

## **The Journal of Contemporary Obituaries, October-Dec 2001**

### **Ernst Gombrich**

Ernst Gombrich may have been the most widely read art historian of the twentieth century, and so it comes as something of a shock that there is little of the reveries of art appreciation about his works. The market treated impressionist canvasses as if they had were gold minted from lead. Gombrich said they were interesting solutions to problems the impressionists posed.

The first shock one encounters with Gombrich is his insistence on works of art as artifacts, objects with histories, rather than examples of a particular style or world view. Such iconoclasm extended to his entire field, as he made plain in the famous first sentence of his most widely read book, *The Story of Art*: "There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists." It is doubtful that he quite believed it, but it sounded good and introduced some important ideas. Works of art are created by craftsmen seeking solutions. Thus Gombrich was equally interested in works of Leonardo da Vinci and the cards in airplane seat pockets that tell you how to escape in case of emergency. He was singularly uninterested in questions of provenance, and in connoisseurship in general. A work of art to him was a rebus to be decoded. He said that he had never been moved to tears, nor even laughter, by a work of art. Somehow this did not kill his fascination with his subject, which captivated him productively from a young age until his tenth decade.

"Why is it," he asked at the start of *Art and Illusion*, "that different ages and different nations have represented the visible world in such different ways?" The answers he provided, for there can be no single answer, are the stuff of psychology and history and science. He was opposed to teleology of any sort; his history of art could never be the history of perfecting the ability to paint "what is really out there," culminating, say, with the Renaissance mastery of the human form or Impressionism's mastery of light. He despised the Pre-Raphaelites for "their dubious conviction that the earlier Italians, such as Fra Angelico, may have lacked the technical mastery of later periods but were, for that very reason, more sincere than Raphael." If such a statement seems hackneyed today, it is only because Gombrich made the truth of it so obvious. Sudden illumination on Rosetti: the art cloys because he was an anti-intellectual snob. Yet Gombrich did have a particular love for the first stirrings of the Renaissance: "There never was an age to match the majesty of Giotto's paintings." However, he was quick to note, it was no age of innocence. "The period of Giotto was also that of Dante, when the streets of Florence resounded with the clash between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines and the exiled poet painted a fearful picture of the wicked gings-on in his native city."

He could produce epiphanies in the uninitiated: Greek temples (source of so much of our own architecture) were based on the timber structures that preceded them. The odd (to our eyes) perspectives of Egyptian tomb painting was the result of showing each feature of the human body from the angle at which it was most dramatic. Eyes are represented in direct gaze, while feet are in profile. Thus it is a great moment in art history, for Gombrich, when he finds a foot portrayed on a Greek vase c. 500 BC projecting toward the viewer. It is the start of "the greatest discovery of all, the discovery of foreshortening."

One of Gombrich's more important insights is that innovations in technique lead not just to achievements but to challenges. Thus the Renaissance mastery of space led to wild new kinds of compositions. One of the most felicitous paintings of that period, Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," utterly distorts Venus's neck and arms. The effect is nearly imperceptible because the composition is so effective. Observations about technique in his writings are complemented by insights into the social

production of art. Of the frescoes of Pompeii, he observed, "These paintings are not all masterpieces, though it is astonishing to see how much good work there was in such a small and rather unimportant town. We should hardly cut so good a figure if one of our seaside resorts were to be excavated by posterity."

In a 1978 essay collected in *The Uses of Images* (1999) he recounts meeting a teacher of art appreciation who complained, "They want a picture to go over the sofa." But for Gombrich this was exactly the point. (He disliked the snobbery: "I am only too keenly aware of worse crimes being committed all around us than the selection of a picture to go over the sofa.") More importantly, the place where a painting is meant to be displayed is an important clue to why it looks the way it does. Botticelli's "Primavera" is listed in an early inventory as *sopra il lettucicio* – over the bedstead. He notes that the word sofa didn't even come into the English language until the 18th century, borrowed from Arabic. Displaying paintings "sopra porta" – over the doorway – has an interesting history of its own. Why and how do we arrange pictures on walls? He considers the contrast in such arrangements between order and disturbance, a way to capturing the viewer's gaze. He looks to old doll's houses and the fascinating subgenre of paintings that depict paintings on the wall to understand what made pictures look the way they do.

Sometimes being an important art historian could itself lead to interesting observations: "I visited the studio of a very good sculptor and expressed my sincere admiration for a very large reclining nude," he writes (was it perhaps Henry Moore, whom Gombrich knew and whose work he admired?). "It suddenly crossed my mind that I had better stop praising it, for what if the artist had said, 'I am so glad you like it, have it?'" Supply and demand are not such simple things as economists might have us believe.

In the same essay ("Sculpture for Outdoors," 1978) Gombrich considers the history of the Teddy bear. "It is a new kind of bear, a creation of this century and maybe one of its few lovable ones." He was, as the passage hints, a bit of a pessimist, not surprising in a man born in Vienna in 1909 to a secular Jewish family. His father was a prominent lawyer and his mother a pianist who studied with Anton Bruckner and played with Arnold Schoenberg. Gustave Mahler and Sigmund Freud were family friends. In his early 20's, art history doctorate already in hand, he went to work at the Warburg Institute in London, which was to be his home for his entire professional career. Already prominent in his field by WWII, he monitored German radio broadcasts for the British. He brought the news of Hitler's death to Winston Churchill. He figured it out because German radio broadcast a movement of a Bruckner symphony written to commemorate the death of Wagner. Another rebus solved. The interest in propaganda he derived from this work led to an essay on political cartooning, which concludes that political cartoons do not seek to convince, but rather to make the viewer more secure in the views he already holds. Such representations are nevertheless important: "If preaching to the converted were quite without function," he notes, "there would be no sermons, day in, day out, in all the churches and shrines of the world."

His books always sold well; his first, *Weltgeschichte für Kinder* (1936), is still in print. Gombrich's seminal *The Story of Art* first appeared in 1950. It became the most widely-used textbook on art history of the century, running through more than a dozen editions. This is strange, because it is so subversive of what we normally think of as art history, or now, thanks in part to him, art appreciation. The book's allure is undeniable: the history of art is a series of technical challenges driven in part by ideology, which, once solved, give rise to new problems. Such a pattern resembles the dialectic that Gombrich detested in its more determinist versions. "Not that we need to deny the reality of progress in the history of civilizations," he wrote. "but one can hold on to this belief and yet accept the basic fact

that what is called human nature never changes." As a youth he had watched the Austro-Hungarian Emperor pass by in a coach. While he did not idealize the emperor's world, he reflected, "Compared to later tyrannies, it was very humane."

He never learned to paint, and did not collect art. His own home was decorated with musical scores. He lived 92 years, and was survived by his wife, a pianist who had been a pupil of his mother's, and a son who is a distinguished professor of Sanskrit.