

E. H. Gombrich, (with David Carrier) "THE BIG PICTURE: David Carrier talks with Ernst Gombrich, Art Forum, Vol. 34 (6), 1996, pp.66-9, 106, 109.

I met Ernst Gombrich in London in 1973, after completing a doctoral thesis dealing, in part, with his work. What most impressed me was the range of his interests. Apart from his two histories, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960) and its too rarely read complementary account, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (1979), he has written on psychoanalytic approaches to art, has developed a number of important iconographic studies, and has dealt with such varied topics as cartoons, Hegel's aesthetics and Nazi radio broadcasts. What ultimately ties him to the speculative traditions of German-language art history is the construction of grand historical narratives of representation and decoration. Gombrich remains highly relevant to younger art historians. There is little bolder in psychoanalytically informed criticism than his beautiful essay about the roots of representation, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse." And though the Eurocentric canon has been central to his work, he has also dealt with Islamic decoration (in *The Sense of Order*) and has frequently written about such popular art forms as advertising images and photographs. However, Gombrich's application of Freud's ideas differs considerably from more recent psychoanalytically informed work in art history, and his insistence on the canon and long-standing anti-Marxism mark him as a member of an earlier generation of art historians. What may most separate him from today's scholars of art, however apart from his resolute refusal to specialise, is his lifelong concern with scientific psychologies of perception.

When I found out Gombrich was coming to New York to sign the 16th edition of *The Story of Art*, how could I resist the chance to talk again with him? His 1993 volume of conversations with Didier Eribon, *Looking for Answers: Conversations on Art and Science*, contained fascinating recollections of Gombrich's childhood and considerable information about his life as a scholar. It tells how his university studies inspired him to critically read the great Viennese scholar of decoration, Alois Riegl, and explains how his hostility to Hegelian and Marxist thought is grounded in his experience of Austrian politics in the 20's and 30's. It was during this time that he met Ernst Kris, the art historian-turned-psychoanalyst, with whom he collaborated. After the frail Austrian democracy disintegrated, Gombrich took refuge in England, a country whose intellectual traditions differed so radically from his own. Since much of this personal history is territory covered in Eribon's book, I focus on other questions - especially those concerning Gombrich's relationship with contemporary art.

- DC

DAVID CARRIER: I should just say that this is a great high point of the year, because I am about to start my undergraduate survey course "Philosophy and Art," a study of the methodologies of art history, by teaching *The Story of Art*.

ERNST GOMBRICH: You are? I always worry a little as to what the students will make of it. You know more about that than I do.

DC: For me, the sentence that *The Story of Art* - "There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists" - is a wonderful puzzle. Is there a particular philosophical force to that nominalism?

EG: Yes, there is. I go back deliberately to the old meaning of the term "art," when art was identified with skill or mastery - the art of war, the art of love, or whatever else. Art is something with a skill. There's no disembodied skill as such; skill is always applied to a particular task. I don't know if you know the wonderful paper by M.H. Abrams, "Art-as-Such," in his volume *Doing Things with Texts*, in which he discusses the coming of the new conception of art in the 18th century. As he rightly says, people in the 17th century admired paintings and sculptures, but no one talked about art as such. That's the philosophical background of the quote. In a sense, it is quite relevant in all those

discussions about Leonardo, art and science. For Leonardo, *arte* was a skill, a know-how applied both to his scientific experiments and to painting.

DC: THE MOST FREQUENTLY REFERRED TO ESSAY IN AMERICAN ART CRITICISM IS PROBABLY BENJAMIN'S "THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION." I DON'T THINK YOU'VE EVER MENTIONED IT.

EG: NO, BECAUSE I THINK IT'S ABSOLUTELY WRONG FROM BEGINNING TO END.

DC: In a recent interview with Antony Gormley you talked about the link between the values of art and of civilization.¹ How does this relation figure in your admiration of other 20th century artists you have commented on, like Oskar Kokoschka, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Giorgio Morandi?

EG: I don't know how far one can go. I just wanted to say that in art in our civilization, in the new sense of which we have just been talking - that is, art as something next to religion or science - there is an order of values. I have actually written about that, but it has not been fully published. In 1979 I had a discussion with Jim Ackerman about this in *Critical Inquiry*, where he posited a relativistic point of view and used *The School of Athens* as an example. Identifying the picture as a presentation of the intellectual ideals of rationality, order, perspective in a judgmental sense, and traditions fostered in the universities of the West, he doubted that this Raphael "would or should mean much to anyone" apart from "a small minority of privileged persons" in one part of this world. He then went on to suggest that perhaps such a much admired work could cease to be thought of as "major." My response was that respect for great teachers, for the guru, is part of our value systems: we value elegance and tenderness; love and other such emotions are ingredients in our value system, and I think this is very much linked in our appreciation of the great masters. The profundities of a Rembrandt, all these are values of our civilisation.

DC: In your *Tributes: Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition*, you have written about Goethe: "We know today through hindsight that this earnest faith of culture . . . was insufficient to prevent the collapse of civilised values and the perpetration, or at least condoning, of unspeakable crimes against humanity." Since the societies in which canonical art was created were not model communities, at least by modern standards, what reason would you have to think that the art made upholds moral values?

EG: The art embodies moral values. I didn't say that it models them. Mr Göring may have a great appreciator of the art he collected, but he was certainly a scoundrel. And I think that there were plenty of scoundrels in the past who were patrons of art. So I don't think there's a contradiction involved. Benvenuto Cellini was also rather a scoundrel, wasn't he, but he embodied certain ideas of elegance and beauty in his work. There are plenty of divisions in all of us.

A great deal has been written about the problems of German civilisation and the Holocaust. Adorno and others have stressed that, after Auschwitz, there can be no poetry. I think that's all nonsense. There have been horrible mass crimes even in the past, though we know, perhaps luckily, less about them. I don't believe old Chinese emperors who may have written fine poetry were very tender-minded when it came to punishing their enemies.

DC: In *Topics of Our Time* you wrote that Cartier-Bresson's images "will make us look at people and situations anywhere with a heightened sense of sympathy and compassion." Is this a fair sense of what you think any significant art must do?

EG: I wouldn't say that it's necessary of all art. But Cartier-Bresson, whom incidentally I had the pleasure of meeting, was a man of simplicity and honesty. I think he really managed to put his feeling of contact and sympathy in his photographs.

DC: It would be hard to generalise the position, to argue that all significant artworks are like Cartier-Bresson's in this way?

EG: Rembrandt may be another case to whom this would apply.

DC: You've suggested that Akira Kurosawa's masterpieces may belong in *The Story of Art*. Does film remain important to you?

EG: Now I am old and I stay at home, but in the past I admired some of the Japanese films in particular. After all, the problem of the cinema is very simple: it moves. You can't put moving images in a book like *The Story of Art*.

DC: With its interest in non-European art and in decoration, and its discussion of the perception of visual repetition, in some ways it seems to me that *The Sense of Order* is your book most relevant to the works of many contemporary artists, particularly painters. You even include a Warhol! Have artists taken an interest in it?

EG: Yes, I had a discussion with Bridget Riley about it last July in the *Burlington Magazine*. I've gotten letters from artists who said it was an important book for them. But I had the impression from these letters that they hadn't read it all. It's a very fat book and artists don't like to read too much, so maybe they just turned the pages.

DC: It may be that the context of the debates with Alois Riegl is too distant.

EG: It's not an easy book to read, I know. They just dip into it.

DC: Reading *Art and Illusion* and then *The Sense of Order* one might easily conclude that, if the major problems with representation and decoration have been solved - or at least the major approaches to them outlined - the present may be a relatively minor period in the arts. I think that long ago in London you told me that the sort of person who worked on perspective in the 15th century would today work in molecular biology.

EG: I happened to have met Francis Crick, and I admired the quality of mind that could do the things he did. I do think that the intellectual level of discourse of, say, a number of great scientists and Nobel Prize winners is much higher than the level of discourse in most art criticism.

DC: As a teacher in a technical university, I am very aware that most of my students are more likely to devote themselves to their classes in computer science than to those in art history. Are the new technologies coming out of the computer sciences relevant to visual art?

EG: I was persuaded to join a new journal on virtual reality. I know very little about it - that's an overstatement, I know nothing about it. But I was talking with the people at the journal, and of course, while I don't deal with this matter in *The Story of Art*, it's interesting how the entertainment industry has taken over the creation of illusion from the world of art. That started as far back as the 18th century, with the side-show, the panorama and the diorama, all these things. And then the moving image - the talkies - appears. All that is outside the field of what we call art.

DC: In a way it's funny that you have been given such a hard time by so many people for using the word "illusion" in the title *Art and Illusion*. Psychologists, philosophers and some art historians criticised the book by arguing that looking at representation rarely involves deception - for example, when viewing Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, we know we're seeing a pigmented surface. But, given the context of virtual reality, how can we describe the genuinely deceptive visual experiences of "real illusions"?

EG: Regardless of what critics may say, there is an illusion in virtual reality, even though it's not yet perfected. For example, the simulators used to train pilots are wonderful; you have the feeling that you can guide the plane. For specialised purposes simulators seem to have been perfected, but as general instruments they still have some way to go.

DC: If your new interest in technology seems forward looking, your tastes remain traditional. You're known as a defender of the canon, but you manage to allow, for example in your supportive review of Francis Haskell's *Rediscoveries in Art*, a considerable sociological dimension to changes in taste. If such canonical figures as Caravaggio, Piero and Vermeer had to be rediscovered, can you still uphold a standard of objectivity?

EG: Yes, because I don't remember anybody saying that Vermeer was a bad artist. They just didn't talk about him. And that's a very different thing. He didn't paint many paintings and he was more or less obscure. Frans Hals was also completely forgotten; he wasn't so much in the public consciousness.

DC: Caravaggio was hated.

EG: Caravaggio was, in a famous phrase, considered "the anti-Christ" of art, but even that means he was a considerable figure.

DC: Jacob Burckhardt didn't like him.

EG: Burckhardt had reservations about Rembrandt, but he didn't say that Rembrandt couldn't paint.

DC: The Caravaggios in Rome never had proper lighting. Those paintings must have been very hard to see before the modern lights were installed.

EG: In San Luigi dei Francesi, it was certainly hard. Now perhaps we see too much, with the pictures falsified through the strong light; it's a problem, of course. But I think nobody denies that Caravaggio was quite a figure. And his influence was staggering, in Spain, in Holland, everywhere.

DC: What about Piero's influence? *In Reflections on the History of Art*, you mention a peculiar Nicholas Tournier painting at the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse, done in the 17th century when Piero supposedly was unknown, that is in fact influenced by the Battle of Constantine at Arezzo.

EG: It has also to do with tourism, with whether Arezzo was on the traveller's track. If you're talking about the more isolated Pieros, the situation has changed drastically. When I was younger, I still had to walk to Monterchi to see the Madonna del Parto; now there's a special building for it.

DC: Clement Greenberg explained his disagreements with other over the canon in a Kantian way, arguing that in the long run good taste was "one".

EG: I don't know whether it's good or bad taste that prevails. I've read little Greenberg.

DC: How would you deal with such disagreements as, for example, your preference for Pierre Soulages over Franz Kline, which is surprising to most American art critics?

EG: I know much less about American art than Americans do. I'm a little out of my depth here. But I would like to add that I'm now writing a book - one should never say one has finished it - about the history of what I call the preference for "primitive," and the rediscovery of the "primitives" - as various styles were called in the course of history. Fra Angelico was even called "primitive." In the MOMA exhibition Rubin, as you know, defended the term; he said he didn't know a better one. I am fully aware of the fact that the word is no longer fashionable, but it's not easy to find a substitute when you're describing, say, what George Boas and Lovejoy called "primitivism" in talking about classical antiquity.

DC: In *The Story of Art* you mention the psychological theories of Peter Fuller, Richard Wollheim and Adrian Stokes - his work, you say "remains of great interest." Since your correspondence with Stokes was published in 1993 in *Art History*, can you say more about your view of his work?

EG: I liked and respected him. He was an out - and - out Kleinian, as you know, and my background in psychoanalysis was always anti-Kleinian.

DC: In the presentation of the correspondence there is the real suggestion that your writing after a certain point was an implicit response to Stokes' concerns: not only because you read Freud differently, but also because he thought of his highly personal style of interpretation as a real alternative to yours. And that surprised me.

EG: It's totally untrue.

DC: You know, I've always thought of him as a great "amateur" (in the tradition of Pater), a deliberately marginal figure.

EG: Absolutely.

DC: I recently reviewed the two books on shadows, Michael Baxandall's and yours. He seems to me the one well-known art historian who has taken up your general approach, that is, looking at scientific psychologies.

EG: He was my student.

DC: There are powerful psychologies of perception available to art historians, but it's not a very fashionable approach.

EG: Maybe one of the reasons for this comparative lack of interest is the fact that, as you know,

much of the activity of art historians has been wedded to whatever is fashionable in the art market at a given time. But don't forget that Bernard Berenson was immensely interested in the psychology of perception.

DC: What so you think about the "market" in present day abstraction? In *Looking for Answers*, you said: "Abstract art has always been anxious to distance itself from decoration." Do you think that there's any other possible basis for abstraction?

EG: Decoration, as we know, depends in a certain sense on a kind of unfocused vision, which is very different from the focused vision of, say, a Mondrian.

DC: What do you think about the interest of contemporary artists in the larger realm of cultural studies?

I DO THINK I HAVE BEEN ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO TRIED TO GET AWAY FROM A PURELY AESTHETIC OR FORMALISTIC APPRECIATION OF THE IMAGE, AND TO TREAT WHAT I CALLED THE LINGUISTICS OF THE VISUAL IMAGE, THE POETICS OF THE VISUAL IMAGES

EG: Well, we can't help being influenced by the environment, what people refer to as "visual culture." I've been, how should I say it, interested in movements in decorative art and in commercial art, which sometimes are more witty and inventive than painting, and an admirer of posters. In the review of Panofsky's *Three Essays on Style* I'm writing, I've found to my pleasure that, in his excellent essay on the cinema, he also talks about the importance of commercial art.

DC: I may turn out that you have more connections to the current world of American art criticism than you did 20 years ago.

EG: That's very flattering, but I don't think it's true. I don't read it. I think I've made pretty clear what I think of the situation of art. I never was hiding my view that the situation is not a very healthy one, partly because of the media and how they deal with art. There is a constant temptation for artists

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