

Michael Podro in Conversation with Ernst Gombrich, Apollo, 130, 373-8 [Trapp no. 1989Y.1]

MP If we had been talking thirty years ago, one of the things which might well have been a matter of concern would have been the isolation of the study of the visual arts from other areas of the humanities, and, indeed, other kinds of intellectual inquiry. Some people would now say that there is no longer an equivalent isolation. How do you view the change and how do you view more recent ways in which the visual arts, and in particular painting, have been drafted into other kinds of discussion?

EG You are quite right that forty years ago there was a situation in which the study of art and the writing about art in this country isolated the arts as a branch of aesthetics—if you think of Roger Fry or Clive Bell or even Herbert Read—from other studies. But I needn't tell you that this was precisely the mission as it was seen at the Warburg Institute: to get this study out of isolation, and that was not fortuitous, because Warburg, with all who came from central Europe and from the Continent, was brought up in the tradition which you know very well, a tradition in which art was studied in the context of what was called cultural history, *Kulturgeschichte*. Certainly this was not only true in the German tradition but also in the France of Emile Male who studied the link with religion and religious history. At the same time this was something novel in England; perhaps not thirty years ago but forty years ago it would have been an issue, which it no longer is.

MP So this is a gratifying change.

EG I would go the other way now and say that I would like to have more isolation of art history, by which I mean a real study of what artists do and did, rather than going off on a tangent to social history or women's studies or other things—I want to know exactly what Ter Borch did when he painted silk. In that respect we have too little isolation and too little concentration on the actual object which the art historian is supposed to comment on.

MP The trouble, it seems to me, is that there is a genre of recent writing in which people have felt free to address art history as though it were a homogeneous and relatively simple literature. They have grandly taken a path-breaking stance towards it, with two rather major disadvantages: first, of knowing little of that not so simple literature, and second, of having little intimate involvement with the objects themselves—without the particular kinds of perceptiveness which the art of painting and sculpture require.

EG I quite agree, but let me interrupt you. I think that before we go on we must agree that the very term 'Art' is elusive if one talks about history. What an Egyptian stonemason did is very different in its function, in the way he proceeded and the way he learnt, from what a twentieth-century artist does. The two have very little in common except that they are linked by tradition. This miraculously transforms the position of the maker of such images and therefore it is precisely when one engages more with the object that one is also much more aware of the difference between what is going on in a workshop and in a studio. I feel that this general demand for a new Art History which should get away from the object and use the objects we find as a peg on which to hang historical issues confuses the issue of what art history is supposed to be. It confuses it in a very simple way because it is archaeology that has always treated objects like that; if you find a figurine or a pot in an excavation you try to squeeze it as far as you can to find out about the religion or the migrations of the tribe, or about the technology of the past. All these things have been part of archaeology since the eighteenth century because archaeology has been cultivated in this country since the foundation of the Society of Antiquaries or even before. Of course you could treat the Bruges *Madonna* by Michelangelo as if it were found by future archaeologists in 3,000 years, and ask what they could infer from it, but that isn't art history,

because, more or less by definition, we are interested in the *Madonna* by Michelangelo because it is art and not one of other artefacts standing on the altar.

MP It is, or was until recently, one of the fashionable things to say that we shouldn't 'privilege' some objects over others in the way that we are 'privileging' the Bruges *Madonna* over some painted pottery that we might also find in Bruges. The serious question is, why 'privilege' the Bruges *Madonna*?

EG Quite. The question, obviously, is one of values. I believe, and I have said so, that if the humanities were to give up an interest in values they would be committing suicide. We must be selective, otherwise we can't write the history of art, or really focus our interest on any thing that is relevant. You could say that the *Madonna* in Bruges has more influence than other works, but that is not necessarily true. What is true is that Michelangelo was a great artist and that we are interested in what he did. This is one of the most moving works I know and I don't think we can get away from the fact that we are moved, otherwise we are dehumanizing the humanities. We are moved because we are human.

MP Can I change the line of our conversation for a moment. *The Story of Art* has now been the introduction to the visual arts for at least the last two generations of under twenties, and if I were to hazard a guess as to why it has lasted so well, it would be because you weren't concerned with issues which were particularly current or any academic disputes which were raging at the time of writing. Now, could I extrapolate from this. Do you think it would be possible for us to engage in the study of art with much less concern for academic dispute than is now usual, and, indeed, thought obligatory?

EG It is quite true that when I wrote *The Story of Art* I did so from a distance. I used my memory and my interest as filter, and I filtered out what I thought wouldn't interest a general reader who wanted a first introduction—a young person—and in that respect I appear to have succeeded. Obviously, if you read it carefully you will find the residues of the Vienna School of Art History in which I was trained, and the issues concerning the 'conceptual image', the distinction between knowing and seeing, were traditional in the discussion of the development of style; they are somehow implied in the treatment of the history of art. But I think your second question about *The Story of Art* links very well with the previous one because what is, of course, decisive in such a book is the need to be selective. My selection, as I have just said, was largely what I remembered. I dictated *The Story of Art* and I looked for illustrations which I could use from my own books, particularly the *Propylaen Kunstgeschichte* which we were lucky enough to own.

What I think makes for the relative durability of *The Story of Art* is an attempt to show the cohesion of tradition. I have been accused recently by a critic in America that I ignored the messiness of history, but I think this criticism misses the point. Of course history is messy in the sense that it mustn't be seen as predetermined—that it had to happen like this—but in retrospect, it *did* happen like this and therefore looking back from our vantage point we must see a cohesion—one thing came from another. It is like standing in the middle of a wood: one sees various lines coming together, and in that respect the cohesion which one creates by looking back is also a marvellous mnemonic device: because once one sees that things cohere one can also remember them better. Recently—yesterday in fact—I looked at Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of Christian Art*. It is a curious book, a perverse book of the middle of the nineteenth century—1847, I think, is the date—and he has long tabulation in front of the various schools of artists. You will see that once in a while Lindsay talks of a school as 'preparation for'; so the Umbrian School is preparation for Raphael. This, of course, is ridiculous in a way, but it was a preparation for Raphael. Raphael might never have come and it might have been the preparation for Pinturicchio, but that is a different matter, isn't it. It is quite an interesting problem that the historian derives his criteria of selection from what came

afterwards. If nothing had come out of the Umbrian School he might still be interested but he wouldn't put it into his general survey.

MP Really, there is a wider issue: we look around not only for anticipations, for preparations. Perhaps the cogency of the notions of art lies less in a strictly developmental relation than in the capacity of one very complex work to illuminate another very complex work. Because we have reached a high level of involvement with one work we are given the possibility of exploring another. May it not be that *The Story of Art* works as it does less because of the development of art and more because one work, or the work of one master, throws light on the work of other artists, other periods?

EG Yes. I hope so. The point is surely that every style creates its set of expectations from the public, and therefore, one has a certain empathy with the surprises and innovations it created. I tried to do precisely this. I always asked the reader to refer back and to think what it would be like for someone who had never seen a painting by Leonardo, but only knew earlier paintings. This is really historical empathy; it is no "more nor less.

MP It might be something more, mightn't it, because what you describe as a framework of expectations that is built up immediately makes it sound like the way in which we listen to music. You once said that those who founded the tradition of western music made all the various factors, pitch, tempo, volume, orchestral range, extension of the melodic line, and so on, into variables which could then be utilized as parts of the medium, to vary in relation with one another. Now, talking about the tradition of painting, would you see painting as developing its own musicality in a comparable way?

EG Yes, there is a comparison; one could even say that what we impose on the past is a kind of symphonic structure. In a classical symphony we have a theme or motif, and we have the development, which brings in its complications with its variations and changes of key. For these things you can find analogies, metaphors for the way one can enjoy the history of art as a kind of major symphony. There is very little doubt in my mind that this is a helpful metaphor. It cannot be much more because the relation between convention and discovery in music is of a different kind from that in art—architecture is closer, or ornament, than representational art. Last week, I had a discussion with a modern composer, about precisely how far the western tonal system is just one of many possible systems or what I would call a discovery rather than an invention. I think that it is a discovery. There are genuine discoveries in the arts which, in a sense, have a common frontier—I wouldn't say more—with science; perspective is a discovery of optics and possibly there are acoustic discoveries inherent in the development of the tonal system—the octave and other things which are quite interesting to discuss. Therefore, I quite agree with you that the analogies are very fruitful provided one does not overstress them, because there *are* enormous differences. If somebody paints a few peaches on a table, it is different from writing a minuet, as everybody realizes.

MP Might we not also be able to see a painting, say, a still-life of peaches or the implements of smoking by Chardin, as a great symphonic procedure? Is there not the possibility of regarding a single painting as having an internal structure of comparable richness to a Mozart quartet, seen in its tradition?

EG Well, there may be analogies but Lessing was certainly no fool when he pointed out the difference: that is to say, how we start with the Chardin and how we go on is much more arbitrary than when we listen to a minuet because we cannot help starting at the beginning and the composer guides us along the route.

Even so, I agree with you that there are analogies in the calibration of the touch, let us say, the finesse of the touch of Chardin and the finesse of a great virtuoso, who plays with sound qualities.

MP Could we not try to be rigorous in probing whether there aren't comparable structures to harmonic structures, when you come to look at the way the subject in a painting—once you recognize it—is amplified by the way the painter handles it.

EG There are always analogies: I think you could also speak of the relations between the metre and the content in a poem, which creates its own tensions and its own resolution. But, as I said, I would rather that we concentrate on exactly what is going on in the painting than going too far off onto other things. I think architecture is certainly a nearer analogy—let us say, gothic tracery and how it develops the same motif; the inventiveness of such things is sometimes absolutely staggering. The development of certain basic forms are, I think, closer to music than is a still-life of Chardin.

MP To go back to a point I was making earlier: what I was thinking about was the huge difficulty of being adequately responsive to and articulate about the richness of paintings. There is a need, particularly perhaps in the context of the recent wave of very literary writing about painting, to develop our capacity for articulate attention.

EG Yes, that is very important. The problem is that there is a difference between attention and writing, because writing is also in time and you have to start somewhere and go on, and the richness, of which you rightly speak, is a togetherness of very many elements. You cannot but select something from which to start, whether it is that bugbear of mine, the 'diagonal' or whatever else: you know the story of Goldschmidt great German art historian, who took over from Wölfflin in Munich, who started off the first day of term with a slide on the screen of a Dutch landscape? He asked, 'What do you see?' The student replied, 'I see a horizontal and a strong vertical', and Goldschmidt said, 'Actually, I see a little more than that. And it is very important that we do see more than that.'