

GOMBRICH, E. H. *Kunsthistorie og samfundsvidenskab*. Trans. by Else Mogensen, ed. by Lars Aagaard-Mogensen. Copenhagen: Humanistica, 1978, 48 pp., 12 ills.

E. H. Gombrich's gentle defense of the humanistic tradition of learning, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1975 under the title *Art History and the Social Sciences*, has now been translated into Danish. The background for the Danish edition is the same as for the original publication: the popularity of attempts to reduce the history of art and similar humanistic disciplines to science, notably in Marxist garments. Attempts to emulate the scientific endeavors of archaeologists and other social scientists would "rapidly lead to the suicide of our subject," states Sir Ernst, who wants to convince us that art history is far from fit for the role of an *ancillae sociologiae*. Indeed, he wants to lead us to the contrary view, that "all the social sciences from economics to psychology should be ready to serve as handmaidens of Art History."

Is there any alternative, then, to scientism on the one hand and sheer subjectivism and arbitrariness on the other? Emphasizing the idea of connoisseurship, Gombrich does indeed propose such an alternative, which could be summed up in the following way (not wholly his own). The masters of a craft or a game have acquired the practical knowledge necessary for its exercise. That practical knowledge (knowing how; more than knowing that) includes the mastery of a number of criteria or rules governing the activities in question. Such rules must in the nature of the case be intersubjective (as Wittgenstein has shown); they constitute our language games and ultimately our form of life. If the experts agree that Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel are superior to those of Streaton in the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford, this might well be correct, a true judgment of

value. (We do not *have* to jump onto the bandwagon of critique of ideology in every case where the experts are found to agree.)

Without denying the value of sociological investigations of the welter of images surrounding us, Gombrich makes a plea for the view that art history should be "the history of masterpieces and of the 'old masters.'" He presents his case with the erudition and wit, elegance and judiciousness we have come to expect from his writings. He does not really argue for his points of view; he points to examples, reminds us of how it is, and makes us aware of possible routes. Sometimes he is rather dogmatic, as in his views on the nature of social science and explanation. When stating his plea for old-fashioned humanism, he sides with the view that the history of art and related disciplines are interpretative, focussed on the individual work (person, event, etc.), and evaluative, in contrast to the social sciences, which are presented as explanatory, interested in theory-building and law-finding, and objective in some sense. Following Karl Popper, he proposes that all scientific explanations conform to the law-subsuming pattern, and goes on to suggest that such laws play a role, albeit a relatively uninteresting one, also in the humanities. As an example, he suggests the law that "all cultural products have precedents." The suggestion is interesting, not least because it shows a lack of awareness of the difference between empirical and a priori statements, which is noticeable also in his other writings. (What would a falsification of the proposed law be like?)

Good essays raise more questions than they answer. Gombrich's *Art History and the Social Sciences* certainly is a good essay. It is an excellent starting-point for reflection on the nature of the humanities. The editor of the Danish version has also taken the opportunity to add a brief introduction and some more footnotes and illustrations to the text, which should help to make it more accessible to students.

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