

Studio International

Hailed in the later years of his life as the world's greatest art historian, E H Gombrich has been described in a number of obituaries following his death at the age of 92 on 3 November 2001, as the most important writer on art from any period. It is easy to see why. Following *The Story of Art* (1950) – now in its 16th edition and translated into more languages than most of us could list – he published the seminal *Art and Illusion* (1960) which totally rewrote the psychology of representation, and a series of unfailingly lucid studies of subjects ranging from Renaissance symbolism to the visual language of contemporary cartoons. But he was more than a great writer in his 'field'. Indeed, he abhorred the concept of 'fields', which he thought appropriate for donkeys but not human beings. His territory was the great traditional area of the humanities; that is to say the study of those human products that represented the highest aspirations of humane culture in literature, the arts, and not least in music. His mother, sister and wife, Ilse, were professionally trained musicians, and he was himself an accomplished exponent of the cello.

His commitment to the humanities as an ideal, now often scorned in the era of postmodernism, was not merely a genteel adherence to abstract notions of the civilising effects of culture. As an Austrian Jew he saw, in a way to which few living Europeans can attest, what happened when culture is manipulated and abused by totalitarian ideologies. Leaving Vienna in 1936, he joined the Warburg Institute in London, itself recently exiled from Hamburg in the face of Nazi oppression. The Warburg was henceforth to be his place of employment and spiritual home, and he served as its Director between 1959 and 1976.

This background gave especial force to his implacable rejection of all overarching ideologies that purport to fit human society into ideal frameworks. This was as true of the philosophical tyranny of ideas (of which he thought Hegel was a prime perpetrator) as it was of such political dogmas as Fascism and Communism. Like Aby Warburg himself, whose psychology in other respects Gombrich found troubling, the mission to illuminate culture in the face of darkness mattered too much to be a literally academic matter.

For someone committed to communication in words and to how things are represented in images, it was both appropriate and deeply informative for him to have spent the war with the BBC Monitoring Service at Evesham. His experiences both cemented his sense that every portion of communication is dependent on its context in a system, and fortified his instinct that the student of representation needs to look beyond the field of high art. It was the former conviction that persuaded him that the claims for absolute communication in abstract art were humbug, while the latter encouraged such tours de force as setting Raphael's 'Madonna della Sedia' beside an advertisement from a rotary shaver.

The two public peaks of his career as an author manifest different but related facets of his vision. *The Story of Art* remains the best doorway into the history of art, widely recognised as such even by those who share little or nothing of Gombrich's particular attitudes. It retains its supremacy as a coherent adventure journey in ways of looking within cultural contexts. The vision is huge but open; the voice is deeply learned yet easy to understand. The reader becomes naturalised in acts of intelligent seeing in such a way that alternative modes of looking become subsequently more accessible.

Art and Illusion, in which the relatively youthful discipline of perceptual psychology was brought into play in the long-standing quest to define why styles evolved, set enduring terms for the debate about seeing and artistic representation. What he sought, at heart, was a rational explanation of why an Egyptian did not paint like a Constable. He wished to understand the collective enterprise of

representation to which artists contributed over the centuries without appealing to the great forces of the *zeitgeist* or collective psychology. This understanding was to be framed in terms of both the cultural imperatives that determined the roles of images, and the business of seeing and knowing.

His key contribution was to formulate a process of 'making and matching' in which the need for the remaking of 'schemata' (or formulas of representation) to achieve better matches was fuelled by the growing sense in the Western tradition that images should place the spectator in the role of an 'eye-witness'. The achieving of a more refined optical match was not to result from the cultivation of an 'innocent eye', but by persistent historical testing of the ways that images can achieve high levels of verisimilitude. The step-by-step progress of naturalistic representation was cast in terms akin to the notion of hypothesis and falsification, developed in the philosophy of science by his friend and fellow exile, Sir Karl Popper.

In this quest, he stood resolutely behind the idea that the illusionistic picture, made according to the rules of perspective, did its job as an optically convincing surrogate in a superior way to any other system. Perspective, for him, was not merely another convention. Cubism, for instance, could not sustain claims that it was truer to how we see things than a Constable landscape or a photograph. In his arguments with doughty opponents, such as the philosopher Nelson Goodman, he resorted increasingly to the evidence of 'occlusion' as the irrefutable common fact of perspective and seeing. That is to say, the extent to which foreground objects (even small ones) systematically overlap and conceal background features according to inviolable rules, testified to the essential congruence between what our visual apparatus does, the rules of the perspective picture and what is 'out there'.

Even if there was some rapprochement between Gombrich and Goodman as their ideas evolved, Gombrich remained vulnerable to the charge that he defined artistic worth in terms of the gold standard of Western naturalism. In fact, he was saying that the naturalistic skills hard won by Western artists were superior at doing the job of eye-witness presentation – not that this job was itself to be taken as defining artistic or aesthetic superiority. He pointed with a certain impatience to his writings on the glories and fascination of other modes of image making, most particularly in his *Sense of Order* (1979) which he fairly believed to be a neglected book.

It is true, however, that he entertained limited sympathy with much of the art of his own era, not only extreme forms of abstraction but also, perhaps more surprisingly, with those movements like Pop Art that re-introduced figuration and the interplay of word and image. He confessed to me that he did not begin to understand Rauschenberg, and conceded that he was perhaps asking for a kind of shared validity between artistic theory and artistic product that he did not require of art from other eras. He did not, for instance, reject Renaissance art because it was founded on a notion of proportional beauty to which we no longer adhere. On the other hand, he was be ill-disposed towards the Abstract Expressionists because he did not countenance claims that their art was achieving some autonomous level of direct communion with the spectator.

Such prejudices and oversights as Gombrich might have perpetrated are, however, a small price to pay for the greatness of his vision, and his rejection of absolute systems, intellectual or political. Unlike the younger generation, he could hear in his mind's ear the jack-boots marching when intolerance resulted from blind confidence in beliefs that trample human liberties. His death has occurred at a time when his humane values are more than ever in need of sustenance.

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