it was a problem where to hang them. After the financial troubles of November 1890, when all values crumbled that he was wont to hold most stable, instead of weeding his collection he began parting with his best things that were still

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unhung. Thus fourteen pictures of his come to be recorded here.

“To know what you like instead of saying Amen to what the world says you ought to like, is to have kept your soul alive.” Decidedly Mr. Graham and Mr. Butler knew what they liked, and needed no expert to form their collections. And what about Mr. Salting? He was tireless in bargaining, and with vast experience sought ever to improve the level of what he had got. But he remained cool. Many a man, born a sportsman as well as a collector, has been known to blunder into sight of deer upon a Scotch hillside, or to shoot unconsciously behind the driven grouse, or to strike too late at the boil of the sea-trout to the fly, so preoccupied was he with his latest *trouvaille*, and absorbed in the dreamland of Art. This was not Mr. Salting's temper. He sought continually to know what other people liked, and subordinated his own preference to the advice of many counsellors. Thus he became the prince of weeders, and always had something to exchange. To him Art was little more than a craft. He was indifferent to nobility of subject provided the execution was good and the painter one whose work had a recognized value in the market. Thus he was content to live with all schools; with a Madonna by Fiorenzo di Lorenzo or the Maitre de Moulins; with a refined portrait by Petrus Christus, or one of an ugly old woman by Frans Hals; with a Constable landscape or a Boudin impressionist sea-piece; with Cima's “David and Jonathan,” or a Dutch alehouse scene with a Boor of dark corners for its hero, love-making in one corner, blind drunk in another, and unrepentant to the last. Mr. Salting did not trouble himself about theories;—whether the representation of such excesses is “the expense of spirit in a waste of shame,”

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or can be redeemed by masterly technique; whether a subject in which beauty and significance meet together is essential, or not, for a masterpiece; whether pictures can be moral and immoral, or are merely well painted and badly painted. His munificent bequest to the nation fills many gaps at Trafalgar Square, and perhaps because it is so catholic, so human, and contains such fine examples of their kind, it may give more pleasure to the average man than the collections of fastidious amateurs, whose subjects are select as well as the execution. Towards the latter part of his life he bought a forgery at auction, a false Ghirlandajo "from the Sciarra Collection," and, when he found it out, declined to take and pay for it. Many pictures passed into his possession and out again, and occasionally he was scared out of a fine thing because some authority disparaged it. For this reason a certain portrait of a lady comes to be recorded here.

Mr. Holford, as catholic in his range, was more exacting in his choice. Like Mr. Graham he demanded a noble subject, but demanded also beauty of composition, line, and colour, and, above all, the life-giving touch of a master. Thus he sought examples of the maturity of every school, preferring the fullness of summer to the colder springtime of Art. He was not one to be satisfied with the maxim *πλέον ἡμῶν παντός*, and had no sympathy with the cult of the crude, or the decadent. Masterpieces of many schools hang in harmony together in Dorchester House, and few private collections contain more of them than Mr. Holford's (now inherited by his son), from Titian, Lotto, Gaudenzio, and Bonifazio, to Rubens, Vandyck, Cuypp, Rembrandt, and Velasquez. In the greatest masters he found side by side the highest and the homeliest types of humanity. He felt