

James Putnam

Images of the soul

Ernst H. Gombrich interviewed by James Putnam

JP: I recall that you wrote in the introduction to *Art and Illusion* - "Never before has there been an age like ours when the visual image was so cheap in every sense of the word." Certainly mass reproduction has reduced the former representational magic of the image and photographs of celebrities have become like contemporary icons. I am interested to discuss with you the relationship between the idea and its representation which has been interwoven with religious beliefs since prehistory.

EG: All this has to do with and takes us back to the basic root of the whole question, to the decalogue or the Ten Commandments. You should not make yourself a graven image because God cannot and should not be represented and he shouldn't even be named.

JP: Why do you think these anti-image beliefs prevail in certain religions?

EG: On the whole, the ban on images which exists in Islam and Judaism has to do with the feeling that it is an aprofanation of the holy if you make an image of it. There is a passage in the Koran saying the image makers will be punished even more than others. God will tell them "now make these things alive that you made" and since they cannot they will be damned. I think the tradition of the ban on images from Judaism and Islam takes us to the very core of religious art. One can reflect on it and also naturally on the problem of why art in Byzantium, after the great Iconoclastic interlude, was hedged in by many taboos. Painting was allowed within strict rules but monumental sculpture was banned altogether because it came too close to reality. These questions have an enormous bearing on centuries of image making, the smashing of the religious art in England and the Netherlands in the sixteenth century because they suggested idolatry.

JP: Although it might appear simplistic, it has enormous political implications since the controlling interests over these kind of images had to remain in the hands of the priesthood. Sometimes rulers themselves acted as priests like the pharaohs in ancient Egypt.

EG: This brings to mind the account by Herodotus, a Greek historian writing about Egypt in 450BC which is based on information given to him by the priests. In an appropriate passage concerning an Egyptian deity, he talks about the distinction between how a God is conventionally represented and what he is believed to be really "like". So in the same way, God the Father is not really an old man with a long beard as he is traditionally represented in Christian images.

JP: The Church was naturally apprehensive about the depiction of religious images, since once subject to artistic licence it might tend to lead to ambiguities in the interpretation of sacred texts.

EG: Well of course. As it comes down from the Church Fathers, Gregory the Great, in a famous text, had an

argument that became the defence of the images against the iconoclastic movement in the East. I also wanted to remind you of what seems to be a crucial passage in Dante's Paradiso (Canto 4, verses 42-46). In this he mentions that the intellect cannot grasp the true nature of God without the sensual or the mind can only grasp the sensual which the intellect can then process as it were. This is known to theologians as the doctrine of "Accommodation" which permits us to speak of the hand of God without implying that God has real hands. This allowed for the representation of God the Father with hands and feet. There were accusations against artists who created such images then defended themselves with this doctrine.

JP: There is this fear of encroaching upon the deity's divine prerogative as sole creator. In your writings you also refer to what you call "Pygmalion's power" or the primordial belief in the magical property of an image or effigy. This idea is clearly illustrated by the Ancient Egyptian word for a sculptor, sankh which means he who gives life to an image or vivifier. Do you think this concept is still valid?

EG: Well it so happens that my son, who is professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, told me about witnessing the consecration of the Buddha image, in Sri Lanka. When the artist makes it, it is just a Buddha of stone, it becomes something else when the artist puts in the pupils of the eyes. This is such a sacred act that he is not allowed to look himself, he does it in a mirror and over his shoulder. It is a very interesting story. So in a way this life giving gesture or magic if you like, probably existed in many cults for as you know both the figure of Christ and of the Buddha, were not represented at first, they were replaced by symbols for a long time, the lamb or a cross for Christ. Certainly the Crucifixion was only represented in the fourth century. It's particularly intriguing with the Buddha, because the one thing that every Buddhist knows, is that Buddha has entered Nirvana, and no longer exists, but even so you pray to the Buddha image you see or you can donate it flowers. So I'm sure that such contradictions pervaded all faiths.

JP: I remember seeing a rather wonderful, almost poetic, custom at a Japanese temple in Kyoto. A long white ribbon which extended for some distance from the entrance, was suspended in the air for people to touch. It was ultimately connected to the hand of the Buddha statue concealed deep within the temple and gave worshippers the opportunity to be linked directly to its sacred power. We could say that an effigy lacks power unless it was animated by prayer, chant or ritual. In the ancient Egyptian temple there existed a complex daily ritual which involved the washing and clothing of the cult statue with the accompaniment of chant.

EG: Yes there was a special ceremony to invest religious statues. Before that in the workshops they were just stone. In the Catholic Church a special formula exists for the blessing of an altar painting. You know I witnessed the feast of the Volto Santo in Lucca. This is a twelfth century crucifix of great, miraculous power and during that feast, there is an enormous procession, where the church is crowded with the faithful who go close to the image. In front of the image sits the priest to whom the faithful hand their jewels and he turns round touches the feet of the crucifix and returns them against a small sum to the owner. Therefore they have been invested with the mana or magic of the holy image in exchange for their donation of lira on a silver plate. So these are immensely interesting but also very complex things because I'm sure if you now cross examine the Bishop of Lucca he would say well it's a popular belief but you need not believe it.

JP: This is linked to the idea of the priest's exclusive access to the power of the divine and the earlier tradition of keeping the religious image or texts concealed. In ancient Egypt, there was this notion of the Holy of Holies, the most sacred temple precinct, forbidden to all except the high priest or pharaoh. Actually, the name for the principal ancient Egyptian deity, Amun, means "the hidden one". Nevertheless, this privileged access was broken down at various times in history when the worshippers were allowed the opportunity to make votive offerings to the gods or goddesses more directly. I suppose this is one of the many contradictions that pervade all faiths and must be due to

complex changes in cultural sensibilities. Certainly the growth in religious images in western art is not always concurrent with doctrine, I mean how do you think that we can explain, for instance, the great shift in attitude manifested in the frescoes of the Assisi church?

EG: It remains a historical puzzle that so few generations after the insistence on humility in the preaching of St. Francis, who was known as the poverello, that such a sumptuous church was erected and richly decorated. Indeed there were always currents within the Franciscan order condemning luxury but how it happened that the church could override the basic doctrine of St. Francis of poverty and erect this, remains an enigma. But it remains a paradox, because one wonders whether St. Francis would have approved of the church at all. Even there we can't go into details, first of all because I lack the knowledge and secondly because it turns out that the question is very complex for Franciscans themselves. There were always movements for poverty and there were the Minimi and Minorites trying to be small and humble until the Reformation. How this happened that this desire for pomp could defeat these very strong principles and actually if they talk of spirituality, these were known as the spirituals. They claimed the monopoly on being spiritual rather than worldly and secular.

JP: Yes in the early Christian period in Egypt the Coptic hermits lived in isolation in the desert in order to become closer to God.

EG: I sometimes tell the story of a Buddhist hermit, who lived in a cave, one of these caves in Ajanta, and a visitor compliments him on the beautiful paintings on the wall, and the hermit says what paintings? He was so holy that he couldn't see any paintings!

JP: I'm sure people believed that having the finest religious images in churches enhanced and gave added power to ritual and worship and in turn ultimately benefited the entire community. In ancient Egypt, the architecture of the temple represented a model of the world and the priests or the Pharaoh were effectively conducting ritual as a sort of symbolic power station for the general well being of the whole country.

EG: Absolutely, the state could not have existed without it. It is similar to the divine power believed to be held by the emperor in early Japan. If he so much as looked in one direction, that meant that this direction prospered and so its welfare would constantly change. Yet because he had such supreme power, like the shogun, who replaced him, his authority was paralysed and he became more of a religious symbol than a ruler. He was considered to be too high to concern himself with the practical workings of government and his role was restricted to ritual.

JP: And it was by ritual that the emperor was able to intercede with the divine on mankind's behalf. He could only do this because he was believed to be directly descended from the sun goddess, like the Egyptian pharaoh who was believed to be the son of Ra, the sun god. There seem to be a number of interesting parallels between Japanese Shinto and the ancient Egyptian solar cult. These hierarchical and unified belief systems enabled art to flourish and attain great levels of excellence. Do you think that without this degree, religious patronage by the state, art has lost some inherent quality?

EG: Well that is a very different matter. Religious patronage can also result in terrible kitsch. I mean I don't want to offend anybody's sensibilities but the Christ of Sacre Coeur or the Virgin of Lourdes are not the greatest works of art. So much of devotional art now is pretty awful but it was great in the Middle Ages. I'm sorry to be so evasive, but one cannot be quite dogmatic about all that.

JP: This might be viewed as the decadence of religious art from the intellectual to the sentimental. Do you think that an artist's lack of religious conviction nowadays might lead to the production of a sacred image of inferior quality

compared to the Renaissance period?

EG: I think that is true but the reasons may be very complex. There were many devout artists in the twentieth century for instance Eric Gill, was a devout Roman Catholic but I don't think he made many sacred images, I don't think Jacob Epstein himself was very religious and Henry Moore may or may not have been, but there are some very fine Madonnas by him.

JP: So do you think that their appreciation of the archetypal mother and child image from non-Christian sources like ancient and tribal art diluted the religious power of their work?

EG: I think that that is a very personal matter. I think that the simple nexus or link which you are expecting between being religious and being an artist is dubious. There is of course the famous text book example of Fra Angelico, who according to Vasari's Lives of the Artists, never put brush to canvas without first praying. But Vasari also tells us (rightly or wrongly) that Perugino was an atheist. He made beautiful Madonnas but he was actually a scoffer and a non-believer. Leonardo da Vinci even though he might not have been a church-goer in his notes speaks with great reverence of divine power and was fascinated by the organisation of the universe. It is certainly true that the vision of Michelangelo of the Creation of the World in the Sistine Chapel is awe inspiring even to non-believers.

JP: The religious images we've been discussing had a specific function but is generally believed that the earliest peoples made no distinction between sacred and secular. In the Neolithic period, for instance, tools, weapons and clothing were probably imitations of divine prototypes. Even houses were not just functional and by orientation, they were thought to be linked to the cosmos. So there is a long tradition of art serving both a utilitarian and ideological purpose and as I recall St. Thomas Aquinas maintained that 'there can be no good use without art'. Nowadays art has no apparent function and we have a very clear distinction between fine and applied art. Do you think that since most art has lost its directly religious role it has declined in quality?

EG: Of course not, because where would we be? I mean what would we do with the Impressionists and their glorious landscape paintings for instance. Maybe we should remember the words of the great composer Johan Sebastian Bach. He said all music that is not to the honour of God or permitted recreation of the mind is the devil's work. So you see he makes a distinction between sacred music and other permitted recreations. In his view you are certainly allowed to listen to and enjoy the minuet and he would not have condemned a landscape painting either.

JP: So in this way we could still claim that the higher function of art is to express and communicate ideas and to represent things that cannot be seen except by the intellect.

EG: Absolutely, recreation or more than that. It may be a little bit over the top, but I always speak of consolation. I think it's a marvellous thing if one stands in front of a masterpiece to think that human beings can do such things. Rembrandt was certainly a devout Bible reader, but he wouldn't be classified as a religious artist.

JP: Before the Renaissance were the greatest works of art limited to some form of religious patronage?

EG: I think it's likely that there is a distorted image of mediaeval art, that it was completely monopolised by ecclesiastical art. This is because, on the whole, religious images survived in churches while the murals and tapestries in the castle of knights were scrapped when they became unfashionable or worn out. There was much more secular art for the aristocracy and the nobility in the Middle-Ages than we are generally aware of.

JP: So what about this idea of the distinction between the artist and the artisan. In ancient Egypt for instance there

was no such division as defined by the word *hemuty* which meant both artist and craftsman.

EG: This distinction didn't exist in the Middle Ages either. So most of the artists were the head of workshops and were in that sense craftsmen but no doubt the situation changed in the course of the Renaissance.

JP: I really wanted to make the point that although many of the greatest works of art are anonymous, we are frequently preoccupied with the life and character of the individual artist and need to equate a masterpiece with a personality.

EG: I think it is true of our civilisation or society that people want to know about the artist. I'm pretty sure this is not so true generally and certainly in India nobody asks who the sculptures are by. I don't think that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, people were very curious to know who did the portrait sculptures in the French cathedrals. By the sixteenth century, Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* catered for a public who were interested in artist's biographies.

JP: Although the identity of the artist may not have been a major factor then, I think that nowadays people are clearly obsessed with what could be called the cult of the genius and the idea that the artist is a very special kind of person.

EG: In one view an artist must experience what is called inspiration and this is something that is thought to come from above.

JP: Yes the definition of inspiration in the dictionary is "supernatural divine influence". This is probably closer to the true origin of the word genius, what St. Augustine calls 'ingenium' or in Sanskrit 'inner controller', a kind of consciousness. The idea that human individuality is not an end but only a means.

EG: It is also worth remembering that famous quip:- ninety per cent perspiration and ten per cent inspiration!

JP: Do you think that the individual artist can distance himself or herself from the cultural or sociological climate of the age?

EG: Within limits, yes but I don't think that it is a rule. They imbibe all sorts of ideas of what art is about.

JP: To what extent do you think that the patron directed the quality of art in Renaissance times?

EG: Some of them certainly allowed artists to do what they liked and there are documents about it. Isabella d'Este, the great princess, wrote a letter requesting Giovanni Bellini to paint a certain subject. When the agent responded that he doesn't take orders of this kind, she replied, well if he doesn't, I'll be satisfied if he paints something with any classical subject matter.

JP: In this way we might say that the patron was simply a consumer - a judge of art, not a critic or a connoisseur, but merely someone who knew their needs and could distinguish good and bad workmanship. The modern connoisseurs interest is primarily in the artist's personality as expressed in style. What part do you think fate plays in this, in the extent that a lot of major Renaissance artists were patronised by the Medicis or the Popes. Do you think that there were equally highly competent or talented artists that were not so patronised and discovered?

EG: No, I think it is very unlikely that there were many undiscovered great masters in the Renaissance, somebody would have turned them up. As to the Medici, if you wanted to be in the good books of the lord, you had to devote

some of your profits to the church and donate an altar painting. In which case you would ask around who was the best painter available.

JP: So you think that the popular image of great artists dying in poverty and obscurity is a myth?

EG: It's ridiculous, most great artists were immensely appreciated in their time. Even in our own century Picasso was probably one of the richest. This image of the starving artist living in a garret is absurd, Rubens didn't live in a garret, neither did Titian or any of them.

JP: To take a wider aspect, could you claim that an artist gained notoriety because his work had certain appropriate stylistic characteristics that were in tune with tastes and sensibilities of the time?

EG: Yes this is quite true but it is also true in a certain sense that artists always congregated in places where it was known that art was appreciated and patronised. The distinction or difference between Genoa and Venice is very interesting. Genoa was a very rich merchant republic, of course they had artists but nothing like the great masters of Venice. Traditions arise, don't they, it's a very mysterious process but it does happen, just like in Cremona they made violins.

JP: How does that process work with Modern and Contemporary Art ? Do you think the situation has become problematic where you don't have patrons as such, but you have collectors whose tastes are too easily directed by critics and dealers ?

EG: Very much so - I think it can be disastrous. If an artist has a certain prestige, the dealer wants his work to be spotted. They want the artist to do the same thing all over because then if you come into the room of a collector they are keen to show off a typical work by so and so.

JP: So do you think this has a vision of art almost like a commodity.

EG: That's true, surely it's not all that rare that artists are valued and in that sense are a commodity. Dealers sometimes say to their clients things like, "if you think your wife will not like that painting if you hang it at home, I'll keep it for you for ten years and its value will double".

JP: Well yes, this is like speculation, like stocks and shares. To take the example of the famous Van Gogh painting that was purchased at auction for a record sum, by a Japanese Department store. They went on to exhibit it and millions of people paid to come to see it, not just because it was a Van Gogh but because it represented so much money.

EG: Well of course, people who talk about art will sooner or later come around to the question that they pay so much for it, this is quite true.

JP: The trouble is, that we can translate this form of art appreciation into money and artists themselves have been sucked into it and become highly motivated by the opportunity of money and fame.

EG: The art market nowadays is very problematic, I quite agree with you but it would also take a long time to analyse what has actually happened but I don't think it's a healthy situation.

JP: It has become particularly complicated since museums themselves have become intertwined with the work of

living artists. How do you feel about the display of contemporary art within a museum context ?

EG: I am perhaps alone in being very sceptical. I think that a museum of modern art is a contradiction in terms. Museums used to exist to preserve the treasures of the past and to save them. I think that it has a lot to do with the media, with publicity and these sort of things. It is not a good situation, but it exists. It's an interesting topic but I don't think it is one that can easily be translated into an interview and article. What do you think?

JP: Well I read your paper for the 1975 Oxfordshire conference on Museums - past, present and future (Published in Ideas and Idols). I found that you expressed very eloquently the poetry of traditional museum culture with its roots in the wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities. As soon as this supposedly dusty old-fashioned quality, with its taxonomic displays has been replaced many people have felt museums have lost some of their magic or poetry. But like everything else they change with the times. Certainly even at the beginning many museums were simultaneously acquiring both contemporary and historic objects, like the Victoria and Albert Museum for instance.

EG: But now it has become just like a fashion show, people want to show what is in or out and it is quite a different thing.

JP: I would just like to ask you one final question. If you were an artist, how would you proceed?

EG: I am not one but I think that one of the things we know from the past is the value of self-criticism. It must not be totally destructive and the artist must also be able to step back and look at his work. There is this story of when Titian finished his work, he turned it to the wall and after a few months he looked at it "as if it were his greatest enemy".

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