

E. H. Gombrich, (with Martin Gayford) *The Knowing Eye: Interview with Martin Gayford, Modern Painters, Vol. 5 (4), 1992, pp.68-71 [Trapp no.1992M.1]*

'I still hold fast to my perspective': Sir Ernst Gombrich's insistence on cultural values comes as a reassuring antidote to media babble at a time when many are questioning the direction of the arts and their relevance to contemporary life.

How, I asked Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich, could I get to his house? Was it close to King's Cross? There was a pause. 'Well', replied Sir Ernst, 'I would not say it was close exactly, but it is at least not *immensely* far'. That reply, with its precision and light dusting of irony, was, I discovered, typical of the man. So too, I discovered when I finally arrived at his West Hampstead house one sunny early autumn afternoon, was courtesy. How long would the interview last? 'Exactly as long as you like.' What should we talk about? 'Whatever you prefer.'

He has been living in England since 1936 — having arrived from Vienna a little before the Anschluss — but in some ways he remains admirably unEnglish. Conversation, for example, tends to be about serious topics, seriously approached (not an Anglo-Saxon habit). 'And what, Mr Gayford', he inquired over tea and shortcake brought in by Lady Gombrich, 'Do you think of this cleaning of the Sistine Chapel?' Very flatteringly, he really seemed to want to know the answer.

At eighty-three, of course, Sir Ernst is the most eminent thinker on art and culture that we have. But part of his distinction lies in the fact that he is difficult to pigeon-hole. To the general public, he is the author of *The Story of Art* (1950) — perhaps the most widely read and influential of all introductions to the subject. But in fact his interests are wider than traditional art history: for many years he was the director of the Warburg Institute, an organisation that is not art historical but, as he is at pains to point out, is devoted to the study of the cultural heritage of classical antiquity. The truth is that Gombrich belongs to two traditions — art history proper, and cultural history (*Kulturgeschichte*) — both of which originated in Central Europe, and were transferred to these shores by that diaspora of German and Austrian scholars of which Gombrich himself was a part. But although he is heir to the line of cultural historians — which descends from Hegel through Jacob Burckhardt, and sadly did not really take root in this soil — in many ways he reacted against it, particularly against the cloudy Hegelian notions of the 'spirit of the age' and inevitable historical progress. Instead, influenced by the ideas of his friend, the philosopher Sir Karl Popper, he has favoured a more empirical approach. Rather than see art as a mirror in which some metaphysical 'spirit' is reflected, he has regarded it as a process affected by all manner of concrete, individual facts — psychological, social, and personal.

In two major works — *Art and Illusion*, and *The Sense of Order* — he stepped outside the realm of any sort of history, and looked for explanations of stylistic change in perceptual psychology. Another intriguing essay, 'The Logic of Vanity Fair', seeks to explain the process of stylistic change in the social mechanism of fashion. These scientific concerns might suggest a lack of interest in values; but, on the contrary, few have argued more authoritatively than Gombrich against the tide of relativism which has inundated the art world and also academia in recent years.

It is hard to think of anybody better equipped to consider the welter of problems our art and culture currently face. Is there any objectivity in our traditional pantheon — Michelangelo, Homer, Beethoven — or are they merely the fleeting tastes of a particular time and class, elitist and ethnocentric? And what has gone wrong? How did art (and culture) get into their current mess? But I began by asking him to say something about his early life.

Gombrich: I was born in Vienna. My parents were typical middle-class people - my father a solicitor, my mother a piano- teacher and pianist. I was born in 1909 - I'm very ancient now - but that means that the famous legendary Vienna was for me only legendary. I never experienced it because the War broke out when I was only five years old, and the post-War period in Vienna was quite particularly grim. So I didn't lead the life people imagine in the golden age of Vienna; it was far from golden. There were a lot of money worries, other worries, and food was scarce. It wasn't an easy life. It was a harmonious family life, but not easy. My parents both came from what one would have to call intellectual, highly-cultured families. My mother was on very good terms with Gustav Mahler, and in her youth she had taken lessons in harmony from Anton Bruckner. My father went to school with Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. So I received some reflections, as it were, of the golden Vienna, but only at second-hand.

Gayford: In your paper on Lord Leverhulme in Tributes, 1984, you describe how your family and education provided you with 'a cultural map' - a guide to the principle landmarks in art and culture. It was not, you wrote, a perfect map, 'but at least there was a map'.

That was what in German is called *Bildung*, you know, what an educated person was supposed to know and have absorbed. And certainly this played an unobtrusive, natural part in our growing up. The books that my father owned - some of them are still here - all reflected the importance of the classics and of classical art: by which I don't only mean Greek and Roman art, but also the Italian Renaissance, Rembrandt, Murillo. As I grew a little older, I looked at these books with interest.

Did it look different from the cultural map a child in America, or England would have been given?

Yes, inevitably different, because it was a Central European map. The German classics and the German philosophers loomed large: Goethe, Schiller, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche - all these were household names. French literature played relatively little part. The Scandinavians and the Russians figured very much. England: well, naturally Shakespeare, and Dickens - but not Jane Austen.

You are describing a grounding in Western culture - viewed from a certain geographical point. Do you think that such a grounding is necessary - that understanding, and appreciating, art are always based on learning?

It must be a matter of learning, and that has of course quite a number of consequences. In the case of mass tourism, for instance, it raises the question of how much all these people get out of it. It sounds terribly elitist, to use that fashionable term to say so, but it may be true. There is an element of art that is like a language. I wouldn't say that art is a language. It obviously isn't. You can't make statements in it. But there are elements where expectations, fulfilled or disappointed, and so on, play a great part in our response. When these expectations haven't been built up, it is difficult to follow the art.

This is where the idea of a canon - which you defended in your Romanes Lecture at Oxford (published in Ideals and Idols, 1974) - comes in. The canon is similar to the map: it gives you your starting place.

That is precisely where the canon comes in, and, if you like, where the cognitive map of one's childhood comes in. I think that there is in all our lives something a little like what Konrad Lorenz calls imprinting. We have certain pre-programmed responses to which we can cling. The Western system of harmony in music is one of those things. It may be conditioning, but we are so fully conditioned that we respond to it automatically, as it were. I do think that a different background also makes a

difference in my response to, say, architecture. In Vienna, the baroque and rococo - the castle of Schoenbrunn and all these things - are very important. In England, although there is some baroque in this country, it is slightly exotic and on the whole not very much beloved. I may have to be a little more cerebral in my response to Christopher Wren than a person who grew up here. It's a slightly different language - different accent.

When I interviewed Professor Quentin Bell - with whom you had a correspondence on this - he ended by saying that 'we are living in a world of dissolving perspectives: In other words, values and aesthetic values shift as time goes on.

Well, they may dissolve, but not for me. I still hold fast to my perspective. My granddaughter may not, or not so completely - she's not primed so much.

From inside, experiencing art feels like a process of discovery - stretching one's taste, deepening one's responses. One accepts that many things are good, even if one has not yet understood them - maybe never will. I think it makes perfect sense to say, don't personally like Schubert much, but I'm sure he's good'.

There is an example quite close to hand. I do not much respond to jazz, but I know that jazz can be very good. I have not entered into this world. I cannot make proper distinctions; it sounds to me all more or less similar. One has to learn to discriminate. Learning is always a learning of discriminations, of differences. ' At first everything has a global character, then out of this global cloud comes the awareness of all the differences; and that is learning. In practically every respect learning is a process of differentiation.

If appreciating a work of art is a matter of learning, then does it follow that it is not just a matter of either/or - you appreciate it or you don't? It's a matter of understanding it more or less.

I think there you have got a very important point. Because I find, and I'm sure we all find, that it is a matter of degree. You may have, for instance, heard a particular piece of music, or seen a particular work of art several times, and thought you knew it and understand it. And one day you understood it better. It's like with human beings, or with situations: suddenly you have an insight.

Do you think it's possible to start from scratch and work out a whole cultural map, or a whole canon, for oneself?

Absolutely impossible. You have to have a starting point. As you know, in *Art and Illusion* I spoke against the idea of the innocent eye. There is also no such thing as innocent taste. We are always somehow in a state of readiness when we step in front of a picture. Without this state of readiness, we may not respond. Perhaps it's a dual psychological process of switching oneself on, then trying to respond. If you know the artist and like him or her, you are much more willing to make allowances than if you loathe him. So I think we shouldn't deceive ourselves into thinking we can be entirely objective. But again, this is a matter of degree. It doesn't prove that when we like Mozart, we are fooling ourselves.

So you have to take a certain amount on trust? You have to accept that whether or not you like him, Giotto is probably good?

Or relevant at least. That people cared for him, and there must be some reason for that. With contemporary art, the frame of reference is much less secure, and therefore people seek all the more to be told what is good. You have no scale, you have no map on which to put new art, and that produces anxiety in many people. Being suddenly presented with something, with no context or connection, they have to ask, 'Is that good?' It's a very difficult thing.

But what basis can we have for evaluating art? Especially art from remote periods and cultures? Do you believe in common human nature?

Yes, and in our own reactions — in human reactions — and what for want of a better word one might call empathy. I know we can't quite imagine what it was like to be Raphael and to be asked by the Pope to paint the Stanza della Segnatura, but even so one can try to see it in much more concrete terms. That is really what I have always endeavoured to do. I'm not sure that there can ever be a completely secure basis for evaluation of the arts except our own response and our own culture.

Maybe some works and periods and civilisations are more difficult for us to understand than others.

And how! Yes, I think that tradition plays a great part — that we, brought up in this tradition still have more access to the ancient Greeks or Romans than we have, for example, to the Japanese. I've been to Japan. I admire it tremendously. I'm very fond of Japanese art. But I do think that it's more alien. It's a different planet, for us; although I'm sure that if I lived there for a long time, I could get into it.

You quote somewhere a story about Arthur Waley, the great expert on the Far East, how he was asked how long it would take to understand and appreciate a form of Far Eastern calligraphy. Waley thought for a moment, then said, 'Five hundred years'.

When I was in Japan, I didn't really want to see the exhibits of calligraphy, because I thought, 'It's useless for me'. And I was perhaps wrong. I gradually came to think that it was worth looking at these strange things, and I had some inkling of what was going on there. But I wouldn't say I could spot a fake in a Japanese calligraphic text.

I had a sort of reverse experience the other day, when I was sent by the Daily Telegraph to review the Bridget Riley exhibition — which I found difficult to appreciate and temperamentally alien. Then I went downstairs and looked at 'The Art of Ancient Mexico, and immediately I found it far easier, far more accessible.

I must say I quite envy you this response. I am too much aware, though one shouldn't be, of the tremendous cruelty of their rituals — tearing out hearts etcetera. To me it is a very savage and threatening art. Of course there is also tremendous formal discipline. One can quite see that: this is a borderline. While, let us say with China, one can start to appreciate Chinese poetry and so on — up to a point — in translation, ancient America is so far away culturally, perhaps more so than any other art style. In fact, I wondered whether I should go to the exhibition. I've seen quite a number, and I've always had this strange feeling of threatening remoteness. One shudders both at their savagery and at the savagery with which they were exterminated. It's not the best chapter in the history of mankind.

It's all very complex. After I left the Hayward, I wondered whether I was really seeing this Aztec art through the eyes of all those British sculptors — from Henry Moore to Barry Flanagan — who have used it as a source. The real culture of those ancient American sculptors is very inaccessible. How would you answer the charge that your values are elitist and ethnocentric?

The answer is maybe they are. I have values, and I know I have derived those values from my civilisation — where else should I have derived them from? — from my upbringing, from people I admire. Everybody who likes living on the Trobriand Islands [off the coast of New Guinea] is very much welcome to try and share the values of the Trobriand Islanders. I am not against it. I have a close Italian friend who spent many years living on a minute archipelago in the Trobriand Islands, and I own one or two of the carvings of these people. He spent all these years interviewing craftsmen who carved the prows of their canoes. It's immensely interesting, and of course one can admire these, but Velazquez is still a different matter.

Why, because his work comes from closer to home?

No. Because of the investment in intelligence, skill and sensitivity. It's very lovely to have a fine traditional art where you know where to put each spiral; I by no means despise these things. But one must also have a sense of hierarchy, of values. Yes, of course, we are ethnocentric. We speak our own language and not that of the Trobriand Islanders; we will probably never learn it — I'm not sure if my friend really understands it.

And elitist?

Elitist? This is the same. I think the reasons for the charge of elitism and ethnocentricity are patent. One should not look down on other people, certainly not people who do not appreciate Velazquez. One should also not despise another culture; though one may abhor 'another culture — that's a different matter. But I think we must stick to our own values. Otherwise, if you are a real relativist, you have no intellectual defence against, let us say, the Nazis. If one has no right to appreciate or condemn, one abdicates as a human being. But it will never be possible — in this respect I have changed my outlook since my student days — never be possible to prove, intellectually let alone scientifically, that Velazquez is very good. I am convinced he is very good, but that is a different matter.

Do you believe that more attention to the values of Western culture should be paid in education these days?

I think that used to be what one called being civilised, which meant you had imbibed something of the human values embodied in Shakespeare, or Dickens, or whatever else. Of course, that is part of our mode of existence. One must regret that so many people are excluded from these pleasures — consolations, I sometimes call them — of great art. But you cannot therefore say, 'I musn't look at it myself'. I see the menace, particularly in America, of this levelling process. I think menacing is the only word, it's a real threat.

You have written against the forces of cultural relativism, which are becoming stronger and stronger with every year. Do you still maintain the validity of our received cultural map?

Yes, I have argued against relativism. And yet I have also become sceptical about the validity of the map in one sense. I am talking now about our own age. I am very sceptical about certain things which have happened in twentieth-century art. Why is there this need to assign a place, and even a place of honour, to Marcel Duchamp? You can put it in a different way: what made people so excited about someone who painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa and sent a urinal to an exhibition? It is rather awful that all this played such a great part.

And the answer is that there is obviously some need to find him — or someone like him — as a point of reference. I still don't welcome it, but I think if we disapprove of certain attitudes — you write for Modern Painters — in our age, and I disapprove very much, I'm an old reactionary after all, we as people who reflect about history and our situation should go a little further and look for an explanation of how these attitudes arise, how this polarisation arises. Just as in politics there is this gradually less and less tenable belief that there is a right and a left, so there is in art this less and less tenable belief that there is reaction and avant garde.

I agree. After all, the 'avant garde' today is in almost exactly the same position as it was at 70 years ago. It hasn't moved beyond Dada.

Absolutely.

Talking of Duchamp, if as you say, art is in some respects like a language which we have to learn, do you think that a form of art - like his, and that of his numerous followers - in which there are no particular expectations, is even feasible?

I don't think so. That is particularly true of certain forms of modern music. I think it can't be done.

What an opportunity the present state of art gives for Ananias the False Artist - that figure you mention in 'The Vogue for Abstract Art'. Walter Pach, who coined that phrase, meant it as a comment on the salon painters of the nineteenth century. But perhaps our contemporary 'avant-garde' gives Ananias even more scope.

It is so easy to cheat, although I would not say they are all cheating, because there are so many who really believe in what they are doing. They are deluded rather than cheating.

But how about Andy Warhol and his successors?

I'm sure they are cynical. They find it amusing to see how far they can go. It is a kind of superhoax. There is the old philistine belief that the avant-garde artist is making fun of us, which is often not true. But sometimes it may be true.

You were talking earlier on about the need for a psychological and sociological explanation for twentieth-century art. Do you think that fashion - the competitive search for novelty which you write about in your essay 'The Logic of Vanity Fair' in Ideals and Idols - provides part of that answer? Is the problem that fashion has become part of the mechanism driving art?

It was originally an element of science which got in - discoveries, genuine discoveries, like perspective or whatever. In our conception of art - which is now in a way obsolete - there was this drive forward. The Impressionists wanted to be discoverers of new ways of seeing the world, of painting the world. There's an element of scientific attitude in them. The break comes with Cubism, because Cubism - although it's sometimes amusing, even nice - is a spoof. The Cubists threw on the shock of the Impressionists. People hoped that one day they would see the world that way. But I don't think we ever have.

And that is really crucial to the whole twentieth-century situation. What Karl Popper calls historicism - the faith that history will take art and us forward, that new things will be revealed by the spirit of history, the idea of the avant-garde, the idea of self expression - this faith has so much dominated not

only artists, but art teaching and art schools, that we are now in a blind alley. They are still teaching, I believe, that all great artists were misunderstood in their time - all that heady stuff that turns the heads of students and leads absolutely nowhere. They are being taught a theory of art and the development of art that may be objectively false. The sooner people wake up to this danger, the more chance there is of recovering a certain amount of sanity. That is really what I feel.

Perhaps, apart from fashion, two other demons have got into the works - the art market, and the media. In Private Eye, there used to be a little phrase 'Enough about this - Ed' which would appear from time to time. That is really the spirit of journalism - you can't go on too long about anything, because it gets boring. You need something new to write about.

I don't deny it. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I think that is true. That is the social pressure for innovation. I received a catalogue yesterday for an exhibition by John Wonnacott, and I thought the introduction by Giles Auty, the critic of the Spectator, was very good. I read it with pleasure and interest. I very much agree with him. I knew Wonnacott. He was one of the students at the Slade when I was there. I think he is certainly a very serious and dedicated artist. He's very difficult to place, and that is really what critics want. But then were any of the pioneers of contemporary art easy to place? Certainly not.

That is true of many significant British artists in the twentieth century. They don't fit into a notion of modernist progress.

I agree, that was the point of Mr Fuller, was it not? I think he was basically right. I don't think one can confine that to British art either. I don't envy the people who buy contemporary art for museums. They are under tremendous pressure, and the pressure, as Auty says in this article, is all for novelty. The Turner prize and all these things are because novelty is at a premium. Something inventive. And sometimes these inventions are very trivial.

Earlier you used the word 'consoling' to describe your reactions to art. Peter Fuller, the founder of Modern Painters, coined the phrase 'the consolation of lost illusions' to describe art which yearns after God in a sceptical age. Do you believe art can be consoling in that metaphysical fashion?

I meant the word consolation in a more down-to-earth way. Life is very often sad, tragic. And I do find great art, music, literature - the awareness that such things exist - literally consoling.

Do you believe it is possible to make art without some kind of metaphysical belief, even if a false one?

It's a very interesting question. Obviously much art is rooted in metaphysical faith, and you can even say that the belief in art is a metaphysical faith. But certainly you do not have to have a formal religion to offer this consolation. It is much more the achievement of the human being which we find takes us out of ourselves. You may say that you can't produce art without some kind of belief in values. If you call that belief metaphysical, then I would say, yes, that it is necessary to have a metaphysical belief.