

**E. H. Gombrich, Review of Frederick B. Artz, From the Renaissance to Romanticism: Trends in Style, in Art, Literature and Music 1300 - 1830, History, Vol. 49, 1964, pp.130-2 [Trapp no.1964F.1]**

FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO ROMANTICISM: TRENDS IN STYLE, IN ART,

LITERATURE AND MUSIC, 1300-1830. By Frederick B. Artz. University of Chicago Press. 1962. 311 pp. 37s. 6d.

When classical learning was threatened with extinction some knowledge of past achievements was rescued through such compendia as Pliny's Natural History or Isidorus' Etymologies. Today we must hope for similar success from similar compendia while new and urgent topics are crowding out the memories of our civilization. The volume under review presents on its 287 pages of text a survey of 500 years of European architecture, painting, sculpture, prose, poetry, drama and music, mentioning close on 500 artists, authors and composers and giving such diverse information as the tradition of the *ottava rima* in poetry from Boccaccio to Wieland and the exact number of string quartets, piano, cello and violin sonatas (but not trios) composed by Beethoven. The scaffolding which is used by the author to accommodate this vast amount of material was erected by art historians in the nineteen twenties. It was then that the labels for styles - Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque, Neo-Classicism and Romanticism - were increasingly used to characterize historical periods, in the Hegelian conviction that a new style always heralds a new 'age', manifesting itself in all aspects of life. It must be said at once that the author does not hold with this assumption. He stresses that changes in style need not reflect changes in society and he is anxious to avoid the impression of a mechanical parallelism between developments in the various fields. But as often happens with such qualifications and concessions, they tend to blur the issue rather than to remedy the shortcomings of the method. It may be true that it is 'difficult to classify' Lessing 'as a neo-Classicist or a Romantic', but must we try? It is more doubtful that Mozart's music 'harks back to the airy graces of the Rococo of which he is in some way the greatest genius', but if he was, can he also have been 'the summation of the Neo-Classical Age?' Would not the student be better advised to forget these pigeon-holes and simply attend to the music?

Such questions are more easily asked than answered, for in some respect we need and demand a network of categories. The continued success of the Hegelian map long after it has been discredited testifies to this demand. The treatment of the Renaissance in this book is a case in point. Though the author is of course aware of the various 'revisions' which the concept has undergone he can say of Boccaccio that 'he is neither a Christian nor a stoic nor even a convinced atheist' and believes that 'according to Alberti and others, a round church represented best the divine order of a universe *that surrounded its supreme creation, man*' (my italics). The idea that the Renaissance style originated in an alleged philosophy of 'man' dies hard. Even so the Renaissance lends itself comparatively well to a synoptic treatment of its literature, art and music. After all it was an intellectual movement and the label we use echoes the battle-cry of the period itself no less than does the term Romanticism. In this respect these two concepts are fundamentally different from the labels of 'Mannerism' and 'Baroque'. These are of course critical terms of opprobrium which only recently acquired a new meaning and a new vogue. The confusion engendered by this discrepancy is best illustrated by a passage such as the following: 'The development of Surrealism and Expressionism in the twentieth century has now led to a

reappreciation of the art, letters and music of Mannerism. So Mannerism, long considered a stage in the disintegration of the Renaissance, is now regarded as a period of invention and exploration out of which arose the Baroque. . . . Certainly any style that produced the paintings of Tintoretto, many of the works of Michelangelo, the major plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Tasso, the Don Quixote of Cervantes, and the madrigals of Gesualdo and Monteverdi can never be regarded as a mere degeneration of some earlier style or as only an unhappy age of transition from High Renaissance to Baroque'. But this is begging the question. 'Mannerism' certainly did not 'produce' the works of these masters, not even in the sense in which the Renaissance may conceivably be said to have 'produced' an Erasmus or the Romantic movement a Berlioz. Nor did Tintoretto, Tasso, Shakespeare or Monteverdi have to wait for the dubious honour of being appreciated by the surrealists. As it happens, the usefulness of this label of Mannerism has come under attack of late (when it was discussed at the last Art-Historical Congress). The efforts of modern movements to find ancestors in the past are notoriously unsafe guides for historians.

Such qualms, of course, need not cancel out our respect and gratitude for a scholar who has gathered in so much material for the use of his eager students. The accuracy of this information could perhaps only be judged by a committee of specialists. In fields where this reviewer feels reasonably at home there are some minor blemishes. Did Leonardo's ideal for instance really lie 'in the forms he saw in classical sculpture'? Can Michelangelo's *Pietà* really owe something to Leonardo's *St. Anne* (which was presumably later and at that time certainly unknown to the younger master)? Surely Haydn did not show his 'rustic simplicity' by naming one of his quartets 'The Lark' and another 'The Frog', since these are later nicknames?

We can be sure, however, that there are more and worse mistakes in Pliny and in Isidorus than there are in this work of great erudition and enthusiasm. The real problem confronting the teacher will soon be whether it is better for the student to read that Botticelli's *Venus* and *Primavera* are frescoes (which they are not), or never to hear them mentioned at all. Faced with this stark alternative our academic tradition has so far preferred the purity of ignorance to knowledge with impurities. Are we really prepared to accept the consequences?

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