

Ideals and Idols

Essays on values in history and in art

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This is a collection of poppered essays. By that is meant that they are peppered with references to Sir Karl Popper, with whom the author entertained friendly relations, both being Austrian exiles of roughly the same age stationed in London. However, one surmises that the relationship was not one of perfect equality, the younger partner - Gombrich - being very much the junior partner and treating his older friend with a degree of respect bordering on reverence. Science has a lot of prestige and Popper having supplied a criterion for what could count for admission, Gombrich felt as a mere art historian a sense of inferiority. What could Art and History contribute that would make it eligible for inclusion in the charmed circle? Are there any absolute standards in art, or is it just a matter of fashion and ultimately anyone is as good a critic as anyone else, meaning that total relativism reigns, or as Gombrich would put it - radical subjectivism. If this would be the case the discipline of Art history would have little meaning, beyond that of cataloging, and no intellectual content whatsoever. Thus the essays are attempts, and not very forceful ones but characterized by a sense of humbleness, to counter the case of radical subjectiveness towards which the author instinctively feels an understandable antipathy without really being able to marshal overwhelming arguments for his cause. The battle is essentially a defensive one in which the author appeals not only to the sympathies of the readers as spectators but also to the opponents.

Can one make sense of history? Any attempts to do so would make you guilty of historicism, which according to Popper is a heinous crime, let alone to refer to Hegel, which would put you beyond the pale. Gombrich does so, with plenty of apologies to Sir Karl, if only to make a point. The term 'Zeitgeist' is commonly used and understood, even if most people would be hard pressed explaining what it really is and amounts to. It is a hegelian term, along with terms such as 'Volksgeist' which nowadays, understandably, are less acceptable. Metaphors can be quite illuminating provided that they are not taken literally, then they become merely silly, and that is what has happened to Hegel, his grand metaphysical scheme amounted to just that, that of being a literal presentation, and seductive as it initially was, it eventually became ridiculed, at least by serious hard-nosed so called analytic philosophers, true to the grand tradition of philosophy. But in the humanities, Hegel still exercises a lot of appeal because he makes sense not only of history but also of its various manifestations such as art. Burckhardt's philosophy of art as he expounded on in the mid 19th century likewise with his emphasis on Zeitgeist has a strong hegelian tinge, although he seems not to have been aware of it, but was urged by a friend to study Hegel (which he no doubt did the author remarks in passing). Maybe hegelian ideas were part of the Zeitgeist at the time, ideas imbibed unconsciously and instinctively without any awareness of their source (which if we are going to be consistent, was not

Hegel himself, he being just a more articulate exponent of them).

Now a trivial version of *Zeitgeist* is fashion. Fashions come and go seemingly without rhyme or reason motivated only by the desire for novelty and a concomitant rejection of the old. Its most extreme manifestation is dress, where it tends to follow a cyclical pattern, as nothing is rejected for good reasons, the old eventually becomes new once memory has faded and variations been exhausted. But, however, creative fashion may seem, it is wedded to a tradition, to which it may add but never seriously depart, hence fashion is but local variations on a basic theme. Now dress is literally superficial, and of course there are deeper layers on which fashion may act, having more momentous consequences. From a hegelian point of view a *Zeitgeist* is but a stage in a development, the course of fashion is not random but follows an inexorable law. The notion of progress is of course a left-over from the hegelian intoxication, and it does seem to make sense at least when it comes to technological and scientific endeavors, and Popper is a firm believer in progress, or at least that there is such a possibility but it presupposes our sustained vigilance and does not come about automatically without our conscious efforts. The goal for science is Truth for which we at each moment cannot hope for more than a mere approximation, but an approximation which can be improved. Does there exist a notion of progress in art, this would assume objective standards? This is the question Gombrich anxiously asks. Or are we forever trapped in the vagaries of more or less random taste? It was easier for people of the past to make a case for art. When art was wedded to religion, the objective value of art lay in how well it served its religious purpose. When art was separated from religion there was always the more ancient Platonism to fall back upon, ironically so Gombrich remarks as Plato condemns Art in his 'Republic' (incidentally a dialogue which has in my opinion been given too much weight in his oeuvres). Plato was concerned with the Truth, the Beauty and the Good all given absolute aspects transcending mere human opinions. As Mengs, a friend of Winckelmann put it. Only God can perceive perfection, men can only perceive through the senses, and all he can hope for is to perceive beauty, which is perfection filtered through the senses. Or words to that effect. Platonism is nowadays thought of as naive and any literal adherence to the creed perverse, making it much harder for the serious art historian to make his case.

The point of art is to please and to delight when it fails to do so it does not necessarily mean that art is to blame, any conversation needs two participants, and when one is absent no conversation will ensue. When Gombrich once sent one of his students to inspect Raphaels drawings in the Albert and Victoria, she came back saying she did not like them, to which the author snapped, this was uninteresting. This may serve as a starting point in a pursuit of an objective appreciation of art. Personal opinions are of little relevance. Of course for an individual personal sympathies may make it easier and harder to appreciate a piece of art, and the role of fashion is to form and guide personal opinion, which hence is much less personal than one would naively assume. A piece of art should be judged on its merits, on its own turf. This is of course far from unproblematic. In the extreme it becomes as vacuous as a tautology, if merits and turf are defined too narrowly as to coincide with the object itself there will be no ranking, no comparison, one object just as good any other. We are in the realm of radical subjectivism. The compromise between universality and specificity to aim at is referred to as 'style' a notoriously vague concept.

As far as I can tell Gombrich tries to make this more precise and also more in accordance with the strictures of Popperian criteria. Gombrich point is that an artist does not start from scratch, as little as a scientist does, what he sees is prejudiced by his expectations. To assume otherwise is romantic nonsense. The way you see is the way to draw or paint, and Gombrich talks about given schemata, which need to be adjusted to the specific situation at hand. The schema serves as a point of departure and needs to be suitably adjusted to the situation at hand. As far as your expectations are frustrated, modification is required. This leads to a problem, just as in science, and the skill and originality of an artist consists in how those problems are being solved. The type of problems which are encountered can be thought of as the style. Different styles give rise to different problems. In this there is the germ of objectivity. Whether you like a painting or not is irrelevant, just as whether you like a theorem or not, your liking or disliking of the latter has no bearing upon the intrinsic worth of the theorem in terms of its difficulty or the problem it is meant to solve and illuminate, let alone its truth. To appreciate it you need to study and understand what it is really all about. As Collingwood points out you cannot judge the veracity of a proposition unless you know the problem to which it provides an answer. Once you understand a problem you are in a position to judge whether it has been solved or not, and in the latter case how far it is from a solution. The solutions or attempts at solutions can then be appropriated by other artists working in the same style encountering the same problems, and in this way one can make sense of progress in Art and also to make sense of a history in which one thing is actually connected to other things, having sources and impacts, being part of a long social tradition stretching further back than the memory of an individual can reach and further on than his imagination is able to conjure. One such overriding problem is that of mimesis, meaning the faithful representation of reality (which according to the Plato of the Republic is vain and stands in the same relation to sensuous reality as the latter to forms), This is a simple problem that even a child can understand and appreciate, even if it may not profitably learn from it. One should note that it is in the nature of a well-posed problem that it is much easier to check its solution than to come up with one. And the delight a solution gives is directly related to the gap between the two, especially when this is not consciously understood. Thus if a painting does not appeal to you it may not be the fault of the painting. Then it is another thing if you should go through the trouble to acquire the taste necessary to do so. As another example he brings up Chinese calligraphy, here we have a much more abstract art which is opaque to the outsider to whom it is mostly a matter of splashing ink on paper, something that children can be engaged to do.

As to pedagogy Gombrich sticks to the old tradition of copying as opposed to the modern one of letting children be creative. I recall at school how we were more or less forced to copy pictures while I was used to do them from scratch so encouraged very much by my mother. Such an attitude equates art with self-expression and thus once and for all makes any claims for being objective and scientific impossible. How can you ever hope to falsify a self-expression. Popper's view on the matter (not mentioned by the author) is that the falsification criteria in the case of art are purely subjective, which does not necessarily make them less demanding only opaque to an outsider. Collingwood emphasizes the element of self-expression in all art, reducing the role of the spectator

to an eaves-dropper. Clearly if you want to pick up the skill of representation, copying the masters is a time-honored practice, the artist being a supreme craftsman. When the emphasis is on self-expression art stands in great danger of degenerating. And this is a danger very much in the mind of the author.

As an anti-dote to degeneration and the proliferation of tastes and opinions he proposes the naming of a canon consisting of truly great names providing touchstones of excellence and thus marking out the territory. You may not particularly like Michelangelo but that is beside the point as long as you recognize his greatness. In fact the role of the canon is to provide a common vocabulary. As we are all aware of, we tend to include among our favorite artists or writers, not necessarily those belonging to the canon, for the same reason that we prefer the beauty of our wives to that of generally recognized icon who serves other purposes. A fare consisting only of the very great would be too austere, but yet without them we would lose our bearings. This incidentally links up by another theme of his essays, namely the role of the humanities and a general education.

A humanist should not be primarily concerned with producing new results as in the sciences, but with the consolidation of what already is. In short he or she should be a scholar not a scientist. Thus knowledge for its own sake has intrinsic value and the humanist should aim for a wide field ignoring artificial divisions into discipline which is but the convenience of the administrators. The purpose of a general education is similar to that of a canon. It maps out the territory, and thereby, just as a map, stimulates the imagination. You know what you know, and even more to the point you will know your own limitations. Thus it is more than mere name-droppings, it indicates intriguing avenues to follow, territories to explore, and hints at hidden treasures yours for the taking. A general education gives you a perspective and also a sense of meaning as it all suggests how different parts hang together. The role of philosophy is to supply a general roadmap of thought so to speak, to, in the words of Collingwood, give you moral guidance, the purpose of any true philosophical education as opposed to technical specialization. What Gombrich says on the role of universities and a university education are strangely topical forty years later, not much having changed since then apparently, except being much more of the same. With a certain nostalgia he looks back at the old Germanic tradition, when a professor was given a chair at whose feet his disciples would sit and listen. He owned just one allegiance, not to the university, nor to his students, only to his subject. Of course such a situation puts a lot of pressure on an individual to live up to, and if he is not up to par and sufficiently committed to his subject those pressures overwhelm and his situation becomes untenable. It is indeed easier to have administrative duties or obligations to students, but it means a devaluation of the role, and thus ultimately a trivialization of the institution. As to academics, especially in the humanities, he warns, in the tradition of Francis Bacon, against idols to be avoided. The first is *idola quantiatatis* the drive to observe and collect data for its own sake. Discrimination is a virtue. The second *idola novitatis* to worship novelty for its own sake, and closely related to this the *idola temporis* meaning to be seduced to apply new gadgets and methods for the sake of prestige when they are not especially relevant. Finally there is the *idola academica* which in fact means the more or less arbitrary division into disciplines and departments, whose purpose is purely administrative.

As to museums he has some good commonsense advice to give. The point of a museum, as far as the public is concerned, is to show objects. Objects of exceptional beauty, or more generally objects which are rare. To travel to see a legendary painting such as the Mona Lisa is clearly a pilgrimage, a thought so obvious, he apologizes, that it must have been formulated repeatedly¹. Thus an important public role of a museum is to be a shrine. But others roles are that of instruction and delight. The delight provided by the objects. But then there is the touchy subject of instruction. Ideally the masterpieces should not be displayed in isolation but in connection to lesser pieces trying to solve the same problem, being so to speak steps on the way. This is what happens in an archeological museum, there being so relatively few of those objects that all are collected regardless of intrinsic worth. What we have there are collections that have 'no gaps' and thus show developments and manifest historical continuity (as an ideal fossil record with no missing links). But it is not feasible to have art museums based on the same principle. When it comes to the instructive aspect he thinks that museums have gone overboard. Why be subjected to standing in front of huge informational placards or become privy to some esoteric technical knowledge, say concerned with the tanning of leather, when you can pick this up more comfortably and conveniently reading a book at your leisure at home.

Finally there are some items that fall outside the frame, One reports on his wartime experience with German wartime propaganda, which interesting as it may be, after all one can consider propaganda as an art form² and decide whether it was well made or not. German war time propaganda was indeed skillfully made and presented, and Gombrich points out that it was ideally meant to be heard on the radio together with others, i.e. being an extension of the rally, and not to be sampled privately in your home, where there always was the option of turning it off. Of course propaganda only worked so far, in the end it could not hide the fact that the war was being lost. The second includes a correspondence between the author and Quentin Bell, the nephew of Virginia Woolf, in the mid 70's. Bell has read with pleasure, not only once but twice, Gombrich essay on values in art and the need of a canon (one is always so polite in such exchanges especially in the initial stages), still he feels uneasy about a canon. The exchange is inconclusive but many wise words (and perhaps not so wise) are being interchanged.

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¹ During a fairly recent visit to the Louvre in the spring of 2013 the Mona Lisa was protected by a sheet of glass along with guards. In front of it a crowd of mostly Orientals had assembled shooting pictures with their mobile. Clearly it could not have been an experience of aesthetic contemplation as much as being in the proximity of a shrine containing sacred relicts.

² Collingwood makes a distinction between propaganda and art, in the former it is a question of inducing specific emotions, in the latter one of witnessing the expression of emotions. Thus a pornographic picture intended to induce lust is not art but a species of propaganda.