

Meditations on a Hobby Horse

And other Essays on the Theory of Art

E. Gombrich

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Gombrich is no regular art critic. He tries to evade mere verbiage and bring to art a more scientific attitude. He has in mind the German tradition, or maybe rather, ideal of *Kunstwissenschaft* and being a friend and admirer of Karl Popper, to whom he repeatedly refers, he makes an effort to present falsifiable statements. Statements, in other words, which have content and which thus further the study of Art, not merely moving it endlessly in circles. Thus in the preface to this collection of essays he reveals that he was once admonished to write on Art as if it was mathematics, albeit an ideal that he was unable to live up to. It is this attitude that sets him apart.

Traditionally comments on Art can be divided into, those of 'connoisseurship' and those in commenting on the expressions of Art. The former is of course an objective undertaking, not to say a forensic one, with the express purpose to establish correct provenance, or more specifically to find out who painted what, in particular to authenticate paintings. This is of course of great financial importance in the Art world when acquiring paintings it is of utmost importance to be able to weed out the fakes from the real thing. Thus the connoisseur is less concerned with the expressions of the paintings, and in fact instead turns their attention to, as Berendsen famously initiated, the peripheral aspects of paintings, under the assumption that in those impostors would pay less attention. On the other hand there is also another aspect of connoisseurship, namely to be an arbitrator of taste. To decide what is good Art and what is bad Art. And in fact much of connoisseurship consists in relying on gut reactions as to what a painting feels like. Is this really a genuine da Vinci? Clearly the connoisseur who relies on superior intuition has much higher status than the mere technician, who gets his hands dirty by making a chemical analysis of scraped off paint.

As to the expressive significance of a painting, Gombrich warns against the great danger of 'reading' a painting, degenerating into the mere 'reading into', not unlike that of reading meanings into a Rorschach blot, an activity with no checks. Thus Gombrich takes exception to Collingwood's view of Art and artistic creation as being an expression of feeling to which spectators are invited to 'eavesdrop'. Thus in effect making a distinction between the emotional impact of a piece of Art and the emotions which may or may not have been present in the artist during execution. A more instructive example than the visual arts is furnished in music. Music more than any other form of Art inducing in the consumer an emotional response. Clearly, Gombrich notes, it is absurd to believe that a composer need to wait for a period of sorrow to write sorrowful music.

Gombrich may not be so much of a scientific Art critic as an Art historian, after all there is not much of a science developed to make such an occupation a full-time one. As a historian of Art he downplays the creative aspects of Art, or at least takes exception to an

overly romantic one, claiming that artistic invention are created out of the void. On the contrary, artists are very much dependent upon a tradition, which they are free to modify, although in no essential way. In particular an artist has to be taught how to draw a house or a horse, without such visual paradigms he is in fact stuck. Once he knows how to do it, he is able to make the necessary modifications for the particular house or horse he is facing. Thus the people of the past did not necessarily see things differently than us, they only had different conventions as to things should be presented. In another context the author makes fun, with the aid of a cartoon, of the notion that the Old Egyptians only presented their profiles, and thus moved around sideways. The original purpose of Art is not to present realistic representations, this is a latter mostly Western tradition, but by means of symbols expressing (and here we have that questionable concept again) a fact or a story, using pictorial conventions in the same way we use words to verbally present a story. Thus, almost as little as in the case of words need those symbols literally represent what they are conceptually meant to represent. We see that in the drawings of children, productions which in spite of their obvious shortcomings do not bother their juvenile artists¹. Thus in this sense Art does have a history, meaning that Art has developed over the centuries, at least when measured against the criterion of mimesis.

One may expect that Gombrich would be skeptical against the phenomenon of Modern Art and that he would prefer the scholarship of the old. This is true, with some crucial qualifications. The attitude of the author towards Modern Art is one of gentle bewilderment. He is also, in a concluding essay, reluctant to enter the fray. What you pronounce on Mediaeval is unlikely to provoke any strong feelings, it is different with Modern Art, the commentary of which is likely to land you in a wasps' nest. Gombrich sees Modern Art as basically a case of experimentation. As such the activity is commendable, because new ways of presenting the visual world is necessary, in fact when it comes to the technical skill of visual representations, we are not able to surpass the great artists of the late Renaissance. But, and this is a big 'but', the experimentation that goes on in Art cannot be compared to that which goes on in Science. In science you make controlled experiments and you state clear hypotheses, whose purpose it is to be tested. Falsification again and the normative influence of Popper. In Art, anything goes. The point of experimentation is to draw conclusions and to reject. But if you reject nothing, there will be no development, but a just a bewildering mass. One needs criteria against which performances can be measured, and this appears regrettably absent in the Modern Art world. And without such criteria, Art just becomes a species of Fashion, which tends to be cyclical, and in which rejection as such of prevailing norms has an intrinsic value. But as Gombrich remarks, by this attitude, anything new that is created, will just be food for future rejection. Any praise that comes its way merely supplies a reason, a compelling reason in fact, to reject it eventually.

Gombrich is thus not against experimentation and the introduction of new artistic forms. In fact one such with roots in the early 18th century, but only becoming entrenched in the 19th, is the caricature, or more generally the political cartoon, for which the former

¹ I recall vividly how satisfied I was with my drawings as a child, and once was perplexed by my mother's remark that the hands of a figure I had drawn only had three fingers. I found the remark puzzling as well as irrelevant, clearly I had drawn a hand, not been concerned with mere fingers.

is just a component. Caricatures were notably absent in Mediaeval times. It relies on a discovery that faithful likeness is not necessary to evoke recognition. A face can be drastically distorted, yet present no difficulties in identification. In fact by distortion and exaggeration, a more striking likeness can be achieved, emphasizing not the merely superficial character of a face and a human being, but 'expressing' deeper facets. The political cartoon derives its effectiveness through striking visual representations of abstract words and ideas, driving home the actual meaning of a state of affairs more effectively and vividly than mere words. Originally the political cartoon came with an extended text loaded with allusions, providing anyone who decided to peruse it seriously much food for thought. In the Modern World, with the demands of rivaling distractions, cutting short the attention span and the patience of the modern reader², most of the text has been cut out, the effect almost solely depending on the visual impact and cues. Caricature is not considered a very elevated Art form, and especially when it comes to cartoons and posters, they quickly date, as the issues which brought them about in the first place have faded into the great oblivion of the past. But, he asserts, in the hands of masters such as Daumier and Goya, those displays have broken new ground.

Another form of Art which is traditionally not held in high regard is the one which is based on the ambiguity of visual clues. Well-known are the ones that can be interpreted in radically different ways, say either as an old witch or as a young woman. It is symptomatic that there seems to be so few of those images, the ones you are continually exposed to, be it in psychology books or selections of curiosities, tend all to be taken from a very small sample. What in particular intrigues Gombrich are the globally impossible figures which abound in the works of Escher. Escher is popular among mathematicians, but hardly among high-brow critics. Clearly there is no expression of emotion, only frivolous play. On the other hand, Gombrich seems to imply, if not stating it explicitly, what is so different with the playful attitude of a Picasso, say in the fad of cubism. As Lewis Carroll remarked, take any string of meaningful sentences, and cut them into pieces and reassemble them fitfully. It now becomes poetry. What about taking any picture and chopping it into bits and reassembling them. Thus the spectator is presented with a puzzle, in order to make sense of it, What is he supposed to do? Reassemble the bits so they make sense, a rather involved undertaking which no doubt will keep him busy. But is it Art? Is it not just a frivolous play of which you soon will get tired? In a similar vein Gombrich presents a rather awkward and vulgar picture, but suggests that we view it through a distorting pane of glass, and lo and behold it becomes immediately far more respectable.

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² Gombrich is writing in the 50's, even before the advent of the Internet.

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