



ERNST GOMBRICH

Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich

1909–2001

ERNST GOMBRICH was the most prominent art historian in this country and probably its best known humanist scholar during the last forty years of the twentieth century. The status derived from two apparently unrelated features of his work: he wrote deliberately for a wide audience, most obviously in his highly successful *Story of Art* first published in 1950, while his standing in the academic world, both within and beyond the field of art history, was established by *Art and Illusion* published in 1960; here he reconstructed some of the basic concepts in which the development of the visual arts could be discussed, introducing into the literature of art history a greatly enriched understanding of perceptual psychology. The two factors—his address to a general audience and his conceptual innovations in *Art and Illusion*—were intimately related because his use of experiments from the perceptual psychologists, appealing to effects which his readers and lecture audiences could test on themselves, lessened the sense that art was an arcane activity isolated from our everyday world. His accessible style was in this way part of the intellectual content, part of the culture he saw himself as defending against the preciosity of aesthetes on the one hand and the grandiose historical abstractions of class, race, and progress on the other.

Early years in Vienna

Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich was born on 30 March 1909 in Vienna. His father Karl Gombrich was a lawyer and Vice-President of the Disciplinary Council of the Vienna bar and his mother, Leonie Hock, was a pianist. He had two older sisters. He described himself as coming from a 'typical middle-class family'. Clearly they were far from affluent, but the notion that the family was typically middle class has to be tempered by the reflection that his father was a close school friend of Hugo von Hoffmansthal, his mother was taught music theory at the conservatoire by Anton Bruckner and the piano by Leschetitzky, and lived in a social world which included close contact with the households of Schoenberg, Adolf Busch, Freud, and Mahler, whose sister was her pupil. The family was Jewish but under the influence of Siegfried Lipiner who had converted Mahler to a mystical Christianity, the family converted to Protestantism. Gombrich himself said that he had had no Jewish education, and while never denying his Jewish origins he seemed uninterested in them and said later that they would be of concern only to racists.

At the age of nine, during the famine in Vienna after the First World War he became acutely ill and undernourished; he was sent with his younger sister Lisbeth under a scheme run by the Save the Children organisation to Sweden to recover. There he lived for nine months with the family of a carpenter who specialised in making coffins. The family could hardly have been more different from his own in Vienna, where his father used to read Homer or translations of Indian poetry to the children, and then encouraged them to read the German classics. This was a family in which there was a concentration on *Bildung*; it replaced religion. Here music and literature, above all Goethe, were central. It was intellectually wide ranging and permeated by a strict ethic of restraint in social conduct and in language. Gombrich later remarked that this no doubt involved a certain snobbery—distinguishing one from the new-comers from the east and from the *nouveaux riches*—but it was a stance from which he would never disengage himself. The rejection of pretentiousness would find application in his rejection of high-flown language in the discussion of art.

On return from Sweden he had been sent to the Theresianum, a conservative but efficient gymnasium (his father had failed to put his name down for one of the more interesting schools) where, he recalls, he felt himself to be an outsider and was bullied; he was also bored as he clearly learned much faster than his classmates. For his school leaving examina-

tion he chose as the subjects for his viva German literature and physics (the interest in the sciences remained through his life), and he wrote an extended paper on changing approaches to art from Winckelmann to his own time. He then went to Vienna University and enrolled in the Institut für Kunstgeschichte and wrote his dissertation under Julius von Schlosser, the last of Schlosser's doctoral students.

Mantua

His dissertation, *Zum Werke Giulio Romanos*,¹ was on the sixteenth-century Palazzo Tè in Mantua, and some of the main themes of his subsequent intellectual concerns are already discernible. The study gives an account of the architectural peculiarities of this 'mannerist' building and of its internal pictorial decoration. At the time when Gombrich was writing, mannerism was a contentious issue: the forms in mid- to late-sixteenth-century architecture and painting were felt not to fit into the accepted progressive logic of European styles, the sequence of High Renaissance to Baroque; they were thought therefore to be either incoherent or to manifest some spiritual crisis. In the case of the Palazzo Tè Gombrich showed its deviations from standard architectural forms were consistent and deliberate and challenged the notion of a spiritual crisis. He could find no trace of this crisis in the correspondence in the Mantuan archives; on the contrary, what interested the patron, Federigo Gonzaga, were his horses, the hunt, triumphs and splendid festivals, which were also designed by his architect-painter, Giulio Romano. Gombrich therefore looked for a different ground for the idiosyncrasy.

He observed that the overall form of the building was dominated by the needs of the interior space and its large windows, rather than outwardly directed public rhetoric; the impression of the external architecture was one of ornament rather than a dramatic development of classical motifs. The incidental features like the dropped triglyphs and displaced keystones, he suggested, should be read not as indications of collapse but of a building under construction and even, occasionally, of stone as not yet refined into architectural members. The underlying metaphor was of the play between nature and art; between determinate articulation and a sense of formlessness where either side could become

¹ This was published in two parts, *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, NF 8 (1934) and NF 9 (1935).

dominant. Throughout the Palazzo, Gombrich said, the viewer was called upon, as in music, to respond to the unstable and incompletely resolved forms and imaginatively to complete them for himself.

The decoration of the interior showed a similar instability; Giulio Romano played upon the transition between the simulated architecture that framed the interior space and the illusory scenes on the walls; this was striking in the relationship between the two rooms which formed a climax of the interior decoration: the tight, classically decorated Sala degli Stucchi in which depiction appears only in reliefs subordinated to the articulation of the real wall and the Sala dei Giganti where the illusion of the collapsing architecture overwhelms our sense of the real wall altogether.

The design and decoration, he wrote, presupposed a sophisticated patron—Federigo Gonzaga, it should be recalled, was the son of Isabella d'Este—and the function of the building: not an urban palace or fortress but a suburban villa, a place of retreat, and a building effectively free from the constraints imposed by the prior use of the site, the need for public rhetoric, and from budgetary restrictions. But it also relied on the current state of the artistic tradition. The great formal inventions of Michelangelo had transformed the tradition and it was in the wake of this, Gombrich wrote, that Giulio Romano could produce his own 'virtuoso' art.

The major themes of Gombrich's thought are already present: the concept of expression as something made possible by the resources of the artistic tradition; the play between illusion and reality, depiction and decoration and crucially the dismissal of explanations that treated art as the expression of some prior state of mind rather than something constructed within a tradition in a way that suited its function.

The *Anschluss* and Emigration

Gombrich was working on his dissertation as the political situation in Austria became more and more dominated by the Nazis. He has said that the *Institut für Kunstgeschichte* remained a haven of calm within the surrounding turmoil, but it was hardly uninterrupted calm. On one occasion Otto Kurz, another of Schlosser's students and a lifelong friend of Gombrich whom he was later to join at the Warburg Institute, arrived at a seminar having been beaten up by Nazis in the university library. Schlosser responded with a line from Schiller: 'Monument von unserer

Zeiten Schande'.² Gombrich later felt that this was hardly an adequate response. There were other resonances of the surrounding situation. Hans Sedlmayr, who was being groomed by Schlosser for the succession to his chair, later became a committed Nazi and was even then explicit in his antisemitism.

After completing his dissertation in 1933 Gombrich began work with the art historian and psychoanalyst Ernst Kris on a study of caricature. But the *Anschluss* was clearly coming and the future very uncertain. He had a dispiriting time trying to find a job; he was given the chance to translate a world history for children, *Weltgeschichte von der Urzeit bis zur Gegenwart* by the publisher Walter Neurath—who also later came to England; Gombrich told Neurath that the text was too feeble, to which Neurath replied: write another if you can finish it in six weeks. Gombrich took up the challenge, writing a chapter a day using an encyclopaedia; he attributed its success to its having been written in a headlong rush but also to the fact that he liked writing for children. Later he said that he thought it should be possible to explain anything in language that children could understand. The book was translated into a number of languages and is again in print in Germany. In 1935, recommended by Kris, he met the director of the Warburg Institute, Fritz Saxl, who was on a visit to Vienna; in January 1936 he came to the Institute, now in London; it had escaped from Hamburg with most of its books in 1933. Its staff included Kurz, and Gombrich was given a two-year fellowship to work on the mountain of Aby Warburg's manuscripts. In the same year he married Ilse Heller, pianist, pupil of his mother and the most devoted and protective companion for the rest of his life. He had worked through the chapters of his *Weltgeschichte* on walks with her as he was writing them and dedicated the volume to her.

The work with Kris on caricature was completed when Gombrich went back to Vienna in the summer of 1936. The assumption was that it was to be published by the Warburg Institute. Saxl was apparently sceptical and gave it to a reader antagonistic to psychoanalysis and the volume, after the considerable sacrifices its authors had made to finish it, was never published. The thesis was that caricature, like jokes in Freud's account of wit, was aggressive and that it emerged only when people stopped using black magic, for instance, sticking pins in representations of their enemies. It argued that the decline in magic opened the way for

² Gombrich reports this in an essay on his friend Kurz in *Tributes* (Oxford, 1984), p. 238.

this new means of aggression. A small book summarising their theories on caricature was published as a King Penguin in 1940, and essays on caricature recur through Gombrich's later work. He also completed a book on Aby Warburg based on his researches on the manuscripts, but it was not the kind of book that Warburg's associates, Gertrude Bing—later to become Director of the Institute—and Saxl had been hoping for. It was left unpublished until 1970 when it appeared, apparently only marginally revised, in the wake of the celebrations of Warburg's centenary.³

As enemy aliens the Gombrichs suffered real privation during the war, and were subject to absurd restrictions on movement. His war work involved monitoring German broadcasts for the BBC. This reinforced his sense that perception relied on anticipation, for under conditions of poor radio reception one required some assumptions about what kind of thing was being said to pick out the words. It was also during the war that he undertook the arduous task of putting Karl Popper's *Open Society and its Enemies* through the press. Although Popper was also from Vienna, they had only come to know each other in London just before the war. Popper then went to teach in New Zealand where he worked on *The Open Society*. He revised the text continually and because of the cost of postage sent his revisions on microfilm, making the task of updating it extremely arduous. (This is described in John Watkins's Memoir of Popper in the *Proceedings* of the British Academy, 94 (1997), 658.) The contact with Popper had an important impact on Gombrich; one sees him aligning his thought with that of the philosopher both in his general view of history, his antagonism to Plato as well as to Hegel and Marx, and in his notion that perception and not only science was structured by the process of testing hypotheses. After the war he returned to the Warburg Institute. The relations between Saxl, who was uninterested in theories of art, and Gombrich were never close although they clearly respected each other. Gombrich remarked to me on one occasion how he admired not only Saxl's learning but his lack of personal vanity and any proprietary attitude toward his scholarly discoveries which were exploited by others. On the other hand he felt aggrieved that he was only given a permanent post in 1948. His son Richard, later to be Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, had been born in 1937, and with the responsibilities of a young family he felt extremely vulnerable. The situation only became secure after the publication of the *Story of Art* in 1950. In 1956 he became

³ *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography* (London, 1970).

Durning Lawrence Professor of the History of Art at University College London and in 1959 Director of the Warburg Institute and Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition.

During the war he had been commissioned, on the strength of his world history for children, to write the *Story of Art* by Bela Horovitz, the owner of Phaidon Press, who gave him a small advance. Gombrich found it difficult with his other commitments and, embarrassed by constantly meeting the publisher on the street in Oxford, tried to give back the advance; Horovitz refused; 'I don't want your money, I want the book!' Eventually Gombrich wrote it, without access to a library, using for illustrations the volumes of the *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte*, which thanks to Ilse they had in their home. He dictated sections of text three times a week. This may have given the book its directness and economy. It does not tell one story but a series of overlapping stories, for Gombrich eschewed grand historical schemes. At the start of the book he said there was no such thing as art but only artists. He was virtually quoting his teacher Julius von Schlosser.⁴ What Schlosser had meant was that although techniques, styles, symbols had continuous histories, art properly so called was something that occurred only episodically in the work of individuals, just as poetry occurred only episodically in the history of language. What was open to rational discussion, so Gombrich was implying, were the techniques, traditions, and purposes involved in image making; the question of what made the images a matter of art had no general answer, no continuous history and attempting to point to it led to vacuous gesturing. As an example of the sense of technique and purpose combined, one might take his account of Egyptian tomb art in which the aim is to provide the occupant with a substitute for the real world and the cycle of the seasons, not an invitation to the viewer to imagine the depicted subject; what concerned Gombrich was to reintegrate past images in their social practices. When it came to the twentieth century the problem was the isolation of images: they were seen simply in the context of art. The following passage on Giacometti might serve as an example of how he linked modern and earlier art:

He is a sculptor who is fascinated by certain special problems of his calling and he assumes—rightly or wrongly—that we, too share his interest. This problem . . . was not invented by modern art. We remember that Michelangelo's idea of sculpture was to bring out the form that seems to slumber in the marble, to

⁴ I am indebted for this observation to Werner Hofmann's obituary of Gombrich in *The Art Newspaper*, 120 (Dec. 2001).

give life and movement to the figure while yet preserving the simple outline of the stone. Giacometti seems to have decided to approach the problem from the other end. He wants to try out how much the sculptor can retain of the original shape of the block while still transforming it into the suggestion of the human head. (p. 436)

After the publication of the *Story of Art* in 1950 there followed a decade of brilliant papers and the writing of *Art and Illusion* and he was in great demand in universities on both sides of the Atlantic. His appointments included Slade Professor at Oxford (1950–3), at Cambridge (1961–3), Visiting Professor in Fine Art at Harvard (1959) and many others.

Quattrocento Florence

Although his best known work in the 1950s was the popular history, his main occupation at the time was his specialist essays on Renaissance art and humanism. The first of these was ‘Botticelli’s Mythologies’ (1945) which constructed a possible context for the ‘Primavera’ and ‘Icones Symbolicae’ (1948), a study of the tradition of allegorical painting from antiquity to the present.⁵ Both of these he later revised and republished in *Symbolic Images* (1972). In these papers he examined the role of Neoplatonic thought in the construction of images. Crucially, he was concerned with recapturing the force which allegorical personifications were felt at the time to possess, how they could convey transcendent ideas such as those of the virtues and vices, the arts, or the forces of nature. His objective was not simply to decode images by reference to texts but to show how such symbolisation could be felt at the time to illuminate moral truths and the purpose such images served in their original contexts. In the case of the ‘Primavera’ there had been a substantial literature about these paintings and the identification of individual figures, including Aby Warburg’s dissertation of 1893, but what had not been addressed was the function these unprecedentedly large allegorical paintings might have served. Only devotional paintings had previously possessed such scale and elaboration; classical allegory had figured only on decorated cassoni and in tapestries. To clarify the function of the paintings, the source that Gombrich adduced was a letter from the philosopher Marsilio Ficino to the young Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco dei Medici (cousin of the Magnifico),

⁵ *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 8 (1947) and 11 (1948).

in whose villa the 'Primavera' had been located, regarding his moral education. Gombrich's hypothesis was that the 'Primavera' was to be conceived as an instrument of that moral education, achieved through an appeal to an informed eye. The letter to Lorenzo Pierfrancesco—supported by another to the young man's tutor—offered a set of moral instructions couched in the form of a horoscope in which the dominant planet was Venus, here representing *Humanitas*. Gombrich proposed that the painting was an adjunct to the scheme of education proposed in the letter. It belonged in a culture within which astrology, moralising personifications, and the theory of the four temperaments formed a constantly interinseminating symbolic resource. This did not solve the problem of identifying all the figures, for which he sought further explanations in other texts and he accepted later that some of his suggestions should be discounted; but he continued to argue that the purpose of the image needed to be explained and that this problem at least he had addressed. The subsequent paper, 'Icones Symbolicae' traced the way in which the representation of allegorical figures took on their moral and emotional impact, arguing that meaning and aesthetic character could stand to each other as libretto to the music of an opera. The allegorical studies between 1945 and 1950 also included a return to the Palazzo Tè with an astrological and literary exegesis of Giulio Romano's Sala dei Venti (also reprinted in *Symbolic Images*).

A second group of his Renaissance papers was concerned not with astrology and Neoplatonism but other more philological aspects of humanist thought which bore upon the visual arts. In 'The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences' (1952)⁶ Gombrich related the humanist account of the gradual improvement in letters during the previous century to a subtle change in the professional ethos of the leading artists; from conceiving their work as fulfilling an already established pattern and level of workmanship to demonstrating innovative skill, one generation seeking to surpass its predecessors. The relation of the artists and the literary men was not merely a parallel. Apart from the most important interaction of the humanists and painting in the writing of Alberti (whom Gombrich never discusses), he adduces evidence of a day-to-day relation between them: a letter of the collector of Greek manuscripts, Aurispa, in which mention is made of Lorenzo Ghiberti being asked to exchange his copies of Virgil and Cicero's *Orator* and *Brutus*

⁶ *XVII Congrès International d'Histoire de l'Art*, Amsterdam, July 1952; republished in E. H. Gombrich, *Norm and Form* (London, 1966).

for a volume on siege machines. We gain here a sense of the humanists and artists as part of a single social world. In the paper 'From the Revival of Letters to the Reform of the Arts: Niccolo Niccoli and Filippo Brunelleschi' (1967) which he contributed to the Festschrift for Rudolf Wittkower (republished in *The Heritage of Apelles*, 1976), he asked what enabled a very small movement involving both humanists and artists to become so successful within the city and then across Europe: on one side the correction of Latin spelling and reform of script from the spikey uneven Gothic to the rounded Carolingian—thought to be antique—and on the other the enhanced logicity of Brunelleschian architecture—thought to be derived from measuring Roman remains but really dependent on the Romanesque forms, in particular the Florentine Baptistery and SS Apostoli. What succeeded—in language as in architecture—was the enhanced regularity, elegance and coordination of forms. Another success story was the invention of the perspective construction; it enabled architects to show what would be visible and what occluded from any given point. It was a genuine discovery with practical implications even before its application to painting. The success, Gombrich implies, is in each case not a matter of mere fashion, although a sense of learned superiority would play its part, but of an objective achievement.

One of his most important papers on the early *quattrocento* is 'The Early Medici as Patrons of Art'(1960)⁷ where he focused on the social discretion of Cosimo de' Medici who—despite his wealth and being in effect the ruler of Florence—kept his subscription in public enterprises to a level that would not be disproportionate to that of his fellow citizens. He also observes how Vespasiano da Bisticci who wrote the lives of contemporaries and was a friend of Cosimo speaks of his ecclesiastical commissions but not Donatello's bronze statues of David and Judith, suggesting that these private commissions might have been thought too grand for a nominally private citizen; in contrast to these, the ecclesiastical commissions were seriously intended by Cosimo the banker as public acknowledgement and restitution to be set against his sin of usury. (Gombrich observes that when Lorenzo de' Medici lists the outlay on such buildings he puts it together with charities and even the payment of taxes: anything that did not benefit the Medici themselves.)

⁷ Originally published in E. F. Jacob, ed., *Italian Renaissance Studies* (London, 1960); republished in *Norm and Form*.

A third group of Renaissance papers, written contemporaneously with some of these, focused on Leonardo, a figure in whom his own scientific, aesthetic, and psychological interests were to be most fully inter-related. The series begins in 1950 with 'Leonardo's Methods of Working out Compositions' in which he makes a fundamental distinction between Leonardo's drawing procedure and that of his predecessors: Leonardo allows a feedback from the suggestiveness of his marks on to the construction of his image, and this leads Gombrich to emphasise the painter's sense of his own creative power. In 1952 he wrote 'The Grotesque Heads' the first of two papers which later he republished under the heading 'Leonardo da Vinci's Method of Analysis and Permutation' in *The Heritage of Apelles* (1976).⁸ He disposes of the notion that the grotesque heads were conceived as caricatures or physiognomic studies. He traces their development as a series of deliberate deviations from—or negations of—a norm, specifically the strong male 'nutcracker' face that even recurs in his doodles. Leonardo himself warned painters of the danger of compulsively repeating their own face in all the figures they depicted and Gombrich suggests that the grotesque heads were aimed at breaking away from his own obsessive image of himself.

The second of the Leonardo 'Analysis and Permutation' studies was 'The Form of Movement in Water and Air' (1969);⁹ here he examined the drawings and the notes in which Leonardo analysed these movements, adapting Aristotelian physics and confronting the difficulties of its application. (After coming to England before the war he had compiled the index of the vast Richter edition of Leonardo's writings.) If Leonardo's thought often remains unresolvable, he makes the notes and drawings mutually informative and this enables him to explain in modern terms some of the scientific issues Leonardo faced. Gombrich then relates these hydraulic drawings to his great designs of the Flood, and suggests that Leonardo may have entertained the idea of a commission to paint a major work on the theme after seeing his old rival Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling; he follows Kenneth Clark's suggestion that Giulio Romano's Sala dei Giganti in Palazzo Tè, with its imagery of cataclysmic collapse, may carry echoes of such a project and Gombrich muses that Giulio Romano may have heard of it from Vasari.

⁸ Originally published in Achille Marazza, ed., *Leonardo, Saggi e Ricerche* (Rome, 1954).

⁹ First published in C. D. O'Malley, ed., *Leonardo's Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969).

The cleaning controversy

The subject of Leonardo was to be drawn into the one major institutional controversy with which Gombrich became engaged. The cleaning of paintings in the National Gallery had been disquieting both art historians, painters, and other painting conservators. The response of the Gallery had been dismissive. The tone of the interchanges can be gauged from this sentence with which the very polite and circumspect editor, Benedict Nicolson, completed his editorial in February 1962. 'All that one asks is that they [the National Gallery] should come forward without arrogance with clear answers to the actual criticisms being made, not answers to imaginary objections which no informed person would nowadays dream of raising.'¹⁰

There were two fundamental questions: first, was it the case that painters from the Renaissance onward had used glazes or tinted varnishes to control the tonal relations of pigments? Second, was it possible in cleaning a painting to know when you had come upon an original glaze of tinted varnish? The National Gallery at the time employed an extremely assured and persuasive restorer called Helmut Ruhemann, a sometime German Expressionist painter. He claimed that the restorers knew when they had reached the original paint surface (although the scientists MacLaren and Werner, defenders of the Gallery, had written at the time: 'it is difficult to make a chemical analysis of media used in glazes—or, indeed, of old varnishes.') and crucially, as explained by conservator Stephen Rees Jones in the same issue of the *Burlington Magazine*, varnishes were also used as a medium in painting so that the solvent which would attack an overall varnish would also attack the paint; there was not necessarily any clear borderline between them; Ruhemann also claimed that such tinted varnishes were not used in Renaissance painting. Gombrich and Kurz in two papers in the same issue of the *Burlington* demonstrated that from at least the sixteenth century such glazes had been widely discussed as they had been by Pliny in antiquity, whose comments were widely known. Ruhemann countered by saying that this was mere book knowledge and not derived from the paintings themselves. He went on—a trifle foolhardily—to challenge Gombrich's use of Leonardo's use of the term *sfumato* and cognate terms with regard to

¹⁰ *Burlington Magazine*, 104 (Feb. 1962).

softening the edges of forms.¹¹ Ruhemann's argument was discredited as was the defence of the Gallery Director at the time. The Gallery, however, never acknowledged any doubts and it remained unclear whether it was prepared to learn from its experience, something Gombrich remarked upon in what was probably his last contribution to the Burlington Magazine, a short letter in March 2001. He had written eloquently and temperately on the issue of cleaning in *Art and Illusion*: 'I venture to think that this issue is too frequently described as a conflict between the objective methods of science and the subjective impressions of artists and critics. The objective validity of the methods used in the laboratories of our great galleries is as little in doubt as the good faith of those that apply them. But it may well be argued that restorers, in their difficult and responsible work, should take account not only of the chemistry of pigments, but also of the psychology of perception . . . What we want of them is not to restore individual pigments to their pristine colour, but something infinitely more tricky and delicate—to preserve relationships. It is particularly the impression of light, as we know, that rests exclusively on gradients and not, as one might expect, on the objective brightness of colours.'¹²

Art and Illusion

Art and Illusion had been developed out of the Mellon Lectures given in Washington in 1956. There he set out to replace the theory of the necessary sequence of artistic styles which had dominated German art historical thought since the end of the nineteenth century through the work of Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl. Throughout Gombrich's work he contends with the ghostly figure of Riegl whose major books were published between 1893 and 1902. His responses to Riegl provide an overall sense of the thrust of his thinking. In Riegl's *Stilfragen*—of which Gombrich said that, despite his reservations, it was perhaps the greatest book written on ornament¹³—he had sought to trace the development of the Egyptian lotus motif in the acanthus and tendril design from ancient Egypt, through Greek art into medieval Asia Minor. What concerned

¹¹ Ruhemann's paper was in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1 (1961), and Gombrich's reply 'Blurred Images and Unvarnished Truth' in 2 (1962).

¹² *Art and Illusion*, 2nd edn., p. 48.

¹³ See Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, p. 182.

Riegl was the continuity of this development seen as a matter of formal elaboration; he resisted the idea that the motif sustained itself because of symbolic meanings or changed by virtue of different techniques or references to different plants in nature. He saw the development as autonomous, springing from an aesthetic urgency which sought to elaborate and reintegrate its forms. This conception was then extended to representational art in the West in two major books, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901) and *Holländische Gruppenröträt* (1902). What made it possible for the development of a single decorative motif to serve as the model for the stylistic development of representational art in general was an extremely schematic sense of style: how one kind of perceptual coherence emerged as a revision of its antecedents, from the single figure isolated against its background to an overall optical effect; and later, from a unity which depended only on the relations between represented figures to unity which implicated the viewer within the imaginative order of the work. Gombrich's objection to Riegl's position (most fully argued in his paper on 'Kunstwissenschaft' in the *Atlantis Buch der Kunst* of 1952) is first of all that Riegl treated the development of styles as if they were like stages of natural growth rather than emerging from the contingencies of context or skill; and second, that he treated all the products of a given era as emanations of some central spirit. As he was to write later in his lecture *In Search of Cultural History*: 'It is one thing to see the interconnection of things, another to postulate that all aspects of a culture can be traced back to one key cause of which they are the manifestation.' *Art and Illusion* sets out to replace these two assumptions and in the introduction he wrote: 'Both in the writings of Riegl himself and in those of his followers and interpreters, such as Worringer, Dvořák, and Sedlmayr, there is a wealth of challenging historical problems and suggestions, but I would assert that what is their greatest pride is in fact their fatal flaw: by throwing out the idea of skill they have not only surrendered vital evidence, they have made it impossible to realize their ambition, a valid psychology of stylistic change.'¹⁴

Gombrich, like Riegl, held that art was necessarily an historically developing enterprise, but it was not necessary that it should take the course that it did. He set out to show how, within Western painting, those transformations of style came about. He asked the very simple question: why did the levels of lifelikeness found first in antiquity and then in

¹⁴ *Art and Illusion*, p. 17.

Renaissance art develop so gradually. Could the painter not simply have looked at the world and copied it? His basic premiss, which was first given extended exposition in his essay 'Meditations on a Hobby Horse' (1951),¹⁵ was that representation in painting was a species of substitution, as the child substitutes a stick for a horse she can imagine herself riding or a doll as a baby sibling she could throw on the floor. Crucially, representation does not start out by the intellectual feat of abstracting some form from the object it represents. The drunk who tips his hat to a lamp-post has not performed the feat of abstracting from it the essential form of a man. Representation starts with the spontaneous transference or projection onto a new object of what biologically or functionally interests us. This would not yet yield an account of representation as it figures within art, for this required discovering more precise controls of our propensities to project. The painter's process of discovery, so Gombrich argued, was conducted by having a provisional schema which he sets out to correct or modify in the direction of greater visual conviction and cogency. What counts as a schema may be a simplifying spatial armature—a simple diagram in relation to which more complicated shapes and details could be plotted as appear in some of the drawings in Villard de Honnecourt's album of the fourteenth century or in modern 'how to draw' books. But it may also be a motif upon which the artist can elaborate or, more problematically, some mental assumption or thought, like the assumption that a medieval cathedral will be Gothic and so have pointed windows, an assumption that led a nineteenth-century printmaker to give pointed windows to Chartres. The schema might even be thought of as a pictorial prototype, as Constable took compositions from Hobbema. We must interpret Gombrich's broad thesis of schema and correction as accommodating each of these, but then add his more specific thesis: that making comes before matching. According to this thesis, the artist looked at the object to be represented not just in the light of general anticipations gained from earlier paintings but with reference to material procedures, the system of marks like the diagrammatic shapes round which representations could be elaborated. In the work of pre-Renaissance art these diagrammatic schemata were fairly rigid, but—particularly from Leonardo onward he would seem to imply—the schema was more like a fluid procedure than a set of shapes; although even after Leonardo the egg-like oval as schema for a head and other geometric shapes recur in drawing.

¹⁵ Republished in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays in the Theory of Art* (London, 1963).

The thesis of schema and correction, made more specific in the priority of making over matching, is first presented with reference to drawing from nature rather than imagination, but he sees the same principle in operation in both; for example he conceives of Daumier starting with a flurry of lines yielding an indeterminate image which prompts him to define further what the lines suggested to him (a conception running back to Leonardo who advised the artist to use the stains of a damp wall to help imagine a landscape, advice which which had anticipations in antiquity).

One of the questions that Gombrich confronted within the book concerns the place of the beholder. How far does what he calls 'the beholder's share' fit in with that of the artist. Clearly viewers cannot discern the steps by which the artist achieved his completed image; it is quite rare that the viewer can see the process of revision in operation. To follow Gombrich we must distinguish the explanation of how in general pictorial representation is achieved—its psychological and contextual conditions—from the subsequent interest of the viewer. He thinks that there is also a skill on the beholder's part; it is not merely a matter of his recognition being triggered by the skill of the painter for he seeks to have a role, to make discoveries for himself. While his discoveries cannot mime the procedures of the painter, here too we have a process of testing out projections, it manifests the same psychological structure of seeking coherence.

Gombrich's discussion of the internal complexity of works is on the whole very limited. He thought of the task of the historian and critic as pointing the viewer to the possible intentions within the original context of the work but avoiding 'rapturous descriptions'. His restraint on extended description must be seen as in part a reaction to the formalist analyses of Riegl and his followers, Worringer and Sedlmayr, whose attention to internal complexities involved a great deal of hand waving, investing forms with large cultural resonances. Where he does provide extended description, as in his Charlton Lecture at the University of Newcastle on Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* (1955),¹⁶ he is diffident in talking about the formal or internal unity of the painting and describes the interplay between the circular format and the compositional arrangement of the *Madonna and Child* by adducing the analogy of a comic advertisement for a rotary shaver; only at the end of the piece does he touch on the unifying expressive import, the sense of *maternità*.

¹⁶ Republished in *Norm and Form*.

A second question raised by Gombrich in his account of depiction is the sense in which we should regard it as a matter of art rather than a matter of practical skill? This takes us to the core of his thought which he had discussed in the essays prior to *Art and Illusion*, particularly the already mentioned 'Meditations on a Hobby Horse' (1951), 'Visual Metaphors of Value in Art' (1952) and 'Psychoanalysis and the History of Art' (1953).¹⁷ He saw our overcoming of impulsiveness and our propensity to do what came to us most easily as the condition of civilisation. The culture with which he grew up would have been reinforced by his reading of Freud's *Ego and the Id* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In the case of an art, the requirement of restraint applies most obviously to emotionally charged subject matter, whether erotic or sentimental. We needed to moderate our regressive taste for sweet things—putting nuts in the chocolate; but the need for restraint applied to all our intellectual and imaginative enterprises. Our propensity to project onto the external world had to be curtailed by a sense of reality, and in the case of painting we had to overcome what we did most readily, with the greatest facility and the minimum effort. 'The more we become aware—he wrote in *Art and Illusion*—of the enormous pull in man to repeat what he had learned, the greater will be our admiration for those exceptional beings who could break this spell and make a significant advance on which others could build.' And he wrote in a later chapter: 'It is this sacred discontent, which constitutes the leaven of the Western mind since the Renaissance which pervades our art no less than our science.'¹⁸ This made the development of representation not simply a technical matter but a value—an exercise in human rationality and self control and this extends beyond the development of representation.

Gombrich's position has been represented as regarding the increase in naturalism as constituting the rationale of art; but this is simply wrong. He thought that the painter's experiments in the cause of more replete and consistent representation were open to rational explanation, and this he undertook to provide in *Art and Illusion*. For Gombrich it was only one axis or dimension of the artist's imaginative work; another was reconciling representational demands and the demands of order; another was exploring more and more elusive or demanding kinds of image, and even dismantling earlier painting's virtuosity and valuing simplicity. 'Art itself now stands in a cultural context in which expectation aroused and

¹⁷ These papers are republished in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*.

¹⁸ *Art and Illusion*, pp. 20 and 148.

denied can itself become expressive of values.¹⁹ It is true, however, that gaining mastery in coherently representing the visible world was central to Gombrich's conception of painting as an art. The other dimensions of achievement were dependent upon it.

Debates over *Art and Illusion*

One could hardly give an account of many of the insights in *Art and Illusion* without addressing the issue which has caused most subsequent controversy, that of his notion of illusion. At the start of the book Gombrich makes clear that the mind does not require simulacra to elicit recognition, for what determines recognition and what makes pictorial representation possible is that the mind seeks out patterns and relationships, not exact replications of prior experiences. We project a gestalt or interpretation onto the perceptual array. This is his background theory of perception. It is, however ambiguous: on one reading our perception projects onto its object and we have no recourse to the object itself; the projection saturates our experience of the object; but on the second reading we can modify our awareness of the object by other 'projections', by other responses to the object. The ambiguity, pointed out by Richard Wollheim in reviewing the book,²⁰ may have arisen because Gombrich structured his theory of perception on the basis of the perception of pictures (in a tradition which goes back through Helmholtz to Locke). In this account of perception, our eyes receive a two dimensional array onto which we project a three dimensional world but we do not see the two dimensional array in seeing that three dimensional world. More generally, we have no neutral uninterpreted access to the objects of perception. This seems to have been enforced by using, as examples, the duck-rabbit and Necker cube in which one way of seeing the figure effaces the other. The problem with these demonstrations is that they prove too much; not simply that we have no raw perception unmediated by a concept but that the projected concept—the triggered interpretation—absorbs the perception; seeing the duck prevents our seeing the rabbit. Yet when we see a landscape or a figure in the painted surface we do not lose our sense of the surface in which we see it. When this extreme reading is set aside the main thrust of the argument is that we project onto the shapes in the picture in

¹⁹ *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, p. 15.

²⁰ 'Reflections on *Art and Illusion*' in Richard Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind* (London, 1973).

a way which makes representational sense; unconsciously as well as consciously we select and neglect from what is present in order to make the situation before us intelligible.

There is a related problem, also raised by Wollheim, in Gombrich's seeming assimilation of the notion of naturalism to that of illusion. What Gombrich's main thesis would suggest is that naturalism in painting is relative to other painting and that when considered historically it is relative to the level of likeness of antecedents which the painter has both utilised and transcended. Illusion, on the other hand, while also triggering pictorial recognition which transcends our expectation, may not be a matter of relations to earlier works but simply something relative to our overall grasp of the painting in question, the dawning of unexpected vividness of the subject—something on which Gombrich sometimes comments with great subtlety. Both of these problems might be traced back to Gombrich's isolation of interest in illusion from the sense of the material surface and from formal order.

A second debate raised by *Art and Illusion* concerned the very nature of *likeness*. Nelson Goodman in his *Languages of Art* of 1968 sought to treat depiction on the model of language: pictures like words denoted objects. He did not deny the fact that resemblances might occur between pictures and what they pictured, but this was neither a necessary nor sufficient condition. He argued that the perspectively constructed projection (which is taken to be a paradigmatic case of depiction by resemblance) would only yield the bundle of light rays corresponding to those delivered by the represented object if we looked at the picture through a peep hole; and this was hardly the normal way of looking at pictures. Furthermore, according to Goodman, the perspective construction itself did not even do this consistently. So likeness as exemplified by the perspective construction, could not, he maintained, be the basis of pictorial representation. In his paper 'Image and Code' (1978), published in *The Image and the Eye* (1982), Gombrich responded by distinguishing between plotting objective information about the world, irrespective of perceptual viewpoint or subjective experience, and representing such experience convincingly. In the case of the perspective construction we had both: a means of calculating what will be seen from a given position, what would be occluded and how size will diminish with distance and experience of how it would look. The perspective construction may imply a convention but it is not arbitrary, in the manner of the word-object relation; it yields true demonstrations of what we would see. Gombrich conceded that some images are harder to read than others, that they require as Goodman said,

'inculcation' and presupposed conventions which we had to internalise. Goodman in his turn accepted that that representation was not only a matter of convention but held that no firm line could be drawn. The serious difference was that Goodman sought to bring depiction into a semi-otic theory of reference, Gombrich into a psychological theory in which depiction was an extension of ordinary recognition.

A third debate generated by *Art and Illusion* was with the great psychologist J. J. Gibson. Over the period in which Gombrich was working on the book and in the decade after, Gibson developed a model of the mind's central perceptual system. According to this it sought invariants through the varying arrays of light registered by the eyes; crucially, the mind structures these in relation to the ground on which we stand and the sky above, and our visual awareness is coordinated with the sense of our own movement, seeking the paths in our surrounding space through which we could move. His disagreement with Gombrich was that he thought the perception of space in pictures was a fundamentally misleading model that had bedevilled the psychology of perception for centuries. Gombrich did not contest Gibson's general thesis and had drawn on Gibson's earlier work in *Art and Illusion*, but he argued that our perception, particularly of distant objects like mountain ranges, of which we had impoverished information, did function like perception in pictures, and in the case of the stars in the firmament could not avoid hypothesising that they were set within a vault because, so the implication was, we had to make some unifying guess. The disagreement was, in the end, marginal to both participants. The underlying issue for Gombrich was that we had to have some interpretation which would unify the array in front of us. When he came to write his last major book, *The Sense of Order* he utilized Gibson's sense of the interrelation of our orientation and movement in a remarkable analysis of the value of symmetry.

The Sense of Order

After considering nineteenth-century theories of design, Gombrich proposed a psychological theory of ornament. Unlike painting it is not meant to enage our focal attention; its domain is the wallpaper, the frame, the pattern of fabrics. Although ornament is thought of as occupying the background of our experience it involves complex psychological mechanisms. The most important of those, he proposed, is the underlying propensity of perception to assume regularity and familiarity within our

environment until change arrests our attention. Where our information is inadequate we extrapolate and interpolate on the assumption of continuity. In contrast to Gestalt theorists it is irregularity that engages our interest not coherence. Gombrich hypothesises the existence of a mental mechanism, the 'break-spotter', which complements our mental assumption of regularity; however, if there are too many breaks, we will cease to have an overall grasp of our environment, with too few, we become bored and inattentive. What concerns Gombrich is how the two concerns interact. We may take in very complex situations like the architectural decoration of the Alhambra, but we can only do so because there are broad framing structures within which we can locate the multiple sub-orders: the resulting hierarchy guards the mind against the confusion that such multiplicity would otherwise produce. Another aspect of order is the role of bilateral symmetry: this has the advantage first of all of economy; once we have a sense of symmetry we do not have to search both sides of the central axis separately; what we find on one side will show up on the other; this has particular importance for architectural planning. Gombrich then linked the value of symmetry in ornament with a fundamental structure in our orientation to the external world: our action, as Gibson had argued, targets some object in our environment toward which we move; if this is not in the centre of our field of vision we will have the sense that we are off target; the flow of unfocused information should continue evenly on either side of our path.

Symmetry and hierarchy are crucial for our sense of order, but for ornament complication is also crucial. A particularly revealing example of complication and order is the moiré pattern, where a convergence of distinct and competing orders generates further configurations in what seems an infinite profusion. These principles apply not merely to abstract patterns but can cover representational motifs. It is striking that Gombrich includes as the final chapter an extended discussion of music. These sections of the *Sense of Order* could be used to complement his account of depiction where the internal order, as opposed to representation, had been given much less attention. Gombrich felt that the book had been neglected and that it was in part his own fault for making it too long. He was surely right on both counts. However, the second section of the book, on the psychology of pattern is surely as important as any writing on the subject and should be required reading for any art historian or critic.

Primitivism

The theme of *The Preference for the Primitive* (published posthumously in 2002) was the deliberate return from sophisticated styles of rhetoric and art to the simpler styles of earlier periods, a return motivated by rejection of the hollow display of virtuosity or sensuality in favour of simplicity and severity. It elaborates on the Spencer Trask Lectures given at Princeton in 1961; over the forty years Gombrich had gathered round his theme a wide range of texts, particularly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, starting with the rebellious students of David, the 'Primitifs', who condemned current styles of painting as 'van Loo, Rococo, Pompadour', and followed by German Romantics like Wackenroder, Friedrich Schlegel, the Nazarenes, and later by Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites and Gauguin. (The book will be useful to students for gathering together—and translating—an array of nineteenth-century texts not easily accessible.) These rejections—like nineteenth-century medievalism more generally—took on by turns moral and religious and even nationalistic connotations. The search for moral or aesthetic simplicity had led to the high value set upon the art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the demotion of the High Renaissance and Baroque. This rejection of sophistication was seen to take an extreme form in the use of primitive masks by Picasso in the *Demoiselles* which Gombrich saw, in a standard art historical move, as the rejection of the meretricious virtuosity of Salon painting. Subsequently, in Surrealism and Art Brut the rejection took the form of a deliberate psychological regression, treating carnivalesque games as art. He clearly saw little value in these while he greatly admired Picasso and Klee. He saw such movements setting up an alternative to the traditional sense of painting—painting as progressively mastering the appearance of the visual world and controlling complex interacting variables. Gombrich's doubts about so much twentieth-century painting might be seen as putting a challenge to its sympathetic commentators to show how it possesses comparable complexities to the major art of the past. These essays, focusing on regressive as opposed to progressive changes, hardly form a free-standing book and need to be read as reflections on themes more fully articulated in his earlier work.

Gombrich retired as Director of the Warburg Institute in 1976. He had pioneered a much greater teaching role for the Institute, starting the two-year M.Phil. courses in cultural history which set numerous research students on their professional careers with much greater conceptual and technical scope than they would otherwise have had. As Director he was fortunate to have, as Registrar, Anne Marie Meyer, someone with a mind as fastidious and accurate as his own and deeply committed to the intellectual standards of the Institute, and as Librarian and Assistant to the Director the literary humanist Joe Trapp, who clearly took a great deal of the institutional burden and who succeeded him as Director. This made it possible for Gombrich to continue his own work, although he would complain angrily of the burdens of administration.

He was the recipient of innumerable honours in the last forty years of his life; he was made a CBE in 1966, knighted in 1972, and awarded an OM in 1988. He had been made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1960 and subsequently of many other academies; he was given the Erasmus Prize, the Goethe Prize, the Hegel Prize, the Wittgenstein Prize, received numerous honorary doctorates, and was made an honorary citizen of Mantua. In 1964 he received the W. H. Smith prize for Literature for his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*. For his birthday at sixty in 1969 there was a concert at the Victoria and Albert Museum, presided over by John Pope-Hennessy, which included a new quartet dedicated to him by Joseph Horowitz. In 1994 he was presented with a Festschrift, *Sight and Insight*, by twenty art historians who had been formally or informally his students, and the papers could hardly have been more diverse in their topics and methods. He enjoyed his public recognition, crafting speeches of acceptance in which he defended his conception of the humanities, but he remained a very private man. It was when hunting for books in the stacks of the Warburg library or in conversation at home in Briardale Gardens that he was at his most genial and at ease. He and Ilse entertained students and visiting scholars with great warmth over many years. I have a particularly fond memory of sitting with Ernst over the translation of a German text which involved musical terms and metaphors; he referred the problem to Ilse, as she was the professional musician, and their conversation involved a small performance of hums and mimes as they agreed on the precise musical term we needed. Cared for as ever by Ilse, Ernst went on working through his final illness, revising chapters and making translations and they continued to entertain friends to tea, refusing to allow the discomforts of age to interfere with conversation. He died on 3 November 2001.

To be taught by Gombrich, whether in tutorials or seminars, was to be treated to an extraordinary range of suggestions, references and analogies for the subject in hand, as well as to brusque criticism. When engaged in argument he gave few concessions and many students—but not all—relished tales of his memorable put-downs. At the same time one was aware of his own anxiety about unchecked mistakes being left to breed confusion in the future. He saw the failure of intellectual clarity and care as in part responsible for the disastrous domination of Marxist and fascist ideologies, his response to the politics of the century being pessimistically conservative.

It is not easy to assess or summarise Gombrich's impact on the field of art history. Unlike Heinrich Wölfflin who was pre-eminent in the first quarter of the century and Erwin Panofsky in the second quarter, he did not proffer a method which others could follow. What he did was to toughen and vastly expand the conceptual awareness of those working in the field; one now had to ask whether a piece of work was engaging with a real, humanly significant question or merely with a self-regarding academic game. From the point of view of method one might say that he made contingency dominant over systematicity while keeping up a running battle against aesthetic relativism. Modes of achievement were historically variable but the achievements were nevertheless objective. For those of us fortunate enough to work with him he made accessible a more wide ranging and challenging tradition of humanist thought than we could otherwise have imagined.

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Note. In preparing this memoir I have been able to rely on J. B. Trapp, *Ernst Gombrich: A Bibliography* (London, 2000) and two memoirs: E. H. Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest. Conversations on Art and Science with Didier Eribon* (London, 1991) and 'An Autobiographical Sketch' in E. H. Gombrich, *Topics of Our Time* (London, 1991). The text of four speeches at a memorial meeting held in February 2002 is being published by the Warburg Institute.