

E. H. Gombrich, Review of George R. Kernodle, *From Art to Theater. Form and Convention in the Renaissance*, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 88, 1946, pp.103 [Trapp no. not recorded]

From Art to Theater. Form and Convention in the Renaissance. By George R. Kernodle. x 255 pp. (62 ill.). Chicago (University of Chicago Press) and Cambridge (University Press), £1 10s.

The history of stage design and theatrical production has posed so many riddles to the historian and caused so much bitter controversy because of the fragmentary and accidental character of the documents on which it had to rely. Mr. Kernodle in his scholarly and well-illustrated book demonstrates that many scattered hints and tantalising scraps of information immediately fall into their place and acquire meaning and coherence once they are seen within the larger context of the visual arts and their traditional conventions and symbols. In the opening chapter three pictorial methods of "organising space" which were to become important for different traditions of scenic organisation are traced back to mediaeval art and—less convincingly—through it to the Greek stage. They are the "arcade screen," the "centre accent" and the "side accents," each of them connected with a set of symbolic conventions. The next chapter is devoted to pageantry which, despite Burckhardt and Warburg, has too long remained a kind of no-man's land between the historian of art and the historian of drama. In this admirably documented account which includes a detailed bibliography of Royal Entries the tableaux vivants, street theatres and show architectures of the fifteenth and sixteenth century emerge in their central importance for both the arts and the theatre. From the point of view of method perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the subsequent analysis of the Dutch "Rederyker" stage and the Elizabethan stage facade. The author tries to reconstruct the meaning these conventional "centre accents" acquired in the mind of the contemporary onlooker and to establish the associations these structures were apt to evoke. His conclusion is that the public can have had little difficulty in projecting into them—with very few external aids such as banners and curtains—the traditional ideas of a city gate, a castle, a throne or even a ship because they embody, as it were, the common denominator of these long-familiar emblematic devices. The "arcade screen" type is shown to be dominant in the Spanish tradition no less than in the school theatres connected with the tradition of Terence and hence with the Jesuit stage. This section includes a brilliant analysis of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico which proves to be less a free evocation of the classical theatre than a splendid adaptation of a living tradition. The Italian tradition of the perspective scene, finally, is shown to be connected with the illusionist prospect between architectural "side accents." The clash of the illusionist method with the older conventions becomes particularly significant in connection with the discussions on the "unity of space" in 17th century France. Despite the victory of this principle the author can point to the persistency of conventional symbolism in such devices as the proscenium and the formal "side houses". It is this wealth of evidence which the author adduces to prove the tenacity and the pliability of archaic pictorial conventions and traditions and the existence of primitive survivals in highly advanced and complex phases of development which makes most stimulating reading for the historian of art. Only the historian of architecture may feel somewhat neglected. After all—the temporary structures of the Royal Entries and the fairy palaces of the stage were not only related to painted architecture. They often embodied visions of buildings their designers would have loved to translate -into more permanent material. It is to be hoped that the author will find opportunity to relate his findings also to this other great current of "form and convention" and thus once more to vindicate Prof. Wolfgang Koehler's recent praise of "trespassing as one of the most successful techniques in research."