

Topics of our Time

Twentieth-century issues in learning and in art

E.H.Gombrich

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This is a collection of essays and talks, written predominantly during the latter part of the 80's, when the author was in his late seventies. The first one is a succinct autobiographical sketch of his years as a student. He touches briefly on the romanticism of Vienna and the Austria-Hungarian empire which he was too young to savor. His tenure in Vienna was that of the inter-war years, which ended, due to the unstable political situation, in exile in England, where he eventually would establish himself nicely. One of many brilliant Austrian exiles and a friend of Popper, whom he repeatedly refers to in his writing. The meaty part of the sketch concerns his studies at the university, which at that time were very different from what it later would become due to the great expansion of the student population. At his time there were no real difference between undergraduate and graduate studies. You were free to sample lectures in different subjects and then gradually converging to your true interests without any time pressures. Admittedly some people never converged and lived lives as eternal students, adding character to the body as a whole. In the case of Gombrich he came early under the tutelage of von Schlosser, who was by virtue of his aloof personality not a very successful or inspiring lecturer, but ran an interesting seminar focused on problems, a gathering which Gombrich attended already at an early stage in his studies. The professor serves as a mentor and relays contacts, and after his early Ph.D. he was a sought-after co-worker in various projects. In England he became attached to the Warburg institute, a private institute devoted to learning, initially based in Hamburg until it was forced to evacuate and move. His work in England was meant to be scholarly, but he anyway took time to write a popular account of Art to be known as *The Story of Art* and which probably did more to his career than anything else he had done. He had done something similar while still in Austria, writing a survey of the history of the world intended for children. His book on Art was written in a similar spirit, finding the child in himself, which is the only way of writing in a popular vein, basically drawing only on his memory and avoiding reference work. The point being that his memory, or rather his lack thereof, would act as a filter and prevent him to enter into details. Consequently it became a narrative, a story in short, and hence its title..

Then there are a few pieces in defense of the humanities. He puts down for emphasis the obvious but nevertheless forgotten, namely that the foremost loyalty of an academic is to his or her subject. Their mission is to advance it, and then of course teaching is an important factor in advancement, but not the only one. But without teaching what would happen to our subject when we die? Our activities would indeed be cloistered and confined to an ivory tower, as we are often accused of. Thus writing, lecturing, taking part in public debates, should not be seen as self-promotions, but as promotions of our subject. He also warns against the mindless proliferation of articles, often in connection

with various fashions and fads. He disapproves of the emphasis on examinations in higher education, and how this encourages specialization, that students end up with very narrow capabilities, as examinations require well-defined curricula and neat parceling out of *pensa* to be mastered. He notes in passing that examinations were only recently introduced in the university system. In the 1880's there were protests signed by hundreds of professors, that education was being sacrificed to the newly introduced examinations, and Gombrich notes that he would have been willing to sign such protests. But he also notes that examinations are very important to ensure quality and high amount of preparation of and by the students, but then it should be introduced early on, to be sure that basic competences have been mastered as well as serving as filters. In the German lands the principle of higher education was *Lehr- ud Lernfreiheit*. Sadly abused in criminal ways, shortly after his graduation.

In the Natural Sciences the possibility of objectivity is taken for granted, while in the Humanities it is at times considered an elusive, not to say impossible ideal. Gombrich contrasts Hegel's emphasis on the '*Zeitgeist*' and how it is impossible to compare actions at different times, in particular to imagine how it would be to live at another era; against Goethe's insistence on the invariance of 'Human Nature'. Collingwood claims that human history only makes sense through the reconstruction of human thought, the possibility of which is based on this very invariance. One may think that psychology would be of fundamental nature as a link between the Natural Sciences and the Humanities, but many humanists are deeply suspicious of this. Collingwood for one, simply scoffs at psychology, while Popper claims that sociology is more basic than psychology, that the latter is but a consequence of the former. This might sound reasonable, yet it can lead to Heglerism, something totally alien to Popper, as it seems to define human psychology to be determined by the collective, and the spirit of the collective will indeed change from time to time. Gombrich rejects notion such as '*Zeitgeist*' and various notions such as 'Gothic' or 'Nordic Man' which have been very popular, but are, according to the author, subjected to a hoist of contradictions. But, Gombrich points out, quoting Popper as he so often does during critical turns, we cannot hope for the ultimate but have to be content with the partial, as long as we can learn from our mistakes.

One thing that has often been pointed to in the discussion of science versus humanism is explanation as opposed to understanding. Science supposedly provides explanations, while the humanities supply understanding. What is the difference really? How can we understand without explanation, and how could an explanation be anything at all if it does not bring understanding? To make sense of the distinction, it might be helpful to relate it to the questions of 'how' versus 'why'. 'How' gives explanations, i.e. a sequence of interlocked arguments, while 'Why' tries to reassure you directly of what is the matter, appealing to gut-reaction and intuition, rather than extended reasoning, which is seen as merely mechanical. Needless to say Popper is very critical of this dismissal of reasoning, to him the fruitful questions to ask are those of 'how' rather than 'why' which is mere sentimentalism. In the first case there is the possibility of falsification, or differently put, piecemeal modification. While Gombrich seems almost always bow to his friend, it is not so clear that he would be as adamant on this issue against 'why' questions. The notion of the conservation of human nature leads to identification, and identification is about understanding. To say that you understand someone is to identify with her or him, and

the understanding is wholesale, holistic as is often said (yet another notion earning the opprobrium of Popper), and not based on explanations, nor divisible into parts, but solid and known only through intuition. Is this the essence of the humanities? Gombrich takes exception to cultural relativism. He believes in objective norms based on a common biological heritage. Biology may be explained, but the consequences of values (such as a disposition towards light) is something that cannot be explained but has to be experienced directly, i.e. understood. Just as we may in a sense come up with explanations of consciousness but can only 'understand' it through direct experience. And to connect to the initial questions. One may give long explanations in mathematics yet not achieve understanding (and if not the explanations have been given in vain). Similarly arguments may be appreciated but may not bring conviction, which is a form of 'understanding'. Popper refers to convictions as subjective as opposed to objective. Explanations are objective and exist beyond those who formulate them, and are the only thing we have control. Ultimate conviction and understanding are beyond our control, but that does not mean that they should be dismissed, on the contrary, Popper seems to say, at least implicitly, but we cannot address them directly.

Students of science are rarely interested in the histories of their subjects, according to the author, the reason being that they do not want to immerse themselves in errors and outdated notions. This is short-sighted, because we can learn from errors, not by themselves of course, but how they relate to each other and to the truth, in short how they illuminate the search for truth. But this of course presumes that there is a truth. The opposite assumption leads to the post-modernistic approach, that each discipline is just a narrative and should be judged on its own merits. Gombrich refers to the book by Kuhn and his notion of paradigms which seemingly denied the existence of objective truth in science, a fact (!) that appealed to very many people, but which the author denied was ever his intention. Closely related to paradigms are ideologies, or, as the author prefers, the untranslatable German word *Weltanschauung*, something which he places somewhere between science and religion. Your ideology does to a great extent determine what you discover and how you formulate and interpret your discoveries. But this does not in any way indicate that the discoveries are not objective, only the way in which they are phrased is subjective. But here we seem to find the source of the post-modernists' confusion. The discovery points to something, but it is very hard to formulate this discovery, giving the oft-quoted words *Das Ding an sich* by Kant, its proper interpretation.

The historian of ideas must confront the issue of relativism. What is true and what is false and how should those ideas relate to it? To claim total relativity as to truth is untenable. How to write the history of witchcraft, say, without taking a stand as to whether magic or witches actually exist (or existed)? This is of course different from taking seriously the fact that those were seriously believed. In fact witch hunting stopped when the religious authorities stated that magic would only be accepted when it was proved that there were no natural causes. And to prove a negative is of course much more difficult than prove a positive (to prove existence you only need to exhibit one example). And as Leonardo remarked, if magic existed, it could be used for much worthier efforts than the petty malevolent one perpetrated by the witches. In the history of Art, the introduction of perspective during the Renaissance was not primarily a matter of changed ideology, Gom-

brich remarks, it is objectively based on basic optics and once introduced it was promptly adopted. Another illustration is the origin of meteorites. That it was stones falling from the sky was vehemently ridiculed by distinguished scientists as mere superstition until the early 19th century¹. What made them change their minds? Arguments may not be enough, ideology has to reassessed. Ideology has a conservative effect, which is not to be resented, on the contrary without ideology, fashion changing from day to day would rule. And ideology is closely related to values. Ideas originate among humans, Gombrich reminds us of, and to discuss them with cold objectivity in a 'value-free' manner would indeed be inhuman, in the true sense of the word, he concludes.

What is objective and subjective in art appreciation? Gombrich doubts that one can make a clear distinction between the two, but that they rather merge with each other, maybe even mutually reinforce. Looking at a piece of art and asking the question of what the intentions and thoughts of the artist were, as if that would give the clue to the right answer to what it all 'means', is a dead-end. We can never really divine what the artist thought, even if we may sympathize with him, by virtue of sharing a common human nature, and to some extent reconstruct his thoughts. A work of art is independent of the artist, just as a mathematical theorem is independent of its discoverer one is tempted to add. As the poet Paul Valery noted: A work of art survives only as long as it is capable of appearing quite different from what the author intended. In other words a work of art only exists in the minds of those who look at it. Thus your subjective emotions engendered by it are part of it. Thus those subjective impressions become in a sense objective components of the art itself, however difficult it may be to know those to others (and is not the essence of objectivity that it can be shared?). As we all know the old adage 'beauty is in the mind of the beholder'. However, there are limits to the interpretations of a work of art, and here the art historian has a mission. To put a piece of art in context may enrich the experience of it, but as one is bound to observe, enrichment does not necessarily involve artistic and emotional engagement. To learn the name and history of the model for Mona Lisa may be very interesting but it hardly affects your appreciation of the painting as painting; on the other hand to be familiar with Henry VIII but not to have seen any painting of him, in particular the classical likeness immediately recognizable by the British public, and then suddenly being confronted with it, and then to learn that it is indeed a likeness of the king, must have a strong emotional impact, making the picture much more interesting and unforgettable than it would otherwise have been. How can this really be separated from artistic appreciation? One may claim that it easily can, that the added information really does not add much more than learning the name of Mona Lisa. But why do we enjoy pictures of things we can recognize? Why are we particularly interested in pictures of human beings, even if they remain anonymous? Can you really separate this from artistic appreciation? What about erotically arousing pictures, is arousing your lust an act of art? Collingwood would disagree, to him any willful intention of producing specific emotions is not part of art, but of propaganda, so for that very reason, pornography cannot be considered art. But what about unintended consequences? Here we are back to Valery again. What can be said in general of art in the form of pictorial representations, can also

¹ In particular the French scientist Jean-Baptiste Biot (1774-1862) was instrumental in establishing their extra-terrestrial origin.

be said for poems and music. (Thus it is not surprising that Gombrich as an art historian focuses on the psychology of representation). A piece of music performed is an act of interpretation never losing sight of the actual notes supplied, just as a translation is an interpretation but of course restricted by the text from which he or she may not stray at his or her discretion, however tempting at times. If we leave art and look at mathematics instead, the issue, I think becomes a little bit more clear. What does it mean to appreciate a theorem, to really 'understand' it? The classical answer is that you should be able to use it, which means develop it in new contexts for which it may never have been intended by the original authors. In mathematics it is important to attribute theorems in order to give dues, even if attributions in the past have often been misplaced, but this is of no great concern, and besides the practice is one of sentimentalism anyway. A mathematician does not 'own' a theorem, it cannot even be patented as technological innovations can out of financial reasons. A theorem lives on to the extent it becomes applied regardless of the intentions of its discoverer, and we are back to Valery's diction. But art can also be used as a theorem. An artist looking at a painting does it with different purposes than a simple art lover, although we should not underestimate the possible overlaps. To an artist a painting may give ideas to develop further in his own paintings (the same holds obviously for poetry and music) and thus stimulate his imagination, just as a theorem may stimulate the imagination of a mathematician. In this regard the artist is like the translator, with the difference that he or she is free to stray. But it puts the question whether artists appreciate art artistically, meaning supposedly with strong emotions, or are they lost in technicalities? Are they blind to its effects as such? After all what a stimulated artist sees in a painting is not to so much the finished paintings as such but the potentialities inherent. Just as a real mathematician is less concerned about the actual formulation of a theorem as the ideas behind it. Haydn is supposed to have cried when he heard a performance of his 'Creation'. Did I write something so beautiful he exclaimed in utter disbelief. If so he cried as a mere human being in the thralls of an emotional experience, while when he composed he was a musician, maybe with no emotional experience of the kind we have in mind, only the one of imagination. And here we come to a crucial point. Images can interest us, and they do so as far as they engage our imagination, but interest goes wider than (mere?) artistic appreciation, which may be nothing more than a fleeting sense of pleasure. The historian of Henry VIII who for the first time sees his likeness has his imagination engaged, and this has little to do with the possible pleasing aspects of the image. The curiosity would have been engaged even if the image had been damaged or distorted, but then the pleasing aspects would no longer be present.

Can you be rational about history, in particular the history of Art? Do science and art share some characteristics? Indeed there is common ground, in both cases we can speak about explanations. But while in science we look for general laws, in history we look for explanations of specific events. Gombrich takes as an example commissions who look into accidents. They take scientific laws for granted, if the engine stops of a plane it is obvious that it will fall to the ground and crash. Any explanations have to stop somewhere, otherwise you will get into an infinite regress, such as a child asking 'why' to every explanation offered. If a crucial individual fell asleep this is indeed interesting, but normally not why he or she fell asleep. To draw the line depends on circumstances and

what is vaguely referred to as common sense. One important part of an explanation is to rule out fallacious or spurious ones. We do not want to be told that the accident was due to Neptune being angry, we want explanations we can relate to and guide us in the future.

More specifically how do you approach writing a history of Art? Already Vasari poses the question in his classical book, but the explanations he provides are far from satisfactory, the same thing with the noted connoisseur Berenson. They cannot think of anything more specific than general atmospheres, and references to *Zeitgeist* or *Volkgeist* is no advance upon invoking the wrath of gods. The same goes for popular biological analogies involving notions such as decadence, a very fashionable notion at the end of the 19th century. More modern variants of this are provided by Marxism, psychoanalysis, racialism, structuralism etc, which may give a sense of security, as they seem to promise everything, but the security is spurious. Spurious because the explanations we seek will always depend on our interest and the questions we wish to ask, the author explains. Rather than to resort to grand abstractions Gombrich wants to come down to earth, and look at psychology and perception, and the concomitant technological innovations in painting related them. This would give to the history of Art a sense of progress, and he refers to Pliny who compiled a list of painterly innovations, by virtue of which, the past appeared cruder and cruder, more and more primitive. However, by the turn of the century, there was a change in attitude. The skills of painting were disparaged, instead there were fashions, and thus the history of art would be reduced to a mere chronicle of changing styles. Gombrich is opposed to that, which also means to a large extent, that he is opposed to much of Modern Art. In the study of art we should focus on the craft of painting not the general context, in particular it is of no interest in which city it was being made. As examples he mentions perspectives, the painting of light and texture. While the first has been given a lot of attention, the latter has been neglected by art historians. He commends Ruskin for his emphasis on craft, but he was active 150 years ago and is now largely forgotten, and as far as he is not considered obsolete. It is interesting to recall that the classical education of artists to a large extent consisted in copying the masters. As a child instructions in drawing at school consisted of copying pictures. I hated it and preferred to draw according to my imagination, this considered being more creative. This view has now become dominant, and copying is considered on par learning by rote. But the point of copying can be summarized in the three T's - tradition, tricks, and technology. You find yourself in a tradition, and you learn the different schemata that tradition provides in representing various visual stimuli. It is very hard to start from scratch, you have to accept what tradition has to offer. But you are not bound to a schemata you are free to vary and modify it, and this also may become part of the tradition of evolving schemata. In short progress as noted above. Part of the apprentice tradition is the evolving of centers of excellence, first pointed out by Vasari, where good traditions have evolved hence acquiring reputations and hence attracting, in principle, the best students. Much of the transmission of tradition has to be done *in situ*. It is the kind of know-how that cannot be codified as information, but has to be acquired as you go along and under some gentle guidance and inspiration. True craftsmanship is far from sufficient to create geniality, but it is necessary. Genius does not emerge out of the void but out of a tradition modified in an inspired way. Goethe, has always, something to say on the matter. He always had a desire to draw and spent a lot of his youth trying

to master the skill, however, with scant success. He realized that with a lot of work and practice he may have at best become a good mediocre draughtsman, which was no commensurate with his ambitions. But he remarked that the main difference between an amateur and a professional is that the latter knows his limitations and does not try to go beyond them, while the amateur tries to do something beyond his capacity, even beyond the possible. But genius in art in what does it consist if not going beyond the bounds set by conventions and traditions? Only if you know the bounds of conventions and traditions can you use them to your advantage. And those excesses are rare, corresponding to lucky modifications. How to explain this in detail is impossible, but there can be ways of making the wonders appear more often. Vasari talks about competition, which works best at so called centers of excellence. And also that the standards of art emerge from the interaction with patrons and clients, maybe not so much by consumers at the time of Vasari.

It has been suggested that art history should not just concern itself with the best but take a neutral stand. Gombrich opposes this. It might be fine and appropriate for sciences, and in fact in archaeology we follow it, all kinds of artefacts are unearthed and studied and aesthetic qualities are secondary at best, but archaeology claims to be an impassioned science while the humanities requires values. Art focuses on superior achievements, and those only make sense in a tradition and cannot be rationally defined and selected. Art is an embodiment of values. Any history is about selection, the past as such is mere chaos, and Gombrich quotes Huizinga to that effect, only with a definite perspective and purpose can we structure it to a meaningful narrative. And history is as far as it is anything at all, not just one damned thing after another, but a narrative in which events are interlinked and make logical sense. Huizinga describes history as the intellectual way a civilization comes to terms with its past.

Gombrich concludes his essay by claiming that you cannot dehumanize the humanities, and hence as to art we need a canon and a concomitant standards of mastery.

*Leicht beieinander wohnen die Gedanken
Dort hart in Raum stossen sich die Sachen²*

Those lines by Schiller has its relevance when it comes to cities and the question of their conservations. The author once again refers to Ruskin, who claimed that buildings belong to the past and the future, and we in the present have no right to demolish them. On the other hand neither the past, nor the future, can actively intervene with the present. The preservation of cities is entirely at the discretion of the present and there seems to be a strong desire to conserve familiar landmarks. Gombrich calls it a law of compensation, meaning a compensation for the rapid technological development making modern man feeling more and more lost. But old things are necessarily in the way, as Schiller notes, and if there is going to be progress and change it is necessary to make space for the new by removing the old. This is both a painful process, as well as liberating. Julius II in Rome wanted to be a new Christian Rome to hold its own against the Roman past. In particular he had the old basilica of St-Peter demolished, stemming from the time of Constantine, and replacing it with the present, much more majestic building. And indeed would we really regret the change, Gombrich asks rhetorically, just as no one really seriously can miss the

² Ideas can dwell together easily/But solid things will clash in real space

old walls of Vienna which made place for Ringstrasse. The balance is hard to maintain, but in general in the eyes of the public, or at least of that of the tourists, too much has been torn down. Incidentally Gombrich makes fun of the spectacle of mass tourism and the obsessive photographing by tourists of the classical landmarks, such as the Eiffel tower and the leaning tower of Pisa. Why do they do it?

A crucial chapter in the book is called 'Watching artists at work'. This is seldom done directly (Gombrich refers to a short footage of Picasso drawing) and has to be inferred indirectly, mostly through sequences of sketches and accidentally preserved half-finished art works. To draw from life rather than copy a drawing is rather difficult, just such a seemingly trivial choice of scale adds a difficulty at the very start. Gombrich makes a distinction with a *what* and a *how*. The *what* is present from the start and is part of the planning, while the *how* cannot be predicted. The *what* is a matter of the eye, while the *how* is a matter of the hand, and the interaction between the two, the so called hand-eye co-ordination is central to all drawing (and painting). It is the eye that guides the hand, the *what* that sets the goal for the *how*. Thus there is a continuous modification of the *how* and most interestingly, sometimes the accidents created by the hand may effect the *what* i.e. changing the goal. Such creative accidents are to be encouraged according to critics and artists of the Renaissance, because in art there is a tension between the planned and the accidental, which require a delicate balance. To make the craft easier one needs to practice, meaning to perfect the schemata that Gombrich asserts are central to all visual art, thereby making the gap between thought and execution narrower. When it comes to writing by hand, that has been perfected so there is no longer any need to execute intention, the letters write themselves on the page. In that case there is another kind of balance to be struck, namely that between ease of writing for the writer and ease of reading for the reader (which sometimes may turn out to be the same person). The easier it is to write the harder to read, and vice versa, and the author suggests, more in jest than in earnest that we have a formula $w \times r = 1$ the kind of formula which when applied in the humanities should be taken with more than a grain of salt.

Leonardo stresses the need to be open to the fortuitous and in his sketches he experiments wildly well knowing that he could always start afresh again, just like a mathematician trying one thing after another. He also advises artists to start with confused images, say shapes of clouds or blots on papers or scratches, because the confused always stimulates the imagination. At least the imagination of spontaneity, if not the more demanding imagination of discipline devoted to problem solving, as it may supply new points of departure. But for all his praise of spontaneity Leonardo takes it for granted that the prospective artist practices and perfects his motor-skills by copying, and those apprentices who do not have the industry nor patience for sustained mechanical practice, such as filling out shadows say, can never become artists.

As a contrast to Leonardo, in attitude if not in execution, is provided by Michelangelo. While Leonardo stressed that everything should be tentative and subject to change, Michelangelo was more rigid staying the course from conception to finished object through an intellectually controlled execution. Symptomatically Michelangelo was a sculpturer who worked with rigid marble, where any part chipped off a block, were no longer of any use, a mistake made could never be rectified. You needed to know exactly what you wanted

and what you were doing. Michelangelo also made sketches, although he did not want it to be known, or at least not to have them looked at, so he destroyed them. A few have nevertheless survived and revealed that his hand was surer than that of Leonardo, never making the egregious mistakes the latter allowed himself to make. Something similar is the case of Raphael. It is tempting to conclude that both Michelangelo and Raphael were more accomplished with their unguided hands than was Leonardo, but I suspect it mostly reflect a major difference in attitude. Leonardo was more curious and prone to experimentation than either of them, and after all his interest and talents were more universal, painting only one of his skills; but to the unforgiving eyes of posterity it is to the latter he owes his lasting reputation.

In the 19th century Gombrich admires Daumier as a master of the pen. In his drawings the tentative is clearly exhibited, it is as if the eye out of the cloud of pen-strokes singles out the right ones, which he proceeds to emphasize. Similar with Delacroix who used to amuse his guests by randomly drawing lines and ovals and then extending it to a real picture. First the hand and then the eye. In 20th century art, the controlling eye is banished, it is all about the unfettered hand unconstrained by the eye, according to the author. And thus demoting skill and craft from the practice of art in favor of unbridled subjectivism. Expression is what counts and by its very nature it cannot be argued against.

Cubism was a fad propagated by Picasso and Braque. It never caught on. Gombrich satirizes the hype with which it was supported, namely representing the real world in a real sense, taking a distortion of Platonism referred to as Neo-Platonism as all such distortions throughout history, as its confirmation. Picasso who was ignorant of philosophy was flattered by the attention, but was snubbed by people who pointed out that the Platonic forms by their very nature were if anything beyond visual representation. Notwithstanding the spurious philosophical connection, beyond the intuitive understanding of the artists themselves, it could lead to interesting visual effects, the author admits.

In his chapter on Kokoschka the author once again has occasion to return to Vienna fin de siecle, a period now immersed in myth and much opinion, uninformed as well as informed. He brings up Loos and Kraus, and reminds the reader that Loos never forbade ornaments, that is a stupid idea, only that he wanted them to be tasteful. Loos rallied against what he saw as the tastelessness in modern society, its abandoning of traditions and roots. The building by a peasant by a lake, does not despoil it, as a modern building would do. A peasant cottage is beautiful in the sense of having a natural beauty, such as a horse, a cow, a shrub. Western culture goes back to antiquity and when that tradition is broken for new-fangled ways, destitution awaits. A Papuan Aborigine has more culture than a German, Loos was fond of saying, as he or she lived their life in a living tradition. Kraus also rallied against the modern world. They were both filled with the passion of contrariness, but that does not mean that they were revolutionaries; on the contrary they did not want to break traditions but to preserve them. Kokoschka as well. He. He complained that we lived in the stupidest of times, because everything was going far too fast and people were getting lost. In particular the art of craftsmanship was being devalued. This brings the author to the issue of photography. It is true that this invention took over the niches in society which formerly were the domains of painting and which forced a reorientation of the art of painting. What was let for painting? Should it be more

decorative as in the art of Klimt?

Kokoschka was very critical of the art education he received. He thought it was constricting and did not let there be any room for spontaneity, which is nowadays often confused with creativity, the romantic idea of the latter being a form of intoxication where there is no space for critical thought. Those ideas were rampant at the time, and critics effused over the artistic nature of childrens drawings (my father always claimed that children were naturally artistic and most of them lose it by the time they reach puberty) and as this naturally encouraged artists to draw like children, the possible conceit was simply reinforced. The portraits of Kokoschka did not strive for likeness, at least not the superficial kind for that we had the camera, but to catch the soul or at least the essence of the sitter. For the first Gombrich thinks that it sounds too much of a rationalization and for the second he shrugs his shoulders and wonders whether people have essences at all. But this does not mean that he does not appreciate the portraits of Kokoschka, only that he has a hard time formulating what exactly is so fascinating about them, the best he can say is that Kokoschka somehow manages to remove them out of their ordinary humdrum existence and hence that they are endowed with an intensity that cannot fail to engage. As to one of the critical outpourings of a portrait he is able to put it to the test as it happened that his mother had known the sitter, and then he was able to compare her impressions from memory with that of the critic from inspection, and they agreed.

Although Kokoschka flirted with those ideas of transcending reason, which come close to the Nazi idea of thinking with the blood (and it is a sobering thought that much of those seemingly charming notions of transcendence popular to this day are very concordant with Nazi rhetoric), at least in his youth. As he aged and mature he became more restrained and controlled. Just as language offers us the only way to structure and express our thought, painting is about interpreting and expressing the visual world making sense of it, and woe the painter who forgets this basic fact. This might be why, Gombrich uses, that Kokoschka was so critical of Picasso, who seemed to have cast off the ties. Visual constraints serve as falsifications do in science, they provide the obstacles and the challenges, which it is the business of the visual imagination to solve and overcome.

July 4-10, 22, 29, 2018 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se