

# Gombrich on the Renaissance I

*Norm and Form*

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June 16-19, 2019

The title is a give away. This is not a book but a collection of lectures given at various meetings. You understand the situation. You are invited, you are honored, all expenses paid, and you need to reciprocate, be it modestly, in the form of giving a talk. What do you talk on? You rummage through your drawers, you try to think about something fresh, there is after all a few months ahead. Thus the contributions tend to be narrow, somewhat technical and not really completed. Some of them are a bit tedious to read, others engage your interest by suggesting a problem to be elucidated and you read on intrigued only to be disappointed, the expected resolution is missing, what you take part in is just a first attempt, a sketch, an intention maybe, but nothing much more.

So what are the problems which are touched upon? For one thing there is the notion of progress in art. When did artists become aware of it? Meaning, when did they rise from being mere craftsmen with commissions, to realize that they had a mission in life. Then there is the emergence of the patron, the sponsor of art, especially architecture, and culture. What were his (almost always a he) motivations? Personal glory or a genuine passion for the arts? A passion diverted from the traditional venues of military conquest? The articles being devoted to the Italian Renaissance this discussion centers on the de Medicis of Florence. Or how the genre of landscape paintings arose. To whom were those works of art directed? One tends to forget that artists of the past were dependent on commissions, they had something to sell, and personal self-expression became secondary. The questions are interesting but Gombrich only formulates them, looks at them, and come to no real conclusions.

But anything you write on Leonardo is bound to be interesting. Leonardo had a lot of ideas on the art of paintings which are extremely interesting, especially as few artists of the time (as in other times as well) bothered to formulate them, maybe even reflecting on them. Leonardo, among other things, inveighed against the idea of the sure hand. Why should the first attempt be successful? And he refers to poets who have no ambition to write their poems in a nice hand, nor to expect them to come out full-blown and perfect from the beginning, but only as the result of many trials aborted, crossing outs and fresh beginnings. This idea of automatic perfection is only a sign of pointless virtuosity. On the contrary drawing should be an exploration with many false starts, and indeed if you look at the sketch books of da Vinci, they are filled with tentative lines that make up a seemingly impenetrable mess. An artist needs not only to have a good eye, he or she must have a good hand as well. Part of the pleasure of drawing lies in the movements of the hand, and with those sketches of Leonardo, one despairs how he could have read them accurately, but maybe what he retained was the movement of the hand. To Leonardo imagination is paramount, but how to stimulate it, it does not work in a void. He suggested that one

makes blots or looks at random images formed accidentally, such as contours of clouds. Those may be meaningless but the human mind desires to interpret them and make them intelligible, and in so doing new forms arise. Gombrich speculates that he used his sketch-books as junk-yards, so when encountering a problem, he could rummage through them looking for some earlier sketch which could be modified for the situation. A study made for one project may in the end be involved in a totally different one.

There is a chapter on one painting, namely the 'Madonna della Sedia' by Raphael. Why this particular painting is being picked out I do not understand, and probably there is no good answer to that. More seriously what is so great about it? The black and white reproductions in the books certainly do not do it full justice, to see it in real life no doubt would make a huge difference, but yet this goes for most genuine paintings. Even a colored reproduction leaves you wondering. It has been argued that with Raphael technical mastery of oil-painting reached its apex. Raphael wanted to compete with Michelangelo, but realized that he could not do so in sculpture hence confined himself to painting. The painting is famous though, and part of its fame must be due to an apocryphal story connected with its conception. According to legend Raphael spotted the young woman with her breast in a window. Having not had his sketch book nor any brushes, oils or crayons with him, he made do with the bottom of a barrel on which he drew with a piece of chalk he had found on the ground. Tourists love such stories, Gombrich explains, and guides add them accommodatingly to their repertoire. No one really wants a painting explained, but any story connected with it adds to its intrigue and makes it stick in memory.

'Norm and Form' is the subtitle given this first collection, and it relates to the classification of art and the concomitant labels. Are they necessary? What do they add to the pictures? All classifications amount to assembling groups of objects and to each assign the thematic unity, or if you want the essence of what they have in common. How much of this is really objective and helpful, and to what extent is it just subjective and arbitrary? Yet how can we go about having no classification schemes at all?

The final chapter concerns Joshua Reynolds and the question of imitation versus assimilation, which is a pervasive aspect of all art. In a previous chapter a lengthy quote by Petrarch is included, expounding on imitation and similarity. For Petrarch an imitation should never be a mere literal copy but more in the spirit of how the appearance of a son imitates that of the father. One should perceive the likeness, which often is not apparent but hidden, only revealing itself through a careful scrutiny. The former likenesses protrude and creates apes, the latter creates poets, according to Petrarch. This ties in with Gombrich idea of schemata which have to be assimilated and modified, and he shows how Reynolds was once given the commission to depict three sisters gracefully engaged and positioned to enhance their beauty. Reynolds proceeds by looking at precedents and decides how he can modify them.