

**E. H. Gombrich, Review of Peter Meyer, Europäische Kunstgeschichte. Vol. I: Vom Altertum bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 90, 1948, pp.272 [Trapp no.1948D.1]**

*Europäische Kunstgeschichte. Vol. I: Vom Altertum bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters.* By Peter Meyer, 352 pp. (567 ill.), Zurich (Schweizer Spiegelverlag), Frs. 42.00.

This first of two volumes in which the history of European art is to be presented to the 'educated layman' covers the period from ancient art to the end of the late Gothic style. To marshal this vast material on less than 340 pages, the author has distributed the load. The illustrations, which are small but well printed, form, with their explanatory captions, a series of pictures which can be studied independently of the text. (It is to be hoped that the second volume will supply such information as the location of the illustrated works.) Chronological lists, partly covering historical events of the periods discussed, partly names and dates of art history, give useful guidance to the reader even though some misprints and mistakes are bound to creep into such compilations. (Tut-Ankh-Amen's tomb was not discovered in 1906 (p. 60); Plato did not start teaching in 425 B.C. (p. 82); Masaccio did not paint with Masolino in Castiglione d'Olona (p. 313).) It is these two elements of the book, the illustrations with their captions and the sections in small print which carry most of the factual information. Consequently the author feels free, in his text, to range unhampered over the whole of the subject matter without obligation to refer to artists or to describe individual works. Perhaps it is a pity that he has decided on this course. For his gifts seem to lie in the evocation of concrete visual experience rather than in the formulation of abstract theories. His genuine sensibility for the formal values of architecture and of ornament is evident from many felicitous remarks, but these glimpses are too frequently clouded by vague generalisations. Metaphors and verbal fireworks which might just be acceptable as the attempt to reproduce an individual impression seem strangely out of place where they describe 'styles'. (Cf. the characterisation of 'Early English' on p. 240 where the black Purbeck stone columns are likened to the piston rods of a ship's engines: 'In this world of forms there is altogether a cold, abstract and streamlined quality, a mathematical elegance; in comparison to the organ tones of the French Cathedrals it whistles here, as it were.') The reason for this emphasis on styles and their 'physiognomic' qualities is clear. Like many art historians of his generation, Mr Meyer bases his interpretations on the Hegelian assumption that art must express the 'spirit of the age' and that every new style reflects a new stage in the evolution of human consciousness. Egyptian art is a-historic, its naturalism is that of the 'primitive hunter' (p. 82); Greek art, with its 'break-through to reality' marks the decisive epoch in the history of the spirit (p. 35) and remains the standard and measure of European art ever since. While classical art, for all its religious background, was created 'to glorify an unproblematical joy of living' (p. III), the arabesque in Islamic art, for instance, betrays 'religious awareness of the vanity of all earthly things' (p. 137). The figures of late Gothic art are no longer quite sure of their home in heaven. 'They must constantly prove their spirituality to themselves and to the beholder, hence their strenuous, frantic, and excited attitudes and features' (p. 294). Is it not time that we question the validity of this type of interpretation?

In Mr Meyer's book the Hegelian approach has even more practical consequences. As each style is regarded as a self-contained entity with its own inherent laws, the author feels justified in starting his accounts of each period with a description of the 'pure' style, tracing it then backwards to its beginnings and forwards to its decline but omitting, as complications, any 'transitional' forms which seem to blur this clear-cut picture. The present volume, for instance, includes Dürer and even Breughel as representatives of the late Gothic period (regarded as a style of its own) but Giotto is set aside for the next volume, since he belongs to the Renaissance (p. 266). It must remain a matter of

debate whether this disregard for the chronological sequence in favour of an imposed 'logic' of history will help the reader to find his way through the maze of facts.

It would be ungracious, however, to harp on criticisms which apply to a school of thought rather than to this individual effort and not to acknowledge the intellectual achievement which lies in this attempt to organise the whole of European art history in an original and stimulating way. Written in neutral Switzerland during the war, the book is remarkable for its rejection of nationalist prejudices and the demonstration of the inapplicability of racialist conceptions to the history of the Middle Ages. If we must have Hegelian 'holism' it is surely better to apply it to such larger units as 'Europe' than to its component members. In his emphasis on the common classical heritage of Western art, the author even provides a rational basis for this conception of Europe as one and indivisible.