

E. H. Gombrich, Exchange with Henri Zerner on *The Sense of Order*, *The New York Review of Books*, 27 September, Vol. 26 (14), 1979, pp.60-1 [Trapp no.1979J.1]

To the Editors:

In his review of my book *The Sense of Order* [NYR, June 28] Professor Zerner has paid me a most gratifying compliment: "Gombrich, always quick at discovering the faults in the arguments of others, is almost as adept at finding weaknesses in his own thought." If he is right I may be forgiven a certain disappointment that those of my thoughts which have so far survived this winnowing process are not probed with similar attention in his review.

It is true that he complains that the book is hard to summarize—I can think of few worth-while books of which this could not be said—but, briefly, I claim that the formal characteristics of most human products, from tools to buildings and from clothing to ornaments, can be seen as manifestations of that sense of order which is deeply rooted in man's biological heritage. Organic life is governed by hierarchical structures which not only secure the interaction of internal functions (e.g. heartbeat and breathing), but also assist adjustment to the environment. Here the role of the "sense of order" is complementary to the perception of meaning, because the detection of food, of mates, or of danger first requires orientation in space and anticipation in time. Those ordered events in our environment which exhibit rhythmical or other regular features (the waves of the sea or the uniform texture of a cornfield) easily "lock in" with our tentative projections of orders and thereby sink below the threshold of our attention while any change in these regularities leads to an arousal of attention. Hence the artificial environment man has created for himself satisfies this dual demand for easy adjustment and easy arousal.

Having stated this theory in my Introduction on "Order and Purpose in Nature" (not mentioned by Professor Zerner), I attempted to study the various refractions and modifications which these basic tendencies have undergone in human history. Though I have tried to show that elements of this "biological" approach can be found in Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*, I readily concede that the generality and comparative novelty of the theme demand close and (I am afraid) sequential reading if the insights which Professor Zerner is kind enough to find on every page are to be seen as consequences of the central hypothesis. Certainly, my subtitle "A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art" is somewhat too narrow to encompass them all, though it indicates the type of evidence I have mainly used. In any case, if I included the Book of Kells or Gothic rose windows in my purview I did not therefore wish to demote their status any more than that of architecture and of music.

It seems a pity that instead of challenging this basic approach Professor Zerner has largely concentrated on such peripheral issues. One of these which appears to concern him most is my real or alleged attitude to nonfigural art—very much a side issue in the book. Denying its connection with decoration he declares *ex cathedra* that this movement developed from landscape painting—ignoring the alternative theories of Sixten Ringbom on Kandinsky[1] and those of Decio Gioseffi (whom I quote) on Mondriaan.[2] I never claimed that the suggestive passages by Brewster, Oscar Wilde, Fenollosa and others which I came across in the course of my work on nineteenth-century debates on design explain the whole of this interesting episode in Western art (which appears to be drawing to its close). Professor Zerner bristles at my speaking of an "experiment" in this connection, but so did Constable in relation to landscape painting and Zola to his novels. Not that my preferences in this matter can have much bearing on the truth or falsehood of the theories expounded in this book, but

for the record I must reject the blanket assertion that I "dislike modern art." One of the leading masters of twentieth-century painting. Oskar Kokoschka, honored me by suggesting that I should write the introduction for the catalogue of his great retrospective exhibition in London (1962) and New York (1966).

I realize that Professor Zerner may find in this fact a confirmation of his suspicion of deviance for Kokoschka is something of an outsider in later twentieth-century art and outsiders are as inconvenient to some art historians as dissidents are to politicians. He quotes with apparent disapproval a remark I made on Alois Riegl in my earlier book that his "theory weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind." But the theory to which I referred is an idiosyncratic version of Hegel's philosophy of history to which the totalitarian movements of Marxism and Fascism notoriously owe so much. Nor am I the first or only reader of Riegl to notice this tendency. My teacher Julius von Schlosser who had known and admired Riegl in his time expressed the same reservation in 1934 writing that Riegl's ideas "tended towards the interpretation of a sufficiently mythical *Volksggeist*, indeed of a highly suspect 'racial' psyche" (*das zur Erfassung eines reichlich mythologischen "Volksggeistes," ja sogar der höchst bedenklichen "Rassen" Psyche drängte*).[3]

In the last analysis, both of Professor Zerner's criticisms mentioned so far reflect our different attitudes to the basic issue of collectivism versus individualism in the study of art. He takes artistic collectivism so much for granted that he believes me to be merely muddled in postulating that the period character of styles emerges from the cumulative effect of individual acts of choice. (I would say that in 1912 Kandinsky went one way, Kokoschka another, and that increasingly many artists and critics decided for the latter than for the former alternative; but that they all had freedom of choice.) Hence I have claimed in the book that it is the growing preference of many individuals for "more of this" and "less of that" that ultimately emerges as a trend, a fashion, and finally as a style. I also suggested that "this" or "that" need not be formal features, they can be expressive characteristics such as "lightness," "severity," "intensity," or "coolness."

I am puzzled, therefore, by Professor Zerner's lengthy exposition of the physiognomic potentialities of shapes, as if I had ever denied them. I am even more intrigued when he asks: "How long did and does it take for such patterns to assume a physiognomic or expressive value, for the tribesmen to feel that the curvilinear motif on their ceramic utensils expresses the gentleness of their tribe as opposed to the aggressiveness of their neighbor's angular zigzags? Perhaps not very long." Alas, he does not tell us if he knows of such a tribe or if he has merely dreamed it up. Such things may happen, but they need not. There are no laws of correlation of this kind. Least of all can I accept the implication that pure design is a late development. James C. Faris in his book on *Nuba Personal Art* (London, 1972), which I reviewed in these pages (May 4, 1972), insists that this artistic tradition of body painting "is chiefly motivated by aesthetic and decorative factors." That these complex designs also stand in a cultural context goes without saying, but need I add that, contrary to Professor Zerner's assertion, I do not and never have identified meaning with naturalistic representation? The chapter of my book entitled "Designs as Signs" to which he nowhere refers is mainly concerned with such systems of signs as alphabets and heraldry and with the gradations we can observe between the distinctive features serving communication, and the settings (such as flourishes and cartouches) which act as means of enhancement. I was also sorry that Professor Zerner who is an authority on the School of Fontainebleau did not comment on my discussion of the grotesque and its passage from magic to playfulness. Instead he took me to task for misquoting the title of a book by Heinrich Wölfflin and also gets it wrong. This is tedious business, for the case can only be explained by reproducing the layout of the original title-page which runs

Die Kunst der Renaissance
ITALIEN
und das
Deutsche Formgefühl

In quoting this title I inserted an "in" between Renaissance and Italien, while Professor Zerner omitted the first line altogether. Mine was a sin of commission, his of omission; I leave it to moral theologians to say which of us will have to spend more years in purgatory.

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Nor is Professor Zerner on very safe ground when he quotes my admission in this context that I deserted Wölfflin's lectures for those of Wolfgang Koehler. Before this episode hardens into a legend let me state that this brief escapade did not make me into a psychologist. In fact what Koehler discussed at that time was not psychology but problems of greater generality; I remember in particular his searching analysis of determinism and indeterminism in the interpretation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law of entropy or the increase of disorder. This happens to be the law which C.P. Snow believes ordinary humanists have never heard of. Be that as it may, the contrast I discovered between the intellectual rigor of Koehler's lectures and the facile generalizations with which the great Heinrich Wölfflin regaled his elegant audience in the *Auditorium Maximum* of Berlin University worried me. Unhappily, despite many changes in the cast, the worry persists.

Notes

[1] *The Sounding Cosmos, A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (Abo, 1970).

[2] *La falsa Preistoria di Piet Mondriaan* (Trieste, 1957).

[3] *Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte*, Mitteilungen des Osterreichischen Instituts für Geschichtsforschung, Ergänzungs-Band XXII, Heft 2, 1934, p. 186.

Professor Zerner's response follows this letter. The reader is referred to *The New York Review of Books* for its text.