

This was originally written at the request of the College Art Association, the year after Gombrich's death. The idea was to have an online forum. The events of 9/11 suspended those plans. More information is [here](#).

Ten Reasons Why E. H. Gombrich Is Not Connected to Art History

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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 discipline in a way that no other art historian does, and his life is a compendium of its key moments, from an examination of Alois Riegl in the journal *Kritische Berichte* (1922-23) 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). In that sense art history is continuously coming to terms with Gombrich's work, and his scholarship is emblematic of the discipline as a whole.

There is, however, another way of assessing Gombrich's work that leads to a less optimistic conclusion. The requirement here for claiming a connection to his work would be more stringent. Gombrich's central concerns included the psychology of art, the relation of what he called "making" and "matching," and the links between art and science. Those are marginal interests in the discipline, and very few scholars take them as starting points for new work.

Because so much has been written about Gombrich (and much more is sure to appear in the form of memorial essays, conferences, and dissertations) I want to use this forum for a particular purpose. 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 by taking Gombrich's central interests seriously, and second, to play the devil's advocate by implying that Gombrich is not, in fact, the central art historian of the twentieth century. I hope this strategy prevents the all-

too-easy accumulation of individual achievements, which can make it seem as if an enumeration of his wide-ranging interests is a sufficient assessment of his work.

Letters are invited in response to the items in this list, or to suggest others that I have omitted; replies are also invited to the rhetorical frame of this essay itself. It is also possible to imagine an alternate version of this essay, in which the devil's advocate is the one who lists Gombrich's affinities with current art-historical work, by way of proving that Gombrich is, after all, deeply connected to the discipline. Letters on that subject are also welcome. One way for the discipline to come to terms with Gombrich's work is by producing a wide-ranging forum of responses. If the letters warrant it, it may prove useful to collect them in a book--a kind of tribute in letters, rather than in formal essays or monographs.

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. His final (posthumous) book on primitivism may alter that judgment, but otherwise 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, and even those 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. (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])

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 less 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” (279). (As exceptions I would name 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 limited 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 widely read but just as widely ignored. Outside of art history, *Art and Illusion* has had a measurable impact on perception studies and studies of images in general. What matters in art history, I would say, is the cultural meaning accorded to naturalism, making, and matching--not the ideals or operations themselves. In that respect art historians are profoundly anti-Gombrichian. Yet Gombrich’s thesis in the book, as has often been noted, is very much in line with contemporary interest in the social construction of concepts such as reality.

3. I think 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 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 (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” (224); the suggestion that crosses are common in many cultures because they attract flourishes (247-50). There are many, many other examples in the book. If specialists in German Expressionism, Chinese bronzes, and medieval iconography have not taken up Gombrich’s suggestions, it is because they are engaged with 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 also 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). 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, but none has investigated current theories of that subject. Historians who study the conditions of attention and perception in the nineteenth century overlap many concerns of contemporary research on attention, peripheral vision, fixation, and visual memory, but to my knowledge no such historian cites current research. Historians who are involved in modernist critiques of figure and ground and the issue of form and formlessness 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 new preface to *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 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” (xxv). I wonder if there is even a single art historian who would be willing to laugh along with him.

5. Gombrich was uninterested in the 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.

6. There is the question of Gombrich and modernism. Gombrich was interested in the avant-garde, but his concerns took him outside recent debates. 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. 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. 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, was also praised for its 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. Ultimately, the question of Gombrich's place in relation to art history will have to include an assessment of his sense of modernism, postmodernism, and the avant-garde.

7. If 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. Gombrich barely mentioned gender studies, 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 at the moment is the social history of art, including economic and patronage studies. 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*, 201-4), 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 often 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.) In what sense, then, are Gombrich's wider interests a precursor of the contemporary understanding of social art history (or even gender studies)? It is a fascinating unsolved question, which could be expanded into reception studies, film studies, and contemporary art-historical practice outside English-speaking countries.

8. Continuing the previous point: A second list, this time of art history's preferred methods, would leave Gombrich even further out of the picture. Such a list might include Lacanian psychoanalysis, Sartrean analyses of the gaze, 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 theoretical preoccupations, so much so that Gombrich appears to be operating in an entirely separate discipline. His real audience, here as elsewhere, is double: On the one hand, it is the scientist and philosopher of science such as Karl Popper, and on the other, it is the art historian who is dedicated to studying the objects Gombrich studied. 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). It remains the major anti-Hegelian tract in the discipline, and his subsequent studies of Hegel, such as "The Logic of Vanity Fair" (date), are still pertinent. His book *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (1970), is an indispensable record, but 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 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. Gombrich's 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: Culture is kept alive by means of reevaluation. To that end 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*, 219) 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, implies 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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