

Ernst Gombrich on the knowledge, theory and analysis of art

Preface

Paolo Fabbri and Tiziana Migliore

This collection has arisen from a colloquium organised in Venice by ISLaV (the International Semiotic Laboratory in Venice), and the PhD Program in History and Theory of the Arts at the School for Advanced Studies of Venice. Both worked in collaboration with the PhD Program in Visual Studies of Siena University (SUM).¹

The aim was to investigate some specific issues among the many activities and interests of Ernst Gombrich, in order to focus on epistemological aspects of his theory of the image, distinguishing it from Erwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg's approaches to art history. Above all, the colloquium considered the relations between Ernst Gombrich, Karl Bühler and Karl Popper, and analysed the development of a theory of artistic communication, with particular regard to Visual Linguistics.

Gombrich's exchanges with a variety of critics concerning the psychology of perception led him to a productive convergence of iconology and semiotics. This can be seen in the research pursued by the Viennese scholar, since *Art and Illusion* (1959), and today witnessed by the internet Gombrich Archive, edited by Richard Woodfield (www.gombrich.co.uk). Needless to say, this fruitful convergence doesn't align with the tradition behind Norman Bryson's theory or with any other tradition which understands semiotics as something still labouring under an 'iconic' function for pictures. That is a harmful *vulgata*, regrettably widespread in Anglo-Saxon countries. Instead, Gombrich's line of thought is in harmony with Greimas's school of semiotics, which started from French structuralism and has far exceeded referentialist accounts to develop a method of analyzing signification processes, including those of pictures.

Gombrich's key insight concerned the traditional ability by which artists have created, through visual devices, a universe of meaningful illusions. Works of art create their illusions through the construction of an appropriate visual language (*Kunstsprache*). Together with the psychoanalytical approach instigated by Ernst Kris, these are the theoretical assumptions that led Gombrich towards — i) a semiotic method of describing pictures, different from formalistic or impressionist interpretations, and ii) a valorisation of the relation between the artistic image and the experience of the viewer.

¹ I saperi di Ernst Gombrich: Teoria del visibile e analisi dell'arte, Venice, March 2009
[<http://gombricharchive.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/showcom34.pdf> accessed 24.10.2011]

The essays available here ponder, in particular: Gombrich's *modus operandi* for being a semiotician – what we can discover and learn, what we have to overcome and go beyond (Paolo Fabbri); the problems involved in articulating a relationship between sematology and the iconological analysis of the image (Richard Woodfield); Gombrich's choice of a rational approach to interpretation, centered on discussion, comparison and sharing (Giuseppe Barbieri); the debate over finding stable meanings in art history, through the representation of bridges in painting, for instance (Omar Calabrese); his attention to mythology, as a way of investigating variations on a theme, when paintings differ from literary sources (Lucia Corrain); the cultural meaning he is able to attribute to the matter of psychoanalysis (Stefano Ferrari); his deep researches on physiognomic perception, useful for describing emotional design, applied to the expressive form given to objects of everyday-use (Patrizia Magli); his critical relationship to Aby Warburg, summed up in his re-composition of Warburg's unedited materials (Katia Mazzucco) and finally, the symptoms of an artwork according to Gombrich, as opposed to other forms of communication: the boundaries between a 'discovery' and a mere 'invention', in the meanings he gave to those terms (Tiziana Migliore). Some of the papers have been presented, in translation, in their original form and others have been reworked.

The authors involved and their respective disciplines share a common ground: an interest in explanation as a scientific matter. As Gombrich said himself, in history we record; in science we try to explain events,² to develop our understanding. That is the quest.

² Ernst Gombrich, 'An autobiographical sketch', in Richard Woodfield, ed., *The Essential Gombrich*, London, 1996, 34-35.