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WHEN Ernst Gombrich died in November 2001 he was finishing a book on a subject that had engaged him, on and off, since his youth. He entitled it *The Preference for the Primitive*, by which he meant the search for antidotes to cloying, even corrupting, charm, or bland perfection, and the inspiration which artists and writers from Cicero to Picasso have found in work perceived as embodying qualities of freshness, or expressive vigour, or moral purity ('sincerity') – whether in early Greek sculpture, Quattrocento frescoes, or African masks. The book, soon to be published, is yet another example of his interweaving of history and psychology, investigating and seeking to explain the roots and changing nature of artistic style. It is at once a continuation and a complementary exploration of themes in *Art and Illusion* (1960) and *The Sense of Order* (1979). With this 'primitive' topic Gombrich returned definitively to the first art-historical problem he ever chose to write on, in his last year of school, about changes in the sort of art in critical favour from the time of Winckelmann onwards. Typically, Gombrich's youthful question had been prompted not just by reading (though he was already impressively acquainted with art-historical literature in his mid-teens) but by looking around him, and observing how the taste of his parents' generation, epitomised in the classic serenity of Raphael (the Sistine Madonna had pride of place on the wall) was being challenged by a new appreciation of the angular expressionism of German late Gothic. Ironically, the work which more than any other encouraged Gombrich to take up art history as a profession, Max Dvořák's *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, at first so appealing with its explanatory 'spirit of the age', came to represent the sort of cultural theory that he strove to oppose – and did so implacably after he had seen how it could be pressed into the service of racist ideology. His enterprise as an art historian was to attempt general explanations which were founded on historical data and reasoned principles, on probability and on common sense.

Ernst Gombrich was born into a comfortably placed Viennese family – his father was a respected lawyer – in which learning and engagement with the arts and literature were valued above the accumulation of material possessions. To this he added his own scientific curiosity, and an interest in the workings of nature; it was the Natural History rather than the Art History Museum which first excited him. The behaviour of animals remained a subject of wonder; in later years, when his mobility was restricted, simple 'cow-watching', as he liked to call it in the comic verses he put on postcards, was a major holiday pleasure. Music was always fundamental to his life; indeed an understanding of music, both as listener and performer, helped shape his theories about rhythm, and its interruption and variation, in patterns of ornament. His mother, a fine pianist who played professionally, also took in pupils. One of these, Ilse Heller, was to become his wife.

Not long ago Gombrich described himself as 'a Viennese from England'; and if anything his sense of the Austrian roots of his cosmopolitanism became stronger – at least more explicit – as he grew older. His desire to express himself on the matter was sharpened by what he saw as a modern provocation, namely the identification and isolation of an influential 'Jewish culture' in early twentieth-century Vienna (into which he himself was notionally inserted; his parents, converts to Protestantism, were of

Jewish extraction). Gombrich regarded this retrospective group labelling of individuals who had no consciousness of themselves as a particular constituency, not just as ahistorical, but as essentially racist – along the very lines of Hitler's model.

Certainly Gombrich was, as he has proclaimed himself, an art historian of the 'Vienna school'. The founder of that school, Alois Riegl, had sought to set his discipline on a scientific basis, and paid particular attention to theories of the psychology of human perception. That combined interest was likewise at the heart of Gombrich's approach, even if he rejected Riegl's concept of the role of perception; already before his intensive debates on the matter with his friend Karl Popper he was intrigued by the extent to which art history could learn from the methods of science. The rigorous scholarly explorations of his chosen teacher at university, Julius von Schlosser, who emphasised reliance on primary sources and historical texts, provided a healthy corrective to the temptations of theorising (and here Dvořák, with his *Zeitgeist*, was more of a danger than Riegl), and proved a lasting inspiration. One of Gombrich's most satisfying studies of an individual work of art, his essay on the Stanza della Segnatura in *Symbolic Images* (1972), based itself on a long and learned article by Schlosser on the traditions of library decoration to produce a masterly exposition of the leading role of artistic intelligence in that celebrated scheme of decoration; for he showed how Raphael gave imaginative form to philosophical ideas that were common currency at the court of Pope Julius II. It was under Schlosser that Gombrich wrote his dissertation on the architecture of the Palazzo del Te, in which the topical art-historical question of the stylistic character of Mannerism was tested against the realities of patronage and the practicalities of historical circumstances as revealed in the Mantuan archives.

Emerging with his doctorate in 1933, Gombrich could find no university job. His great student friend, Otto Kurz, similarly unemployable, had been working as an assistant to Ernst Kris, who was collecting material for a book on enduring myths about the artist. Kris, an extraordinary figure, at once museum curator (the author of definitive catalogues of the gems and the goldsmiths' work in the Kunsthistorisches Museum) and practising psychoanalyst, was in contact with the Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg, and had just persuaded its director Fritz Saxl to take on Kurz as a researcher. (Kurz was later to remark that he must have been the only Jew to immigrate to Germany during the Nazi period.) Gombrich was able to replace his friend as Kris's collaborator, this time with the aim of writing a study of caricature which Kris saw as a transformation of and substitution for image-magic. Gombrich much valued the stimulation of working with this imaginative scholar who was always ready to pose wide-ranging, general questions. He himself had already, almost accidentally, found himself writing a history book of the most general kind: the publisher Walter Neurath had commissioned him to translate from English a world history for children; having read this 'unbelievably awful' work, he showed how he himself could produce something much better. The success of this prompted Neurath to suggest a follow-up history of art for young people, thus implanting an idea which eventually, and triumphantly, took form in English as *The Story of Art* (1950). The book on caricature was, however, blighted by circumstance. Kris, who had been closely observing the advance of National Socialism, sensed the imminent threat to Austria. He now

persuaded Saxl to take on Gombrich in the newly established Warburg Institute in London – the Library had migrated from Hamburg in 1933. Gombrich arrived at the Institute in 1936 to be confronted with the daunting task of sorting the photographs and papers of the Library's founder, Aby Warburg, who had died in 1929. The aim was to publish these in some way, but given the scattered and often enigmatic nature of the material, some of it written in the shadow of mental illness, the question of how to do so appropriately was delicate and difficult. (Gombrich's solution, which he admitted was a partial one, was to incorporate significant elements into an intellectual biography of Warburg which he revised and published, through the Institute, in 1970.) Gombrich's early experience of London seems to have been something of a culture shock. Fortunately he had Kurz, ever philosophically good-humoured, with whom to share ideas and problems, and a relentless diet of tinned food in their spartan lodgings. And in the summer of 1936 he was able to return briefly to Vienna to work on the book on caricature with Kris (which, however, appeared in 1940 in English only in abbreviated and schematic form) – and to marry. Ilse accompanied him back to share his new life in London; two years later the Anschluss marked the move as definitive.

Like Saxl, Gombrich strove to counter the image of the Warburg Institute as an isolated Germanic enclave, and in the late 1930s he began teaching at the Courtauld Institute. The director, T.S.R. Boase, suggested that he and Kurz compile various handbooks for students, beginning with a guide to iconography; and the pair embarked enthusiastically on this task. They thought of dealing with subject-matter by categories: portraits, for example, or allegory, or history, a formula which was preserved in the iconography course they later taught at the Warburg Institute; alongside these general themes they introduced telling case studies of individual works. It was in connexion with this enterprise (the book itself was another casualty of events) that Gombrich happened upon the idea that became in 1944 an article in THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE: the explanation of Poussin's *Orion* in terms of the meteorological reading of the classical story that the painter would have found in Natale Conti's mythological handbook. But Gombrich always held that the exploration of artistic conventions and traditions, establishing the normal range of possibilities open to a painter or sculptor at any given period, was a better starting point for investigation into the meaning of a work of art than the (often pointless) search for a precise textual key. Poussin's *Orion* is an iconographic oddity: a novel pictorial theme depicted in an unexpected way. Gombrich was pleased with his solution, as he was with other answers to iconographic puzzles which he discovered in written sources: the realisation, for example, that Giulio Romano's 'genre' scenes in the Sala dei Venti of the Palazzo del Te were illustrations of the effects of constellations as specified by ancient astrologers. In a sense, however, his more characteristic and methodologically significant studies in this area were those which considered iconographic invention in the context of an analysis of an artist's creative process. Such is the piece on Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura; such are many of his essays on Leonardo, an inexhaustible source of fascination for him; such are the few, eloquent pages he once devoted, in *Symbolic Images*, to Rubens's Horrors of War, and such is the very first article which he published in THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE in 1942 on Reynolds's theory and practice of imitation as illustrated in his *Ladies adorning a term of Hymen*.

The two contributions to the Burlington, as can be seen from the 128-page bibliography published in 2000 by J.B. Trapp,[1] constitute virtually Gombrich's entire wartime output; earlier contact with Herbert Read (editor until 1939) was no doubt crucial in encouraging these short but important studies into print. The war largely removed Gombrich from scholarship, though he stayed in touch with his Warburg colleagues. He was occupied with the exacting job of radio monitor, listening to and retailing the content of German broadcasts. Gombrich had a remarkable ability to learn from his surroundings, to profit from people and from circumstances, even adverse ones. His reflections on the difficulties of understanding indistinct patterns of speech (or again in interpreting aerial photographs) without a set of prior expectations of the content, were fundamental to the genesis of *Art and Illusion*. His war work also contributed, indirectly, to another book. Six years of interpretation and translation into English immeasurably improved his command of the language. This is seen in the lucid and unpretentious prose of *The Story of Art* which Gombrich took up – in his spare time, since he felt it was not judged a really serious project by his colleagues – directly after the war finished and he returned to the Warburg. In Vienna, he had doubted the feasibility of explaining the history of art to children, even though he had duly set out to try. The reader for the Phaidon Press in London, in the person of Bela Horovitz's daughter Elly, approved the abandoned German chapters, and Gombrich produced in English the book which over the years has introduced so many people all over the world, young and not so young, to an interest in art and its history.

With this work Gombrich acquired a fame he never expected, outside but also within the academic world (the book was indeed taken seriously by many scholars). Invitations to visit and give talks came from Britain and abroad, especially the United States – though his grateful attachment to the country in which he had found hospitality made him resist American job offers. At the Warburg Institute he taught renaissance history and established himself as a renaissance expert, publishing on subjects from the *Primavera* – with a Neoplatonic interpretation that, without repudiating, he later half-recanted – to the Medici as artistic patrons; at the same time he lectured widely and on wider topics, notably as Slade Professor, at Oxford from 1950-53, and at Cambridge from 1961-63, and as Durning-Lawrence Professor at University College London, from 1956-59. But the decade between the publication of *The Story of Art* and the appearance of *Art and Illusion* saw him present papers to scientists, philosophers and psychologists as much as to art historians. These encounters, and the discussions which resulted from them, influenced the formulation of ideas in *Art and Illusion* – a work which impressively implements his plan to attempt 'explanations' for artistic developments along the lines of those posited for advances in science, adapting, for example, Popper's notion of conjecture and refutation; at the same time he laid up material for *The Sense of Order* (significantly subtitled 'A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art') and for his investigations into 'the Primitive'. Gombrich thrived on the lecture form, which was so well adapted to his skill in the exposition of the most difficult topics – philosophical, technical or historical – and to his talent, fuelled by an extraordinary depth of knowledge and breadth of curiosity, in making familiar subjects newly and consistently interesting by unexpected, often witty, juxtapositions of thought and of imagery. His appointment in 1959 as Director of the Warburg Institute, a post in which he remained until his retirement in 1976, may have curtailed his scope for academic research abroad (he never took sabbatical leave), but he

knew how to exploit the resources of London's libraries and of his contacts, both within and outside the Institute. Questioned as, to his irritation, he regularly was, about the 'Warburg method' his response, 'asking and receiving help from one's colleagues', was not a frivolous one. The formulation provides a key to Gombrich's intellectual personality, when the notion of colleagues is extended to the broad scholarly and scientific community, and the expectation and provision of help is translated into a mutual one – for he was immensely generous to others.

The scope and variety of Gombrich's writings makes it impossible to attempt any adequate survey here; as in the case of the honours he received (of which the Hegel Prize in 1976 was perhaps the most surprising given his well-known dislike of Hegelianism), a bare catalogue would be too long. His students never formed a 'school'. They neither shared a subject area nor felt bound by a line of approach. Ideological preconceptions were resolutely discouraged: it was enough for Gombrich that a prospective candidate was seriously committed, academically competent, and had chosen a topic of real interest; he had a refreshing aversion to programmatic imposition in scholarly research, as in life. He was at once a supreme generalist, ranging easily through time and space (his engagement with non-European art, particularly the arts of the East, is much more evident in *The Sense of Order; The Story of Art* concentrates on Western Europe because it was also the story of naturalistic representation). At the same time he was a specialist, if a paradoxically multiple one: in the culture of the renaissance; in iconography; in propaganda and caricature; in the relationship of art to perception. While he habitually expressed his views with great firmness, Gombrich liked to remark that one advantage afforded by a long life was the opportunity to change one's mind, and over the years he returned to many old themes with new questions and answers. One great artist, Leonardo, was the focus of his special interest; another, Raphael, was perhaps his favourite. With Haydn and Schubert, Shakespeare and Goethe, Raphael was a lifelong point of reference and consolation, a testimony to his belief in the power of art to give meaning to the concept of civilisation, a belief which he did his utmost to promote.

ELIZABETH MCGRATH

The Editor writes: Because of Ernst Gombrich's unparalleled eminence as an art historian, and his exceedingly long association with the Magazine – he was a member of the Consultative Committee for well over fifty years – his achievements have been gratefully recorded in these pages on other occasions.[2] Nevertheless, one particular aspect of his contribution, in addition to those recalled above, should be remembered here – his role, with Cesare Brandi and Otto Kurz, in the so-called 'cleaning controversy' in these pages. from the late 1940s to the 1960s and his continuing insistence over many decades (his last intervention on the subject was in the January 2001 issue, p.162) that conservators of paintings should exercise caution and restraint, not least for fear of removing possible original varnishes and surface coatings.

Writing to Benedict Nicolson in March 1953 about an invitation to the Magazine's fiftieth anniversary celebrations that had gone astray, Gombrich concluded: 'I am looking forward to your party in 2003 for which I consider myself invited.' His joking prediction was so nearly fulfilled.

[1] J.B. TRAPP: *E.H. Gombrich. A Bibliography*, London [2000].

[2] See Editorials, 'Ernst Gombrich and the Warburg Institute: 1936-1976', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, CXVIII [1976], p.463; and 'The voice of reason', CXXXVI [1994], p. 211.