

The Preference for the Primitive

Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art

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Does Art has a history? And if so is it one of progress similar to that of science? Art is not science, and thus the latter question may strike the reader as inappropriate not to say naive. Is it not better to view the history of Art as a cyclical process, in which each new generation rejects the accomplishments of the previous generations starting anew? Thus there are no absolute criteria of quality and achievement, everything is ultimately equally good, and graduations of quality may only be viewed within each period of dominating taste. For such post-modernistic approaches Gombrich has no truck. A friend and compatriot of Karl Popper¹ his attitude to Art is somewhat different from what most writers, academic as well as journalistic and commercial connoisseurs of art, tend to gush out. In his *The Story of Art* he tries to depict the history of Art as a continued improvement, each generation building on the accomplishments of the previous, with the problem of Mimesis forming the uniform thread, at least in Western Art. Such a view of art history is bound ultimately to lead to frustration, and in the end of the book, Gombrich expresses his puzzlement as to the disintegration of all standards of excellence that characterizes the 20th century. In his *Art and Illusion* he provides a rather technical, if accessible, account of the problems of depicting a 3-dimensional reality on a flat surface, with the intention of creating an illusion of space.

As Goethe pointed out the problem of Mimesis is only one aspect of visual art, the other being Form, the purity of which makes visual art fuse with the ambitions of music, for which faithful representation (of what?) is never an issue. Goethe observed that the amazing life-likeness of an ancient classical work of sculpture is only one part of the story. The artist also wanted the image to be pleasing, even when viewed from afar when it would be impossible to make out what it actually represented. Thus the intricate design to be found in many untutored folk-art, or in the more sophisticated achievements of Islamic Art (with its well-known prohibition of depicting animate matter and thus competing with the Almighty) provides a quite a different challenge.

In many ways the technical mastery achieved already by the late Renaissance painters was intimidating and in many ways inhibited further progress. After all had not perfection already been accomplished, and what was there to do afterwards? In fact in the first part of the book Gombrich goes to great length in documenting previous reactions, if never as radical as that of the 20th century, to perfection. As an example in the 18th and 19th century there was a fashion for early medieval painting, whose crudity was seen as

¹ Popper born in 1902 and Gombrich born in 1909 both stem from Vienna, which in its tens and twenties provided the common background to their formative years. Both ended up as refugees in Britain, surviving into advanced age.

more spiritual than the excellence that followed. Not surprisingly similar such reversals of traditions can be traced back to the ancients, and Gombrich typically starts out with Plato. With the invention of photography in mid-nineteenth century the problem of Mimesis, i.e. the faithful depiction of reality, seemed to once and for all to have been solved, not to say trivialized. Some artists famously pronounced Art to be dead², while others saw in the invention of photography a release from the constricting demand of faithful rendering. This stimulated, so to speak 'new research' in the story of Art, trying to find out more subtle ways of capturing reality true to itself. The impressionists constituted an obvious modernizing movement, as did Cezanne, maybe more than any other painter, a painters painter. Concomitant with this crisis in the history of Art was the discovery of other painterly traditions, the Chinese and Japanese foremost. In this Far Eastern tradition Western Artists discovered a completely new way of approaching the problem of Mimesis. The Western having been the complete rendering, while the Chinese and Japanese artists pointed out that any work of art necessarily involves a selection, and that selection could be quite radical. A western landscape submits to strict perspectives and shows everything that meets the retina of the eye, just as an image projected onto a screen; while an Eastern one only shows essential aspects of a scene, and although not indifferent to the rules of perspective, do not need to strictly follow them³. In fact the discovery of Far Eastern Art became a fad lasting for many decades and strongly influenced many artists, van Gogh being a well-advertised example. From this it was natural to take the next radical step, to appreciate Art with no tradition, primeval art so to speak, the primitive and often crude representations of savages and simple folks, whose art was compared to that of children, and thus was thought to be more vital and basic than the refinements of a long tradition.

Art had a purpose, and that purpose was more elemental than the solution to technical and intellectual problems posed by the pursuit of Mimesis. Art had to express and thus convey emotions, and did not crude art, be it of primitive societies or unformed individuals, constitute the epitome of this the most important aspect of Art? Tolstoy, in his *What is Art*, espoused such views, and many lesser men, with axes to grind and theoretical views to develop, exalted the expressionistic idea of Art, unquestionably assuming that there is some kind of unique and recoverable connection between an emotion and the sign for that emotion, a very problematic assumption indeed. It is a philosophical commonplace, explicitly formulated by Frege (to take an original example) among countless others, that ideas and experiences of different minds cannot be compared; and that there is hence a distinction between the subjective and the objective. Once you turn Art into a purely subjective matter, there are no limits to the kind of nonsense you can express, and although Gombrich does not say so explicitly, he leaves the conclusion to be drawn by the reader⁴

Modern Artists took those ideas to heart. To Picasso, as an example, the encounter

² Notably Delaroche, maybe also Delacroix

³ One may compare such depictions to be similar to literary, especially poetic, descriptions of landscape. Gombrich does, although not in this context, briefly touch upon the difference between a verbal evocation of a scene and its visual representation

⁴ The glorification of childrens drawing is interesting. Clearly the child draws to express itself, but it is not so clear what it wants to express, especially not whether it is not just out to tell a story. My father used to say that all children are artistic, but most of them lose that ability in puberty. It seems to be true

with primitive art, was a revelation, a kind of epiphany that radically changed his art. The Fauvists with Matisse as a leader did away with academic conventions, seeking salvations in pure shapes and colours. Van Gogh and especially Gauguin can be seen as predecessors to the Fauvists, with Gauguin famously going Native. Paul Klee took the doodles of children seriously and made that into a systematic study in his art. Later on Dadaists made a mockery of Art itself, urinals were exhibited as objects of Art to be admired along with the classical ones. With this wonderful freedom from shackles developed a total anarchy, which only made sense as a reaction against a solid tradition, without which it would be suspended in a void. Ultimately in this nihilistic setting, anything, according to Warhol was Art, as long as you got away with it. Nowadays it is hard to formulate explicit criteria of excellence for art, traditional ones like skill being hopelessly obsolete. Art is indeed a question of taste, in fact what you can get away with, as is testified by the proliferation of installations (so to speak conceptual art, where the idea and intention carries all the weight and implementation none), video-art and other excesses of the Modern Art scene.

Gombrich does not look happily on those developments, and in fact he mentions most of them not at all, contented to focus on the preference of the primitive that took place in the beginning of the 20th century and makes for the title. I myself as a child was also quite distraught, or at least puzzled, by the development modern art had taken, but that clearly was an untutored reaction shared by most philistines and uneducated. I remember when I first looked at reproductory prints by Picasso at home, I was not able to put him in time, but thought at first that he was a medieval painter. My father explained to me that Picasso was a very skilled painter who could paint very realistically when he wanted, but who had gotten tired of it. This puzzled me very much, it was like some kind of voluntary amputation. A brutal artistic mutilation⁵. As I grew older I too began to see the point of taste and visual freedom, and in fact nowadays I find the 20th century art-scene much more interesting than that of any century preceding. The variety in style and conception is simply much greater, and although one cannot but admire the accomplishments of the great masters of the past, that admiration is inevitably cold and inhibiting, inspiring no efforts of ones own. Just like the great diversity of the organic world must fascinate the serious observer as facts given, so the great variety of visual styles and fashions nowadays available must be a source of delight. Taste is in fact always acquired, and the proliferating of different tastes, is indeed nothing else but a proliferation

that almost all children spontaneously draw, but that impulse is absent in most adults. In fact most adults are technically as inept as children (my own skill has not advanced beyond those I had acquired by the age of ten) but supposedly without the innocent charms. I must say that I now seriously start to doubt this romantic image of childrens artistic ability. Its basis seems to rest on the general fusing of the mind that comes with sexual awakening, as is in particular observable among our cousins, the Apes. Artistic and scientific pursuits are playful activities supposedly demanding a childlike mind, and mens cultural ascendancy is often attributed to his prolonged childhood, which for some of us, seems to be lifelong. Aldous Huxley defined the intellectual as a person interested in other things than Sex and Money.

⁵ I must admit that I have never been fond of Picasso. He is too much of an icon and a celebrity for my taste, and too many artistically dyslectic gush about him. This does not mean that I am not fascinated by the phenomenon that he constitutes, and the kind of life he thus has been able to lead. A life of continued play, as close to paradise as can be conceived, no matter its inevitable conflicts.

of different modes of appreciating. Each variety of taste setting its own standards and deserving to me judged on those alone, just like each individual is an end in himself⁶. So notwithstanding much nonsense of expressive power and empty excesses, the abolition of Mimesis as a dominant influence is salutary. But of course the development of a new tradition should not mean the wholesale rejection of the old, following good old fashioned Hegelian dialectics.

Gombrich, referring to the anthropologist Boas, reminds the reader that primitive people are not primitive, only their traditions. A savage, to use an absurdly obsolete terminology, is not an undeveloped individual, he is no child. But just as an individual in a technologically advanced society is at an advantage, due to no intrinsic merit of his own, the art of an untutored artist is primitive because he has no tradition to build on. The supposed inferiority of technologically primitive people is given the lie by language. Human language all over the world appears more or less equally expressive. Language is an inherent technology, decorated by culture⁷, but essentially independent of it. It takes time to learn, but it can be done, and is done by every individual save that of the pathological; but unlike technology it does not seem to develop in sophistication on the level of cultural groups and in historical time, only in the individual as he grows and ages. Once there is an acquisition of language there is no felt need to regress to the primitive. As your vocabulary shrinks and the range of verbal constructions diminish, you are simply impoverished. Everything that can be expressed in a primitive language, can also be expressed in an accomplished, but not conversely. As your skills develop and your verbal imagination grows, the more equipped you become. The same way with Art. The problem of representing the 3-dimensional world we conceive around us onto the flat surface is indeed a very hard problem and quite counter-intuitive. Gombrich likens it to the problem of leaning to fly, there is always the gravitational pull to be overcome, the gravitational pull to the base line of the flat and non-spatial representation. Whenever the untutored copies the accomplished this pull, this simplification into something cruder is inevitable. Something is inescapably lost. The result may be more charming, but as Gombrich reminds the reader, that charm is inextricably tied to regression, and there is admittedly always a charm in regression, and he quotes Heine

*Selten habt ihr mich verstanden,
Selten auch verstand ich euch;
Nur wenn wir im Kot uns fanden
So verstanden wir uns gleich.*

To the effect that only meeting in the gutter can we really communicate with each other

⁶ This might be a concession to post-modernistic democracy, but the problem of post-modernists is that they do not appreciate the stratification of different levels. Each language, to be considered below, is at the face of it an arbitrary construction, each setting its own terms of beauty and expressivity. But nevertheless there are common features of all human languages, which thus on the level of individual languages per se, is nothing arbitrary

⁷ We are clearly thinking of vocabulary, as when it comes to the deeper expressive feats of human language, like its propensity for metaphors and ability of self-reference, this is in no way affected by culture.

with direct mutual understanding. Thus the art of the child and that of the artist gone primitive is not the same. The former effects its art by ineptitude the latter by design. Also in the primitive adult artist there is a profound difference, just as there is in the mature language of an accomplished speaker and the babble of the child. Gombrich points out that primitive artists could be capable of forming quite life-like objects, at least when confined to sculpture, when there was a need for it⁸. And also the discovery of Ice-Age art turned out to be a shock, as those supposedly primitive people, inhabitants of a world predating that of our culture by millenias, were nevertheless capable of striking visual sophistication. But after all they were adults, who had reached their skills through a lifetime of practice, maybe even, for all we know, building on a tradition on their own.

Thus Gombrich warns against disparaging the fruits of centuries of tradition struggling with very hard problems. What it bequested, and what apparently behooves every artist to assimilate, is a way providing a sophisticated visual language, which actually enables an artist, rather than constricts him. The more skilled you are, the more freedom you have to create. There is nothing wrong with the primitive, he seems to say, as far as you add it to your arsenal, rather than merely regressing to it. Thus it is noteworthy that there has been a long tradition of education in painting and sculpture, but none say in the writing of poetry or fiction. One may argue that the first is unavoidable, while the latter is superflous.

As to regression in technology, to go beyond the concerns of Gombrich, there clearly is not much to be achieved, except nostalgically. Technology, however, is typically not a skill to be incorporated but one that can be consumed. This explains the alienation many people experience which often takes the form of a resentment against civilization. Many more people than would dare or care to admit so, find a secret satisfaction in seeing civilization frustrated by natural disaster or terrorist attacks, as long as they are not directly affected.

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⁸ It seems likely that sculpture, at least as far as it involves malleable material as clay, is easier than painting as far as attempting life-like impressions. The spatial structure is given, it does not have to be evoked