Visits to Kress repositories, to meet with staff and examine paintings and curatorial files, have been an extremely valuable and rewarding aspect of the Kress Provenance Research Project. In the case of this painting, acquired by Samuel Kress in 1939 from his long time dealer Alessandro Contini Bonacossi and now at the Spencer Museum of Art, a previously unnoticed document provided the crucial clue to its earlier provenance.

When sold to Kress, the picture carried only the generic provenance of “English Private Collection.” However, the document reproduced below, found during a visit to the Spencer Museum of Art, provided the key to tracing its earlier whereabouts.

Letter signed by one J. de La Roncière, October 29, 1935
Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas; curatorial files
The letter, dated 29 October 1935 and signed by one J. de La Roncière, refers to the Spencer painting, then thought to be by Giovanni Bellini: “Finally I am sending you the reproductions of the famous paintings that my grandmother sold 6 years ago. The squared painting is by Giovanni Bellini, which was sold for 42,000 French Francs. I do not know to whom.” This information alone might not have been decisive. But elsewhere in the letter, La Roncière refers to a painting by Botticelli also from his grandmother’s collection, and which was sold at the same time to the dealer Wildenstein. We were able to identify the Botticelli as one now in the National Gallery of Art, acquired by Kress from Wildenstein in 1947. The Botticelli, we knew, had been included in a 1929 sale at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris - six years before the letter in the Spencer files.

Based on this promising clue, we checked the 1929 sale catalogue, and discovered the Spencer painting attributed to Bellini.

The 1929 sale is that of Mme Reynaud, née Emile Paravey. The auction catalogue further notes that the Spencer picture had been previously offered for sale in 1878 by Charles Paravey. Unsold, it had remained with the family. A handwritten annotation on the 1929 auction catalogue indicates that the Spencer painting was bought by Terrisse, a Parisian dealer, for 42,000 francs – precisely the amount stated in the correspondence above. The writer of the 1935
letter, Jean de La Roncière, was revealed through research to be the grandson of Mme Reynaud, who was in turn the granddaughter of Charles Paravey.

Thus, as of a result of a single, telling clue found in the curatorial files of the Spencer Museum and a tangential connection with another Kress painting, we now can trace the ownership of the Spencer painting in an unbroken chain from 1878 until 1929, while previously we had virtually no information prior to its sale from Contini to Kress in 1939. This little case study illustrates powerfully the value of systematic provenance research.

Nancy Yeide and Fulvia Zaninelli, June 2013