

E. H. Gombrich, (with Carlos Montes) Sir Ernst Gombrich. Interview with Carlos Montes, Composición Arquitectónica. Art & Architecture, Bilbao (Spain), June, Vol. 6, 1990, pp.125-136 [Trapp no.1990V.1]

Carlos Montes. Architect. Professor in the Analysis of Architecture at the School of Architecture of Valladolid. Author, among others, of the books *Teoría, Crítica e Historiografía de la Arquitectura* (1985), *E. H. Gombrich: marco conceptual y bibliografía* (1985), and *Creatividad y Estilo* (1989).

C.M.: *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* was published in Spain in 1968, many years prior to that the publishers Garriga had brought out *The Story of Art*. However, it has taken almost twenty years for professor Gombrich's influence to be felt in our country. *The Story of Art* is the book which has sold the most copies of the prestigious Alianza Forma collection; two editions of the book *Art and Illusion* have gone out of print; and, in the last few years, *The Sense of Order, Ideals and Idols, The Image and the Eye*, and the four volumes of his *Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* have been published.

Nevertheless, we fear that your particular methodological approach has not been entirely understood by the art historians of our country. Indeed, there seems to be a certain lack of interest among the scholars in theoretical questions, along with a lack of vision of the general problems of art and excessive specialization. What is your opinion on this matter?

E.H.G.: In the Bible Christ says: "*In My Father's house there are many mansions*" (St. John xiv, 2). There are many mansions also in art historical studies. I would never want to advocate that every art historians should occupy himself with the problems which have interested me. Above all I have always stressed that the traditional role of the art historian as a consultant to collectors and to museums will always remain the most important one. We want to know who made the works of art in our collections, when they were made and how they reached the collection; in other words we need historians who are connoisseurs of style and who can study the relevant documents in the archives. There are many such excellent scholars in Spain whom I greatly respect. They could not do their work without specialising.

If I myself have chosen a different approach in my writings this may be due to accidents of temperament and of my academic life. I have been influenced from the outset by the so-called Viennese school of art history, the school of Wickhoff, Riegl and my teacher Schlosser. They were interested in the large scale movements of style, the various ways in which nature has been represented in various periods, and in explaining these developments. It has always been obvious that any such explanation would have to draw on psychology, particularly the psychology of perception. I have continued this tradition, but of course not to the exclusion of other issues. I would never claim that I have said the last word on any of them and if my colleagues in Spain continue these researches this gives me much pleasure.

C.M.: In 1936 you entered the Warburg Institute, which had recently been moved from Hamburg to London, in order to work on an ambitious research programme which had absorbed Aby Warburg's

interest during the last years of his life and had been interrupted by his death in 1929. Could you tell us what you learnt from Aby Warburg and what can we learn from this great art historian today?

E.G.: Those who have read my book on Aby Warburg will know that his approach was highly individual, not to say idiosyncratic. In other words his work and outlook was much too personal to be imitated, and I have never tried to imitate him. I think Goethe once said about Winckelmann: "One does not learn something in reading him, but one becomes somebody". I hope that in involving myself with Warburg's problems I have also become a different kind of scholar, not by adopting his method - in fact I think it is a misunderstanding to speak of a Warburg method- but by being drawn into the area of his research, the cross currents of the Florentine Renaissance which have also fascinated me.

What anybody can still learn from Warburg is his intellectual courage. He was not afraid of crossing the frontiers, of his discipline in his research and he built up his library to facilitate such crossing of frontiers. In other words he wanted to integrate art history in the study of cultural history. This is a risky undertaking, but it can be worthwhile.

C.M.: In Spain, many art historians relate Professor Gombrich to the Warburg Institute and, consequently, to Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky and the iconographical and iconological method. However, in your different books you have been critical of some of Erwin Panofsky's works; particularly of *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, *Studies in Iconology*, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* and *Idea*.

How would you judge Erwin Panofsky's work, his methodological principles and his position in the History of Art now, twenty years after his death?

E.G.: I have just said that it is a misunderstanding to identify Aby Warburg's work with iconography; the great master of iconography in the history of art was Emile Male. Erwin Panofsky rightly admired Warburg very much and came close to him when he took up the Professorship of Art History at Hamburg. Technically he was never a member of the staff of the Warburg Institute. I was most happy to meet this great scholar quite frequently during my trips to America, I was often in his house and admired the range of his knowledge, his wit, and the warmth of his personality. But there is an old saying dating from classical antiquity "*Plato is my friend, and so is Socrates, but Truth is an even greater friend of mine*". I never thought that Panofsky could never be wrong and he did not think so either. Scholarship cannot be a respecter of persons. Needless to say I have never read a book by Panofsky without profiting from the experience, even where I came to disagree with him. It is a common lot in science and in the humanities that the next generation will have much to criticize in the work of earlier pioneers and I am by no means the only art historian who feels unable to accept the conclusions of the works you mention.

C.M.: Ernst Kris' work is not very well known in Spain; *Die Legende vom Künstler* has only recently been published in Spain. In the preface of this book and in some of your writings you frequently refer

to the enormous gratitude and to the influence that Ernst Kris had on the course of your career in the years prior to the war and on your first works. Could you explain how you are able to reconcile Ernst Kris' theories - the application of psychoanalysis to art - and Karl Popper's methodology?

E.G.: I am afraid I have to repeat myself in answer to this question. The motto of the Royal Society which had Newton among its founders reads "*Nullius in verba*" [We swear by nobody's words]. The fact that I have learned a very great deal from Kris and from Popper has not turned me into a schizophrenic. It is precisely Popper's point that no authority in science can be absolute. He has objected to the absolute authority sometimes accorded to Freud in psycho-analytic writings and I fully agree with him, but that does not mean that Freud had not pointed to very interesting questions in the history of culture and of the human mind. In my book *The Sense of Order* I have certainly profited from Kris' ideas about the grotesque.

C.M.: I believe your *The Story of Art* has been published in 18 languages and has sold more than two million copies. What started out as a history for young people has ended up as one of the few bestsellers among art books. Could you explain how and why you wrote this book? In your opinion, what are the reasons for the great popularity it has achieved?

E.G.: The genesis of *The Story of Art* is a curious one: before I ever came to the Warburg Institute I wrote a little *History of the World* in a series intended for children. (This book, by the way, which was published in 1935 has recently been reissued in Germany with an additional chapter on the last 50 years). It was the success of that book that prompted my publisher to invite me to write a history of art for children, and though I was reluctant to do so I ultimately made the attempt because I needed the money. I signed the contract during the war when I worked for the BBC and was not officially connected with the Warburg Institute. Returning to the Institute I felt I had to fulfil the contract, though, truth to say, Fritz Saxl did not like my doing this at all. Maybe, the success of the book is due to the fact that it was never conceived as a text book and that I wrote it largely from memory, having been away from art historical research during the years of the war and seeing the whole development from a distance. I was thrilled to receive the Chinese translation of the book yesterday.

C.M.: We continuously come across references to Karl Popper's work in your books and particularly to *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies*. On one occasion you actually stated that you owe all your familiarity with problems of scientific methodology and philosophy to your constant friendship with Karl Popper. Popper himself wrote that you do not limit yourself to taking references from his work but that you have developed his ideas in a brilliant and original way and that your work surprises and delights him for both its excellence and the wealth of new suggestions that you set forth.

What were your relations with Professor Popper from the years prior to the war in Vienna? Could you talk to us about the most important aspects of Karl Popper's philosophy in relation to your ideas?

E.G.: I had met Karl Popper only fleetingly in Vienna, though we had common friends and I had heard about his work. I suppose it was one of these friends who sent him to me when he came to London for a short time in the spring of 1936 and our friendship dates from that period. After Hitler's invasion of Austria Popper accepted a position in New Zealand and only came to England after the war, but we were in correspondence at that time and he asked me to help see his book *The Open Society* through the press. We have kept in close touch ever since and we generally talk on the telephone several times a week.

It would take me a good deal of time to answer the last part of your question, but briefly I might mention three aspects of his philosophy, his rationalism, his individualism, and his rejection of relativism. I fully accept his criticism of all collectivist theories of history which he has called "Historicism". Many of these ideas can be traced back to the philosophy of Hegel and I share with Popper the feeling that this heritage has impeded the progress of the humanities.

C.M.: Now, years on, and thanks to your writings and those of Karl Popper, we have been able to appreciate how architects like Le Corbusier, Gropius or Mies van der Rohe as well as architectural historians like Emil Kaufmann, Hans Sedlmayr, Sigfried Giedion or Nikolaus Pevsner were deeply influenced by historicist approaches.

As you know, Professor David Watkin analysed this situation in a little book entitled *Morality and Architecture* (1977), basing himself on your writings and those of Karl Popper. Watkin was especially critical of Nikolaus Pevsner's work in this book. Do you agree with this harsh criticism? Did you know Professor Pevsner? Did you have dealings with him?

E.G.: I am glad you asked that question. Indeed I knew Nikolaus Pevsner very well and greatly loved and admired him. I was sorry Watkin criticized him so harshly. I never thought he should have been so personal in his attack. Like all of us Pevsner could not have done his work if he had not been inspired by a strong faith, and surely his work is admirable. His sheer industry in compiling the *Buildings of England* and directing the *Pelican History of Art* while continuing to write and to teach was really awe-inspiring. I once had an informal public discussion with Pevsner about his book *The Englishness of English Art* and found him as modest and humane as I expect him to be. To be sure, like Panofsky and many other great scholars he had been influenced by Hegel's philosophy of history, but that does not make him less admirable.

C.M.: In our opinion, in the last few years, a profound debate has been taking place concerning both the teaching and practice of architecture in an attempt to recover objective canons for criticism. Do you think it is possible that this return to critical debate will also occur in the case of painting and sculpture?

E.G.: I certainly think that it is possible. In fact I believe this debate has already started. Whether such a debate can help the creative artists I do not know, but it may influence the teaching of art and that can be all to the good.

C.M.: Do you think we should be optimistic as regards the present state of art and the overcoming of historicism?

E.G.: Yes, I think there are good reasons for optimism, but there are also serious obstacles to be overcome: I am thinking of the hold which intellectual fashions have over the young, the hold which may be reinforced by television and other media. I know that fashions have always existed, but the power of the "box" seems to me unprecedented.

C.M.: In the sixties you were opposed to the cleaning and restoration of the pictures in the National Gallery in London. What is your present opinion on the subject? How do you value the work of restoration and cleaning of the paintings of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel?

E.G.: I never opposed cleaning as such, no reasonable person would. The term "cleaning" however can be misused and has been misused. It was this I opposed in the sixties. I have been lucky enough to see the restoration of Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling at close quarters and I am fully convinced that this work is done with all necessary care.

C.M.: In our opinion, the book, *The Sense of Order* is also fundamental for the understanding of many aspects closely related to architecture. However, it has been said that it is an excessively complex book and difficult to understand. What would you say to this comment?

E.G.: I cannot but agree that *The Sense of Order* is a difficult book, but then it not only deals with a difficult subject but also with a topic which has been greatly neglected in the literature on art. I was all the more happy the other day to receive a letter from a scientist who is also working in applied art who clearly appreciated the book and found it useful. One cannot please everybody all the time.

C.M.: Your last work published in Spain, *New Light on Old Masters* (1987) includes two interesting articles on the architecture of Giulio Romano in which you offer an original point of view and valuable reflections on Mannerism. We know that these articles are related to your doctoral thesis on the architecture of Giulio Romano, written in 1933, but we do not know the reasons which led you to carry out this research: if the works of Ernst Kris, Max Dvorák or Hans Sedlmayr influenced this choice in any way. Could you tell us about your doctoral thesis?

E.G.: I came across the Palazzo del Te as a student and found to my surprise that it had been much neglected in literature. This was indeed the time when the problem of "Mannerism" was much debated in Vienna by all the people you mention. In particular the question was asked whether there was a distinctive Mannerist style of architecture. Since Giulio Romano was both a painter and an architect I found this a worthwhile point of entry into this problem. I believe I have written about my choice in a

contribution to the xxv Vienna Congress of Art Historians 1983 entitled *Art History and Psychology in Vienna Fifty Years Ago*, and in the catalogue of Werner Hofmann's Exhibitions *Zauber der Medusa* (Vienna, 1987, pp. 22-23).

C.M.: You have always been greatly interested in the idea of primitivism and its relation to the idea of progress in the arts. We have heard that you are at present working on a book on this subject. Are we to understand that this book complements, in a way, your previous books on the psychology of the image by highlighting the influence that ideas exert on forms?

E.G.: The proverb says that you should not count your chickens before they are hatched. I wish I had had more time during the last few years in hatching out these particular chickens. If you would see my mail everyday you would not be surprised that in my eightieth year I have somewhat fallen behind with this project, but I still have hopes of producing the book if I live long enough.