Richard Woodfield

Gombrich on Art, Style and Culture*

It may be difficult to think of Gombrich as a radical theorist, but he certainly has upset commonsense notions of the relationship between art and culture. His radicalism has become disguised by his own manner of proceeding.

In Search of Cultural History, which dealt with the question of the relationship between art and culture, was framed as an attack on the after-effects of Hegelianism: Hegelianism without metaphysics. This, he argued, has left its indelible mark on the practice of art history. Many scholars have argued that since the art historians that he named were conspicuously not Hegelians, but interested in non-, or even anti-, Hegelian thinkers, his attack has missed its mark.

For other scholars, Gombrich's overwhelming concern with psychology has simply failed to address the social issue. Even Carlo Ginzburg, a sympathetic commentator, concluded his important essay "Da A. Warburg a E.H. Gombrich: Nota su un problema di metodo"[1] by observing that the

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1 *Studi medievali*, 3rd ser., 7 (1966), pp. 1015–65, translated in Carlo Ginzburg, *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, London 1990.

> "very concept of art as communication presupposed in *Art and Illusion* poses questions that need to be answered in a broader context. History (the relationship between artistic phenomena and the history of politics, religion, society, mentalities, etc.), put out quietly at the door, reenters through the window."[2]

This reservation appears to be shared universally: at least, I have not come across one writer who has been inclined to show any understanding of Gombrich's point of view. This paper is intended to illuminate his position by placing it in a wider perspective.

It would seem obvious, as a matter of commonsense, that there is an intimate connection between art and culture. When we look at paintings and sculptures in a museum we believe that we are being offered an insight into other worlds. This belief isn't simply a product of the age of museums.

With the development of naturalistic imagery in the Renaissance, the elevation of painting to the status of a liberal art and the comparison of painting to poetry, the figurative arts were held up as a universal language.[3] At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Jonathan Richardson Senior declared:

> "Words paint to the Imagination, but every man forms the thing to himself in his own way: Language is very Imperfect: There are innumerable Colours, and Figures for which we have no name, and an infinity of other Ideas which have no certain Words universally agreed upon as denoting them; whereas the Painter can convey his Ideas of these Things clearly, and without Ambiguity; and what he says every one understands in the Sense he intends it.
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> And this is a Language that is Universal; *Men of all Nations hear the Poet, Moralist, Historian, Divine, or whatever other Character the Painter assumes, speaking to them in their own mother tongue.*"[4] (my emphasis)

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[2] *Ibid*, p. 59.

[3] This is, of course, a transformation of the notion prevalent in the Middle Ages that images were the Bible of the illiterate.

[4] J Richardson, *Essay on the Theory of Painting*, London 1725, pp. 3–4.

Richardson's contemporary the Earl of Shaftesbury believed "'Bad figures: bad minds.' 'Crooked designs: crooked fancies.' 'No designs: no thought.' So Turks, etc."[5] The saying 'Manners maketh man' was rewritten as 'Manners maketh art' and became an eighteenth-century commonplace. This notion was certainly not Hegelian, though Hegel did transform it into a central feature of his view of History as a reified idea.

It was actually Hegel's disciple Carl Schnaase who took Hegelian thinking into the history of art[6] through a physiognomico-poetical method which enabled him to detect the presence of culture in art: "the most subtle and most characteristic features of a people's soul can only be recognized in its artistic creations."[7] In Gothic poetry and architecture:

> "There is everywhere the same emotional tendency: in the soaring of the slender members and the ample span of the vaults the same boldness as in the knightly adventures, in the soft profiles the same feelings as in the lovers' laments, in the pinnacles and flying buttresses the aspiring, and in all parts the martial spirit that pervades the world of chivalry. And finally there is the same similarity in technical matter as well."[8]

This kind of approach to art historical writing had an obvious intuitive appeal in the late nineteenth century. It would appeal to readers familiar with the anecdotal approach to art criticism which was to become so despised by the formalists.

Gombrich's reason for becoming attracted to the discipline of art history was his belief that it offered a point of entry into "the mind of bygone ages."[9] In particular it was Max Dvořák's posthumous collection of

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[5] *Second Characters or The Language of Forms* ed. Benjamin Rand, Cambridge 1914, p. 105.

[6] Gombrich pointed to the importance of Schnaase both in his *Hausarbeit* of 1928 and in his lecture "In Search of Cultural History," republished in *Ideals and Idols*, Oxford 1979.

[7] Quoted by Gombrich from *Geschichte der bildenden Künste* in "In Search of Cultural History," *Ideals and Idols*, p. 34.

[8] Quoted, same source, by Paul Frankl, *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries*, 1960, p. 549. As Frankl pointed out, Schnaase saw similar parallels for Gothic architecture and Scholasticism.

[9] "Focus on the Arts and Humanities," *Tributes*, Oxford 1984, pp. 13–14.

essays *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* (1924) that persuaded him of the legitimacy of this point of view. From his account of Dvořák's work in his *Hausarbeit*[10] it would seem that Gombrich particularly admired Dvořák's analytical incisiveness in describing works in such a way that they could be seen to lock into the general climate:

> "With almost visionary conviction he was able to create from a work of art a complete picture of his age."

His followers were a different matter, however:

> "Dvořák indeed reaches the very limits of what it is possible to describe with an admirable gift for empathy. Too often his followers and imitators lack the tactful reserve which Dvořák himself always maintained. Occasionally, in a truly wild tangle of associations they bring together the most unlikely names and concepts, and in their identification of sonata forms and analysis, of Rembrandtian chiaroscuro, Newton's theory of gravity and the court etiquette of Louis XIV, they seem to be approaching the "Ars magna" of Raymond Lull, creating a labyrinth of words which is impossible to verify and which the sharp-witted reader is left to untangle."[11]

At this point it must be emphasised that Gombrich obviously distinguished between Dvořák's project and its means of implementation, having particular regard to the persuasiveness of the connections established. What he seems to have discovered, even at this early stage, is that there is a rhetoric of historical description which may or may not succeed in reaching verifiable truth.

When Gombrich encountered Schlosser, at the 2nd Institute of Art History at the University of Vienna, he discovered a man who had his own reservations about Dvořák's method and prevailing approaches to the history of style. Schlosser emphasised the importance of the irreducibility of the work of art, either to a style, as it was understood then, or to the context in which it was produced. There was a tension, however, in his thought between his commitment to the idea of the

[10] *Wandlungen in der Kunstbetrachtung (Von Winckelmann bis zur Jetzeit): Hausarbeit des Ernst Gombrich*, ms. Vienna 1928. I am grateful to Sir Ernst Gombrich for allowing me access to this text.
[11] *Ibid*, p 71.

uniqueness of the work of art and the obvious fact that no work of art could have been produced at any other time and place than it was.

The idea of style has a double strand which is both formal and historical. This is captured in Schapiro's classic characterisation of style as:

> "a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of a group are visible. It is also a vehicle of expression within the group, communicating and fixing certain values of religious, social, and moral life through the emotional suggestiveness of forms." [12]

Schapiro's description of the formal dimension of art historical artifacts conceals a conflation of two separate ideas, however. The first is that a formal system may uniquely identify an artifact as being made by a specific artist at a particular moment of that time. The second is that the artifact may be taken to reveal a "personality." The conflation of these two ideas is a product of the romantic myth that the work of art necessarily reveals the artist's personality; this idea had no place in the premodern world. If one regarded works of art in the same way that one regarded jewellery or carpets, the inappropriateness of the concept would become readily apparent.

It was the conviction of historians such as Wölfflin and Riegl that it was possible to write a history of art without names and simply as a development of formal achievements. Wölfflin, in particular, asked:

> "...how, then, does a consistent formal approach, a style, come into being? ...
> ... What, first of all, determines the creative attitude to form? It has been said to be the character of the age he lives in; for the Gothic period, for instance, feudalism, scholasticism, the life of the spirit. But we still have to find the path that leads from the cell of the scholar to the mason's yard." [13]

Admittedly, Wölfflin went on to develop his own psychological theory of the "fundamental temper" of the age, and Riegl advanced the idea that there was a parallel between *Kunstwollen* and *Weltanschauung*, but the

[12] "Style" in *Aesthetics Today*, ed. M. Philipson, New York 1961, p. 81.
[13] *Renaissance and Baroque* trans. K Simon, London 1966, pp. 76–7.

success of their analysis of formal structures did not depend upon such connections. Both Wölfflin and Riegl's formal accounts of stylistic development could stand or fall on their own grounds.

Schlosser's scepticism was echoed by Gombrich when he wrote his dissertation on Giulio Romano. Dvořák had accounted for the stylistic features of mannerist art as being the product of an age of great spiritual crisis. But on examining the documentary evidence in Mantua, Gombrich failed to find confirmation of this theory. As he later said:

> "Research took me to the well-stocked archives of Mantua and although I did not make any spectacular discoveries there, I learnt what I should always have known, that the past was not peopled by abstractions but by men and women. I found it hard to credit them all with that spiritual predicament Dvořák and others had found expressed in the style of Mannerism, and I cast around for alternative explanations of the style, including the demands and expectations of Giulio's princely patron, the spoilt and pleasure-loving Federigo Gonzaga, about whom we know a great deal from the documents. I have been wary of collectivism ever since."[14]

Dvořák's characterisation of mannerist art as an *expression* of spiritual crisis was, in fact, a concealed causal explanation which was not true in terms of the available evidence.[15] Much later, Gombrich situated Giulio's work within the kind of formal experimentation which had its roots in the architectural theory of the day.[16]

In his essay "Wertprobleme und mittelalterliche Kunst" published in *Kritische Berichte* for 1932–3,[17] Gombrich argued against what he called

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[14] "Focus on the Arts and Humanities", *loc. cit.*, p. 14.

[15] Compare Dvořák's description of the mourners in El Greco's *The burial of Count Orgaz*: "There is something hard and at the same time magnificent about these faces, a hint of spiritual egotism and traditional love of metaphysics, a spirit capable of understanding that which is hidden from the senses" (*The History of Art as the History of Ideas* trans. John Hardy, London 1984, p. 97). What is the basis of this description? the appearance of the mourners (physiognomic) or some views about their beliefs (causal)?

[16] See "Architecture and Rhetoric in Giulio Roman's Palazzo del Te" in *New Light on Old Masters*, Oxford 1986.

[17] Translated as "Achievement in Medieval Art," *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse*, London 1963.

'The Physiognomic Fallacy', the fallacy that one could read a culture from its art. Not only does it presuppose the idea that a culture, like a person, has an expressive mind but it also presupposes the view that an artistic style is, itself, expressive. But if one takes the view that a style is like a language and has the resources of expression within it, then style, like language, is not of itself expressive:

> "Popular psychology may infer from the rough sound of a language to the rough character of those who use it. A scientific appraisal of expression, however, can be concerned only with judgments based upon the understanding of the language and the discrimination and elucidation of the individual expressive features within it."[18]

This position has clear implications for the kinds of analysis proposed by sociologists of culture.

Gombrich's attack on Arnold Hauser's book *The Social History of Art* has been taken to be a critique of the very notion of the social history of art, but this is not so. After all, Gombrich himself was extremely interested in the conditions under which Giulio Romano laboured. Apart from his complaints about the derivative and inaccurate nature of Hauser's history, it added nothing to the real social history of art; it mistook metaphoric description for explanation:

> "He has built into the groundwork of his system a psychology of expression that is simply too primitive to stand the test of historical observation. For though I have called superficially plausible the theory that rigid noblemen will like a rigid style and that agile merchants will be eager for novelty, the contrary assumption – that blasé aristocrats love ever new sensual stimuli while strict business men, with their 'double entry book-keeping', want their art neat and solid – sounds equally convincing. And so Mr. Hauser's sociological explanations really turn out to be vacuous as explanations."[19]

They are vacuous as explanations because they work only at a purely rhetorical level. Feudal society depends upon a rigid system of social

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[18] *Ibid*, pp. 75–6.

[19] "The Social History of Art" in *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse*, p. 90.

stratification (is this true? was feudal society that rigid? isn't "rigid" itself simply metaphorical?) and it leads to an appreciation of rigidity in all things (is this true? did noblemen like their women rigid? did they like rigid diets?)

In his later book *The Philosophy of Art History*, Hauser obviously realised the weakness of his case:

> "To connect the rigorous formalism of medieval art with feudal lordship and the authoritarian culture radiating from the Church may not do much to explain the special artistic quality of the works in question, but it does establish a significant, if indirect, relationship between two quite differently organised cultural structures, thus making intelligible the attraction of this type of art for those who were contemporary with it in some degree."[20]

But he has still not learnt his lesson. Describing the formal characteristics of the art as "their special artistic quality" is to simply hedge the issue of the identity of the formal qualities which allow the work to be assigned to a particular historical moment. To describe the art as rigorously formalist is not to describe its expressive characteristics and so it is not to describe characteristics which might have appealed to its first spectators. Furthermore "rigorous formalism" carries no informational load at all: how many kinds of art different from medieval art may be described as rigorously formalistic and how many different kinds of social background might they have come from. Wasn't Mondrian's art 'rigorously formalistic' and wasn't the art of Polycleitus so as well? The phrase "rigorous formalism" can be applied to everything and nothing. Similarly to describe the Church as radiating "authoritarian culture" is a crass over-simplification of realities. If the connection between artistic formalism and feudal lordship cannot explain "the special artistic quality of the works in question," as Hauser admits, then the connection actually explains nothing at all.

Perhaps the deeper historical problem lies with the notion of period. As Schapiro put it:

[20] *The Philosophy of Art History*, New York 1959, p. 262.

> "To explain the changing period styles, historians and critics have felt the need of a theory that relates particular forms to tendencies of character and feeling.. ... The interpretation of Classical style is not founded simply on firsthand experience of Greek buildings and sculptures; it rests also on knowledge of Greek language, literature, religion, mythology, philosophy, and history, which provides an independent picture of the Greek world. ... Today, after the work of nearly two centuries of scholars, a sensitive mind, with relatively little information about Greek culture, can respond directly to the "Greek mind" in these ancient buildings and sculptures."[21]

The logic of the argument is that works of art are datable to a moment of place and production. There is a family of affinities between works of art over a certain period of time. Over that period of time culture has a certain character. Therefore it is the culture that explains the affinities. Putting the matter baldly like that severely weakens the argument. Firstly, Culture is not an identifiable entity which can have a causal status in the same way that History is not an identifiable entity. Secondly, the features of works of art that are taken to be a *product* of a particular culture are, at the same time, used to *identify* it; this is, of course, the famous non-explanatory hermeneutic circle.

If you want to explain how a brick wall is made you start with the bricks, explain cement and then describe how the bricklayer creates foundations and lays the bricks. If you want to explain why a house was made in the way it was, you start with the material conditions in which it is made: how the architect makes a plan which has to gain planning permission and how the builder implements the plan. The activities of

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[21] Schapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 108. This line of thought has provoked Gombrich into remarking that:

> "art historical studies in the context of a liberal education... holds out the promise of a history without tears, a survey course in which the Parthenon can be diagnosed as an expression of the Greek spirit and a view of Chartres Cathedral save the student the trouble of reading the tangled arguments of the scholastics."
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> "A Plea for Pluralism," *Ideals and Idols*, p. 186.

He went on to say that in itself this is not such a bad thing as "any access to the past is better than the collective loss of memory with which we are threatened."

painters and sculptors lay some where, on a sliding scale depending on circumstance, between a builder and architect. The activity of making is essential to the production of the work of art and what is datable is precisely the manner of making. The connoisseur Giovanni Morelli had it down to the making of ears, toes, noses and such things. Other connoisseurs are not so specific and would want to talk about the handling of the brush, or chisel, and the palette and so on. It happens that within the western tradition of art education, these have been labelled the "mechanical part of the art" and "the Language of the Art."[22] Because of the desire of visual artists to elevate themselves socially to the level of poets and thinkers, the activities of painting and sculpting have been suppressed in favour of accounts of artists' ideas.

A recent study by Michael Kitson, "Panofsky, Suger and St. Denis," has shown how Panofsky's analysis of Suger's accounts of St. Denis was hopelessly off beam.[23] Panofsky credited Suger with philosophical interests which are not warranted by the texts and also with a role in the construction of St. Denis which he could not have had through his lack of technical expertise. It nevertheless suited Panofsky to have St. Denis as a resplendent example of a philosophical work embodied in stone.

But even if we withdraw from these extremes and suggest, modestly, that if the actual physical construction of a painting might have its own distinctive grounds, like the language we use, then it still reflects cultural life in some way or other. I may describe this environment in English, you may describe it in Swedish; our languages are distinctive but our descriptions are shared through our mutual response to the environment. But even this moderate statement has its problems. In noting the role that works of art play in our visualization of the past, Gombrich remarked:

> "The idea which most of us form of Medicean Florence is coloured, and how pleasantly coloured, by that splendid cavalcade through a smiling landscape which Benozzo Gozzoli painted in the Riccardi Palace. Who would find it easy, after a

[22] See, for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses on Art*, Discourse IV.
[23] "Panofsky, Suger and St Denis," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 50, 1987, pp. 1–17.

> visit to Ravenna and its solemn mosaics, to think of noisy children in Byzantium, or who thinks of haggard peasants in the Flanders of Rubens. Let me call this tendency to see the past in terms of its typical style 'the physiognomic fallacy'."[24]

As it happens, in Medicean Florence there were two styles which competed for attention: the so-called Renaissance style and International Gothic. A great deal has been made of these styles reflecting different 'mentalities' but as Gombrich's studies "The Early Medici as Patrons of Art" and "Apollonio di Giovanni: A Florentine cassone workshop seen through the eyes of a humanist poet" demonstrate, there are no straightforward connections between stylistic preferences and intellectual tastes. It was possible to praise artists for their work 'in the antique style' when, stylistically, they were up to very different things. There is an argument that an emphasis on style gets in the way of true historical understanding.

Although in a culture everything is interconnected, it is not necessarily the case that every specific feature of every element of culture is interconnected. Dvořák maintained that: "The idea that the men of a single generation might manifest different feelings and intentions in, say, poetry, religion and art, is absurd."[25] He was simply wrong. One might observe that inconsistency is a greater characteristic of human

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[24] "Art and Scholarship" in *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse*, p. 108. In the light of Gombrich's 1972 essay on Huizinga (published in *Tributes*) it is worth mentioning Huizinga's essay "The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought" (published in *Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century and other essays*, London 1968; Inaugural lecture of 1905). Speaking of the role of the image in the historical imagination he wrote:

> "Suppose you have a somewhat vague idea of the fall of the ancient world. You may do something to clarify it by careful reading. But how much better to visit Ravenna and see the mosaics there! Then, whenever you think of those times, you will always see their actual splendour as it survives in the flecks of green and gold in the San Vitale and the hue of nocturnal blue in the mausoleum of Galla Placida. The true image of the era is now indelibly fixed in your imagination. Is not that something better than the most elaborate structures of thought? Do logical mosaics give you a better appreciation of what it was to live there long ago? Nor are the logical connections in historical knowledge nearly as pellucid as they may seem; the association of ideas is always more or less arbitrary"
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> (*loc. cit.*, p. 240.).

[25] Quoted by Hauser, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

behaviour than consensus and that periodization simply represents an attempt to iron out inconsistencies. Even where one may observe consistencies of interest, this may hardly be regarded as a manifestation of the Spirit of the Age.[26] To make such a suggestion confronts severe methodological difficulties, as the following example demonstrates.

The eminent American art historian Millard Meiss described the Florentine painting of the Trecento as having more:

> "hieratic and archaic modes of representation [than the art of Giotto's generation]. Dramatic narrative is often replaced by symbolic ritual, spatial rendering by flat forms, free movement by rigid frontality, lively expression by mask-like features."[27]

He explained this as being expressive of the effects of the Black Death. Following this line of thought, and Leonardo's suggestion that standards simply dropped, Gombrich suggested that:

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[26] In this connection, Gombrich's friend, the historian and philosopher George Boas, once made the following remarks about historical periods:

> "If one can find modal patterns, styles, ideas, and the like in any chronological period, it is useful to discover them. The trouble arises when after their discovery they are erected into an explanatory principle and used to interpret what was actually written or intended to have been written. If you find a spirit of rationalism in a period, like that of eighteenth century England, you simply find it wherever it exists. It does not exist, as far as anyone knows, in any unconscious or subconscious or abstract or metaphysical sense during the period. Therefore one cannot say that Pope wrote as he did because of the rationalism of his age. The age was rationalistic, in so far as it was rationalistic, because Pope wrote the way he did. Consequently when one comes upon someone like Thomson or Collins whose rationalism is not that of Pope, one need not look for a hidden rationalism in their works nor yet wonder why they were not rationalistic."
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> "Historical Periods," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 11 (1952–3), pp. 249.

This is one of the best formulations of the problem of the Spirit of the Age that I'm aware of. Panofsky's reply, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, Stockholm 1965, p. 3 n.1, simply compounds the problem by personifying History. Does one *have* to say that History is not a person? – it seems so.

[27] "The impact of the Black Death" in *Reflections on the History of Art* ed. Richard Woodfield, Oxford 1987, p. 42.

> "It might then be said that this art 'expresses' the crisis of the Black Death less by its emotive content than by the symptomatic character of regression, true to the old dictum that 'devout pictures are often bad paintings."[28]

If, however, the paintings show a pursuit of other, more positively expressed, values it makes sense to ask what those values might be. The answer could be found by searching the wider European scene. There was a similar movement towards the primitive between a thirteenth-century sculpture at Bamberg and a fourteenth-century figure in Rottweil, explained by Pinder as 'renunciation in favour of unification'. The problem is, however, that:

> "The Rottweil Madonna and the style she represents antedates the Black Death by more than a generation. In fact most of the symptoms which Professor Meiss ascribes to this catastrophe, the religious fervour and new inwardness, are described by Pinder as characteristic of the first half of the fourteenth century. To the German historian the plague only marks the final culmination of these waves of mysticism and hysteria, a culmination which is at the same time the turning-point towards a more optimistic and shallow attitude towards life. He quotes a chronicle as saying that 'after the mortality, the pilgrimages, the flagellants and the pogroms the world began to live again and to be gay' and he interprets the German monuments of the subsequent decades in the light of these words. Not that Professor Meiss overlooks this paradoxical effect of the plague to which we owe Boccaccio's *Decamerone*– he only does not find it expressed in the painting of the period. The issue here is one of the methodology of historical explanation rather than of facts. For granted that events may and must have their effect on art, need art also 'express' them? Is not the effect of such a trauma on personality much less predictable than one might at first expect?"[29]

I apologise for the length of this quotation. It does, however, bring home the problems faced by the historian who suggests that the art or culture of a period reflects a moment of history. However hierarchical,

[28] *Ibid*, p. 43.
[29] *Ibid*, pp. 43&5.

rigid or formalistic the imagery of painting might have been in the middle of the fourteenth century, it can hardly be said to be reflected in the *Decamerone*. And if both are equally 'expressions' of the Black Death, how meaningful can the concept of expression be in such a context?

Gombrich is much more positive when talking about movements rather than periods. Movements are much more tangible than periods: they may be identified with people and their purposes. The best examples of his work in this area are the essays "The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences"[30] and "From the Revival of Letter to the Reform of the Arts: Niccolò Niccoli and Fillipo Brunelleschi".[31] If the Italian Renaissance is treated as a movement rather than as a period, when 'man discovered himself and the world', there are clearly definable gains in the analysis. A group of people may be identified who shared certain ambitions. The outcomes of those ambitions may be seen in tangible results. More importantly, hard documentary evidence may be adduced both for the ambitions and for the outcomes. Even so, one cannot describe the stylistic outcome of such interests in the quattrocento as simply a *reflection* or *product* of them; the essay on Apollonio di Giovanni demonstrated that. Purely artistic processes generate their own developments; one cannot retrospectively predict the art of the High Renaissance.

Apart from movements, there are larger historical drifts, the move from classical antiquity to the so-called Middle Ages being a particularly spectacular example. It is at this point that Gombrich insists upon talking about the institutions of art and the functions of visual imagery within a society. But although one may speak of a general shift in purpose, like the move from an art of the dramatic evocation of a particular scene to an 'art of the unlettered', it is impossible to explain specific features of images in terms of extra-artistic factors. The reason is quite simple: the typical image has a multiplicity of potential purposes and it exists at a point of intersection of those purposes. It is like turbulence in a stream, which is the product of causal factors but can-

[30] Republished in *Norm and Form*, London 1966.
[31] Republished in *The Heritage of Apelles*, Oxford 1976.

not be described in terms of them. In this connection it is worth quoting the discussion between Gombrich and Burke:

> "BURKE: ... There was a marvellous pioneering essay by Malinowski in, I think, 1930, about the stick. The stick used in the given culture may be a digging-stick, a walking-stick, a sceptre: once you know what it's associated with, you've got a cultural context and we can begin to understand the object. Shouldn't we be doing this with paintings? Asking whether a given Italian painting was intended as a form of magic, or whether it was just to delight the beholder, or whether, because it was a picture of a criminal, it had the function of some kind of 'wanted' poster?
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> GOMBRICH: I too am convinced that the most important task for the future of the history of art is to clarify this matter of function. But one of the things we have learnt from psychoanalysis is that which is successful in society will have many functions at the same time. The picture of the criminal was not so much a 'wanted' poster as a magic imprecation, and it may also have been a display of the skill of Leonardo or Botticelli, who actually painted criminals hanging on the wall of the town hall. Most things in society, including sticks, fulfil many functions. The number of specialised tools is very small, and art certainly belongs to those institutions which meet many demands at the same time."[32]

As we know from many documents, the purposes of medieval art extended from illustration to instruction, to exemplification, to display, to adornment, to the exercise of vanity, to conspicuous consumption of time and materials. Varieties of purpose call upon varieties of explanation, and to think that there is one single line of explanation, whether it be ideological, economic or political, will simply fail to do the job. And to think of History or Culture as a causal agent is simply to reify abstract entities; that, for Gombrich, is the legacy of Hegel.

The most difficult task which faces the art historian is to explain why the work of art has the features which it does. This goes well beyond establishing what a picture is a picture of and enters the realm

[32] "Ernst Gombrich discusses the concept of cultural history with Peter Burke," *The Listener*, 27 December 1973, p. 883.

of how it works as a representation. One can imagine a hypothetical set of examination questions. Why was it that Van Eyck modelled form with highlights and Masaccio with tonal gradation? How was it that Titian was able to develop a form of painting which allowed much greater freedom of brushwork than was tolerated in Florence? What were the conditions which made possible Kalf's virtuoso magic of the glass which disappeared under one's eyes? These are all questions which the theorists of art of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shovelled under the carpet as the 'mechanical part of the art'. But as Sir Joshua Reynolds himself said: "The power of drawing, modelling, and using colours, is very properly called the Language of the Art."[33]

Contemporary art historians are the unwitting victims of the desire to improve the status of art in the Quattrocento. Alberti declared that the painter ought to associate with the literati to improve the quality of his *istoria*:

> "I therefore advise the studious painter to make himself familiar with poets and orators and other men of letters, for he will not only obtain excellent ornaments from such learned minds, but he will also be assisted in those very inventions which may gain him the greatest praise."[34]

Prior to then, painting was not regarded as an intellectual matter. When the Greek satirist Lucian was visited in a dream by the personification of sculpture, who promised to make him a sturdy fellow with broad shoulders, all he recalled was: "the Art of Statuary... stammering at every point in her foreign accent as she strung her words together in an attempt to persuade me. But I no longer remember it all; most of it has already slipped out of my memory."[35] It is that loss of memory that the historian of art needs to recover and which Gombrich started to explore in *Art and Illusion*.

[33] *Seven Discourses 1778* ed. R Woodfield, Menston 1971, p. 31.
[34] *Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting* trans. C. Grayson, Harmondsworth 1991, p. 89.
[35] Lucian, *Somnium*, 6–9, quoted in J.J. Pollitt, *The Art of Greece 1400–31 B.C.*, Englewood Cliffs 1965, p. 227.