

# Ten Reasons Why E. H. Gombrich Remains Central to Art History

## ONE

Gombrich's main contribution to art history is his very popular introductory volume, *The Story of Art*<sup>1</sup>. Its famous opening, 'There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists', announces a bold, non-essentialist view of art, under which the concept of art is continually redefined by successive works, acquires an innovative impetus, a pliant tradition. Art in this view is only to be defined by its history, so that art history acquires a central place in aesthetics and new weight as a discipline. Gombrich later, tactfully, called this branch of art history 'art theory' but traditionally this remains part of aesthetics. These are simple yet startling departures, which nevertheless reflect philosophical developments of their time and impatience with the tedious encyclopaedias of rival art histories.

*The Story of Art* concentrates on a process of adaptation and experiment with style, with the piecemeal accumulations of realism, negotiated between cultures, by individuals. Gombrich's aim was to eliminate idealised 'spirits' or collective wills from changes in style and to replace these with a model of constant or absolute humanity, in particular situation. Crucially, differences between the advanced and primitive, between first and following worlds are seen as matters of opportunity or interaction rather than evidence of race, nation, creed or place.

*The Story of Art* wears these commitments lightly, yet their weight directs the story in controversial ways. It is a story freighted with philosophical and aesthetic realism; that traces a growing sophistication in picturing or depiction. The story is carried furthest by the civilisation of Western Europe with the development of perspective, the felicities of light and local colour these then allow. Rather than take these as just cultural variation, Gombrich sees them as an objective advance for mankind. Perspective makes for better pictures, enables more realism. The claim is of a piece with his humanism, but the story then has little time for non-western civilizations, where perspective takes longer to be accepted. There are important differences in pictorial projections (oblique, orthogonal, isometric, etc), as opposed to perspectives, and presumably in a longer history Gombrich might have accommodated these, looked longer at non-western cultures. But the story in short remains the acquisition of perspective, its flourishing applications and eventually, the recycling of more basic or primitive picture schemes alongside it.

In any case, the inclusion of more civilisations only begs others, confronts pragmatic limits. To follow the route of *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, for example, with sections on India, China and Japan, then assorted regions and continents yet skirting the vast expanse of Eastern Europe and Central

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<sup>1</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (editions 1-15) 1950 – 2002, Phaidon, Oxford, New York.

Asia, prompts questions of the encyclopaedic approach<sup>2</sup>. Clearly, it is not practicable to honour all differences equally or at once, by nation, creed, culture or continent. At some point, priorities obtain, if only concerning the size and cost of the publication, at worst, conceding category is arbitrary. The project of a global history of art proves compromised, patchy at best. While it may be read with profit after *The Story of Art*, it offers neither the rigour nor momentum of a shorter, more incisive introduction.

Gombrich makes a relatively short story of art but what it lacks in detail it makes up for in principles. His contributions to art history are mainly revisions of method; that give greater scrutiny to ethical, scientific and even metaphysical implications. He asks more of art history than diligent cataloguing and chronicle, and lays bare its broader frameworks, uses and implications. He reduces the history of art to a story, but it is a story for everyone, about everyone.

## TWO

Gombrich's second contribution is an analysis of development in pictures, in his books *Art and Illusion* and *The Image and the Eye*<sup>3</sup>. This follows as a direct consequence of the position taken in *The Story of Art* concerning 'the riddle of style'<sup>4</sup>. In a sense, this trumps iconography in establishing meaning, since iconography merely accepts representation or proceeds on the basis of intuitive content. Since perspective is seen by Gombrich as meeting a native need in depiction more fully, the aim is to establish innate dispositions to the perception of depth, principles to pictorial representation that reflect these. Examples in the two books range from advertising and cartoons to fine art or "art with a capital A", to use Gombrich's phrase, in order to level out the issue of depiction, separate it from just fine art. On the use of contemporary pop culture, it is worth noting the book is based on Gombrich's Andrew W. Mellon Lectures in 1956, which perhaps pace the painting of Richard Hamilton, but precede general recognition of Pop Art. The broader scope to examples begs the distinction between mere pictures and fine art, and while this might seem to narrow questions of art or excellence, at the same time it undermines *The Story of Art's* 'technical' claims to a rolling definition of art. While Gombrich conceded that 'progress' in art does not equate with excellence; he was unable to then qualify excellence *as art*. The problem awaits further study.

Gombrich subtitled *Art and Illusion* 'a study in the psychology of pictorial representation' and the book was in part a response to Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception: a Psychology of the Creative Eye*<sup>5</sup>. Where Arnheim used Gestalt psychology, Gombrich adopted the more behavioural approaches of James J. Gibson, Konrad Lorenz and Nikko Tinbergen. In keeping with his background in the Vienna School of art history, the emphasis was upon broadening scientific resources available to the discipline. Both Gombrich's books juggled views of pictures as a system of signs and

<sup>2</sup> Fred S. Kleiner (editor), *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History* (13<sup>th</sup> Edition) , 2008, Wadsworth Publishing, Belmont, CA.

<sup>3</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion, a study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, 1960, Phaidon, Oxford/London. *The Image and The Eye, Further studies in the psychology of pictorial representation*, 1972, Phaidon, London and New York.

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion, a study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, 1960, Phaidon, Oxford/London, pp. 330-332.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A psychology of the Creative Eye*, 1954, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

compelling resemblance (basically illusion). Both books coincided with a revival in interest in semiotics, the broader study of iconography in social document. In semiotics, pictures are accorded an 'iconic' function, essentially conceding resemblance, if not illusion. Efforts there to supply a grammar or vocabulary to the structure of pictures consistently fail. Gombrich advanced on this traditional view by demonstrating that resemblance comprises of elements concerning stereotypes or abstraction, formula and function and the beholder's disposition. He concluded that resemblance is not easily broken or modified, privately or socially.

In some ways, *Art and Illusion* was a victim of its own success. For the problem of explaining stylistic transition has been largely avoided by following art historians, concentrating on the artist monograph, a school or trend, to strict matters of intention and document. The larger picture simply ceases to hold interest, and in the long term, this creates problems. Eventually, Twentieth Century Western Art struggles for a coherent perspective, erodes critical practice. There is, of course, sharp criticism of his views, and I do not believe illusion, however modified, is adequate as a theory of depiction. But unquestionably, some theory is needed, for both the art historian and critic. Even a critic devoted to abstraction, such as Clement Greenberg, resorts to a view of pictures as illusions, in order to explain how they are then abstracted, in a (equally flawed) notion 'flatness'. In his essay 'Collage', he quotes with approval from *Art and illusion*<sup>6</sup>. Greenberg's influence on American abstraction and subsequent art historical scholarship is considerable, so part of Gombrich's contribution feeds into an important strand to 20<sup>th</sup> century art history. Yet Greenberg's views were notoriously narrow, even within abstraction and by the late 70s, he lost interest in further developments. As art criticism and scholarship returns to this problem, it will need to revisit Gombrich's work on illusion as well, if only to reformulate it.

The influence of *Art and Illusion* is also measured in publications on what may be called the analytical wing to art theory. Gombrich's students and colleagues, such as Michael Baxandall<sup>7</sup> and Michael Podro<sup>8</sup> interpreted works through complex notions of intention and psychological projection, channelled through social history. Friend and philosopher, Richard Wollheim borrowed many of *Art and Illusion's* examples to advance a theory of depiction less committed to illusion<sup>9</sup>. Argument for and against an iconic model of pictures was reviewed in Bryson, Holly and Moxey with recurring discussion of *Art and Illusion*<sup>10</sup>. Further Gombrich-inspired research on pictorial development was provided by John Willats<sup>11</sup>. Detailed history of the use and meaning of colour in art by John Gage<sup>12</sup> – much admired by Gombrich and conducted with a similar interdisciplinary spirit -

<sup>6</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: critical essays*, 1961, Beacon Books, Boston, p.76.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 1971, Oxford University Press, Oxford. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, 1972, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York. *Patterns of Intention: On Historical Explanation of Pictures*, 1985, Oxford University Press, New Haven and London.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Podro, *Depiction*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998. *The Critical Historians of Art*. 1984, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 1987, Thames and Hudson, London and New York.

<sup>10</sup> *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, Edited by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, 1991, Polity Press, Oxford, UK.

<sup>11</sup> John Willats, *Art and Representation: New Principles in the Analysis of Pictures*, 1997, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.

<sup>12</sup> John Gage, *Colour and Meaning*, 1999, Thames and Hudson, London and New York. *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from antiquity to abstraction*, 1993, Thames and Hudson, London and New York. *Colour in Art*, 2006, Thames and Hudson, London and New York.

supplies telling insight into many styles throughout art history, including colour-field abstraction by artists such as Joseph Albers. Other studies, such as those by James Elkins, research differences and mixtures of perspectives and projections in Renaissance painting (*The Poetics of Perspective*), or links between ornament and notation across a range of cultures (*The Domain of Images*) and argue for sweeping revisions in critical priorities<sup>13</sup>. Finally, Julian Bell adopts a critical perspective explicitly derived from Gombrich to propose a theory and history of painting<sup>14</sup>.

Even when departing from standard research on styles (as individual, group or school, movement, period and place) this branch to art history nevertheless enhances interpretation through technical or formal features, tipping at times into psychological disposition. It stands in contrast to the tendency to greater cultural and social programme available to iconological method and anchors art history against the temptations of social science.

### THREE

Gombrich augmented his findings with more substantive research in his area of specialisation, The Renaissance. *Norm and Form* offered essays on attitudes and tastes in the Italian Renaissance and their influence on production and appreciation of works<sup>15</sup>. 'Norms' here contribute to issues of function and the 'beholder's share' introduced in *Art and illusion* and frame stylistic options for the artist as well as iconographic options for the critic or social historian. It marks an important shift in interpretation, in seeking to confine iconological programmes through more specific cultural practices. *The Heritage of Apelles* looked to the wider influence of 'classical' norms on Western art<sup>16</sup>. In particular, Gombrich was anxious to present norms or standards for the treatment of light or tone as objective and scientific, rather than merely cultural and aesthetic. Objections to his appeal to optics and geometry in *Art and illusion* still hold, however. Yet the study did at least project these back to Greek practices (the Apelles of the title) and draw interesting differences between Northern and Southern Renaissance treatments in the fifteenth century. A surprising result of his attention to lighting effects was a novel and convincing interpretation of Bosch's '*Garden of Earthly Delights*' as an illustration of antediluvian times, a decadence that summons the biblical flood. It does not explain all of Bosch's distinctive fantasies, but succeeds in narrowing 'the Garden's' time frame.

*New Light on Old Masters* reinterpreted historical texts concerning Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Guilio Romano and Michelangelo<sup>17</sup>. The studies of da Vinci and Raphael in particular, are based on issues of ideal and type raised in *Art and illusion* and drew upon relevant texts from the Italian Renaissance. Gombrich reinterpreted Leonardo's 'making and matching' in his studies of torrents and deluges as schemas rather than observations and traced Raphael's inheritance of feminine ideals from Perugino, although without quite explaining how Raphael is able to 'perfect' the female face, or to what exactly his starting point is then 'matched'. All three volumes

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<sup>13</sup> James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*, 1994, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London. *The Domain of Images*, 1999, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Bell, *What Is Painting? Representation and Modern Art*, 1999, Thames and Hudson, London and New York.

<sup>15</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Gombrich on the Renaissance: Volume 1: Norm and Form*, 1966, Phaidon, London and New York.

<sup>16</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Heritage of Apelles: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 1976, Phaidon, London and New York.

<sup>17</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance IV*, 1986, Phaidon, London and New York.

demonstrate how his theory of making and matching applies to individual, school, movement and period styles, how further studies might benefit from such a framework.

#### FOUR

*The Preference for the Primitive* revised Gombrich's views on the nature and extent of Modernism, still a vital debate in art history, entailing relation to Post-Modernism<sup>18</sup>. In *The Story of Art*, he had been troubled by the twentieth century's drift to Expressionism, Primitivism and Abstraction. His story of art, as steady adaptations of tradition seemed to unravel, where no 'making and matching' could be properly identified, no set task for the artist seemed to obtain beyond mere innovation. *The Preference for the Primitive*, his last book, returned to this problem, placing it in the context of the recurring tendency to prefer earlier standards in light of successive ones. Strictly, this is not a retreat or regression but rather the projection in retrospect of new values upon past works. It occurred even in Ancient Greece. Where newer works may allow more sophistication, versatility and perhaps ambiguity, older works in comparison, acquire a dignified reserve, a directness and conviction. In reality, there is no going back to recover these values, for earlier works simply lacked these expressive resources. They just said less, rather than saying it with less. The preference actually assigns a new, more sophisticated value to them. As Gombrich concluded, 'The more you prefer the primitive, the less you become primitive'<sup>19</sup>.

The insight is hardly original. However, he provides a more detailed history of formative critical texts than had previously been available, and traces the tendency from differences in Greek rhetorical standards and architectural orders to revisions within The Renaissance canon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to Romantic preferences for the medieval, their echoes in The Brotherhoods of The Nazarenes and Pre-Raphaelites, to following appreciation of Romanesque, Byzantine and oriental art, then to broadening tastes for African and other Non-Western cultures, and finally to acceptance of folk art, children's art and outsider art, in the interests of identifying basics or primitives to depiction. In short, Gombrich is able to present a succession of revisions firstly within the Western canon, secondly with inclusions to the canon, thirdly from outside the canon. He is thus able to accommodate Modernism within art history more effectively than in *The Story of Art*, to locate the period according to the second or third of these shifts. Just as importantly, *The Preference for the Primitive* addresses the key issue of expression in reviewing successive critical advocates, from Tolstoy and Gauguin, to Worringer and Dvorak to Fry and Read. There are basically two issues at stake. The first is the belief in an intuitive understanding of the (primitive) work; the second is of a basic or primitive psychology shared by artist and beholder. Gombrich criticises the first for its violation of context or culture, the second for its regression from mature or proper personality. While Gombrich's method makes important distinctions between primitives and help us define Modernism as a period or movement, his own tastes remain essentially opposed to Modernism.

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<sup>18</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 2002, Phaidon, London and New York.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.297.

## FIVE

Gombrich extended his psychological approach to pictorial representation with a matching study of ornament, *The Sense of Order*<sup>20</sup>. Where *Art and illusion* posited a psychological disposition to illusion in pictures, here, a disposition to ordering or pattern is similarly taken as universal. The aim was to erect a full spectrum of artefacts for a culture, under such a theory, from which to study stylistic links without resorting to gross determinations by nation, race or creed, without personifying a period or implying laws to history. Gombrich was intent upon rehabilitating Alois Riegl's history of ornamental styles, their permutations and influence, but considerably expanded the project, from decorative motifs to the full array of design and to tricky questions of function against which decoration is perceived. This interest in marrying design or craft to fine art is a perennial one, obviously of more interest to the cultural historian than the art historian, but currently fashionable in museums of art.

By setting in place a fixed psychology and terms for pattern, Gombrich constrains cultural determinations, resisting standard notions of decline or decadence to a period or to skills and technique, with a more localised impetus he terms a 'logic of Vanity Fair' (a concept introduced in an earlier essay and reprinted in his volume *Ideals and Idols*)<sup>21</sup>. Under this arrangement a given feature or features are steadily emphasised or exaggerated in rivalry for immediate or close cultural approval (perhaps some small version of market forces or peer review), until technique or inspiration desert the artist, rival options prove more appealing. Unfortunately, specific episodes illustrating this situation are lacking. The disposition to ornament also constrains representation or reference under this theory, so that meaning need not be pursued beyond pure pattern, fruitless iconological speculation resisted. At the same time, Gombrich conceded that much pattern retains figurative allusion, and that important lessons in stylisation or abstraction arise with stylistic shifts<sup>22</sup>. Gombrich's aversion to pictorial abstraction registers in most of his books. It remains the work of future art historians or critics to more adequately integrate degrees of stylisation with full abstraction or self-reference, to amend a theory of ornament accordingly.

## SIX

*Symbolic Images* strictly belongs with Gombrich's other three volumes dedicated to The Renaissance (Reason 3)<sup>23</sup>. However, the opening essay 'Aims and Limits of Iconology' offers incisive criticism of a crucial method of art historical interpretation, while the lengthy, closing essay, 'Icones Symbolicae', traces a complex history of competing theories of metaphor, a mode of reference at the heart of iconography and iconology. For this reason the book merits separate recognition. 'Aims and Limits of Iconology' firstly makes the helpful distinction between iconography, whereby a work illustrates a

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<sup>20</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A study in the psychology of decorative art*, 1979, Phaidon, London and New York.

<sup>21</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 1979, Phaidon, Oxford and New York, pp. 60–92.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 61-62.

<sup>23</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 1972, Phaidon, London and New York.

given text, and iconology, in which a body of works illustrates a *programme*, or combination of texts<sup>24</sup>.

According to Gombrich, iconology is a concept introduced by Aby Warburg<sup>25</sup>. A different account of the two methods is found in Erwin Panofsky<sup>26</sup>. Both methods are most at home in The Renaissance, but have increasingly been applied to other periods of art history, so that the issue is really central to the discipline. In Renaissance art, accurate identification of texts depends upon correct identification of genre, concerning mood and content and compliance with rules of decorum, usually concerning social function for site or setting of works, and governing suitable literary themes for each genre. Additionally, the artist's wishes or inclinations may skew or disguise evidence in the pictures for such texts. The scope for error is vast yet underestimated. Gombrich, a key associate of the Warburg Institute, renowned for its revival of these methods, sounded a cautionary note against reckless or dogmatic application of texts. Iconology 'must start with the study of institutions rather than the study of symbols'<sup>27</sup>.

Gombrich then chipped away at 'The Dictionary Fallacy' to interpretation of pictorial metaphors, with reliance upon symbols as tabulated in, for example, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, ignoring Ripa's advice that the fit between symbol and meaning is a matter of delicate concessions to both picture and text. Next Gombrich dismissed pluralistic meaning, or 'levels' of meaning, preferring a coherence through 'dominant' or primary meaning, with subordinate or secondary allusion. And finally, he rejected personal or psychological intention, as unshared or unavailable to the beholder. Without accusing Erwin Panofsky directly, it is clear Gombrich associated these errors with Panofsky and followers and that the need for elaborate and exacting interpretation is at best partial, (it excludes false readings) at worst, futile (since works of art, by their nature, invite open or continual readings). For Gombrich, art history is properly concerned with stylistic change, diachronic and synchronic, while for Panofsky, art history is really about stylistic stability, its broadest and deepest significance.

'Icones Symbolicae' supplied a history and taxonomy of pictorial metaphor, commencing with personification and the complexities of mythic or fictive reference<sup>28</sup>. The familiar distinction between allegory and symbol, the didactic versus poetic or mystical, oscillates throughout Western art history, steadily modifies and polarises. Very briefly, medieval times favoured an Aristotelian rigour of allegory. The Renaissance tended to symbol, introduced a Neo-Platonic esotericism to ideals, (love and beauty as prerequisites to higher knowledge) albeit fed through Christian doctrine inherited from St Augustine and The Gnostics. Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, symbol endorses ecstatic visions as direct engagement with the divine, a Baroque excess. 18<sup>th</sup> century Classicism reverted to allegory and measured idealisations, while later Romanticism embraced the exalted and intuitive

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp.1-22.

<sup>25</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A study in the psychology of decorative art*, 1979, Phaidon, London and New York, p.217. Also, concerning Warburg, Gombrich's long involvement with the Warburg Institute, strictly a centre for cultural studies rather than art history, may account for some reluctance to recognize his contribution to art history. I omit Gombrich's intellectual biography of Aby Warburg here, although a considerable achievement, since its focus also is properly with cultural studies.

<sup>26</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. 1955, Doubleday, New York, pp.51-54.

<sup>27</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 1972, Phaidon, London and New York, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp.123-198.

revelation of symbol, to which Sigmund Freud's theories owe much. Each swing inspired pictures, suggests texts, although theoretically, symbol accords the artist greater importance, the picture an untranslatable meaning.

The range and detail of Gombrich's treatment is formidable and as a framework for iconology would seem indispensable. It is puzzling that subsequent studies in iconology, such as W.T. J. Mitchell's *Iconology* and *Picture Theory*, ignore it<sup>29</sup>. It is disappointing that others have as yet not carried its rich themes across the twentieth century.

## SEVEN

*Topics of Our Time* was notable for a defence of humanism and realism against a rising academic orthodoxy committed to deconstruction and the spectre of radical relativism dispensing with truth and reason<sup>30</sup>. Today, this challenge has receded a little and Gombrich's position usefully restates some fundamentals for art history. The essay 'Relativism in the Humanities: The Debate about Human Nature' defends a wider heritage against cultural relativism that denies absolute or universal humanity in the interests of endless subdivision or pluralism<sup>31</sup>. But without a world, some special segment of it is all the harder to find, and a universe of worlds only urges other universes. The folly of art history divided by, for example, gender, sexuality, race or creed delivers only an exercise in sociology for art history and sociology to a slender cause. It adds little to art or its history beyond the conviction that each awaits further qualification. It confuses art history with social science.

The essay, 'Relativism in the History of Ideas' addressed the relativism that subordinates science to ideology and denies objectivity in the interests of politics<sup>32</sup>. But this is to inflate ideology beyond reason; for ideology itself, then becomes ideologically determined and succumbs to fatal contradiction. This issue has been dealt with at length by others (for example, James F. Harris<sup>33</sup>) but criticism of ideology also serves to return Gombrich to discussion of the proper scope of art historical enquiry. In 'Approaches to the History of Art: Three Points for Discussion' he again recommends research that focuses upon the art work, rather than allow it to serve as a springboard to loftier, mostly emptier speculation<sup>34</sup>. This attention to technical or formal aspects of the work is of a piece with his philosophical realism, his suspicion of history's grand designs and determinism. Finally, in 'Relativism in the Appreciation of Art' he considers the relativity of interpretation; how excessive subjectivity is to be avoided<sup>35</sup>. Subjectivity is certainly needed for full engagement with a work, but is rightly constrained by objective identification of the work, its content and qualities. This is the job of the art historian: to prepare for the beholder correct information about a work, upon which the beholder may bring their personality to bear in interpretation and find deep reward.

<sup>29</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, 1986, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London. *Picture Theory*, 1994, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

<sup>30</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Topics of Our Time: twentieth-century issues in learning and in art*, 1991, Phaidon, London and New York.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pp.36-46.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* pp.47-55.

<sup>33</sup> James F. Harris, *Against Relativism: A philosophical defense of method*, Open Court, La Salle, Illinois, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Topics of Our Time: twentieth-century issues in learning and in art*, 1991, Phaidon London and New York, pp.62-73.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* pp.56-61.

## EIGHT

The emphasis placed upon scientific rigour under Gombrich's approach, inevitably raised the question of the status of art history within the humanities. Science is surely best left to the sciences, the humanities do other things. This issue was addressed in the essay 'Art History and the Social Sciences' in his book *Ideals and Idols*<sup>36</sup>. Given the recent growth and overlapping interests of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, it remains a lively issue. Essentially, the humanities preserve core cultural values - not strictly ethics, but related customs for a collection of vital artefacts. The social scientist is concerned with establishing the facts of a practice, while the humanities scholar is concerned with maintaining the practice. Gombrich's method may resort to science to understand the working of pictures or patterns, for example, but the standards for these are to be found in the canon of works around which art history is constructed. This much is unexceptional. However, Gombrich also maintains that one cannot teach these values so much as practice them. It is only by using the canon as a measure of other works that one can truly appreciate what is being measured. There is no recourse to 'first principles' for such judgements. The canon is simply one's platform from which to engage in civilisation at its fullest.

This is a striking rationale. The emphasis upon practice is consistent with his view of art as an activity rather than a set of rules. But the canon, like art history, expands over time and Gombrich's argument for absolute values is compromised by the steady inclusion of others, the revision and reassignment of values as a consequence. Michelangelo, for instance, remains in the canon, but the course of painting since, owes much less to his influence and steadily revises his contribution. This matter also arises in *The Preference for The Primitive* (Reason 4) and the issue of mastery or excellence, as noted in Reason 2, is one that still needs work. Finally, this respect for the canon surely explains Gombrich's conservative tastes. While Gombrich made no rediscoveries or argued for revision or addition to the canon, his contribution lies in the opposite direction, with the equally important work of maintaining established figures.

## NINE

The need for knowledge over many diverse areas potentially exposed Gombrich's approach to the charge of superficiality, of amounting to a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. In the essay 'The Tradition of General Knowledge' in *Ideals and Idols* he considered the role of the freshman survey or foundation course that broadly maps out a discipline, perhaps a department, school and faculty, set against the traditional requirement for specialisation and the tendency to sterile or trivial outcomes in both cases<sup>37</sup>. He argued that general knowledge, or knowledge of topics surrounding an area of specialisation, affords valuable perspectives and insights that an immersion in a discipline or topic might miss, that regulating more general inquiry stifled curiosity and originality, crucial ingredients for advancing knowledge. There is little time or space for this free-ranging reconnaissance within a

<sup>36</sup> Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 1979, Phaidon, London and New York, pp.131-166.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* pp.9-23.

university syllabus, little encouragement within university administration. If anything, the problem has only increased since Gombrich first voiced his concerns in 1961.

His remedy, bizarrely, looked to medieval monastic practices and the development of the Creed and Catechism as simple, memorable maps for the complex terrain of Christian faith. He proposed, not entirely seriously, a secular creed that encapsulates historic, geographic, religious, philosophical and artistic developments for Western Civilisation. In a later essay from the same volume, 'A Plea for Pluralism'<sup>38</sup> he took up a similar theme, suggested by Thomas Kuhn's distinction between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' science, and questioned the equivalent entrenchment of art history practices, such as connoisseurship and attribution for marketing reasons as well as the academic trend to routine degrees and plodding research. As in science, there is too much pressure for art history to remain 'normal' and to resist 'revolutionary' inquiries. Surprisingly, Gombrich advocated pluralism to approaches or paradigms, a much looser map of art history within which a student navigates. This is somewhat at odds with his rejection of pluralistic interpretation (see Reason 6) but indicates the priority he accords experiment, an appreciation of the stakes to truly open inquiry.

## TEN

Historiography is a feature of many of Gombrich's most important publications. In *Art and Illusion*<sup>39</sup> a detailed review of relevant publications serves to introduce the problem of pictorial style to art history and announces the pedigree and scope of the problem as well as the author's scholarship or credentials. Similarly, in *The Sense of Order* a survey of treatment of decoration as a history of styles and motifs furnishes a context for the kinds of objects studied and qualities for which they are studied<sup>40</sup>. An equivalent framing accompanies *The Preference for the Primitive* while 'Icones Symbolicae' provides something of a tour de force of historiography for pictorial metaphor<sup>41</sup>. Historiography focuses an issue with the full resources of historical scholarship.

However, historiography relies upon working with a tradition and recognising themes and problems for which one can still find work. Increasingly, art history would seem to look to smaller, more comfortable themes and to steer away from 'grand narratives' only to forfeit narrative entirely, to find modesty in just conscience or politics, by monograph and panegyric. Gombrich, for the moment, appears to have been the last of the great generalists, intent upon the architecture rather than furnishings of the discipline, with placing method upon firm and fair foundation that others now simply take for granted. His attention to historiography exemplifies the importance of tradition (a point noted under Reason 7) the potential it delivers. But while Gombrich respected historiography, following historiography has not always respected Gombrich. *Art History: a critical introduction to its methods* by Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, for example, can no more than acknowledge his omission, prefers to inflate Panofsky's contribution before retreating to the determinism of Freud or

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pp.184-188.

<sup>39</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion*, 1960, Phaidon, Oxford and London, pp.4-25.

<sup>40</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A study in the psychology of decorative art*, 1979, Phaidon, London and New York, pp.180-225.

<sup>41</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 1972, Phaidon, London and New York, pp.123-192.

Marx, and muddled compromises within, to the semiotics that still labours under an 'iconic' function for pictures, ignores the folly of cultural relativism and can admit Lacan and Foucault while denying deconstruction<sup>42</sup>. As historiography for art historical method, it is little short of a disgrace. As a measure of Gombrich's contribution, it only serves to demonstrate how much he still has to offer.

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klouk, *Art History: a critical introduction to its methods*, 2006, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, p.3.