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Sir Ernst Gombrich

Art historian whose book *Art and Illusion* has remained central to the philosophical and critical discussion of visual arts for 40 years

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Sir Ernst Gombrich, who has died aged 92, was the most eminent art historian of the last half-century, both for specialist scholars and for a wider public. *The Story of Art* (1950, 16th edition 1995) has been the introduction to the visual arts for innumerable people for more than 50 years, while his major theoretical books, *Art and Illusion* (1960), the papers gathered in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (1963) and other volumes, have been pivotal for professional art historians. The sheer scope of his reading, the way he coordinated his knowledge and the accuracy of his memory were - as another historian described it - "awesome".

Gombrich was born into an extremely sophisticated family in Vienna, originally Jewish but converted at the turn of the 20th century to a rather mystical protestantism in an ambience close to that of Gustav Mahler. Throughout his life, he was anti-sectarian and unreligious. But it was impossible, in the wake of Austria's enthusiastic adoption of Nazism, to dissociate himself from Judaism, and he insisted on describing himself as born not as an Austrian, but as an Austrian Jew.

Educated at the Theresianum secondary school in Vienna and at Vienna University, he came to Britain in 1936 and joined the Warburg Institute, which had escaped from Hamburg two years previously with most of its library, as a research assistant. His second world war service was spent with the BBC Monitoring Service at Evesham from 1939-45. On returning to the Warburg in 1946 as a senior research fellow, he held various research and teaching posts until becoming its director, combining the post with being London University's professor of the history of the classical tradition (1959-76); previously he had been professor of the history of art at the university (1956-59).

The fact that he became one of the country's most honoured scholars, a knight and a member of the Order of Merit, having held all the most prestigious chairs - at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Cornell universities, and at the Royal College of Art - and received so many international awards (the Goethe, Hegel and Erasmus prizes), may lead one to forget that his first 15 years in Britain were fraught with difficulty: for several years, as a restricted alien, he struggled to look after his young family and his parents. The flight from Austria and the war years checked his professional career, but the scope and originality of his work in 1945-60 make one aware of his pent-up intellectual energy and the sustained thinking and reading that must have preceded it.

His family was highly musical: his mother was a pianist whose teacher was only two generations away from pupils of Beethoven. His wife, Ilse, whom he married in 1936, was also a pianist, a pupil of Rudolf Serkin, giving up her concert career when she married, though continuing to teach; they had one son, Richard, who has been professor of Sanskrit at Oxford since 1976. Ernst Gombrich's sister was a pupil of the violinist Bronislaw Huberman, and had been leader of the Palestine Philharmonic

Orchestra. Gombrich himself was a fine cellist, and in Vienna, the Gombrich and Busch families played chamber music together (the violinist Adolf Busch and his brothers were among the great musicians of the age). The serious understanding of music formed a crucial factor in the development of Gombrich's thought.

The pursuit of a rational study of painting - however different from music - seems one of the goals of his work in *Art and Illusion*. Gombrich - although it was not a view he expressed in so many words - sought in the optical and psychological basis of painting some equivalence to the rationality of musical structures. It was not that he believed the expressive power of music was reducible to principles of harmony, or that of painting to the psychology of illusion, but that these formed the framework for understanding artistic achievement.

In turning to psychology he was taking up an enterprise of the late 19th and early 20th century by such historians as Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl, while at the same time distancing himself from them on two grounds. First, because he saw their notions of visual style as being too narrow and formalistic - they had isolated the aesthetic interest of visual properties from their more complex human and historical context; and second, because they had treated changes in that visual style as reflecting changes in the spirit of the age or people.

Gombrich engaged for 50 years in a polemic against invoking the collective mind - whether of an age or a nation or a class - as explanatory of changes in art or politics. He did so because he saw such explanations as not only circular but as failing to recognise the essentially rational nature of the way artists experimented and learned from each other.

The work in which he set out to replace the formalisms of the turn of the century was *Art and Illusion*, first published in 1960 and based on his Mellon lectures given in Washington in 1956. It presented an account of the psychological factors which made it possible for us to see a three-dimensional moving subject - such as people in action - on a flat, still surface. The painter learned to do this by trial and error, checking whether his marks elicited recognition of his subject.

This led Gombrich to argue that the major factors in changes in pictorial style were the result of rational activities rather than mysteriously changing expressions of the age. He was deeply opposed to any account of artistic creativeness which was couched in terms of a collective psyche rather than by reference to individual invention and discoveries which others could then adopt.

A third line of argument (manifesting his close intellectual relation to his friend from Vienna, the philosopher Karl Popper) was that the history of western painting shared with science the self-critical urgency to overcome its own previous formulas so as to become more coherent and compendious in representing natural appearances.

The book has remained, for 40 years, central to the discussion of the visual arts by philosophers, art historians and critics. It retained this position despite radical criticisms of parts of his argument because at its core it focused, as no art historian before had done, on the role of illusion, on the fact that in depiction, without our being deluded, we are caught up by the represented subject that we recognise within it - the expression of a face, the gesture of a figure, the spaces of a landscape.

Instead of taking the fact for granted, he turned it into a focus of inquiry. Earlier writers had treated the fact in three ways: as merely an unproblematic extension of ordinary perception, as opposed to our interest in aesthetic or expressive properties, or as something modern painting had to overcome.

Gombrich changed all that. He challenged aesthetic exclusiveness and its snobberies while at the same time being a great defender of high culture. In one of his finest essays, on Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia*, he followed the implications of the painting's circular format for the intricacies of its drawing and its expressive composure. But on the way, he used an advertisement for a rotary electric shaver which also played on circular forms to illuminate the nature of the painting's visual wit.

His writing was always vivid and accessible. When he was a research student in Mantua writing a thesis on Giulio Romano at the Palazzo del Tè, a 10-year-old daughter of some family friends wrote to ask him what he was doing. In his correspondence with her he described how, once upon a time, there was a prince, and in his court he had an artist who delighted in surprising people by his paintings. A little later he wrote a world history for children (*Weltgeschichte für Kinder*, 1936, revised and enlarged 1985, though not translated into English) and famously - at the prompting of his publisher Bela Horovitz of the Phaidon Press - he wrote *The Story of Art* (1950).

Among his most accessible and seminal papers dating from the same decade as *Art and Illusion* are those in the volume *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*. Here the fundamental questions of aesthetics are explored: how the imagination functions in painting, how it elicits or transforms our psychological urgencies and how aesthetic and moral awareness are related to each other.

These essays combine a conversational ease of expression with a depth of thought which makes them perhaps the finest introduction to the subject. Several volumes followed, mostly on Renaissance art, the most important being *Norm and Form* (1966), which includes the paper on Raphael's circular *Madonna*.

Gombrich was legendary as the recipient of honours: it often seemed as if the ceremonies prompted a certain melancholy, as if they distracted him from his own deeper purposes, or as if the ceremonies might well be compromising or absurd, despite his belief in the importance and dignity of public institutions. He would turn an acceptance speech - always beautifully crafted, witty and courteous - into a serious argument.

A masterly lecturer, he transfixed an audience with visual demonstrations so that he made his arguments seem inescapable. In one public debate he became irritated at objections to his account of an optical effect, and with the slide on the screen he invited the audience to walk round the room to check that the ingenious object displayed would seem to point to them wherever they were. The chairman, Stuart Hampshire, was trying to bring the meeting to a decorous conclusion and had gracefully to acknowledge that Gombrich had concluded it for him.

He has been represented as the conservative opponent of modernism on the grounds of his interest in illusion and his ironic treatment - in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1958 - of *The Vogue of Abstract Art* (his title, which was changed by the editor to *The Tyranny of Abstract Art*; the piece was reprinted in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*).

Though he had written eloquently about Picasso and other artists of the first half of the century, they were not central to his sensibility. He was critical of various modernisms: he was, for instance, sceptical about Schoenberg's 12-tone system as musically disabling - I remember him saying once that you couldn't hear whether you had got something right or not - and he was unimpressed by art which seemed to depend on making a rhetorical gesture (as opposed to art in which there was visible internal structure), however interesting the psychology of such gesturing might be.

Those of us fortunate enough to have been his students were always aware of his huge inward energy, which could manifest itself not only in his thought, his recall of obscure references or his suggestion of historical analogies, but also in his welcoming warmth - as when one met him in the library of the Warburg Institute. However, his energy could also appear in his formidable irritation at what he saw as one's travesties of scholarship.

Many will remember him most vividly at home with Ilse in Hampstead's Briardale Gardens: Ilse's wry humour when they disagreed about the translation of a musical term or the fair assessment of someone's behaviour, her unceasing care of him even when she herself was in serious discomfort. Through the illness of his last years he never stopped working, and they both maintained social life with humour and stoicism. He is survived by her and their son Richard.

· Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich, art historian, born March 30 1909; died November 3 2001

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