

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain 1530-1790* & Benjamin Rowland, *Art and Architecture of India*, *The Observer*, 17th May, 1953. [Trapp no.1953E.1]

Avenues of Art

Painting in Britain 1530-1790. By Ellis K. Waterhouse; *The Art and Architecture of India*. By Benjamin Rowland. (Pelican 42s each)

A wondrous bird is the Pelican ... in its latest mutation it has shed the familiar blue-and-white plumage and outgrown its handy pocket size. The first two bulky volumes of The Pelican History of Art have just come from the press, and handsome volumes they are, bound in red cloth, stamped in gold; each with 192 pages of half-tone illustrations and nearly three hundred pages of scholarly text, complete with notes, bibliographies and all. They are the vanguard of a stately procession of forty-eight projected volumes, priced at two guineas each, which are to appear at regular intervals during the next twelve years and which, when completed, should form the first comprehensive History of Art in the English language at a total price of £100. Well may the prospectus claim that this is "the boldest venture in Penguin's progress."

Nor is it only the publishing aspect that deserves this epithet. It must have required a good deal of faith in the discipline often perversely called "art history" (for who speaks of "poetry history"?) to embark on such a summing up at this juncture. Granted, as Professor Pevsner reminds us as Editor, that many new facts have come to light since the last similar enterprises were planned on the Continent more than a generation ago; but facts alone do not make history. The very first historian of the arts, Vasari, said so much 400 years ago. "To make a mere list of artists and an inventory of their works," he wrote, "I would never consider such a worthy end of my labours ... rather have I tried to demonstrate the causes and roots of styles and of the improvement and decline of the art."

Today, after the intellectual earthquakes of this century which shook the foundations of art we almost envy Vasari that confidence, the certainty of his standards, which enabled him and his successors to select and marshal their facts. They knew, or thought they knew, what the history of art was about. Are we still so sure?

The inevitable disparity between Professor Rowland's history of the Art and Architecture of India and Professor Waterhouse's volume on British Painting 1530-1790 may justify this question. Professor Rowland feels obliged to explain the strange world of Indian religion, philosophy and aesthetics to Western readers while keeping his eyes on seal-stones from Mohenjo-daro, stuccoes from Afghanistan, and the varying forms of temples, stupas, cult-images, reliefs, wall and book paintings of province after province, dynasty after dynasty. Thus he has to compress a discussion of the art and culture of Tibet's long history into two pages – less, that is, than his luckier colleague is allowed to devote to a brilliant characterisation of Francis Hayman, the neglected painter of the Vauxhall Gardens. Professor Waterhouse has decided to take much of the social and political background for granted and to treat the history of painting in Britain mainly as a succession of masters, great and small; his unrivalled knowledge of English collections enables him thus to define the blurred outlines of many a dim figure and to present us with masterly 'profiles' of a Reynolds, a Gainsborough or a Wilson.

Both approaches, of course, are legitimate, but will not both let important facts slide through the meshes of their net which we may need to “demonstrate the causes and roots of style”? It was in England, for instance, in the period treated by Professor Waterhouse, that the Italian studio-joke of portrait caricature was fashioned into a political weapon. Keeping strictly to painting (to the exclusion, even, of drawings and prints), the author had to disregard this fact. Will another place still be found for it in the forty-eight volumes – or is it not a fact relevant in the history of art as we see it today?

The example suggests that there may be certain disadvantages in the idea of once more splitting off the history of British art from that of the continent of Europe – particularly since the Oxford History of English Art is planned to appear more or less concurrently with these volumes. Looking at the whole of the plan as presented in the prospectus one wonders how a volume on “Gothic Architecture” in Europe is to be co-ordinated with one on “Medieval Architecture” in Britain, or, for that matter, with two on “Art and Architecture” of France, Germany, Spain, etc., from 1250-1500 when the Gothic style of building still flourished in these regions. On the other hand the plan does not seem to provide for the inclusion of the arts of the Balkans, of Poland, of the Baltic countries and Scandinavia between 1500-1800. At any rate one hopes they will not have to be treated under “the German lands,” whatever these may be.

But whether or not a fresh and coherent picture of the History of Art will emerge on Penguin Island, the prospectus certainly makes us look forward to a thrilling succession of important monographs by some of the greatest authorities in the field.