

Gombrich's Legacy. Art History as Embodiment of Values

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“Shall we never, never get rid of this Past? It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried... I ought to have said, too, that we live in dead men's houses; as, for instance, in this of the Seven Gables!” “And why not,” said Phoebe, “so long as we can be comfortable in them?”

You have probably recognized Nathaniel Hawthorne's words in this witty reply of his to the core problem of the Western culture: tradition and the relation past-future. Since we cannot avoid when thinking of the future – as Margherita Sprio hinted at with her question “Does art history have a future?” – to feel a sense of uncertainty and bewilderment, for want of common beliefs which may give the unwarranted and perhaps complacent impression that no area can be now forbidden ground for exploration, I shall start my paper with a simple statement: art history had and has to do with meanings and therefore with explanations, reconstructions of creative processes and - since we cannot divorce history from criticism - also attributions of value.

To support my conviction I address two major topics of Gombrich's theory: the classical norm with the principle of sacrifice and the artist's-art historian's moral quest through art, which, in my opinion, constitute his legacy and prompts us to consider art history as an embodiment of values.

Before starting I would like to make as plain as possible that it is also my ambition to open again the discussion on Gombrich's general theory which is thought of late as good as a buried corpse. Part because of sometimes uncommitted sometimes provincial and rarely fruitful criticism of his tenets, part of Gombrich's own failure to get over some points that in the long run came to stiffen into a recurrent polemic and, also, from his unwillingness to draw the implications from others probably too dimly lighted.

To Gombrich, as to T.S. Eliot, the essential function of art history-art criticism is to promote the understanding and enjoyment of art. He stressed the point that he did not think of enjoyment and understanding as distinct activities – one emotional, the other intellectual. By understanding he did not mean explanation – though explanation of what can be explained may be a necessary preliminary to understanding. It is certain, according to him, that we do not fully enjoy a picture unless we understand it; on the other hand, it is equally true the other way round. And that means, he suggested, understanding and enjoying it in the right way (by means of a moral quest) and in the right degree (by means of a canon). But he was enough aware of the demand that had been raised during the last few decades about the meaning of the work of art: not only the search for explanation but even the striving for understanding had to be thrown on to the scrap heap. The idea of man was to be altogether removed from the historians' field of vision in order to confront only the text-picture; and whatever sense the historian might make of it, it was and remained his own sense and not the one intended by the artist. Gombrich was sure that cultural relativism had led to the jettisoning of the most precious heritage of all scholarly work, the claim of being engaged in the quest for truth.

He had been struck by the idea that the testimonies of the past were no longer to be regarded as testimonies and our commerce with them was no more than a clever game that did not serve knowledge but was simply the display of intellectual acrobatics. Nevertheless he did not confuse knowledge, that is factual information, about an artist's period – the condition of the society in which

he lived, the ideas current in his time implicit in his works, and the state of the art – with understanding. Such knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for understanding the work of art – the appreciation of the painting brings us just on the threshold: we still have to find our way in. But how? The answer is by a new mapping of reality through visual discoveries.

For the purpose of acquiring such knowledge he suggested that it is not primarily that we should be able to project ourselves into a remote period, to think and feel, when looking at the picture, as a contemporary of the artist might have thought and felt, though such experience has undoubtedly its own value. What matters most, let us say, in looking at a painting of Raphael, it is not that I should imagine myself to be in the Stanze Vaticane in a sunny day of 1512, but the experience which is the same for all human beings of different centuries capable of enjoying painting. This is possible because Gombrich accepted the hypothesis that there are indeed constants in the psyche of man with which the historian can reckon.

Before going on, I would like to stress that Gombrich had always in mind the concept of balance, or equilibrium, when speaking of understanding and enjoyment. For if we place all emphasis upon understanding, in art history, we are in danger of slipping from understanding into mere explanation. We are in danger even of pursuing art history as if it was a science, although Gombrich, showing a general interest about explanation gave often the impression of championing it as such. But he clearly specifies his position declaring that art history depends on a system of values and that this is precisely what distinguishes it from the natural sciences. If, on the other hand, we overemphasize enjoyment, we will tend to fall into the subjective and impressionistic, and our enjoyment will profit us no more than mere amusement and pastime.

I am now to discuss the two points that I mentioned at the very beginning of my paper, the first will be understanding and enjoying art to the right degree – related to the Classical norm. Gombrich was a declared (and unrepentant) rationalist, in search of rational explanations of the artistic phenomena. He was in search of norms, avoiding ideology, plain iconography, mere sociology of art, formalism, and any sort of abstract explanations. He was always ready to admit that we cannot ever rationally recapture the inner motivations which led the first artists to produce their works, but on the other hand we – as art historians – have the task to explain why art has a history and according to what we are going to ascribe values to artistic works.

The well known Gombrichian development of art as due to the solution of artistic problems has risen most frequently negative remarks, for the very reason that this account seemed to leave no room for artist's imaginative freedom. According to him, once focused a real artistic problem (for example, how to depict space, light, movement, and expressions) the very fact to have caught it does mean neither that the solutions found are unique nor that are the best. Gombrich believed that in art making there appears always a struggle and only some classical artists had the promptness in managing the two fundamental features of the artistic process, the notorious schemata and the naturalistic elements. Nevertheless the sure handling of traditional formulae and the quick mind in the presence of the challenges of nature are at odds. No other contraposition is at work, but this one is complex enough as to allow a wide spectrum of choices. Because the gamut of results is very wide and diversified, here, when the art historian is asked to establish a scale of values, he needs a principle, which Gombrich finds in the Classical canon, the product of a long historical process.

But what does the Classic presuppose? One of the components of the Classic is maturity (of mind and skills). I raise this point as a reminder, first that the value of maturity depends on the value of that which matures, and second, that we should know when we are concerned with the maturity of

individual artists, and when instead with the relative maturity of artistic periods. The maturity Gombrich was speaking about is the result both of the maturity of a society in which that art is produced and of the artist whose work has been prepared somehow by his predecessors but not accomplished. A mature art, therefore, had a history behind it, a history that is not merely a chronicle, an accumulation of pictures, or of technical tricks, but a detectable series of results – in a few words, a progress – which show the artists' potentialities along with their own limitations.

What does according to Gombrich allow this progress is the principle of sacrifice which he contrasts with the other it is paired called 'the principle of exclusion'. He is consciously using two ideas stemmed directly from the field of morals that question fundamental givens when placed within the field of art. Creativity, freedom, originality, and the power of the unconscious cannot appeal for him to some general artistic theory based on the autonomy of each term, but they all come to acquire some real meaning only, and only if considered as means within the domain described by the canon. That art needs rules is generally accepted but that these rules are to be substituted by one universal law, determining choices and judgments of value, is something seemingly not so easy to tolerate.

If you ask me to outline what does the universal law – the Canon – urges, I would express it as "Every painting should aim at a compositional equilibrium derived from the process of sacrifice. An artist ought to sacrifice some accomplished results in order to realize others". This is one of the central tenets of Gombrich's theory but seldom remarked on by the critics, just because they are annoyed by the 'compositional equilibrium' and most of all because they do not realize the implications the principle of sacrifice carries with it.

The Canon acquires its *raison d'être* – as I have already said – only when art has reached a high stage of development. Only then we can appreciate how the principle of sacrifice really works. When an artist lives in an epoch of wide formal possibilities – because of the richness of complex schemata at his disposal, that is of formulae which constitute the pictorial tradition – then he may will to challenge both tradition and nature. The historian can understand the importance of sacrifice only when an artist, aware that his choice could undermine – at least partially – the very foundations of art, gives up the certainty of successful formulae in favour of more naturalistic proposals. Raphael's choices were not as revolutionary as those of Constable, because he decided to sacrifice, of the tradition, only the least elements and allowed nature to enter only in the necessary way as indication of his close observation of it.

We can speak of sacrifice because an artist abandons something sure and known to which he conferred decisive value. As historians and observers, in order to value the kind of sacrifice made by the artist, it is indispensable to recognize, of the tradition, what the artist has renounced, whereas to estimate what role new naturalistic elements would play, we must use our imagination (with the projection). In other words all that is concerned with schemata, conventions and order is valuable as just the ground of our judgements, while when we are asked to check the pictorial inventions that render naturalistic elements imagination is required.

Contrary to the necessity of a universal law, Svetlana Alpers believes that the acceptance of a canon is really a limitation for an artist (and for a historian as well, indeed of every period) because she distinguishes, at the basis of art, a fundamental tendency towards freedom, the essential condition for the development of the 'mode', that is the relation between painter and object represented. Since each artist has a unique relationship with 'his' world, we cannot limit by means of rules the manifold possibilities in rendering pictorially that 'world'.

The choice (not the simple acceptance) of a universal law – far to be a limitation to Gombrich, but the necessary condition for the artist who, among constraints, seeks after the right solution – brings out at least two remarkable effects in the process of art making and art interpreting. First of all it leads to acknowledge that the artistic system is made of two elements, one constant – the sense of order with its schemata-composition – and one variable – the naturalistic features. Imagination works just on the variable but in such a way as to have influences on schemata too. The limitation to which naturalistic stimuli are subjected depends, of course, on the nature of schemata: Raphael could handle them in such a manner as to conceal their presence, since he was used to give more importance to his visual naturalistic discoveries than to the known traditional formulae.

The second effect is related to aesthetic judgments. Once the 'canon' is chosen as standpoint we are allowed to establish an objective scale of artistic judgments and to build by means of it a history of art focused on the efforts made by artists who faced the challenges of nature. If nature is the main point of reference and the ever present source of subjects, tradition (system of visual-artistic solutions as well of judgments) becomes the counterweight to it.

It is time now to discuss the second topic, the artist's-art historian's moral quest through art. Because Gombrich was a rationalist, it will be really surprising to discover how much importance he attached to art as a privileged source of the most deeper emotions, believing altogether in a man (the artist and the beholder-critic-art historian as well) who conceives life on the one hand as a continuous fight for meaning, with the goal of a better understanding both of men and reality, and on the other hand, as an involvement in crucial psychological changes, with art as the central field for search and development.

Both E. Panofsky and M. Baxandall have laid particular emphasis on the explanation of artistic-historical process, the former aiming at placing the work of art in the realm of symbolic forms, the latter advocating the theory of critical language as apt for disclosing the intentional process which made possible artistic products. But neither Panofsky nor Baxandall were much concerned with emotional reactions produced by art, whereas Gombrich conceived them the most adequate instrument for a fresh understanding of the natural and human world, the ultimate goal of every artistic creation. On what grounds did he try to connect the emotional sphere and the rational one, the latter absolutely necessary for him when criteria of value are called to play their role in historical and critical traditions? Let us venture to answer searching suitable elements in Gombrich's general theory.

He firmly believed that we could reach objective knowledge about history and specifically about history of art, provided we follow the bent towards representational naturalism that characterizes the Western tradition in the post-medieval period, and resort to the operative concepts of making and matching and to the universal law or canon. Looking at the development of art as presented in art history handbooks no difficulty would arise in recognizing that conceptual art is much more treated than naturalistic one. The very nature of art would justify this preference, being every artistic work based on mental schemata, visual structures (a sort of ready-to-use-relations between different elements) that allow artists to build images. Also naturalism cannot avoid schemata but with the fundamental difference in relation to conceptual art – according to Gombrich – that the artist who aims at naturalistic effects is compelled to modify them for the sake of a more plausible representation of reality. Such an artist is certainly aware of the double human weakness (of senses and of emotions) and at the same time of the unique possibility of art to transform that weakness into an inexhaustible resource of knowledge and feeling provided – Gombrich states – he could ground his experiences on a steady point of reference.

It has been not an haphazard choice, for Gombrich, to find out this point in the Renaissance period, because exactly during the sixteenth-century Italy and specifically in Raphael's works – complex in meaning and economical in expression – the process of rendering natural appearances reached its highest outcome, accounting for the full handling of mental schemata and the sharp observation of nature as well, connected into an unequalled equilibrium. This very choice of Renaissance 'classic' – as formulated and amply discussed in his *Norm and Form* (1963) – has provoked reservations in many scholars, perhaps because the intellectual and emotional process that led him to this preference has not been sufficiently investigated.

That Gombrich's universal law does concern substantially a certain type of art and entail a certain type of moral conduct it will be not so difficult to ascertain. This moral conduct takes a specific meaning in Gombrich's thought because it implies first of all that art really changes just when there emerges an idea of progress and, secondly, that an artist contributes to this progress only if he takes part in the unending attempt of rendering naturalistic forms in more and more illusionistic way. Right at this point Gombrich introduces the concept of discovery that, though derived from the scientific field, it is here endowed with psychological and moral features.

How could a personal discovery (as artistic result) arrive at being for others a real experience that should add something unexpected to life? Gombrich believes that the artist, through visual discoveries supported by technical inventions, endeavours to provoke a reaction in the beholder, that is a change in his psychological status which would compel him to a new interpretation of reality. Obviously, not all the reactions will have the same value (for instance, in front of abstract art), for, according to him, we most appreciate those relatable to our profoundly based attitudes, in short to all the emotions produced on us by individuals and the environment. Human expressions, light, the sense of movement and orientation, as central features of the western pictorial naturalistic tradition, are liable to generalization and therefore to valuation. This could explain why Gombrich does by no means believe in the power of a pure formalistic art for the simple reason that it stimulates just a part of our personality, namely the calculating mind which particularly enjoys rhythm and formal, geometrical complications. If, at this point, we start thinking of abstract art as well fitted into this sort of conception, we should change our mind because, oddly enough, for Gombrich abstract art, unlike ornament, does not have this power grounded as it is on a simple equilibrium, even less so abstract expressionism for its total lack of order.

Gombrich distinguishes sharply abstract art from ornamental one, even if both could appear very similar to us. The former might be the expression of art's impossibility, once given up naturalism, to offer suggestions for an objective development of artistic problems, whereas the latter is another side of the art, that based on order (in a talk given in 1987 he affirmed that he saw the development of art as representation in the centre, with symbolism on the one side and decoration on the other), this time with a matching towards all of the possible complications of the internal order instead of those towards nature. Abstract and expressionistic art cannot have an ethical-objective character because no matching is ever possible with something outside their own field.

Once established that the goal of art is to give the beholder more and more new visual experiences and through them emotions, Gombrich specifies what does 'react' mean. The actual reaction of the beholder is the urge to put questions on the one hand on the kind of solutions found by the painter and on the other on the possibility to recognize in reality some unnoticed aspect put forward in the work of art. Obviously a problem arises when the beholder is asked on what grounds he is conferring psychological value to illusionistic visual discoveries. Gombrich suggests that several pictorial

solutions seem more 'sincere' than others, as he decidedly believes with regard to Raphael's, Rembrandt's, and Constable's works. I shall try to outline the reasons for these preferences.

What fundamentally matters to the three painters is the relationship of their work with the tradition. All three were well aware that a better understanding of naturalistic forms had to go through their personal and artistic experiences, Raphael by means of religious subjects, Rembrandt focusing his attention on man – choosing even himself as preferred subject of investigation, and Constable, in his turn, on nature. All were seeking for a 'true' image which could provide the beholder with the visual transcription of one of the most important features of man, the compelling search for meaning through sensitivity, reason and emotions. Raphael's religious images and some portraits as 'la muta' are good examples of his behaviour towards tradition. Since sincerity is not related at all to the subject but to the way in which it has been treated, we are entitled to ask also for the objectivity of beauty. Might we ever overcome the widespread idea that beauty is a matter of personal preference either in the critic or in the historian? Gombrich's answer is certainly in the positive, because beauty is a formal achievement in a process of revision and transformation of the traditional forms, and because if we want to speak of beauty we must recognize some shared points of reference in order to be able to express some sort of evaluation. Raphael, Rembrandt, and Constable always kept in mind that their results were partial and ought to be overcome. In this interpretation sincerity is twofold. On the one hand the artist must pay attention to the sources of his art, to his personal character and psychological structure. On the other he knows that each work created is but a partial step toward an ideal which could be infinitely approached but never attained.

Nevertheless when Gombrich speaks of 'sincerity' he seems to follow an idea well accepted during the Renaissance, that of 'aria', always related to 'vivezza', to the apparent life of the image. An idea that did not have to do simply with exactness as suggested by Vasari himself when describing the attempts of fifteenth-century artists, but rather with the visual translation of the individuality of each soul, recognizable in movement and expressions. Because the problem of illusionistic painting was not to deceive but to evocate a plausible reality in a convincing way, the question was how to use the pictorial signs as to render not just life but moral life as well. Gombrich's and Renaissance painters' reply had been a concrete although a difficult one to be translated in definite pictorial terms. Only when an artist has paid attention to all his emotions together with the transformations they produced in his soul and consequently in his appearance (and for Constable in the appearance of preferred naturalistic points of view), he can then afford the right representations of them. This is the reason of the involvement brought about by the works of these three artists, an involvement which demands from the part of the historian, as precondition, alertness, and as final attitude, detachment. The detachment, apparently in contradiction with the very notion of involvement, is absolutely necessary, if we want to be historians, otherwise the meaning of the work of art will miss its possibility to be brought to life again.

When we speak of new visual and emotional experiences, we will discover that illusionism declares the artist's ethical stance towards himself and the beholder alike, because a demonstration is required for the visual rightness of his own results. I said that both making and matching are operative principles, but we should add that the latter reveals more this ethical stance than the former because a proof is needed about the coherence of meaning. Hence we could judge the artist's point of view on reality, his implication with it and the society, something impossible to account for if meaning is private and expressed according to abstract or expressionistic forms. It is easy to understand that, for Gombrich, a really objective research (and therefore a moral one), could be found only following illusionism. Artists who believe in realism and artists who do not, share the same awareness that their attempts stem from their own individuality but for those who create abstract or expressionistic paintings individuality seems to lead to a form of art whose results cannot be proved and consequently shared.

It is time to present you my own proposals. What should we start from for a future history of art which would take into account the praiseworthy ideas of Gombrich's theory (search for meaning, visual truth, principle of sacrifice), excluding competition and the preferential focus on illusionistic art? I suggest to start from the man. Gombrich would have promptly warned me that in speaking of man one must not lose sight of the good old Adam who insists on the satisfaction of those drives which all people have in common. But what is not common, in my opinion, are the answers the artist tries to offer, sprung from the tension between the urge for satisfaction and the pressure of cultural demands. The artist has the possibility to do visual research on the main features of man in his relationships with himself, the other men, nature and God. These are not only simple artistic topics but the very inexhaustible subjects for him to work out and for the historian to understand and connect.

I think we are no more asked to reconstruct the ways naturalistic painting has taken during the centuries nor the formation, development and disappearance of styles. Our task is a more demanding one, because it presupposes two kinds of belief: that the condition to be artist is the only one which allows men to know reality and that the historian, arranging and assessing the artist's creativity, is able to produce in other men interest and involvement.

Why does creativity happen to be the only way to know reality? We may live either according to shared ideas which we have not shaped but found ready or we may live accepting the inner challenges which promise us neither equilibrium nor definite results but an unending quest for meaning supported by spiritual energy. This very quest does not require competition, but rather a joint work very close to Peircian agapism, where the individual is individual because among other individuals devoted to a fallibilistic search of truth and in doing so each one attempts to bring in action the best potentialities of the others.

As historians, we are of course not artists in the sense of producers of art, but our role which is never to be exhausted it does have something to do with creativity. Our contribution towards the artists and their works is to grasp the intentional process of which we know only the visual results, and to 'compose' the richness of the individual and cultural situations using language in a way that should produce in others interest and involvement.