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TEN REASONS WHY E. H. GOMBRICH IS NOT CONNECTED TO ART HISTORY

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Abstract: This is a speculative essay on the place of E.H. Gombrich in art history. Gombrich is universally known, and still often studied at the undergraduate and graduate levels. He is indispensable for the historiography of the discipline. But at the same time, he is not often cited, and his work is not usually part of the ongoing conversations of the current state of art history or visual studies. This brief essay questions that condition.

Keywords: art history; history of art; Kunstgeschichte; Gombrich, E.H.; Gombrich; historiography.

The first version of this essay was written at the request of the North American art history organization, the College Art Association, in the year following Gombrich's death. It was intended to be posted in an online forum, a new kind of publication for the College Art Association: the idea was to gather brief, informal responses and other reactions to Gombrich's death, and later possibly publish them in book form. The project was abandoned by the CAA because the attacks on 9/11 resulted in the closing of the business that supported the website, and the essay was never posted online or published. It has been completely revised for this book, but I have retained the original parenthetical citations as a sign of the work's informal and conversational beginning. (J. E., July 2009).

How can art history come to terms with the work of E. H. Gombrich (1909-2001)? In one sense that question does not need answering, because Gombrich's work is so encyclopedic that every art historian can find a link between his or her own work and something Gombrich wrote, whether it is an entire book, an essay, a lecture, or just a passage in which Gombrich sums up a problem in a few sentences. Gombrich exemplifies the twentieth-century development of the discipline in a way that few other art historians do, and his life was a compendium of its key moments, from an examination of Alois Riegl in the journal *Kritische Berichte* (1922-1923) to his Olympian critique of Simon Schama's *Rembrandt's Eyes* ("Portrait of the Artist as a Paradox," *New York Review of Books,* 20 January 2000, 6-10). Any practice of art history that bears its history in mind, so it would seem, will have to come to terms with Gombrich's work.

There are, however, other ways of assessing Gombrich's work that lead to a less optimistic conclusion. There is, first, the practice of art history that depends only indirectly or intermittently on the discipline's deeper history. That practice, which is mainly comprised of scholarship on contemporary art, traces art and art historical practices to a moment variously

understood as the postwar period or the moment of poststructuralism. In such work there is little reference to art historical precedents before the 1960s. (I am thinking here of the writing traditionally exemplified by the journals *October* or *Texte zur Kunst,* but widely disseminated throughout the discipline.) In addition there is the growing practice of visual studies, which draws on an even shallower history. It often depends on readings of Benjamin and a few other early twentieth-century scholars, but for the most part it traces its roots to developments in the 1990s, and studies art of the last thirty years.

I do not want to engage with either of these discussions here. What interests me in relation to Gombrich is the nearly total absence, in recent scholarship, of the principal concerns that drove his work. Gombrich's central interests included the psychology of art, the relation of what he called "making" and "matching," and the links between art and science. Those are marginal subjects in current art history and visual studies. Very few scholars take psychology, naturalism, or science as starting points for their work.

When Gombrich died, it was widely assumed that there would be a memorial volume, and several were mooted. I was briefly involved in one that would have been edited by Richard Woodfield, Joan Hart, Margaret Olin, and myself. More recently Richard Woodfield has been organizing conferences and publishing anthologies on Viennese *Kunstwissenschaft,* but there is still no collection of essays on Gombrich. In part that is only a matter of accident and occasion, but I think it is also a symptom of the distance between Gombrich and current practices. Now nearly a decade has passed since Gombrich died, and I would like to use the occasion of this centenary of his birth to ask, again, about his place in art history.

I will list what I consider to be the ten principal areas of Gombrich's work that are not connected to the discipline of art history. I have two purposes in mind: first, to pay an honest tribute to Gombrich by taking his own interests seriously rather than asking how his work could be adapted to current scholarship or form a background for contemporary concerns; and second, to play the devil's advocate by implying that Gombrich is not, in fact, the central art historian of the twentieth century. The ten points, in no particular order:

1. Gombrich wrote a number of texts on non-Western art, but it has long been noted that the subject was, in the end, a subsidiary interest. I haven't seen evidence that his final (posthumous) book on primitivism has altered that judgment, and in any case it is fair to say that non-Western and tribal art interested him primarily as comparative material for the study of Western art. The principal text that exemplifies this issue is also Gombrich's most widely read: *The Story of Art* (1950 et seq.). In my count, twenty-three pages out of 637 are devoted to non-Western art. (This count is of course affected by the additional illustrations in the new editions, but it is proportional to the emphasis of the original first edition.) Even those few interpolations do not always harmonize with the fundamental "story" of illusionism in art that stretches from its inception in Babylon to its reversal at the hands of modernism. The entire tradition of Chinese painting, for example, is presented as a counterpoint to Western naturalism. Even though the history of art still struggles with the problem of presenting an integrated, motivated account of both Western and non-Western art, *The Story of Art* can justly be described as the least multicultural, and the most unrepentantly Eurocentric, of best-selling surveys of world art. It is a serious problem for our discipline that the book continues to outsell competitors in its size and price range. My own response, *Stories of Art* (2002) is intended as a contribution to the ongoing problem of rethinking the places of non-Western art, but I also suggest that the core story of *Story of Art* is not as easily dismissed as we sometimes think. The problem of *The Story of Art* in relation to art history is different, I think, from the question of the value Gombrich placed on it (see "Secular Creed," in *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art,* 1979),

and it is not sufficient to dismiss *Story of Art* by saying that Gombrich planned it as a book for children. In fact it is a worldwide best-seller for adults. The narrative of naturalism continues to give implicit support and significance to any number of more specialized monographs in art history. In that respect—it would have been an unexpected and I assume unwelcome one for Gombrich—his work remains central to art history; but the place of non-Western art has been thoroughly re-imagined in ways not compatible with *Stories of Art.*

2. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation,* Gombrich's second principal book (1960), is even more detached from the current state of the discipline. Only a few art historians have taken up the problems it poses about illusion, making, and matching. Even fewer study how pictures are "read" or try to advance the idea that "the discovery of appearances was due not so much to a careful observation of nature as to the invention of pictorial effects" (Gombrich 1960, 279). (The exceptions are now increasingly names from a previous generation of art historians, starting with Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall.) A majority of art historians have read *Art and Illusion* because—curiously—it is still considered a staple in the curriculum. But it remains the case that naturalistic representation is of little concern outside very limited technical specialties such as the history of perspective or chiaroscuro. Some of Gombrich's most inventive essays in the same line as *Art and Illusion,* such as "The Heritage of Apelles" (1976), are still widely read in graduate seminars, but just as widely ignored in professional scholarship. Outside of art history, *Art and Illusion* has had a measurable impact on perception studies and studies of images in general, and it continues to be cited in aesthetics and studies of perception. What matters for art history in *Art and Illusion,* I think, is the cultural meaning Gombrich accorded to naturalism, making, and matching—not the experiments, concepts, or theories that support that meaning. People remember the tenor of the book, what it dared, rather than its arguments. Gombrich's thesis about making and matching, as has often been noted, was very much in line with an emerging interest in the social construction of concepts such as reality: but no one cares for the empirical investigations, because no one in art history investigates naturalism per se (as a scientific or empirical phenomenon), and no one except marginal figures like David Hockney want to think of artworks as experiments in perception. In taking what is seen as a conventionalist argument from the book while avoiding its empirical methods and its balanced arguments about convention, art historians are profoundly anti-Gombrichian.

3. Something of the same is true of Gombrich's next major book, *The Sense of Order* (1979), a major study of the psychology of decorative art and, I think, one of his less frequently read books. It is tempting just to list the issues Gombrich raises, which have not been taken up by specialists: the idea that German Expressionism has a "basic weakness" because, like all expressionist theories of art, it mistakes expression for communication (Gombrich 1979, 43); the supposition that the flaw in historical theories of ornament, such as the search for meaning in the Chinese *t'ao-t'ieh,* is the "assumption that designs must be interpretable as signs" (*ibid.,* 224); the suggestion that crosses are common in many cultures because they attract flourishes (ibid., 247-250). There are many, many other examples in the book. (In fact I think that no individual chapter of this book has been given a full reading: it is remarkably dense with implied claims, many so subtle that a thematic reading may mistake them for simple description, and at the same time it is studiously parsimonious with fully articulated arguments. That dynamic itself, and its connection to the subject matter, would support a close reading.) The book has attracted some attentive readings be design historians such as Michael Golec, but few extended citations by art historians. If specialists in German Expressionism, Chinese bronzes, and medieval iconography have not taken up Gombrich's suggestions, it is because

the suggestions are engaged with psychological explanations and frameworks for understanding rather than historical issues. Even so, it is curious that a book as encyclopedic and well versed in the art historical literature as *The Sense of Order* has found relatively little resonance with ongoing issues in the specialties it samples.

4. Gombrich was centrally concerned with science throughout his career, as seen in *Art and Illusion; Art, Perception, and Reality* (1972); "Illusion in Art," in *Illusion in Nature and Art* (1973); *The Image and the Eye* (1982); and *Conversations on Art and Science* (1993). These books have vanished from art historical bibliographies, and with reason: how many art historians seek to learn the scientific foundations of the phenomena they describe? Historians who study Friedlieb Runge, Georges Seurat, and Wassily Kandinsky are sometimes attracted to the history of color theories, but that does not necessarily intersect any concern with current color science. Historians interested in perspective occasionally come into contact with theories of subjective curvature or three-dimensional perception, but very few have investigated current theories of that subject. Historians who study the conditions of attention and perception in the nineteenth century, such as Jonathan Crary, overlap many concerns of contemporary research on attention, peripheral vision, fixation, and visual memory, but to my knowledge no such historian cites current scientific research for its scientific, rather than its historical or methodological, interest. Historians who are involved in modernist critiques of figure and ground and the issue of form and formlessness, such as Rosalind Krauss, do not make use of current research in cognitive psychology that bears on the mental construction of images and the functional definition of a form. Gombrich kept himself informed about cognitive psychology throughout his career, making use of Bela Julesz's experiments on attention, as well as fixation studies and incomplete-information experiments. The fields of cognitive psychology and neurophysiology have progressed rapidly in the last twenty years, but art historians have not been taking Gombrich's lead. In the last preface to *Art and Illusion* (2000), Gombrich notes the semiotic claim that realism and naturalism are culturally relative because "all images are based on conventions"—but then he says, in a wonderful aside, "it seems to me a little rash to assert that what you do not like does not exist" (Gombrich 2000, xxv). I wonder if there are more than a half-dozen art historians who would be willing to laugh along with him. The few who look at contemporary science, including John Onians, Barbara Stafford, David Freedberg, and Ladislav Kesner, are a heterogeneous bunch: we don't agree among ourselves about *what* science should be studied, or how it might best be connected with art. That could be seen as a healthy empiricism, but I think it is also a sign of the isolation of the vanishingly small community of historians who study science. (And "contemporary science" here means scientific papers, not popular science.)

5. Gombrich was uninterested in that staple of art-historical scholarship, the biographical monograph. In an interview, asked if he regretted anything about his career, he said he wished he had written a monograph on a single artist. (He had in fact written one, on Giulio Romano.) I am not sure how to take his regret, but I am tempted to read it as a covert point of pride: he would have been saying, in effect, I successfully avoided the most common pitfall of art historical writing. No matter how his answer is interpreted, it remains the case that he did not write biographical monographs on artists, although he came close: He wrote dozens of essays on individual historians and philosophers, specialized studies of *parts* of artists' lives, and studies of particular media and methods. It seems to me the absence of a monograph on a single artist is a telling sign of Gombrich's distance from the discipline, especially because an artist's life might well present itself to history as a *problem,* and therefore fulfill Gombrich's own primary requirement for a suitable subject. Monographs on artists and artworks remain an indispensable

sign of a scholar's engagement with art history as a discipline. Although I can think of dozens of art historians who have not written entire books on individual artists, the library catalogues show thousands more who have. Gombrich's comment, I think, was an observation on the discipline's sense of itself, and his distance from it.

6. Then there is the question of Gombrich and modernism. There are at least three ways to assess Gombrich's relation to modernism: by looking at his own tastes and preferences; by studying his theories of the historical avant-garde; and by considering his books and his scholarship as exemplars of modernist tendencies. The first is the easiest but most treacherous. Gombrich has been accused of being antipathetic to modernism, and there is sufficient evidence to support the claim on both sides; he was certainly antipathetic to innovation for innovation's sake. The second approach is perhaps more amenable to evaluation. Gombrich was interested in the avant-garde, but his concerns took him outside the existing debates. (He did not engage with the Frankfurt School, or the rethinking of the avant-garde in the 1970s and after.) In particular he argued persuasively that the avant-garde can be said to have begun in the Italian Renaissance, with the inception of public competitions ("The Leaven of Criticism in Renaissance Art," in *The Heritage of Apelles*, 1976). It remains to be seen how his assessment accords with the more common alternative accounts positing an avant-garde that begins with the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the generation of Manet, or the decades following Cézanne. I tried to square Gombrich's sense of the avant-garde with other scholars' usages in *Master Narratives and Their Discontents* (2005), but there is little correlation. It is also possible to assess Gombrich's books as examples of modernist scholarship. In the 1960s *Art and Illusion* had a reputation for being radical for its contributions to the philosophy of coding and convention and, at the same time the book was also praised for what would now be called its postmodern use of cartoons. Yet the unexpected appearance of cartoons in serious scholarship merely coincided with Pop art; it did not correspond with the reasons Pop artists were attracted to cartoons. *Art and Illusion* could be read as a precursor to the wider and wilder scholarship of the later 1960s and 1970s, but in what sense, exactly, was it modernist? In what sense did it participate in an avant-garde?

7. If Anglo-American art history's current interests were to be listed in order of preference, a top place would have to be given to gender studies, including feminism and queer theory. (Paradoxically, the German tradition Gombrich spurned remains more concerned with other issues, including the technical and perceptual ones Gombrich enjoyed.) Gombrich barely mentioned gender, and an art history that is preeminently engaged with gender cannot easily recognize Gombrich's relevance. (Even so, it is intriguing, as Richard Woodfield reminds me, that Gombrich's student Alex Potts wrote an excellent book on the subject.) Another popular topic in contemporary scholarship is the economic and institutional study of art, together with its wider methodological context, the social history of art. Gombrich was closer to those concerns: He was one of the first to move art history away from Heinrich Wölfflin's kind of formalism (see, for example, *The Sense of Order*), (Gombrich 1979, 201-204), and he made several incisive critiques of Erwin Panofsky's adaptation of Aby Warburg's concept of iconology. Yet in the United States, Gombrich is not named as a progenitor of contemporary social art history; Meyer Schapiro and John Berger are more likely to be cited. (In England, Gombrich's influence has been more direct, both in a positive and negative sense, and one might name Francis Haskell and T. J. Clark as examples.) Gombrich widened the scope of art history, but in what sense are those wider interests precursors of the contemporary understanding of social, economic, or institutional art history? And how different are gender and identity studies? Could they be seen as further developments in this history of broadening

horizons, or do they belong to a different, and even an opposed, history? If even "conservative" social art historians do not trace their practice to Gombrich, it is unlikely that scholars interested in gender studies, queer theory, or identity would find many points of connection. Still, it is best to be circumspect on this point: from a future vantage, these may appear as widening circles with early twentieth-century *Kunstwissenschaft* at their center. I say *may,* because that horizon is not yet visible.

8. Continuing the previous point: A second list, this time of art history's preferred methods, might leave Gombrich even further out of the picture. Such a list might include Lacanian psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and newer manifestations of semiotics. Gombrich had an amicable correspondence with Nelson Goodman and wrote extensively on Freudian psychoanalysis, but his work seems entirely detached from current methodological preoccupations, so much so that Gombrich appears to be operating in an entirely separate discipline. Postcolonial theory and area studies are particularly far from Gombrich's interests, even though the rewriting of art practices as signs of socioeconomic constructions could conceivably be seen as compatible with Gombrich's move away from the pure aesthetics of connoisseurship and its dependence on value and quality. But that's a stretch, and it would be difficult to imagine a less comfortable pair than Gombrich and postcolonial theorists like Rasheed Araeen, or Gombrich and Lacanian historians such as Margaret Iverson. These examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Gombrich's affinity with disciplines other than art history is perhaps strongest when it is judged in terms of his methodological sources.

9. Gombrich's own sense of the history of art history has been widely influential in some respects, and more personal in others (for example, *Tributes,* 1984). His lecture *In Search of Cultural History* (1969) remains the major anti-Hegelian tract in the discipline, and his subsequent studies of Hegel, such as "The Logic of Vanity Fair" are still pertinent. Even after studies by Stephen Melville, Horace Pippin, and others, Gombrich's response to Hegel and art history's history remains both strong and useful. Gombrich's assessments of twentieth-century art history are often more personal and less easily applicable to current readings. His book *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (1970), is an indispensable record, but as others have noted, Gombrich's Warburg is not the iconoclastic, fervent, unpredictable, and personal writer whose *Nachleben* is now being rewritten. Most recently, to give examples of scholars from three different countries, there is work by Georges Didi-Huberman, Tetsuhiro Kato, and Georg Szönyi. (The last has talked with Hopi elders to determine Warburg's degree of immersion in the culture.) In short, Gombrich's sense of the twentieth-century history of the discipline is not in accord with its current state.

10. My last category is one that Gombrich himself did not aspire to: art criticism. At the same time his work is replete with criticism, and his oeuvre can even be taken as a critical enterprise. By that I mean it carries forward ideals of *Bildung,* which involves critical thought (*Kritik*) and not just documentation: in this view culture is kept alive by means of revaluation. Gombrich's descriptions of artworks often harbor subtle (and not-so-subtle) criticisms, just as his many reviews of historians contain implicit (and sometimes outspoken) criticisms that bear on art. For example, he accuses André Malraux of being in a "dangerous muddle" (*Reflections on the History of Art*) in supposing antinatural art to be more expressive than naturalistic art; the accusation also indicts a Surrealist-inspired sense of history and implies a judgment about Surrealism itself. Gombrich's work, I think, articulates a strong sense of the values that should be accorded to art of many times and places, and yet—my theme one last time—that body of criticism seems to have had virtually no effect on twentieth-century art criticism.

I have listed these ten points to suggest how it can be argued that Gombrich's work is intellectually distant from contemporary art historical and critical practice. Whether that redounds to our credit is another question.

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