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Gombrich - The Art of Criticism

by Sam Oakley.

Having met the author of the one book every 'A' Level student of History of Art has referred to, I can honestly say I feel humble. 'The Story of Art' is now in its fifteenth edition, and heads to bibliography that would impress even the most intellectual amongst us. The man - Sir Ernst Gombrich CBE.

Much controversy surrounds the criticism of Gombrich by later art historians. For example why no female artists are included in 'The Story of Art'. When I approached Gombrich about this his retort was 'Whom should I have taken?' There are many who would put forward such names as Bertha Morisot, the Impressionist, perhaps. But as was pointed out to me, "There could not have been any great female artists, and there weren't" This would have been dictated by the climate within which women were able to follow artistic pursuits. Theirs was one of submission, and although it would be unfair to consider women as inferior artists, the opportunities for them to reach a wide audience, or practice their art, were limited.

However, there is one female held in high esteem by Gombrich. Kathe Kollwitz is the one woman to be included in the German edition. This can only compliment her as an artist. The frequent complaint about the exclusion of women is one that does not prey on Gombrich's mind. As he humorously told me; "The question of whether Michelangelo was a man or a woman really doesn't interest me. Historians have to take things as they are and as they were".

The ordinary 'man in the street', on the other hand, is much more inclined to subjectivity. We like what we like. When this is discussed in the context of education however, Gombrich is not so such whether it should still be taught as an academic subject. "Now there are no stateable standards" he feels. "If it is taught as an academic subject it should be taught differently from the way it is". It is surely a difficult task to say what is good and bad. Reaching a higher level, it is hard to know what sort of art would be accepted to institutions such as the Royal Academy. Although "in the case of Michelangelo it was pretty clear".

Michelangelo, whose name was mentioned frequently during the course of the interview, seems to be Gombrich's ultimate genius. "But genius or no genius, he could just do it!". Gombrich passed on a little piece of Renaissance gossip, when he disclosed how Michelangelo was actually a forger. Apparently he sculpted a figure of Cupid, and had it buried for a few years, later re-producing it out of the ground as an antique.

But is there such a thing as Art? Gombrich states that it is useless to look for a definition of Art. Originally the word Art meant skill, for example the Art of war or the Art of medicine, and it was not until the 18th century and the Grand Tour that the concept of Art in itself was born.

Michelangelo, (that old favourite!), was a great artist and a great sculptor, but apparently he would never have been elevated as a great Artist. When people talked grandly of the Art and Science of Leonardo, "he wouldn't have understood what they were talking about".

Painting was a skill based on knowledge, that people had to learn. Therefore in that context, it was an Art. But not because it was expressive.

Their (*sic*) is snobbery involved in art criticism, especially by those with very little knowledge. This is linked to the convention of 'What is great art?' Gombrich uses the example 'Is photography an Art?' "Good photography is an Art, bad photography certainly isn't" he says with a smile. "Nor is bad painting Art". There we are, that little thing called subjectivity again.

Awareness of our senses is important in the appreciation of Art. So many of us are unable to decide what we like and don't like. But reassuringly; "We are all not aware of our senses, and if we were it would take too much time. Our senses are selective". And he goes on to say; "Our senses serve a biological purpose, they serve our survival. One can never be completely conscious of everything". In my experience, most people are conscious of very little in their surroundings.

Now I am directed to look at my image in the teapot, having emptied its' contents! Then onto the teaspoon, to notice the way I am reflected upside-down on one side, and the right way up on the other. I bet you've never noticed that. "There are many things in our visual surroundings of which we are not fully aware," Gombrich tells me. "Artists train themselves to be aware of certain things more than others. One of the ways to make yourself aware is to paint it". Does it then restrict an Art critic if he or she does no practical art? Surely the experience of painting or sculpting would only increase one's ability to understand Art? "I'm sure it is restricting, but life is short. 'Art is long and life is short', and everything is a full-time job. You can't do everything."

Well, for the man who can't do everything, Gombrich has achieved a remarkable amount. During the war he was involved in broadcasts for the Monitoring Service of the BBC. This meant listening to what various other nations were saying. For example, the Russians and the Libyians (*sic*). This is indicative of his linguistic skills. I was modestly informed that he is fluent in German, English and Italian, and his French is so-so. Then his wife interjected; he lectures in French, writes speeches in Latin and Greek and reads Swedish and Dutch, "but not always accurately, to be sure". He also started to learn Chinese, "but my Chinese is not much to write home about". That Americanism sounded so charming with a lilting Austrian accent.

"I'm not an intellect. When one grows very old, people know about one. It is inevitable". So he is modest about his intelligence and his fame. As I told him, people of my intellectual capacity would consider him an intellect. "That again depends on definitions." He laughs. Do you think he's calling me stupid?!