

E. H. Gombrich, (with Hayden White et al) Interview: Ernst Gombrich, Diacritics, Winter, Vol. 1 (2), 1971, pp.47-51.

The following is a conversation that took place on April 16, 1971, shortly after a talk given by Ernst Gombrich at Cornell University. The other participants were: Mr. Hayden White, Professor of History at U.C.L.A., Mr. Allen W. Wood, Professor of Philosophy at Cornell, Mr. Theodore M. Brown, Professor of Art History at Cornell, and Messrs. David I. Grossvogel and Robert Matthews, editors of *Diacritics*.

White: If no one has a question that he wants to begin with, let me raise one that concerns both your book *Art and Illusion* and one you alluded to in your public lecture here the other day. It has to do with the possibility of transferring or borrowing from the rhetorical tradition conceptions of style or language analysis that can then be applied to the analysis of the history of visual representation. Do you conceive any particular difficulties in making this transference?

Gombrich: Of course, there are lots of difficulties. A visual representation is different from a linguistic statement. There are tremendous differences: language has statements or propositions which can be true or false; representations cannot. Only statements about representations can be true or false. But I think this analogy can be illuminating just as other metaphors and comparisons are and can be.

White: But there is a level at which this metaphor of the historian of art as one who utilizes theories of meaning becomes significant: for example, you define style at one point in *Art and Illusion* as a system of notation. This means you must see the history of art analogously to something like the evolution or development of language itself.

Gombrich: It needn't mean that: the word style comes from *stilus* which first meant an instrument of writing and then a mode of writing, and then a mode of architecture, and later a mode of painting. The history of this concept has been very well explored, so I don't claim in any way to have been the first to discover that there are styles in art.

White: No, of course not. But I am concerned with your function as a historian dealing with the interaction between different stylistic traditions or systems of notation, and with how you conceive this interaction. My students ask me repeatedly whether, even though you are obviously not a Hegelian, you may not have a dialectical conception of the interrelationship between these different systems of notation that might be likened to the kinds of relationships between the high, middle, and low styles that the late Erich Auerbach ascribed to the evolution of realism in western literature.

Gombrich: Yes, if you strip the word "dialectic" of its metaphysical, Hegelian meaning, and also its logical meaning—that the terms of a contradiction can both be true—which I don't hold; then I think you might describe my idea about art as dialectical. If you have no other word, I am quite ready to accept this word, by which I mean, as I have said several times, that there is, you might say, a symphonic element in art. Every theme that turns up has a relation to what goes before and is sometimes even seen as having a relation to what comes after; and the theme acquires its meaning partly from this relation within the history of art. At least this is true of Western art, though not of all other arts.

Matthews: If I may continue with the language analogy, is it your view, somewhat along the lines of de Saussure, that at any particular point in time an art "semantic," if we might call it that, shows a

synchronically systematic unity or coherence, and that these successive semantics are related in history by a systematic evolution or development?

Gombrich: Well, up to a point. There are quite clearly in art, as such, different arts, different media, so that the analogy would have to be rather stretched to apply exactly, wouldn't it? Whether print-making, mural-painting, sculpture, and so on, at a given time, can all be accommodated in the same synchronic system is questionable.

Matthews: Your suggestion during the public lecture was that in understanding a particular art work we have to be aware of the semantic or stylistic choices available to the artist. This seems to involve the notion that there is a certain systematic character to an art style, such that just these particular choices were available.

Gombrich: Absolutely. There is a kind of expectation arising from the style which is either fulfilled or denied in viewing a particular work of art.

Wood: I have a question relating to your lecture. You seemed to suggest, and I think quite rightly, that when we look at a work's style, or perhaps a work of art within the history of art, we are not necessarily correct in attributing to it solely the significance that it might presently have, disregarding its significance for the people of its own time. I wonder if part of the custodial task of the humanist is not that of keeping alive our ability to perceive the work of art both in a way that might continue to have meaning for us and preserve as well the original meaning that it had for those in its own time.

Gombrich: Yes, I think that that is a very good description of what I had in mind. The involvement with the past which may be a romantic involvement usually comes first: somebody is fired by a style or a period because he identifies with it, and it becomes for him an important metaphor of an attitude. But if he is a scholar, a critical scholar, he soon will start to ask the question "what were these people really like?" And of course you can play the old skeptic and say "Well, how can we ever know? There is always something missing." That's Malraux's position isn't it?

Grossvogel: There are a number of modern critics who believe that criticism can only bear upon that which is ongoing. A real loss of historical sense.

Gombrich: Exactly. Well, I believe this position is wrong because it is "all or nothing." Some things we can understand more easily than others. I suppose that the *Roman de la Rose* is a little less easily accessible to some people than the lyrical poetry of Wordsworth, but these are matters of degree. Still, is this so remarkable? Anthropologists have been known to get into the life and the minds of people among whom they live, and to understand them perfectly well. So I believe the historian can come closer to an understanding of what the *Roman de la Rose* was really about.

Grossvogel: It is characteristic of a society that has been rootless, and busy extirpating what roots it has, that the concept has been embraced that you can "feel" music better without knowing too much about music.

Gombrich: Yes, it is a very strange thing. Music is quite a good example, because I am personally convinced that music, in particular traditional, Western music, even contemporary music, carries many associations (I don't very much like the word "associations" when I talk in terms of psychology) or clusters of meanings which are traditional in hymns, in marches, even in the hunt with its particular sounds, or in the dance—needless to say, for example, the minuet—or funeral marches (think of the

Eroica or the *Pastoral*). All these are clusters of meaning which are embodied in music. Think of the *Heilige Dankgesang* of one of Beethoven's last quartets. These are things one can only understand if one has some sort of access to the world of feelings that clusters around the idea of religious thanksgiving, of the pastoral, or whatever else it may be.

Wood: In reading your book *Art and Illusion* I was struck by a connection between some of the things you were doing there and some of the things Deryck Cooke was doing in his book *The Language of Music*. Your book was centered upon visual art and his upon music, but the analogy with language which you developed even more fully in your lecture points to a certain similarity.

Gombrich: Surely. Music has at its disposal, if you count from the higher to the lower octaves, little more than 100 tones with which it makes its patterns. Even contemporary music, excluding electronic music, gets along, by and large, with these 100 select sounds or meaningful noises.

Matthews: How applicable to the visual arts is this notion of semantic discreteness which we find exemplified in language or music? Are there basic elements in visual representations comparable to the phonemes of language or the tones of music?

Gombrich: Yes and no. This is a bad answer, but I believe it is still true. There are styles with very discrete building stones. That's why I used the example of the mosaic which is a medium that builds with these discrete building stones. There are also styles like Chinese painting, if I am correctly informed, where the strokes have names, where you can really speak of such a granular structure; but, of course, one shouldn't overdo it. There are soft transitions and continua in painting, and there are even crescendos in music; therefore, one should probably not be too dogmatic.

White: Could I ask you a question about the response to your characterization of Greek Art in *Art and Illusion*? I don't know what the critical response has been to it, but at one point you indicate that this "twilight realm of dreams for those who are awake may constitute the decisive discovery of the Greek mind." Now I am not suggesting that you've hypostatized the "Greek mind." What I'm interested in is your conception of the "fictive" as the middle-ground between conceptualization, if you wish, on the one side and perception on the other. This conception has had a very great influence. Your colleague Frank Kermode, for example, has been working on the problem of the theory of fiction for the last ten years or so. I was wondering if there has been any critical response that you're aware of to this characterization of the bases of the "Greek miracle," because there again you stress the discovery in literature first, or the development in literature first, of a narrative technique—fiction as against mythic representation—a literary technique that preceded and may have suggested the representational art that developed against the more conceptualized archaic art.

Gombrich: Am I aware of what classical archeologists have been saying about this account? *White*: And classical historians ... whether they find this a helpful notion for the characterization of Greek culture. Secondly, the conception of fictive capability itself as a third-order "twilight realm," as you called it, which sets its own problems. Thirdly, the relationship between narrative representation in literature and realistic representation in the visual and plastic arts.

Gombrich: I have not seen an explicit discussion of this in classical archeology.

White: Or in classical art history? It is a rather crucial historical hypothesis that you advance, it seems to me, because it has to do with the breakaway from the archaic or ritual past.

Gombrich: You see, there is, perhaps I should say this, an older, fairly well established though never completely worked out theory, which I also hold, that something analogous happened in the change from the kind of ritualistic image of the middle ages to the more narrative art of let us say Giotto. This older theory was put forward long before I put forward this analogy, for instance in Emile Male's famous book, *Religious Art*, on the end of the middle ages, in which he thinks that it was a type of literature—he narrows it down a little too much to particular texts—like the *Meditation on the Life of Christ* by Pseudo Bonaventura, the preaching of the friars, and the popular preachers who wanted their listeners to evoke vividly the story of the Passion, which influenced art in this way. I believe this to be true. I believe that the story of Saint Francis who actually built a crib and put a Christ child into it is a very relevant story for the growth of realism. Sabatier and other 19th century scholars were interested in this, but art historians in the last few decades have tended, with some very great exceptions, to deal with other problems and have not clearly gone on record whether or not they accept this view. One of the reasons for this is, I believe—a sort of pet aversion of mine as you know—the Hegelian bias which wants to fit every style into the expression of the new spirit of an age without considering the change in function which the image may have undergone. And this story of Saint Francis would be a typical example of the shift in the total function of art which leads to a visual representation which may not have existed in this form in romanesque art and which would account for a new striving for lifelikeness, first demanded and then fulfilled.

White: And you think that an analogous transformation occurred in the fifth century B. C.?

Gombrich: That is what my idea would be. And the basic example of course, is the drama. Tragedies could and certainly can represent the myth on the stage in different forms without causing offense, because there is an element of a play in it, which differs from the ritual reenactment. Now I am aware of some problems, particularly of the drama in ancient India where perhaps the situation was analogous, perhaps not. Well, other people ought to do some work on that!

Grossvogel: I wonder whether we haven't gotten back to the first question in the sense that the understanding of any one of these forms presupposes a grasp of a totality in the past; so that what was called the custodial need is in fact an ability to achieve that grasp.

Gombrich: Surely there never is a grasp of totality, because we are very limited human beings, but we can just try to bring in as much as possible into the picture . . .

Grossvogel: But your criticism of Hegel is a criticism of an incomplete grasp, or of a system imposed.

Gombrich: It is indeed. A system which knows the outcome before it starts investigating.

Grossvogel: I was wondering whether, as one moves from ritual to fiction, one is not in a sense acknowledging one's separation from the past; that is to say, whether we are not dealing with a progressive internalization or a rendering private of that which was tribal, social, and more complex at the beginning. If I'm right, and we have gotten back to the question of humanistic custody, the custodial virtue is an attempt to get back to the fuller complexity of the past.

Gombrich: I would accept that. I am not totally optimistic about the possibility of a 20th century person understanding what the spectator of Aeschylus really felt when he saw the *Prometheus Unbound*. One can only try, in that it makes sense to say that one can come a little closer to this understanding. There is quite clearly a tremendous task involved in grasping another religion or another system where such a totally different outlook prevails. But perhaps more than this custodial value, I see in the

humanist's very attempt to grapple with this a significant value because that is a really human ... well, duty, if you like, that one should know that there are different values, that there are different societies or cultures which shape their whole life and language around different value systems.

Grossvogel: My feeling is that this kind of understanding must be increasingly difficult to achieve as the public ritual has been replaced by internalized myths; and in an age which has become more and more private, more and more atomized, the task is more difficult still. Must this abandonment of a collective myth not necessarily result in more private interpretations so that somebody who reads Aeschylus tends to respond as a 20th century man, and neglects a whole dimension that the play must have had originally and which is also worthwhile and the rediscovery of which, I believe, defines precisely the role of the humanist?

Gombrich: I totally agree with you there; but if I may take as an example the reading of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, surely his world is tremendously far from us, and there are passages in the *Divine Comedy* which may at times repel us for their cruelty and their harshness; nevertheless it is a great experience to immerse oneself in this very different world which one can then still condemn as very antagonistic in its value.

Grossvogel: Dante is a case in point. Eliot said of the *Divine Comedy* that he read it before he understood Italian. I think he meant by that that for him it was a phonetic or musical experience. When he says that, he neglects nine tenths of the poem. ...

Gombrich: Ninety-nine per cent!

Grossvogel: But Eliot's is a modern sensitivity.

Gombrich: But in a way, you know, one of the interesting things, and I think my colleagues and you may agree, is the experience that springs from such incomplete understanding—like Eliot's first reading of Dante. When you step before any picture a second time, or any fresco, or reread something, you are suddenly aware of making an advance which is only one of an inch compared to a mile but you have the feeling "well, now I begin to see something which I didn't see before."

Brown: And you cannot necessarily go back to the old way of seeing.

Gombrich: No, you cannot necessarily go back. A simple analogy to this experience is if, for instance, you are really familiar with a famous opera which is always sung in Italian, and you don't terribly bother with the libretto because it is poor and silly like many of Verdi's operas; nevertheless, one day you look up what this aria really says, and suddenly it becomes a little more transparent: there's something more there, you know why it is this and not that. And you can't, as you say, go back. You have a fresh dimension; a new meaning has been added. And you do gain such insights.

Brown: I've been curious to know if you've given any thought to the effect that a shift in the "historical prism," if you will (Stuart or somebody uses this metaphor), has on the practice of the trade itself. I have in mind works like Rudolf Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. Have you observed how these works actually shift our assumptions and images of the work itself? In other words, what effect, and how long does it take, and it is possible that these art works are in many cases just completely ignored insofar as the historiographer is concerned?

Gombrich: I think there are two things one must acknowledge: one is that I know of few art historical works which are not somehow implicitly influenced by contemporary art or contemporary issues. The questions which should be asked of history are very often prompted by contemporary issues. I wouldn't for a moment deny that I might not have written *Art and Illusion* if it had not been for abstract art. One suddenly sees a problem by stepping outside the tradition. One is caught by certain oversimplifications; such as the statement I discuss at the beginning of *Art and Illusion*: "this is a mere transcript of nature." You ask, "Well, is that true?" Criticism of present attitudes will often lead one to a new, fresh, point of view. Wittkower was largely and originally influenced or prompted to write and investigate the whole of theory of proportion in Renaissance art by the assumption that prevailed at that time, that pagan aestheticism was responsible for the building of Saint Peter's, that the symmetrical, centralized Church is an example of Renaissance paganism. He started to question this, and he went deeply into the question. So that I think it is true to say that he, and any other art historian, is always influenced by the situation of his time, or rather the issues of his time. And I think we ought very much to distinguish the Hegelian terminology of "the spirit of the age," which is a holistic concept, from this knowledge of the problems or issues which the age offers or has brought forth as issues or conflicts which people are prompted to think about. You can call this "dialectical" if you like.

Brown: But I was referring to the climate, if you will, that leads up to the historical work. How about its implication for transforming historiography within the framework of this discussion? In other words, you have led up to the work, now how about looking ahead after the work, after the egg is laid, so to speak, and people can see in a new way? We have been looking at art history in one way, now we should shift a little bit and look at it in a different way.

Gombrich: Yes, I think that it often happens, sometimes it even happens too much, to talk in the terms of Thomas Kuhn, that a new paradigm is created and everybody then adopts it rather mechanically, whether or not it is applicable. I've been gratified and sometimes a little alarmed to see certain of my own concepts reproduced and used. I am told there is a book on the Hudson River School which uses my terminology. I haven't yet seen it.

Grossvogel: Every statement that evokes an echo becomes part of the historical continuum; one can make no public pronouncement nor write any book with absolute impunity.

White: I'd like to take this opportunity to ask a question. I don't recall that you have, other than in asides, paid tribute to Karl Popper, commented upon the extent to which you and he work in the same general philosophical tradition. In the introduction to your *Art and Illusion* you mention that you share the same attitude toward historicism. To what extent would you say that Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* and his conception of science influenced the terminology and the conceptualization of the history of art that you present in *Art and Illusion*, of making and matching, question and answer, schema and correction, and so on—a terminology and conceptualization which varies quite considerably from the terminology of your *The Story of Art*? To what extent was Popper's conception of scientific discovery consciously in your mind?

Gombrich: It was very much in my mind! Of course these things work both ways, by which I don't want in the slightest way to minimize my debts to his originality. The reason that we became friends, one of the reasons at least, was because we thought alike.

White: I have another question. This chance to get you on record about certain things without trying to hold you to it as in a court of law can't be passed up ... In *Icones Symbolicae*, which is my favorite of

your individual essays, you distinguish—I'm thinking of the brilliant analysis of the broken vessel — three different ways of looking at this object that appears in the painting: (1) from the standpoint of technical problems; (2) from the standpoint of the symbology, and of the symbology of the age; and (3) from the standpoint of the conceptions of the artist himself, at which point you touch upon the whole domain of a psychoanalytic approach. Now you've written on Freud's aesthetics. Without forcing you to come to any rigid position, what do you see as the limitations of a psychoanalytic approach, other than the fact that it may be rather monistic in the hands of a dullard or a fool? What do you see as the limitations of someone who is working within or very close to the psychoanalytic approaches to art history and art criticism? Have you any particular objections?

Gombrich: Far from it. This sounds like the famous answer "Many of my friends are Jews": many of my friends are psychoanalysts! You know I gave the Ernest Jones Lecture in London on Psychoanalysis and the History of Art. Needless to say, there can be very grave misinterpretations in psychoanalysis as everywhere else, but the approach is valid. But I do think that what the psychoanalyst investigates, when he investigates the origin of the work of art, is more the causes for certain decisions than the meaning of the work of art. He investigates the origins—what made an artist do things. And if you read *Art and Illusion* with care, you'll see that I have inserted a kind of psychoanalysis of Constable by telling the story of how he says "take these slimy posts, I wish I could cut them off." This is a psychoanalytic story if ever there was one. Only, I said, one needn't be explicit, because those who understand will know. Up to a point you could perhaps trace back Constable's love of the humid and the realistic smells and surfaces of country landscapes to very early experiences. But there may be many people, as I also said, who have similar early obsessions but don't become Constables because they couldn't articulate them. And what, I think, one can criticize in certain psychoanalytic accounts of art is precisely the failure to distinguish between the causal analysis, the tracing of certain obsessional symbols back to early childhood, and the analysis of what it becomes in the context of the art of the times. It is certainly not true of all psychoanalysts, but you can see the inherent danger.

Matthews: I wouldn't think that psychoanalytic criticism could very well explain the progressive nature of art as an institution.

Gombrich: No, it could not do that, and if it fails to see the way in which art is context-bound, it may really commit quite awful blunders. The slightly embarrassing example for this sort of thing is, of course, Freud's *Leonardo*. He didn't and couldn't know a lot about the way Ste. Anne was then represented within the tradition, and so on. Luckily, Freud confessed this himself in a letter which I quoted in the essay to which Hayden White refers where he terms his *Leonardo* a "novel," a kind of "fiction." "I wouldn't want you," he adds, "to judge the certainty of our results by this example." That is all we can say about it.

Grossvogel: This too might be a form of modern sensitivity, examining according to its own categories certain values which extend beyond those categories. I was wondering whether there would not be a tremendous disappointment in any beholder of the Parthenon if he had to suddenly see it as it was. We can only conceive of it as an open object, broken, and very much accessible to the sky.

Gombrich: Perhaps not. I think there would be a shock, a tremendous shock, if we mounted the Acropolis. Imagine that there were all these sacrifices going on, the smoking altars, the stench of animals burning, booths selling all sorts of things, the high coloration, the shouting, the noise. Everything we don't connect with Greek Art. But I wonder if after a morning we wouldn't think, "Well, it is tremendous!" ... going into the cella and seeing Phidias' Athene—I wouldn't mind that!

Grossvogel: Nor would I, but I think we would have to change very rapidly certain aesthetic concepts, even our thoughts about the proportion of the columns. We know, theoretically, how marvelously proportioned the columns are supposed to be, but I think we understand the proportion only through our present perception of them—a perception which was not possible at the time when the structure was enclosed.

Gombrich: Yes, I think that probably there would have to be a lot of readjustment. But, as I say, it is just as in finding the text of a libretto where sometimes one will say "I'm sorry I now know the text." Generally there is a gain, but this is a matter of faith, a matter of humanistic faith.