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Obituary

Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich

Critic and theorist who occupied an important place in art historical circles and at the same time wrote a runaway bestseller, *The Story of Art*

One of those greatly gifted refugee immigrants to this country whose impact on cultural, scientific and social life has been out of all proportion to their numbers, Ernst Gombrich was an influential scholar of art history, as well as being familiar to the general public through his ever-popular outline history, *The Story of Art*. Since its first appearance in 1950 the book has been through 16 editions, selling more than six million copies and constantly being revised and updated in the light of new discoveries in art and advances in colour printing technology; it is one of the most successful and accomplished works of its kind.

Updating it was a task that Gombrich approached in all humility over the years. He delighted in the capacity which new printing processes gave his publishers to illustrate his insights to rising generations of art lovers, lay and student, who were then able to travel to the sites he named and test out his insights for themselves.

He eagerly welcomed new knowledge. His treatment, in the later editions, of the magnificent classical Greek Riace Bronzes, recovered from the seabed off southern Italy in the 1970s and now displayed - somewhat off the beaten track for the general traveller - in the National Museum at Reggio di Calabria, is characteristic.

Far from finding such a relatively recent discovery difficult or inconvenient to assimilate in a book which might have been thought to have set in its mould, Gombrich had no hesitation in declaring that these magnificent warrior figures added fundamentally to our view of what Greek art was capable of at the apogee of its inspiration. And in a large measure thanks to the treatment he gave them in the later editions of his book, the cryptically named Statua A and Statua B have taken their place alongside the Discobolus of Myron and the Hermes of Praxiteles in the iconography of ancient sculpture.

This was Gombrich the populariser - if, indeed, *The Story of Art* needs to be pigeonholed as such. Equally influential for art historians and students were his theoretical works, among them *Art and Illusion*, which took shape as the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts in 1956, and saw the light of day in book form in 1960. Together with the studies Gombrich gathered together in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (1963), it confirmed the arrival in the world of art history of an intelligence of the very first rank.

And yet Gombrich always liked to protest that he was "not very interested in aesthetics or art criticism, because so much of what people write is just an expression of their own emotions." His enterprise, as he saw it, was not to make qualitative judgments - he believed those emerged as the historical consensus of the well-informed - but to discover new facts and to squeeze from them

new knowledge. "We must feed on fact, and on observation," he said.

Heritage and tradition were of paramount importance for him. In an age which has tended to place its emphasis on the individual vision, his emphasis was constantly upon precedent and the need for artists to learn their craft. Seeing, he argued, was a skill, and art is a training in perception. The artist learns what and how to see - as well as how to draw, paint or model - from his predecessors.

Gombrich was wary of pronouncements about "the Renaissance" or "Romanticism", and agreed with his friend Karl Popper that history was not an inevitable pattern, that things could have gone another way. For him art history was not about emotions and self-expression, nor about a succession of supposedly self-conscious movements, but was primarily a series of technical advances. Stylistic change was born of individual technical accomplishment: Giotto's realistic rendering of space, Uccello's understanding of perspective, van Eyck's mastery of oil painting.

Such developments gave artists a new medium, which could itself teach them to see in a new way. The artist, Gombrich maintained, "attends to things he can deal with; he attends to what his medium can yield. An etcher will not be interested in colour effects. That is what we call the style of an artist: his mode of attention."

Gombrich was very much a product of his native Vienna, and would probably have remained in Austria and Germany but for the rise of Hitler. Employed as a young research assistant at the Warburg Institute, which re-established itself in England, he settled in Britain in 1936 and went on to enjoy a uniquely influential position not only in art-historical circles, but in philosophical and allied fields.

Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich was steeped in the intellectual life of Vienna which was shattered by the rise of fascism. His keen intelligence, like his deep love of music, was perhaps directly inherited. His father, Dr Karl Gombrich, was vice-president of a legal disciplinary council. His mother, born Leonie Hock, was a talented pianist and teacher who had been taught by Bruckner, was a friend of Freud and Mahler, and lived long enough to see her son become Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford.

Gombrich was educated at the Theresianum and then at Vienna University, where he studied art history under a series of illustrious teachers, including Julius von Schlosser. Although indebted to them, he would vividly recall their amusing, even absurd, quirks, as well as admitting to having been attracted to the lectures on psychology at least as much as to those on art. Psychology was to be the key to many of his later investigations.

Gombrich never had much patience with connoisseurship in the amateur tradition of attributing works of art to individual hands, and during his active life more and more was understood about how artists served apprenticeships and collaborated in studios. Nor was he content to be a narrowly professional art historian researching in archives or even - despite his long career at the Warburg Institute - in purely iconographical studies.

He may have begun with such studies, but he gradually shifted his focus to the study of ideas behind the images. He pursued these less in literary or social terms than in a broadly psychological context, tracing how we perceive them and how they may change. This approach proved significant and fruitful, resulting in work appreciated by philosophers, scientists, artists and

educationists.

Gombrich's approach was based on detailed study of particular paintings, and he produced numerous straightforward, well-argued papers on aspects of art history, usually with a Renaissance emphasis. Almost his earliest published work was an exemplary article which appeared in 1934 on Giulio Romano's activity at the Palazzo del Tè, in Mantua, constructed as a house for the lover of Federico Gonzaga.

In 1936 Gombrich joined the Warburg. In that year, too, his first book, an English history of the world for children, *Weltgeschichte für Kinder*, appeared, the approach of which partly anticipated *The Story of Art*. It received a second edition in 1985. In 1940, in collaboration with the psychoanalyst Ernst Kris, he produced a book on caricature.

During the Second World War Gombrich worked in the BBC monitoring service, an experience to which he was to ascribe his rapid acquisition of the flawless English that was to characterise his writings. The daily chores of translating, writing and checking for six strenuous years, were, he said, entirely beneficial in that regard. At the end of the war one of his tasks was to write the note that announced to Churchill that Hitler was dead.

When *The Story of Art* made its first appearance in 1950 it was immediately recognised as a remarkable achievement, providing - with unobtrusive scholarship and jargon-free simplicity - a coherent account of art through the ages for a wide range of readers. Gombrich was a master of lucid English prose, and succeeded in explaining complicated developments and ideas clearly. The book is not a mere summary, but an argument, beginning with the first words: "There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists."

Inevitably an historical survey achieved in so concise a compass had its limitations, some of which were to do with Gombrich's own: he did not seek fully to engage with non-Western art; he took a rather old-fashioned view of Mannerism; and his view of the modern period, especially Abstraction, is somewhat in the nature of a postscript.

After *The Story of Art*, Gombrich's fame and career accelerated. In 1950 he was elected Slade Professor at Oxford, a post he held until 1953. It was an experience he found not entirely congenial and he contrasted it with his treatment as Slade Professor at Cambridge, 1961-63. In 1956 he became Durning-Lawrence Professor in Art History at University College London, and in the same year he gave the Mellon Lectures in Washington about the history of artistic progress towards Naturalism. The lectures were published in 1960 as *Art and Illusion*, a book which confirmed his reputation as a highly original thinker.

*Art and Illusion* investigates the means by which artists convince us that their marks on paper or canvas look like a person or a landscape - how the illusion works - and argues that "to draw an unfamiliar sight presents greater difficulties than is usually realised". The artist cannot just draw what is before him, and only with a great struggle can he see what he is not already accustomed to seeing. The book was much praised and indeed received in some circles with almost mystic enthusiasm. Gombrich extended the discussion further in *The Image and the Eye* (1982).

In 1959 Gombrich became Director of the Warburg Institute and Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition in the University of London. His occasional lectures and articles were collected in a series of volumes, of which the first, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (1963), won the WH Smith

Award. As a visiting lecturer and contributor to conferences, Gombrich was much in demand, particularly in America. He gave the Wrightsman Lectures in New York, taking pattern and design as his theme. In 1970 he published a biography of Aby Warburg, founder of the Institute. That pious task had long occupied him, and caused him some struggles.

By the time of publication of *Tributes* (1984), Gombrich seemed pessimistic about the future for humanism as he conceived it. He tended to see himself as a lone surviving defender of values shared and inculcated by those he commemorated in the book.

Publicly and privately, Gombrich carried his considerable eminence with almost excessive modesty, always courteous and approachable and interested in the work of others. Faintly smiling, faintly pachydermatous in a greyish suit, he might be seen eating a frugal lunch at the Warburg, or slipping quietly into a seat at a concert or art-historical congress. But while his behaviour seemed tacitly to convey scholarly equality, and rebuke pretension, he held his own views with firmness, even sharpness, keeping in check an impatience bordering on arrogance.

His softly lisping conversational urbanity could be spiced by caustic observations on people and behaviour. The range and depth of his knowledge made him a formidable opponent, especially for those who wished to generalise about aesthetics. "If you try to formulate a principle for beauty in art, somebody can show you a counter-example," he once said.

He lived modestly in a terraced house in Hampstead, surrounded not by pictures but by musical scores. He never collected art, saying that the best was available to him in the National Gallery.

Gombrich was a fellow of many learned societies and the recipient of a host of academic honours. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1960, appointed CBE in 1966, knighted in 1972 and, finally, appointed a member of the Order of Merit in 1988.

Ernst Gombrich married, in 1936, Ilse Heller, a pianist who had been a pupil of his mother's. They had one son, Richard, who is himself a distinguished scholar. His wife and son both survive him.

Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich, OM, CBE, FBA, art historian, was born in Vienna on March 30, 1909. He died on November 3, 2001, aged 92.

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