

"HISTORY OF ART" BY ERNST GOMBRICH ANTÓN CAPITEL

"History of Art", by Gombrich, a famous book with unusual deficiencies.

E.H.Gombrich: "History of Art", pocket edition in Spanish by Phaidon, 2010.

The famous book "History of Art" by Ernst Gombrich was published for the first time in the United Kingdom in its primitive version. Since then it has gone through 16 revised editions, with numerous reprints. In 2006 the first pocket edition was printed in London in English, of great quality, and with printings of the 413 images that constitute its anthology. The book has been translated into numerous languages. In 2010 the pocket edition also appeared in Spanish. The blurb of this edition begins by affirming that "History of Art" [by Gombrich] "is the most popular and famous book of art ever published". We don't doubt it, and it is precisely this enormous diffusion that has invited me to write the published notes as follows.

My respect and inclination towards Gombrich's works is based upon my reading of several of his more important books. Among them it seems convenient to me to point out "Art and Illusion", "The Image and the Eye" and "The Preference by the Primitive". These are wonderful books, and I recommend them entirely. Some time ago, when the first Spanish edition was published, I had had a certain temptation to read "History of Art", although I didn't do it. But last year, when I was living in London, I found the pocket English edition in the National Gallery bookshop. When I verified that this edition was so beautiful, carefully compiled and cheap, I convinced myself to buy and read it in English. I did it with pleasure and care. In Madrid I later verified that the pocket edition had also been published in Spanish, and this discovery brought me to write the present commentary.

Firstly, I would like to express gratitude that such a great professor dedicated himself to the divulgation of Art History, and that he put upon himself the obligation to talk about Art through all the periods of humanity, from Prehistoric times to the 20th century. Apart from Gombrich, nobody or almost nobody has done it, thus, the diffusion and prestige of the work comes as no surprise. As Gombrich visits all times and styles with a distinctive quick yet dense pace, he combines an historical organization of periods with an accompanying explanation of the works' relationship with their surrounding and society's ideology. Neither can one forget the morphological and individual analysis that picks up on changes of vision and taste, as well as the instruments, discoveries, and the particular characteristics and qualities that make each work somehow notable and significant in the development of history. Therefore one can say that it is this process that

converts itself finally into the true protagonist of the book. In other words, Gombrich gives testimony to human's capacity of producing such a great and diverse quantity of most esteemed artistic products.

In his text about "A note of art books", Gombrich says that "Art history is a branch of history". He who writes this is in complete agreement with this affirmation and thus he feels obliged to gravely dissent some contents of the book in particular.

In the first place, we shall look over all the errors and mistakes concerning the anthology that are presented within the book. This bears great importance as it is the book's main reference. Effectively, the book delves straight away into explanations of the artists through their particular works, a rather estimable characteristic, as mentioned beforehand. The fact of having chosen and reproduced the particular works in question constitutes as, to a great extent, one of the main features of the book, if it is not indeed the most important.

The book has been widely published and sold in Spain, to the point that it is even used for academic purposes. Thus it makes sense to begin with a quantitative analysis of the anthology, with the aid of the book's index. In this way, we can verify that out of the 400 works of art chosen to represent Art History of the world throughout time, only 6 of them are pictures or buildings within Spain. This seems to be extremely unusual, specially given the collective memory of such museums as the Prado among many others. But let's continue: only Switzerland and Holland have 6 references just as Spain, Russia has even fewer (despite the Hermitage Museum !!), Belgium has 8, Austria 17, United States, 26, Germany 28, France 50, Italy 65 and the United Kingdom 71. It is very clear that Gombrich, Austrian Hebrew residing in Great Britain, is a grateful man who has been knighted as "Sir".

From the anthology and throughout the text it is possible to deduce which of the painters Gombrich considers as most important as he dedicates to them the illustrations of four or more works; one could say that their authors are "geniuses" within the History of Painting. Thus Leonardo features four times, Durero six, Rapahel five, Rubens five, Velázquez five, Holbein four, Rembrandt six and Picasso six. Michelangelo has only three works, although it is true that there are four illustrations of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, accompanied by only one sculpture (one of the slaves). Tiziano, Correggio, Caravaggio and Goya also have three, and thus the first and the two last appear underestimated in a certain sense. We must emphasise the mistakes of believing that Holbein lies among the "geniuses", and of equalising in number the works of art by Correggio with those of Michelangelo, Tiziano, Caravaggio and Goya, as already mentioned. On the other hand, memories of Giotto and of El Greco are gravely offended with two illustrations and the memory of Mantegna with one. Did Gombrich not know that Giotto and El Greco are as important as the others? Was he of a different opinion? Here, therefore, is where the anthology's

mistakes begin, and also where their causes become apparent. The selection was influenced to a great degree by the difficulty of obtaining the illustrations as well as the contents of the book. In other words, in many cases the works of art are subordinate to the content, and not the other way round. This is a common fault of critic books of Art and Architecture, if not of all genres to a certain extent. This coincidence, however, doesn't alleviate its gravity, as within this book this distortion is very abundant.

Let's continue. As the book unravels unknown artists of very scarce importance start appearing most of whom are Central European or British. These are just a handful of them: who are Peter de Hooch, Melozzo da Forlì, Konrad Witz, Mabuse, Nicholas Hilliard, Jean Goujon, Jacques Callot, Simon de Vlieger, Jan van Goyen, Jan Steen, Jacob van Ruysdael, Willem Kalf, William Hogarth, Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, John Singleton Copley, William Powell Frith, Pierre Bonnard, Ferdinand Hodler, Käthe Kollwitz, Emil Nolde, Grant Wood? While this question is rather rhetoric, I truly insist that the reader replies, who are they? They are people of a very second rank and so absolutely dispensable. Nevertheless, these characters provide the backbone of the book to a great extent, for their abundance if nothing else.

Does Gombrich, therefore, align himself with the small-minded traditional interpretation so typical of British and Dutch protestants, that undermine Spanish culture, a culture which, even at this point in history, many consider as worn? Or is it, simply, because the book is British? If so, why is it translated into other languages and sold in the same version? Should we continue to stand by such a form of cultural colonialism that permeates through such second-class material?

But let's continue a systematic verification. While the Alhambra features as an example of Architecture, de Mosque of Cordoba does not. Neither does Santa María del Naranco or El Escorial, or Gaudí, or any other such examples that the reader would expect. While the book is preoccupied with themes such as China, Persia or Primitive Art, it ignores Spain, Portugal and the Americas. With regards to the latter, the United States is the only country featured –and yet somewhat bad choices are only taken from 20th Century Art and Architecture. In other words, both Pre-Colombian and Colonial cultures are ignored. Thereby it also ignores the wonderful Renaissance cathedrals of Spain and Spanish America, unique pieces in the world. Also obscured is the important Latin American Baroque.

Neither do Francisco de Zurbarán nor Ribera feature among the painters, as neither for example does Luis Meléndez, the Spanish genius of still life in the 18th Century. However, while this is the case, the book does feature very average examples of British still life. We could overhaul the Spanish picture to find many more absences (over-all in comparison with the list of unknown people before transcribed) but let's move on to clearer examples. The choice of El

Greco paintings is quite absurd (there are only two faintly important paintings, and from New York and Boston museums !!). The choice of Velázquez paintings is better, as the book features “El aguador de Sevilla” and “Las Meninas” and the portrait of Inocencio X, but then again it also features the relatively unimportant painting of a member of the Royal Family (from a Viennese museum). Goya is completely undervalued, not simply because only three of his paintings appear, but most of all because the very choice of them is not convincing. Neither does Carlos IV’s family nor the paintings of “2 de mayo” feature, for example, nor many other very important works. Meanwhile, though Picasso is not undervalued as far as quantity is concerned, his chosen works too are extremely unsuitable.

We’ve already been noticing that such cases occur not only with Spanish Art. Giotto, Mantegna and Tiziano are similarly undervalued, and quite absurdly, Guardi is featured instead of Canaletto, who, in spite of his importance in England, does not appear. Indeed, it was he who painted Greenwich Hospital. With regards to Mantegna, many of his important works are ignored, such as the wonderful “The Death of the Virgin” (in the Prado museum) , or the fresco paintings of the “Camera degli sposi”. “The Triumph of Caesar” was also ignored, despite it being in London’s Hampton Court Palace, which Gombrich had close to hand.

Raphael on the other hand was treated well, however there is not one reproduction of the wonderful Vatican frescoes, which I believe is a grave mistake. Instead, there is an exaggerated reproduction of the Sistine Chapel. Of Fra Angelico’s works only a poor Annunciation (from the San Marco museum, in Florence) is reproduced, and not the splendid one in the Prado museum.

Naturally, Tiziano’s best works have not been chosen either as the best ones are in the Prado: the portraits of the Emperor Carlos and Empress, or the portrait of King Philip II (how can one possibly think about this diabolical King !!), or the Danae, among others. The best of Rubens works are also in the Prado, and thus they don’t appear either. Neither can one explain, given Gombrich’s obsession with the author, the absence of Durero’s magnificent self-portrait, “Adam and Eve”, also present in the Prado. That is to say that Gombrich does not allude to the Prado even though he could satisfy his obsessions. Could this be a form of ignorance?

It is impossible to understand how Gombrich could have systematically turned a blind eye to the world’s most important, richest, and finely assorted art gallery; the great Art Gallery of Madrid. Indeed, it brims with so many masterpieces that any other gallery would look plain in comparison, and I have absolute faith that many other people share my opinion. One cannot possibly be a History of Art expert without knowing the Prado Museum inside out. While this statement might sound like an

exaggeration to the average English or North American, one thing remains certain; that it is impossible to be an expert in History of Art without knowing Madrid.

One more thing : while it is possible that other authors are not as disciplined as Gombrich, it is noteworthy that the bibliography in History of Art not only is compiled solely out of books produced in England, but only out of books translated into English. Thus books in their original language German, French, Italian, Spanish or other languages are absent. They simply are not used. To compile a bibliography solely out of books in English is not only a pretension tinged with racism but also, most of all, a notable mistake. For example, the not so systematic but very lucid author Eugenio D’Ors (Xenius), whose few to none works have been translated into English, would have made excellent material for the Austrian professor. His ignorance of “Three Hours in the Prado Museum”, one of the best books written about painting, strikes one as a grave fault. If he were to read it, he would have surely enjoyed it. Nonetheless, and fortunately enough, Gombrich’s book does bring to mind something of Eugenio D’Ors lucid positions and formal analysis.

But if we want to highlight the book’s true disaster, let’s move onto his discussion of architecture that should have been completely discarded due to the fact that Gombrich does not know how to deal with this subject. Sculpture, too, is almost entirely absent. Indeed, Gombrich wouldn’t have missed anything out had he not referred to Architecture or Sculpture in his work. Their only reason for appearing is that it is impossible to talk about the ancient world without referring to them. Both styles are poorly represented, and as the book continues the mistakes become ever more awkward. In the manuals of Art History, while errors related to architecture are common it does not mean that they are less serious. The examples of pre-renaissance architecture that he has chosen to relate within the book are certainly acceptable because of the conventional knowledge he has applied to them. However, I do protest against his examples of English, German, Dutch, gothic and other styles. Once again, the examples chosen are of a rather secondary order and they ought to have been replaced by different examples, especially by French or even Italian and Spanish works.

The disaster really starts to take its course from the baroque period onwards. Only one example of Italian baroque is featured, that being Borromini’s rather conventional St Agnese in Rome’s Piazza Navona. Versailles, both topical and scarcely attractive, is also featured alongside less important Teutonic-Austrian works. No other works from Italy, Spain or Latin America are included. Two pieces by Wren (what a miracle, may I add) have been included, but none by Hawksmoor : it is impossible to reach such knowledge or such lucidity.

He pays particular tribute to topical Britishness

with Boyle’s Chiswick House in London while he fails to recognize the great Ledoux, for instance. With regards to Soane, only a relatively unimportant picture of his has been chosen. The British Houses of Parliament, and no other, is also not unexpectedly included as are examples by Victor Horta and not of Gaudi; yet another example of a lack of clarity.

With regards to XXth Century architecture, the disaster could be no less complete. The anthology appears to be ridiculous, to the point of being rogue. How can he dare present himself as an educated person, and why has no one advised him? The examples chosen include one considerably minor work by Wright (could it have been so difficult to choose another?), the Rockefeller Center (out of where did this trace of apparent lucidity arise?) and Gropius’ Bauhaus. No other traces of modernism exist, neither Le Corbusier nor Mies van de Rohe or Alvar Aalto; these common and scandalous absences are simply unforgivable. The ultimate point of destruction could not have been more rugged: the AT&T by Johnson and Burgee (who knows why it was necessary to chronicle the “post”?), and the most conventional, sad Stirling; the amplification of the Tate Gallery. It is true that little can be included, but this is not a reason to do one’s job so badly.

Leaving aside momentarily the anthology and its errors, I would like to reinstate the point that the book’s ideology is one that mystified protestant attitudes and denigrates catholic ones. This mentality, at least as far as the clearly religiously apathetic author of this piece is concerned - can no longer be bore at this particular point in time, an era in which so many lies and errors have been denounced or cleared up. According to Gombrich, protestant artists (in Great Britain, Germany and Holland for example) dedicated themselves to portraits and to the capture of daily life and reality thanks to the fact that they had no religious commissions due to the prohibition, or quasi prohibition, of icons. This, to Gombrich, seems ideal to the same extent that he considers the dedication to religious and classic themes of an almost negligible, much lower value. These subjects, which he regards as exclusive to the Catholics, are looked upon with a suspicion of banality and useless idealism. It is this very reason that can explain why he places Holbein up on a pedestal, though in reality he cannot be lined up next to the true greats, and also what makes him value certain themes over artistic merit, and thus in conforming he only picks out the most banal examples of the social history of art.

These arguments not only are impossible to accept, but they also quite simply oppose many of the well balanced ideas that the book reflects throughout. Indeed, Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel is especially celebrated within the book, despite it being a religious work of art, notwithstanding one of the greatest works of all time. On the other hand, other great artists including Velázquez, Goya, or even Murillo, are considered of a Catholic order, especially protected by monarchs. Instead, these are the

very geniuses that revolutionised absolute realism, or rather those who perfected the art of capturing not religious nor classic themes, but popular stories. There are hardly any paintings by Velazquez and Goya which are both religious and of any interest. Neither should one forget that any one of Holbein's portraits looks pale, in whatever shape, form or color, compared to any portrait by Velazquez.

So, all of the above is quite enough to demonstrate, and to protest against, the biased,

self-interested and possibly ignorant point of view which Gombrich maintains in his celebrated and widely sold book. In spite of this, I wouldn't mind recognising that it is, all in all, a good book. The one thing that saddens me the most is how its errors, back to back against its successes, ultimately result in the disinformation and dis-education of the masses while paradoxically proving to be formative at the same time. It is equally down-putting, and this goes between you and I, that there is neither a sufficiently supportive editorial industry nor

the sufficient will to encourage great Spanish or (and especially) Italian authors to write -if they have not yet written- a popular work that could act as an alternative to the one commented above.

The deception which one feels when reading this book is rather intense if one is to remember the fantastic essays of the authors mentioned at the beginning. Turn away from this author, and turn towards the rest.