

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain 1530-1790*, *The Listener*, Vol. 49, 1953, pp.1019 [Trapp no.1953F.1]

Painting in Britain 1530-1790 By E. K. Waterhouse. The Pelican History of Art. Penguin Books. 42s.

This is one of the first volumes of the long and eagerly awaited Pelican history of art and let it be said at once that it does not disappoint the high hopes raised by this ambitious venture. The production looks clean and competent, neither pretentious nor shoddy, the quality of the plates is good, the printing clear. Most of all the editor, Professor Pevsner, is to be congratulated on having secured for one of the first samples an author as outstanding in knowledge and skill of presentation as Professor Waterhouse. A glance at the illustrations suffices to show that this is not a rehash of familiar handbook material but an entirely fresh contribution to a difficult field of study. Its difficulties, indeed, are manifold. They arise, first, from the nature of the material which is largely scattered and hidden in private collections in town and country. This obstacle Professor Waterhouse has triumphantly surmounted in years of research. He has tracked down the rare key-paintings, signed and dated, by masters great and small, and thus laid a firm foundation for our knowledge not only of the lesser painters but also of the artistic milieu in which the leading figures grew and operated. For a long time to come his volume will remain the standard authority, the starting point of future work. But there is a second difficulty, no less formidable. It springs from a certain lack of unity in the subject itself. For this is less the history of a national school of painting than the history of paintings done in a certain geographical area. During the first 200 of the 260 years under review the dominant figures, Holbein, Van Dyck, Lely, and Kneller came from abroad and can only be explained against a wide European background. Unlike some of his predecessors in the field Professor Waterhouse always makes the reader aware of this changing background not only in the case of these foreign masters but also in the discussion of their English successors. He is nowhere parochial or insular, but this widened horizon makes it all the harder for him to preserve the coherence of his story. Admirable as are the individual sections, the book would lose comparatively little of its value if the artists were arranged in alphabetical rather than in chronological order. Part of the responsibility for this inherent weakness lies with the allocation of this particular period and subject to one volume, but it was possibly aggravated by a certain indecision in questions of method. The author, who always finds the apt phrase when characterising an artist, seems somewhat ill at ease when confronted with the larger issues. The following passage (page 189) is not only symptomatic of this malaise, it may also help to diagnose its cause: 'Unpleasant as it still is for some of us to introduce the shade of Marx into the history of art, it may contribute to the understanding of Gainsborough to make plain that, unlike Reynolds, whose finest achievements owe a good deal to his sense of social values, Gainsborough's supreme quality lay in his awareness that the beauty of the English scene lay in the lyrical exploitation of the world which lay outside the canons of social distinctions'. It is a sentence most untypical of the crisp and witty style of the author but revealing in its very obscurity. Why 'still' unpleasant? Is the history of art soon and inevitably moving towards 'the shade of Marx?' And must we really become Marxists to understand the importance of Reynolds' social tact and of Gainsborough's pastoral longings? Moreover, is not the pastoral itself very much a category within 'the canons of social distinctions', and recognised as such long before Marx was ever heard of? Can it be that Professor Waterhouse accepts the false alternative that the historian of art must either be a 'mere connoisseur' or become a Marxist analyst? Can the history of art not become a piece of history' to quote the title of his unforgotten broadcast (*The LISTENER*, November 6, 1952), without being caught in the dark Hegelian mills? Surely there is nothing 'unpleasant' for the historian in considering the social position

of art and artists, or more particularly the social function of painting in England. It is hard to see how one could write its history without such consideration.

Yet it is on this question that Professor Waterhouse sometimes seems to waver. He writes of a work by Holbein that it was 'intended as a visible historical document rather than as a work of art' (page 9). Does this not introduce a false distinction? After all, about four-fifths of Professor Waterhouse's illustrations may be characterised as such documents, descriptive of either people, horses, topographical views, or events. It may even be argued that a little more space should have been found for the allegories of Streeter and Thornhill, the religious paintings of Hogarth and the histories of Reynolds. But for good or ill English society conceived of painting mainly as a method of making visual records. 'Fine Art' was something produced abroad and in the past. The history of this attitude and the diverse reactions it produced among painters has yet to be written. No one would be better equipped to do so than Professor Waterhouse.