

On alien art and experiencing art fully: Gombrich - Kesner correspondence, Umění, Vol. XLII, 1994, pp.107-115.

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O uměním cizím a plném prožívání umění: korespondence Gombrich-Kesner

V dopise, který navazuje na diskusi při semináři profesora Gombricha na Středoevropské univerzitě v dubnu 1993 se Ladislav Kesner zabývá problémem percepce „cizího umění“ (alien art). Na příkladu článku profesora Jamese Ackermanna ukazuje, že pojem „cizího umění“, stavěný do protikladu k „naší tradici“ (západnímu umění), je především ideologickou konstrukcí, a zabývá se východisky, na nichž je založen. Každé výtvarné dílo je zakotveno ve svém specifickém kulturním kontextu a je třeba k němu přistupovat jako k součásti specifické historické situace a vizuální kultury (Čína doby Sung, italské cinquecento atd.), spíše než vytvářet opozici západní vs. východní (cizí) umění. Zvláště nebezpečný je mýtus, že jedině dílo z vlastní kultury je možné „plně prožít.“ Ernst Gombrich ve své odpovědi zdůrazňuje, že estetický prožitek výtvarného díla nevyžaduje nutně porozumění. Souhlasí, že není možné hovořit o „plném porozumění“ určitého díla, ale uvádí, že nicméně některá díla jsou mu bližší než jiná a je možné jim rozumět nikoliv úplně, ale „lépe.“

17 May 1993

Dear Professor Gombrich,

Thank you very much for sending me an offprint of your reply to James Ackermann's article in *Critical Inquiry*, which reminds me of our discussion at the seminar at CEU this April. If my delayed reply takes a form of a lengthy manuscript instead of simple acknowledgement, it is largely due to the great intellectual stimulation that your writing on this topic has provided for me. I take it as quite symptomatic that in replying to Ackermann's complex essay, both you and Professor Bell focus your comments on the short passage which deals with the universality of aesthetic experience. Much has been written on experiencing and appreciating works of art from alien cultures, yet the significance and legitimacy of this issue does not seem to be on the wane. I should perhaps underscore that my question to you at CEU and my taking up this topic today does not reflect mere academic interest, but has very practical ramifications for me.

In the National Gallery in Prague, there is one of the most comprehensive and finest collections of Asian arts in Europe. What makes this collection unique is the way it was assembled: by a few Czech people, such as one painter of very mediocre stature, or one customs officer – collectors with no formal training in art history or aesthetics (or in Eastern cultures) and upon arrival in this country subsequently aroused a wave of interest among contemporary artists, many of whom became ardent admirers and collectors of Asian art. However, this fascination with the arts of China, Japan and other traditions has been balanced by persistent conservatism on the part of official Czech art history and museum establishment. Until today, the collection had never had a permanent exhibition space in

Prague. In a similar vein, non-European traditions have not yet entered curricula at the Art History Department of Prague University.

This culture chauvinism can be ultimately traced to very practical and tangible considerations: in an environment of scarce resources, non-European, "alien", art is an unwanted competitor for a limited budget and available space. Predictably, the bottom line is rather simple: to build a gallery of Asian arts (or to purchase a Chinese scroll for collections) means that less money can go to Czech or European art. I further suspect a deeply-seated anxiety that the inclusion of non-European art threatens to disrupt the self-perceived identity of some art historians, defined by their assumed authority over a canonical body of imagery. However, these motives persist unspoken, couched in a kind of assumption that Chinese (or Aztec, African, "primitive" ...) art is "alien" to our cultural tradition and this fact necessarily conditions and limits the possibility of our experiencing and responding to such works. A very learned and bright scholar of European art, who seriously claims that Chinese (Aztec ...) art is alien to us because of the distance of cultures and sensibilities and it thus perforce must remain a sort of curiosity (or marginal episode in the glorious history of man's art) for us, is an empirical personality of my world with many personal incarnations. Beyond some of these views I even suspect a moral imperative, mentioned by Professors Ackermann and Bell. Namely that to experience and enjoy fully alien works of art is not only impossible, but somehow not entirely appropriate for us (and vice versa), that we should not enjoy tribal or Chinese art in the same way that we can enjoy art of our own tradition. But the more I look at Professor Ackermann's statement, the more I am troubled by it. I realize that it is not fair to dissect one passage in an otherwise much more complex and, indeed, extremely revealing essay. Yet, Ackermann's formulation to me neatly summarizes a position (and often just implicit assumptions) persisting in current Czech art history. It is against this view, against the practice of constructing a wide gap between "our" and "alien" art, in fact against the very notion of "alien art" — that I am arguing here, extending and focusing somewhat our discussion, begun at the CEU seminar in Prague.

Of Raphael's Vatican palace *Philosophy (School of Athens)*, Professor Ackermann writes:

"The picture matches in its principles the intellectual ideals of rationality, order, perspective in a judgmental sense, and traditions fostered in the universities of the West. I doubt that it would or should mean much to anyone who is alien to those principles; its values are not universal but quite specific, reflecting those of a small minority of privileged persons in one part of the world ... "

And in a footnote he adds: *"I maintain that a viewer from a tribal culture would be unlikely to find Raphael's fresco rewarding, even if he were fully informed about its significance for us. Conversely, I believe that our capacity to experience fully tribal art is restricted by our being alien to the culture. Both he and we can, however, transpose some of the criteria we use for judging works from our own culture onto works of the alien culture and gain satisfaction from them."*[1]

Professor Bell and yourself have raised some objections to such formulations. You commented on *"the notorious gap that frequently separates or response to works of art*

from our ability to put it into words." In recalling your viewing of the cartoon for this very fresco you write: *"My experience was not conditioned by the intellectual programme ton which I have my own views), but simply by what I saw."*[2] I am going to affirm this point with one experience of my own later in this paper, for the moment, however, I would like to address the above passage from another perspective.

At least one important aspect of what can be seen in Raphael's fresco has been aptly summarized by Ackermann, who repeatedly evokes the concept of "order"; he remarks on the School of Athens that *"it offers visual analogue of the rational order"*...

I would like to introduce two Chinese works of art — of status equal to that of *School of Athens* — to both of which this characteristic could also apply:

The first one is the Shang dynasty (c. 12th century B. C.) *fang hu* bronze vessel from Queen Fu Hao's tomb. Structured entirely on the principles of bilateral symmetry, complementarity and hierarchy, it stands as a tangible plastic idea of order; in fact, I can hardly think of a more compelling -visual analogue of rational order". This pervasive and powerful ordnungswille — certainly one of the most prominent morphological features of Shang bronze vessels — is undoubtedly an important factor in our aesthetic response to these vessels.[3]

In Kuo Hsi's *Early Spring*, dated 1072, one of the most celebrated masterpieces in the history of Chinese painting, order is perhaps not so imminently visual. Yet one can agree with the authority who said that *Early Spring* "must certainly be included among the most effective embodiments of order in Chinese art." [4] Northern Sung (monumental) landscape painting — which Kuo Hsi's famous scroll is often taken to represent — has been repeatedly characterized as a macrocosmic vision of the worldly order, an analogy for a NeoConfucian and Taoist natural order — indeed a paradigmatic order.[5]

Each of the three works of art in its turn compelled its respective commentators to evoke the concept of "order". No doubt, each of them embodies, projects and sustains order in one way or another. What are we to make of this fact, what does the presence of order in these three visual compositions attest to? Medical scientists and psychologists would probably point out that the predilection for order (and its visual manifestation) are constant to human psyche, encoded deep in the neurophysiological constitution of the human brain. An eminent anthropologist has recently gone so far as to claim that: "Any artefact with aesthetic quality is a tangible symbol standing for the idea of order ... Aesthetic quality through visual order has been, and still is, achieved in most, if not all, societies ... Neither composition nor the symbolization of order are based on cultural specificities." [6] This, I would think, comes close to your position, forwarded in another essay, in which you touch on this topic and where you plead against extreme cultural relativism, namely, that *"It is always worthwhile to make the initial assumption that even in foreign countries and in distant ages we have to do with people who are not all that different from ourselves ..."* "that"... *we must start from the hypothesis that there are indeed constants in the psyche of Man with which the humanist can reckon. Naturally we must not expect too much.* "[7] This biologically ingrained capacity of the human brain for ordering, for enjoyment of visual

order, would certainly be a part of that "not much", which we can expect as constants underlying diverse cultural manifestations in arts.

However, even if we accept Maquet's assertions – and take heed of lessons provided by your *Sense of Order* – we see that each of the three masterpieces mentioned, embodies order in a particularly strong sense of the term. And a recourse to common neurophysiological or psychological, i.e. metacultural, level of human beings does not seem adequate to explain why each of the three works looks the way it does. Quite obviously, the order, symbolized in Raphael, Kuo Hsi and Shang bronze is culture-specific, notwithstanding any possible transcultural basis for order as visual category. The distance between Raphael's fresco and my two examples is quite obvious. What is perhaps less obvious (and even less so to the mind, already pre-programmed to „seeing" a radical opposition of Western vs. Chinese art, „us" vs. „them") is that the distance between the Shang bronze vessel and Kuo Hsi is scarcely smaller. As a specialist in Chinese art, I would be hard pressed to specify some common ground underlying the two distinct manifestations of order in Shang fang hu and Kuo Hsi, some distinct „Chinese" quality or value – present in both works – which could contrast them to Raphael. Such an explanation would be on a very abstract, philosophical level, rather than on an immediately visual level at any rate.

What these three given examples of visual composition embodying order imply to me then, is that we are not confronted with Western culture – specific embodiment of order *versus* two examples of Chinese culture – specific embodiment of order, but rather with Italian cinquecento *and* Chinese Shang dynasty *and* Chinese Sung dynasty culture – specific embodiment of order.

Now, I am aware that under certain circumstances and for specified aims, it can be indeed perfectly legitimate to insist on articulating contrast between Chinese (Japanese, non-European ...) and Western works of art. I do not intend to deny the role of culturally induced (often unconscious) skills, expectations and value hierarchies which operate in our encountering images. The example of Chinese calligraphy, which you evoked in your Prague lecture, comes easily to mind. There are common perceptual skills, cultural information, or knowledge of iconography, the presence or absence of which will affect one's experience of a Chinese landscape scroll, Renaissance fresco or any other artistic manifestation.

But why should a difference between Raphael and Kuo Hsi be necessarily and always conceptualized into the categorical dichotomy of a Chinese (tribal, non-Western) work of art, as opposed to a Western (European, "our") work of art? Such constructs appear to be little more than products of an ideologically infested agenda, the purpose of which is to sustain dominance of an europocentrist view, of those who cast themselves into position of the bearers of "western" (whatever this exactly might be) tradition. Moreover, by thinking in such a conceptual dichotomy, we are bound to lose sight of diversity of which each member of such a pair is composed, imposing a homogenous view on either side. As an alternative, I would maintain that properly any work of art or image should be first and foremost approached as ingrained in a particular visual culture, as a part of very specific historical and social context, on a level much deeper than the "us" vs. "they" contrast evoked by Ackermann permits.

It is exactly here, I think, where Ackermann's weakest point lies: for what exactly is meant by "it would not or should not mean much to *anyone who is alien* to those principles?"

What is referred to by "our capacity"? Whom does Ackermann count among "us", i.e. "*inheritors of the culture that put this company of philosophers together?*" In the logic of the case, we should think of ourselves as members of Western post-Renaissance culture. Yet we can also conceive of ourselves as people of Western post-Enlightenment culture, or, alternately, postmodern culture. Surely, from the point of view of experiencing images, the distinctions here are crucial. Perceptual habits and expectations operating in the viewing of images in most respects differ more substantially between the present day viewer and the Renaissance humanist than between the letter and the audience for aboriginal sand painting or Chinese scholar of 10th century. And even if Ackermann's "*inheritors of culture*" are more exactly specified, as let us say, present day viewers, I still want to know who is that "us"? Professors of classical studies and art history at British and American universities? Or readers of *Critical Inquiry*? White urban population, or could it also be second generation ethnic immigrants? For my part (acknowledging all my ingrained cultural equipment and western education), I do not consider myself an inheritor of Renaissance cultural tradition in a particularly strong sense.

However, I am having even more problems with Ackermann's notion of "*experiencing* (a work of art) *fully*". We can certainly never re-experience all emotional and cognitive aspects in which, e. g. the Shang ritual bronze vessel was "seen" by the audience for which it was originally intended. This seems quite obvious. Less obvious may be the fact that we (i. e. present-day museum visitors) cannot – in this sense – fully experience the Raphael painting, anymore than we can fully experience the Shang ritual bronze vessel, or *Early Spring*. All of them were decontextualized, turned into objects of visual contemplation by/for a present-day audience. (The fact that *School of Athens* can still be found in the same architectural topos does not change this). Ackermann's words sound oddly enough indeed at the age when the best and most imaginative art history enterprise has been concerned in one way or other with the recontextualization task. I think especially of Michael Baxandall's paradigmatic concern with reclaiming both institutional and viewing contexts of art works, with what he calls "*an excursion into alien sensibilities*" [8]

Those, who tend to pose an insuperable barrier between alien (i.e. non-European) and Western art, between "us" and Other, would be well-served merely to consider the title of chapter N of Baxandall's remarkable book on *Patterns of Intention: "Truth and Other Cultures: Piero della Francesca's Baptism of Christ."* Baxandall strongly reminds us that Italian medieval culture is not (or at least, if I read him correctly, need not be) ours, that indeed Piero della Francesca was "*a man culturally different from us in his knowledge of pictures, in his assumptions about what his pictures are for, in his perceptual skills and dispositions, and even in his thinking about causes and about intention itself,*" that "*both Piero and his customers perceived pictures and thought about pictures differently from us, in that their culture equipped them with different visual experience and skill and different conceptual structures*".[9]

With Raphael's fresco, as with Australian tribal art or Kuo Hsi, we are not participants in their respective culture, but observers. And even if we accept as a common-sense the fact

that the context of Raphael or Baroque sculpture may be more accessible to us than that of the Shang dynasty bronze, I would maintain that it is a matter of degree, not of categorical distinction. Thus in the place of Ackermann's insistence that "*our capacity to experience fully tribal art is restricted by our being alien to the culture ...*", I would prefer to claim that our capacity to experience a work of art is affected by our being alien to its particular visual culture. We have to approach every work of art as a part of a particular historical situation in the first place, before (occasionally and for specified aims) attempting generalizing contrasts of the Western culture vs. China - culture type.

But there are even more troubling points with Ackermann's notion of "*experiencing art fully*". As both viewer and art historian, I believe that the reclaiming of context of given work of art usually rewards the beholder of such work in one way or another. However, can we agree with Ackermann's claim - implicit in the quoted passage - that to experience a work of art fully, depends on our being a participant in the respective culture, rather than just an observer? Both you and Baxandall underscored a crucial role of imagination in our response to art. We can go a step further here. The fact that I will probably not respond to the Shang bronze or Raphael in a way that a typical beholder of the original audience experienced them, that I probably lose some important dimension of these works, because I am not partial, or sensitized, to the work's respective culture or context, does not mean that I cannot intensify and enrich my experience of such an object in some other dimension. I am convinced that my encounter with contemporary art and reality sensitizes me to certain dimensions of art of alien visual cultures which could not have been accessible to the original audience, even as the work does not "mean" to me what it meant to this original audience. There is the further possibility that we view pictures differently because our concept of the self itself has changed.[10] The possibility of experiencing so many diverse visual manifestations - and projecting these experiences into the viewing of other images - seems indeed to be one of the few privileges of living in the postmodern world.

This leads me to another, and perhaps crucial, problem of the notion of "*fully experiencing art*". What Ackermann probably had on his mind has been already mentioned here. The aesthetic appeal and emotional power of works of art are undoubtedly to a certain degree conditioned upon a viewer's command of certain perceptual skills, knowledge of iconography or adherence to shared values. In this sense, one could be perhaps justified in saying that without the ability to read Chinese characters, one's experience of Chinese painting or calligraphic scroll is limited, that without at least some knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy, one cannot experience Raphael's Philosophy, fully etc. Yet the notion of "*experiencing a work of art fully*" thus implies that aesthetic experience is an objective, measurable and definite given. That in each work of art there is a potential, open for the beholder to experience it fully, something that ultimately can be acquired or appropriated in its totality and complexity, and "we" stand a better chance to acquire it than "they" - in the case of Raphael and vice versa. This is indeed a crucial point. If there is such an objective aesthetic potential to be realized in each work of art, how should I - as a museum professional - go about recovering it for viewers, enabling observers of my culture to retrieve this potential? How do I myself realize it in the first place? My answer, predictably, is contrary: there is nothing like this ultimate, objective potential, and that is why the concept of "*fully experiencing*" art is misleading and perhaps even dangerous.

Earlier, I noted the problematic status of "our culture", of "we". The very common experience of watching people in a gallery react to what they see in many different ways immediately points out the pitfalls of the "we" notion in the context of talking about aesthetic experience. (Even assuming that all of these people can be subsumed as inheritors of, e. g., western post-Enlightenment culture). The emphasis on the role of the subject and subjectivity, so central to contemporary artistic practice and critical discourse, is very pertinent here." Specific collectives may share certain uniform or similar dispositions, operating in their perception and experience of art. And yet, it is through each particular encounter of one viewing subject with one particular work that the aesthetic experience is realized. To emphasize this point, I would like to consider one image that is, let's say, more accessible in some strategic aspects to us than Raphael's or the Shang bronze vessel or Kuo Hsi's might be, taking heed of your example that instead of enjoyment of works of art, we can, (indeed should), sometimes think of reaction to images.

One of the most potent images of this decade is a photograph of the damaged Chernobyl reactor. Not only is it familiar to tens or hundreds of millions of people, but these beholders can still remember both the general and private viewing context of this image. They remember the situation following the catastrophic meltdown, with the Soviet government placing an effective information blockade on the event and scant reports on the accident in official media, denying any serious damage and danger, as rumours on the magnitude of the catastrophe and the danger of radiation contamination began to unfold. What made the experience of this event so strange was the total absence of any visual information, unparalleled in this age of visual proliferation. Danger, as it were, twice unseen: terror of invisible radiation matched by the absence of any visual clues to the accident, leaving the imagination infinite possibilities to entertain the mind. Only after some 10 days or so began to circulate an unclear, grainy black and white picture of the damaged reactor building, taken from a helicopter hovering above the site, to be later supplemented by similar picture of a concrete sarcophagus burying the debris of reactor. The few versions of the same picture remained to symbolize the Chernobyl catastrophe, as well as the ultimate danger of living in the nuclear age.

Admittedly, the image of the Chernobyl reactor would probably mean nothing to Raphael's or Kuo Hsi's contemporaries, indeed little to anybody prior to 26 April 1986. Its impact, we can say its "meaning", is sustained by one's knowledge of minimal context – i. e. the fact of the nuclear meltdown in the depicted building and minimal knowledge of what such a meltdown (potentially) brings about. Such knowledge (a minimal condition for the picture to be meaningful) was available to millions of people. It would be possible, with a reasonable degree of probability, to outline the kind of response that it most often elicited in these beholders: this would include, e. g., fears of being affected by deadly radiation, anxiety of unseen menace, or more generalized anxiety of what life in the contemporary world brings about. However, what would it mean to parents who lost their child to radiation? What to the Ukrainian family who was allowed to resettle to the Czech Republic to avoid living in contaminated areas? What to somebody who is told by a doctor that his/her constant colds may be due to immune deficiency caused by a small dose of radiation from Chernobyl? What does it mean to a survivor of Hiroshima? Millions of people shared analogous emotional response in seeing this photograph. Who of us, however, experienced it fully?

Can we possibly describe or qualify in some way what would it mean to experience this image fully?

Even if we can sometimes approximately qualify the minimal knowledge of context necessary for an image to signify, we can never qualify some necessary condition, sufficient for viewers to experience an image "fully", or ultimately. Not only is the aesthetic experience always realized in the unique encounter of one subject with a particular work, even the experience of the same subject with the same work need not always be the same. This, in short, would be the main thrust of my reply to Ackermann's footnote's doubt about the possibility of experiencing alien works of art fully. But let me close with somewhat more pleasing images.

In the Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin, there is, among other fine works, a small granite statue of the V Dynasty Old Kingdom (c. 2400 B. C.), depicting the *Scribe of the Granaries, Dersenedj, and his wife, Nofretka*. Reproduction, limited as it is to the frontal view, cannot adequately convey the museum visitor's view of this small sculpture, which sits under the glass cube on the column in the open space. Approached from behind, only a shadowy silhouette looms from the beam of pointed reflector: two helmet like coiffures, defining the head and streamlined outline of the torsos, dominated by a summarily depicted, yet delicate gesture of the woman, embracing the shoulders of her partner. A faint smile of the woman, seen from the front view, completes the appeal of this small masterpiece.

Egyptian art has traditionally been presented as very example of art that is alien, absolutely distant – even enigmatic and mysterious – to us, thus, in the logic of Ackermann's argument, perhaps least likely to elicit response in the contemporary viewer. And yet, I am hardly alone in having an instant and strong aesthetic experience of this piece. It is the simple gesture of Nofretka and her smile, which make the sculpture accessible and appealing. Having some interest in Egyptian art, I remember that such gesture is in fact conventional – a variation of the iconographical device to symbolize the marital relationship – and the artist or patron may have not intended to express any particular quality of relationship of the two people depicted, or to make a symbolic statement on universal human emotion. And yet, what else is expressed in the gesture and subtle expression of Nofretka's face than the intimacy of two people, the emotional bond and closeness between man and woman – this is what this small block of red granite appears to be about. And these are feelings, or values, if you will, that transcend cultures, or, to use an eminent Czech aesthician Jan Mukařovský's words, something which is connected with man's anthropological essence.[12] The simple gesture of Nofretka not only closes physical space between her and her husband, it also closes distance between them and us, negates the abyss of time and cultures. And if I can use "we" for once, is not a part of our reaction to this sculpture precisely the delight that in such (purportedly) alien art we find something immediately resonating with us, some affinity and connection with "alien" Egyptians, something that tangibly proves that after all, "we are all human beings"?

In another room of the same museum, I come across a limestone relief plaque of roughly the same date as *Nofretka*. The caption states that it is *Methethy and his son*. I stay in front of this plaque, having no direct access to the work's meaning. As most visitors to the Egyptian museum, I cannot read hieroglyphs. Without reading a catalogue entry, I could

only guess at the meaning of the juxtaposition of large and small figure. My understanding of what this work was intended to be about, much less my grasp of values encoded herein is minimal. And yet, captivated by the fine lines of the engraving, I have an intense aesthetic experience, triggered in this case – it seems to me – by the very tension between the visually attractive form and my inability to penetrate beneath it, sustained by the very fact that it seems so enigmatic, even alien. Unlike your experience with Raphael's cartoon, I can hardly form a view on the intellectual programme of what is depicted, like you, I react to what I see.

What conclusion should I make from these two encounters? Egyptian art has traditionally been perceived as a both very coherent and distant cultural tradition. The two works of art considered here conveniently occupy what appear to be the opposing poles of potentials with which we are faced in experiencing art of alien cultures. Viewing both of them, I feel an intense reaction. In the first case it seems to be sustained by the closeness, by the immediate resonance with the subject, in the second case by the very distance and inaccessibility of work's meaning. In both pieces, one encounters work of alien visual culture. However, why should I make this fact a defining feature of these works, predetermining my aesthetic response, a priori occluding the possibility of my experiencing these images? This would be not only silly, but perverse. Seeing, after all, should be a liberating experience.

As a curator, as an exhibitor, I have also to take into consideration certain givens: perceptual skills, knowledge, values, the whole cultural baggage, which I can expect today viewer brings into his/her encounter with the collection. Trying to reclaim the original context of artworks, I will hope to make visitor's experience of them more rewarding. Or, to use Baxandall's ingenious metaphor, I will be trying to expand the space between the label and object, to stimulate the viewer to be active in this space.[13] I believe that in doing so, I should think of working for the viewer, whose visual encounter with a work of art of an alien culture will not only bring him an aesthetic experience, but perhaps also lead him to question his/her culturally ingrained premises and concepts. Perhaps even to lead him from the art object itself to learn about these cultures' thought and values. I refuse to think of the viewer who is a priori afraid that his/her experience will be restricted by his/her being alien to work's particular culture. What need then would be for us to look at works of art?

Sincerely yours

Ladislav Kesner

4.06.1993

Dear Dr Kesner,

I hope you will forgive me, if I reply by hand and rather dogmatically in the interest of brevity. I fully agree with you that it may never be possible to know if we fully understand a work of art. But I would still make a number of qualifications: "Exotic" artefacts have only been acknowledged to be "art" within the last 150 years or so. Before, they were classified as "curiosities" and viewed accordingly. The Renaissance Prince Ferdinand of Tyrol owned

two Chinese paintings on Schloss Ambras near Innsbruck, but they were no doubt considered curiosities and described in the inventory of the *Kunst und Wunderkammer* as "*Indianisch Tüchel*".

Our aesthetic response does not necessarily demand "understanding" – we respond to nature, flowers, trees, rocks, shells and butterflies, the song of birds etc. Without asking ourselves what they "mean". The term "meaning" is correlative to "understanding". I do not know the meaning of an Arabic or Chinese inscription, therefore I don't "understand" it.

But the main source of my doubts lies in our response to music. It seems to me certain that I "understand" Mozart better than I understand Chinese, Japanese or Indian music. (The Chinese, Japanese and Indians have by now acquired a marvellous understanding of Western music!)

Nor can I possibly doubt, that certain musical performers understand, say, a Beethoven sonata better and more profoundly than others, and that one may be compelled to say of a certain virtuoso: »*He can play very fast and he plays all the notes, but he simply does not understand the idiom of Schubert and has no idea of what the piece "means"*.«

Now I would hesitate to be equally dogmatic about the other arts, but the history of taste appears to suggest that, let us say, Gothic architecture was not understood before the 15th century and that one may argue how far the Romantics really understood it! Nor would I contradict anyone who maintains that the German Nazarenes or the English Pre-Raphaelites "misunderstood" quattrocento painting when they talked about its "innocence" etc.

I don't even think that my friend Jim Ackermann fully understands the *School of Athens*! Order, as such, i.e. symmetry has been commonplace in the Western tradition; what Raphael achieved is *variety* within order! But nobody can easily doubt that works of art can be *misunderstood*: The title *The School of Athens* is such a misunderstanding, Vasari also got its subject quite wrong, and e. g. the title of Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* is also based on obvious misunderstanding! I have written about this in my essay volume *Topics of our Time* in a piece on "Relativism in the Arts".

I have confronted that thorny problem much earlier in my review of Malraux reprinted in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, I would not claim that I have come near in solving the problem, but at least I have insisted that understanding is not an "all or nothing" affair! So why should we not *try* to understand Chinese art? It is true that our understanding will rarely be satisfactory: The other day, a Chinese friend sent me a splendid reproduction of a wonderful anonymous Sung scroll which I much admired. But having asked a Chinese friend to translate for me the poems and inscriptions, I realized that I got it somewhat wrong. It represents a wood, partly shrouded in mist and many black birds in the tree and on the ground. I began to understand that the birds are hungry in the stark winter landscape and that one of the poems (by an Emperor) even compared them to the people who are hungry and starving! It is a scene of utter melancholy and desolation but neither my wife nor I "understood" it fully, before the poems revealed its meaning. I may have read enough about Chinese art to have learned a little about the symbolism of the landscape and I am sufficiently fond of Chinese poetry to make some of the necessary associations with sages,

hermits, exile etc. But of course I think that I understand the painting of a Biblical scene by Rembrandt better than that of a Buddhist legend! Nor can I doubt that it would be much easier to deceive me with a fake or copy of a Chinese painting than with one after Rembrandt – because, may I say so? - I understand Rembrandt a little better. Not "fully", to be sure, but simply *better*.

Therefore, if I may say so, allow the visitors to your collection to *enjoy* the exhibits a little like flowers or jewels and finally to discover that they also may "mean". Personally, I know of no other way!

Please forgive this dogmatic response due, largely to the pressure of work, and thank you once more for your interest & your letter.

Yours sincerely

E. H. Gombrich

1 On Judging Art without Absolutes. *Critical Inquiry* VII. Spring 1979. p. 449-51.

2 Critical Response. *Critical Inquiry* VII, 1979. p. 795.

3 I deal with that extensively in my *Seeing Through the Guang. Aesthetic and Ideology In (and of) the Ritual Art of Bronze Age China*, ms. Interestingly, the quality of "order" has been detected from the very beginning of western interest in these works: "We cannot but concur in admitting the superior beauty of the antique sacrificial bronzes ... it is more than a style – it is a true order" (italics mine). Okakura Kakuzo. Exhibition of Recent Acquisitions in Chinese and Japanese Art. *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston* X, December 1912, p. 55.

4 John Hay, Some Questions Concerning Classicism in Relation to Chinese Art. *Art Journal*, Spring 1988, p. 30.

5 Cf e. g. James Cahill, *Compelling Image. Nature and Style in Seventeenth Century Landscape Painting*. Cambridge, Ma 1982. p. 13, 63; Wen Fong, *Images of the Mind*. Princeton 1984, p. 45-50.

6 Jacques Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience. An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts*. New Haven and London 1986, p. 130-35.

7 E. H. Gombrich, They Were All Human Beings– So Much Is Plain. Reflections on Cultural Relativism in the Humanities. *Critical Inquiry* XL 1989, p. 693. 696.

8 *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*. New Haven and London 1980. p. 143.

9 *Patterns of Intention. On the Historiographic Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven and London 1985, p. 108-109.

10 As argued e. g. by David Carrier, David Reed: *An Abstract Painter in the Age of "Postmodernism"*, in: Stephen Bann & William Allen, eds., *Interpreting Contemporary Art*. London 1991, 67-84.

11 In arguing with Greenberg's and Fry's formalism, one contemporary critic thus aptly asks: "Who is that we of whom they speak? When I see Cezanne's pictures differently than Fry or Pollock's in ways unlike Greenberg, I would observe that their "we" is a fiction, a way of trying to pretend that their accounts are more objective than they really are, or could be." David Carrier (see note 10), p. 83.

In a similar vein, cf. Griselda Pollock's review of Mieke Bal's *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. *Art Bulletin* LXXV, 1993. p. 531 on the importance of replacing 'educated consensually ours' with articulated subjectivity, in affirming relation to the image.

12 Jan Mukařovský, "On Universal Aesthetic Value," in: John Burbank & Peter Steiner, eds., *Structure, Sign and Function. Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*. New Haven and London 1977, p. 66.

13 M. Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," in: Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington 1990, p. 33-41.