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Sir Ernst Gombrich OM

SIR ERNST GOMBRICH, who has died aged 92, became, as E H Gombrich, the best known art historian in Britain, perhaps in the world, through his books *The Story of Art* and *Art and Illusion*.

The Story of Art (1950), which Gombrich intended as a book for children, ran to 15 or more editions and sold in excess of two million copies. It opens with the celebrated warning: "There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists." The book was, Gombrich later explained, the story of "making good pictures", and started from the traditional theory that seeing depends on knowledge - or, as he was to re-state the idea, on hypothesis or expectation.

Gombrich, who was Director of the Warburg Institute and Professor of the History of Classical Tradition at London University from 1959 to 1976, maintained that there are two approaches to painting and sculpture: that of the connoisseur, who applies labels; and that which seeks to interpret, for example a picture, in the contemporary cultural and historical context, so as to understand the meaning intended by the artist. Gombrich himself, preoccupied with the psychology of perception, adhered to the latter approach.

In 1960 he published *Art and Illusion*, one of the most challenging modern books about the visual arts. With ruthless logic he used his profound exploration of the deceptive nature of vision as a platform from which to attack the prejudices that many had exalted into principles; and he revealed the limitations of many of those concerned with the practice or study of art.

The central question of *Art and Illusion*, which provides a kind of commentary on *The Story of Art*, was, according to the author: "What happens when somebody sits down and tries to paint what is in front of him?" The book's starting point was "the perception of pictures and not the perception of reality".

In the first book he told the story of the progressive development of representation - roughly, from what ancient artists "knew" to what later artists "saw"; in the second he sought to explain and justify what he had written, supporting his thesis by the findings of modern psychology. *Art and Illusion*, said Noel Annan, made his generation "look at art in a new way".

In his writings Gombrich persistently argued against "abstractions" and the collective niches of ages and periods. He believed in people, not periods; artists, not styles. "All collectivism has its dangerous side," he said. "It leads to talk of Our Nation, Our Age. I very much dislike this sense of isolation and superiority. We are not all that different from our past. It was governed, as our life is, by many accidents, tragedies and luck."

As a young man, Gombrich had stayed for a time at Mantua, to write a doctoral thesis on Giulio Romano, Raphael's favourite pupil. He recalled his thrill on reading the correspondence of the 15th-century Duke of Mantua: "I remember a letter the children of the Duke wrote to him when he was away. For me that was very important, the conviction that they were all real people and not abstractions."

But Gombrich was quick to acknowledge the academic's limitations. "We historians," he

confessed, "just cannot raise the dead and put them on our couch."

Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich was born in Vienna on March 30 1909. His father was a lawyer and as a young man had been a friend of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the librettist of *Der Rosenkavalier*. His mother, a pianist, had studied under Anton Bruckner and played with Arnold Schoenberg; Gustav Mahler's sister was at one time her pupil. As a child she had been taken to hear Johann Strauss play in the Vienna Volksgarten, and the family were friends of Sigmund Freud.

As a boy Ernst was a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The headmistress of his private school used to deliver a loyal address on the Emperor Franz Joseph's birthday, standing before an Imperial portrait; and Ernst remembered seeing the Emperor passing by in his coach on the way to his palace of Schonbrunn. Aged seven, he watched the Emperor's funeral.

"I don't idealise the Empire," he reflected years afterwards, "but compared to later tyrannies, it was very humane."

When, after the First World War, starvation in Austria became widespread, Ernst and his sister were so undernourished that they were sent by Save the Children to live with families in Sweden. Ernst lodged with the family of a cabinet-maker who specialised in making coffins, and he learned Swedish.

On returning to Vienna he attended the Theresianum, where, aged 14, he wrote an extended essay on changing approaches to art from Winckelmann onwards. He also enjoyed studying German literature (above all Goethe) and Physics. He always remained interested in science, subscribing to *Scientific American*.

At Vienna University he studied the History of Art under Julius Schlosser, but also attended lectures by Schlosser's arch rival Joseph Strzowski. He made friends with Otto Kurz, who later became a colleague at the Warburg Institute, and wrote comic sketches for the students' annual party.

The burning art-historical issue in Vienna at that time was Mannerism. On his visit to Mantua, Gombrich visited the Palazzo del Te, built and decorated around 1530 by Giulio Romano; Gombrich's subsequent thesis on the palazzo contributed to the definition of Mannerist architecture. After his five years at Vienna University, Gombrich obtained his doctorate, and then had to find employment. The publisher Walter Neurath commissioned him to write a children's history book. Having never studied history, Gombrich completed the book in six weeks, and 50 years later it was still selling well.

Through Schlosser, Gombrich had got to know Ernst Kris, who was both a Vienna museum curator and a psychoanalyst. From Kris, Gombrich learned to combine his interest in art history with more general questions, and the two men collaborated on a book about caricature (Kris saw satirical drawing as an outlet for aggressive impulses).

The work was never published, but when Gombrich later wrote a short book on caricature for Penguin he wrote on the title page "by Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich". Thinking that there were too many "Ernsts", he decided to call himself "E H Gombrich" instead - and thereafter stuck to the appellation.

In Vienna, Kris introduced Gombrich to Fritz Saxl, the director of the Warburg Institute in London (where it had moved from Hamburg in 1933). Gombrich joined the Warburg on a two-year fellowship in 1936, and assisted Gertrud Bing in the preparation of Aby Warburg's papers for publication.

When the Warburg lost its temporary premises and the papers were crated up, Gombrich began to teach at the newly-founded Courtauld Institute; for two years, 1938 and 1939, he gave a weekly class on Vasari.

He also began to write a book on iconography with Otto Kurz, working in the Reading Room of the British Museum. The book was almost finished when the Second World War broke out, and consequently was never published.

During the war, Gombrich worked for the BBC, listening to and reporting on foreign broadcasts. The experience ignited his interest in the problems of the perception of speech and of translation. When he was awarded the Wittgenstein Prize in 1988, he spoke on the subject in his speech of thanks.

In 1945 it was Gombrich who dispatched the news of Hitler's death to Churchill. He had been monitoring German radio broadcasts when an impending announcement was prefaced by a Bruckner symphony, which Gombrich knew had been written for the death of Wagner; he guessed what was to follow.

While working for the wartime BBC, Gombrich published an essay on Poussin's painting Orion, in *The Burlington Magazine*, and he kept in touch with the Warburg Institute, which had been taken over by London University. After the war he was given a permanent post by Fritz Saxl's successor Henri Frankfort.

He resumed his work on Aby Warburg's papers, and on a history of art for young people, which, during the war, he had been commissioned to write for the Phaidon Press. He dictated the whole text from memory, using illustrations from books in his library as prompts.

The result was *The Story of Art*, which was published to great acclaim in 1950. "Writing *The Story of Art*," Gombrich said, "changed my whole life." Having been "a poor foreign scholar" with no contacts, he was appointed Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, partly on the strength of the book.

He held the Slade Chair for three years, and was Professor of the History of Art at University College, London, from 1956 to 1959. That year he was appointed director of the Warburg and London University Professor of the History of Classical Tradition, a post he held until 1976.

At the Warburg, he reorganised the teaching programme, encouraging the institute's resident scholars - Rudolf Wittkower, Hugo Buchthal and Otto Kurz among them - to play a more active role in teaching. He organised lecture series, and invited colleagues to come from abroad.

He was Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge from 1961 to 1963, and in 1967 became Lethaby Professor at the Royal College of Art.

Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other essays on the Theories of Art (1968) was a further

exploration of the relation of art to life, and how a lack of understanding of the psychology of the period in which art is created results in the imposition of unfortunate historical labels.

In *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (1972), Gombrich drew on esoteric lore to discuss the importance once accorded to all forms of symbolism. He drew attention to the ambivalence of symbolism, and how it could be misinterpreted, citing the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus.

Erected to the memory of the philanthropic Lord Shaftesbury, Alfred Gilbert's statue had become associated with the flesh trade of the area, rather than with Christian charity; the arrow in the statue's hand had acquired connotations other than hastening beneficence, and it was erroneously claimed that the architect had intended a pun on "Shaftes-bury".

In 1975, Gombrich gave the Oxford University Romanes Lecture, taking as his subject "Art History and the Social Sciences". Delivering the lecture in the Sheldonian Theatre, with its ceiling painted by Streeter, he discussed how it was possible to refute the claim made, when Streeter was alive, that "future ages must confess that they owe more to Streeter than to Michelangelo".

Among Gombrich's numerous other published works are *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (1967), *Aby Warburg, an intellectual biography* (1970), *The Sense of Order* (1979), *Ideals and Idols* (1979), *The Image and the Eye* (1982), *New Light on Old Masters* (1986), *Topics of Our Time* (1991), *Shadows* (1996) and *The Use of Images* (1999).

Honours, fellowships and honorary degrees were showered on him by academic institutions and governments. He won the Erasmus Prize (1975), the Hegel Prize (1976), the International Balzan Prize (1985), the Ludwig Wittgenstein Prize (Austria, 1988), the Goethe Prize (1994) and many others.

He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1960, was appointed CBE in 1966 and knighted in 1972.

He was appointed a member of the Order of Merit in 1988.

To the end, Ernst Gombrich was a warm-hearted sceptic of the "20th-century art madness". He posited the idea that the rapid shift in artistic fashion had commercial origins in those artists who sought to draw attention to themselves, and dismissed much of contemporary abstract art as a "fad".

He speculated that the public, once antagonistic towards change in art, had been transformed into an audience which passively accepted change and novelty. "If anybody needs a champion today," he said, "it is the artist who shuns rebellious gestures. It is the interest in change that has accelerated change to its giddy pace."

Gombrich himself did not own paintings, and he never learned to paint. Aside from painting, his great love was music, particularly Schubert's - "There is very little that quite reaches this kind of refinement," he said.

Ernst Gombrich married, in 1936, Ilse Hiller, a professional pianist. Their son Richard is Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University.

