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Leonie Gombrich

Foreword – ART& THE MIND

Right at the end of his life, after two years in which he was almost completely immobilized by arthritic pain, my grandfather lay in his bed musing about rituals that have accompanied sowing and reaping since ancient times in cultures across the world. His speech was intermittent by then, and he hadn't the strength to explain the context of his musings: only to make clear that he was considering the practices of Greeks and Celts, in particular, and wondering whether there could be direct influence involved. He was reflecting, in short, on the recurrent patterns of nature, and the place in these of human behaviour and progression. It is not an outrageous inference, I think, to consider that these private meditations stemmed in part from contemplation of his own efforts – the efforts of a lifetime of scholarship—and what the sum of their worth might be as time rolled on. What is scholarship, after all, but a lifelong hope of contributing to the history of human knowledge?

Even this image, I realise, stems directly from my grandfather's conception of cultural history and indeed, of humanity – of generational reinterpretations of tradition, of reflection and refinement in practice – that is far from being shared by all thinkers, or even all contributors to this volume. I shall not wade into those waters! But as his literary executor and thus in some ways custodian of his legacy, I was thrilled when Professor Moser-Ernst proposed the E. H. Gombrich 100th birthday conference in Greifswald that was the genesis of this book.

Professor Moser-Ernst was adamant from the start that this was to be no exercise in hagiography, but an exposition of Gombrich's impact in terms of reaction as well as influence. The contributions within this book, in their range of theme and variety of stance, bear proof of the success of her aims. They are also a testament to her considerable and well-placed effort to include widely diverse areas of Gombrich's intellectual heritage. I was reminded, reading through, of an occasion on which my grandfather read to me, from his writings, a quoted description of ants scurrying this way and that in apparently random toil, but through their efforts creating a giant anthill. The comparison was with the work of art historians, each making their contribution to the greater sum of knowledge. Such apparent differences of intent and direction, each fascinating in their own right, each contributing to a larger and unexpected whole, are clearly demonstrated here.

Would all the contributions have pleased him? Some, undoubtedly, would have moved him greatly; some contain clear challenges to his ideas. But if the definitive answer to my question was, "Yes", I think this collection would have missed its point. Its significance as a tribute to Gombrich is that it represents, as it were, a crop from seeds that he planted, seeds he had reaped from a previous harvest – and an early crop, one would hope, in a cycle of sowing and reaping that will continue for years to come.

Leonie Gombrich

Sybille Moser-Ernst

Why read Gombrich now?

„Wer wird nicht einen Klopstock loben? Doch wird ihn jeder lesen? Nein.
Wir wollen weniger erhoben und fleißiger gelesen sein.“
(Gotthold Ephraim Lessing)

Rocks of Gombrich's achievement standing out as landmarks

Half a century ago Ernst H. Gombrich's testable theories transformed thinking on how to look at art. After only a few years during which semiotics appeared to render Sir Ernst's common sense framework outdated, the rise of cognitive approaches has enabled him to recover internationally the status he once had in France as a radical thinker within modern philosophy.

E.H. Gombrich became the most influential art historian of the Twentieth Century. His innocent sounding “The Story of Art”¹ provided a robust framework which millions throughout the world would use to understand one of man’s most important activities.² Reflection suggests the observation that the historiography of art history has again some difficulty in evaluating his position or even just placing him.

With the expansion of the study of art to become a true *Bildwissenschaft* or *Image Science* the relevance of his insistence on the standard of testability has never been greater.

It was to meet this need, to bring back Gombrich to centre stage, that in 2009 I organised a conference on the occasion of Sir Ernst H. Gombrich’s Hundredth Birthday. My vision attracted the financial support of the Alfried Krupp Foundation in Greifswald and the intellectual engagement of some of the most influential figures in the History of Art.³ Certainly, holding the conference in Germany had many additional benefits, since it made everyone look at him from a fresh point of view.

The ambitious aim of this book is to explore Gombrich’s intellectual legacy by analysing some of his concepts and insights in the context of Image Science. Its purpose is to assess Gombrich as an engine of change and innovation across disciplines. He introduced students in many fields to the complexities of the artist’s mind and helped them realise the power of their own eyes and intellects. These achievements were obscured in the last decades of his life by a tide of fashion in the Humanities or Geisteswissenschaften, but this has now receded leaving the rocks of his achievement standing out as landmarks. Gombrich’s clarity of sight was recognised even by his enemies, and that clarity is apparent in this ambitious collection of papers, that shun hagiography⁴ in favour of a rigorous reappraisal of his role in

¹ 1950 Erstveröffentlichung in englischer Sprache, bei Phaidon, London. „The Story of Art“ auf Englisch in 16 Auflagen und auf Deutsch („Die Geschichte der Kunst“) in 14 Auflagen erschienen, weltweit bislang in 39 Sprachen übersetzt. Neben allen Landessprachen Europas finden sich auch Russisch, Hebräisch, Arabisch, Mongolisch, Thailändisch, Koreanisch, Argentinisch, Brasilianisch-Portugiesisch, Isländisch und Türkisch. Nicht nur Sprache ist hier das Kriterium, sondern das Übersetzen eines abendländischen Denkens in eine andere Kultur und damit das Eindringen in ein völlig anderes Bild-Verständnis als das europäische.

² Vgl. Yiqiang Cao’s Erinnerung an Gombrichs Klage (siehe sein Beitrag) in diesem Band), dass die englischen Kollegen seine „Story of Art“ nicht kannten, weil sie dieses Buch nicht lasen. Das Verwenden des Begriffs Story anstatt History ließ sie – ohne es gelesen zu haben – das Urteil denken, es handle sich um ein populärwissenschaftliches Werk.

³ [https://www.uibk.ac.at/public-relations/presse/.../2009/03/gombrich.wiko\[15\].pdf](https://www.uibk.ac.at/public-relations/presse/.../2009/03/gombrich.wiko[15].pdf) E.H. Gombrich auf dem Weg zu einer Bildwissenschaft des 21. Jahrhunderts Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg Greifswald, Internationales Symposium vom 30. bis 31. März 2009, Wissenschaftliche Leitung: Prof. Dr. Sybille Moser-Ernst.

⁴ James Elkins is a rare example in our discipline who took “Gombrich’s central interests seriously”, as he tells, very seriously, as I can confirm. His conclusion: “Gombrich exemplifies the discipline in a way that no other art historian does, [...]. In that sense art history is continuously coming to terms with Gombrich’s work, and his scholarship is emblematic of the discipline as a whole. There is, however, another way of assessing Gombrich’s work that leads to a less optimistic conclusion. The requirement here for claiming a connection to his work would be more stringent. Gombrich’s central concerns included the psychology of art, the relation of what he called “making” and “matching” and the links between art and science. Those are marginal interests in the discipline, and very few scholars take them as starting points for new work. To “prevent the all-too-easy accumulation of individual

the past and a forward-looking assessment of his potential importance for the future. This book could only be realized because I could win over and engage a powerful team of contributors (Austrian, English, German, American, Canadian, Chinese, Indian) who are original authorities in their own right, among them some of Gombrich's former students.

achievements, which can make it seem as if an enumeration of his wide-ranging interests is a sufficient assessment of his work" (quoting Elkins) he invited letters in response to his paper: James Elkins, Ten Reasons Why E. H. Gombrich is not Connected to Art History. *Human Affairs*, 19 (3), 2009, pp. 304–310. Retrieved 9 Sep. 2017, from doi:10.2478/v10023-009-0044-6.