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Riegl Heir: Richard Wollheim on E.H. Gombrich. (Passages).(Obituary)

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Daumier said: "We must follow our own time." And Ingres said: "But what if the time is wrong."
--E.H. Gombrich and Didier Eribon, *Looking for Answers: Conversations on Art and Science* (1993)

THE ART HISTORIAN Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich was born on March 30, 1909, and died on November 3, 2001. The ninety-two years that he spanned were no ordinary ninety-two years, nor was the life that he crammed into them an ordinary life. Gombrich lived through the dissolution of the great empires of Europe, the destruction of some of its grandest cities and monuments, the excesses of the various nationalisms into which it dissolved, and the continuous, sometimes frenetic questioning of its cultural norms. And through the circumstances of his upbringing and career, he was no mere onlooker to these great historic convulsions. Born in Vienna, where his mother, a pianist, was the pupil of Bruckner and knew Freud and Mahler, Gombrich, while still a young man, went into exile from his native city and lived long enough to be called upon, as the most famous and distinguished art historian of his age, to comment on the work of Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst. In the hushed lisping tones that came naturally to him, he spoke always in his own voice, preferring, had the choice to be made, to provoke than to placate.

For some years Gombrich was the last survivor of that group of German-speaking scholars--including Nikolaus Pevsner, Fritz Saxl, Johannes Wilde, Edgar Wind, and Rudolf Wittkower--who had such a remarkable effect on the country of their adoption. Without any bitterness toward the nation that did not welcome them, they managed, either by keeping themselves to themselves or by becoming totally assimilated, to impose certain standards of intellectual sophistication on British art history: they forced it to come of age.

However, there were major differences within the group. To begin with, Gombrich was somewhat younger than the others. I remember vividly when I was first introduced to him, by Rudolf Wittkower, a man of sublime good nature, in what must have been the late '50s, and Gombrich was spoken of as a prodigy, as a polymath, but above all, as a man of promise. Except for *The Story of Art* (1950), that amazing tour de force in which the whole of Western art is set out as a voyage of discovery, and of which by now more than six million copies have been sold, the greater part of his work lay ahead. Still to come were *Art and illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960); a biography of Aby Warburg (1970); *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (1979); and eleven collections of essays on everything from Renaissance iconography to the cartoons of Saul Steinberg.

But what truly distinguished Gombrich from the other great European scholars was that all of them were, in their different ways, single-minded men: each had his own row to hoe and ultimately made his own contribution to the aims and methods of cultural history. Gombrich was different. His

erudition was diverse, his interests were wide-ranging, and he made a point of following them wherever they led. It was this extraordinary range that determined the nature, the stature, of his achievement, but it also made him a less than contented man. Confident in his great abilities, he was often less than confident about where they took him.

It was a common suspicion that Gombrich was not as sensitive as many lesser minds to the sensuous appeal of visual works of art. In large part this charge derives from a failure to appreciate Gombrich's aims.

Gombrich inherited from the great Vienna school of art history, of which he thought himself product, an interest in the fundamental question of the place of visual art in human culture. However the answers that the luminaries of this school gave to this question, couched as they were in terms of the spirit of the age or the nation, deeply dissatisfied Gombrich. He found them empty in themselves and dangerous in the consequences they suggested. But these answers did have one merit: they fairly rapidly returned the art historian to a scrutiny of the pictorial surface, where the traces of these transcendent forces were held to be visible. A brilliant example of this is Alois Riegl's magisterial study *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (1902), which, alongside its reification of something unique to each of the different Dutch urban centers, contains marvelous observations on the work of Hals and Rembrandt.

Gombrich replaced these non-explanations, as he saw them, with an appeal to what an earlier age would have called "philosophical anthropology." That is to say, Gombrich thought that we grasp the contribution of art to culture only if we see how art derives from, and what it offers to, human nature, given our capacities, needs, and yearnings. If one consequence of this shift in explanation was to rid the study of art of what Gombrich did not mind calling "cant," it also tended to distance the fundamental questions of art history from any direct confrontation with works of art.

Gombrich's theory of art is ultimately embedded in three basic analogies: between the artist and the scientist, between the spectator and the scientist, and between the spectator and the artist.

The first two analogies, those between, on the one hand, the artist, or, on the other hand, the spectator, and the scientist, are grounded in the fact that, for Gombrich, all three parties are basically engaged in an activity that common wisdom associates only with the third: which is to say, inquiry. Inquiry comes as naturally to the artist and to the spectator as it does to the scientist. For, as the artist is engaged in trying to master what is before his eyes when he looks out onto nature, the spectator is engaged in trying to master what is before his eyes when he contemplates art. As for the analogy between the artist and the spectator, Gombrich derives this from a view of inquiry as a process of trial and error. In the case of the artist, and of what he puts on the support, Gombrich called this "making and matching": it is only through the placing of marks on a two-dimensional surface and then looking to see if they provide a counterpart to nature that appearances are ultimately mastered. In the case of the spectator, and of how he tries to make perceptual sense of the marked support, Gombrich called this "schema and correction": perception, too, proceeds by the making and refining of hypotheses.

In point of fact, there is more than an analogy between the artist and the spectator of his work. There is a collusion. For, when the artist matches his work against nature, he is in effect anticipating the way the spectator will come to perceive it once he, the spectator, reconstructs the intentions that the artist is trying to realize through the work. It is the grasp of this two-way process that gives a certain depth, a peculiar poignancy, to the finest of Gombrich's analyses of how artists achieve art. I am thinking of "Leonardo's Method for Working out Compositions," printed in *Norm and Form* (1966), and "Watching Artists at Work," printed in *Topics of Our Time* (1991). Gombrich's writing stands in marked contrast to that of a certain kind of art historian who talks of the creation of art as though it were a completely solipsistic, disembodied process.

Gombrich shrank from thinking that there was an essence to art. In fact he treated this view as an error from which the philosopher of science Karl Popper had saved him. "We can decide," Gombrich claims at one point, "what we call art or not art." Of course we can--but at the evident price of changing the subject.

Indeed, Gombrich's thinking, so far from going in an anti-essentialist direction, actually requires us to think that, given the nature of the physical materials, the aims of the artist, and the perceptual capacities of the spectator, painting, pursued as an art, must abide by certain constraints. Such a view stands out against the so-called "institutional" views that proliferate, according to which art is what artists call "art," or art is what art critics write about, or art is what is to be found in museums. All such callow views either attribute an infallibility to what they call the "art world" or else they trivialize the underlying issues. Gombrich always thought it to be a real, not a conventional, issue whether something lies within or falls outside the frontiers of art. Despite what he found himself saying, he didn't think it was a mere matter of convention. Indeed, a great deal of what has been held to be Gombrich's aesthetic conservatism is really a concern for what we may call the territorial integrity of art. Gombrich was certainly a traditionalist, though a traditionalist who believed that the tradition moves forward through experimentation, but hardly a conservative.

I never knew Gombrich well. He was, as I have suggested, not an easy man, neither easy with himself nor easy with others, though he had great charm and true courtesy of manner in all social dealings.

We were colleagues when he taught art history at London's famous Slade School of Art in the late '50s, and we became neighbors when he was appointed director of the Warburg Institute in 1959. We had lunch together occasionally, and once we gave a term-long seminar on Kant's aesthetics. In intellectual debate, particularly on an issue where he had committed himself to print, he could be a ruthless combatant. If ever I said something that I hoped was of interest, he gave a nod of approval and passed on with a brief "Of course": whenever I said something vacuous, his eyes lit up: "Very interesting, could we hear more of that?"

The last time I saw Gombrich was in 1997 or 1998, at the Austrian embassy in London, and he behaved with that intellectual courage which he greatly cultivated in himself. The Austrian government had decided that it should make amends for its Nazi record, and the embassy put on a

series of lectures celebrating the glory of Jewish culture. Gombrich gave the opening address in a London synagogue, and the event I recall, which took place some months later, was a reception to celebrate the publication of the text. He summarized for our benefit what he had said, which paid little attention to what he had been expected to say. There was no unitary Viennese culture, he observed, nor was there any specifically Jewish area within it. In every area there were Jews, such as Schoenberg, Freud, Schnitzler, Wittgenstein, and also non-Jews, such as Loos, Klimt, Berg, Mush, Kokoschka, and no discernible difference went along with this distinction; and if it had, this would have been of interest largely to the Gestapo. He spoke with humanity and dignity, out of the depths of a wheelchair.

Gombrich saw it as his duty to keep alive the complexity, the poetry, the poignancy, of earlier ages. He thought it more than enough if he could help people to go on listening to Mozart and looking at Velazquez.

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