

THE AMERICAN ART JOURNAL

Published by Kennedy Galleries, Inc.

A Plea for Pluralism

Author(s): E. H. Gombrich

Source: *The American Art Journal*, Spring, 1971, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring, 1971), pp. 83-87

Published by: Kennedy Galleries, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1593887>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Kennedy Galleries, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Art Journal*

JSTOR

The State of Art History

The American Art Journal has invited prominent art historians throughout the world to discuss the state of their profession, where it is going and what it should be doing. Our contributors in this issue are E. H. Gombrich, Mikhail Alpatov, Jan Białostocki and Victor Lasareff. The Journal will publish additional views on the subject in subsequent issues.—The Editors

A Plea for Pluralism

BY E. H. GOMBRICH

IN HIS well known book on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*¹ Prof. Thomas Kuhn introduced a terminology that has been the subject of much searching discussion. He wants us to distinguish what he calls "normal science" from "revolutionary science." Most practitioners of any science in most periods (if I may condense his argument even at the risk of oversimplification) are not out to question the foundations of their discipline. Instead they apply what he calls a "paradigm" in order to extend knowledge of a particular field. To be a research chemist means in our day mainly to apply techniques of analysis that have proved successful in the solution of certain puzzles to compounds that have not yet been subjected to this procedure. Professor Kuhn's critics do not deny that such an outlook exists, but unlike him they find the picture depressing.² Granted that there is a case to be made for applied science where such routines may yield desirable results—as for instance in the pharmaceutical industry—they express the hope that anybody who considers himself a scientist will never forget that it is critical thought that keeps science going. Indeed in the field of pure science the application of a ready-made paradigm to a problem seems to them to describe nothing more "normal" than the band wagon effect of intellectual fashions.

I have found this discussion engendered by Thomas Kuhn's book illuminating in thinking about the situation in the field of art history. Clearly there is such a thing as "applied" art history that has arisen in answer to a social need. As long as there are public and private collections of art they will have to be manned by competent practitioners who can label the objects under their care by answering

E. H. Gombrich is director of the Warburg Institute and Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition at the University of London. He has lectured extensively and his articles have appeared in many periodicals. Among his books are The Story of Art, Art and Illusion, Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Norm and Form.

1. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the University of Chicago Press, 1962.
2. Imre Lakatos and Allen Musgrave (Editors), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1970. I refer in particular to the paper by K. R. Popper, "Normal Science and its Dangers."

the routine questions of where, when, and if possible by whom the objects were made. Nobody needs doubt that the techniques for answering such normal questions are highly developed. To master them requires years of specialized study, first-hand acquaintance with many collections, a retentive memory and what is somewhat misleadingly called a "good eye," a sensitivity to subtle differences that comes only with practice. It is a commonplace that in the last analysis all art history rests on the efforts of connoisseurs, for clearly it is no good pontificating about Raphael unless we know what Raphael painted.

But it is precisely because connoisseurship is so fundamental that one may follow Kuhn's critics in questioning the value of any unchallenged paradigm. However refined the procedures of dating and attribution may be that result in the labels of our museums, they can but rest on hypotheses. This is not the place to ask what is generally meant even by a "documented" work, for there may be many a slip between the cup and the lip, but whatever the circumstantial evidence no serious historian will be inclined to deny that our ideas about the past are at least as fallible as are the theories of scientists that have so often been overturned. Unfortunately in applied science or art history this conviction conflicts with the social demand. We do not much like to hear that the laws of statics used in building skyscrapers are rather rules of thumb that must be applied with a hefty safety margin; we would not enjoy either visiting collections in which every label is liberally sprinkled with question marks. Not only would they look distracting, they would lower the financial value of a painting or object out of all proportion. As far as I can see this situation has led to a somewhat undesirable polarization. The demand for certainty has tended to produce the mystique of the connoisseur whose "good eye" is almost equated with second sight. On the other hand the awareness of the financial implications of attributions has sometimes resulted in an inverted snobbery that attaches greater prestige to skepticism than to faith. There are still laurels to be collected by a future art historian who will deny that Michelangelo painted more than two panels of the Sistine ceiling himself. After all, the implication of such a claim would be that his eye is so good that he can see distinctions that had been overlooked by all previous critics.

A case could therefore be made for removing even the routines of connoisseurship, the making of catalogues and the discussion of attributions from the safe precincts of a "normal" science and to expose them to the constant probings of fundamental criticism. Nothing would be easier, one should think, than to test the methods applied, by asking the connoisseur questions of which the answer is known on independent grounds. Are there volunteers for such experiments and how would they best be devised?³

But whatever the outcome of such investigations there are other social needs that the study of art is expected to answer. One concerns the question that is more easily asked than answered—why is this good? There was a time when some kind of paradigm existed for answering this question. I refer to the technical interpretation of the history of art as a steady progress toward the achievement of certain ends. In this interpretation, which Vasari inherited from classical antiquity, the greatness of a master was equated with the contribution he had made

3. I am indebted to my friend Prof. Otto Kurz who convinced me in conversation that with the cooperation of a major art school such a systematic test of attributions and chronology would be quite feasible.

to the progress of artistic skills. We can still write the history of aviation in some such terms, and thus assign their place to Montgolfier or the brothers Wright, but we have lost the confidence of writing the history of art in terms of problem solutions. Indeed some students are more attracted by the negative possibility of giving marks to artists for rejecting skills, but neither paradigm will do for real criticism⁴ and, since nature abhors a vacuum, description of what happened, particularly in twentieth century art, too often takes the place of a critical valuation of achievements.

True, such description can be dressed up as interpretation by the application of the Hegelian paradigm that enjoins us to look for the symptomatic significance of stylistic change. This paradigm has certainly contributed to the popularity of art historical studies in the context of liberal education. It holds out the promise of a history without tears, a survey course in which the Parthenon can be diagnosed as an expression of the Greek spirit and a view of Chartres Cathedral save the student the trouble of reading the tangled arguments of the scholastics. It is sometimes difficult, as Juvenal said, not to be satirical, but though I am very critical of this approach I must admit that any access to the past is better than that collective loss of memory with which we are threatened. After all some of those who first heard about the Greeks or the Scholastics in such survey courses, may really be stimulated to find out more and may even come to question the paradigm they had been taught.

But if these paradigms can be seen as a direct response to the questions naturally raised by art, and can be criticized in relation to the degree to which they satisfy these needs, there are others that are more subtly related to the intellectual climate of the day. I refer to the link that undoubtedly exists between the fashions in our field and the fluctuations of taste among artists and critics. Some of the movements of art history can be seen as rationalizations of these fashions, which owed their attraction to their original polemical stance. Seen in retrospect it is not difficult, for instance, to trace the connection between Wölfflin's "formal analysis" and the depreciation of subject matter in art. "Where you see a Madonna, I see an equilateral triangle, and that is what you ought to see, or attend to." Meanwhile, of course, we have experienced the inevitable swing of the pendulum, not unconnected, perhaps, with the rise of surrealism: "Where you see an equilateral triangle I see a wealth of symbolic references into which I am ready to initiate you." Soon, one may venture to predict, the preoccupation of the young with sociology will lead to the formula: "Where you see symbolic references I see the interplay of economic forces." In all probability the learned footnotes referring to mythographic handbooks will give way to statistical tables correlating the size of paintings with fluctuations in investments—all backed by computers, of course.

I would not assert that these shifts of interest are necessarily harmful in themselves. Indeed it would ill become me to do so, for I have experienced the impact of intellectual trends and fashions as much as anyone else. While I was a school-boy in Vienna I was deeply impressed by Max Dvořák's writings and if I have been critical of *Geistesgeschichte* in later years this was a reaction to an early en-

4. The demand is sometimes raised that the art historian should go to school with the literary critic whose standards of value and whose procedures rest on a more developed tradition, but much as I sympathize with the sentiments underlying this demand, I am not entirely convinced that our colleagues in Eng. Lit. have all the answers.

thusiasm.⁵ I have mentioned elsewhere that I still heard Heinrich Wölfflin in Berlin and arrogantly skipped his lectures,⁶ but I certainly succumbed to the fashions of the day when, in my doctoral thesis, I applied "formal analysis" to the mannerist architecture of Giulio Romano.⁷ Having entered the orbit of the Warburg Institute I was entranced by the new paradigm of iconology, which led me to interpret Botticelli's mythology in the light of Neo-Platonism.⁸ Nor would I assert that my later work was not subject to similar influences. After all, this very paper derived its framework from the present debate stirred up by Thomas Kuhn while its heading echoes the title of a paper by Kuhn's principal opponent, my friend Sir Karl Popper.⁹ In fact, it seems to me quite inevitable that a scholar will react to the traditions of his field, that he may fall under the spell of a great book or a great personality, and also that he may be attracted to problems that are being debated in his circle. By itself this sway of intellectual fashions may be no more harmful than the changing fashions in the hair styles of our students, provided we do not take either too seriously. One might argue, in fact, that a certain sensitivity to the issues that come to us from outside may even be beneficial if it alerts us to the multiplicity of questions that we can ask of the past.

It is precisely for this reason, however, that I cannot but agree with Thomas Kuhn's opponent who regards the existence of "normal science," the application of an existing and ready made paradigm as a threat to the health of our search and research. This health, as we all know, has anyhow become precarious through the rise of what one can only call the "academic industry." It is an industry that demands "research," not from a craving for truth, but quite openly as a qualification for degrees and promotions. Who can blame the victims of such pressure if they look for the nearest paradigm and apply it to whatever oeuvre or work comes to hand? I am sometimes reminded of certain provisions in Austrian law that constituted extenuating circumstances. One is if the crime was attempted with unsuitable means (*Versuch mit untauglichen Mitteln*) such as an attempt at murdering someone by incantation, the other an attempt on an unsuitable object (*Versuch am untauglichen Objekt*), such as an effort to shoot a ghost. Everybody must know papers that fall into either of these categories, applying the methods developed for the critical study of Michelangelo to some fifth-rater or using a hopelessly inadequate apparatus for the analysis of a great work of art.

Of course we have all used incantations, and we have all fired at nonexistent ghosts. But at least we should train ourselves and our students in that spirit of criticism and self-criticism that alone makes intellectual pursuits worth while. One of the least desirable consequences of the academic industry seems to me a certain atrophy of discussion, as if vigorous criticism might endanger a colleague's chances of promotion. We cannot and must not evade the demand of constantly probing the foundations on which the various paradigms are based.

5. Particularly in "Art and Scholarship," now reprinted in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, London, 1963, and my "Deneke Lecture" *In Search of Cultural History*, Oxford, 1969.

6. In *Norm and Form*, London, 1966, p. 92.

7. *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, N.F. 8, 9, 1934, 1935.

8. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, VIII, 1945; I have included this controversial paper in a forthcoming volume of my essays together with a discussion on the methodological issues which it raises.

9. "A Pluralistic Approach to the Philosophy of History" in *Roads to Freedom*, Essays in honor of Friedrich A. von Hayek (ed. Erich Streissler), London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.

We should not write about “space” without stopping to inquire about the nature of three-dimensional representation, we should not talk about “levels of meaning” without probing the implications of this search.¹⁰

It is precisely in the course of such probings—if I may again draw on my own experience—that we are likely to stumble across fresh problems of research that stand in need of new paradigms. If my own doubts have prompted me to acquaint myself a little more closely with the problems and results of contemporary psychology,¹¹ others may feel the need to inquire into economics or anthropology. Not that we can become experts in any of these fields, but we may learn enough to be able to talk to experts without being overawed. Indeed if there is one single cause that may impede the advance of learning it is the timidity that is inculcated by bad teaching, a teaching that harps on the quantity of knowledge to be acquired.

Knowledge is stored in books and periodicals where it can be activated any time by those who know how to use them. It is this we must persuade our students to learn; it implies learning languages and, if necessary, different terminologies. Once we have done this it should be easy to convince them of the intellectual impoverishment that a facile application of ready-made paradigms brings about. We can encourage them instead to look for questions that have not yet been asked and that may need new paradigms for their answer. Obviously there will be failures as well as successes, but if reasoned criticism of fundamentals will again be encouraged the process of trial and error should result in a real advance. Instead of cultivating “normal science” we shall enter into that interesting state of ferment Thomas Kuhn describes as revolutionary science, and keep it on the boil. True, if that happens it will no longer make sense to ask about “the present state of art history.” There will be not one art history, but many different lines of inquiry freely crossing the boundaries of any number of so-called “disciplines” that owe their existence merely to administrative convenience, not to say inertia. Only in this way can our studies recapture what Erwin Panofsky so beautifully described as “the joyful and instructive experience that comes from a common venture into the unexplored.”¹²

10. For literature see the astringent book by Donald E. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967.

11. *Art and Illusion, a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, New York, 1960 (now Princeton University Press and Phaidon Press), “Visual Discovery through Art” and “The Use of Art for the Study of Symbols” in *Psychology and the Visual Arts* (ed. James Hogg), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1969 and “The Evidence of Images” in *Interpretation Theory and Practice* (ed. C. S. Singleton), Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969.

12. “Three Decades of Art History in the United States” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York, 1955.