

## **E. H. Gombrich, Press statement on *The Story of Art*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 22nd September, 1995.**

As you know, I'm really here to answer questions about my book, *The Story of Art*. But I thought, before I switch on the answering machine, I might briefly comment on at least three salient points of that long book.

Let me begin with the beginning: I opened the text with a remark I did not invent, the statement: "There really is no such thing as art, there are only artists." One of the rhetorical functions of this opening arises out of the wish to reassure any reader who might feel intimidated by big abstract nouns, what I call "art with a capital A." But this opening also implies the theoretical position that underlies the whole book. Briefly, I propose to go back to earlier usage, to the time when the word "Art" signified any skill or mastery, as it still does when we speak of the "Art of War," or the "Art of Love," or as Whistler did "The gentle art of making enemies." This good old usage was replaced in the Romantic Period by the one that is still in current use according to which the word "Art" stands for a special faculty of a human mind to be classified with religion and science. It is an interesting shift in meaning but it cannot concern me here. Suffice it to say that when you replace the word 'Art' by the word 'Skill' in the opening sentence, it ceases to look challenging or paradoxical: There can be no skill in the abstract, skill is always for something and the skill with which this book is concerned is mainly that of image making.

I do not deny in the introduction that a visual artist must have a special feeling for shapes and colors, much as a musician must be sensitive to sounds and rhythms, but those who have read the book may also remember that I come back to my theoretical position in what was originally the concluding chapter of the book, now Chapter 27, and that I there introduce a metaphor by way of clarification. Let me quote (page 594) "To produce a perfect pearl the oyster needs some piece of matter .... round which the pearl can form . If the artist's feelings for form and color are to crystallize, he too needs such a hard core -- a definite task on which he can bring his gifts to bear." It is here also, that I tell the readers what I propose to call Art. I quote again: "It is a secret of the artist that he does his work so superlatively well, that we all but forget what his work was supposed to be, for sheer admiration of the way he did it." My book wishes to inculcate first respect and then admiration for the achievement of the Masters regardless of their task. Indeed, I add "One need not approve of bison hunting by magic, or the glorification of criminal wars, or the ostentation of wealth and power to admire the work which once served such ends. The pearl completely covers the core."

These problems of mastery, of course, are not the same for the architect, the playwright, the poet or the maker of images and needless to say it is these specific problems I mainly meant to deal with. The way I chose must be the subject of my second comment.

Briefly, I built my plot around a contrast familiar to any art teacher: The contrast between seeing and knowing. It is an old experience that it is far from easy to make the beginner attend to what he or she really sees, rather than what he or she knows about the motif that is to be drawn. I think it is an old insight, indeed it was discussed in the 18th century and even more in the 19th, for instance by John Ruskin who introduced the slogan of the Innocent Eye, but only towards the end of the 19th century did art historians use this contrast systematically to explain the character of children's drawings or what was known as primitive art as based on the so-called conceptual image or memory image.

I found that the great advantage of this approach was that it did not imply what is called a "value judgment". Earlier ages had despised or even ridiculed images that seemed so far at variance with

appearances, as clumsy or barbaric. I mainly used my chapter devoted to Egyptian Art to establish the basic fact that these artists (page 60) "did not set out to sketch nature as it appeared from any fortuitous angle. They drew from memory according to strict rules which ensured that everything that had to go into the picture would stand out in perfect clarity." To avoid getting involved in psychological jargon, I refer to this approach throughout the book as the Egyptian method. As you may remember, I tried to show how this method of image-making gave way to its alternative, the reliance on visual observation which the Greeks called *Mimesis*. I cannot claim that I developed this approach all of my own. As early as 1900 the archeologist, Emanuel Lowy, had published a seminal book called *The Imitation of Nature in Greek Art*, and I was so lucky in my student days in the '30s, still to attend the lectures and seminars of this immensely lovable scholar. It was Lowy who demonstrated how the schematic images of archaic Greek Art gradually approximated to nature in the course of centuries without ever quite losing the traces of their origin in the Egyptian method. What I did, in the rest of the book, was to extrapolate on this observation, and to tell the story of image making as a kind of ding-dong battle between these opposing principles, up to the time of the Impressionists, when Manet, as I said -- tried to forget that he knew that a horse had four feet and aimed at representing only what he really saw during a horse race (page 517).

Here, with the triumph of Impressionism the story I chose to tell should in a way have come to an end and I had to explain why it did not. I reminded the reader (page 562) that "The paintings that resulted from this theory were very fascinating works of art, but the idea on which they were based was only half true. What we call "seeing" is invariably colored and shaped by our knowledge (or belief) of what we see." As I put it: "The Egyptian in us can be suppressed but it's never quite defeated."

You will find this reflection quite near the opening of my chapter on 20th Century Movements, because I thought it helped to explain why Impressionism was not and could not be the end of my story. The imitation of nature really turned out to present an insoluble problem that led to a frantic search for alternative aims.

Noticing this break in my narrative, many critics have concluded that I am out of sympathy with this search. I am not, but as an historian I had to confront the fact that the art of our century lacks the kind of cohesion or continuity that provided my story with its narrative thread. I believe that this, discontinuity has been hidden or masked, in the mind of many critics by an implicit belief in the inherent logic of progress. It is this belief that my late friend the philosopher, K.R. Popper, called "Historicism," the metaphysical faith in the inevitable rightness of any historical development. This faith, which certainly reacted back on the art of the century regards any criticism as blasphemy.

Let me say in conclusion, as my final point, why I do not share this faith. Having experienced the rise of the Nazis in my formative years, I have an instinctive abhorrence of all collectivist creeds. I am an individualist and wholly allergic to the cry of "We, we, we" whether it results from sectarianism, nationalism, racism, or what I might call 'periodism', that invokes the so called spirit of our age. I don't believe that we have a moral duty to go with the times, on the contrary, we may rather have a moral duty to resist the pressures of collectivism that are menacing our civilization. But I better get down from the soap box and switch on my answering machine.