

Jen Hoyer

Interview: Deborah Parker on *Becoming Belle Da Costa Greene*

In November 2024, Deborah Parker and I spoke in detail about her new book, *Becoming Belle Da Costa Greene*, for an episode on the New Books Network *Library Science* podcast.¹ We are grateful to *RBM* for letting us put together a complementary written interview that explores a different set of broader themes. While our audio interview is focused on Parker's analysis of Greene's correspondence with Bernard Berenson, this print discussion looks at the bigger picture of Greene's place in special collections librarianship, her growth as a professional, and how we might do research on important individuals in the history of rare books and special collections.

Jen Hoyer: Your book *Becoming Belle Da Costa Greene* examines the letters that Belle da Costa Greene, famous as a pioneering librarian at the Morgan Library, wrote to Bernard Berenson. Could you explain who Greene and Berenson were, and why Belle is an important figure for readers of *RBM* to know about?

Deborah Parker: Belle Marion Greener (1879–1950) was the daughter of two mixed-race Black Americans, Genevieve Ida Fleet and Richard T. Greener. Her father was the first Black man to graduate from Harvard. When they separated in 1887, Belle's mother assumed a Dutch middle name (Van Vliet), changed the family's last name to Greene, and lived henceforth as white. Belle Marion Greener became Belle da Costa Greene. As Pierpont Morgan's personal librarian, Belle rose to great prominence. By her death in 1950, Belle Greene had become a legendary figure in the rare book world.²

Bernard Berenson (1865–1959) was an eminent American art historian and connoisseur, advisor to many American collectors, and the author of numerous books on

1. Deborah Parker, *Becoming Belle Da Costa Greene: A Visionary Librarian through Her Letters*. (I Tatti - The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Officina Libraria, 2024); Jen Hoyer, host, New Books Network, "Becoming Belle Da Costa Greene: A Visionary Librarian through Her Letters: Deborah Parker," New Books Network, November 16, 2024, 58 min., 58 sec., <https://newbooksnetwork.com/becoming-belle-da-costa-greene>

2. Read more about Greene on the website of The Morgan Library & Museum, at: <https://www.themorgan.org/belle-greene>

Italian Renaissance art. By the time he met Greene in January 1909, Berenson was one of the most famous art historians in the western world.³

JH: Interest in Greene has surged as we have learned more about her life and work. She worked as librarian for John Pierpont Morgan and, in 2024–2025, was the subject of a major exhibition at the Morgan Library and Museum.⁴ How did you first encounter Greene, and could you explain for readers how research and discourse around her has evolved over time?

DP: I had been aware of Greene since reading Heidi Ardizzone's, *An Illuminated Life: Belle da Costa Greene's Journey from Prejudice to Privilege*,⁵ but my interest was piqued anew in fall 2021 while I was a Visiting Scholar at Villa I Tatti. While working on Berenson's interest in Dante for a Masterclass, I learned that the *Vita Nuova* had functioned as something like a book of love between Berenson and Greene.⁶ Once I started reading Greene's letters, I couldn't stop. Her expressive writing reflects her vibrant personality. At times, her words seem to pop off the page.

JH: One of the areas that you explore in your research is Greene's own learning journey as a librarian. How did she become an expert on illuminated manuscripts and rare books? And how did she become a celebrity librarian? Can you give us a sense of the reputation she gained during her own lifetime among her professional peers?

DP: Over the course of her long career, Greene befriended many rare book experts and art connoisseurs. Some shared their expertise with her. Sydney Cockerell, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, was a well-known arbiter of taste. Each time Greene visited London, the two friends visited collections and examined illuminated manuscripts together. Berenson helped hone her eye. The two traveled through Italy in the summer of 1910 and studied many works of art in churches and galleries.

Greene became a celebrity after newspapers across the US began running articles about her following her acquisition of a rare edition of Caxton's *Le Morte d'Arthur* at an auction for \$42,800 in April 1911. Between 1913 and 1955, forty-eight articles on Greene appeared in American newspapers. The librarian herself was aware of all this notice: "I've come to the conclusion that I really must be grudgingly admitted the most interesting person in New York, for it's all they seem to talk about," she wrote

3. For more on Berenson, see <https://itatti.harvard.edu/bernard-berenson>

4. *Belle da Costa Greene: A Librarian's Legacy*, New York, NY: The Morgan Library and Museum, October 25, 2024–May 4, 2025.

5. (W.W. Norton, 2007).

6. Deborah Parker, "Berenson, Dante, and Botticelli," *I Tatti Masterclasses II*, November 2021, <https://vimeo.com/659695915>

Berenson in January 1912. The entire country was avid for news about Morgan's glamorous and brilliant librarian.

JH: One fact noted in the Morgan Library's exhibition on Greene is that her interest in Islamic art was far ahead of her time. Is there anything we learn from her correspondence with Berenson about her interest and growing expertise in that area?

DP: Greene and Berenson viewed the *Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art* exhibition in Munich in August 1910. The experience was transformative: both began collecting Persian drawings. After her return to the US, Greene mentions Persian art more than thirty times in letters to Berenson. Her bequest to the Morgan includes Persian, Turkish, Mughal and Arabic miniatures.

JH: Greene's personal collecting practices are impressive and serve as a reminder of her wealth; her salary from Morgan made her one of the highest-earning women of her time. How did this set her apart from her professional peers?

Greene's wealth distinguished her from other librarians. A November 1913 article in the *New York Tribune* notes that Greene was making \$10,000 a year (\$300,000 in today's terms) by 1911.⁷ Other librarians were making \$400 a year. Belle Greene moved in the highest echelons of society, was known for her stylish dress, and had many pieces of fine jewelry, some designed by Cartier.

Her last apartment, located at 535 Park Ave, had three master bedrooms and quarters for a butler and maid. The apartment itself was full of rare objects, including antique Chinese carpets and porcelains, Renaissance paintings, Middle Eastern artefacts. At her death in 1950, her estate was valued at close to \$706,474.92. Adjusted for inflation, that's \$7,406,474.92 in today's terms.

JH: In reading your book, I found it fascinating to bring together your study of Greene's personal life and evolving sense of self alongside revelations about the professional life and accomplishments that she is most celebrated for. Looking at Greene as our key example, when we study the professional work of individuals in our discipline, what do we gain from incorporating close reading of personal correspondence into our methodological repertoire?

DP: Any cache of letters offers revelations about the writer, and Greene's letters to Berenson are a treasure trove. They are the largest repository of information we have

7. "\$10,000 Librarian Speaks a Word for \$400 Sisters," *New-York Tribune* (22 November 1913): 6, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1913-11-22/ed-1/seq-6/>

on Greene's personal life and furnish a window through which we can glimpse her many worlds—rare book enclaves, auction houses, aristocratic estates, private libraries and collections, Harlem clubs, and avant-garde galleries—to name but some of the spaces she frequented.

I began by trying to identify the most distinctive features of her writing and their effects—how features like hyperbole and comparisons contribute to her creation of a highly expressive self. Many contemporaries noted her wit, sparkling conversation, and sense of humor. Lawrence Wroth, librarian at Brown University and a historian, noted that “to her life is drama.”⁸ In the absence of recordings of Belle speaking, her letters to Berenson allow us to hear her lively voice. The letters are now available on *The Letters of Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson* website, hosted by Villa I Tatti.⁹

JH: Your book reveals the extended time you spent with Greene's letters, demonstrated by your close reading and the selection of transcripts you've included. Could you share more about your research process for working with this source material?

DP: I read Greene's letters to Berenson four times, made transcriptions, extensive summaries, a timeline of her activities, and lists of people mentioned in the letters. I consulted biographies of Morgan, Berenson, and Ardizzone's biography of Greene regularly. Good thing they're all so well-indexed! I also read many of the books she mentions, investigated the historical and cultural references, read books on racial passing, and studies of many of the people mentioned. Fortunately, I had a good knowledge of Italian medieval and Renaissance art and knew something about Renaissance printing practices.

Working on Belle Greene is bracing—my cultural world has been enlarged through investigation of her many worlds. Investigating one topic often leads to new insights or the discovery of unforeseen connections.

JH: Outside the world of librarianship, Greene also left a mark on the world of fashion: she dressed incredibly well and perhaps one of her best-known quotes was: “Just because I am a librarian doesn't mean I have to dress like one.” You write a lot in your book about her self-transformation and the way

8. Lawrence C. Wroth, “A Tribute to the Library and Its First Director,” *The First Quarter Century of the Pierpont Morgan Library, a Retrospective Exhibition in honor of Belle da Costa Greene* (The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1949), 18.

9. *The Letters of Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson*, Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 2023, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://bellegreene.itatti.harvard.edu/resource/Start>

she curated her image; what did you learn in your research about the role of fashion in how she felt that she was perceived as a professional woman in a field dominated by white men?

DP: There are few explicit references to what Greene wore in her letters aside from her raptures over the Fortuny pieces Berenson gave her. One finds references to her stylishness and to some accessories: plumed hats, long cigarette holders, and the occasional outfit (black velvet dress adorned with chartreuse lace—quite the combination!) in some contemporary accounts. Co-workers describe her preference for Renaissance gowns and jewelry. Belle Greene dressed to be noticed—and she was.

Years ago, I kept a blog about artists' clothing—*A Hymn to Intellectual Beauty: Creative Minds and Fashion*—and the post on Belle da Costa Greene is still available.¹⁰

JH: Greene was born to mixed race parents but passed as white for most of her life; journalism and scholarship about her work have discussed her racial identity in a variety of ways, especially in recent years. How do you handle the subject of race and her racial identity? What do we learn from her own correspondence about her relationship to race?

DP: While there was gossip about Greene's background while she was alive, nothing certain was known until Jean Strouse revealed Greene's ancestry in her 1999 biography, *Morgan: American Financier*.¹¹ Strouse's big reveal reoriented dramatically subsequent investigations into Greene's life.

Since Greene's Black ancestry became a prominent topic, there have been two approaches to this subject: one, exemplified by Ardizzone's biography, emphasizes the complexity and indeterminacy of this subject with respect to Belle. Fictional biographies offer another approach: these writers "imagine" and recreate scenes of Belle's anxieties about passing.

I take a different approach: I see Greene's passing in more expansive terms, as part of a larger exercise in self-invention and self-transformation. Belle didn't identify herself through her race: she identifies herself through the things she loves. In my view any consideration of Greene's views on her racial identity must remain open-ended. Much as some might seek to fit Greene's comments on racialized subjects within a more definite program, what we don't know must be respected, as well as all the mystery and doubt that such a mode of existence implies.

10. Deborah Parker, "Belle da Costa Greene," *A Hymn to Intellectual Beauty: Creative Minds and Fashion*, August 2013, <https://creativemindsandfashion.com/2013/08/20/belle-da-costa-greene/>

11. (Random House).

JH: What other work would you like to see done to understand and celebrate Greene's life? What else do you hope we'll uncover by further study, discussion, and celebration of her personal and professional accomplishments?

DP: New resources such as the Letters site, the essays in the Morgan Library and Museum exhibition catalogue,¹² and, I hope, my book, will spur new inquiries into Greene's life and achievements.

In February 2025 the Institute for English Studies at the London University hosted a conference on Belle da Costa Greene and the Europe Book Trade. Participants spoke on Greene's relationships with a wide range of professionals as well as broader topics such as women in the book trade. The *Letters* website indexes her correspondence to Berenson with more than seventy subjects, among them Greene's observations on politics, language learning, art from different cultures, finance, her health, fashion, family, social world, even the weather. I have no doubt that all these activities and resources will spur findings about Belle Greene and her world.

12. Julia S Charles, et al., *Belle Da Costa Greene: A Librarian's Legacy*, eds. Erica Ciallela and Philip S. Palmer (The Morgan Library & Museum, 2024).