

Belle da Costa Greene  
*A Librarian's Legacy*

OCTOBER 25, 2024 TO MAY 4, 2025

LARGE PRINT LABELS

The  
Morgan  
Library &  
Museum

# Belle da Costa Greene: A Librarian's Legacy

I just have to accomplish what I set out to do, regardless of who or what is in my way.

—Belle da Costa Greene, *New York Times*, April 7, 1912

Bold, fearless, and uncompromising, Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950) left an indelible mark on the Morgan Library as its first director. A pioneering figure, she broke barriers for women in the field of rare books and manuscripts. She was born Belle Marion Greener to an elite Black family in Washington, DC. A few years after moving to New York City in 1888, during the age of Jim Crow, she passed as white as Belle da Costa Greene, crossing the color line with her mother and siblings. She left no trace of her thoughts on racial passing and willed this aspect of her history into oblivion by destroying diaries and private papers. To friends and colleagues, however, she wrote thousands of pages of correspondence that capture her wit, humor, brilliance, and ambition. She was remembered as “the soul of the Morgan Library,” as a person whom one “would not have missed knowing for anything.”

This exhibition brings together the Morgan's collection with objects from over twenty lenders to tell the intertwining narratives of Greene's personal and professional lives against the backdrop of institutional and national histories. Her legacies are multiple and complex, yet her life resonates widely today and her memory endures.

*Belle da Costa Greene: A Librarian's Legacy* is made possible by lead support from Agnes Gund. Major support is provided by the Ford Foundation; Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin M. Rosen; Katharine J. Rayner; Denise Littlefield Sobel; the Lucy Ricciardi Family Exhibition Fund; Desiree and Olivier Berggruen; Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, GRoW @ Annenberg; and by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom. Assistance is provided by the Franklin Jasper Walls Lecture Fund, the Friends of Princeton University Library, Elizabeth A. R. and Ralph S. Brown Jr., and the Cowles Charitable Trust.

Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

“I knew definitely by the time I was twelve years old that I wanted to work with rare books. I loved them even then, the sight of them, the wonderful feel of them, the romance and the thrill of them.”

—Belle da Costa Greene, *New York Evening Sun*,  
October 19, 1916



**Clarence H. White (1871–1925)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1911***

**Platinum print**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center  
for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson  
Papers, Personal Photographs, Box 12, Folder 37**

## **BELLE GREENE'S BOOKPLATE**

Though Belle Greene primarily acquired books and manuscripts for the Morgan Library, she was also an avid bibliophile in her own right. She used a bookplate with her signature and the French phrase “Un livre est un ami qui ne change jamais” (“a book is a friend who never changes”). Her friend and colleague Albert T. Clay, founding curator of the Babylonian collections at Yale University, gave her this book and added a warm handwritten inscription.

**Albert T. Clay (1866–1925)**

***Amurru, the Home of the Northern Semites***

**Philadelphia: Sunday School Times Company, 1909**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of the Hroswitha Club,  
1984; ARC 661**

**Printed books and manuscripts from the Morgan collection**

## A NOTE TO VISITORS

This exhibition engages with the histories and historical language of enslavement, racial violence, mental health, racist stereotyping and slurs, racial passing, and colorism. Throughout the exhibition Belle da Costa Greene is identified as a Black woman of mixed-race ancestry. This specific language not only acknowledges that Belle Greene's parents were Black, but also that the light complexion of her family can be attributed to the legacies of slavery.

Greene's name changed throughout her life, from Belle Marion Greener to Belle Marion Greene to Belle da Costa Greene. Colleagues at the Morgan called her "Miss Greene," and she signed letters as "Belle Greene," "Belle da Costa Greene," or "B. G.," reserving "Belle" only for personal letters to correspondents such as Bernard Berenson. In discussing the different aspects of her personal history, the exhibition's curators use these names variably depending on context.

“I met the Washington belle, Miss Genevieve Fleet, who, if possible, shone with more than her ordinary brilliancy.”

—H. O. Wagoner Jr., *New National Era*, September 12, 1872

## A FAMILY IDENTITY

From music and society to rare books and librarianship, many of Belle da Costa Greene's lifelong passions and pursuits began with her family. Her mother, Genevieve Ida Fleet Greener, a school principal and music teacher, was the daughter of James H. Fleet and Hermione Peters Fleet, both descended from long-standing families of free Black people in Georgetown, Washington, DC. Genevieve's parents were musicians and her father also taught music, though he had trained to become a physician before being barred from establishing a medical practice because of his race. Belle Greene's father, Richard T. Greener, was the grandson of an enslaved man but became the first Black graduate of Harvard College. He would go on to pursue a career in education, law, political activism, and academic librarianship while also becoming an accomplished writer and rhetorician. Genevieve and Richard both prized education and instilled in their children a love of art, reading, and music, providing Belle Greene with an upbringing that would prepare her for the rarified world of J. Pierpont Morgan's library.

## **GENEVIEVE FLEET, EDUCATOR**

After attending a college preparatory course at Oberlin College—known from the 1830s for admitting African Americans and women—Genevieve Fleet was employed as a teacher at a Freedmen’s Bureau school in Washington, DC. She went on to serve as principal at the Thaddeus Stevens School and later managed musical instruction for the city’s Western District. A newspaper reporting on the “Colored School Examinations” in 1872 described her students as “prompt and accurate, while their deportment was the subject of general and favorable comment.” A year later, before a monthly teachers’ meeting, her student choir sang Jules Massenet’s “Twilight,” rendering the contemporary French composer’s piece “more than usually attractive” and “reflect[ing] credit upon their conception and fine training.”

**“The Colored Schools: Monthly Meeting of the Teachers”**

***Daily National Republican, May 17, 1873***

**Reproduction**

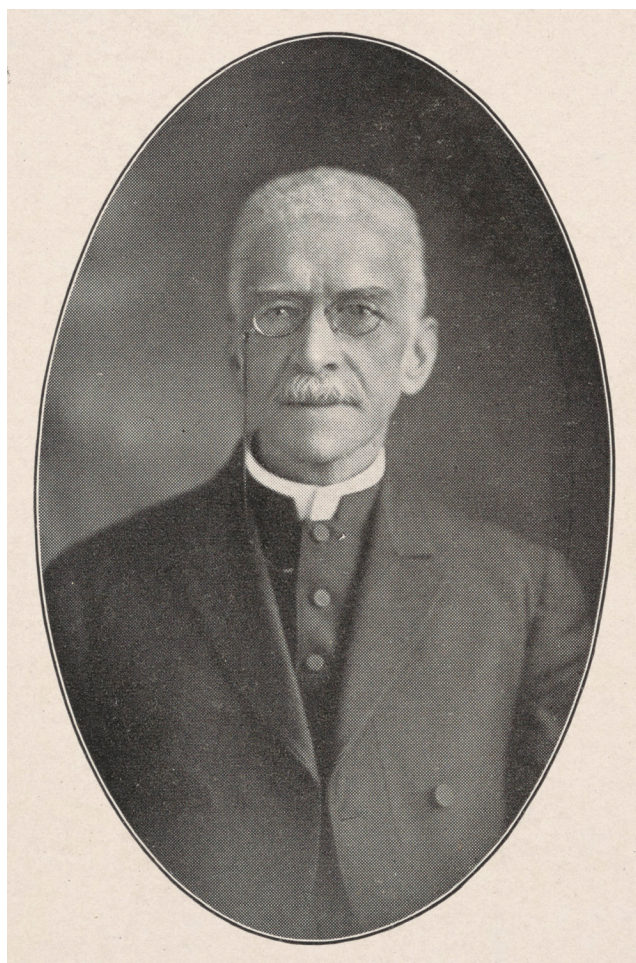
## THE FAMILY CHURCH

The Fleet and Peters families had strong connections to the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, a social hub for the Black elite in Washington, DC, where the famous minister Francis “Frank” J. Grimké presided from 1877 to the 1920s. Like Grimké and the Fleets, many of the church’s members were the descendants of both white and Black ancestors, their mixed-race ancestry attributable to the legacies of slavery. The congregants were solidly middle class before Grimké’s arrival, but he pressured those unable to support the church financially to leave, which resulted in a wealthier, more homogenized group. Leaders of the church and other Black elite spaces often defined their social status through the exclusionary practice of colorism.

***Negro Churches—Presbyterian Church, Wash., D.C., 1899?***

**Photographic print**

**Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division**



Rev. Francis J. Grimké, ca. 1910–30. Photographic print. Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division; LC-USZ62-26179.



## **COLORISM**

Colorism, a term coined in 1983 by the African American writer Alice Walker, is a form of discrimination that privileges individuals with lighter skin tones and European features within and between ethnic groups. It is rooted in white supremacy and the legacies of slavery, where divisions of enslaved labor were largely defined by complexion. Beginning in the nineteenth century, as violent, anti-Black images proliferated, African Americans were portrayed as animalistic, uneducated, and typically darker in complexion. To distance themselves from such stereotypical images, light-skinned African Americans used colorism as a strategy to mobilize their proximity to whiteness and gain access to education, wealth, and political power. Some lighter-complexioned individuals in elite Black spaces also excluded their darker-skinned counterparts. Colorism was, and still is, a controversial topic in Black and non-Black communities alike. The decision of Belle Greene and her family to pass as white cannot be understood without discussing the language and practice of colorism.

## **A SOCIETY WEDDING**

The Fleets joined the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in 1866. Genevieve's brother Bellini Fleet regularly performed during services and, as this newspaper article describes, played Felix Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" at Maimie Syphax and Albert R. Brodie's nuptials. Maimie was the eldest daughter of Maria and Charles Syphax, formerly enslaved at Arlington Plantation by George Washington's stepson George Washington Parke Custis. Maria's parents were Custis and one of his enslaved maids, Arianna Carter. The newspaper account reflects colorist sentiments, noting that Maimie Syphax's "fair and clear complexion heightened into additional color" and that the event itself showcased "the beauty, wealth, and culture among our colored citizens."

**"Hymen's Halter: A Wedding Which Called Out the Elite of Our Colored Society"**

***National Republican*, April 6, 1881**

**Reproduction**

“I have been thus minute with my life, partly to remove many false impressions about me, such as that I escaped from slavery with innumerable difficulties; that I came direct from the cotton field to college; that I was a scout in the Union army; the son of a Rebel general &c, and partly because I have an impression that, perhaps, hereafter it will be pleasant for my classmates, and myself, to remember these things.”

—Richard T. Greener, Autobiographical sketch, May 19, 1870

## **RICHARD T. GREENER**

Belle Greene's father, Richard, was born in Philadelphia in 1844. His paternal grandfather, Jacob C. Greener, was born enslaved, and his maternal grandfather was a Spaniard from Puerto Rico. After his family moved to Boston, Richard attended the Broadway Grammar School but left his studies to provide for his mother. Later Greener studied at Oberlin College's college preparatory course and at Phillips Academy before entering Harvard College in 1865. A short, handwritten autobiography, entered into a book containing similar accounts by his Harvard classmates from the class of 1870, is the sole source of much of his family history. In the final paragraph, quoted above this case, he seeks to set the record straight amid racist rumors about his background.

## **FIRST BLACK GRADUATE OF HARVARD**

In his autobiographical sketch Greener states that his “chief desire is to lead a finely literary life, in my own way.” He indicates his interest in art and metaphysics, his suitability for the study of law, and his love for “the Greek and Latin Classics when divested of grammatical pedantry.” He mentions articles he wrote and elocution prizes he received, as well as his involvement in the Pi Eta Society (a theatrical group) and “a radical religious club.” In 1870 Greener would become the first Black graduate of Harvard College. With his graduation in sight, Greener was ambitious for the future: “My plans in life are to get all the knowledge I can, make all the reputation I can, and ‘do good.’”

***Class Album, Harvard 1870***

**Photographs by George Kendall Warren (1834–1884)**

**Cambridge, MA: Harvard College, 1870**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Horace W. Goldsmith Fund for Americana, 2021; ARC 3270**

## **BELLE GREENE'S WASHINGTON, DC**

Belle Marion Greener was born into a vibrant Black community in Washington, DC, in 1879. Her family history is rooted in the city, going back to the free Black communities in which her mother's side, the Fleets, lived and worked. From DC's oldest neighborhood of Georgetown to the Capitol Building, African Americans both free and enslaved comprised a significant part of the population. By the time of Belle's birth, Black Washingtonians made up a third of the capital's inhabitants. This map and associated text show many of the places in DC that tell the story of its Black residents and Belle's family.

### **Adolph Sachse**

***The national capital, Washington, D.C. Sketched from nature  
by Adolph Sachse, 1883–84***

**Baltimore: A. Sachse & Co., 1884**

**Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division; G3851.A3  
1884 .S3**

## **1. JAMES H. FLEET'S SCHOOL (NEW YORK AVE. AND 14TH ST.)**

After his plans to become a physician were dashed, Greene's grandfather James H. Fleet founded a school for free Black children in 1836. The school was burned by an arsonist in 1843, and Fleet opened another school, described as "very large and of a superior character," three years later in a new location. Efforts to restrict education and literacy led to white violence against schools for African Americans, including attacks on their teachers and students. This was unfortunately common, even in free states, as shown in this image of a mob attacking the Prudence Crandall School in Canterbury, Connecticut.





**COLORED SCHOOLS BROKEN UP, IN THE FREE STATES.**

When schools have been established for colored scholars, the law-makers and the mob have combined to destroy them;—as at Canterbury, Ct., at Canaan, N. H., Aug. 10, 1835, at Zanesville and Brown Co., Ohio, in 1836.

“Colored Schools Broken Up, in the Free States,” in *American Anti-Slavery Almanac, for 1839* (New York: published for the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838).

Library Company of Philadelphia; Am 1838 Ame Ant 16996.D.3  
p 15.



## **2. THE FLEET FAMILY HOME (1208 30TH ST., FORMERLY 109 WASHINGTON)**

In 1843, the same year his school was burned, James H. Fleet purchased this Federal-style home in Georgetown for \$800. The five-bedroom house was built circa 1810 and still stands as a private residence. A hotel across the street served as a Union Army hospital during the Civil War. Only a block away from the Fleet home was the feed and grain store of Alfred Lee, a prosperous Black businessman who left an estate of about \$300,000 when he died in 1868.



Fleet family residence, 1208 30th St. (at center; formerly 109 Washington).

Library of Congress. Historic American Buildings Survey. Creator, Andrew Ross, William P. Thompson, Ellen J. Schwartz, William P. Thompson, and Sponsor US Commission of Fine Arts, Alexander, J., and Jet Lowe, photographer. Andrew Ross Tenant House I, 30th Street Northwest, Washington, District of Columbia, DC. Washington D.C. Washington, 1933.

### **3. M STREET RESIDENCE (1713 M ST.)**

After James H. Fleet's death in 1861, Genevieve (Belle Greene's mother), her mother, Hermione, and siblings remained in the family home until the mid-1870s, when they sold the house to make ends meet. They then moved into Washington, DC, proper, to 1713 M Street. This address was located near the Sumner Building (17th and M St. NW), where Genevieve taught in the 1870s, and was not far from the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. During this period, Genevieve's mother worked as a dressmaker.

**Fleet Henderson, lab, Libbeys al nr  
21st and M nw  
Fleet Hermione C. wid James H. dress  
mkr, 1713 M nw  
Fleet Jennie V. music teacher, 1713 M  
nw**

*Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia . . . 1874.* Washington,  
DC: W. H. Boyd, 1874.

#### **4. FIFTEENTH STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Belle Greene and her siblings were baptized at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, and her parents were married there. Her grandfather, James H. Fleet, led the church's choir.

## **5. US CAPITOL BUILDING**

During Reconstruction, sixteen African Americans served in the US Congress. Hiram Revels was the first, sworn in on February 25, 1870. Between the end of the Civil War and 1877, African Americans made great strides toward political power. But with the removal of federal troops from the South in 1877, at the end of Reconstruction, states began violently placing checks on that power.





*The First Colored Senator and Representatives. In the 41st and 42nd Congress of the United States. New York: Currier & Ives, 1872.*

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

## 6. THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Richard T. Greener, Belle's father, was close friends with Daniel Murray, one of the first African Americans to work for the Library of Congress. Murray was part of DC's Black elite and along with Greener sought ways to provide access to libraries and reading rooms for their communities. Authoring the Library's first bibliography of African American writers, Murray once said that "the true test of the progress of a people is to be found in their literature."





Daniel A. P. Murray, n.d. Photolithograph.  
Library of Congress, Manuscript Division; Daniel Alexander  
Payne Murray Papers; mm 79005741.

## 7. HOWARD UNIVERSITY

Howard University, a historically Black institution, was founded in 1867 in the heart of DC's U Street district (just above the map's northern border). During the 1870s and 1880s, this neighborhood was middle class and racially mixed. As segregation laws proliferated after the fall of Reconstruction, the area became primarily Black, and during the 1920s it was called Black Broadway. After leaving South Carolina, Richard T. Greener took a teaching position at Howard and soon became dean of the law school. He left the university in 1880 to work as a law clerk in the US Treasury Department.





Students in front of Main Building, Howard University, 1870.  
Howard University Archives, Moorland-Spingarn Research  
Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.

## **8. THE GREENER FAMILY HOME (1454 T ST. NW)**

The Greeners' home sat on the edge of the U Street district, near Howard University. Genevieve and Richard moved to T Street after returning from South Carolina in 1877. Records list several T Street addresses for the family, but by 1880 they had settled at 1454 T Street NW. Genevieve's mother and siblings continued to live on M Street until 1878, when they, too, moved to T Street, living in houses neighboring Richard and Genevieve's. When Belle Marion Greener was born in 1879, she was brought home to T Street.





1454 T St. NW, ca. 2020.

## **GENEVIEVE'S SOCIAL LIFE**

Few archival traces of Belle Greene's mother, Genevieve, have been preserved, as is unfortunately typical with the lives of historical African American women. This rare advertising flier lists "Mrs. R. T. Greener" second on a roster of "The Ladies of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church." Other notable women here include the educator and Colored Women's League member Ella Barrier, the teacher Sarah Ann Martin, and the teacher, activist, and poet Charlotte "Lottie" Forten Grimké, the minister Francis J. Grimké's wife. Charlotte Grimké was well known for her writing and political activism, helping to form both the Colored Women's League and the National Association of Colored Women.

### **Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church**

**"The Ladies of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church,  
Washington, D.C., Will Hold a Fair, Beginning  
December 22nd . . ."**

**[Washington, DC, ca. 1880]**

**Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections  
Division; Printed Ephemera Collection; Portfolio 207,  
Folder 4a**

“How I admire your real bibliomaniac spirit! Thanks for the checklist on American Negro poetry, which I shall value, and place among my few relics of racial effort in literature.”

—Richard T. Greener to Arturo Schomburg, June 4, 1918

## **GREENER'S HARVARD DIPLOMA**

This vellum, handwritten diploma for “Richardum Theodorum Greener” conferred the bachelor of arts degree on Harvard’s first Black graduate. Perhaps the document’s most visible features are its water stains and faded signatures. These signs of distress speak to its incredible story. Long thought to have been lost during the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, when Greener lived on the West Coast, the diploma and other personal papers were discovered in 2009 by a contractor, Rufus McDonald, in the attic of an abandoned South Chicago house slated for demolition. McDonald consigned the document for sale in an auction, and it sold to Harvard University, which now preserves the diploma in its archives.

**Richard T. Greener’s bachelor of arts diploma, Harvard College, June 28, 1870**

**Harvard University Archives; HUM 201 Box 1**



## **RICHARD AND GENEVIEVE**

After leaving Harvard, Richard worked as an educator in Philadelphia before moving to Washington, DC, in 1873. There he would become the principal of the city's first high school for Black students, the Preparatory High School for Colored Youth (later Dunbar High School), which was founded in the basement of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. Richard had likely met Genevieve in 1872 in Boston. Their relationship blossomed in DC, and they were married in the fall of 1874.

**“Married”**

***The National Republican, September 29, 1874***

**Reproduction**

## **SOUTH CAROLINA**

When Greener moved to South Carolina, he held high hopes because of newly gained freedoms that came with the end of the Civil War. Nevertheless, he was surrounded by the vestiges of slavery. During the Greeners' time at the University of South Carolina, Third Professor's House, built in 1837, served as faculty housing. Before the Greeners took up residence there, it had been the home of other professors and eleven enslaved individuals.

With the fall of Reconstruction in 1877, the university ended its short period of racial integration, and Greener was asked to leave. Once again the rights of African Americans were violently taken away. The University of South Carolina would remain an all-white institution until desegregation in 1963. Reckoning with this past, in 2018 the university erected a statue of Greener to honor his legacy.

**Third Professor's House (now Lieber College),  
Columbia, South Carolina, ca. 1870s  
Reproduction of a  
photographic print  
University of South Carolina**



Jon Hair (b. 1949), *Richard T. Greener*, 2018. Bronze. University of South Carolina. © Jon Hair. Photo: Courtesy Jon Hair.

## RARE BOOKS AT HARVARD

While studying at Harvard, Greener befriended the alum and Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner, best known today for cowriting the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which sought to protect the rights of freed Black people during Reconstruction. In a pamphlet on view nearby, Greener described the utter delight of being welcomed by Sumner to browse his library of rare books and manuscripts: “With what tenderness he would bring forth his art and literary treasures, a missal, some book in law French or patois . . . *Cicero de Officiis* in MSS. Of the XVth century.” At Phillips Academy Greener had written a Latin play titled *Ancient Rome Modernized* and performed in the role of the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero.

**Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC)**

***De officiis*, in Latin**

**Italy, ca. 1450**

**Houghton Library, Harvard University; MS Lat 177f**

“He waited only for Civil Rights, and the coming of the day toward which his gaze was ever directed . . . when the races of our varied nationality should dwell together in mutual harmony and protection, each striving to dare most for the honor and safety of their common country. Oh! Confederate and Federal, Negro and Saxon, was it not the record of a noble life?

—Richard T. Greener, writing about Charles Sumner, 1874

## TRIBUTE TO A MENTOR

In the fall of 1873 Greener accepted a job at the University of South Carolina, where he was the first Black professor and served as the university librarian. While teaching at the university, he also attained a law degree. During his first year there, before marrying Genevieve, he delivered this address in memory of his friend and mentor Charles Sumner. Greener was inspired by the senator, recalling how he had heard Sumner's speeches in Boston as a young man. The eulogy showcases Greener's skill as a rhetorician and his wide reading, including quotations from John Keats, John Milton, the Bible, and Latin authors. For Greener, Sumner was "ever earnest, loyal, hopeful, indefatigable and constant of purpose."

**Richard T. Greener (1844–1922)**

***Charles Sumner, the Idealist, Statesman and Scholar. An Address Delivered on Public Day, June 29, 1874, at the Request of the Faculty of the University of South Carolina***

**Columbia, SC: Republican Printing, 1874**

**New-York Historical Society**

## **A DISTINGUISHED ELITE**

“The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men,” wrote W. E. B. Du Bois in his famous essay “Talented Tenth” (1903). Du Bois referred to a small group of individuals who, through education, would elevate the rest of the Black race. Though the idea of the Talented Tenth was criticized by contemporaries who believed Du Bois’s theory to be what is now termed colorist, uplifting only those from elite and light-skinned backgrounds like his own, the men depicted in this print were regarded as role models for the Black community. While depicting positive views of Black American life in the corners of the image, the print also perpetuates social hierarchies in the Black community.

### ***Distinguished Colored Men***

**New York: A. Muller & Co.; Chicago: Geo. F. Cram, ca. 1883**

**Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division**

## **MOVING TO NEW YORK**

In 1885 Richard T. Greener moved to New York City to take a job as secretary of the Grant Monument Association (GMA), charged with building a memorial for Ulysses S. Grant.

J. Pierpont Morgan was treasurer of the GMA. Given the limited and entirely business-related correspondence between Greener and Morgan, it is unlikely that the two discussed their families. The rest of the Greeners joined Richard in early 1888, when Belle was eight years old, and together they lived on West 58th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. At the time, only 1.4 percent of the city's population was Black. Located in Morningside Heights, the monument now popularly known as Grant's Tomb was completed in 1897, five years after Greener left the GMA.

**Byron Company (act. 1890–1942)**

**Seven African American men on the steps of Grant's Tomb on Riverside Drive, ca. 1903**

**Gelatin silver print**

**Museum of the City of New York, Prints & Photographs collection; 93.1.1.7009**



**Martin Deschere (1848–1902)**

**58th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, ca. 1880**

**Albumen print**

**Museum of the City of New York, Prints & Photographs  
collection; X2010.11.6103**

## **RICHARD T. GREENER, BIBLIOPHILE**

From his student days at Harvard to his library work at the University of South Carolina, Greener was an avid book collector. Later in life he shared a small correspondence with Arturo Schomburg, whose premier collection of African Americana and African diasporic materials formed the core of what came to be the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Belle Greene inherited her passion for rare books from her father, later noting that she became fascinated with the subject at the age of twelve.

**Richard T. Greener (1844–1922)**

**Autograph letter signed to Arturo Schomburg, June 4, 1918  
New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in  
Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books  
Division; Richard T. Greener Papers, Sc MG 107**



Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, ca. 1900–1935. Gelatin silver print.  
New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in  
Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division.

## **A BOOK FROM GREENER'S COLLECTION**

Richard T. Greener donated several rare books and ephemera on African American history to the New-York Historical Society. This pamphlet presents a speech the prominent historian George Washington Williams gave in Washington, DC, on April 16, 1884, the anniversary of Lincoln's 1862 legislation to end slavery in the nation's capital. Greener was an agent for Williams's newspaper in 1875 and worked with him on political campaigns; both men, along with Frederick Douglass, spoke at the 1884 Emancipation Day celebration. Williams had recently published his two-volume *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*.

**George Washington Williams (1849–1891)**

***1862—Emancipation Day—1884: The Negro as a Political Problem***

**Boston: A. Mudge & Son, 1884**

**Inscribed: To Prof. R. T. Greener, Compliments of Geo. Williams.**

**New-York Historical Society, Main Collection; E29.N3 Box 13  
Non-circulating**



## **RICHARD T. GREENER'S LATE CAREER**

By the summer of 1896 Richard and Genevieve Greener had separated after a period of tension stemming from finances, family relations, and, less prominently, racial passing. (Genevieve had begun passing as white, but Richard was also known to pass for convenience occasionally.) He left New York in 1898 for a diplomatic appointment in Vladivostok, Russia. There he began living with a Japanese woman, Mishiyo Kawashima, and had three children with her. But in 1906 he was recalled to the US, where he eventually settled with family members in Chicago, living in a white neighborhood, and died in 1922.

***The Crisis* 13, no. 4 (February 1917)**

**Cover featuring Richard T. Greener at age seventy-three  
New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research  
in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and  
Reference Division**

## RACE AND THE US CENSUS

The first US Census was conducted in 1790 to determine the number of delegates for the House of Representatives. It listed households' inhabitants followed by their occupations, ages, and three options for race—"free white," "all other free persons," and "slaves." By 1850 free individuals could choose from "white, black, or mulatto," and no guidance was provided for recording Indigenous communities. The 1870 Census was the first not to include enslaved people, and by 1900 there was no longer an option to identify individuals as mixed-race.

In 1850 specific instructions were given to census workers, known as enumerators, about noting race: "Be particularly careful in reporting the class *Mulatto*. The word is here generic, and includes quadroons, octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood." These instructions illuminate the evolving role of racial identity in American life and the government's concern with the growing mixed-race population, which resulted directly from the institution of slavery.

## **THE FLEETS AND GREENERS IN THE CENSUS**

In the 1860 and 1870 US Censuses, the Fleets were designated “M” for “mulatto,” and the value of their personal property and real estate, the latter appreciating over the decade, are listed. The 1880 Census, taken after Genevieve had married Richard, finds the young Greener family living next door to Genevieve’s mother and siblings, with Belle, aged six months, appearing for the first time. Curiously, everyone in both households is listed as “W” for “white,” but this does not necessarily mean the family was passing at this time. Census records are highly mediated documents, and it is possible that the enumerator simply looked in the door, saw people with a light skin complexion, and assumed they were white.

**United States Census for 1860, 1870, and 1880  
Reproductions**



## **BELLE GREENE'S BIRTH CERTIFICATE**

Belle Marion Greener was born on November 26, 1879, when the family lived at 1462 T Street. Her birth certificate lists her parents' names but not her own, and notes that Genevieve had three other children: Belle was preceded by her siblings Mary Louise (born 1877) and Russell (born 1878), as well as Horace Kempton Greener, who died at nine months old in 1875. For the questions "twins," "sex," and "color," the form instructs physicians to "cross out the words not required." Belle's "color" is indicated, therefore, as "~~White~~, Colored," a designation that presents her race both for what it was and for what it was not.

**"Return of a Birth to the Office of Health Officer,  
212 4½ Street NW, Washington, D.C.," no. 20945**

**Reproduction**

**District of Columbia Office of Public Records; Births and  
Christenings, 1830–1955**

“Mrs. Greener is a very refined woman, and has been, and is very anxious for her children to have good education in every sense.”

—Lucetta Daniell to the Secretary of Northfield Seminary,  
July 2, 1896

## AN EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Education and intellectual development were necessary for all women but they were essential for black women.

—Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load:*

*Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (1999)

During the nineteenth century, women's education became a catalyst for equality. The emergence of the female seminary movement offered a chance for women of means who faced limited opportunities to receive higher education. Institutions such as Troy Female Seminary and Litchfield Female Academy revolutionized women's education by providing courses in the sciences, Latin, and math. Many of these institutions offered these courses to both white and African American women. This was true of the Northfield Seminary, founded in Northfield, Massachusetts, in 1879 by the preacher Dwight Lyman Moody. Its student body included Indigenous and Black Americans as well as many international students. Belle Greene attended boarding school at this institution (now the coeducational Northfield Mount Hermon School) from 1896 to 1899, where she thrived. It gave her the intellectual foundations for a library course she completed in 1900 at Amherst College.

## **WORKING AT TEACHERS COLLEGE**

In Manhattan, after attending a public primary school, Belle Marion Greener spent a year at the Horace Mann School for Girls before leaving her studies to work in support of her mother. She was employed for two years at Teachers College, at the time associated with the Horace Mann School, working for the registrar Lucetta Daniell, who wrote a glowing letter of support for Belle's application to Northfield. It is one of the only sources that documents her character and personality as a young person, describing her intelligence, industry, and judgment, and noting that "she has a strong will, and shows much resolution about overcoming a fault when she is persuaded of it."

**Lucetta Daniell (1867–1943)**

**Autograph letter to the Secretary of Northfield Seminary,  
July 2, 1896**

**Northfield Mount Hermon Archives; Greene, File 2052N**



Teachers College Main Building, ca. 1894. Gottesman Libraries at Teachers College, Columbia University; TCX B142. Photo: Courtesy Teachers College, Columbia University.

## **AN EDUCATIONAL PATRON**

Teachers College introduced Belle Greener to the New York philanthropist Grace Hoadley Dodge, who cofounded the institution and supported the YWCA and similar organizations. Here Dodge pledges to fund Belle's education at Northfield Seminary. Dodge's letter suggests she knew of Belle's mixed-race ancestry: she was aware that her father was Black but believed her mother, Genevieve, was white. She mentions that Genevieve had left Richard and was "supporting her five children with terrible struggle." Dodge describes Belle as "bright, quick to learn, easily influenced, full of fun & energy," also noting that "while the trace of Negro blood is noticeable, Belle has always associated intimately with the best class of white girls."

**Grace Hoadley Dodge (1856–1914)**

**Autograph letter to Emma Charlotte Revell Moody,**

**July 1, 1896**

**Northfield Mount Hermon Archives; Greene, File 2052N**

## **APPLYING TO NORTHFIELD**

When filling out her daughter's application to Northfield, Genevieve used Belle's given name, "Belle Marion Greener," and described her "prominent traits of character" as "generous and affectionate." The application names Belle's educational patron, Grace Hoadley Dodge. Genevieve also writes that Belle has taken elementary French, "begun Latin," and has a "marked preference for study" in "mathematics & language"—indicating that Belle's language learning began long before she started working at the Morgan. Most importantly for her future career, the application indicates that she "would like to fit for Librarian."

**Genevieve Ida Fleet Greener (1849–1941)**

**Belle Marion Greener's application for study at the  
Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies, 1896**

**Northfield Mount Hermon Archives; Greene, File 2052N**



**A. French**

**Northfield Seminary campus and East Hall, ca. 1890**

**Photographic print**

**Northfield Mount Hermon Archives**

## HESITANT IDENTITIES

Belle Greene's student file from Northfield Seminary contains these extraordinary objects. At right is her earliest known letter, and at left is one of the only extant letters written by her mother. The surname in neither signature reads "Greener." There is hesitation at the end of each: Genevieve's terminal *e* trails off with a slowly lifting pen that returns to the page for a final stroke, while Belle's signature ends with what appears to be a lightly obliterated *r*. Neither Belle nor her mother left behind written accounts about why or when they decided to start passing. Instead there are glimpses such as these, suggestive gestures that evoke moments of uncertainty, in which passing manifests itself as the omission of a single letter.

**Genevieve Ida Fleet Greene (1849–1941)**

**Autograph letter to Miss Hall, June 27, 1896**

**Belle Marion Greene (Belle da Costa Greene, 1879–1950)**

**Autograph letter to Miss Hall, August 27, 1896**

**Northfield Mount Hermon Archives; Greene, File 2052N**

## **THE EARLIEST PHOTO OF BELLE GREENE**

Belle Greene left Northfield Seminary in 1899 without a degree, which was common for many of the school's students at this time. In 1900 she attended the Summer School of Library Economy at Amherst College, about twenty-five miles south of Northfield. There she also learned the upright cursive handwriting she later used in her research notes and catalogue cards at the Morgan. This group photograph contains the earliest known image of Belle Greene, taken when she was twenty years old. She can be seen in the back row, against the ivy, with a wry smile and knowing expression. Like the other sitters, she signed the back of the photograph, where she recorded her name and hometown as "Belle Marion Greene, New York City."

**Amherst College Summer School, Fletcher Course in  
Library Economy, Class of 1900, 1900  
Gelatin silver print  
Amherst College Archives**



Detail of class portrait, depicting Belle Greene, 1900.

## **ANITA HEMMINGS**

In 1897 Anita Hemmings became the first African American to graduate from Vassar College. Like Belle Greene, she studied at Northfield Seminary and would become a librarian. To attend Vassar, Hemmings, who had mixed-race parents, passed as white. Shortly before graduation, her roommate's father hired a private detective to learn the truth of Hemmings's background. While the college did grant Hemmings her diploma, it would be another forty years before it began to admit African American students. After leaving Vassar, Hemmings married physician Andrew Jackson Love. The two continued to pass as white, and their daughter Ellen would also graduate from Vassar, unaware of her family background.

**Anita Hemmings, ca. 1890s**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**Vassar College Library, Archives & Special Collections,  
Vassar College Photograph Files, Folder 12.8 (OV3.110)**

## QUESTIONING THE COLOR LINE

The crucial question has always been a question of identity: Who is this Negro whose identifying characteristic is his color and what is his status in this world?

—John Hope Franklin, *Color and Race* (1969)

Despite our contemporary understanding of race as a social construct with no biological basis, it has been used to create a system of power and privilege that has changed the course of American history. In 1896 the US Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* aimed to define race legally. Should Homer Plessy, a mixed-race, white-presenting individual, be categorized as Black? The ruling not only formalized segregation with the infamous “separate but equal” clause, but also established that an individual does not need to appear Black to be considered Black.

Among the thousands of letters that Belle da Costa Greene wrote, there are few traces of her thoughts on race. Her contemporaries grappled with the question of the color line, with many using art, literature, and film to comment on the subject. Responding to the escalating anti-Black violence in the early twentieth century, as well as to issues of colorism, passing,



and class consciousness, the artists and writers featured in this section offer various perspectives on identity in a deeply segregated and racist society.

“Slavery is gone, it is true, but the spirit of it still remains, the same purpose and determination to keep the Negro down still persists, and never was more active, more alive than it is today.”

—Francis J. Grimké, “God and the Race Problem: A Discourse Delivered in the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church” (1903)

## ***UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, BANNED IN NEW YORK***

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which made it compulsory to turn over individuals escaping slavery, prompted Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1851. Stowe sought to speak to the realities of slavery, though today her novel is also recognized for its racist stereotypes. In 1903 New York City schools banned the book, arguing that with the end of slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had served its purpose.

In Washington, DC, Francis J. Grimké spoke out against the ban in a sermon titled “God and the Race Problem,” reminding his audience that American society was far from racial equality and the book’s message remained vital.

**Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896)**

***Uncle Tom's Cabin***

**London: John Cassell, 1852**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, bequest of Julia P. Wightman;  
PML 150858**

## **A CALL TO ACTION**

At the turn of the century, with expanding Jim Crow laws and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, Black Americans faced racial terror across the country. New York City saw multiple race riots between 1900 and 1935. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) distributed broadsides such as this one to emphasize the large number of individuals being lynched. In 1917, just two blocks from the Morgan Library, ten thousand people marched silently down Fifth Avenue to bear witness to the violence experienced by Black communities. The women and children dressed in white to emphasize their vulnerability.

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
(est. 1909)**

**Poster for the NAACP anti-lynching campaign, 1922  
the Smithsonian National Museum of African American  
History and Culture; 2011.57.9**



*New York—Silent Protest Parade, July 28, 1917.* Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature; JWJ MSS 76.

## **THE PASSING OF PASSING?**

In 1952 *Jet* published the article “Why ‘Passing’ Is Passing Out.” It claimed that passing was losing its necessity because African Americans were beginning to obtain careers and educational access based on merit. The piece offered testimonials from African Americans who formerly passed and those who refused to pass. Featured prominently is the Johnston family from Keene, New Hampshire, who passed as white so that the father, Albert, could practice medicine. In 1947 the Johnstons publicly disclosed their racial identity in *Reader’s Digest*, the basis for the 1949 film *Lost Boundaries*, which starred all-white actors. After their story came out, the family was tolerated if not accepted by Keene’s white residents, but Albert eventually lost his job at a hospital because of his race, opening a private practice thereafter.

### **“Why ‘Passing’ Is Passing Out”**

***Jet*, July 17, 1952**

**New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research  
in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and  
Reference Division**



## **ALICE RHINELANDER**

In 1925 the case of *Rhineland v. Rhineland* dominated the headlines in New York. The millionaire Leonard “Kip” Rhineland, apparently unaware of the mixed-race ancestry of his wife, Alice, sued her for fraud. While the courts ruled in favor of Alice, based on the belief that race could be perceived visually, the case demonstrated the very real consequences facing those who might transgress racial boundaries. Throughout the trial Alice was subjected to various indignities: her relationship was scrutinized, her personal love letters were read aloud, and she was forced to show portions of her body to the jury so they could examine her skin color.

**Alice Rhineland, at center, with her sisters in the courtroom, 1925**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**Photo: Getty/Bettmann**

## **ONE-DROP RULE**

In the United States, race-based laws date back to the late seventeenth century and have been used to restrict the rights of African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups. With Virginia's passage of the Act to Preserve Racial Integrity in 1924, for the first time one of these laws established a legal definition of whiteness. In doing so, the act codified the one-drop rule, which stipulates that a single trace of non-European blood marked an individual as non-white. This idea contrasted with earlier perspectives that recognized people of mixed-race ancestry as "mulatto" or other racial categories between white and Black.

**"The New Virginia Law to Preserve Racial Integrity"**

***Virginia Health Bulletin* 16, extra no. 2 (March 1924)**

**Reproduction**

**The Library of Virginia, Richmond, State Government**

**Records Collection**

## ***THE DROP SINISTER***

In 1914, when this painting was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York, viewers did not know what to make of the work. W. E. B. Du Bois commented in *The Crisis* that some of the crowd was mystified, but “another part pretended that they understood it. ‘It is miscegenation,’ they croaked.” Du Bois wrote, “the people in this picture are all ‘colored,’” and contemplated how the child would be marked “Negro” on the census. Speaking of her life, he continued, “90,000,000 of her neighbors, good Christian, noble, civilized people are going to insult her, seek to ruin her and slam the door of opportunity in her face the moment they discover ‘The Drop Sinister.’”

**Harry Willson Watrous (1857–1940)**

***The Drop Sinister—What Shall We Do with It?*, 1913**

**Oil on canvas**

**Portland Museum of Art, gift of the artist; 1919.18**

## **AN EARLY PORTRAIT OF BELLE GREENE**

This image made by the British-born American photographer Ernest Walter Histed is the earliest known solo portrait of Belle da Costa Greene. At this time Histed operated a studio on Fifth Avenue in New York City, though the circumstances under which he photographed Greene are unknown. Greene may have been referring to this image when she wrote in a 1910 letter to Bernard Berenson of a “real” photograph of herself. While early images of Greene would share visual affinities with many of the light-skinned women depicted on the cover of *The Crisis*, as with the image of Georgia Douglas Johnson nearby, Greene’s portraiture as a white-passing woman would take a divergent path.

**Ernest Walter Histed (1862–1947)**

**Belle da Costa Greene, 1910**

**Gelatin silver print**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 2702**

## PASSING ON FILM

This presentation features two movie clips, from *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) and *Imitation of Life* (1934), that reveal the many ways in which film engaged with histories of race and passing in early twentieth-century America. Reactions to racist films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which depicted a reinvigorated Ku Klux Klan, spanned from anti-propaganda messaging by activist groups to Black filmmaking pioneer Oscar Micheaux's 1920 silent film, *Within Our Gates*. Micheaux also adapted literary stories of racial passing in *Veiled Aristocrats*, which imagines the emotional and familial turmoil of two light-complexioned siblings grappling with the color line. The actor Fredi Washington, who chose not to pass in her own life, immortalized the white-passing character Peola in *Imitation of Life*. The scenes with Peola and her mother, Delilah (played by Louise Beavers), are deeply affective in dramatizing the toll of passing on family bonds.

## **FREDI WASHINGTON**

After the actor Fredi Washington's breakout performance as Peola in John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934), she was often typecast as light-skinned African American characters passing as white. Not wanting to be seen only as the "tragic mulatta" figure, she turned to activism, helping to found the Negro Actors Guild of America and working as a casting consultant for films dealing with race. She always embraced her Black identity: "Early in my career, it was suggested that I might get further by passing as French or something exotic. But to pass, for economic or other advantages, would have meant that I swallowed, whole hog, the idea of Black inferiority."

**Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964)**

***Fredi Washington*, March 18, 1933**

**Reproduction of a gelatin silver print**

**Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University;  
James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of  
American Literature, Carl Van Vechten Papers Relating to  
African American Arts and Letters; JWJ MSS 1050, box 107,  
folder 1953. © Van Vechten Trust**



“You don’t know what it is to look white and be Black.”

—Peola, *Imitation of Life*

## ***IMITATION OF LIFE* (1934)**

**Directed by John M. Stahl**

**Starring Louise Beavers, Fredi Washington, and  
Claudette Colbert**

Based on the 1933 novel by Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* offered a candid portrayal of racial passing, a mixed-race character, and interracial friendship in the age of the Hays Code, when scenes suggesting “miscegenation” were forbidden on screen. Unlike in Douglas Sirk’s 1959 remake, the light-skinned, white-passing character of Peola was portrayed by an African American actor, Fredi Washington. She costarred with the veteran actor Louise Beavers, who played Delilah, a housekeeper (and Peola’s mother) whose family pancake recipe enriches her employer and eventual friend, Bea (Claudette Colbert). Though Delilah’s character reflects the racist “mammy” stereotype, her scenes with Peola are full of humanity and nuanced emotion. In this scene Peola rejects her mother before leaving home.

**© 1934 Universal Pictures. Courtesy Universal Studios  
Licensing LLC.**

“I’m afraid to talk, to smile, to do anything for fear that I’ll make a mistake.”

—Rena, *Veiled Aristocrats*

## ***VEILED ARISTOCRATS (1932)***

**Directed by Oscar Micheaux**

**Starring Laura Bowman and Lorenzo Tucker**

This film by the African American director Oscar Micheaux survives in a 48-minute fragment and is based on his now-lost silent film (1927) adapting Charles Chesnutt's novel *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). Chesnutt, who had a light complexion, embraced his Black identity and wrote about racial passing. As a "race film" made before the Hays Code, which established content guidelines for American films from 1934 to the 1960s, *Veiled Aristocrats* was geared toward Black audiences and directly addresses themes of racial passing and mixed-race identities. In this scene, the main characters Rena and John Walden, light-skinned Black siblings from an elite family, discuss prospects for the future. John and their mother desperately want Rena to break it off with her dark-skinned romantic partner and pass as white, but she is defiant and resists their exhortations to cross the color line.

**Kino Lorber LLC. Materials preserved by George Eastman Museum.**

## OSCAR MICHEAUX

Oscar Micheaux was America's first prominent Black filmmaker, producing over forty-four films, many of which are now lost. His work countered the negative portrayal of African Americans on screen by highlighting the complexity of Black life. Released in 1920, *Within Our Gates* is the oldest known surviving film by an African American director. It was Micheaux's response to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and, more broadly, the legacy of white supremacy in America. His pictures were known as "race films" and commented on gender and class issues as well as the politics of skin color. He is best known for his 1925 silent film *Body and Soul*, starring Paul Robeson in his debut role.

**Oscar Micheaux (center) with an actor and possibly a crew member, ca. 1923**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division**

## **RACIST FILM PROPAGANDA IN NEW YORK**

The first film to be screened in the White House, under Woodrow Wilson's presidency, was D. W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*. The deeply racist film was based on Thomas Dixons Jr.'s 1905 book *The Clansman*, which was conceived in response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Writing from a pro-Confederate, anti-Black viewpoint, Dixon felt that Harriet Beecher Stowe had wrongly portrayed white southerners. Griffith's film reinvigorated the Klu Klux Klan, which had been founded as a violent reaction to Reconstruction in the 1860s. With the Klan's resurgence, the NAACP protested the widespread screening of the film. This broadside argues that the film "distorts and falsifies history" and reminds New Yorkers that the Klan's prejudices extend to Jews and Catholics.

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
(est. 1909)**

***Stop the Ku Klux Propaganda in New York, 1921?***

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Gordon N. Ray Fund, 2023; PML 199007**



## GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON

Georgia Douglas Johnson was one of the best-known Black female writers of her time. Publishing four collections of poetry, she was also a noted playwright and hosted in her Washington, DC, home weekly salons frequented by some of the top names of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Angelina Weld Grimké, Jean Toomer, and Jessie Redmon Fauset. These Saturday-night salons took place on S Street in the same neighborhood where Belle Greene was born. When Johnson's first publication was criticized by prominent African American writers and publishers for its relative lack of race consciousness, she wrote *Bronze* (1922), a poetry collection centered on race that included her poem "The Octoroon."

***The Crisis* 19, no. 5 (March 1920)**

**New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division**

**“THE OCTOROON” (1922)**  
**BY GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON**

One drop of midnight in the dawn of life’s pulsating stream  
Marks her an alien from her kind, a shade amid its gleam;  
Forevermore her step she bends insular, strange, apart—  
And none can read the riddle of her wildly warring heart.

The stormy current of her blood beats like a mighty sea  
Against the man-wrought iron bars of her captivity.  
For refuge, succor, peace and rest, she seeks that humble fold  
Whose every breath is kindness, whose hearts are purest gold.

“It’s funny about “passing.” We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it.”

—Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

## **NELLA LARSEN**

Nella Larsen was a librarian, nurse, and novelist during the Harlem Renaissance. Like Belle Greene's, much of Larsen's childhood is marked by gaps. Born Nellie Walker in 1891 to a Danish mother and West Indian father, Larsen struggled with her identity from a young age. It wasn't until she attended Fisk University in 1907 that she began to live in a primarily Black environment. In 1922 she became the first African American admitted to the Library School of the New York Public Library, from which she graduated the following year. After the success of *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), a plagiarism accusation and divorce prompted Larsen to move out of the spotlight. She returned to her nursing career and died in 1964.

**Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964)**

***Nella Larsen*, November 23, 1934**

**Reproduction of a gelatin silver print**

**Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University;  
James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of  
American Literature, Carl Van Vechten Papers Relating to  
African American Arts and Letters; JWJ MSS 1050, box 96,  
folder 1706. © Van Vechten Trust**

## **NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING***

*Passing* tells the interconnected stories of Irene Redfield, a woman capable of passing for white who embraces her Black identity, and Clare Kendry, a childhood friend who passes and marries a white racist but longs to feel connected to the community she once knew. Larsen's novella explores the complexities of racial identity through the relationship of these two women. The reader is given access to Irene's inner thoughts and her conflicted feelings about her friend's life:

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed.

**Nella Larsen (1891–1964)**

***Passing***

**New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, the Carter Burden Collection  
of American Literature; PML 185968**

## ***PLUM BUN***

In 1912 Jessie Redmon Fauset began contributing essays, poetry, and short stories to *The Crisis*, a magazine recently founded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). By 1919 she became the journal's literary editor, and in 1924 she published her first novel, *There Is Confusion*. Several of Fauset's works, including *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, portray women living under the weight of racial oppression. The book's main character, Angela Murray, chooses to pass as white to find a better life. But she learns that, as a woman, whiteness will never grant true freedom. The plot revolves in part around colorism: while Angela has a light skin tone, her sister Virginia has a darker complexion, which in one scene leads Angela to spurn Virginia.

**Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882–1961)**

***Plum Bun***

**London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1928**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, the Carter Burden Collection  
of American Literature; PML 185103**



## ***THE BLACKER THE BERRY***

When Wallace Thurman published this book, his first novel, in 1929, it was unprecedented for its frank and open engagement with the subject of colorism. The protagonist, dark-skinned Emma Lou Morgan, navigates a world structured around hierarchies of skin complexion. The novel's character development of Emma comments on racial performance and sexual identity against a backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance, whose cultural spaces and principal figures have analogues in the book: Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Carl Van Vechten, and Thurman himself all appear as thinly veiled characters.

**Wallace Thurman (1902–1934)**

***The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life***

**New York: Macaulay, 1929**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, the Carter Burden Collection  
of American Literature; PML 187341**

## **JEAN TOOMER**

Jean Toomer, the grandson of Louisiana Reconstruction governor P. B. S. Pinchback, became a prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance in 1923 when he published his novel *Cane*. The book was hailed for its authentic and vivid portrayal of southern African Americans. But Toomer struggled with the idea of representing his race and did not identify as a “Negro” writer, preferring instead to be known as an “American.” “My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I alone may determine,” he wrote. Wanting to be seen for his talent rather than his skin color, Toomer eventually left Harlem, embraced Quakerism, and led a reclusive life in Pennsylvania.

**Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946)**

***Jean Toomer, 1925***

**Gelatin silver print**

**National Gallery of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection;**

**1949.3.645**

## **THE OCTOROON GIRL**

The portrait and genre-scene painter Archibald Motley Jr. made a series of three works that portray African American women based on their Creole racial classifications, including *The Octoroon Girl*, the most famous, as well as *A Mulatress* (1924) and *The Quadroon* (1927). The sitter in *The Octoroon Girl*, as in the sister paintings, remains nameless. She is only identified by her race, which is one-eighth Black. Born into a mixed-race family, Motley was raised in New Orleans and Chicago and experienced firsthand how these complex classifications determined social status and privilege.

**Archibald Motley Jr. (1891–1981)**

***The Octoroon Girl*, 1925**

**Oil on canvas**

**Michael Rosenfeld Gallery**

**Clarence H. White (1871–1925)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1911***

**Platinum prints**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 2821–22**

## **GREENES IN THE CENSUS**

By 1900 certain members of the Greene family adopted the middle name “da Costa” and began claiming a fictional Portuguese heritage to explain their darker skin tones. The US Census for 1900 records the family, with a widowed “Ida Green” at its head, as white. The occupation of “Marian” [*sic*] is “libraryberian” [*sic*], and Russell’s name is listed as “Da Costa Greene.” The 1905 New Jersey Census notes “Belle Greene” lives with her boss, Charlotte Martins, and is employed in “Library Work.” Here, Greene gave her father’s birthplace as England and her mother’s as Spain (the 1920 census conversely lists her parents’ places of birth).

By 1910, when working for Morgan, “Isabelle” was the “librarian” for a “private family.” Despite the vagaries of census enumeration practices, these documents record the changing identities and names of Belle Greene and her family, including her younger siblings Ethel Alice and Theodora, also known as Genevieve and nicknamed “Teddy.”

**United States Censuses for 1900 and 1910**

**New Jersey Census for 1905**

## **DA COSTA**

Inscribed in 1903, this book features the earliest known use of “da Costa” in Belle Greene’s name. The volume was a gift from the obscure Canadian poet Craven Langstroth Betts, whom Greene clearly knew when she worked at Princeton University.

While Belle’s activities are poorly documented during this time, 1903 was a momentous year for the Greene family: her older brother, Russell, started engineering school at Columbia University; the family moved farther uptown to 507 West 112th Street (near Columbia); and Genevieve adopted the surname “Van Vliet,” perhaps to claim a Dutch heritage and align herself with old-money families of New York.

**Pierre Jean de Béranger (1780–1857)**

***Songs from Béranger***

**Translated by Craven Langstroth Betts**

**New York: F. A. Stokes, 1893**

**Inscribed in Belle Greene’s hand: Belle da Costa Greene from Craven Langstroth Betts 1903.**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene; PML 45820**

“I am . . . renewing my youth in this my beloved Princeton—I have a peculiar fondness for the place as I have spent so many happy days here.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, June 7, 1909



## PRINCETON

Belle Greene began her library career at Princeton University. By the time she started her position in 1901, the university was well established and had built up its library holdings. But Princeton was also known for its racist and Southern culture. Leading up to the Civil War, forty percent of students came from elite Southern families. Slavery was a part of life at Princeton at this time, as students would have encountered enslaved individuals held by university presidents, faculty, and Princeton town residents. New Jersey had been the last Northern state to end slavery, not adopting the Thirteenth Amendment until 1866. While in the late nineteenth century Princeton saw several African Americans attempt graduate degrees, the university barred the enrollment of any undergraduate Black student. When future US president Woodrow Wilson became university president in 1902, he maintained a strict code of segregation and allowed the campus to maintain its white supremacist attitudes. Wilson once said of Princeton, “The whole temper and tradition of the place are such that no Negro has ever applied for admission, and it seems extremely unlikely that the question will ever assume practical form.”

## **BELLE GREENE'S FIRST LIBRARY JOB**

Belle Greene had been passing as white for several years before starting at Princeton in 1901, and given the racial climate at the university, it is unlikely she divulged her identity while working there. The library's employee lists from 1903 and 1904 include a "Greene, B." making forty dollars per month, working for Charlotte Martins in the Purchase Department. In the 1910s Greene and Martins briefly corresponded. In this letter Martins, known to Greene affectionately as "Aunt Lottie," calls her former employee "a busy little woman, and a high flyer," while asking, "Are you never coming to see us again?" As with Greene, there is evidence that Martins had mixed-race ancestry.

### **Charlotte Martins**

**Autograph letter to Belle da Costa Greene, February 6,  
[1912]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1310**

## **WORKING AT PRINCETON**

Princeton's earliest purpose-built library was the Chancellor Green Library, completed in 1873 from designs by William A. Potter. In 1897 Pyne Library was built nearby and connected to Chancellor Green, which became the reading room. When working for the Purchase, or "Order," Department, Greene was based in Pyne. Some sources describe her as a cataloguer at Princeton, and her later work certainly demonstrates the research acumen and trained eye of a cataloguer. One of her chief mentors at Princeton was the University Librarian Ernest C. Richardson, who started his career at Amherst College.

**Pyne Library, view from northwest with Chancellor Green Library at left, ca. 1880–1900**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**Princeton University Library Special Collections, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library; Historical Photograph Collection, Grounds and Buildings Series, Box MP25, Item 606**

## **THE CASE OF MATILDA**

Handwritten accession ledgers document Greene's work at Princeton. She used these books to track new acquisitions for the library, including the John Shaw Pierson Civil War collection, containing many titles about slavery, abolitionism, and race in America. For example, she recorded this pamphlet, which recounts the story of a mixed-race woman named Matilda of Greene's grandparents' generation. Matilda escaped from slavery and passed as white in Cincinnati before being caught and returned to her enslaver. Her case, taken up by Salmon P. Chase, later chief justice of the United States, galvanized the abolitionist movement.

**Accession Book 37, October 1904–March 1905**

**Princeton University Archives, Princeton University Library  
Records; AC123, Box 497**

***Speech of Salmon P. Chase in the case of the colored woman,  
Matilda, 1837***

**Princeton University Library Special Collections; W17.251q  
Oversize**

**Pyne Library's cataloguing room, ca. 1920**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**Princeton University Library Special Collections, Seeley G.**

**Mudd Manuscript Library; Historical Photograph Collection,**

**Grounds and Buildings Series, Box MP41, Item 1204**

## **JUNIUS SPENCER MORGAN**

Belle Greene came into the Morgan family's orbit when she met Junius Spencer Morgan, J. Pierpont Morgan's nephew, while working at Princeton. Like his uncle, Junius collected rare books, specifically early editions of the first-century-BC Roman poet Virgil, known for his epic poem *The Aeneid*. Junius, who had donated most of this collection to Princeton in 1896, was an associate librarian and likely mentored Greene. There is little doubt that she saw the early printed books that Junius gave Princeton, and this experience must have had a formative influence on her interest in incunabula. Junius was Belle's "great chum" at Princeton and recommended her to his uncle, who was about to hire a librarian in 1905.

**Gainsborough Studios, London**

**Junius Spencer Morgan, ca. 1900**

**Photographic print**

**Courtesy of Elisabeth Morgan**

“One aim is to make the Library preeminent, especially for incunabula, manuscripts, bindings, and the classics. Our only rivals are the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale. I hope to be able to say some day that there is neither rival nor equal.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to J. Pierpont Morgan, April 23, 1909



## **BELLE DA COSTA GREENE, LIBRARIAN**

By the summer of 1905, Belle da Costa Greene had landed a new job in New York City working for J. Pierpont Morgan. His new Library building was under construction, and much of the collection was stored at the Lenox Library on Fifth Avenue, the site of which is now the home of the Frick Collection. “Miss Greene telephoned me the other day about her work at the Lenox,” wrote Junius Spencer Morgan, “& said she was having the time of her life! She is putting in book plates dusting the books & packing them.”

Greene quickly progressed beyond her initial responsibilities, overseeing the move to Morgan’s new Library. Along with another librarian, Ada Thurston, she managed the immense task of cataloguing the collection, arranged publications and exhibition loans, and met select researchers, including the art historian Bernard Berenson. Developing her international reputation as an authority on rare books and manuscripts, Greene protected her boss from forgeries and inflated prices, leveraged a nearly unlimited purchasing power, and became a formidable presence in the auction room.

## **A NEW JOB**

Though there is no direct account of Belle da Costa Greene's job interview with J. Pierpont Morgan in 1905, a *Time* magazine article in 1948 described the exchange in legendary fashion: the financier, "seated massively at his desk . . . grunted a 'How d'you do?'—and the interview was over." With her education at Northfield and Amherst, language skills, work experience at Princeton, and rare book knowledge from her father and Junius Spencer Morgan, Greene must have made quite an impression. Morgan's daily diary records her first salary, \$75 a month, the equivalent of around \$2,700 today. By 1911 she was making \$10,000 a year—over \$300,000 today.

**J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913)**

**Daily journal, 1905**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1196, Box 28, Folder 3**

## **WORKING FOR MORGAN**

Morgan quickly developed a deep and abiding trust in Belle da Costa Greene. She ran all aspects of the private collection's operation in these early years, from paying vendors and making acquisitions to managing publication projects and meeting with important visitors. She was even on hand when her boss settled the national financial crisis known as the Panic of 1907 from the rooms of his Library. She and Pierpont had a friendly relationship often characterized by playful bantering, but they were not romantically involved, despite rumors. Their rapport was sometimes clouded by tension, as Greene bristled at Morgan's occasionally authoritarian demands on her time, but these episodes did not affect the "high reverence" she carried for her employer.

**Edward Steichen (1879–1973)**

**Portrait of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1903**

**Platinum print**

**Inscribed in Greene's hand on the back: Belle da Costa Greene, her most precious possession.**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; AZ182**

## **A LITERARY TREASURE**

Less than four years into her role, Greene wrote to Morgan to inform him that she “bought the only existing manuscript of the Raven by Poe.” She continued, “I think it one of the most important items in American literature and felt that this belonged with your other Poe manuscripts. It was offered by Hellman for \$2500—I bought it at \$1500.” The deluxe binding that formerly housed the manuscript bears Greene’s pencil notes on the inside cover, where she later indicated that another manuscript of “The Raven” had been discovered. The wall quote nearby continues Greene’s letter cited above and articulates her early ambitions for the library.

### **Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)**

**Autograph letter to John Augustus Shea, containing the earliest surviving fragment of “The Raven,” February 3, 1845  
The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1909; MA 621**

**Bound for J. Pierpont Morgan**

**Alfred Launder (d. 1952), binder**

**Brown and tan morocco, with gilt tooling, made to house the earliest surviving manuscript fragment of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven"**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1909; MA621A**

**Clarence H. White (1871–1925)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1911***

**Platinum print**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center  
for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson  
Papers, Personal Photographs, Box 12, Folder 37**

## **CAMERA PORTRAITS**

In May 1911 Greene sat for New York photographer Theodore C. Marceau. These stylized studio portraits represent an idealized version of Greene that fits within the conventions of the time. Most photographs of Greene were taken between 1910 and 1912, a period during which she became a more public figure. Many were reproduced in newspaper accounts describing her powerful position and wealth as Morgan's librarian. "They are none of them very good," she wrote Berenson the same month the Marceau group was made, "but I am hard to photograph they all tell me." These early images of Greene present her race and age ambiguously, reflecting her own efforts at self-fashioning.

**Theodore C. Marceau (1859–1922)**

**Series of portraits of Belle da Costa Greene, May 1911**

**Gelatin silver prints**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Personal Photographs: Box 1 Friends (Large Format)**



Visit the new digital resource “Belle da Costa Greene: A Portrait Gallery,” which features images and information about every known visual image of Greene.



## THE LIBRARY

Today the Morgan's East Room holds around eleven thousand volumes, many of which Belle Greene acquired early in the institution's history. During this era select researchers could consult the collection in this room, which also was visited by many distinguished guests, including the actor Ellen Terry, the operatic singer Enrico Caruso, and the novelist Henry James, as well as politicians and members of royalty. The early sixteenth-century sculpture *St. Elizabeth Holding a Book*, still in the East Room today, is visible at left while *Standing Virgin and Child* (ca. 1470), now in Morgan's study, can be seen at right.

**Tebbs & Knell, New York**

**East Room of J. Pierpont Morgan's Library, ca. 1923–35**

**Gelatin silver print**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1604**

## **A MIDTOWN SETTING**

When McKim, Mead & White began designing Morgan's library in 1903, Manhattan's landscape was changing. With the opening of the subway in 1904, shifting populations caused dramatic changes in midtown. After building Morgan's "bookman's paradise" in the Murray Hill neighborhood, the architectural firm completed Penn Station only a few blocks away in 1910. The new railroad station, while making travel easier, destroyed what was left of a Black enclave, whose residents were forced to move farther uptown. As areas in lower Manhattan became densely populated with emerging immigrant populations, the wealthy moved to Murray Hill, transforming once-isolated plots of land into an upscale district.

**J. Pierpont Morgan's Library (inscribed by Belle da Costa Greene), ca. 1905–50**

**Photographic print**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1637**

## **BERNARD BERENSON**

One of the great art historians of the twentieth century, Bernard Berenson was born Bernhard Valvrojenski in 1865 into a Jewish family in Lithuania. When he was young, his family immigrated to Boston, where he eventually attended Harvard University. He wrote several influential books on Italian Renaissance art, earning him a wide readership and building his reputation as an art connoisseur. He advised some of the greatest collectors of his day, including Isabella Stewart Gardner and Henry Walters. As a young man Berenson converted to the Episcopal faith and began hiding his Jewish background. It has been suggested that Belle and Bernard were drawn to one another in part because they were both hiding their true ethnic identities.

**Bernard Berenson holding a photograph of an artwork,  
ca. 1909**

**Photographic print**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center  
for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson  
Papers, Personal Photographs, Box 2, Folder 1**

## **MEETING THE BERENSONS**

In January 1909 the couple Bernard and Mary Berenson, both art historians, visited J. Pierpont Morgan's Library and met Belle Greene for the first time. Mary wrote to her daughter shortly after, describing Belle as "a most wild and woolly and EXTRAORDINARY young person." Bernard and Mary lived outside of Florence, Italy, in Villa I Tatti, now a research center owned by Harvard. Bernard was the better-known figure in the art world, being an author of several books and consultant for leading collectors, but Mary had a major, unacknowledged role in his scholarship. An alumna of Smith College and the Harvard Annex for Women, she also published under her own name and lectured in the United States on Italian Renaissance art.

**Bernard and Mary Berenson, Fernhurst, Sussex, England, 1901**

**Gelatin silver print**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Personal Photographs, Box 1, Folder 8**

“I am so glad, you beloved you, that you liked the photographs—  
As you say, they are mine own self, poor, indifferent and bad—I  
hope the smoking one particularly appealed to you.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, January 9, 1912

**Clarence H. White (1871–1925)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1911***

**Platinum print**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center  
for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson  
Papers, Personal Photographs, Box 12, Folder 37**

## **ART AND LOVE**

In the winter of 1909 Belle and Bernard began their famous romance. Given both Bernard and Mary's progressive view on marriage, their relationship was not hidden from Mary, though they took care to maintain the appearance of propriety given societal pressures of the time. The largely long-distance relationship is documented in the nearly six hundred letters Belle wrote to Bernard over four decades, the first of which is shown here. Her letters are full of affection, but to call them love letters is misleading since they spend so much time talking about art and art-world gossip. The correspondence is incomplete, as Greene burned Berenson's letters before her death in 1950, along with a set of diaries in which she "wr[o]te things I hardly dare think."

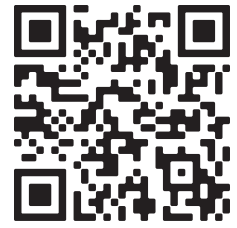
**Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950)**

**Autograph letter to Bernard Berenson, February 23, 1909**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Box 60, Folder 1**



Visit the new digital resource “The Letters of Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson,” which features images and transcriptions of the nearly six hundred letters Belle wrote to Bernard. The site was developed in collaboration with Harvard’s I Tatti Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.



“J. P. is so well trained now that he rarely ever buys a book or manuscript without consulting me by cable or letter first.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson,  
February 21, 1911

**Alexander Popini (1878–1962)**

**Color-printed illustration imagining Belle da Costa Greene at  
the Robert Hoe sale**

**Reproduced from “Fifty Thousand Dollars for That Book,”  
*The World Magazine*, May 21, 1911**

## THE AMHERST CAXTONS

Greene's first major acquisition as Morgan's representative was her much-lauded coup at the 1908 sale of the library of William Tyssen-Amherst, first Baron Amherst of Hackney. There she purchased sixteen incunabula (European books published before 1501) printed by William Caxton, including the first book printed in English, *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1473). Greene bought the collection outright before the public sale, having promised not to bid against one of her British colleagues. The story established her reputation as a negotiator and major force in the world of rare book collecting. This book, derived from medieval encyclopedic sources, was the first illustrated book printed in England and bears annotations by an early reader.

*Mirroure of the world*

[Westminster: William Caxton, 1481, after August 12]

The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased with the Amherst collection, 1908; PML 776

## UNIQUE IN THE WORLD

The holy grail of Belle Greene's early collecting for J. Pierpont Morgan was Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, printed by William Caxton in 1485 and surviving in only a single complete copy. Sold at the auction of Robert Hoe's library in 1911, this book is arguably her most famous acquisition. Morgan was willing to pay up to \$100,000 for the volume, but Greene successfully bid at around \$42,000. She was one of two women at the sale. The press was enthralled, fancifully imagining Greene's feathered hat placing bids and striking fear into the hearts of rival bidders. One paper described her as the "lady of the victorious plumes."

**Sir Thomas Malory (act. fifteenth century)**

***Thus endeth thys noble and joyous book entytled le morte  
Darthur***

**Westmestre: [William Caxton], the last day of Juyl the yere  
[sic] of our lord /M/CCCC/lxxxv [July 31, 1485]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont  
Morgan, 1911; PML 17560**

## IN SEARCH OF REMBRANDT

Though Morgan had owned an impression of this print since 1905, Greene continually sought to upgrade his collection of Rembrandt etchings. She wrote Berenson in 1909:

We have a large collection . . . it is without question the finest in America. . . . We add whenever we find a rare print or one we lack. But we have gotten to the point now where we need (mostly) only the rarest & almost unattainable pieces. . . . I am much interested in the collection of which you write & will be glad to get from it any thing that would fill up the cracks—and yawning chasms!—in ours.

In 1925 Greene was finally able to acquire an earlier impression of this print, one of Rembrandt's most accomplished.

**Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669)**

***Christ Healing the Sick (or “The Hundred Guilder Print”),***

**ca. 1648**

**Etching, engraving, and drypoint**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased from Elisabeth Achelis, 1925; RvR 116**

**Clarence H. White (1871–1925)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1911***

**Platinum print**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center  
for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson  
Papers, Personal Photographs, Box 12, Folder 37**

“I am eager to get the first draft of a book or poem in manuscript—and note the differences—the growth of the idea—or the betterment of the expression.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, May 9, 1913



## **EXTREME REVISION**

One of French writer Honoré de Balzac's greatest works, *Eugénie Grandet* is an early novel in his larger literary project *La Comédie Humaine*. After Belle Greene acquired this manuscript in 1925, she remarked, "from the point of view of rarity alone, it is the most important autograph manuscript acquired by the Library during the 20 years of my connection with it. No other Balzac manuscript has ever come to America." It combines 114 pages of manuscript with 41 pages of heavily revised printed proofs. Many pages are voluminously corrected and annotated, with the crowded margins extended in some cases by small, affixed pieces of paper.

**Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850)**

***Eugénie Grandet***

**Autograph manuscript and annotated printer's proofs, 1833**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased, 1925; MA 1036**

## ***SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE***

This is the earliest surviving draft of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's well-known sonnet cycle, so-titled in part because of the nickname—"my little Portuguese"—given by her husband and fellow poet, Robert. The nickname purportedly arose from Elizabeth's dark skin, eyes, and hair. Belle Greene used a fictional Portuguese ancestry, along with the middle name "da Costa," to explain her own dark complexion and mask her Black ancestry. Though there is no direct evidence to suggest Greene was attracted to these sonnets for this reason, or knew of the Browning family's ties to slavery, the notion is nonetheless intriguing. The manuscript was originally mounted within this sumptuously bound volume that preserves Greene's notes: her analysis compares the handwritten text to the first printed edition.

**Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861)**

***Sonnets from the Portuguese***

**Autograph manuscript, ca. 1845–50**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr.,  
1917; MA 933.3–28**

## **“PERFECTLY AMERICAN”**

When French artist Paul-César Helleu visited New York in 1912–13, his chief task was to design Grand Central Terminal’s original ceiling decoration. He also drew several portraits of women. His portrait of Belle Greene, which whitewashes her to an extent, may not capture her likeness, but it evokes her fashion sense, showing her in a plumed hat. Helleu described the image for the *New York Times*: “Here is a typical American! . . . Miss Belle Greene, Librarian of Mr. Pierpont Morgan. Ha!—Librarian, eh?—that is funny to a Frenchman. In France, we have no bibliothéquaires—female Librarians—no, never! Perfectly American.” Greene largely disparaged the drawing, remarking that it had “1% of Belle Greene and 99 of Paul Helleu.”

**Paul-César Helleu (1859–1927)**

**Portrait of Belle da Costa Greene, 1913**

**Black, white, and red chalk**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950; 1950.12**

## **THE DEATH OF MORGAN**

While traveling in Egypt in 1913, J. Pierpont Morgan fell ill and died soon after in Rome, on March 31. His funeral was held at St. George's Church in Manhattan on April 14, 1914, but his body was ceremoniously brought to the Library before the service. Greene wrote to a colleague:

I feel as if Life had stopped for me, . . . and it is all I can do to “go on” without him. He was so much more than my “boss.” He was almost a father to me—very often I felt like a son . . . his understanding and his great confidence and trust in me bridged all the differences of age, wealth and position. So you can see I feel stranded and desolate.

**Preserved flowers from the day of the funeral of J. Pierpont Morgan, enclosed in a folded sheet of mourning stationery and envelope annotated by Belle da Costa Greene,  
April 14, 1913**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1196, Box 2, Folder 34**



J. Pierpont Morgan's Library on April 14, 1913, with hearse set to transport Morgan's coffin to St. George's Church for his funeral. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

“I think you will know how almost impossible it is for me to write—but you are all I have left now. He came back to me and the Library he loved so much, last night at six o’clock. We fixed his room for him almost exactly as it was on Christmas Day—all red and white roses and a few wreaths. I cannot tell you how beautiful it looks—It has resulted in just what we aimed at—a home coming.”

**Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950)**

**Autograph letter to Bernard Berenson, April 12, 1913**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Box 61, Folder 7**

“My friends in England suggest that I be called “Keeper of Printed Books and Manuscripts” . . . but you know they have such long titles in London. I’m simply a librarian.”

—Belle da Costa Greene, *New York Times*, April 7, 1912

## **LIBRARY WORK CONTINUES**

By 1913 Greene was accustomed to seeing her name in the headlines. This article, describing her role after J. Pierpont Morgan's death, offers a glimpse of the conversation growing around her as a public figure. As typical of media of the time, the piece emphasized her age and femininity. But the illustrator's imaginative rendering of Greene at a desk underscores the great responsibility she held. This was a time of uncertainty for the collection, much of which was sold or donated by Pierpont's son, Jack. But the Library, with the works on paper that Greene held so dear, was kept intact and she remained its librarian.

### **“Young Woman Librarian Continues Work of Great Morgan Collection”**

***New York Herald, August 3, 1913***

**With reproduction of a photograph by Adolph de Meyer  
(1868–1946)**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3295**



## A TREASURE IN FACSIMILE

This faithful reproduction of the “Crusader Bible,” one of the Morgan’s greatest treasures, offered readers unprecedented access to images of the fragile original manuscript. Belle Greene acquired this manuscript and helped convince her employer, J. Pierpont Morgan’s son, Jack, to fund the publication. She promoted the creation of many such facsimiles and reproductions and distributed them widely to research libraries around the world.

In this photograph, a fashionable visitor to the Morgan’s illuminated manuscripts exhibition (1933–34) admires a volume displayed on this intricately carved wooden lectern. “On a lectern as tall as a man is a fifteenth-century Antiphonarium,” reads a contemporary review. “Its pages are as big as a newspaper and the book is open to the Resurrection scene.” Greene started the Morgan’s robust exhibition program as another way to increase public access to the collection.

***A Book of Old Testament Illustrations of the Middle of the Thirteenth Century***

**Cambridge: printed by W. Lewis at the University Press for the Roxburghe Club, 1927**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, reference collection;  
178.4 N4**

**Lectern for displaying manuscripts, ca. 1920s–30s  
The Morgan Library & Museum**



Visitor viewing MS M.686 at the Pierpont Morgan Library's exhibition of illuminated manuscripts, New York Public Library, 1933–34. The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291.

“I was busily engaged hunting up particulars of a certain book & half the Library was on my desk.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, June 29, 1909

## LIBRARY WORK

From her office in the North Room Belle Greene ran the library and managed its staff, using custom furniture including a desk with hidden compartments, a swivel chair, and an ornate card catalogue cabinet. At this desk she researched the collection, kept a vast correspondence with scholars, answered reference questions, and negotiated with book and art dealers. Otto Schneider's etching is the only known image of Greene sitting at her North Room desk, which was situated to the right of the entrance. Librarians such as Greene preserve traces of the past and drive the production of knowledge. But this labor often goes unseen and underappreciated.

This staged photograph of Belle Greene's office was taken for publicity purposes. Though it does not show her desk, which would have been situated at the right side of the room, it does depict the two card catalogue cabinets flanking the fireplace, with a print of the Edward Steichen portrait of J. Pierpont Morgan atop the cabinet at right.

**Cowtan & Sons**

**Desk and swivel chair used by Belle da Costa Greene, 1906–7**

**Card catalogue cabinet from the North Room of J. Pierpont**

**Morgan's Library, ca. 1907**

**The Morgan Library & Museum**

**Otto J. Schneider (1875–1946)**

**Belle da Costa Greene at her desk in the North Room of**

**J. Pierpont Morgan's Library, 1909**

**Reproduction of a  
drypoint etching**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3271**





Tebbs & Knell, North Room of J. Pierpont Morgan's Library, ca. 1923–35. Gelatin silver print. The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1600.

## **BUILDING A LIBRARY: ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS**

Belle da Costa Greene specialized in medieval illuminated manuscripts, building on the collection J. Pierpont Morgan had been forming since the late nineteenth century. He was drawn not only to their sumptuous, bejeweled covers and their elaborately painted images, called miniatures, but also to their religious content. Most medieval manuscripts contain scripture or religious texts used for prayer or ritual celebrations. Sharing this interest, Greene and Morgan's son, J. P. Jr., or Jack, would develop the Morgan collection into one of the finest in the world. She displayed these manuscripts in major exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1924) and New York Public Library (1933–34), demonstrating a curatorial vision that was ahead of its time. In addition to acquiring Western European objects, she sought out Persian and Indian miniatures as well as manuscripts made in Armenia, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Her professional network among medievalists was wide-reaching in both the United States and Europe, and she is now recognized as the first person of color elected to the Medieval Academy of America.



## **A TWELFTH-CENTURY MASTERPIECE**

The largest extant English Bible of the twelfth century, the Winchester Bible, is preserved in Hampshire, England, at Winchester Cathedral. At some point this leaf was removed, and it subsequently passed among several owners, including the artist, writer, and textile designer William Morris, before J. Pierpont Morgan purchased it in Rome in 1912. It bears the manuscript's only fully painted page. Belle Greene included this leaf in a 1933–34 exhibition, describing it as such: “Two pages from a Bible which was probably executed in St. Swithin's Priory, Winchester, by the scribes and artists of the famous Bible now in the library of Winchester Cathedral. The scenes illustrate events in the lives of David and Samuel.”

**Single leaf from the Winchester Bible, in Latin**

**Winchester, England, ca. 1160–80**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1912; MS M.619**

“If the illuminated manuscripts are the chief glory of the Morgan Library, they are also the special love of Miss Greene. To talk with her about them is to feel at once the profundity of her knowledge, the infallibility of her eye, the warmth of her affection for the beautiful. To watch her look over the large black ledger of acquisitions is to see each clearly inscribed entry serve as a clue in the drama which was her life.”

—*New York Times*, April 17, 1949

## **ACQUIRING MANUSCRIPTS**

This ledger, known as an accession book, documents the early acquisitions of medieval manuscripts for the Morgan's collection. Most of the entries are carefully written in Belle Greene's hand and record data such as the presence and nature of illuminations, place of origin, binding, purchase price, and source of acquisition. These pages include many of her most famous acquisitions: the "Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards" (M.630); the "Crusader Bible," also known as the Old Testament miniatures (M.638); Coptic manuscripts from Egypt (M.633–36); and manuscripts from the collection of Henry Yates Thompson (M.641, 642, and 644). Several of these volumes are on display nearby.

**Early accession book of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, ca. 1900–1974**

**The Morgan Library & Museum**

## **ONE OF HER FINEST ACQUISITIONS**

In 1916, amid World War One, Belle Greene visited England and acquired what is now one of the most important illuminated manuscripts held in the United States. Commonly referred to as the “Crusader Bible,” it has had many owners, traveling from France to Italy, Poland, Iran, Egypt, and England. Though J. Pierpont Morgan had declined to purchase the manuscript in 1910 for £10,000, Greene was determined to secure it for Jack Morgan’s collection, even though he had not authorized wartime purchases. “If I had been able to stay here several weeks longer,” she wrote him, “I know I could have bought every important manuscript in private hands in England.”

**Old Testament miniatures (“Crusader Bible”), in Latin,  
Persian, and Judeo-Persian**

**Paris, France, ca. 1244–54**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr.,  
1916; MS M.638**

## **AN INCOMPARABLE TREASURE**

The British curator and museum director Sydney Cockerell was one of Belle Greene's good friends and colleagues. They first met during her visit to England in 1908, when he described her as "a very nice intelligent woman with a great enthusiasm for manuscripts." In 1916, after she purchased this volume, known as the "Crusader Bible," Cockerell wrote her a congratulatory letter in which he called the acquisition "cheap at any price." At the time he owned a single leaf from the "Crusader Bible" (now at the Getty Museum) and would later write descriptions of the full manuscript for a facsimile edition published in 1927, on display on the lectern in the Marble Hall.

**Old Testament miniatures ("Crusader Bible"), in Latin,  
Persian, and Judeo-Persian**

**Paris, France, ca. 1244–54**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr.,  
1916; MS M.638**

## **INFINITE RICHES IN A LITTLE ROOM**

From 1933 to 1934 the Morgan held a major exhibition of one hundred and fifty of its illuminated manuscripts at the New York Public Library. Belle Greene wrote the entries for the accompanying catalogue in collaboration with her protégé Meta Harrsen, a medievalist who joined the Morgan in the 1920s. Remarkably, the book is the only one of Greene's career that lists her name on the title page.

In describing the “infinite riches” on display, critics noted Greene's “excellent judgment” in acquiring manuscripts and in curating an exhibition that was “unparalleled in the city's artistic history.”

***Exhibition of Illuminated Manuscripts Held at the New York Public Library: New York, November 1933 to April 1934***

**[New York]: Pierpont Morgan Library, ca. 1934**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3298**

“It is also interesting to note the numbers and types of people who are visiting the exhibition—not only many scholarly looking men and women, but also many girls and boys who are obviously students and an appreciable number of illiterate persons. All seem absorbed in the beautiful examples in the cases.”

—Ruth Jenkins to Belle da Costa Greene, February 8, 1934

Rave reviews and gracious letters characterized the illuminated manuscript exhibition's accessibility. Belle Greene once described these types of blockbuster exhibitions as “caviare for the peepul.”

**Poster for the Pierpont Morgan Library's exhibition of illuminated manuscripts at the New York Public Library, ca. 1933**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291**



## **ISLAMIC ART IN MUNICH, 1910**

In the summer of 1910 Belle Greene sailed to Europe to tour Italy with Bernard Berenson. They also visited Munich, where they saw a landmark exhibition of Islamic art. As its catalogue relates, the exhibition sought “to present the purely artistic significance of this area of the arts which to many is unknown or misunderstood” and “to demonstrate that Muhammadan artworks deserve to be considered on a par with the art of other cultures.” To his wife, Mary, Berenson summarized their experience: “Overwhelming is the word. The quantity is immense, the quality very high or very interesting, and the arrangement a revelation of order, taste, and distinction.”

***Ausstellung München 1910: Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst . . .*** (Exhibition Munich 1910: Masterpieces of Mohammedan art . . .)

**Munich: Rudolf Mosse, 1910**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Belle da Costa Greene, 1935; ARC 3299**



Julius Diez (1870–1957), Poster for *Ausstellung München 1910*. . . , 1910. Color lithograph. Münchner Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Reklamekunst; P-70/56.2.

## **THE READ ALBUM \***

One of the treasures Greene and Berenson saw in Munich was an album of Persian and Mughal paintings and calligraphy from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The collection belonged to Charles Hercules Read, keeper of British and medieval antiquities at the British Museum. In 1911 Greene wrote to Read, a friend and colleague, to ask if the album was for sale, explaining her rationale for the acquisition. She noted that, despite Morgan's minimal interest in Persian and Mughal art, "in a collection of manuscripts and drawings such as he has, it is very necessary for him to have a representation of this most important school." Greene's interest in collecting Islamic art, among peer institutions, was ahead of its time.

**Ibrāhīm Adham of Balkh served by angels**

**Faizabad, Oudh, India, ca. 1750–75**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont**

**Morgan, 1911; MS M.458, fol. 32r**

**\* On view until January 27.**

**A seated courtier with his pet falcon, with surrounding text  
in Persian**

**Herāt, Afghanistan, ca. 1600**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont  
Morgan, 1911; MS M.386, fol. 1r**

**\* On view until January 27.**

**Exhibition room of the Pierpont Morgan Library with  
medieval manuscripts on view, ca. 1928–60**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1948**

## **THE HENRY YATES THOMPSON COLLECTION**

In 1918 the British collector Henry Yates Thompson began auctioning off many of his renowned illuminated manuscripts. Yates Thompson was famous for owning exactly one hundred manuscripts, and with each new acquisition he sold a less choice volume to maintain that number. Unable to attend the sale in person, Belle Greene carefully calibrated her bids with the British bookselling firm Bernard Quaritch. In the end she bid successfully on several items, including this liturgical book made at the island abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel, located off the coast of Normandy. The manuscript, which sold for the bargain price of £1,000, was one of Greene's top targets at the sale.

**Sacramentary, in Latin**

**Mont-Saint-Michel, France, ca. 1060**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr.,  
1919; MS M.641**

## **A SPANISH APOCALYPSE COMMENTARY**

In 1919 Belle Greene purchased this manuscript commentary on the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) at auction from the collection of Henry Yates Thompson. In her notes for the sale, she marked this manuscript (and one other) as “most important.” She bid successfully and yet again acquired a Yates Thompson manuscript at a steep bargain. The manuscript was written and illuminated by an artist/scribe named Maius and is the earliest complete copy of the celebrated Beatus manuscripts of medieval Spain. It is a prime example of Greene’s acquisitions of medieval manuscripts originating outside of the traditional Western European cultural centers of Britain, France, Italy, and Germany.

**St. Beatus of Liébana (d. 798)**

***Commentary on the Apocalypse*, in Latin**

**San Salvador de Tábara, Spain, ca. 945**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; MS M.644, vol. 1**

## **THE LIFE OF AN ENGLISH SAINT**

In 1927 manuscripts from George Holford's library, built by his father, Robert Stayner Holford, became available for purchase. The crown jewel of the collection was this illuminated biography of the East Anglian king known as Edmund the Martyr (ca. 840–869). It was probably made in Suffolk and is one of the earliest illustrated histories of an English saint. Belle Greene believed "the estate ought to arrange to practically give it to the British Museum," but since the London institution could not raise the requisite funds, the Holford executors sold it to the Morgan. Despite this outcome, Greene and Jack Morgan often deferred to British institutions and in some cases helped them acquire manuscripts of national importance.

**Miscellany on the life and miracles of St. Edmund, in Latin  
Bury St. Edmunds, England, ca. 1130**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr.,  
1927; MS M.736**



## **FIT FOR THE KING**

Belle Greene acquired this sumptuous Book of Hours, illuminated by the French painter Jean Bourdichon, with the sale of George Holford's manuscripts in 1927. The book was probably made for the French king François I. Containing eight miniatures, the manuscript also has ninety-six border decorations of flowers, fruits, plants, and insects. To aid her identification of the botanical subjects, Greene consulted a French plant catalogue from 1928, which includes a note in her hand reading, "hold with & for Bourdichon hours for names of plants." A typed description of the manuscript by Greene indicates her knowledge of another Book of Hours made by the same artist and featuring similar decorative borders.

**"Hours of François I," in Latin and French**

**Tours, France, ca. 1515**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr.,  
1927; MS M.732**

## **GOSPELS FOR A COUNTESS**

Four magnificent manuscripts from Holkham Hall, Norfolk, caught the attention of Belle Greene and Jack Morgan in 1926. This Gospel Book, with its jeweled treasure binding, was probably made for the powerful and well-connected noblewoman Judith of Flanders (1032–1094), a great patron of the arts. Morgan traveled to England to finalize the deal, informed by Greene’s research into the collection. As he left the company of the owner, Thomas William Coke, third Earl of Leicester, Morgan quipped, “My librarian told me she wouldn’t dare spend so much of my money, but just the same I wouldn’t be able to face her if I went home without the manuscripts.”

**“Gospels of Judith of Flanders,” in Latin  
England, 1051–64**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr.,  
1926; MS. M.708**

“Tonight we are going to hear Bohème at the New Theatre, an opera which I hate because I love it so & it always breaks me all up—by the end of the evening I am invariably desperately enamoured of the man who sits next me [*sic*], be he old or young, black or white, lame, halt or blind—n’importe-qui!—Such is Bohème.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, March 8, 1910

**Adolf Hohenstein (1854–1928)**

***La Bohême, quattro quadri di G. Giocosa e L. Illica. musica di  
G. Puccini***

**[Milan: Officine Grafiche Ricordi, 1895/96]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, James Fuld Collection**

## A LIFE OF HER OWN

Belle da Costa Greene defied social expectations both within and beyond her job at the Morgan. Greene's wealth afforded her a privileged life that many women of the time, especially Black women, could never have dreamt of living. Though she was the primary breadwinner in a household that at different times included her mother and various siblings, her relative financial freedom enabled her to pursue interests that ranged from art collecting to opera to political and charitable affiliations. Her artwork purchases included Chinese sculpture, old master paintings, modern drawings, and antique jewelry. A member of Greene's household staff even described her apartment as a "museum." The social connections she formed outside of work brought her face to face with the avant-garde artistic movements and bohemian values sweeping across the city, allowing Greene to live outside of the restrictive definitions of race and gender that permeated much of the nation.

## **A FAMILY HOME**

Belle Greene's mother, Genevieve, lived with or near her daughter for most of her life. Her adjoining apartment, labeled "Mother's apartment (little larger than mine)" can be seen in this diagram. The family lived in various neighborhoods on the west side of Manhattan before moving to Murray Hill, close to the Morgan Library, in 1911. Genevieve was the heart of the family's home. In 1914 Greene and her sisters threw Genevieve a birthday party, where they

made Mother's life miserable by trying to learn her real age. We guessed all the way from 40 to 80 but she would not admit to anything. We all simply busted ourselves on presents to her. Ethel & Teddy combined gave her a lovely opera wrap, my sister a small diamond brooch and I, the diamond hair piece. We have all decided to go naked and hungry in consequence.

**Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950)**

**Reproduction of a drawing of her apartment, 104 East 40th Street, in autograph letter to Bernard Berenson, July 9, 1912**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center  
for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson  
Papers, Box 61, Folder 1**

## **THE ONLY PHOTOGRAPH OF GENEVIEVE**

This previously unknown photograph of Genevieve was taken by a member of Belle Greene's household staff, Gertrude Tuxen, while on a picnic in the Hudson Valley. The image shows Genevieve (at left) around ninety years old with another member of the staff and her family, as well as the household Pekingese dog, named "Hia Shua San." The photograph conveys the visual foundation of racial passing, based in colorism, as Genevieve's complexion appears quite light. The image helps explain how Genevieve Ida Fleet Greener could pass as Genevieve Van Vliet Greene, fit into the colorist social world of DC's Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, be mistaken for white by Grace Dodge, and have children who could cross the color line.

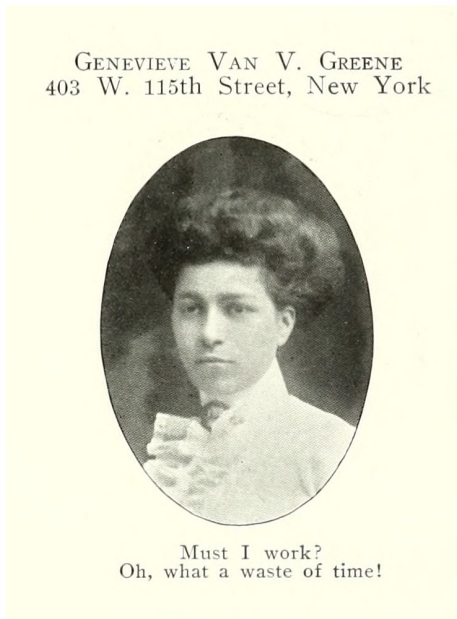
**Gertrude Tuxen**

**Genevieve Van Vliet Greene, Belle da Costa Greene's mother,  
on an outing in the Hudson River Valley near Bear Mountain,  
ca. 1939**

**Gelatin silver print**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3297.1**





Yearbook photo of Genevieve “Teddy” Greene, Belle Greene’s younger sister, Barnard College class of 1912. Barnard Archives and Special Collections, Barnard College; BC12.01 - Mortarboard, 1894–2023, carton 2.

Passport photo of Ethel Alice Greene, Belle Greene’s younger sister, ca. 1920.

## **A BELLE GREENE MINIATURE**

This miniature, which Belle Greene displayed in her apartment, is the only known painting of her surviving today. While she described her appearance in it as “Egyptian,” it is unlikely that she intended to associate herself with Blackness or African ancestry, given the ways Western imaginings of Egypt tended to be Eurocentric, typically depicting figures like Cleopatra as white. And yet by invoking Egyptian imagery, Greene positioned herself within a space that is neither white nor Black, while also embracing an exoticized beauty acceptable to Western culture. In other letters to Berenson, she made a few specific references to her dark skin color and likened herself to women from Persia, China, and Abyssinia (now Ethiopia and Eritrea).

**Laura Coombs Hills (1859–1952)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1910***

**Watercolor on ivory**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950; AZ164**

“The whole value of the portrait really lies in the coloring which is quite wonderful—the veil which I have around me is a most wonderful glowing saffron with high lights of sunset colors in it & the background is a dull gold—It is not the Belle that you know but you will know her some day & you, I think will like her—It is the Belle of one of my former incarnations ‘Egyptienne.’”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, June 7, 1910

## **A PERSONAL COLLECTION**

Belle Greene acquired some Persian, Indian, and Arabic manuscripts for the Morgan Library, but she focused more intensively in this area for her personal collection. This Persian calligraphic leaf is one of several she owned, along with a few miniatures and the illuminated Qur'an seen in the case below. Greene was part of a growing group of collectors who found much beauty in non-Western art. She also owned an antique Persian silk prayer rug—listed in her estate inventory but untraced today.

Western medieval manuscripts were equally of interest to her, and her collection included this Book of Hours as well as single manuscript leaves. The Morgan inherited the portions of Greene's estate not specifically bequeathed to others in her will, and many of her artworks and books were added to its collection.

**Calligraphy, in Persian**

**Probably Tehran, Iran, 1841**

**Commissioned for Muḥammad Shāh Qājār and written by  
Asad-Allāh Shīrāzī**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da  
Costa Greene, 1951; MS M.846.5**

**Qur'an, in Arabic**

**Probably Istanbul, Turkey, 1832–33**

**Written by Pashāzāde**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950; MS M.835**

**Book of Hours, in Latin and Middle French**

**Rouen, France, ca. 1460–70**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, Melvin R. Seiden Collection, 2007; MS M.1160**

## **EAST ASIAN ART**

In the 1910s Belle Greene gained an appreciation for East Asian art, attending gallery shows and cultivating relationships with prominent Asian art dealers in the US. Her admiration was likely inspired by J. Pierpont Morgan's large collection of Chinese porcelains. This bodhisattva head was originally part of a larger statue of Mahāsthāmaprāpta, who represents the power of wisdom. Likely removed from a cave three-hundred miles southwest of Beijing after 1909, the head entered the Western art market at a time when many private collectors were purchasing Chinese sculptures and pottery without scrutinizing their provenance. Greene also owned many other pieces of East Asian art.

**Head of a bodhisattva (Mahāsthāmaprāpta)**

**Northern China, Northern Qi dynasty, 550–77**

**Limestone with partial polychrome**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1949; AZ075**

## IMAGINING ASIA

As trade between Europe and China increased, European artists began producing work with imagined or imitated Asian scenes and motifs, known as chinoiserie. In France Jean Pillement popularized the style. He completed several royal commissions for chinoiserie and later became court painter to Marie-Antoinette. Greene owned three Pillement drawings. She was likely attracted to them because of her interests in Chinese and French culture but also because of their fashionable status among early twentieth-century collectors, which reflected a growing public interest in non-Western subjects in art. In 1941 she lent this drawing to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *The China Trade and Its Influence*.

**Jean Pillement (1728–1808)**

***Chinoiserie: Fisherman with Two Nets*, eighteenth century**

**Colored chalks**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950; 1950.16**

## **A NOBLE PORTRAIT**

This captivating portrait was hung in Belle Greene's apartment and was among the most valuable items in her personal collection. The display of wealth in the painting must have spoken to Greene, who was often described in the news as one of the highest-earning women in the country and who adored fashionable gowns and Renaissance jewelry. Both the artist, the Italian Renaissance painter Lavinia Fontana, and her subject represent women in positions of power and privilege, roles Greene sought for herself.

**Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614)**

***Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman*, ca. 1580**

**Oil on canvas**

**National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and  
Wilhelmina Holladay; 1986.77**



## WOMEN WHO EARN BIG WAGES

No. 8.

### BELLE DA COSTA GREENE

Librarian Who Earns a Salary of  
Over \$25,000 a Year.

(By International News Service)

Many woman in recent years have taken up the vocation of librarian and among the foremost among them is Miss Bella da Costa Greene, of New York city, Morgan librarian, who earns over \$25,000 a year. In 1911 Miss Greene startled the world of bibliophiles by bidding \$42,800 for the Caxton edition of the "Morte D'Arthur" at the Cox sale.



"Women Who Earn Big Wages," *Asbury Park Evening Press*,  
March 10, 1921. Photo: New Jersey State Library.

## MELANCHOLY

Nothing is known about how or why Belle Greene acquired this print of Dürer's enigmatic *Melencolia I*. She was probably drawn to the image as a high spot of Northern Renaissance printmaking. Various readings of the image align with emotions Greene felt in her personal and professional life. Though outwardly exuberant, she often experienced depression: "I have been so blue and discouraged—my life seems to be no longer my own and I no longer a 'free-born' person—I spend all of my waking hours in the library." Dürer's winged Melancholy sits among unused instruments related to woodworking, geometry, metallurgy, and mathematics—a view of the creative imagination mired in unproductive stasis. While Belle Greene's executive function was never in doubt, in her feelings of powerlessness she may have felt an affinity with Dürer's grounded angel.

**Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)**

***Melencolia I*, 1514**

**Engraving**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950; 1950.33**

## HIGH FASHION

Clothing was essential to Belle Greene's style and personality. The substance of her most famous quote—"Just because I am a librarian doesn't mean I have to dress like one"—comes to life in the words of her colleague Meta Harrsen, who once described her boss wearing a "dress of dark red Italian brocade shot with silver threads, a gold braided girdle, and an emerald necklace." Here Greene dons a feathered hat and pair of harem pants, introduced around 1910 by the French fashion designer Paul Poiret, along with the turbans and kimono coats of his Orientalist style. Greene also owned garments designed by Edward Molyneux and Mariano Fortuny, though none of her clothing apparently survives today.

**Clarence H. White (1871–1925)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, ca. 1911–12***

**Digital reproduction from a gelatin dry plate negative**

**Princeton University Art Museum, The Clarence H. White Collection, assembled and organized by Professor Clarence H. White Jr., and given in memory of Lewis F. White, Dr.**

**Maynard P. White Sr., and Clarence H. White Jr., the sons of Clarence H. White Sr. and Jane Felix White; CHW NEG-1085**

“At 12 called on Belle Greene at her house 123 East 38th Street, which is full of beautiful things.”

—Sir Sydney Cockerell, diary entry for October 31, 1920

## **MODERN DRAWINGS**

Belle Greene also collected drawings by modern artists, including her friend Everett Shinn (who drew “a dashing Carmen-like portrait” of her, now lost), Arthur B. Davies, Abraham Walkowitz, and Clara Tice. Many of these pieces are conventional nudes, though Walkowitz gave Greene two abstract drawings.

While no correspondence between Greene and Tice survives, they probably met one another and were in many ways kindred spirits. Known as “the Queen of Greenwich Village,” the bold and outspoken Tice first exhibited her watercolor nudes in 1910, and her work was subject to an infamous raid by the anti-obscenity zealot Anthony Comstock in 1915. It was probably at her 1922 exhibition *Animals and Nudes* that Greene purchased this drawing.

**Clara Tice (1888–1973)**

***Anteater*, twentieth century**

**Opaque watercolor over graphite**

“I am really rather overwhelmed by your kindness in letting me have two of your drawings. I feel that your work is ‘life-enhancing’ which is so much more than one dares hope for in New York—I wonder if you could be persuaded to come to see me some afternoon—quite quietly. Will you let me know if you dare?”

—Belle da costa Greene to Abraham Walkowitz,  
February 23, 1914

**Abraham Walkowitz (1880–1965)**

***Human Abstract*, ca. 1913**

**Graphite**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950; 1950.22**

## MATISSE AND MODERNISM

Modern art elicited strong, frequently contradictory impressions in Belle Greene. She attended the controversial Armory Show in 1913—America’s introduction to many of Europe’s avant-garde artists—and wrote to Berenson that she never “experienced anything so dreadful . . . altogether it was a nightmare such as I hope never to have to endure again. Cubists—Futurists—and out-futuring Futurists. What is your friend ART—coming to?” And yet she also owned modern art, including this Matisse drawing she purchased in 1912 from an exhibition at 291. Contrary to previous assumptions, it does not depict Greene but rather a North African scene that Matisse later realized in the drawing *Backs and Scene of Tangier*. Greene loaned *Nude* to the Museum of Modern Art for a Matisse exhibition in 1931.

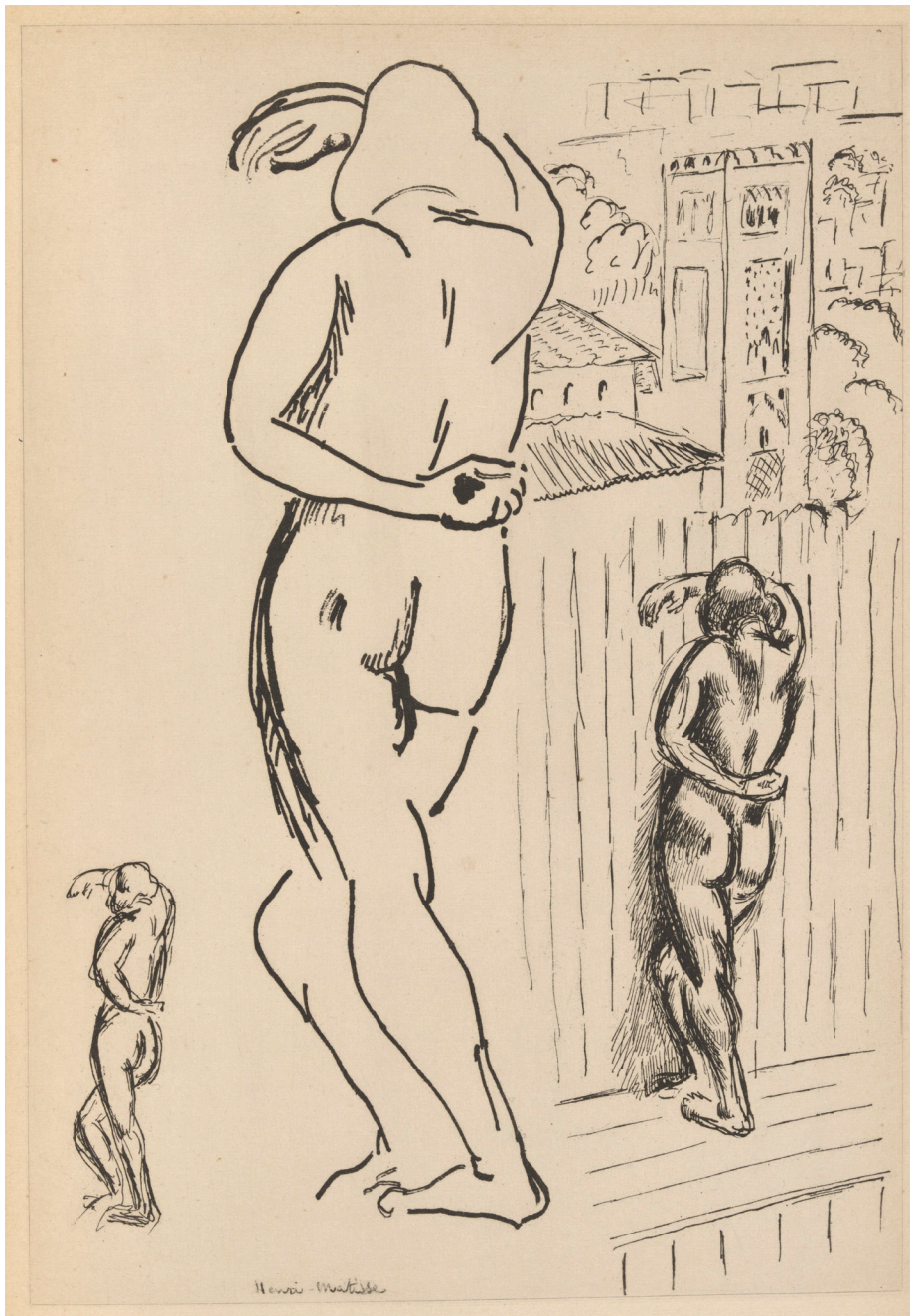
**Henri Matisse (1869–1954)**

***Nude*, 1912**

**Pen and ink**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950; 1950.14**





Henri Matisse (1869–1954), *Cinquante dessins* ([Paris]: Album édité par les soins de l'artiste, 1920). The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Frances and Michael Baylson, 2010; PML 195589. © 2024 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



“They had an exhibition of the drawings of Matisse which I had never seen before—They are the most extraordinary things I have ever seen. It was absolutely new to me and almost incomprehensible. I don’t understand what he is trying to do, what he is wanting to make me think whether an emphasis of character (sometimes called caricature) although at first it appeared to me to be only a series of extravagant contortions. They shocked & repelled me strongly at first but held me there quite two hours.”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, March 1, 1910



Henri Matisse's drawing *Nude* was exhibited at the 291 gallery, February 23–March 8, 1910.

Henri Matisse (1869–1954), *Nude*, 1908. Graphite on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949; 49.70.8. © 2024 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo source: Art Resource, New York.

## THE STIEGLITZ CIRCLE

In the 1910s Belle Greene became acquainted with the avant-garde circle of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, best known for founding the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, later known as 291 (named for its Fifth Avenue address). The gallery exhibited photographs by Edward Steichen, Gertrude Käsebier, and Clarence H. White, among others, as well as works in other mediums by figures such as Henri Matisse, Auguste Rodin, and Constantin Brancusi. Greene met Steichen when ordering prints of his well-known photographic portrait of J. Pierpont Morgan and soon began corresponding with his friend Stieglitz. In this letter, Stieglitz asks Greene to contribute a testimonial to “What is 291?”—a special issue of his journal, *Camera Work*. He adds the postscript, “With greetings, Don’t refuse!”

**Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946)**

**Typed letter to Belle da Costa Greene, July 10, 1914**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1310**

## **CAMERA WORK**

Greene opens her piece about 291 by placing Stieglitz at the center of the “Satellites” in his orbit (Matisse, Picasso, and the like). For Greene, these modern artists have rejected the old masters on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, figured as “a morgue,” which is likely a pun on “Morgan” (who was a major benefactor of the Met). Though Greene “creep[s] back to that same Morgue,” she finds that both the traditional museum and 291 radiate artistic glory in equal measure. The journalist and NAACP publicity director Herbert J. Seligmann later wrote about the sixty-eight contributors to “What is 291?": “All testified to the reality and vitality of the living spirit of freedom, tolerance, vital experiment which had found a home at 291.”

**Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950)**

**“291”**

***Camera Work*, no. 48 (July 1914): 64**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Mrs. Herbert J. Seligmann, 1986; PML 78904**

## GREENE IN CARICATURE

Greene was acquainted with the Mexican artist Marius de Zayas through Alfred Stieglitz and 291. The gallery mounted early exhibitions of his work, including *Up and Down Fifth Avenue* (1910), which featured large cardboard cutouts of his New York City caricatures. For his skeletal caricature of Greene, de Zayas may have drawn inspiration from the *calaveras* of Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada.

**Marius de Zayas (1880–1961)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1913***

**Charcoal and graphite**

**The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz  
Collection, 1949; 49.70.188**

**William Rothenstein (1872–1945)**

***Belle da Costa Greene*, 1912**

**Red and black chalk**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Frederick B. Adams Jr.,  
1956; 1956.5**

“I think if I were to choose my six favorite books (and were limited to that number) I’d take Alice in Wonderland, the Bible, the Mille Nuits, Rabelais, the Apocrypha, the Miracle Plays, Casanova—oh! dear I’m only just beginning and there’s 7 already . . .”

—Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, January 29, 1915

## **A HOME LIBRARY**

This is the only known interior image of one of Belle Greene's apartments, likely 104 East 40th Street, the home she diagrams in the drawing reproduced nearby. The photograph was embellished with overpainting for newspaper reproduction, appearing in an article on Greene's high salary. Here we see her library adorned with Renaissance decorative art, including Flemish tapestries, and her seventeenth-century Italian armchair. Greene sent a fragment of this photograph to Bernard Berenson, and on the back is a note in her hand indicating that it was taken "at home."

**Paul Thompson (1878–1940)**

***Bella da Costa Greene, a Morgan librarian who is numbered among the women of the country, earning \$25,000 a year, ca. 1915***

**Reproduction of a photographic print with overpainting**

**Photo: Getty/Bettmann**



The books shown here were either owned by Belle da Costa Greene, favorite literary works of hers, or titles that appear in her estate inventory but have not been traced today in specific copies she owned.

## **The Morgan Library & Museum**

## PHILANTHROPY

Greene contributed to many causes important to her. She steered efforts to reestablish the University of Leuven Library in Belgium after the First World War, donated to the YWCA in honor of her educational patron Grace Dodge, and sold war bonds during the Second World War. Greene was chair of the fund committee for the Lewis Carroll Children's Library at the Babies' Hospital, located at Broadway and 168th Street (today the Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital). The Alice Fund, named in honor of Carroll's hundredth birthday, was established to create a children's library for the hospital, a pioneering institution in pediatric care originally organized and run by women.

### *Lewis Carroll Anniversary*

**[New York: Babies' Hospital, 1932]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Drue Heinz Fund for Twentieth-Century Literature, 2023; ARC 3303**

## WOMEN IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Greene served as treasurer for the Women's Roosevelt League, a group organized in 1916 to support Charles Evans Hughes's presidential campaign. In the September leading up to the election, she traveled with the league to Washington, DC, for a conference on the role of women in politics. The women photographed alongside Greene came from similar social circles. Maude Wetmore cofounded a camp for young women and was a friend of Anne Morgan—J. Pierpont Morgan's youngest daughter and a prominent philanthropist in her own right. Katherine Davis was an advocate for women in New York reformatories. Alice Carpenter was an active leader in the suffrage movement and managed the women's department at a Wall Street brokerage firm.

***Belle DeAcosta Green [sic] - Alice Carpenter - Kath. Davis - Maude Wetmore, September 12, 1916, from Bain News Service Members of Women's Roosevelt League for Hughes. Left to right Mrs. Jos G. Deune, Sec'y., Miss Alice Carpenter, Pres., Miss Belle Greene, Treas., ca. 1916***

**Photographic prints**

**Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division**

## **POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

Greene did not write about politics often, but during the height of her career she spoke up about New York City political corruption and the growing suffrage movement. While not wishing to be labeled a suffragette, she was a founding member of the Women's City Club of New York. In 1916 she pledged her support for the Republican presidential candidate, former New York governor and US Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes, who sought to extend the vote to women. Supporters of the National Hughes Alliance, including Greene, advocated for the election of Hughes and for women's equality. Partly due to his belief in universal equality, Hughes lost in a close race to the incumbent Woodrow Wilson.

### ***Women in National Politics***

**New York: Women's Committee National Hughes Alliance,  
1916**

**Library of Congress, General Collections; JK2357 1916 .N3**

“Miss Belle da Costa Greene, to be Director and Keeper of the Manuscripts, at a salary at the rate of Twelve thousand five hundred dollars per annum, from January 1, 1924.”

—Minutes of the Pierpont Morgan Library Board of Trustees, 1924

## **BELLE DA COSTA GREENE, DIRECTOR**

In February 1924 Jack Morgan formally gave oversight of the 1906 Library and its contents to a board of trustees and established the Pierpont Morgan Memorial Library to honor his father. There was no doubt that Belle da Costa Greene would serve as its inaugural director, a position she held until her retirement in 1948.

In 1928 Greene oversaw the construction of the building you are in now, called the Annex, which was designed with a dedicated exhibition space and state-of-the-art reading room. During the quarter century she led the Morgan, she acquired 138 illuminated manuscripts, 596 incunabula, and more than 17,000 reference works for the institution, in addition to presenting 46 exhibitions, issuing 35 publications, and starting a public lecture series.

Greene was committed to preserving the collection but also offered multiple ways to engage with its treasures, welcoming researcher appointments, mounting large blockbuster exhibitions, photographing collection material for remote accessibility, and incorporating original books and manuscripts into hands-on teaching. She formed lifelong contacts and friendships with many scholars and expertly mentored her staff, who always knew her as “Miss Greene.”

## **A NEW ERA**

With the transformation of Morgan's private collection into a public educational institution, it was now Greene's responsibility to serve a community outside of the Morgan family. The institution was established as a "public library, for reference only . . . for the use and benefit . . . of all persons whomsoever, subject only to suitable rules and regulations."

Greene's appointment is recorded in this beautifully handwritten book with the board's meeting minutes, which also indicate that Ada Thurston, Greene's first hire, would stay on as the "Keeper of Printed Books." Jack Morgan served as the inaugural board president.

**Minutes of the Pierpont Morgan Library Board of Trustees,  
1924**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3294, Box 1425, v. 1**

“Miss Greene’s personality filled the building, the electric tension in the air as she approached, noisily, energetically alive and alert.”

—Aline B. Louchheim, “The Morgan Library and Miss Greene,”  
*New York Times*, April 17, 1949



## **THE GREAT MORGAN TREASURES**

Jack Morgan's decision to create the Pierpont Morgan Library made international news. The collection had been the subject of public interest for many years but had only been accessible to invited guests of the Morgans or Belle Greene. Pierpont wrote in his will of his "desire and intention to make some suitable disposition of [the collections] . . . which would render them permanently available for the instruction and pleasure of the American people." When Jack decided to create the Morgan Library, Greene wrote to the art dealer Jacques Seligmann, "Is it not splendid that he is following so beautifully in the footsteps of his illustrious Father."

**"The Story of the Great Morgan Treasures"**

***New York Herald*, February 17, 1924**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291, Box 91, Folder 12**

## **FROM LIBRARIAN TO DIRECTOR**

After Pierpont's death in 1913, Belle Greene was concerned about her role under Jack Morgan, who managed the development, selective dispersal, and stewardship of his father's collection. She quickly learned that Jack had every intention to honor his father's wishes and keep her on the payroll. Their working relationship took time to develop, and in the early years she sometimes unfavorably compared "this Mr. Morgan" (Jack) with "my Mr. Morgan" (Pierpont). But as time went on, Greene and Jack formed a close professional relationship and collaborated to make many important acquisitions. Taken during this busy time in her career, this photograph is a rare image of her as director of the Pierpont Morgan Library.

**Mattie Edwards Hewitt (1869–1957)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1929, for Bain News Service***

**Reproduction of photographic print**

**Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, George  
Grantham Bain Collection; LC-USZ62-93225**



Portrait of J. P. Morgan Jr. aboard SS *Mauretania* upon his arrival from the Paris Reparations meeting, 1929. The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Henry S. Morgan, 1955; ARC 2690.2.

## **HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS**

Belle Greene and the Morgans were interested in European history, collecting documents from the reigns of various monarchs. In the middle of the Great Depression, when the library had slowed down its purchases, Greene acquired this letter signed by Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife. The manuscript complemented the Morgan's holdings of documents by Queen Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, and others. Greene's acquisition of a collection related to Robespierre reflects her interest in French culture and history, a passion she shared with J. Pierpont Morgan. Greene had begun studying French (and Latin) as a child and continued to learn and use the language, later interspersing her letters with French phrases and corresponding with French scholars.

**Anne Boleyn, Queen, consort of Henry VIII, King of England  
(1507–1536)**

**Letter to the dean and canons of Exeter Cathedral, March 26,  
[1536]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased, 1936; MA 1131**

**Jacques Louis David (1748–1825)**

***Maximilien Robespierre on the Day of His Execution,***  
**eighteenth century**

**Graphite**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased, 1928; MA 1059.6**

## LITERARY MANUSCRIPTS

Charles Dickens had long been a collecting interest of J. Pierpont Morgan, who bought the original manuscript of *A Christmas Carol*. Belle Greene continued to build what is now the finest Dickens collection in North America, acquiring letters and the manuscript of his third Christmas book, *The Cricket on the Hearth*. Near the end of her career, in 1944, she purchased her most magnificent Dickens manuscript yet: the working draft of his late masterpiece *Our Mutual Friend*. The pages include such heavy revisions that a writer in the 1870s said, “the fineness and closeness of the writing are enough to render the most amiable of experienced printers temporarily insane.” This is the only manuscript of a full-length Dickens novel held outside of Britain.

**Charles Dickens (1812–1870)**

***Our Mutual Friend***

**Autograph manuscript, September 2, 1865**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased, 1944;**

**MA 1202–1203**



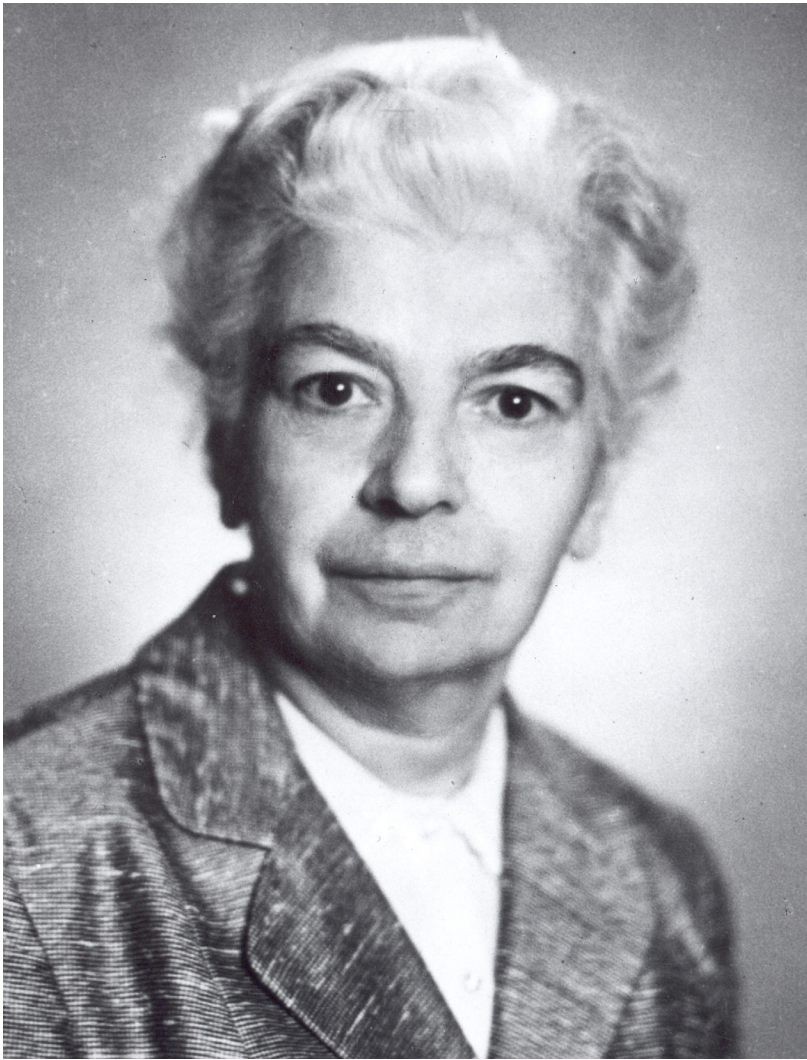
## **ARMENIAN GOSPELS**

Sirarpie Der Nersessian, a scholar of Armenian manuscripts who taught at Wellesley College, first visited the Morgan in 1930 and described it as “a perfect realization of a scholar’s dream and desire.” Belle Greene would hire Der Nersessian to catalogue the Morgan’s Greek and Armenian manuscripts and give lectures on the latter. Der Nersessian’s 1936 course titled Armenian Illustrated Manuscripts was the first of its kind in North America. It was open to graduate students from New York University and Columbia and used original materials from the collection. She would later recall the course to Greene “as one of my most pleasant experiences.”

**Gospel Book, in Armenian**

**Sis, Cilicia, 1274**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased, 1928; MS M.740**



Sirarpie Der Nersessian, ca. 1961. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection; Archives, AR.PH.Misc.090. Photo: © Dumbarton Oaks, Archives, Washington, DC.



## RESEARCH ACCESS

The Reading Room was built in 1928 to meet the needs of a growing number of researchers interested in working with the collection. Belle Greene collaborated with the architect Benjamin Wistar Morris to bring to life this “scholars’ paradise,” which was (and still is) open by appointment for approved research projects. She consulted with other institutions and devised a set of rules and regulations that would provide access to the collection while also preserving it for generations to come. Unlike in the early days, when intrepid researchers knocked at the 1906 Library’s massive doors, supplied a business card, and hoped to be admitted, in this new era applications for research privileges could be made in writing to Greene, who signed each readers’ card.

### **Pierpont Morgan Library**

***The Board of Trustees of The Pierpont Morgan Library has established the following rules for the use and regulation of the Library, ca. 1933***

**Library card issued to Harold Strong Gulliver, 1934**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291, Box 81, Folder 3;  
Box 77, Folder 7**

## TREASURES USED AS TEXTBOOKS

In the 1934–35 academic year, the Morgan began to host a series of lecture courses for students at New York University and Columbia. Advertisements highlighted that “constant use will be made of the original source material.” One of these courses, taught by the art historian Erwin Panofsky, was featured in the *New York Herald* for its “liberal experiment in museum practice” and use of this fifteenth-century French missal, among other materials. Teaching with rare and special collections was still novel at this time, and Greene was an early advocate for giving students hands-on experiences.

**“Morgan Library art treasures used as textbooks for lecture”**

***New York Herald*, February 16, 1935**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291**

**Missal, in Latin**

**Probably Troyes, France, ca. 1400**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont**

**Morgan, 1907; MS M.331**

## **TEACHING THE ART OF THE BOOK**

Belle Greene did not give formal lectures but welcomed class visits to view the Morgan's collection. "We cannot accommodate very many, at a time, in our manuscript room," she wrote one instructor, "but if there are not more than a dozen or so, I would be very glad to show them the manuscripts and explain the technique and the position they occupy in the history of art—but quite informally!" She also taught a session on manuscripts for the NYPL's Library School course titled Art and the Book, which included guest instructors such as the printer Elmer Adler, the Grolier Club librarian Ruth Granniss, and the Shakespearean bibliographer Henrietta Bartlett.

**Schedule for a series of lectures on Art and the Book,  
February to May 1924, at the Library School of the New York  
Public Library, 1923**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1310**

## **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

The card catalogue may seem quaint and nostalgic today, but it was a crucial part of the organization system within a library. Each book or work in the collection would receive a handwritten or typed card containing key bibliographical details and recording its physical location. The card catalogue amounted to an indispensable paper database, giving Belle Greene control of collection data and putting its information at her fingertips. The typed and handwritten cards shown nearby document some of the collection's literary manuscripts and have evolved over time into today's online catalogue records.

### **Cowtan & Sons**

**Card catalogue cabinet from the North Room of J. Pierpont Morgan's Library, ca. 1907**

### **Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950)**

**Catalogue cards, various years**

**The Morgan Library & Museum**

## **AN ACTIVE AND FEARLESS CURIOSITY**

In 1943 Belle Greene oversaw the conservation of this painting, which has long hung in J. Pierpont Morgan's study. The job involved transferring the work from canvas to a wood panel, its original form of support. David Rosen, the conservator responsible for the restoration, later recalled working with Greene:

She was curious about proper and safe methods of conservation . . . as one who had constantly to take the responsibility of purchase, she was interested in forgeries and in the tricks of the “restorers” and “repainters.” But what created the lasting bond between us was her uncompromising desire for the truth—an active and fearless curiosity about the object as it actually was, devoid of crafty repairs and pompous enhancements. Pretense or evasion of any kind she found intolerable.

**After Sandro Botticelli (1444/45–1510)**

***Madonna of the Magnificat*, Florence, Italy, ca. 1490**

**Oil on panel**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1911; AZ014**

## **POETRY LOVER**

Belle Greene enjoyed poetry by British Romantics, including John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. She fondly recalled Bernard Berenson reading Keats's poems to her in a London hotel, and she helped develop the collection of Keats manuscripts and books started by Pierpont Morgan. "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is the most celebrated of Keats's early poems, composed and published in the fall of 1816. Greene acquired this manuscript in 1915. Line seven of the sonnet—"Yet could I never judge what Men could mean"—would become "Yet never did I breathe its pure serene" in the 1817 edition of the author's *Poems*.

**John Keats (1795–1821)**

**"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"**

**Autograph manuscript, n.d. [October 1816 or later]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr., 1915; MA 214.3**

## **AMY LOWELL, KEATS COLLECTOR**

The American poet Amy Lowell gathered the most important Keats collection in private hands before bequeathing it to Harvard University. When researching her book on Keats, she corresponded with Greene and visited the Morgan. Lowell even sent Greene a “cheeky’ request” to consult a manuscript overnight in her hotel room while recovering from surgery. Greene agreed to the unconventional arrangement, humoring a friend whom she clearly admired: as Greene wrote to Lowell, “What we ‘think of you’ is entirely too complimentary for transmission by mere paper.” Lowell lived openly as a lesbian in Boston and dedicated the magisterial two-volume biography *John Keats* (1925) to her longtime partner, the stage actor Ada Dwyer Russell: “To A.D.R. this, and all my books, A.L.”

**Houghton Library, Harvard University**

***The Librarian of The Houghton Library requests the pleasure of your company at a talk by Helen Vendler[:] Amy Lowell:***

***A Ouija Board for a Dead Song, ca. 1950s–60s***

**The Morgan Library & Museum; MA 4098**

## UNMASKING A FORGER

One of Belle Greene's greatest research accomplishments was her work documenting a late nineteenth-century forger who painted more than four hundred "medieval" images. This panel, then attributed to the fifteenth-century painter Jorge Inglés (believed to be Spanish at the time), was offered to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1930, and Greene was asked for her opinion on the work. She found it suspicious, and during the rest of her career revealed over a dozen additional examples by the artist she nicknamed the "Spanish Forger," who intentionally damaged his work to make it appear older. In 1978 Morgan curators William M. Voelkle and Roger S. Wieck would build on Greene's work for a major exhibition, *The Spanish Forger*, and Voelkle continues to catalogue new forgeries that have come to light.

### **Spanish Forger**

***Betrothal of St. Ursula*, late nineteenth/early twentieth century**

**Oil on panel**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Martin Cooper;  
1988.125**



“Now, with the war, it has become necessary to put away for a time many of those special treasures, and some of us have felt impelled to interrupt the normal tenor of our lives . . .”

—Helen Franc to Belle da Costa Greene, July 30, 1942

## **A LEADER IN TRANSITION**

As Belle da Costa Greene began to settle into her role as the director of the Morgan, major world events affected her professionally and personally. During the First World War, while still dealing with the death of J. Pierpont Morgan, Greene wrote to friends and colleagues in Europe, concerned for their safety as she kept up with news. Soon after the Morgan celebrated the opening of its Annex building in 1928, the Great Depression forced Greene to curtail acquisitions. The outbreak of the Second World War once again put Greene in a position of leading the institution in wartime. In addition to enacting emergency measures to protect the collection, Greene aided scholars who had escaped the war and immigrated to the United States. These professional challenges coincided with immense personal tragedies in the 1940s that would shape the later years of her life.

The following SECTION CONTAINS material that may be upsetting to some visitors, touching on antisemitism, suicide, and racial violence.

## **THE WORLD'S FAIR**

The 1939 World's Fair opened in Queens, New York, and was promoted as the "World of Tomorrow." Cultural institutions around the city created special exhibitions for the event, which would attract more than forty million visitors over its nearly six-month run. Greene selected some of the Morgan's greatest pieces to present, including a drawing by English writer and artist William Blake—from his illustrations for the biblical Book of Job—and one of the collection's best Rembrandt drawings. With the outbreak of the Second World War only four months into the fair, the event became a window into growing troubles overseas.

**The Trylon and Perisphere illuminated at night at the 1939  
World's Fair, October 28, 1940**

**Gelatin silver print**

**Museum of the City of New York; 91.69.39**

**Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669)**

***Woman with a Child Descending a Staircase*, ca. 1636**

**Pen and brown ink and wash**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont**

**Morgan, 1909; I, 191**

**William Blake (1757–1827)**

***The Lord Answering Job out of the Whirlwind*, eighteenth century**

**Pen and black and gray ink, gray wash, and watercolor, over faint indications in pencil**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1909; 2001.75**

## **EDITH PORADA**

Edith Porada grew up in a Jewish family in Austria. She was the first woman to earn a doctorate in her field—ancient Mesopotamian cylinder seals—from the University of Vienna, in 1935. With the rise of Nazism and the German annexation of Austria, Porada made plans to flee the country. She decided to take with her only a few possessions so as not to arouse suspicion. Her two-volume dissertation would be an important professional calling card abroad, but she abandoned her copy of the text, taking only her drawings of the seal impressions. As Porada’s protégé Sidney Babcock (a curator emeritus at the Morgan) put it, “She knew the text, she needed the images.” With her sister, Porada daringly made her escape in 1938, eventually making it to New York. Her passport and battered dissertation plate volume bear traces of this courageous journey.

**Passport issued to Edith Porada, Vienna, September 14, 1938**  
**The Morgan Library & Museum, Edith Porada Papers; Box 8-1**

**Edith Porada (1912–1994)**

***Die Rollsiegel der Akkadzeit: Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde an der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Wien [volume two, plates], 1934***

**Original drawings displayed separately, alongside the volume Porada smuggled out of Austria**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3304**

## **A NEW LIFE IN NEW YORK**

Having recently arrived in New York, Porada struggled to find work in academic and cultural institutions as a junior scholar without local connections. Aware of the Morgan's great collection of ancient cylinder seals, she contacted Belle Greene in early 1939 to ask to continue the work of cataloguing the collection that Reverend William Hays Ward had begun in the 1880s. Greene hired her, and that opportunity helped Porada launch her academic career in the United States. She would go on to teach at Queens College and later at Columbia University, and eventually become honorary curator of ancient seals and tablets at the Pierpont Morgan Library.

**Edith Porada, [1950s?]**

**Photographic print**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, Edith Porada Papers; Box 8-1**

**Edith Porada (1912–1994)**

**Autograph letter to Belle da Costa Greene, n.d. [1940?]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291, Box 57, Folder 9**



“Please forgive this letter, should you find it too personal. It is to thank you again for having permitted me to work during these last two months at the Library, at a task, which took my thoughts off everything else. . . . I don’t know how I could stand the strain of having everybody I care for most, including my parents ‘over there’ without my work—without the daily contact with the friendly people at the Library. Less closely tied to Europe with mind and heart they constantly remind one of the fact, that there is another world, even if one’s own is falling to pieces. . . . I have used the words thanks and gratitude so often—I wish there existed others to express what I feel—all I can say is, I’ll never forget.”

—Edith Porada to Belle da Costa Greene, [1940?]

## **PORADA'S FAVORITE SEAL**

In ancient Mesopotamia cylinder seals were used for both authentication and artistic expression. This seal was Edith Porada's favorite in the Morgan's collection. For her, the stag recalled an image of her family's hunting lodge in Austria while the trees and leaves perhaps evoked nostalgia for her homeland's forested retreats. In addition to writing many academic books and articles, Porada authored *Mesopotamian Art in Cylinder Seals of the Pierpont Morgan Library* (1947)—which Belle Greene praised as “rather popular, while scientifically accurate.” In a 1991 speech Porada “gratefully thought” of Greene: “I was quite conscious then of the fact,” she said, “that such a generous faith in an untried young scholar was possible only in the United States, and this I still believe.”

***Tree on Mountain beside Three Shoots and Stag,***

**ca. 1300–1200 BC**

**Milky chalcedony**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, acquired by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1885–1908; Morgan Seal 601**

## **BELLE'S NEPHEW, BOBBIE**

Belle Greene was an adopted mother to her nephew, Robert MacKenzie Leveridge, known as “Bobbie,” born in 1919.

Bobbie’s father had died young as a soldier in the First World War, and when his mother, Greene’s sister Theodora, remarried in 1921, Bobbie came to New York City to live with Belle permanently. From the age of five he was her legal ward, though he continued to have a relationship with his mother and stepfather, who taught him how to swim, change a flat tire, and cook on a campfire, while also taking him on road trips.

Bobbie’s story is full of joy but also immense tragedy. After an academic career guided by his aunt, he joined a bombardment squadron during the Second World War and was deployed to England, where he would die by suicide in 1943.

## **LOOKING AFTER BOBBIE**

Bobbie was a happy, confident child, and Belle clearly doted on him, describing his playful behavior in letters to colleagues. He attended several prep schools during his adolescence. In 1932 he was enrolled at the Malcolm Gordon School in the Hudson Valley, where he progressed well and enjoyed “a general awakening of his sense of responsibility.” He moved to St. Paul’s School in Concord, New Hampshire, for the 1932–33 school year. There he sang treble in the school choir. His family had musical talent: after the First World War, his stepfather sang in a two-hundred-person chorus that toured the United States welcoming returning soldiers.

**St. Paul’s School Choir, with Bobbie in the second row from the bottom, second student from the left, 1932–33**

**Photographic print**

**Archives of St. Paul’s School**

## **MOVING WEST**

After St. Paul's Bobbie continued his education in Colorado, at the Fountain Valley School, graduating in June 1936. Belle Greene took him on a trip west before he enrolled. This letter, written from a Wyoming ranch, announces their plans to go on a horseback-riding trip through Yellowstone. Belle notes his improvement in health and asks about a good local dentist. In another letter to Froelicher, Fountain Valley's headmaster, Belle describes her nephew's "keen and alert intelligence" and his interest "in a scientific, medical or surgical career."

**Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950)**

**Autograph letter to F. M. Froelicher, August 29, 1933**

**Archives of the Fountain Valley School**

## **BOBBIE AT FOUNTAIN VALLEY SCHOOL**

Bobbie's academic performance at Fountain Valley occasionally disappointed his aunt, prompting Greene to send the school a letter of reproof—one she was “quite willing that Bob should read.” The headmaster, however, described him as “unusually competent.” His extracurricular activities included glee club, writing poetry for the school magazine, and performing in Shakespeare's plays. With his interests in poetry, music, drama, art, and medicine, Bobbie seems to have distilled his family's collective passions—from the musical and medical talents of the Fleets to the theatrical and literary facility of Richard T. Greener. Fulfilling his and his aunt's ambition, Bobbie enrolled at Harvard in 1936, in pursuit of a medical degree, but would leave in 1939, a year before graduating.

**Robert “Bobbie” MacKenzie Leveridge at the Fountain Valley School of Colorado, standing in the courtyard of the Hacienda, early fall 1933**  
**Archives of the Fountain Valley School**

**Drawing of First Lieutenant Robert McKenzie Leveridge,  
ca. 1942**

**Photographic print**

**Reproduced in St. Paul's School, *Alumni Horae*, spring 1944**

**Archives of St. Paul's School**

## **FIRST LIEUTENANT ROBERT LEVERIDGE**

After leaving Harvard Bobbie moved to California, where he worked in journalism, public relations, aviation, and the film industry before enlisting in the US Army Air Corps in August 1941. He was eventually sent to England, where he was stationed with the 92nd Bombardment Group in August 1942. According to his aunt he “flew a bomber in the Dieppe raid one week after he landed in England.” Sadly, Bobbie’s service ended with his untimely death on August 3, 1943. Greene was told he “had been killed in action ‘in the European area,’” and this was the cause of death she reported to the St. Paul’s School alumni magazine, which reproduced a drawing of Bobbie in uniform.

**St. Paul’s School**

***Alumni Horae*, spring 1944**

**Archives of St. Paul’s School**



## **BOBBIE'S DEATH**

According to military records, Bobbie was not killed in action but tragically died by suicide. An archive preserved by the Greene family friend and art historian Daniel Varney Thompson sheds more light on the end of Bobbie's life. When Dan last saw Bobbie in June 1943, the young airman shared with him a disturbing handwritten letter from his fiancée, Nina Taylor.

The previous spring and summer, Nina had discovered and divulged to Bobbie the truth of his family's ancestry. Using upsetting and racist language, she wrote him a letter to call off their engagement and ask him to promise he would never have children. Thompson added an emotional note on the outside of this envelope, which once contained the letter. Based on clues in her correspondence with Thompson, Greene likely read the letter and ultimately learned that racism was at the root of her nephew's fate.

**Daniel Varney Thompson (1902–1980)**

**Autograph note to Belle da Costa Greene, ca. 1944**

**Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution;**

**Daniel Varney Thompson Papers**

## **“THE YOUNG DEAD SOLDIERS”**

In 1943 Belle Greene was long-established in her role at the Morgan, so whatever rumors had been circulating about her ethnicity could no longer threaten her position. And yet the story of Bobbie shows that Greene and her family were always vulnerable to racism. His death devastated her:

I am sorry to say that I have not “guts” enough to take it yet. . . . I try to remember that so many others are in the same position as myself—and that innumerable families are suffering—I accomplish it in the day-time, by working every second, from 8:30 to 7 p.m.—but the nights are unbearable.

Greene’s friend, the Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish, sent her in sympathy the manuscript of his 1941 poem “The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak.”

# **“THE YOUNG DEAD SOLDIERS DO NOT SPEAK” (1941)**

## **BY ARCHIBALD MACLEISH**

The young dead soldiers do not speak

Nevertheless they are heard in the still houses: who has not  
heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the  
clock counts.

They say, We were young. We have died. Remember us.

They say, We have done what we could but until it is finished it  
is not done.

They say, We have given our lives but until it is finished no one  
can know what our lives gave.

They say, Our deaths are not ours: they are yours: they will  
mean what you make them.

They say, Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a  
new hope or for nothing we cannot say: it is you who must  
say this.

They say, We leave you our deaths: give them their meaning:  
give them an end to the war and a true peace: give them a  
victory that ends the war and a peace afterwards: give them  
their meaning.

We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.

## THE WORLD AT WAR

During the Second World War, many worried that the Germans might bomb American cities on the East Coast. Colleagues at the British Museum, in the wake of the London Blitz, warned Jack Morgan of the danger of air raids for library and museum collections in a July 1941 letter. Belle Greene took this threat seriously, referencing the pamphlets on display here and arranging to have the most valuable collections shipped to various offsite facilities, bomb shelters, and bank vaults. After World War One, Greene had served as a member of the National Committee of the United States for the Restoration of the University of Leuven, and she knew firsthand the devastation that military aggression could bring upon cultural institutions.

***Air Raid Precautions in Museums, Picture Galleries and Libraries***  
**[London]: printed by Order of the Trustees, the British Museum, 1939**

***The Care of Records in a National Emergency***  
**Washington, DC: National Archives of the United States, 1941**  
**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291, Box 80, Folder 15**

## **A CALL TO SERVE**

Many of Greene's colleagues, staff, and friends served in the Second World War and wrote to her describing the conditions abroad. Helen Franc worked as "special assistant to Belle Greene" from 1934 to 1942, edited exhibition catalogues, and curated *The Animal Kingdom* (1941). In this touching letter, she thanks Greene and bids farewell to the Pierpont Morgan Library to join the US Army. Franc recalls her first introduction to the Morgan and poignantly says that it has been her work with the collection that fostered her desire to serve and help protect it. Greene would stay in touch with Franc over the years, becoming close friends once she had returned from the war.

**Helen Franc (1908–2006)**

**Typed letter to Belle da Costa Greene, July 30, 1942**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291, Box 36, Folder 9**

## THE COLLECTION RETURNS

During the war, much of the collection was moved off-site to secure locations in case of attack. The Rembrandt etchings, for instance, were sent to Oberlin College in Ohio, where they were placed on exhibition. High-value paintings and manuscripts were stored at a secure facility in upstate New York. When the threat of attack waned, these prized items returned to the Morgan. To mark the occasion, Belle Greene curated *The Written Word*. Highlighting the power of writing throughout history, the exhibition presented some of the library's most celebrated holdings, including this cutting from a fourteenth-century Italian choir book, a manuscript containing the musical parts of the mass.

### **Pierpont Morgan Library**

#### ***The Written Word***

**[New York, 1944]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291, Box 89, Folder 10**

**Choir book leaf, Trinity Sunday, in Latin**

**Florence, Italy, 1392–99**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1909; MS M.653.2**

## MASTER DRAWINGS

In the 1940s many drawings entered the collection from the estates of Jack Morgan and his wife, Jane Norton Grew Morgan. The most celebrated of her gifts was a large group of drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, but she also bequeathed eighteenth-century botanical illustrations and other works. Jack gifted several eighteenth-century portraits of women, including this drawing purchased by his father, Pierpont, and once believed to be of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. The work is now recognized as one of a group of preparatory drawings for *The Richmond Water-Walk*, an unrealized painting of fashionable women taking a stroll by the River Thames in London.

**Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788)**

***Lady Walking in a Garden*, ca. 1785**

**Black and white chalks with smudging, worked wet and dry, watercolor**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, acquired from the Estate of J. P. Morgan Jr., 1943; III, 63b**

## **THE DEATH OF JACK MORGAN**

Belle Greene's professional world was shaken in March 1943 with the death of yet another "Mr. Morgan," Jack, under whom she worked for a much longer period (thirty years) than she did for his father (eight years). "I never expected to go through it twice," she wrote to her longtime assistant librarian Ada Thurston. "The Library, as you can imagine, seems empty." In a published tribute for Jack, Greene observed, "It may be truly said that when Mr. Morgan died, scholarship in literature, history and the fine arts lost one of its most sympathetic patrons, and that the Library he founded was deprived of an active benefactor, a friend, and a vital force in its affairs."

**Frank Owen Salisbury (1874–1962)**

***J. Pierpont Morgan [i.e., J. P. Morgan Jr.] Seated, Half-Length, 1928***

**Charcoal and white chalk with fixative**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Acquisitions Fund; 1973.8:3**



## **JACK MORGAN, COLLECTOR**

Jack Morgan built on his father's legacy by continuing to acquire early printed books, illuminated medieval manuscripts, and literary drafts. One of his favorite literary manuscripts was Thackeray's satirical fantasy *The Rose and the Ring*, first published in 1854. Best known for his novel *Vanity Fair* (1846), Thackeray based *The Rose and the Ring* on a set of paper cutout characters he created for his children. Belle Greene was also partial to the book and after Jack's death dedicated a published facsimile of the manuscript in his memory: "To John Pierpont Morgan, 1867–1943, who acquired and particularly loved the original manuscript of the Rose and the Ring."

### **William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863)**

#### ***The Rose and the Ring***

**Autograph manuscript, 1853**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. P. Morgan Jr., 1915; MA 926**

## **FROM JACK MORGAN'S DESK**

Belle Greene found this ring in Jack Morgan's desk after his death in 1943. It once belonged to the Romantic poet George Gordon, Lord Byron, who received it from his half sister, Augusta Leigh. From the Latin *gimellus* ("twin"), a gimmel ring typically comprises two or three rings that fit together when closed. When worn, this ring conceals a pair of hearts underneath the clasped hands, as well as the inscription "NOEL BYRON FROM MY DEAR SISTER AUGUSTA." Greene corresponded about the ring with Jack's daughter, then acting board president Jane Morgan Nichols: "It takes a Morgan! No—I did not open the 'true-lovers' ring. As no-one had ever given me one I did not even suspect that they did open. I'm furious at the neglect shown me."

**Lord Byron's gimmel ring, ca. 1813**

**Yellow gold**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of J. P. Morgan Jr.; AZ122**



Lord Byron's gimmel ring, shown closed.

**Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928)**

***Reclining Female Nude with Hand under  
Her Chin*, nineteenth century**

**Pastel with graphite**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gifts of the Estate of Belle da  
Costa Greene, 1950; 1950.35 and 1950.32**

## **BLACK LIBRARIANSHIP**

Libraries in the United States have a fraught history with racial equality. In the early twentieth century, African American librarians not only had limited opportunities for employment but also confronted laws and customs that sought to restrict Black knowledge and history. Despite this adversity, figures such as Catherine Latimer and Dorothy Porter Wesley decided to pursue librarianship, change the field, and make a difference in the communities they served. In many cases, these librarians were the first Black people to hold their positions—a designation that gives them credit today, but at the time meant that they faced insurmountable odds.

The women in this section took great risks to provide their communities with access to reading, as well as to preserve the creative work and archival histories of Black people. Through such advocacy, librarians empowered patrons to exercise their political rights. Belle da Costa Greene broke barriers as a woman in special collections librarianship, but her path was different from those librarians who worked within the Black community, fighting against the gender, economic, and racial barriers put before them.

## CATHERINE LATIMER

In 1920 Catherine Latimer (1896–1948) became the first African American librarian hired by the New York Public Library. In 1925 she was appointed head librarian of the NYPL's division of Negro History, Literature, and Prints, housed at the 135th Street branch in Harlem. After NYPL acquired Arturo Schomburg's collection in 1926, Latimer would spend the next twenty-five years stewarding the collection and connecting with the community. Like Belle Greene, Latimer worked closely with an ambitious man committed to building a world-renowned institution. But while Greene and Morgan focused primarily on the creative legacies of Europe, Latimer and Schomburg sought to collect and preserve the historical and literary heritage of Black people while providing open and free access to the material.

**View of researchers using the Schomburg Collection when it was the 135th Street Branch Library Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints, with Catherine A. Latimer, reference librarian of the collection, in left background, 1938**  
**Reproduction of photographic print**  
**The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division**

## **REGINA ANDERSON ANDREWS**

Regina Andrews (née Anderson, 1901–1993) broke barriers during her career with the New York Public Library, serving as the institution's first African American supervising librarian. She made waves from the beginning: on her 1923 NYPL employment application, instead of marking her race, she wrote "I'm American." In her work as a librarian, first at the 135th Street branch and later at the Washington Heights branch, she assisted writers, artists, and the larger community during the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance. She spearheaded community forums and lectures and held salons in her Harlem apartment attended by such figures as Jessie Redmon Fauset and Langston Hughes. A supporter of the Harlem Experimental Theater, Andrews wrote several plays, including her unpublished work "The Man Who Passed," which explores the complexities of racial passing.

**Regina Andrews (seated) with librarian Edna Law, 1940**

**Gelatin silver print**

**The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division**

## **VIVIAN G. HARSH**

Vivian G. Harsh (1890–1960) was the first African American branch head in the Chicago Public Library System. Working at the George Cleveland Hall Library in the Bronzeville neighborhood, she was a pioneer in public librarianship who viewed education as a community endeavor. As with Belle Greene, only trace amounts of Harsh’s letters and diaries have survived, but her dedication to librarianship has been documented in work and professional papers. She spent her career advocating for funding to build special collections of African American books, and she established community activities that served Bronzeville. She once wrote, “It is a librarian’s duty to stimulate and guide in the matter of reading, to promote use of books so that all people of all ages may develop educationally and culturally.”

**Hall Branch opening day with Vivian G. Harsh at center,  
January 1932**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**George Cleveland Hall Branch Archives, VIVIAN G. HARSH  
RESEARCH COLLECTION; Photo 084**



## **DOROTHY PORTER WESLEY**

Dorothy Porter Wesley (1905–1995) was a librarian, curator, and bibliographer who laid the groundwork for what is today one of the premier special collections libraries for Black studies, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. A self-described “bibliomaniac,” Wesley was the first African American to receive a library science degree from Columbia University, in 1932. Like Belle Greene’s, Wesley’s career began as a cataloguer. She would spend forty-three years at Howard, developing the library and reinventing the classification of African American collections. For Wesley, the Dewey Decimal System failed because it restricted this material to classifications related to slavery or colonization. It was her intervention to classify these works by genre and author, thereby emphasizing the presence of Africans and African Americans in all subject areas.

**Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964)**

***Dorothy Porter Wesley, May 23, 1951***

**Reproduction of photographic print**

**Carl Van Vechten Papers Relating to African American Arts and Letters, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library**



Dorothy Porter at her desk in the Carnegie Library at Howard University, 1939. Howard University Archives, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.

## **A HARLEM LIBRARIAN**

Winold Reiss made numerous portraits of Harlem residents in the 1920s, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Robeson, Alain Locke, and other well-known cultural figures. But he also painted anonymous sitters and created composite portraits such as *The Librarian*. The image was reproduced as part of the series “Four Portraits of Negro Women” in the landmark March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic*, titled “Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro”—an important publication of the Harlem, or “New Negro,” Renaissance. The portraits precede the educator Elise Johnson McDougald’s article “The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation.”

**Winold Reiss (1886–1953)**

***The Librarian*, 1925**

**Pastel and tempera on Whatman board**

**Fisk University Museum of Art, Nashville, Tennessee**

## A LEGACY REMEMBERED

When Belle da Costa Greene retired in 1948, letters came in from around the world congratulating her on the contributions she had made to the Morgan and scholarship at large. She had not only built an inspiring collection but also shaped the careers of women she mentored, including Morgan librarian Meta Harrsen and Walters Art Gallery curator Dorothy Miner. Several years after her retirement, staff members would even continue to say fondly that they were working on projects for “Miss Greene.”

But her legacy has extended far past the lifetimes of those who knew her. Her story has galvanized the work of scholars, biographers, writers, and artists. Awards and fellowships have been named in her honor, including the Medieval Academy of America’s Belle da Costa Greene Award, Belle da Costa Greene Scholarships to support booksellers and librarians attending antiquarian book seminars in Colorado and York, and the Morgan’s own Belle da Costa Greene Curatorial Fellowships, established in 2019 and given to “promising scholars from communities historically underrepresented in the curatorial and special collections fields.” Despite the gaps she left in the narrative, both intentional and not, Greene’s singular devotion to the world of librarianship remains one of her most enduring legacies.

## **THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH**

In the last known photograph of Belle Greene, she is seated in the West Room leafing through one of her final acquisitions—the Gospel Book shown at right in the case below. (An eagle-eyed Morgan curator was able to identify the barely visible decorative border.) In a note about its acquisition to another Morgan curator, Curt Bühler, Greene commented, “While the cat was away the two little mice (MPH [Meta Harrsen] and B.G) had a field day.” A few years prior, Greene had turned down the purchase of this manuscript, but further research persuaded her (rightly) of its immense importance as an exceptionally rare example of painting from tenth-century France.

**Belle da Costa Greene in the West Room of J. Pierpont Morgan’s Library, 1950**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Personal Photographs**

## **A MARVEL OF CAROLINGIAN BOOK ART**

In her published report on the Pierpont Morgan Library's first five years, Belle Greene wrote that this manuscript, one of her favorites, "ranks with the finest known examples of Carolingian painting." The manuscript was probably made at the Abbey of Saint-Remi during the tenure of the archbishop Hincmar (806–882). Greene's deep knowledge of Carolingian book arts is evident in her report on the acquisition: "In style and colouring this manuscript closely resembles the famous 'Charlemagne Gospels' in the Treasure Room at Vienna, and the 'Loisel Gospels' in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris." It featured in the 1949 exhibition held in her honor.

**Gospel Book, in Latin**

**Reims, France, ca. 870s**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased, 1927; MS M.728**

“Preceding the text of each Gospel is a full-page picture of the seated author-Evangelist, with a small representation of his symbol in one of the upper corners. . . . Opposite each picture is a full-page panel containing the opening lines of that Gospel; these are written in gold antique capitals, with a full-length and elaborate strapwork initial at the left.”

—Belle da Costa Greene, description of the Reims Gospel book, 1929

## **A TRIBUTE EXHIBITION**

In 1949, a year after Belle Greene's retirement, the Morgan mounted an exhibition to mark its twenty-fifth anniversary as a public institution as well as to honor Greene. The galleries featured over two hundred items acquired during her directorship, including the Reims Gospels, shown nearby. At the exhibition's opening, Junius Spencer Morgan, then board president, spoke on Greene's "outstanding scholarship" and "remarkable contribution to the Library." In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, art historian Lawrence C. Wroth, Greene's friend and colleague, wrote of the library as her greatest legacy: "If her monument you would see, look about you."

### **Pierpont Morgan Library**

***The First Quarter Century of the Pierpont Morgan Library***

**[New York, 1949]**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 3291, Box 82, Folder 1**



## **A LATE ACQUISITION OF AFRICAN AMERICANA**

One of Greene's final purchases was a letter by Frederick Douglass—a rare case of her acquiring an American history manuscript, as she did not feel well-versed in the subject. Its content hearkens back to the civil rights work of her father, Richard T. Greener, who was a contemporary of Douglass's. "I would not throw cold water on the laudable ambition of my race to obtain some recognition in the Government," Douglass writes: "They ought to have it and will get it. All that they have a right to ask of General Garfield is, that they shall not be discriminated against on account of race or color in his selection of the men to fill the offices under him."

**Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)**

**Autograph letter to J. D. Husbands, January 17, 1881**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased from P. Alloway,  
November 1947; MA 1221**

## **END OF AN ERA**

Belle Greene died on May 10, 1950, at the age of seventy. Her final days are recounted with great emotion by her friend and mentee Meta Harrsen, the Morgan's keeper of manuscripts, in a letter to Bernard Berenson. Harrsen also described Greene's funeral:

The attendance was about 200 friends who came from all over the East, Baltimore, Boston and Washington. It was just as she would have wished it. . . . Several of her friends spoke of her going as marking the end of an era; it is certainly the end of a brilliant era for this Library. . . . I feel there was great rejoicing in Heaven, when she met Bobbie and both Mr. Morgans and old Prof. Hyvernat and all the others.

**Meta Harrsen (1891–1977)**

**Typed letter to Bernard Berenson, May 18, 1950**

**Biblioteca Berenson, I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers, Box 68, Folder 2**

The exhibition's advisory committee helped guide the Morgan's curatorial team in the planning, design, and label writing for *Belle da Costa Greene: A Librarian's Legacy*. We thank the committee for their time, expertise, and generosity:

Lisa Unger Baskin, **collector and philanthropist**

Julia S. Charles-Linen, **Associate Professor, Arizona State University**

Jesse R. Erickson, **Astor Curator and Department Head, Printed Books and Bindings, Morgan Library & Museum**

Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, **Director of the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives**

Rhonda Evans, **Director of the LuEsther T. Mertz Library, New York Botanical Garden**

Anne-Marie Eze, **Associate Librarian of Houghton Library, Harvard University**

Carla Hayden, **Librarian of Congress**

Dominique Jean-Louis, **Chief Historian, Center for Brooklyn History**

Tracy Sharpley-Whiting, **Professor and Vice Provost, Vanderbilt University**

Deborah Willis, **University Professor, New York University**

## **AN EDUCATION DENIED**

Belle Greene's maternal grandfather, James H. Fleet, was trained as a doctor at Columbian College, now George Washington University. His education was funded by the American Colonization Society (ACS) with the expectation that he would finish his studies in Liberia and work there. But Fleet refused to immigrate to West Africa, citing discrimination in the program, and was consequently not allowed to practice medicine in the United States. Instead he became an educator, opening two schools and offering music lessons. In this letter Fleet and two other Black medical students funded by the ACS criticize the organization for not allowing them to attend lectures and demonstrations open to white students.

**James H. Fleet (ca. 1815–1861)**

**Autograph letter to the Board of the American Colonization Society, October 7, 1833**

**Library of Congress**

## **A NEW BOSS**

After Pierpont's death in 1913, Jack Morgan managed the development, selective dispersal, and stewardship of his father's collection. Though Belle Greene had at first feared for her job, she quickly learned that Jack had every intention to honor his father's wishes and keep her on the payroll. But their working relationship took time to develop, and in the early years she sometimes unfavorably compared "this Mr. Morgan" (Jack) with "my Mr. Morgan" (Pierpont). In a few instances they had substantial arguments. For example, Greene was concerned that Jack did not fund as many purchases of rare books and manuscripts as Pierpont, but eventually Jack collaborated with Greene to make many important acquisitions.

**Frank Owen Salisbury (1874–1962)**

***J. Pierpont Morgan [i.e., J. P. Morgan Jr.] Seated, Half-Length, 1928***

**Charcoal and white chalk with fixative**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Acquisitions Fund; 1973.8:3**

**Tebbs & Knell, New York**

**Reading Room, ca. 1928–60**

**Reproduction of a photographic print**

**The Morgan Library & Museum; ARC 1913.4**

## **TWO LIBRARIANS, WORLDS APART**

This photograph, one of the few of Belle Greene during her tenure as Morgan director, has striking affinities with the German American artist Winold Reiss's adjacent painting of a Harlem librarian. Made within four years of each other, the portraits both present confident women with serious expressions and stylish hats, gloves, and fur coats. But despite a shared profession, the two New Yorkers belonged to different worlds. Greene was employed in the predominantly white Murray Hill neighborhood at an elite special collections library and museum, while the woman in Reiss's portrait likely worked within the Black community at a public library uptown.

**Mattie Edwards Hewitt (1869–1957)**

***Belle da Costa Greene, 1929, for Bain News Service***

**Reproduction of photographic print**

**Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, George  
Grantham Bain Collection; LC-USZ62-93225**

**“Anhalt-Morgan Gospels,” in Latin**

**Possibly St. Bertin or St. Vaast in Arras, France,**

**late tenth century**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the**

**Lewis Cass Ledyard Fund, 1948; MS M.827**



**Svenska Biografteatern, Sweden (est. 1907)**

**Excerpt from *New York, 1911*, 1911**

**Digital black-and-white, restored from nitrate film,  
silent, 9 min.**

**Museum of Modern Art, New York; W5184**

## **BELLE'S JEWELRY**

The only property from Belle Greene's estate bequeathed to the Morgan were her "antique pendants, jewels, [and] boxes . . . to dispose of as they see fit and to use the proceeds as they see fit, for the benefit of the Pierpont Morgan Library." Several examples of her antique jewelry are held in museum collections today, including this pair of Byzantine earrings at Dumbarton Oaks and this striking Medusa cameo at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her estate appraisal lists many other pieces of jewelry, inherited by her niece and untraced today.

**Benedetto Pistrucci (1784–1855)**

**Head of Medusa, cameo 1840–50**

**Red jasper mounted in gold with white enamel**

**The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; 2003.431**

**Earrings with pearls, sapphires, and gold globules,  
fifth century**

**Dumbarton Oaks; BZ.1952.7.1–2**



One of Belle Greene's most distinctive pieces of jewelry is described in her estate inventory as a "14 kt. gold mesh bag with platinum circle and inscription 'Belle' set with single cut diamonds." The piece likely referenced this custom "Belle" stamp, which Greene often used on her personal correspondence. The stamp appears in green ink on her letters as late as 1930, though she used it most frequently in the 1910s.

## **A FINAL MANUSCRIPT ACQUISITION**

Belle Greene's final acquisition was this early fifteenth-century Ethiopian manuscript, written in the Ge'ez script and executed for Princess Zir Ganela, granddaughter of King Amda Seyon, known as a founder of the Ethiopian state. The opening portion of the manuscript preserves illuminations dating back to the tenth or eleventh century, perhaps to highlight Zir Ganela's family legacy and provide a link to the past. Like that of many historical women, documentation of Zir Ganela's life is minimal compared to the men in her family, which makes this manuscript all the more precious. In making a case for the purchase, Greene wrote, "We have no Ethiopic manuscript. I have known and wished to acquire this manuscript for over ten years."

**Miniature of the Evangelist, John**

**"Zir Ganela Gospels," in Ge'ez**

**Ethiopia, 1400–1401**

**Commissioned by Princess Zir Ganela**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Lewis Cass Ledyard Fund, 1948; MS M.828**

## **THE PASSING OF PASSING?**

In 1952 *Jet* published the article “Why ‘Passing’ Is Passing Out.” It claimed that passing was losing its necessity because African Americans were beginning to obtain careers and educational access based on merit. The piece offered testimonials from African Americans who formerly passed and those who refused to pass. Featured prominently is the Johnston family from Keene, New Hampshire, who passed as white so that the father, Albert, could practice medicine. In 1947 the Johnstons publicly disclosed their racial identity in *Reader’s Digest*, the basis for the 1949 film *Lost Boundaries*, which starred all-white actors. After their story came out, the family was tolerated if not accepted by Keene’s white residents, but Albert eventually lost his job at a hospital because of his race, opening a private practice thereafter.

### **“Why ‘Passing’ Is Passing Out”**

***Jet*, July 17, 1952**

**New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research  
in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and  
Reference Division**

## **ISLAMIC ART IN MUNICH, 1910**

In the summer of 1910 Belle Greene sailed to Europe to tour Italy with Bernard Berenson. They also visited Munich, where they saw a landmark exhibition of Islamic art. As its catalogue relates, the exhibition sought “to present the purely artistic significance of this area of the arts which to many is unknown or misunderstood” and “to demonstrate that Muhammadan artworks deserve to be considered on a par with the art of other cultures.” To his wife, Mary, Berenson summarized their experience: “Overwhelming is the word. The quantity is immense, the quality very high or very interesting, and the arrangement a revelation of order, taste, and distinction.”

***Ausstellung München 1910: Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst . . .*** (Exhibition Munich 1910: Masterpieces of Mohammedan art . . .)

**Munich: Rudolf Mosse, 1910**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Belle da Costa Greene, 1935; ARC 3299**

**A youth flexing an exercise bow, with surrounding text  
in Persian**

**Herāt, Afghanistan, ca. 1600**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont  
Morgan, 1911; MS M.386, fol. 10r**

**\* On view beginning January 28.**