

The Image and the Eye

Further studies in the psychology of pictorial representation

E.H. Gombrich

September 23–29, 2017

Gombrich is an Art Historian, but what interests him are not pictures and their aesthetic qualities per se, unlike the traditional connoisseurs such as Kenneth Clark, Berenson, and the predecessor of them all – John Ruskin, but the psychology of visual interpretation and the problems those pose to the artist. Thus the backbone of art and its history is mimesis, at least according to Gombrich, although he does not make any such categorical and explicit claims. Of course mere faithful reproduction is not enough, what art aspires to is to go beyond mere mechanical reproduction to enter more exalted realms, yet it is the problem of mimesis which has given the development of visual art its necessary objective aspect. In fact its objectivity is illustrated by the phenomenon of mimicry which in a sense proves that images are interpreted more or less the same way by humans and non-humans. You have to start somewhere, Gombrich points out talking about schemata. Those give the ways of representing various objects on the canvas but they are far from perfect but have to be modified. Thus we enter the piecemeal trial and error procedure in which various attempts are tested against visual reality and modified accordingly. The criteria according to which our attempts are measured are those of visual impression. In this way a slow convergence towards greater and greater verisimilitude can be achieved. The Greek painters understood this well, and there are various legends as how realistically they could paint. The final result should be a *trompe l'oeil*. Birds should peck at the flowers, and horses should greet their images. Those became the ultimate judges, as it is one thing to fool a fellow human, sharing some common prejudices, quite another to fool non-humans. Greek sculpture is unsurpassed when it comes to likenesses, and it is quite likely that the same thing holds for paintings, it is only that so few have survived that we are unable to make an assessment and pass a reasoned judgment. It could well be that the development of painting reached its perfection over two thousand years ago. As to a scientific project, it is not that difficult. In medieval times the process had to start all over again, everything that the Greek had accomplished in two-dimensional representation had been forgotten. Thus early medieval art strikes us as primitive and inept. To some extent the judgment is unfair, that kind of religious art, which we are almost exclusively concerned with, served other purposes than just faithful represent, still their crude representation of perspective reveals technical ineptitude rather than convention. The emergence of perspective at the end of the period has been seen as an invention with no real precedent. But the absence of evidence is no evidence of absence. Although Gombrich holds that whether the Greek had perspective or not to be a controversial question, I would consider it obvious. They certainly had the technical skill and mathematical acuity to easily work out the principles, after all work has survived on optics. The columns of the temples are usually thicker higher up to give the impression of being straight and not tapering off for viewers below.

One may even speculate that they were aware of the Camera Obscura, after all this is a simple device, just a box with a pinhole, allowing a projection on an opposing face, be the image a bit faded. Anyway the emergence of a perspective meant that the artists of that time were of a different brand than those prevalent today. They were less concerned with personal expression than objective scientific inquiry. Dürer and da Vinci are two representatives of the phenomenon of the scientist as an artist, although they were far superior as artists than as scientists, which says more of their artistic qualities than their scientific.

As to perspectives we have now become quite adept at reading such pictures, and cannot really understand how people in the past could be satisfied with showing a table top from above, when picturing from the side. All the objects on it were doomed to fall off. Yet children (and inept adults) still draw carpets standing up unable to realize by themselves that there are drastic foreshortenings. In the past people did not have perspective drawings to teach them, thus the deficiencies we find intolerable that they were able to accept. But not quite, as the very fact of the development of perspective shows dissatisfaction without which there would be no incentive for improvement.

Gombrich may at heart be more of a visual psychologist than an art historian as such, as noted above, and to him our ability to accurately read and interpret perspective drawings is short of miraculous. One thing is that the foreshortening is far more drastic than we realize, able and eager as we are to interpret a picture realistically. A lamp post situated some short distance away compared to a nearby one is surprisingly small when cut out of its proper context and put down for a direct comparison. Many visual paradoxes are grounded in this fact.

Connected to visual representation is the distinction between recalling and recognition. We are much better at the latter than at the former. We all have visual images in our minds, and they often represent faces with which we are familiar. It is not difficult for us to conjure up in our minds how somebody 'looks like'. But what is it that we conjure up? Once we try to focus on it it fades away, it seems impossible to use it as a template from which we can draw information. When it comes to sounds, it often happens that we hear a word or two without catching the meaning it is mere sound. But we may retain the sound for some short amount of time and then listen to it again and derive its meaning. It is said to be people who have a photographic memory in the sense that they can perform the same feat with visual images. It should mean that they see a street sign flash by, and not catching what is written on it, but being able to recall it in their minds and read it. To us who do not have this skill it sounds (and looks!) hardly plausible. What we conjure up in our minds seems to be something more abstract, in a sense giving the essence without any tangible details. The Platonic image so to speak devoid of any material manifestation. It is this image we have when we recognize something in the real world. It is not a question of comparing part by part and checking off, but just a realization that we have before our eyes yet another material manifestation. Without this ability to recognize, which is very distinct from recalling, the visual world would remain incomprehensible to us. This flexibility of the evasive inner image may to some extent explain our ability to recognize a face under the most diverse conditions. To be allowed a small digression. Bicycling in today I passed a bicyclist who later caught up with me by a red light. I looked at him and he appeared vaguely familiar. Then it struck me who he was. A young colleague at the

philosophy department. What did I really recognize? I could of course give a description. A youngish man with a read beard, but there are many such men around to the point of being indistinguishable. Recognition was not immediate, as noted above, until it so to speak dawned on me. What was it that dawned upon me? It clearly was not the details of the beard, which are bound to change repeatedly, but something about the gaze. There is much to be had from a gaze, and it might be that which is the key in recognition. But the gaze seems to transcend the physical position of the eyes. Can we really make such accurate measurements? I would say it is a mystery, but it could be it is the gaze that we can conjure up, just like the smile of the proverbial cat independent of the face itself. As to the physical expression, Gombrich refers to a Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töppfer (1799-46) who suggested an exercise in Popperian spirit. By experimenting with simple faces by changing the distance between eyes and nose and other small parameters, one may produce a lot of different emotions. The judge of those emotions are yourself. In this way one may converge to different solutions as how to represent anger, sadness, surprise. The noteworthy thing is that in order to do so you do not need to make elaborate faces, the simpler ones are actually more effective for the purpose. Clearly it is the case of an imagination filling out a mere skeleton.

Now to discuss this matter the author makes a distinction between a face and its mask. I guess the mask may be a particular physical manifestation that has been solidified. He wants to illustrate the point by showing two pictures of Bertrand Russell, one as a four year old, and one at ninety. What do those two images have in common? Yet he claims that there still a definite likeness between them, a realization that it is the same individual. He would dare a computer to pick out and destill this invariance.

Other topics the author treats in this volume of essays is the problem of representing movement. To do so literally is of course impossible, you had to wait for the film to do so. But once again by enlisting the imagination of the viewer quite a lot of illusions can be created. When we see a frozen movement we are unable to resist the temptation of its extrapolation as well as retroactive reconstruction (what happened before?), although the former is more important than the latter. (When we are watching a film, 24 frames a second, we are unable not to make the interpolations. Connected to the problem of movement is the one of gesture. Gestures are not static, so only if you are able to create the illusion of movement may you represent a gesture. A gesture is of course much more than a physical movement, it is often a more eloquent expression of emotion and intention than words. For one thing gestures may be unconscious and automatic, while when speaking there is always a definite element of deliberation and volition, although one may of course at times say more than was necessary, maybe being carried away by the emotion (as in a gesture?). In fact much of what we see and experience are blurred by motion. We cannot really see how a flush looks like in lightening, it is far too quick, only by technology can we freeze that movement. If so is the sight a natural one. The quest for greater and greater versimilitude led to the experiments of the Impressionists, whose object was not abstraction, but to catch the reality of visual experience in its more subtle aspects. Turner, whose mature images, look so abstract were a pioneer, and was as such actually appreciated by the general public, much more so than the public today appreciates modern art. The reason being, I would suspect, they understood and sympathized with his intentions.

October 18, 2017 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*