

REFLECTIONS ON "REFLECTIONS ON THE GREEK REVOLUTION"

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E. H. Gombrich's "Reflections on the Greek revolution" (Gombrich 1977, 99-125) offers one answer to a question frequently posed in ancient art history: how and why did Greek art develop so rapidly towards "naturalism" during the sixth and fifth century BC? But Gombrich's answer is unusual for two main reasons. First, his "Reflections" forms a chapter of his now classic Art and Illusion -- a wide-ranging study of style and interpretation in the visual arts; and so it provides an all too rare example of the integration of ancient art into the broader discipline of European art history. Secondly, it stands out from the intellectual barrenness of much specialist work on Greek art in its attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the explanation of the revolution in style. For this reason, it has often formed the jumping-off point for those archaeologists and art historians who have wished to do more than just date, order and attribute the surviving works of Archaic and Classical Greece; and it has often been seized upon by students left unsatisfied by the introverted connoisseurship practiced by the Classical establishment.

This article will look at the argument of Gombrich's "Reflections". It will not concentrate specifically on the broad philosophical issues that underlie the whole of Art and Illusion (Gombrich 1977); for a critical review of these one can turn to Richard Wollheim's appraisal of the book, reprinted in his On Art and the Mind (Wollheim 1973, 261-289), or to Norman Bryson's recent Vision and Painting (Bryson 1983). Its aim is to reveal for (I believe) the first time the flaws in the explanatory framework that Gombrich adopts for the rise of Greek art. Gombrich's chapter was at the time of its publication (1959) innovatory, and it remains even now an exciting and sometimes insightful piece; but it is, in my view, deeply misleading and provides an uncertain foundation for further work.

The main lines of Gombrich's argument are clear enough. The "great awakening" of Greek sculpture and painting between the sixth and fifth centuries is contrasted with the essentially static quality of pre-Greek, Oriental and Egyptian art: the Greek Archaic kouros with its rigid, formal pose progressively gave way to the "lifelike" masterpieces of high classical sculpture; Egyptian carving and painting, on the other hand, never became illusionistic, but remained for all of its history conventionalized, even diagrammatic. How is this difference to be explained? Gombrich rejects any notion that the Egyptians and other pre-Greek cultures were simply less sophisticated than the Greeks. Their schematised art is not to be seen as somehow "childlike" in comparison (Archaeological Review from Cambridge 4:2 [1985])

with that of the more "mature", "adult" Greeks. Instead the explanation is seen to lie in the difference of the function of art in pre-Greek and Greek cultures: Egyptian art was essentially totemic, embodying in its signs timeless events and timeless presences; Greek art was doing something different -- it was telling stories. The narrative function of Greek art and literature is what, in Gombrich's view, distinguishes the cultural achievements of the Greeks from those of their predecessors. The lifelike, illusionistic quality of Greek painting and sculpture stemmed from the artist's desire (just like the poet's) to capture the passing moment of the narrative story; it was the pressure towards vivid description (of such events as "The Judgement of Paris" or "The Sacrifice of Iphigeneia") that gave birth to Greek "realism". Once it was born, the constant, self-generating process of testing and matching the artistic product against the literal "reality" of the observable world brought about the heights of illusionism associated with classical and post-classical Greek art. Reversal of the trend came only with cultural and intellectual shifts of the late Roman Empire: the growth of Christianity, absolute monarchy and the emergence once more of hieratic, totemic art.

Gombrich's argument is seductive. He is a master of the winning line, the apparently apposite rhetorical question, the timely (if spurious) appeal to commonsense. The reader is carried along in agreement, lulled at the same time by Gombrich's certainty and his paraded diffidence: "narrative art is bound to lead to space and the exploration of visual effects" (Gombrich 1977, 118; my emphasis). Alternatively: "maybe taboos played their part in this sorting out process" (ibid, 123; my emphasis). And again: "the very fact that certain images had survived for immeasurable periods must have appeared as a token of their magic potency" (ibid, 107; my emphasis).

It is hard on first, or even second, reading not to be convinced. I hope to show, however, that three major pivots of his argument -- the initiating rôle of the narrative, the continuing process of the refinement of "realism" and the breakdown of that process in the late Roman Empire cannot bear the weight assigned to them. On careful examination Gombrich's delicately balanced argument, with its artful rhetoric, collapses.

The Initiating Rôle of Narrative

Many scholars would now accept Gombrich's claim that the Greek revolution is to be explained by "a change in the whole function of art". "Naturalistic" Greek art was different from the "stereotyped" images of the Egyptians precisely because it fulfilled a different function in the cultural, political and the social life of the community. The problem is -- how is that different function to be identified and what is it that Greek art did that Egyptian art did not? Gombrich suggests that it is the story-telling function of Greek art that served to differentiate it from its predecessors and that acted as

a catalyst to the growth of stylistic naturalism; but this "solution" is produced as a rabbit out of a hat, by sleight of hand, ill-supported and ultimately unconvincing.

Gombrich's arguments (such as they are) for the narrative catalyst come in two stages. First he observes that:

Egyptian art scarcely knows any narrative illustration in our sense. There are no mythological cycles telling of the exploits of gods and heroes. ... Nor can the attitude of Mesopotamian cultures have differed greatly. (Gombrich 1977, 109)

He then moves deftly from this (probably correct) observation to the simple hypothesis that:

when classical sculptors and painters discovered the character of Greek narration, they set up a chain reaction which transformed the methods of representing the human body. (Gombrich 1977, 110)

So far, so good -- as a starting point, as a working hypothesis to justify and evaluate against alternatives. But little justification or evaluation is forthcoming.

The second stage of the argument offers some elaboration, but sidesteps the central issues. Gombrich attempts to justify his stress on the determining rôle of the Greek narrative tradition by an appeal to the uniqueness of Homer:-

For what is the character of the Greek narration as we know it from Homer? Briefly, it is concerned not only with the "what" but also with the "how" of mythical events. Obviously this is not a strict distinction. There can be no recital of events that does not include description of one kind or another, and nobody would claim that the Gilgamesh Epic or the Old Testament is devoid of vivid accounts. But maybe there is still a difference in the way Homer presents the incidents in front of Troy, the very thoughts of the heroes, or the reaction of Hector's small son who takes fright from the plumes of his father's helmet.

(Gombrich 1977, 110)

This will hardly do. The reader has been shifted from the problematic area of growth of a "naturalistic" style in Greek art to the adjacent (rather firmer) territory of early Greek epic; but even here Gombrich says nothing to convince the sceptic that Greek narrative practice is so special that it could plausibly account for the observed differences in Greek and (say) Egyptian artistic practice. As Gombrich

himself almost admits there are passages both in Gilgamesh and the Old Testament that lose nothing in vividness to Homer -- and his suggestion that "maybe there is still a difference" in Homer simply invites the response "but maybe not".

Gombrich's argument at this crucial point is too elusive and brief to carry conviction. His claim that the "naturalistic" character of Greek art is to be related to the narrative function is neither trivial nor uninteresting. But he fails to show why narrative should take the centre of the stage. There are other plausible catalysts in artistic change. Why should we follow Gombrich in privileging narrative rather than framing an explanation in terms of the rise of the city-state, for example, or the social and economic changes of Archaic Greece? The initiating rôle of narrative forms the assumed base of much of these influential "Reflections". Yet that rôle is never adequately justified.

The Refinement of "Realism": Making and Matching

Once the "realistic" mode is established, it is, in Gombrich's view, constantly refined by a process of "making and matching". The artist tests his product against the reality of the observable world and tries, at each new rendering, to capture that reality more faithfully. In this way, the familiar progression of Greek art towards "naturalism" is assured: each generation of artists "matches" the observable world "better" than their predecessors.

The process of "making and matching" underlies much of the argument of Art and Illusion as a whole and is one of the themes of the book most challenged by Gombrich's critics. My concern here is not to enter the theoretical debates that have surrounded the concept (for which, again, see Bryson's Vision and Painting [Bryson 1983]) but to suggest that, whatever its theoretical validity, the idea of "making and matching" provides a peculiarly inappropriate way of understanding the Greek material with which Gombrich is concerned in the "Reflections".

The visual representations most prominent in Gombrich's "Reflections" are representations of deities and other mythical beings. The particular examples on which Gombrich lays most stress are two versions on painted pottery of "The Judgement of Paris" (Gombrich 1977, 111, Figures 87 and 88) -- the first, a sixth century, still "hieratic" representation in which the god Hermes is seen leading three rather "unlifelike" goddesses to the beauty contest; the second, a much more "plausible" rendering of the fifth century, in which the individual characterization of the goddesses (the "dignified reserve" of Hera, for example) offers the viewer a now convincing image of the scene. By the fifth century artists have reworked the static, rigid images of the sixth century; they have "amended the formula" so as to match "reality" more closely.

The problem is that these mythical images chosen by Gombrich have

no external reality against which the artist can be imagined to have "tested" his rendering. It is one thing to imagine that representations of (say) trees were constantly matched against observable reality and so constantly "improved" -- though even here I, like others, am doubtful about the argument. It is quite another to suggest that images of gods and goddesses developed by a similar process. For in this case there was no external reality against which they could be matched; their "reality" consisted in whatever image was chosen for their representation. Gombrich might, of course, object that Greek deities were "anthropomorphic" and that consequently men and women of the world provided the fixed point against which to match and test. But such an objection would be seriously to under-estimate the subtlety of Greek religion. The construction of the gods' appearance was itself the subject of (implicit) debate: were they just like men and women or were they not? how were they distinguished as divine? was it by size? by dress? by colour? how indeed could certainty be reached? Visual images provided one important medium for that debate, parading different options in all kinds of different representations. It was no accident that some gods (like temple cult images) were portrayed in gold and ivory, immense and shining, while others were in the likeness of a perfect athlete: these were all valid explorations of a culturally agreed, yet constantly shifting, imaginative construction of the divine. From a modern analytical perspective, it was the image that constituted the reality of the god or goddess; the image did not, and could not, attempt to replicate yet more faithfully some actual presence in the observable world.

Gombrich fails to recognise the inappropriateness of any process of "making and matching" where the image necessarily represents the only "reality" the subject can ever have. It cannot be that his fifth century version of "The Judgement of Paris" is more "realistic" than that of the sixth century. The older version represents simply a different attempt at claiming a reality for the incident. In just the same way, there can be no more or less lifelike representation of (say) a unicorn; there are only different ways of "imaging".

The End of Realism

Gombrich's arguments finally break down when he comes to the period of the later Roman empire and what he perceives as a retreat from realism. Why, he asks, were "the achievements of Greek illusionism" gradually discarded? He rejects with paraded reluctance the view that art simply declined -- for that explanation "has become unfashionable" (Gombrich 1977, 125). And besides, as he goes on to say, "it is hard to use such a word (as decline) when one stands in San Vitale in Ravenna". (ibid, 125).

Instead he sees, once more, a change in the function of art. This time the triumph of Christianity is seen to have brought back pre-Greek conceptions of "schematic" art, conceived not as "free fiction", but as

the "timeless re-enactment of the life of Christ" and the representation of eternal truths (ibid, 125). He adds: "Small wonder that (this conception of art) led to a concentration on distinctive features and came to restrict the free play of the imagination in artist and beholder alike" (ibid, 125).

Gombrich's difficulties are understandable. Once he has depicted the developments of Greek art as a process of "making and matching", with a constant progression to a more faithful image, he is left almost resourceless in the face of the clear trend away from realism in the later Roman Empire. He would like, of course, to claim a retreat from narrative in the art and culture of this later period and so reverse the functional argument that he adopted for the beginning of Greek realism. Yet he has to recognise that in the life of Christ the artists of the period were representing, like their predecessors, a vivid and important narrative story. He can only sidestep and invent a convenient, if unconvincing, distinction: while earlier Greco-Roman artists were recreating "free fiction", their Christian counterparts were engaged in "timeless re-enactments". This leads him, perhaps in desperation, to make his extraordinary assertion that the imagination not only of the artist but also of the viewer was restricted by such developments as we see at Ravenna and in Byzantine art.

The difficulties with which Gombrich here wrestles unsuccessfully are an indication of the generally unsatisfactory nature of his explanatory model. It is not that it cannot simply be reversed in order to provide an explanation for the reversal of the trend towards realism. It is more fundamentally that Gombrich's failure (both here and with modern non-figurative art) to deal with what for him must be "hiccoughs" in his developmental scheme calls his explanatory model yet further into question.

Conclusion

"Reflections on the Greek revolution" is deeply flawed at the major pivotal points of its argument. This is not to say that an argument on the crucial role of narrative in the development of early Greek art could not be convincingly framed -- but simply that Gombrich has not achieved conviction. Nor do the faults in this one chapter of *Art and Illusion* imply a blanket rejection of Gombrich's work; he has after all produced some modifications to his general hypotheses in his more recent writing. "Reflections" has, however, remained a key text for archaeologists and classical art historians. For this reason its particular faults need to be stated.

References

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