

Art History

As noted, Gombrich's *The Story of Art* all but exchanges art for history in excluding a definition for art, only to introduce depiction and reference as the proper object of study. It is appropriate to now look a little closer at this history. Treating art simply as the history of pictures, unfortunately does not give us the whole story on art or pictures. There are too many pictures for such a history, too much history for such pictures. Nor can a history get by trading on common usage of art to refer to merely pictures and at other times as beauty or excellence, and elsewhere as beauty and excellence only in pictures. The confusion costs pictures. Fine art is a necessary distinction, or art has a capital A for this reason. However in-keeping with current practice of abbreviation, it is enough here to no more than register this deep and mischievous ambiguity.

One does not abandon an essential unpredictability or loss of scope for art, in appealing to some further concept or framework for definition. In fact there is no real choice. Firstly, because history must be *of* something, the surprise and scope of art are meaningless if unmeasured *against* something. The question is only to what to appeal for a broader basis? Secondly, to assume that future works will in some way surpass whatever concept or definition one cares to propose is in truth to no longer be in the business of history or art, but prediction. Following Goodman, an appeal to art's cognitive efficiency is advocated, and questions of how and when styles change and variously maintain this efficiency now call for a history and method. By looking more closely to Gombrich's example a model is gauged, modifications suggested

The method to *The Story of Art* is actually presented in more detail in *Art and Illusion*, where it is bound up with a set of principles for pictorial representation and visual

perception.¹⁰⁰ The cornerstone to the method is the axiom that ‘making precedes matching’. This asserts that reference or symbolic relations follow from our conception of the world, that we make entities, before matching them in tasks of reference.¹⁰¹ It may seem an obscure point of metaphysics, but as shall be shown, it does not remain one. Gombrich is at pains to refute notions of a platonic form or an a priori concept, guiding making, and argues instead for freely revised or elastic concepts. He offers the example of building a snowman, in which a man is seen as literally built of snow, rather than as an effigy or replica. His argument is that the man of snow is an entity first, and an effigy second. Common sense would tell us that what we have is firstly and really snow, in the form of a man, rather than firstly and really, a man, currently taking the form of snow. Or, if we drop the matter of snow and talk simply of making a human, then precedence of conception or making, before the matching of parents, looks a little silly.

But since this point is crucial to Gombrich’s method, it is worth dwelling upon a little. The argument fails because it proposes a resulting concept of a man of snow, in precisely the same way as it denies a guiding concept of a man in general. The argument is not strictly coherent. If there is no guiding concept in making, nor can there be a resulting concept to be matched to anything. This is because an elastic concept can only expand or contract in relation to some definition. To propose that we need a man of snow before we can have a concept of a man (or indeed snow) is to mistake man-ness for man. *Some* concept of a man, or man-ness, must be taken as a guiding concept, but this concept need not, and cannot be the platonic form, but nor need it imply only and always snow. Another way of putting this would be that snow may improve or alter our concepts of a man, but snow alone does not make a man. If the notion of replication is inconvenienced by notions of an antecedent concept of a man and of snow, equally construction is inconvenienced by the subsequent ‘form’ of the concepts - of a man and of snow. This is, as Gombrich rightly states, the ‘real’ issue.¹⁰² But Plato is not to be out-manoeuvred quite so easily. For that we must perhaps trade a dualism of real and ideal or essence and accident, for a pluralism of worlds and versions. For the moment however it

¹⁰⁰ Both in the preface and the concluding ‘Retrospect’, of *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich declares the essential unity of approach in the two books. See Gombrich, 1960, p. vii, pp. 330-332.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p. 80-98.

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 85.

will suffice to point to the symmetry of the argument, and to conclude that making does not precede matching. They are neither consecutive nor alternating, but simultaneous and relative. It is a two-way process, and they are two ways of describing the same thing. In making an individual we expand our universal, in matching a universal, we detect an individual. It makes no sense to claim it as a one-sided affair, to insist on a priority, or that it can be wholly arbitrary. The process cannot be absolute either; no entity is established wholly devoid of, or in complete possession of, all of its properties, including relations. So there is always more at stake than an isolated snowman.

The aim here is not simply to rehearse metaphysics however, but rather to reject the argument Gombrich offers and more especially the ends it serves. These can be summarised in three points. It is firstly an argument for the development of reference from contingencies of concept, and their elastic use and custom. But the priority given to conception is here rejected; and instead reference and conception are taken to go hand in hand. Symbols are not second in the business of making the world, but partners. There is no making without matching, nor distinction or articulation without system and symbol. Even nothing has a name, or is a name for something. Secondly it is an argument for the primacy of the individual before the group. One can have some sympathy with Gombrich's totalitarian anxieties on this point, but they are unfounded.¹⁰³ Equally, one must deny the primacy of the group, whether material or transcendent. Both identities are elastic, relative and revisable and one cannot precede the other, or exist in isolation. In the matter of pictures and styles, no picture precedes a style or exists in isolation. The very term picture already places it as a certain type or style of artefact.

Thirdly, making and matching underlie Gombrich's distinction between schema and correction, and the belief that the artist and work can stand outside of tradition, in order to identify and correct the rules of a schema, according to the way we 'really' see things. But the 'correction' a revised schema can make is equally the latitude a tradition allows. Nor does it make a difference to claim that the 'discovery' is accidental or unintended, or achieved through blind trial and error. If the result is taken as more realistic or illusionistic, then a scale or set of rules is implied. The

¹⁰³ Gombrich, 1960, pp. 16-17.

mistake here is in assuming that even the details of a style – its schemas - present themselves for scrutiny by the ambitious artist in such a way that would allow the rules or the conventions to be grasped. For this the tradition must somehow be frozen for a moment. But there are no such intervals in history. There are no static schemas, no entire catalogue of instances for the artist to consult. Each instance revises the nature of the schema, and at any time art has many, if any, competing schemas and applications. A work's 'corrections' are no more than its connections to other and older works. Hence schemas do not precede works, anymore than they proceed by correction. There is no realism for pictures outside of the tradition or the consensus to which to appeal, and there is no single and fixed form of it within the tradition, to be refined or distilled.

Gombrich's historical method in fact provides a story of realism that underlies his history of art. What is notable about the story is firstly the strength and optimism of its opening, in which the concept of art (with a capital A) is breezily tossed aside, in preference and deference to artists, and from where it can trade on art simply equating with pictures, and the gradual accumulation of realistic features through schema and correction. This is in stark contrast to the stalled and stumbling ending, with its fears for the death of art (even in 1950) its grim list of eight factors detailing where society has failed art, its scant and scattered handling of developments in the second half of the twentieth century and its general lack of appreciation or enthusiasm for the achievements there, its indifference now to the artists. It is in all respects, a sad ending. But one cannot help but reflect on the merits of the historical method, and to doubt the teller rather than the tale, when he can find no space for mention or reproduction of a Francis Bacon, a Willem de Kooning, a Mark Rothko, a Frank Stella, a Jasper Johns, a Robert Rauschenberg, a Andy Warhol, a Roy Lichtenstein, a Chuck Close, a Larry Poons, a Brice Marden, a Phillip Guston, a Sol Le Witt, a Gerhard Richter, a Anselm Kieffer, a Julian Schnabel, a Francesco Clemente, a Jonathan Lasker, a Lari Pittman, anything of the world of sculpture, of mixed and expanded media and installations, or even of Australian aboriginal painting.¹⁰⁴ To have lost some through the exigencies of space may be accepted as unfortunate, (although in a book running at over six hundred pages, one

¹⁰⁴ This list is based upon the 16th edition of *The Story of Art*, London, 1995, but grudging acknowledgement of Rauschenburg is found in an earlier essay, see Gombrich, 1982, pp. 31-33.

wonders how much pressure can there have been on one or two more pages?) To have lost most, may be regarded as regrettable, perhaps even rigorous, but to lose all, as Lady Bracknell might say, rather looks careless.¹⁰⁵ For Gombrich of course the selection is rigorous and merely excludes ‘specimens of taste and fashion’, unfortunately it also amounts to a devastating critique of his own taste.¹⁰⁶

Yet Gombrich maintains his method is sound and it is art that has failed history. But do we have poor art, or do we have a poor art history? The whole point of *The Story of Art* is to allow an appreciation of art’s variety, to fail in an appreciation of the present, is to fail not just art, but also its history, forty years of it, at least. If one allows perhaps that the method succumbs in the end because there can be no short-term history, or a history of the present, and that history requires a longer perspective, one confronts a different problem. Since Gombrich’s story proposes that art simply is its history, then if history cannot pursue art to the present it is in effect to say there is no such thing as contemporary art. If there is no contemporary art, then can it be that art and its history are at an end? Yet if its history is finally at an end, then it can at least be defined! This would be cold comfort for aspiring artists, if it were true, but the fact is art can be defined without the necessity of an end, and such a definition is precisely what is required to direct an historical enquiry in the first place.

Gombrich’s story fails in the short term because he can no longer distinguish between fashions, tastes and traditions, schemers and schemas. Art becomes increasingly diverse and remote for the historian seeking the self-evident tradition and the given schema in need of correction. Yet it is not so much that they are no longer in use but rather that they never really were. Tradition on Gombrich’s terms is the product of his historical method and story, and is actually as much a historicist myth as the moods and spirits of the times he regards with some scepticism. Instead of an idealist myth of grand historical forces, we have a realist myth of minor and piecemeal insights of an absolute perception. But it too comes at a price. Firstly it is realism at the cost of art, and secondly it is realism at the cost of

¹⁰⁵ There are of course more comprehensive histories of late twentieth century art, although none so directly concerned with the basis of depiction. Rival versions are considered in the closing chapters.

¹⁰⁶ Gombrich, 1995, p. 7.

history. It starts as realism as a goal for the correction of schemas or tradition, and then realism as the measure of expression in schemas. Gombrich allows that the process is relative, that realism cannot escape a medium and a style, but since corrections are the name of the game, sooner or later pictures will converge on realism. The terms vary with the tasks of a time and place, but successive corrections theoretically ought to accumulate into the one true realism.

Every generation discovered that there were still unsuspected “pockets of resistance”; strongholds of conventions which made artists apply forms they had learned rather than paint what they *really* saw.¹⁰⁷ (My italics)

The problem is not, as Gombrich concludes, that the Impressionists reached the end of the road, in their translation of supposed light values into colour, but that pictures keep ditching one schema in order to correct another. The one true realism keeps cancelling itself out. We can have volume at the cost of movement, light at the cost of depth, detail at the cost of simplicity, excitement at the cost of proportion, sentimentality at the cost of sobriety. The relativism and realism of the story are actually at odds. On the one hand Gombrich allows that there is no progress in art, since all correction is relative, but on the other, that there are genuine discoveries such as perspective or the localised colour values achieved by Constable, and that they represent a real advance for depiction. Something has to give. When art subsequently does without perspective or Constable’s localised chromatics or a good deal more, Gombrich can only conclude that it is doing without realism and that art is so much the worse for it.

Less realism is taken as a measure of more expression. For Gombrich this amounts to an increasing subjectivity and the twentieth century’s retreat into introspection. But expression’s correct schema, like realism’s, proves somewhat elusive and chimerical. For Gombrich it is the quest for just this spectre that charts painting’s dissolution throughout the twentieth century.¹⁰⁸ But while expression abandons Expressionism, the more concrete in depiction, and even the standard materials and techniques of painting, it also adopts geometric rigour, biomorphic forms, novel and compelling facture or gesture. Reference is never quite abandoned; we never

¹⁰⁷ Gombrich, 1995, p. 561 (quoting from Gombrich, 1960, p.330).

¹⁰⁸ Much the same verdict is passed in Bell, 1999. Bell readily acknowledges the influence of Gombrich.

quite reach nothing, anymore than realism ever quite managed to accumulate everything under its steady corrections, and for the same reason. Each ‘correction’ or change supplants content, or supplies its own, and the business of reference, of resemblance – even of illusions - is actually maintained. But for Gombrich the relativism this implies threatens to unravel the whole basis of the story. The principle and the precedence of making before matching, of reality before reference, would then be hopelessly compromised. It is easier in the end to dismiss the whole period as decadent, superficial, neophyte and self-indulgent.¹⁰⁹

The problem of course is not simply with the ending of *The Story of Art*, but with the story itself. To accept that the story is valid up until the twentieth century, for example, is to merely paper over the cracks.¹¹⁰ The method does not hold for the twentieth century, not because the twentieth century is so utterly different, but because the principle of recognising a tradition in its constituent schemas disintegrates as it approaches the present, or once the historian is confronted with precisely the situation proposed for the artist throughout history. If the historian cannot detect it in the present, armed with a scrutiny of the past, why should one believe the artist does? Or how is it therefore adequate or acceptable to reconstruct such situations in the past?¹¹¹ The fact is the present has its artists, who are accepted and recognised, and there is no clear and cataclysmic break between the twentieth century and the preceding five thousand years or so. It is convenient to see the twentieth century as utterly different, but it is inconsistent if one is also to claim that art is an elastic concept, or only a matter of depiction and reference. The problem is really one of a diminishing hindsight.

At this point one needs to consider how an historical method is to interpret the past without tripping over its own terms. The problem is how a distinction is to be

¹⁰⁹ Gombrich, 1995, pp. 612-618.

¹¹⁰ David Carrier takes this position in his critique of art history narratives. See Carrier, *Artwriting*, Amherst/Penn., 1987 and Carrier, *Principles Of Art History Writing*, Philadelphia, 1991.

¹¹¹ Gombrich acknowledges the dilemma, in considering the objections raised by Andre Malraux in *Voices Of Silence*, (see Gombrich. 1960, p.54) and proposes to overcome it through ‘historical imagination’ but does not explain how this can identify the differing mental sets, and styles for pictorial notations, except *in relation* to their successors, that ‘confirm or deny’ their influence. His criticism of Malraux’s reluctant historicism is pursued in a later review of Malraux’s *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, reprinted in Gombrich, *Reflections on the history of Art*, Richard Woodfield (ed.) Berkeley/London, 1987, pp. 218-220.

maintained between method or interpretation and history. Confusion of the two is considered the folly or fallacy of historicism, but history cannot do without interpretation, obviously. There is no way to isolate just the facts, and only those accepted as incontestable, are usually those of least interest. Method clearly makes interpretation for a history, rather than simply accompanies it. Before proceeding to an historical method consistent with Goodman's philosophy, the following chapter considers interpretation more generally.