

**E. H. Gombrich, Foreword to Heinrich Schäfer's Principles of Egyptian Art, Oxford, 1974, pp.ix-x [Trapp no.1974G.1]**

This book is more than a classic of Egyptology. Its results must be of interest to art historians, psychologists and philosophers who concern themselves with systems of signs and their role in communication. It constitutes indeed the only attempt ever made of analyzing an artistic style as a mapping procedure. Heinrich Schäfer has successfully reconstructed the key we have to consult if we want to interpret an Egyptian image in terms of what it is intended to represent. Put in another way, he teaches us the rules of transformation we must apply if we want to translate an Egyptian representation into the corresponding verbal description of a real or imaginary situation.

Most readers, of course, will be aware of the highly conventionalized character of Egyptian representations and they may therefore be tempted to take Schäfer's rather laborious analysis as read. It is a temptation that should be resisted, because it is in the fine detail that his method really comes into its own. Indeed the reader may be well advised first to sample the illustrations of these fascinating *minutiae* in Chapter 4 to gauge the importance of this book.

Not that Schäfer's general argument is anything but challenging. He was convinced that the role of the Greeks in the history of art could never be overrated. It was they and they only, he postulated, who launched the visual arts on that quest for the imitation of appearances that ultimately led from the pictographic to the photographic modes of representation. Wherever we encounter such illusionist features as foreshortening, perspective, light and shade, aerial perspective or the attempt to render textures we must assume the influence of the Hellenic tradition. It is one of the many merits of this English version of Schäfer's book that its learned editor-translator has undertaken to test this radical thesis in the light of present knowledge. It may be said to emerge dented but not demolished. The counter examples from Mexico (Addenda, p. 364) certainly acquire fresh interest in the light of Schäfer's thesis, but they do not dispose of his assessment of the re-orientation that art underwent in ancient Greece when the changing aspects of objects were first submitted to systematic investigation on the part of the artists.

The failure of earlier styles to take full account of these phenomena, Schäfer rightly insists, should not be taken as an indication that the world had to wait for the Greeks to become aware of the diminution of apparent size with increasing distance. His reference to a passage in the Etana epic which describes this diminution should have disposed of this fallacy for good and all. What is less clear in Schäfer's discussion is the explanation he proposed for this refusal to take note of the shifting appearance of things in space, a negative characteristic that the most sophisticated Egyptian representations share with the drawings of children. Like other students of this intriguing problem Schäfer took recourse to the alleged structure of mental images, though there is more than one indication in his text that he was far from satisfied with this explanation.

Possibly the great Egyptologist was here debarred from further progress by the intellectual tradition which he inherited and to which he adhered to the end. Like so many eminent German art historians he thought in terms of polarities or fundamental oppositions. For him there was an unbridgeable gulf between the Egyptian and the Greek method, a gulf that was symptomatic of contrasting national characters. Maybe Schäfer's results could become more fruitful if they were differently interpreted. Could the Egyptian system not have owed its success and its stability over so long a period to the fact that it was more self-consistent than the Greek? It could be argued that we owe the variety and drama of the history of Western art to the self-contradictory elements in the aims of *mimesis*. This happens

to be the point I tried to make in my book *The Story of Art* where I said that 'the "Egyptian" in us can be suppressed, but he can never be quite defeated'. (Twelfth edition, p. 446).

Once this gravitational pull of the pre-Greek mode of representation is fully acknowledged we may also be entitled to ask, what could have led the Greeks to counteract this universal tendency? I have suggested in *Art and Illusion* that this motivation may be sought in the attitude of Greek culture to mythological narrative; the image was put into the service of story telling, of a fictional evocation not only of what happened but how it might actually have appeared to an eye-witness. It seems that this function is indeed largely alien to Egyptian art, but why this should be so is a different matter.

We cannot tell how far Schäfer would have accepted any such reading of the situation in terms of the differing functions of images. But if I understand the Epilogue to this book by Emma Brunner-Traut correctly, it may at any rate not be inconsistent with her view of Egyptian notions of space and time.