

**E. H. Gombrich, Review of William M. Ivins, Jr., *Prints and Visual Communication*, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 5, 1954-5, pp.168-9 [Trapp no.1954J.1]**

*Prints and Visual Communication*, William M. Ivins, Jr. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1953. Pp. xxv + 190. 2s.)

This lively and provocative history of picture-printing (from woodcuts to half-tone blocks) reproduces a course of eight lectures delivered by the Emeritus Curator of Prints of the New York Metropolitan Museum at the Lowell Institute in Boston. With refreshing unconventionality the author brushes aside the traditional aesthetic and bibliophile approach to old prints and illustrations. His problem is not the development of an art form but the evolution of a technique of conveying information. In the course of his survey the author treats the reader to a most stimulating analysis of the different functions of verbal and visual symbols. His description of the pictorial conventions used by sixteenth-century engravers to represent the visible world is a model of its kind. But the author aims beyond descriptive analysis to an explanation of the progress of Western thought in terms of his dichotomy between verbal and visual 'communication'. Unfortunately it is precisely this aspect (which must be of the greatest interest to readers of this *Journal*) which is least acceptable. The author is so deeply convinced of the inadequacy of words as scientific tools that he would like to attribute almost the whole technological and scientific progress of the Western world to the invention of making 'exactly repeatable pictorial statements', that is, to prints and photography. 'Science in actual practice is not a dead body of acquired information but an actively growing accumulation of hypotheses put forth to be tried and tested by many people. This trying and testing cannot be done without repeatability of communication.' This challenging thesis is particularly developed with respect to the alleged limitations of science in classical antiquity. The Greeks and Romans, we learn, were thrown back on verbal description and thus tempted to develop a predominantly literary and rhetorical culture, the one-sidedness of which comes in for some merited and some unmerited ridicule on the part of the author. The *pièce de résistance* in this historical argument, which is somewhat parallel to that of Zilsel and Farrington, is a passage from the Elder Pliny's *Natural History* (xxv, 4) referring to the difficulties of botanical illustration. Since the author (slightly flaunting his inability to read the original) relies on a rather inadequate translation it may here be reproduced in Latin: *Verum et pictura fallax est coloribus, tam numerosis praesertim in aemulatione naturae, multumque degenerat transcribentium fors varia. Praeterea parum est singular earum aetates pingi, cum quadripertitis varietatibus anni faciem mutant.* The difficulty to which Pliny refers, of rendering the exact hues and varying colours of a species during the four seasons and preserving it in subsequent copies is no doubt a real one. But Mr Ivins appears to underrate the degree to which it was surmounted. Historians of book illuminations have long come to recognise that herbals, bestiaries, astronomical and mechanical texts tend most faithfully to preserve the style and character of their illustrations simply because their purpose demanded a 'facsimile' reproduction. Moreover, the main problem which Pliny mentions, that of colour, has not even been solved today. But has this technical difficulty really impeded the progress of botanical taxonomy? Was it not rather overcome by selecting criteria (such as Linnaeus chose) which can be described quite unambiguously? After all, illustrations can only be more or less accurate. Only propositions can be true or false, and without this distinction there can be no science.

It is in trying to tackle these philosophical questions that the author seems to overtax the relevance of visual communication. To him almost the whole of classical philosophy seems due to an enforced reliance on verbal rather than visual symbols. Plato's theory of ideas no less than Aristotle's doctrine

of substance and accidents might have proved unnecessary, he implies, if these philosophers could have understood that not only verbal counters for universals but also descriptive pictures of particulars are 'repeatable'. The author seems to have overlooked the fact that the principle of making repeatable images (as distinct from prints) was extremely familiar to the ancient world wherever seals were used. It so happens that this very principle of stamping an image on wax or another substance is one of the most important models Plato uses to explain both his theory of ideas and his conception of memory traces. Philosophically, therefore, he could have learned nothing from the print. That printing helped a great deal in the spreading of information is incontestable but even here the author tends to overlook rival means of duplicating forms; his caustic remarks on eighteenth-century critics deriving their knowledge of classical statues from falsifying engravings should have been tempered by some reference to the role of plaster casts.

It is always amusing to watch Mr Ivins grinding his axe, but where he grinds it too fine it will not cut ice. After all, the technique of making repeatable pictorial statements, i.e. the woodcut, was known to the Chinese long before it was applied in Europe, without giving the Far East a corresponding advantage over the West. Perhaps there is some leaven in the Classical heritage which accounts for this difference? For though the author would hardly be ready to concede the point, the bracing questioning spirit in which his own book is written owes more to the verbal culture of the Greeks than it does to any technique of 'doing things'.