Rediscovering Herbert Horne

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Before 1900, Herbert Horne's life is a field more appropriate to the literary historian. A historian of art is a requisite for some just estimate of Horne's activities after that date. To the latter term, I cannot pretend, so I touch tentatively, if extensively, on Horne as collector and as art historian. Nevertheless it seems proper enough to attempt a gathering—as Horne himself might have phrased it—of "all that we know" about a figure who was in some ways so highly typical of, though in others so severely antithetical to, that mysterious precipitation, the 1890s.

Horne was a person of acute virtuosity, embodying in himself some reflex of that Renaissance breadth and finesse he so admired: poet, craftsman, book designer, typographer, connoisseur, architect, art historian. In a period known for the brevity of its lives, the narrowness of its range, its perpetual flight to the peripheral, Horne's sanity, practicality, sobriety and variousness are particularly remarkable. Yet he exposed himself to the representative movements, temperaments and forms of the end of the century—to arts and crafts, the aesthetic movement, the Church and Stage Guild, the higher journalism, the Rhymers' Club, Pater, Mackmurdo, Morris, Selwyn Image, Stewart Headlam, Johnson, Dowson, Dolmetsch, Fry, Berenson, Wilde, Ross, Beerbohm, Symons. Still he remained, or rather he became, his own man: equably so, whether in Chelsea, Bloomsbury, or Florence. Frugal,
contained, learned, Horne impressed observers with a stylized opacity which attracted curiosity and sometimes resentment.

Where possible I have culled unpublished sources and should like to acknowledge the generosity of those who have permitted their use. This is the moment and the place to record my thanks in particular to Lisa Tickner, Linda Dowling, Dr. Peter Stansky, and Mrs. T. C. Dugdale for help and encouragement. Signor Tito Messeri, son of Horne’s housekeeper, gave me free access to Horne’s house in Florence.

I must concede that this little book is but a beginning, a rediscovery, we might say, of this alarmingly versatile man’s contributions to the art and culture of his time. Though my tenuous health has made the final stages of writing demanding, I nevertheless am sanguine that my purpose here is valuable: to sketch Horne’s varied achievements and thus offer a groundwork for other scholars to build upon. What is needed of course is not only an edited collection of Horne’s essays and closer analysis of his diverse work, but a full-scale biography. Those considerable tasks I must leave to others.