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Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich

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E. H. Gombrich, Author and Theorist Who Redefined Art History, Is Dead at 92

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Ernst Gombrich, an author of panoramic erudition and probably the world's best-known art historian thanks to his best-selling "Story of Art," died on Saturday in London, where he had lived since moving from his native Vienna in 1936.

He was 92.

"The Story of Art" sold millions of copies and was translated into 23 languages, including Turkish, Finnish, Chinese and Korean. But Mr. Gombrich wrote about nearly everything that interested him, which was nearly everything, from caricatures to psychology, from Raphael and Poussin to Schubert and Saul Steinberg — even about the behavior of white ants. He was an authority on the Renaissance, a theorist of perception, a writer on the psychology of visual images, a wide-ranging cultural historian, a gadfly of modern art (which he stubbornly declined to understand), a knowledgeable lover of classical music and a teacher of generations of British scholars at Oxford, at the University of London and at the Warburg Institute in London, where he was director until his retirement in 1976.

He taught students about the Medici, neo-Platonism and astrology. But mainstream art history — connoisseurship and attribution — he once said, was "very much on the fringe of my formation."

"I was never much concerned with it," he added, "not entirely through a lack of interest, but because my work took me into very different directions."

His writings proved the point. "Art and Illusion," "The Sense of Order" and "Meditations on a Hobby Horse" were among dozens of books he wrote, and, like "The Story of Art," they helped reshape the study of visual culture during the second half of the last century.

Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich, who as an author went by the name E. H. Gombrich, was born in Vienna in 1909. His father was a respected lawyer and former classmate of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the librettist of "Der Rosenkavalier." His mother, born Leonie Hock, was a pianist who knew Freud and Mahler; she was a pupil of Anton Bruckner and at least once she turned pages for Brahms.

Music became the greatest source of pleasure in Mr. Gombrich's life. His mother also played music with Arnold Schoenberg, although she complained that he wasn't very good at keeping time. Webern and Berg were friends of his sister Dea, a violinist who became a member of the Busch Quartet. Adolf Busch and Rudolf Serkin met at the Gombrich house. Mr. Gombrich said it may have been partly because Busch, a musical great, disliked much modern music that he himself later felt emboldened in his skepticism toward modern art.

The Gombrich family was Jewish, but his parents felt this had no particular relevance. In later years Mr. Gombrich said that whether someone was Jewish or not was a preoccupation for the Gestapo. As a boy, he recalled the headmistress at his school delivering a loyal address on the Emperor Franz Josef's birthday. When starvation in Austria became widespread after World War I, Mr. Gombrich and his sister Lisbeth were sent by Save the Children to live in Sweden. He lived with a coffinmaker and learned Swedish.

Then he returned to Austria to study art history and archeology at the University of Vienna with Julius von Schlosser, a towering figure of that era. Mr. Gombrich's dissertation was on the Italian painter Giulio Romano. Partly because of anti-Semitism, Mr. Gombrich had a hard time finding academic employment after graduation, so he learned Chinese and wrote a short children's history of the world, whose success led his publishers to urge him to write a similar book on art. Years later it became "The Story of Art."

In 1936, at the urging of Ernst Kris, a museum curator and psychoanalyst, he moved to London to teach at the Warburg Institute, a center for the study of cultural history. When war broke out, he was employed by the BBC as a radio monitor of German broadcasts. He did this for six years, perfecting his English. In 1945 it was Mr. Gombrich who dispatched the news of Hitler's death to Churchill. When an impending announcement on German radio was prefaced by a Bruckner symphony, Mr. Gombrich guessed that Hitler was dead because he knew the symphony had been written for the death of Wagner.

The radio broadcasts were often faint transmissions, he recalled, and he realized, as he wrote in "Art and Illusion," that "you had to know what might be said in order to hear what was said." This became a concept he later dubbed "making and matching," which he saw as crucial to how people perceive images.

He explained the idea in the 1970's by citing the pictograph on the Pioneer spacecraft that was launched in 1972: in the unlikely event that beings from outer space intercepted the craft, the pictograph was supposed to tell them what human beings looked like and where Earth was in our solar system. Line drawings showed a man and a woman. The sun and its nine planets were a row of circles; an arrow from the fourth circle, Earth, pointed to a drawing of Pioneer. The pictograph was meant to be, quite literally, universal.

But, Mr. Gombrich asked, what could a directional line mean to creatures who hadn't invented bows and arrows? And if, somehow, they were to grasp that the drawings depicted humans, without a knowledge of foreshortening how could they know that the woman's body was slightly turned, partly obscuring a hand? They would assume that Earth women had a claw.

The pictograph illustrated that illusion in art derives from a system of conventions evolved over centuries of trial and error, a process of "making and matching" whereby our reaction to an image corresponds to the reality of what it represents. "Art and Illusion," in which he elaborated on this idea, was his attempt to describe "what happens when somebody sits down and tries to paint what is in front of him."

Like Meyer Schapiro, the other great art historian of his generation, Mr. Gombrich was a lucid writer. His clarity, dry humor and Johnsonian abhorrence of cant made his books accessible despite the complexity of his ideas, although he wasn't very adept at expressing aesthetic pleasure, to which he never seemed especially attuned. He said 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."

Mr. Gombrich's war experience was crucial in another way: having fled the Nazis, he was wary of totalizing explanations of culture. Talk of Renaissance man or Romantic psychology, besides being hopelessly vague, for him smacked of Nazi claims for Aryan man or for German physics as opposed to Jewish physics. "All collectivism has its dangerous side," he said.

He was always deeply hostile to Marxism, which he considered a false ideology, and to any doctrine that embraced cultural relativism. "No doubt it is interesting when studying the arts of Florence to learn about the class structure of that city, about its commerce or its religious movements," he once wrote. "But being art historians we should not go off on a tangent but rather learn as much as we can about the painter's craft."

There was nothing more dubious to Mr. Gombrich than what William Hazlitt in the 19th century called the Spirit of the Age. It is absurd, he said, to account for Botticelli's women by asserting that Renaissance Florence was virginal and springlike.

Visual forms, he thought, were solutions to specific problems that come from specific needs. The forms catch on with a group of people and evolve piecemeal; great artists are separated from the others not as inventors but as discoverers of appropriate forms. Only retrospectively does this piecemeal evolution seem to have had a clear destination.

As the author of a famous standard history, "The Story of Art," Mr. Gombrich was sensitive to criticism that he misunderstood modern art, which he had to write about in the book's last section, and he cited his friendships with artists like Bridget Riley, whose abstract paintings intrigued him as perceptual puzzles. But his discomfort with modernism was undeniable, and it had partly to do with his disdain for novelty for its own sake. The modern era, he said, was unlike previous eras because it was ready to embrace whatever was new. In other words, art is not a race, and even if it were, just remember the story of the tortoise and the hare.

"If anybody needs a champion today," he once said, "it is the artist who shuns rebellious gestures."

He ended the preface to a book of his selected writings, "The Essential Gombrich," by saying, "I would never claim that these activities are as essential to the welfare of mankind as are those of our colleagues in the medical faculty, but if we cannot do much good, at least we do little harm, as long, at least, as we refrain from polluting the intellectual atmosphere by pretending to know more than we do."

Simple in his personal taste, Mr. Gombrich lived with his wife, Ilse Heller, a pianist, whom he married in 1936, in a modest, uncluttered house in Hampstead with a few photographs on the walls by his friend Cartier-Bresson, but with little art, which he said was already available to him at the National Gallery. He is survived by his wife and their son, Richard, a professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University.