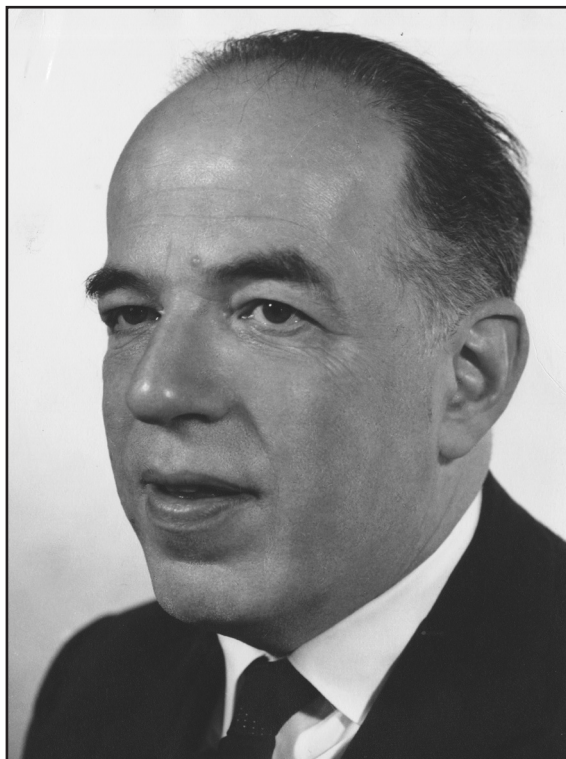

ERNST HANS GOMBRICH



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ERNST HANS GOMBRICH had an unmatched ability among twentieth-century art historians to appeal to a wide public, but at the same time was regarded with respect and even awe by his professional colleagues. But within the field of art history, he was perhaps more influential for his criticisms of certain once fashionable approaches to the subject than for his original research, important though this was. Born in Vienna, he was the son of a prominent lawyer and a pianist who had been taught by Bruckner and sometimes played with Schoenberg. Gombrich himself, like his parents, was not particularly drawn to the more avant-garde aspects of Viennese intellectual life, but was brought up with a wide knowledge of European literature, art, and especially music, which remained his greatest source of pleasure throughout his life.

At school he was enthusiastic about science, but chose to study art history at university, a decision reluctantly accepted by his father on the grounds that his chances of employment were so bleak that he might as well do something that interested him. The Department of Art History in Vienna was notable for the ambition and quality of the teachers. In Gombrich's day, the two leading professors were Josef Strzygowski, notorious for his arrogance as well as his dislike of classical art and its later influence, and Julius von Schlosser. From Strzygowski, whom Gombrich considered something of a charlatan, he acquired some of his interest in the art of Egypt and the ancient Near East. But he was much more attracted by the less charismatic Schlosser, from whom he derived his lifelong preoccupation with the early written sources of art history. Other important influences were the classical archaeologist Emanuel Loewy and the psychologist Karl Bühler. Gombrich was uninterested in connoisseurship, which was then considered highly prestigious, and skeptical about attempts to treat stylistic changes mainly as symptoms of broader social and historical developments. This was already evident in his dissertation on the architecture of Giulio Romano, who was categorised as a leading exponent of Mannerism, which in the 1930s was generally thought to reflect a spiritual crisis in Italian society. After studying the copious surviving archival material, Gombrich realized that this interpretation hardly fitted what was known about Giulio himself or about his employer, Federico Gonzaga.

After finishing his thesis, Gombrich was invited to collaborate with Ernst Kris on a book about the history of caricature. Because they shared the same first name, Gombrich adopted the practice of signing his publications with the initials EH. Kris, a curator in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and a practicing psychoanalyst, was interested in broad questions about art and psychology, for example, about

its relationship to magic. The study of caricature, in which the artist distorts the physical features of the person represented while retaining the basic likeness, presented Gombrich with questions about the nature of representation and illusion that preoccupied him for the rest of his life. The book itself, however, was never published, although a much abbreviated version appeared in 1940.

Gombrich's first book, a history of the world for children, which is still in print in many languages, appeared in 1936, the year of his marriage to the pianist Ilse Heller. In the same year, at the suggestion of Kris, he was appointed research assistant at the Warburg Institute in London, specifically to work on the unpublished papers of Aby Warburg, a task requiring excellent German as well as a familiarity with the art of the Italian Renaissance. Also on the staff was another former student of Schlosser, Otto Kurz, who was soon asked to collaborate with Gombrich in teaching at the newly founded Courtauld Institute. Together they were asked to produce an introduction to iconography, the study of the subject matter of art. Their approach was very different from that of Erwin Panofsky, whose *Studies in Iconology* appeared in 1939. Whereas Panofsky was mainly interested in images whose subject matter was obscure, they concentrated instead on those that followed conventions that were once well established but were later often forgotten. Gombrich, in particular, was interested in the ways artists sought to convey meaning.

Because of the outbreak of war, the book was never completed, and Gombrich spent the next few years monitoring German radio broadcasts. At this period he did much to arrange for the publication of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by Karl Popper, who became a close friend and an important influence on his thinking. Gombrich returned to the Warburg Institute as a research fellow in 1945. By now it had become clear that Warburg's manuscripts were mostly not publishable, and accordingly Gombrich was asked to write an intellectual biography of him, tracing the origins and development of his ideas. Due to circumstances beyond Gombrich's control, this did not appear until 1970, and then in a somewhat revised form. From the immediate postwar years also dates *The Story of Art*, written in the evenings in fulfilment of a contract. The success of the book, which has been in print ever since and which has been translated into more than thirty languages, is easy enough to understand. Rather than overwhelming the reader with a series of names and dates, Gombrich chose to explain, in a notably clear and unpretentious style, how the means used by artists to represent the world changed over the centuries.

On the strength of *The Story of Art*, which was unlike any previous general history of art, he was appointed Slade Professor of Art in

Oxford, and in 1956 gave the Mellon Lectures in Washington, published in 1960 as *Art and Illusion*, shortly after he became director of the Warburg Institute. In these lectures, he explored the psychological processes involved in the perception of pictures, drawing on a vast range of visual material, including cartoons and advertisements. Some of the issues had preoccupied him at least since his collaboration with Kris, and most of them were already outlined in a proposal for a book to be entitled *The Realm and Range of the Image*, which he unsuccessfully offered to publishers in the late 1940s. The result was a highly original and genuinely interdisciplinary study, which attracted a much wider audience than works of conventional art history.

The success of his two books led to the publication of many volumes of Gombrich's shorter and more specialized studies, whether scholarly articles, lectures, reviews, or even obituaries. His studies on the art of the Renaissance, the subject of much of his teaching at the Warburg Institute, and on iconography, which appeared as *Symbolic Images* (1972), were particularly influential, both in encouraging scholarly interest in the motives of patrons and in providing a challenge to the very complicated interpretations of subject-matter then in vogue. But his main interest during the 1960s and 1970s was decoration, the subject of his Wrightsman Lectures of 1970, published in 1979 as *The Sense of Order*. The topic was particularly associated with the name of Alois Riegl, who had been one of the most influential art historians in Vienna before Gombrich's time, but had subsequently been rather neglected; and probably for this reason, the book, the longest that he published, has so far had a relatively limited impact.

In his introduction, Gombrich drew attention to "the complementary character of the two investigations [*Art and Illusion* and *The Sense of Order*], one concerned with representation, the other with pure design." He went on to say, "I hope that the book on *Symbolic Images* (1972) and other matters I have written on narrative and illustration can now be seen as fragments of an even more ambitious project: to study some of the fundamental functions of the visual arts in their psychological implications." His last book, *The Preference for the Primitive*, a study of an important aspect of changes in taste over the centuries, appeared in 2002.

Gombrich himself once stated that "my ambition—and it was rather a lofty ambition—was to be a kind of commentator on the history of art. I wanted to write a commentary on what actually happened in the development of art" (from "An Autobiographical Sketch," in *The Essential Gombrich: Selected Writings on Art and Culture*, ed. Richard Woodfield [London: Phaidon, 1996], 34). His skepticism about claims that artistic change was symptomatic of much

larger historical and social developments and that it obeyed certain laws was based on his recognition that such claims were merely circular and did not possess any explanatory power. His work on art and psychology, although widely read, has not been much developed by other art historians, although it has proved more influential among psychologists. Within the more specific area of art history, his influence, as he would surely have wanted, has been primarily in extending the range of questions that art historians need to address, in discrediting various previously fashionable approaches to the subject, and in providing an inspiring example in the clarity of his language and the skeptical tone of his approach. In a discipline in which this was by no means always the norm, he sought to persuade, whether in articles or in lectures, by reasoned argument rather than by the assertion of authority. The recipient of an astonishing number of public honors, in his private life he was notably unpretentious and generous with his time to other scholars.

Elected 1968

CHARLES HOPE

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