

Independent, Monday, November 5, 2001

Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich, art historian: born Vienna 30 March 1909; Senior Research Fellow, Warburg Institute, London University 1946-48, Lecturer 1948-54, Reader 1954-56, Special Lecturer 1956-59, Director 1959-76; Slade Professor of Fine Art, Oxford University 1950-53; Durning-Lawrence Professor of the History of Art, London University 1956-59, Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition 1959-76 (Emeritus); Visiting Professor of Fine Art, Harvard University 1959; FBA 1960; FSA 1961; Slade Professor of Fine Art, Cambridge University 1961-63; CBE 1966; Lethaby Professor, Royal College of Art 1967-68; Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large, Cornell University 1970-77; Kt 1972; FRSL 1975; OM 1988; married 1936 Ilse Heller (one son); died London 3 November 2001.

Ernst Gombrich was the most famous art historian in the world. His reputation was based less on a particular approach to the subject, or the mastery of a single period, than on the breadth of his interests and his skill at making the history of art interesting to a non-specialist public.

His first major book, *The Story of Art* (1950), written primarily for teenagers, is still in print almost half a century after it appeared. Translated into at least 19 languages and selling over a million copies, even today it remains the most accessible, intelligent and stimulating introduction to the subject. It has also created a vast demand for Gombrich's other work of a more specialised kind, so that his books now have pride of place in the art history section of virtually every bookshop.

Gombrich was born in Vienna in 1909, into a family that seems to typify the bourgeois values of the last years of the Austro-Hungarian empire. His father, Karl, was the vice-president of the Disciplinary Council of the Austrian Bar, while his mother, the pianist Professor Leonie Hock, had been taught by Bruckner and sometimes played with Schoenberg. She also knew Mahler, and Freud, whom she did not much like, although she admired his brilliance at telling Jewish anecdotes.

Ernst Gombrich himself, like his parents, was not particularly drawn to the more avant-garde aspects of Viennese intellectual life, but he was brought up with a wide knowledge of European literature, art and especially music, which was to remain his greatest source of pleasure throughout his life. His friends included many musicians, and his sister Dea was a member of the Busch Quartet. Though both his parents were of Jewish origin, neither of them felt that this had any relevance to their own lives, and the same was true of Gombrich himself. The question of whether or not someone was Jewish, as he himself observed, was one he preferred to leave to the Gestapo. In later life he was certainly no Zionist, and disliked all manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism.

The comfortable world into which he was born was destroyed by the First World War. In order to escape the food shortages of the post-war period the young Gombrich was sent in 1920 with his sister Lisbeth to Sweden, where he lived for nine months with a coffin-maker. Back in Vienna, his school-days do not seem to have been particularly happy. He evidently found most of the lessons too easy, and he had no taste or aptitude for sport. Despite an early interest in science, he was in no doubt that he wanted to study art history at university, a choice reluctantly accepted by his father, who himself had been forced to study law rather than science, on the grounds that his chances of employment were so bleak that he might as well do something that interested him.

Vienna had for several decades been one of the main centres for the history of art in Europe, with a university department that had long been outstanding for the distinction of its staff and the range of their interests. In Gombrich's own day the most famous professors were Josef Strzygowski and Julius

von Schlosser. From Strzygowski, notorious for his arrogance as well as his dislike of the art of the Roman empire and its later influence, Gombrich acquired some of his interest in the art of Egypt and the ancient near East, but he found Schlosser a much more inspiring teacher.

Even today, Schlosser is considered one of the giants of the subject. He is best known for his survey of the entire corpus of European writing on art, stretching from antiquity to modern times. These texts, including guidebooks, works of criticism, technical treatises and early historiography, provide an essential tool for understanding the attitudes of artists and their public at all periods. Yet this incomparable resource was scarcely exploited by art historians in the first decades of the last century. Most of the leading figures were either interested in a rather abstract type of analysis of stylistic change, or else devoted themselves to connoisseurship, usually, as in the case of Bernard Berenson or Roberto Longhi, in the service of the art market.

Neither of these approaches ever had much appeal to Gombrich. He was always suspicious of historical generalisations and always sceptical about the claims of connoisseurs, which too often seemed to him to be based on little more than intuition and deliberate mystification. When he was once asked by Paul Getty to pronounce on a painting attributed to Rubens, of which two almost identical versions were known, his response was to propose a trip to the National Gallery, so that Getty could see some real works by Rubens and decide for himself.

Gombrich's dissertation was on the architecture of the 16th-century Italian artist Giulio Romano. Giulio, who had worked for the Duke of Mantua, was regarded as a leading exponent of Mannerism, which in the 1930s was generally considered a deliberate distortion of the ideals of the High Renaissance, reflecting widespread anxieties in Italian society, and often compared to the Expressionism of the early years of the 20th century. But Gombrich realised that this interpretation hardly fitted what was known about Giulio himself or his employer. Accordingly, he suggested that the eccentricities of Giulio's style, far from being indicative of some kind of neurosis, were meant to entertain a patron eager for fashionable novelty.

After finishing his thesis, Gombrich was invited to collaborate with Ernst Kris on a book on the history of caricature. Kris, a close friend of Freud and himself a psychoanalyst, was interested in broad questions about art and psychology, for example about its relationship to magic. The study of caricature, in which the artist distorts the physical features of the person represented while retaining the basic likeness, presented Gombrich with questions about the nature of representation and illusion that were to preoccupy him for the rest of his life. The book itself, however, was never published, although a much abbreviated version appeared in 1940.

Gombrich's first book, *Weltgeschichte für Kinder*, a history of the world for children, which is still in print in many languages, was published in 1936, the year of his marriage to the pianist Ilse Heller. In the same year, at the suggestion of Kris, he was appointed research assistant at the Warburg Institute in London. This was the library founded by the German art historian Aby Warburg which had moved from Hamburg to London in 1933, and which was to remain Gombrich's professional home for the rest of his life.

Warburg, who died in 1929, was interested in exploring the "afterlife" of classical culture, and more particularly the ways in which the art of the Renaissance, with its surprising combination of ancient and Christian elements, reflected the psychology of the patrons. In order to do so, he had created a unique collection of books, covering not just art history, but also the history of religion, philosophy and other more esoteric aspects of culture, such as astrology. In London, the library had found a

temporary home in the basement of Thames House, where it was staffed by a brilliant, if not entirely harmonious, group of exiled European scholars, whose interests and approaches had almost nothing in common with academic practice then prevailing in Britain. Among them was another former student of Schlosser and protégé of Kris, Otto Kurz, who was to remain Gombrich's closest friend and art-historical collaborator.

The resources available in London were ideally suited to Gombrich's interests, but the job he was given, working on the unpublished papers of Warburg, was less congenial. As a scholar Warburg was very different from Gombrich. He worked by juxtaposing very diverse types of material and looking for suggestive parallels, but he had great difficulty in formulating his conclusions in a clear or definitive way. Gombrich soon realised that Warburg's notes were not suitable for publication. None the less, his study of this material later enabled him to write an intellectual biography of Warburg (Aby Warburg, 1970), which remains by far the best introduction to this scholar's ideas.

Gombrich was able to help his parents leave Austria in 1938, but at the outbreak of the Second World War, as an enemy alien, he was subject to various restrictions on his movements. Fortunately Kris soon recommended him for work monitoring German radio broadcasts. The experience gave him a lasting interest in the mechanism of propaganda as well as providing an excellent opportunity to perfect his written English. It was Gombrich who broke the news to Churchill of the death of Hitler, having recognised the significance of the broadcast of a movement of a symphony of Bruckner written to commemorate the death of Wagner.

In the years immediately after the war, while he was writing *The Story of Art*, Gombrich was also working on iconography, the study of the subject-matter of art, and had already begun compiling a textbook on the subject with Kurz, which was never published. From this period dates a famous study of Botticelli's *Primavera*, which Gombrich associated with the ideas of the Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino. This kind of approach was then common among scholars who had worked with Warburg or at the Institute, notably Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind.

The idea that there was a close link between Renaissance art and the philosophical doctrines of the same period is now viewed more sceptically, not least because of criticisms by Gombrich himself, notably in the introduction to *Symbolic Images* (1972), his collection of essays on iconography. But he remained ambivalent about his own interpretation of the *Primavera*, rightly claiming that it was less implausible than some of the others that have been proposed.

The appearance in 1950 of *The Story of Art*, which had been commissioned in 1937, established Gombrich's reputation among a wide public. At that time surveys of the history of art tended to be burdened down by names and dates, or filled with discussion about the evolution of different styles or about the supposed parallels between the art of a particular period and the "spirit of the age". Gombrich concentrated instead on the tasks that artists were given at different periods, the specific problems that they faced, usually involving the representation of elements of the visible world, and the ways in which they tried to solve them.

He also made good use of the texts that artists and their public had left behind and, rather than appealing to immutable historical laws, he preferred to explain artistic innovation much more in terms of changes in fashion among patrons and competition among the artists themselves. This approach was refreshing, convincing and consistently interesting, and it can be seen as a summation of his earlier work. From Schlosser he had acquired his vast knowledge of the literature of art, from his work

on caricature his preoccupation with the conventions of representation, and from his study of Giulio Romano his sensitivity to the demands of patrons.

The success of *The Story of Art* led to Gombrich's appointment as Slade Professor in Oxford (1950-53) and in Cambridge (1961-63), and as Durning-Lawrence Professor at University College, London (1956-69), as well as to many invitations to lecture in the United States. In 1956 he gave the Mellon Lectures in Washington, which were published as *Art and Illusion* in 1960, the year after Gombrich became Director of the Warburg Institute.

They deal with a deceptively simple problem: why does art have a history, that is to say, why do artists represent the visible world in different ways? Drawing on recent work in perceptual psychology, and using a vast range of visual material, including children's art and advertising, Gombrich explored the complexities of illusionism, showing that artists have never simply painted what they see, but have developed different conventions for representing nature, which are then tested against reality. As he put it, "Making comes before matching."

Art and Illusion was one of the most innovative books ever written by an art historian, and among the most successful examples of an interdisciplinary approach. In his later work Gombrich repeatedly returned to questions of perception and representation, notably in his Wrightsman Lectures, published as *A Sense of Order* (1979), a study of decorative art, and in a long collaboration with the neuropsychologist Richard Gregory.

Gombrich also continued to publish extensively on other art-historical issues, usually related to his preoccupations with iconography, the mechanism of changes in taste and stylistic innovation. His publications, usually in the form of essays, and reviews, were notable for their range of reference, their clarity of argument and their scepticism towards general theories. These qualities are also evident in his writings on wider themes, such as *In Search of Cultural History* (1972) and *Tributes* (1984).

A brilliant lecturer, for whom the greatest sin was to exceed the time-limit, Gombrich always claimed a particular debt, in his handling of historical evidence, to his great friend Karl Popper, whom he had helped with the preparation of the manuscript of *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945). Gombrich will be remembered above all for extending the frontiers of his subject and for his opposition to the more speculative and subjective flights of his colleagues. He showed relatively little interest in the more traditional aspects of art history, the investigation of who made what, or when, and his touch was at its weakest when he tried to deal with specific problems associated with such issues. In these cases he tended to produce brilliant insights which, on closer examination, do not always quite fit the evidence.

Gombrich received countless honorary degrees and other awards, including, in 1988, the Order of Merit. Many people were intimidated by his learning and by his readiness to criticise views which he found unconvincing. But he always believed that discussion and disagreement were essential to the advancement of knowledge, that hypotheses were there to be challenged and tested.

Austere in his personal tastes and generous with his time to students and visiting academics, he had little sympathy with the pomposity and appeal to hierarchy so common in academic life. Yet, despite his apparent unworldliness, he was proud of the recognition he received, especially in his adopted country. Gombrich would have wished to be remembered, as he will be, for his disinterested pursuit of

knowledge, his creativity in posing new and productive historical questions, and for the accessibility of his style.

He is survived by his widow and by his son Richard, the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University.

Charles Hope