Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation Study Guide

Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation by Ernst Gombrich

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Contents

Introduction

Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, published in 1960, is one of the most influential books written during the twentieth century on the subject of art. Following the publication in 1950 of his incredibly popular book, *The Story of Art*, Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich consented to give the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1956. Those lectures became the book *Art and Illusion*. Critics generally agree that this volume, among Gombrich's myriad publications, is his most far-reaching and influential work. Gombrich continued to advocate many of the ideas put forth in this book throughout his life. Indeed, he not only revised the text and wrote a new preface for the second edition of the book published in 1961, he also wrote a new preface for the "Millennium Edition" published in 2000, in his ninety-first year.

In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich poses this essential question: "Why is it that different ages and different nations have represented the visible world in such different ways?" Throughout the pages of the book, Gombrich attempts to address this question using science, psychology, and philosophy to help formulate his answer. At the heart of his theory is the notion of "schemata," that is, the idea that the artist "begins not with his visual impression but with his idea or concept" and that the artist adjusts this idea to fit, as well as it can, the object, landscape, or person before him or her. Gombrich calls this theory "making and matching."

While art critics and historians have developed new ideas about representation since the first publication of *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich and his ideas continue to be a mighty force. Thus, serious students of art and art history find *Art and Illusion* an important and necessary part of their education.

Author Biography

Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich was born in Vienna, Austria, on March 30, 1909, to Karl B. Gombrich, a lawyer, and Leonie Hock Gombrich, a pianist. Gombrich credits his intellectual development to the music in his home. Indeed, Adolf Busch, the leader of the Busch Quartet, was a frequent visitor to the Gombrich home. Leonie Gombrich was also well-acquainted with the great modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg and Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis.

Although the atmosphere in his home led to his development as a thinker, Gombrich did not follow his mother's footsteps into music but chose rather to study art history at Vienna University. Gombrich said that he made his decision because "art was a marvelous key to the past" (*The Essential Gombrich*). At the university, he studied with the great art historian, Julius von Schlosser. Another important influence in the life of young Gombrich was Ernst Kris, who asked Gombrich to help him write a book on caricature which incorporated the work of Freud.

The rise of Nazism in Germany, however, interrupted the project, and Kris encouraged his Jewish assistant to leave Austria. It was largely due to Kris's urging and his recommendation of Gombrich to the director of the Warburg Institute that Gombrich moved to London in 1936.

When World War II began, Gombrich served as a "radio monitor," working for the British Broadcasting Corporation as part of the war effort. His duty was to listen to and translate German radio broadcasts for the use of the military. With the end of the war, Gombrich returned to the Warburg Institute, becoming its director in 1959.

During the 1950s, Gombrich wrote prolifically and lectured widely. His introduction to Western art, *The Story of Art*, was published in 1950. Since that time over six million copies of that volume have been sold. In 1956, Gombrich gave a series of Mellon lectures in Washington, D.C., choosing as his subject "Art and Illusion." These lectures were later collected into the book *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960). Many critics consider this book to be the most influential of Gombrich's works.

Over the next forty-two years, Gombrich published more than twenty books and hundreds of journal articles. Indeed, J. B. Trapp compiled a book-length bibliography of Gombrich's work in 2000, and the list of publications filled more than one hundred pages. His last full-length book, *The Preference for the Primitive*, was published in August 2002.

During his lifetime, Gombrich received many honors and awards. Most notably, he was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1966, and he was knighted in 1972. Gombrich died in London on November 3, 2001, at the age of 92. He is generally acknowledged to be one of the most influential art historians of all time.

Plot Summary

Part 1: The Limits of Likeness

In the introduction to *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich asks the question, "Why is it that different ages and different nations have represented the visible world in such different ways?" This is the question he attempts to answer in his book. First, however, he provides the reader with a critical account of the history of style and the psychology of representation. That accomplished, he turns to Chapter One, "From Light into Paint." In this chapter, Gombrich notes that the English painter, John Constable said, "Painting is a science." Like Constable, Gombrich believes that science is involved in both the creation and the appreciation of art. He explains the many ways that artists through the years have learned how to represent light in their paintings.

Chapter Two, "Truth and Stereotype," begins with a discussion of how a picture can be neither true nor false. By contrast, the caption of the picture can be so judged. Further, when artists undertake to paint pictures, they start not with what they see, but rather with an idea or concept, what Gombrich calls a "schema." The schema, Gombrich argues, is "the first approximate, loose category which is gradually tightened to fit the form it is to reproduce." Thus, in portraying a person, animal, landscape, or thing in art, the artist must have a starting point, for, as Gombrich states, "you cannot create a faithful image out of nothing." Furthermore, an artist will tend to look for "certain aspects in the scene around him that he can render. Painting is an activity and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather than paint what he sees."

Part 2: Function and Form

The first chapter, "Pygmalion's Power," covers the connection between the artist and creation. It is not, Gombrich argues, the artist's aim to make a likeness, but rather to create something real. In so doing, the artist particularizes, starting with an idea, say, of chairness, and particularizing this idea until it represents the chair that is the subject being painted.

The section continues with a description of how Greek art moves from a stiff rendering to more "lifelike" rendering. Gombrich asserts that this is a perfect illustration of the theory that making always occurs before matching. That is, an artist (or culture) begins with a schemata, which the artist then adjusts and corrects to make it ever closer to the appearance the artist wants the creation to have. Gombrich then moves to an exploration of "the basic geometric relationships that the artists must know for the construction to be a plausible figure." In so doing, he considers the Medieval and Renaissance "drawing books" which used geometric shapes as formulas for teaching drawing. These books, according to Gombrich, "form a reservoir of formulas or schemata which spread throughout Europe." He compares these books with basic vocabularies; in a very real sense, they provided artists with the building blocks of the

language of art. For Gombrich, however, "effective portrayal" is only possible when the artist goes beyond the formulas and demonstrates a willingness "to correct and revise."

Part 3: The Beholder's Share

The chapters of this section focus primarily on the role of the viewer in the reading of an artist's image. Gombrich relates this tendency to what psychologists call "projection," wherein a person projects onto another person his own desires and personality. A beholder of art will likewise project his or her catalog of classifications onto the images created by artists. In this case, the artist creates and the beholder projects; both are necessary ingredients in the making of meaning.

In an important section of Part Three, Gombrich turns to "the perception of symbolic material," using his experience as a British Broadcasting Corporation monitor during World War II. He discusses how our knowledge and expectations contribute to what we actually see or hear. The greater the likelihood a given word will occur, the less likely we are to listen. In Gombrich's own words, "Where we can anticipate we need not listen. It is in this context that projection will do for perception." The beholder, in other words, closes the gaps through projection, the act of projecting the image he or she expects into "an empty or ill-defined area."

Likewise, incomplete visual images push the beholder into completing the image: artists provide the hints that the viewer must use to complete the image. Artists cannot represent every detail of reality, no matter how painstakingly they work. It is the creation of an illusion that allows the beholder to fill in the details. Gombrich asserts, "I believe that this illusion is assisted by what might be called the 'etc. principle,' the assumption we tend to make that to see a few members of a series is to see them all." Furthermore, the expectation of the viewer as well as the context of the image affect the meaning the viewer assigns to an image.

In Chapter 8, "Ambiguities of the Third Dimension," Gombrich tackles perspective and the "rendering of space in art." The problem, of course, is how one renders the illusion of three dimensions in a two-dimensional medium such as painting. A painting clearly has only two dimensions, height and width. In order for the painting to have depth, however, the painter must engage in the art of perspective. As Gombrich argues, "One cannot insist enough that the art of perspective aims at a correct equation: it wants the image to appear like the object and the object like the image." He further asserts that perspective depends on certain expectations of the beholder, most notably on the sizedistance ambiguity. That is, a viewer estimates the distance of an object by how large or small it appears. Image makers take advantage of this assumption. In opposition to Gestalt psychologists, Gombrich asserts that interpreting perspective in a flat image is a learned behavior rather than an innate skill. In this, he draws on the work of philosopher Sir Karl R. Popper. Painting, then, that accounts for perspective is illusionist painting, meant to be viewed by a beholder who "willingly suspends disbelief" and sees what he or she expects to see, not what is really in the painting. Gombrich credits the rise of cubism, by contrast, to a "radical attempt to stamp out ambiguity and

to enforce one reading of the picture—that of a man-made construction, a colored canvas."

Part 4: Invention and Discovery

After recapitulating his stance on the power of interpretation, Gombrich next offers a brief history of perception, referring to Bishop Berkeley, John Ruskin, and Roger Fry. Gombrich argues that "all thinking is sorting, classifying." Further,after summarizing Ruskin's position, he rejects Ruskin's notion of "the innocent eye." For Gombrich, this term is impossible, for no human eye can be "innocent," that is, unaffected by experience and attitude. The eye is connected to the brain and the experience of the viewer, and the perception of any viewer will make meaning using that connection. For the painter, this process is deeply affected by his or her ability to view his or her subject in terms of the traditions of painting. Gombrich writes, "A painting, as Wölfflin said, owes more to other paintings than they owe to direct observation."

In this section, Gombrich also touches on the importance of experimentation. With Constable, who viewed art as natural philosophy (or science), Gombrich agrees that "only experimentation can show the artist a way out of the prison of style toward a greater truth. Only through trying out new effects never seen before in paint could he learn about nature. Making still comes before matching."

Gombrich differentiates himself from nineteenth- century models of both art and science, however, models that believed in the possibility of neutral observations, or what is known as the belief in induction. Gombrich argues that "pure observation" is impossible in either science or art. Rather, all observation is predicated by hypotheses, which in turn, create expectations. Only through testing hypotheses do scientists and artists amend their already perceived picture of reality.

In one of the most interesting chapters of the book, Gombrich turns to a discussion of caricature, drawing on his earlier work with Ernst Kris. He uses the work of Freud and other psychologists in the exploration of the "minimum clues of expression," those features that allow a viewer to see a face in only a few lines. Finally, Gombrich closes this section and the book with a discussion of the similarities between "the language of words and visual representation," concluding "the true miracle of the language of art is not that it enables the artist to create the illusion of reality. It is that under the hands of a great master the image becomes translucent."

Characters

Gertrud Bing

Gertrud Bing was Fritz Saxl's assistant and a close associate of Gombrich. She is noted for writing the introduction to the Italian translation of Aby Warburg's papers.

Karl Bühler

Gombrich recalls in autobiographical writing that the work of Karl Bühler was an important influence on his own thinking, especially in *Art and Illusion*. Bühler was a professor of psychology in Vienna during the 1920s and 1930s. In addition, he was an early writer on the Gestalt theory of thinking, which worked its way into the theory of art through Rudolf Arnheim. Perhaps most important for Gombrich was Bühler's model of communication and his theory of language.

John Constable

John Constable, an early nineteenth-century English landscape painter, was one of the first painters to consider science and observation in his understanding of painting. Gombrich devotes a chapter of *Art and Illusion* to Constable and his experiments with paint and light, noting that Constable remarked, "Painting is a science and should be pursued as in inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?" Constable's "experiments" were an attempt to render paintings that ever more closely resembled the appearance of the scene in front of him. Gombrich suggests that it is only through experiments like Constable's that a painter can make his or her "way out of the prison of style toward a greater truth." Constable's work provides for Gombrich an easily understood illustration of some of the theories he propounds in *Art and Illusion*.

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud, the great Viennese psychologist and the founder of modern psychiatry, attempted to chart in a scientific manner the mysterious regions of the human psyche. Gombrich's interest in psychology and perception necessarily led him to both intersect and interact with Freud's theories. Gombrich specifically cites Freud's study of the work of Leonardo da Vinci.

Roger Fry

Roger Fry was an English art critic and painter whose work became important for Gombrich as he wrote *Art and Illusion*. According to Gombrich, Fry hailed

"impressionism as the final discovery of appearances." For Fry, the difficulty in painting was in the "difficulty of finding out what things looked like to an unbiased eye." Furthermore, the only way an artist can represent reality is through, ironically, the "suppression of conceptual knowledge." An important theorist for the history of art, Fry died in 1939 while delivering a series of lectures on art history.

William Hogarth

Gombrich states that William Hogarth was one of the most interesting of eighteenth-century artists. Hogarth produced a series of prints called *Characters and Caricatures*. According to Gombrich, Hogarth believed that "caricature rests on comic comparison" while character "rests on the knowledge of the human frame and heart." Gombrich includes many of Hogarth's drawings to illustrate his understanding of caricature.

Ernst Kris

Ernst Kris, a close friend of Gombrich, worked as keeper of the Department of Applied Art in the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Kris was part of Sigmund Freud's inner circle, and he taught Gombrich about psychology. Together, Kris and Gombrich worked on a book on caricature, using Freud's theories. Kris was acutely aware of the rise of the Nazi Party, and he urged Gombrich to leave Austria to find work. Kris recommended Gombrich to Fritz Saxl who was the director of the Warburg Institute in London. Gombrich credits Kris for both his fortuitous move from Austria and his first job.

Karl R. Popper

Karl Popper was a highly influential philosopher. Born in Vienna like Gombrich, Popper also immigrated to London. The two men became close friends, and Gombrich openly acknowledged his indebtedness to Popper's thinking. Most notably, Popper rejected what he called the "bucket theory of mind." That theory suggests that the human mind is an empty container, like a bucket, waiting to be filled up with sensory data. This theory defines the mind as a passive recipient. Popper opposed his own "searchlight theory" of mind to the bucket theory. He hypothesized that gathering information about the world is an active proposition, one that requires the mind to match internal schemata with sensory information from the world. Most importantly for Popper and for Gombrich is the notion of "activity." The beholder is an active participant in meaning making.

John Ruskin

John Ruskin was a prominent Victorian art and literary critic as well as a social reformer. Born in 1819, Ruskin became interested as a child in art and architecture. Ruskin is perhaps most famous for his multi-volume work *Modern Painters*. This book exerted tremendous influence on nineteenth-century artists, critics, and viewers. Ruskin championed the work of artist J. M. W. Turner as well as the Pre- Raphaelites. Although

Gombrich shows Ruskin a great deal of respect throughout *Art and Illusion*, he also clearly rejects many of Ruskin's ideas about art, most notably, that an artist should look at nature with an "innocent eye" in order to best represent nature in art.

Fritz Saxl

Fritz Saxl was the director of the Warburg Institute in London. He hired Gombrich in 1936 in order to help him publish the papers and letters of Aby Warburg.

Julius von Schlosser

Julius von Schlosser, Gombrich's art history teacher at the University of Vienna, was the author of an important text *Die Kunstliteratur*. Although Gombrich recalls that he was not a good lecturer, Schlosser influenced the young student, particularly in the seminars he held in the Vienna Museum's Department of Applied Arts. In these seminars, Schlosser would ask his students to talk about artifacts contained in the museum. In addition, he also gave seminars in problems, in which he would ask his students to consider a problem in art history. For example, he asked Gombrich to discuss hand gestures represented in a medieval law manuscript. Gombrich dedicates *Art and Illusion* in part to Schlosser's memory as his teacher.

Aby Warburg

Aby Warburg was the founder of the Warburg Institute in London, which housed his books, papers, and letters after he was forced to move from Hamburg with the rise of Nazism. The Institute's main focus was the study of cultural history, particularly of the Italian Renaissance. Warburg collected everything he could find that would help contemporary scholars understand the social milieu of the Renaissance in Italy. His interest in art was not for art's sake but rather for what it could reveal of the times in which it was created. Gombrich wrote the definitive biography of Aby Warburg in 1970.

Themes

Perception

One of Gombrich's most important themes in *Art and Illusion* is that of perception. Technically, perception is the process through which a human being gains sensory information about the physical world. Twentieth-century scientists and philosophers have been intrigued by perception and by the way the brain takes sensory information and transforms it into a meaningful picture of the world. For example, how is it that humans have depth perception? How does the brain translate the images on the retina of the eye into a three-dimensional picture of the world? Those who study perception debate whether interpretation of sensory data is innate or learned. In other words, they explore whether people are born with the ability to understand sensory information or must learn how to interpret sensory information through trial and error.

Gombrich, with his close attention to science and philosophy, is intrigued by questions of perception. He writes:

The question of what is involved in "looking at nature"—what we today call the psychology of perception—first entered into the discussion style as a practical problem in art teaching. The academic teacher bent on accuracy of representation found, as he still will find, that his pupils' difficulties were due not only to an inability to copy nature but also an inability to see it.

For Gombrich, then, perception is more than merely a physiological response to light and dark or patterns and background. Perception and the ability to "see" nature depend not only on the correctly functioning eyes, retinas, and brains but also on the viewers' experiences and training. This point is important for both the artists and the beholders, since they all must use their powers of perception to derive meaning from the work of art.

Illusion

Illusion is one of the most puzzling phenomena in the study of perception and by extension, the study of representational art. In the case of an illusion, perception is not dependent on how the receptors in the eye and brain react, nor is it dependent on the object being perceived. That is, a human being is able to make meaning from an image independent of the physiology of either the eye or the image. For example, when children see a picture of a duck in a book and are asked what they see, they will answer, "A duck." Now, the light receptors in the children's retinas do not fire in an identical way when the children see a real duck outside in a pond and when they see a picture of a duck. Likewise, the picture does not resemble in any real way the duck in the real world. The picture, therefore, is illusory; it is paint on paper. Yet the human mind is capable of perceiving the paint on paper as a duck. Gombrich uses the following

example to illustrate the ways that human beings confront illusions each day and still make sense of the world:

If the reader finds this assertion a little puzzling, there is always an instrument of illusion close at hand to verify it: the bathroom mirror. I specify the bathroom because the experiment I urge the reader to make succeeds best if the mirror is a little clouded by steam. It is a fascinating exercise in illusionist representation to trace one's own head on the surface of the mirror and to clear the area enclosed by the outline. For when we have actually done this do we realize how small the image is which gives us the illusion of seeing ourselves "face to face." To be exact, it must be precisely half the size of our head.

Clearly, the perception of representational art requires the use of illusion. It is only through illusion that the viewer recognizes the landscape in the painting to be the landscape out the window. One of Gombrich's main purposes, then, in *Art and Illusion* is to investigate how artists, across time, have developed the particular illusions that they have in order to render their paintings ever closer to the perception of "reality."

Style

Narration

Narration is the telling of a series of events, often in chronological order, and generally in a way that creates a story. Certainly, in his *Story of Art*, Gombrich creates a narrative that gives a sense of unity to the history of art. Likewise, in *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich's stated purpose is to "explain why art has a history." Although he begins with the nineteenth-century painter John Constable, Gombrich soon jumps back to early Greek art to begin his story of "making and matching." Gombrich's narration is one that traces the way artists attempting to represent reality employ tradition and experimentation in their art. Furthermore, Gombrich includes in his narration both the changes artists make and the changes viewers must make as they are confronted with new ways in which art represents reality. Because Gombrich chooses to use a narrative style, the book itself, while long and at times technical in vocabulary, is nonetheless accessible to a general audience.

Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech that expresses an idea through a comparison between two objects or ideas. In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich uses language as a metaphor for art. That is, he suggests that artists develop a "vocabulary" of artistic schemata that allow them to build their images. But the schemata available in any historic period can constitute a limitation within which artists tend to work. He likens the schemata to a writer's vocabulary that both builds and limits the work the writer creates. Indeed, through his use of the words "language of representation," "reading," "grammar," and "articulation," for example, Gombrich further builds the metaphor that art and language are comparable forms of human communication and representation.

Historical Context

Gombrich and World War II

Although Gombrich did not publish *Art and Illusion* until 1960, many of the ideas contained in the book had root in Gombrich's experiences in London during World War II. Critics and biographers alike note this fact, as does Gombrich himself in Part Three of the book. Gombrich developed many of his ideas about perception while working for the British Broadcasting Corporation in their Monitoring Services division. His job was to listen to and translate all radio transmissions coming out of Germany for the six years of the war. Through this surveillance, the British government hoped to gain information about what the Germans had planned. However, often the transmissions were faint or garbled. As a result, Gombrich became skilled at "filling in the gaps," so to speak. As he notes in *Art and Illusion*,

Some of the transmissions which interested us most were often barely audible, and it became quite an art, or even a sport, to interpret the few whiffs of speech sounds. . . . It was then we learned to what an extent our knowledge and expectations influence our hearing. You had to know what might be said in order to hear what was said.

For Gombrich, making sense of what he heard required that he match what he heard to his internal catalogue of possible German word combinations. The difficult part of this process, of course, was that he could not let his expectations lead him to fabricate illusions about what he heard. He needed to use both his knowledge of possibilities and his critical faculties. As the receiver of auditory information, Gombrich needed to consider both the words and their contexts while keeping in mind his own expectations.

Without this wartime experience of listening and translating, Gombrich may not have considered how expectations affect recipients of sensory input and he may not have considered the importance of the psychology of perception for the understanding of art. Viewers of art fill the gaps of what they see based on their internal catalogues of what is possible. Moreover, according to Gombrich, "the context of action creates conditions of illusions." Context and expectation shape the meaning viewers impart to works of art, just as Gombrich and his colleagues used context and expectation to interpret German messages.

The Significance of Art and Illusion

Critics are nearly unanimous in their assessment of *Art and Illusion*: they consider it to be the most influential work of Gombrich's life, and they consider Gombrich to be the most influential art historian of the twentieth century. Indeed, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of this work. Perhaps most important is its attempt to connect the appreciation of artistic creation with the scientific study of perception. Gombrich carefully builds a case that the meaning of a work of art resides in a collaborative

communication between individual artists and viewers. He rejects the notion of a transcendent *zeitgeist*, or spirit of the times, that creates artistic representation. Furthermore, he destroys Ruskin's nineteenth-century notion that one could view a piece of art with "an innocent eye." For Gombrich, the innocent eye was an impossible abstraction. What the artist sees and what the beholder sees are both inextricably shaped by cultural and historical contexts. That this notion seems so patently obvious in the early twenty-first century is an indication of how thoroughly Gombrich's work has been assimilated by all studies of art history.

Critical Overview

When *Art and Illusion* was published in 1960, it was immediately hailed as a masterpiece. In an obituary appearing in *Art in American* shortly after Gombrich's death in 2001, critics Stephanie Cash and David Ebony provide a retrospective of Gombrich's work. They hail *Art and Illusion* as Gombrich's "most influential volume." They also note that Gombrich "rejected the notion that artistic change was the result of a collective mind or 'spirit of the age.' Instead Gombrich preferred to focus on how individual artists dealt with specific technical problems."

The importance of a book can often be determined by the amount of critical response it generates over the years, and by this standard, *Art and Illusion* has demonstrated its ongoing influence from the time of its publication to the present day. Moreover, the intellectual heft of those scholars who respond to a book also increases a book's prestige. In the case of *Art and Illusion*, some of the most respected philosophers of the era respond to and use Gombrich's work.

For example, Nelson Goodman, an important theorist in the area of perception, refers to Gombrich in his classic *Languages of Art* (1968). Although Goodman and Gombrich had what has been described by Malcolm Bull as an "uneasy relationship," Goodman nonetheless acknowledges Gombrich's accomplishments in *Art and Illusion*: "Gombrich . . . has amassed overwhelming evidence to show how the way we see and depict depends upon and varies with experience, practice, interests, and attitudes."

The longevity of Gombrich's work is also impressive, and a number of late twentieth-century scholars continue to engage *Art and Illusion*. Bull, for example, in "Scheming Schemata," an article published in the July 1994 issue of *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, is interested in using the work of both Gombrich and Goodman to develop a new theory of pictorial representation.

In another important article appearing in the Winter 1998 issue of the *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Leslie Cunliffe links Gombrich's theories and social constructivism. He argues, "In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich convincingly demonstrates that it is the symbolic representations embedded in a given culture that give rational purpose to the work of artists, providing the necessary direction, visual codes, strategies, and critical feedback mechanisms that enable them to create art."

Norman Turner in the Spring 1992 issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* starts with Gombrich's assertions about perspective in *Art and Illusion* and suggests questions that still need to be addressed. He writes: "The purpose of this essay is to take up these questions. In elaborating them, what stands forth is that perspective operates, like other schema of representation, not to literally replicate the actual world, but as what might well be called a species of visual trope."

Perhaps no other scholar has done more investigation of Gombrich's work than Richard Woodfield. The writer of many articles on Gombrich and the editor of many important

collections of Gombrich's work, Woodfield summarizes Gombrich's arguments in *Art and Illusion* and identifies succinctly many of the critical approaches to *Art and Illusion* in his introduction to a collection of essays, *Gombrich on Art and Psychology* (1996). He concludes the chapter by asserting, "the area between psychology and linguistics, whose subject is the visual image, needs something better than contemporary popular semiotics to deal with it. Gombrich's use of Bühler has resulted in great gains, but, as he has frequently said, it is not method which offers a way forward, but a sense of the problems which need to be solved."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is a professor of English at Adrian College and has written widely on contemporary literature for reference and educational publishers. In this essay, Henningfeld compares the role of the beholder in the theories of E. H. Gombrich with the role of the reader in the theories of reader response literary critics.

Throughout his book *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, writer E. H. Gombrich compares painting to language. The comparison offers him a useful metaphor: he is able to speak of an artist's vocabulary, the grammar of art, and the syntax of painting. Gombrich's primary argument is that an artist builds his or her representation of reality through the use of schemata, or formulas, which function in much the same way that vocabulary functions in the verbal representation of reality. Furthermore, he suggests that only certain combinations of schemata are available to an artist at any particular time, just as there are only certain combinations of English words that can work together in an intelligible English sentence.

While Gombrich's argument is persuasive, not all scholars agree with this analysis. For example, Svetlana Alpers in her essay "No Telling, with Tiepo," published in the collection *Sight and Insight*, (1994) states bluntly, "It is a matter of common sense that image is different from a text, that painting is not language." She goes on to discuss the role of narrative in painting and the ways story telling and painting differ.

Alpers' essay notwithstanding, there are striking similarities between Gombrich's theory of "reading" a painting and the theory of reading a text developed by reader response theorist Stanley Fish. The starting point for exploring these similarities is to return to Gombrich's experiences during World War II and to Part Three of *Art and Illusion*, "The Beholder's Share."

Gombrich reports that his experience as a radio monitor during World War II, working for military intelligence by listening to and translating German broadcasts, greatly affected his understanding of perception. Often, the broadcasts he listened to were faint and difficult to understand. However, Gombrich and his associates became skilled at "filling in the gaps." That is, because Gombrich had particular experiences and understood the context of the broadcast and the language, he was able to fill in the spaces where he could not clearly hear the words. There are, he argues, only certain words and ideas that are possible given the contexts.

Likewise, when he discusses the beholder's role in the reading of an image, he argues that the beholder brings with him or her a certain range of experiences and knowledge that allow him or her to understand a painting. In addition, Gombrich discusses the way that a painter can leave out portions of a painting and merely provide hints at what actually belongs there. The viewer completes the painting by seeing what is not there. An example of this phenomenon occurs when an artist paints part of a tree at the edge of a painting. While only part of the tree actually appears on the canvas, the beholder

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will see the entire tree because of his or her horizon of expectation and the hints left by the painter.

Likewise, for Stanley Fish and reader response critics, the reader of a text fills in the gaps left by the writer. How the reader fills in these gaps is largely dependent on the reader's background, experience, horizon of expectation, and context, as well as the hints the writer puts into the text. For reader response critics, readers do not so much interpret texts as create them; making meaning is a collaborative effort between the reader and the writer. An unread text, necessarily, is a meaningless text. Further, just as a beholder of a painting will finish incomplete images in a painting, a reader of a text will finish incomplete thoughts or development in a text.

Second, Gombrich suggests that in order for a beholder to understand a painting, he or she must share some of the traditions and cultural background of the artist. That is, the artist and the viewer must share some common language. Gombrich famously rejects Ruskin's notion of the "innocent eye," the notion that one can observe a painting from a completely objective and neutral stance. Rather, Gombrich argues that there is no innocent viewing of a work of art. A reader's background and learning will largely determine how much meaning the reader derives from the art.

Fish would agree with this position. Reader response critics argue there are many possible readings for a given text, and any reading is dependent on the reader's background and experience. Consequently, there are some things a text simply cannot mean at a given time or place, simply because the context and vocabulary do not exist to make such a reading possible. For example, prior to World War II, critics could not read Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* with knowledge of the Holocaust. Similarly, critics cannot now read *The Merchant of Venice* without knowledge of the Holocaust. Another instance might be the common Oedipal reading of *Hamlet*, a reading that would have been impossible before Sigmund Freud developed the vocabulary necessary to create the reading.

Another point of comparison between Gombrich and reader response theorists is their objection to formalism. A formalist approach to art and literature argues that all meaning inheres in the work of art or text itself, regardless of the artist or the viewer. For the formalist critic, the text is complete unto itself; its meaning, when the "true" meaning is derived, will be true for all people in all times. Gombrich's notion of "making and matching" is in clear opposition to a formalist approach. He argues that both the artist and the beholder use schemata to help them understand both reality and art. The meaning of a work of art does not begin with the paint on the canvas but rather with an idea in the artist's mind. Likewise, the beholder of the work of art must draw on categories and expectations within his or her mind to make sense of the art. In a similar manner, a reader of a text will draw on his or her own understanding of literary conventions and cultural backgrounds to make sense of a text.

Reader response theorists and Gombrich would also agree on the pleasure derived in the reading of a text or the viewing of a work of art. Gombrich describes one such pleasure: "what we enjoy is not so much seeing these works from a distance as the very

act of stepping back, as it were, and watching our imagination come into play, transforming the medley of color into a finished image." Likewise, as one reads a text, the individual details, through the imaginative response of the reader, form themselves into a coherent whole. The pleasure for the reader, then, is derived from watching the text come into focus.

Finally, Gombrich and reader response critics would find themselves in agreement with what they imagine happens when a beholder encounters an image or text for a second time. Both would agree that one can never recover the initial encounter with an image or text and that all subsequent encounters will be informed by the first. Thus, a reader who knows that both Romeo and Juliet die at the end of their famous play will read the play differently from a naive reader who has not yet encountered this information. In the same way, once a beholder sees particular details of a painting, he or she cannot go back to the time when he or she did not notice these details. Subsequent readings are always built on earlier ones, and the meaning of the image or text changes with the reading.

For students in the early twenty-first century, such privileging of the reader or the beholder might seem intuitively commonsensical. That this is true suggests the great power that both Gombrich's and Fish's ideas have had on meaning making. For both, an encounter with a work of art, whether it is a visual image or a text, requires active participation on the part of the beholder, not passive appreciation. As Gombrich writes, "What we called the 'mental set' may be precisely that state of readiness to start projecting, to thrust out the tentacles of phantom colors and phantom images which always flicker around our perception." Meaning making is hard work, but it is in the work that the art becomes art.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Find several of John Constable's paintings. Demonstrate your understanding of Gombrich's analysis by applying his theories to the paintings you find. Write a short paper detailing what you note.

Research Sir Karl R. Popper's "searchlight theory." How does this theory coincide with Gombrich's approach to art?

Find examples of several optical illusions. Using Gombrich's theories, explain why the illusions deceive the eye. What accounts for our "reading" of the image in the way we do?

Read "Illusion and Reality," the first chapter of Leonard Shlain's *Art and Physics* (1991). Compare and contrast the ideas you find in this chapter with the ideas you find in *Art and Illusion*.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Post-World War II Europe is still recovering from the uncertainties and devastation of the war years. The growth of the Soviet Union and ongoing hostilities between Eastern Bloc countries and NATO lead to the Cold War.

1990s: Although the Cold War ends with the breakup of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, fear and uncertainty continue to dominate the international political scene.

1950s: Growth of technology as well as the "miracles" of science lead to a general belief in the application of the scientific method to all fields of endeavor, including art criticism and history.

1990s: While technology continues to grow at unprecedented rates, there is evidence of some distrust of science, most notable in the critiques of science offered by scholars such as Bruno Latour.

1950s: Gombrich's theories are set forth in the 1956 Mellon lectures, appearing in 1960 as the book *Art and Illusion*. Its influence on the field of aesthetics is formidable, according to Dieter Peetz.

1990s: Dieter Peetz identifies Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Works and Worlds of Arts* (1980) as having "innovative power and imaginative sweep" for those involved in philosophical aesthetics at the close of the twentieth century.

1950s: Literary critics known as the "New Critics" identify the quality of a text by its "universal significance." That is, this theoretical school posits that meaning and value of a text is contained within the text, is true across cultures and eras, and thus does not depend on context.

1990s: Reader response critics, basing their analysis on the seminal work of the 1970s and 1980s of theorist Stanley Fish, among others, argue that there is no innocent reader and that the meaning of a text is created by a collaborative effort between writer and reader.

What Do I Read Next?

Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, published in 1950, remains the best selling work of art history ever written, with over six million copies sold by 2002. Gombrich masterfully shapes the history of art into a clear, chronological narrative.

The Essential Gombrich (1996), edited by Richard Woodfield, is a treasure trove of Gombrich's best writing. It includes excerpts from Gombrich's major works, interviews, journal articles, and musings. Woodfield provides cogent introductions as well as a valuable list of books of interest for each selection. This compilation is a mustread collection for every student interested in Gombrich's work.

French intellectual Didier Eribon and Ernst Gombrich collaborated on the book *Looking for Answers: Conversations on Art and Science* (1991). The book includes extended interviews and conversations between the two men.

Leonard Shlain's *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time, and Light* (1991) is a highly readable alternate vision of art. Shlain, a surgeon, pairs breakthroughs in art with breakthroughs in physics.

Further Study

Gombrich, E. H., *The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Cornell University Press, 1982.

In a companion volume to *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich takes as his subject "the perceptual basis of art, psychology, and visual phenomena." In this book, he further refines his theories.

—, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 4th ed., Phaidon, 1985.

In this collection, Gombrich considers how the activity to which an image or object is put informs the meaning a person derives from the image or object. Thus, a broom in a corner is just a broom until a child chooses to use it as a horse.

Preziosi, Donald, ed., *The Art of Art History*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Preziosi has collected the essential theoretical texts of art history as a discipline. In addition, he has included helpful introductory chapters for each section of his text.

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Woodfield, Richard, ed., *The Essential Gombrich*, Phaidon Press, 1996, pp. 28-36.

—, *Gombrich on Art and Psychology*, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 19.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

☐classic☐ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of ☐classic☐ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members☐educational professionals☐ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

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□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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