

# The importance of being Ernst: A reassessment of E.H. Gombrich's relationship with psychoanalysis

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## Introduction – discussing myth

Ernst Gombrich is unquestionably a cultural giant of the twentieth century, whose prolific career spans seventy years of scholarship. The sheer wealth of work he produced presents both a rich intellectual legacy, and a methodological challenge. His official bibliography rivals *Norm and Form* in length. Yet the majority of readers, commentators and critics know Gombrich through relatively narrow material. However important *The Story of Art* and *Art and Illusion* are, they comprise merely a fraction of Gombrich's corpus. Each seminal text he produced was preceded by hundreds of versions and revisions in the form of lectures and articles, and each was continually re-evaluated and developed after initial publication. One could say that limited reading of a scholar as paradigmatic as Gombrich is inevitable, but this is an attitude that exposes the fault lines in methodological rigour.

The question arises, then, of whether twenty-first century scholars apply the same contextual and socio-historical meticulousness, with which they approach artists and objects, to the study of art historians. The more a scholar is read, the more his or her ideas are – sometimes imperceptibly – distilled, until these ideas are in danger of becoming a set of soundbites which preclude the existence of doubt or complexity in the scholar's work. This reductive interpretation must be resisted, to avoid misconception and myth building around a historian's *oeuvre*.

This study hopes to challenge one particular assumption made about E.H.Gombrich's theoretical position and academic influences: his relationship with psychoanalysis. It aims to problematise the commonly-held belief<sup>1</sup> that Gombrich rejected and mistrusted psychoanalysis as a discipline, and that it had no influence on his art historical work. Gombrich's relationship with psychoanalysis is worth exploring carefully because by problematising and questioning his work, our understanding of its impact cannot fail to be enriched.

The reductive interpretation to which I perceive Gombrich to have been subject posthumously is particularly evident in one area more popularly engaged with than psychoanalysis – modern (ie. twentieth century) art. Gombrich is infamous

<sup>1</sup> Statements attesting to this, from Richard Gombrich and Anna Wolff, appear later in this article.

for his dislike of modernism, but few people who regurgitate this 'fact' really explore his writing on the subject. Challenging this myth will act as a foil to the exploration of the misconceptions surrounding his relationship with psychoanalysis, and make our task of rehabilitating psychoanalysis into the wealth of Gombrich's influences appear possible.

An obituary for Gombrich, written by Michael Kimmelman in the *New York Times* asserts, 'his discomfort with modernism was undeniable, and it had partly to do with his disdain for novelty for its own sake. The modern era, he said, was unlike previous eras because it was ready to embrace whatever was new'.<sup>2</sup> The power of the reductive is evident. In this obituary – a public testimony to his exceptional life – Gombrich is immortalised in terms of a myth. Gombrich himself would surely have disputed this simplification of his extensive writing on modernist ideology; in *A Lifelong Interest: Conversations on Art and Science with Didier Eribon* he admits, 'I am very critical of the ideology of modern art, that is, of the cult of progress and the *avant garde* which I have frequently analysed and discussed in my chapters on Hegel'.<sup>3</sup> However, he goes on to say:

How could an art historian fail to be interested in the transformations of art in the twentieth century? [...] Just as I can admire artists of the past whose ideology I do not share, I am also very ready to admit that artists of enormous talent lived in our century.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the simplified summary fails to tell the whole story. Kimmelman's claim that modern art was something 'he stubbornly declined to understand'<sup>5</sup> does an injustice to the tenacity with which Gombrich pursued answers, as this study will illustrate.

Just as Gombrich's academic response to modernism has been distorted by the tunnel-vision of reviewers, there exists also the prevailing assumption that psychoanalysis as a field never interested – indeed, actively deterred – Gombrich. All emphasis has been placed, both during his lifetime and posthumously, on his keen interest in cognitive psychological processes of visual perception. Psychoanalysis as an influence has been almost entirely disregarded.

Personal contacts attest to Gombrich's presumed discomfort with psychoanalysis. Anna Wolff, the daughter of Ernst Kris (1900-1957) – Gombrich's close mentor and friend – also recalls that, 'psychoanalysis did not interest Gombrich. He had very little use for it'.<sup>6</sup> Richard Gombrich, Ernst's son, believes:

He just thought it [psychoanalysis] was wrong. He just thought it wasn't true. [...] My father would have thought it totally pointless to ask about Ansel

2 Michael Kimmelman, 'Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich', *The New York Times*, 7 November 2001.

3 Ernst Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest: Conversations on Art and Science with Didier Eribon*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993, 118.

4 Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest*, 118.

5 Kimmelman, 'Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich', *The New York Times*, 7 November 2001.

6 Anna Wolff, conversation with the author, 26 July 2010.

Adams' sexual thoughts or anything. That wasn't what he thought was interesting.<sup>7</sup>

Richard Gombrich is right, Gombrich Sr would probably not have found it productive to speculate upon the psychosexual state of the artist, but that should not preclude other elements of psychoanalysis – a multi-faceted discipline – from offering him other food for thought.

Richard Gombrich collates psychoanalysis purely with the sexual, Oedipal issues he believes to define it. In this sense psychoanalysis has also been subject to a reductive definition process. The human desire to comprehend dense theory leads, naturally, to its increasing simplification. Complex psychoanalytic ideas have been – over the course of a century – distilled into nuggets of theory that are made to stand for a broader, largely unexplored whole. Freudian psychoanalysis is today almost uniformly associated with the Oedipal complex, psychosexual development and dreams; while the important evolution of these ideas by others after Freud is rarely considered at all. Today's young scholar, steeped in poststructuralist discourse a generation after the Linguistic Turn, sees Lacanian psychoanalysis as the credible and relevant younger brother of the Viennese old-school tradition. In Gombrich's *oeuvre*, psychoanalysis is perceived as the distant cousin of psychology-proper, an embarrassing shadow that obscures the truths of psychological perception he revealed in his work.

There are a number of published instances where Gombrich has criticised elements of psychoanalytic method. These are often cited as evidence for his dismissal of the field:

Try as we may, we historians just cannot raise the dead and put them on your couch. It is a commonplace that there is no substitute for the psychoanalytic interview. Such attempts as have been made, therefore, to tiptoe across the chasm of centuries on a fragile rope made of stray information can never be more than a *jeu d'esprit*, even if the performance is as dazzling as Freud's *Leonardo*.<sup>8</sup>

Gombrich's characterisation of psychoanalysis and art history as connected by 'a fragile rope made of stray information' is a strong critique to make of the application of psychoanalytic formulations to art – especially in a room full of psychoanalysts.<sup>9</sup> However, given that the quotation is from his lecture *Psychoanalysis and the History of Art*, read to the British Psycho-Analytical Society in 1953, no matter how apparently negative his comment appears, Gombrich's engagement with the field is evident in the lecture's title. Thus, like Gombrich's view of modernism, words can be misappropriated when isolated from context, and require qualification. The 'chasm of centuries' to which Gombrich refers is that of time; his wariness concerns the

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gombrich, conversation with the author, 30 October 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Gombrich, 'Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art', in *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, London: Phaidon Press, 1963, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Gombrich's *Ernest Jones Lecture 'Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art'* was read before the British Psycho-Analytical Society in November 1953.

presumption that twentieth century people can ever truly define the emotional states of fifteenth century people, whose own urges and feelings may have been unconscious. Gombrich elaborates on this in *A Lifelong Interest*: 'I do not say that psychoanalysts are always wrong. But their notion of 'overdetermination' is very problematic. When an artist painted a picture for somebody he would not tell him: "It means this and this and this"'.<sup>10</sup> Just as the ideology of modernism – and the potential dangers therein – constitute the specific source of Gombrich's criticism of twentieth-century art, the strongest foundation for his criticism of psychoanalysis lies in its *methodology*. As Richard Gombrich explains, 'The fundamental objection – because my father's other great friend was Karl Popper – was that they [psychoanalytic beliefs] were unfalsifiable, which meant that they, by definition, were not scientific'.<sup>11</sup> Gombrich himself, followed by numerous scholarly commentators, notes this debt to Popper.<sup>12</sup> Jan Bakos does so as an explanation for the development of Gombrich's scepticism of Riegl's *Stilfragen*. Gombrich's doubts about Riegl's evolutionist view of how patterns developed were first voiced while studying under Julius von Schlosser at the University of Vienna. According to Bakos, this early "'doubting Thomas" position found its philosophical formulation in K.R. Popper's "critical rationalism"'.<sup>13</sup>

As Bakos asserts, Gombrich was a man who prized methodological rigour, for whom historiographic method was crucial; Gombrich inherited and developed from his Vienna School training the desire to make art history, if not a science (he ultimately knew this was not possible), then 'a branch of history proper'.<sup>14</sup> He recognised the value of methodology for underpinning and regulating the emotional responses one experienced to the stuff of history itself – its art.

While the practical application of psychoanalytic theory to art and artists could evidently be difficult to reconcile with Popperian ideology, there were elements of the discipline that Gombrich found fascinating, and pursued throughout his career. These were concepts that didn't just adhere to his methodology, but actively developed his psychological perspective. As we have established, Gombrich did not believe it was possible for a twentieth century person to claim to understand the emotional states and unconscious urges of a particular artist from the past. But he did believe that by exploring psychoanalytic concepts in terms of the *universal* mental processes involved in making and seeing art, one could better understand the problems that affect artists and beholders in every century.

The object of this study is not to claim that those who knew Gombrich are wrong in their assertions that psychoanalysis was not a major interest of his. The creation and perception of art for him represented mysteries whose understanding remained the driving force behind his prolific career. This study will not attempt to

10 Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest*, 157.

11 Richard Gombrich, conversation with the author, 30 October 2010.

12 See interview with Gombrich: 'What I learned from Karl Popper', in Paul Levinson, ed., *In Pursuit of Truth*, Brighton: Humanities Press, 1982, 203-20. See also the preface to *Art and Illusion*, London: Phaidon Press, 1960, in which Gombrich states his debt to Popper.

13 Jan Bakos, 'The Vienna School's hundred and sixty-eighth graduate: The Vienna School's ideas revised by E.H. Gombrich', in Richard Woodfield, ed., *Gombrich on Art and Psychology*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, 237.

14 Richard Gombrich, conversation with the author, 30 October 2010.

demonstrate that Gombrich clandestinely applied purist Freudian sexual theory to art – he never did. Instead it will explore those other elements of psychoanalytic theory with which Gombrich did engage. Psychoanalytic theory could not be immediately accepted, nor simply discarded. His engagement was not merely occasional, and not necessarily positive – but represented a nuanced and complex exploration of those elements Gombrich believed could help him unravel the mysteries of art-making and -looking. In his words:

This interplay between the artist and the beholder is a factor which is often overlooked. We owe its theoretical formulation from the point of view of psycho-analysis to Ernst Kris, who is my guide and mentor in these things. The connoisseur wants to identify himself with the artist; he must be drawn into the charmed circle and share in his secret. He, too, must become creative under the artist's guidance. To us historians this psycho-analytic insight is so valuable because without it such rapid developments as the one I described would be inexplicable.<sup>15</sup>

Gombrich appreciated that the 'inexplicable' questions of art – why we find something beautiful, or disturbing, or why an artist works as they do – may require a calculated leap of faith within psychology in order to reach their answers. Psychoanalysis was a key element in that search.

### **Forgotten dialogue – a discovery from 1988**

The catalyst for this project was the discovery of a forgotten conference between Gombrich and a leader of British psychoanalysis in 1988. In July 1987 Irma Brenman Pick, the Chairman of the British Psycho-Analytical Society (BPS), wrote to invite Gombrich to take part in a series called 'Dialogues on Contemporary Issues' to be run by the Society during the Summer Term of 1988. This dialogue, entitled *Art and Psychoanalysis*, was recorded on tape, but never published. Its transcript, which I have edited, is published in this Journal as a document. The conversation between Gombrich and Professor Joseph Sandler – the latter a distinguished and eminent Freudian psychoanalyst – represents a meeting of minds: a dialogue between two leaders in the fields of psychoanalysis and the history of art in the twentieth century. Gombrich, a man who must have received numerous requests for lectures and panel discussions at this point in his career (he was almost eighty years old), could easily have turned down the invitation to address the BPS. Yet he chose to accept, making the conference evidence that Gombrich actively and publically engaged with psychoanalysis in later life.

The dialogue is fascinating for a number of reasons. It shows Gombrich to be a man comfortable conversing in psychoanalytic language. He and Sandler discuss the issue of sublimation, as well as regression, fantasy, transference and dreaming. These are related and applied to problems of the history of art, alongside discussion of Van Gogh and Constable, as well as 'the artist' in more universal terms. The

<sup>15</sup> Gombrich, 'Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art', *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse*, 35.

interaction between the men is interesting, because while Sandler appears keen to delve into issues and construct a substantial dialogue, Gombrich is at times evasive. He contributes a great deal to the conversation, but it is evident he came to the meeting with set examples to share, and he often controls the movement of discussion. Early on, Sandler talks about the relationship between 'the genius, on the one hand, of the artist and on the other hand the symbolic significance, the unconscious representation, that finds an allusion in the work of art'. He asks, 'if you have any comments to make?'<sup>16</sup> Gombrich replies, 'Perhaps if you allow me to dodge the question for a moment and go to another subject...' before adding, 'I have warned you Professor Sandler that, having been a Professor of the History of the Classical tradition, I would read a long passage from Cicero, and this is what I am going to inflict on you and the audience'.<sup>17</sup> Later he interrupts a stream of conversation to say 'if I may, because time is short, and I promised myself to bring this matter to our discussion,' and reads 'a beautiful sonnet [by] I.E. Richards'<sup>18</sup> to which Sandler politely responds.

Despite this occasional awkwardness, it is evident the two men have done their homework. Sandler's wife, Anne-Marie Sandler – a distinguished psychoanalyst in her own right – recalls that 'Joe did more work for this meeting than he ever had before. He read everything of Gombrich's work'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Sandler is able to reference Gombrich almost to the line, frequently prefacing statements with '[as] you yourself have written elsewhere...'<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it is clear Gombrich had engaged with the work of his host. Asked a question by a member of the audience, he asks Sandler, 'Would you answer first? I know you have written about sublimation and I remember you saying that learning to ride a bicycle is not sublimation but riding it may be!'<sup>21</sup>

The dialogue is interesting in its own right, but to our study it illustrates three important points about Gombrich's engagement with psychoanalysis. Firstly, that in 1988 Gombrich's knowledge of psychoanalytic theory is extensive enough to allow him to converse in public with a leader in the field. Secondly, that his response is at times ambivalent and he appears to engage selectively, with the elements of analysis he finds most interesting. Thirdly, that he is, by the end of the twentieth century, considered by the world of British psychoanalysis – and its official manifestation, the British Psycho-Analytical Society – enough of an authority in the realm of psychoanalytical art history to speak on the subject. These three points require elucidation, and prompt a return to Gombrich's early career. This should offer illumination, and important contextualisation, of the development of that relationship which in 1988 seems both close and complex.

16 Joseph Sandler, in 'Art and Psychoanalysis', part of the *Dialogues on Contemporary Issues* series hosted by the British Psycho-Analytical Society, 15 June 1988. Transcript published in this journal, December 2012 and edited by Rachel Dedman, 6. (Henceforth *Dialogues*.)

17 *Dialogues*, 6.

18 *Dialogues*, 12.

19 Anne-Marie Sandler, conversation with the author, 6 May 2010.

20 *Dialogues*, 7.

21 *Dialogues*, 18. For Sandler on sublimation and riding a bicycle see Joseph Sandler and Walter Joffe, 'On Skill and Sublimation', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 14, 1966, 335-355.

### **Gombrich's early career: from Vienna to London**

Ernst Gombrich and psychoanalysis share a birthplace: late Habsburg Vienna, in the era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Gombrich, born 1909, grew up in a middle-class family, his father a lawyer and his mother a pianist. Around their family moved a creative circle, although life was not easy, the first World War disrupting their domestic world considerably. On leaving school Gombrich decided to study the History of Art at the University of Vienna, and chose as his teacher Julius von Schlosser, a man for whom he retained a great amount of respect throughout his career, paying him tribute in an obituary. Gombrich was also taught by Emmanuel Loewy, one of Sigmund Freud's most intimate friends, though Gombrich came closest to the tight circle around Freud via his excellent friend, Ernst Kris. Schlosser, Loewy and Kris, giants of art history and psychoanalysis, constitute the three dedicatees of *Art and Illusion*.

Until his early death in 1957, Kris was perhaps the greatest influence on Gombrich in terms of art history, and also psychoanalysis. An art historian-turned-psychoanalyst, Kris was a polymath who bridged these disciplines, and acted as both a source and a filter of the psychoanalytic theory to which Gombrich was exposed. The pair met in 1931 when Gombrich approached Kris at the University of Vienna about a medieval ivory on which he was working. Kris was sceptical of whether Gombrich's research into the object could yield results, and was later sent up in an end-of-term skit in which Gombrich cast him as a figure of *Doubt*. In his official *Tribute* to Kris fifty years later, Gombrich quotes him in their first meeting:

“Why do you want to study the history of art? [...] If your interest is intellectual, you must realize that you have chosen the wrong field. We really know too little about art to make any valid statements. The best our colleagues can do is to escape to some more advanced branch of study; they want to draw on psychology, but really psychology is not yet sufficiently developed to help the art historian”.<sup>22</sup>

Kris was discovering in psychoanalysis new strategies for understanding artistic processes. Looking back on their friendship Gombrich writes, ‘What I learned from him was that one can combine interest in the history of art with interest in more general questions... For me contact with [Ernst Kris] was very important’.<sup>23</sup> Not only did Kris represent an art history informed by psychoanalytic concerns, as a protégé of Freud and a member of his inner-circle, Kris was to become for Gombrich a touchstone of Vienna, once he had left it.

While still in Vienna, Kris and Gombrich began joint research into the project that was to have significant impact on the latter's development as a scholar. Their work was on the psychology and history of caricature – ‘a nearly complete book

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Gombrich quoting Ernst Kris, in ‘Ernst Kris (1900-1957): The Study of Art and the Study of Man’, in Gombrich, *Tributes: Interpreters of our Cultural Tradition*, Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1984, 223.

<sup>23</sup> Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest*, 45.

manuscript [of] two hundred and fifty-four pages<sup>24</sup> – whose research and writing must have constituted a richly formative experience for Gombrich. They began this joint research in 1934; Gombrich was – aged just 25 – embarking on the first book of his career, with a friend and brother-figure a decade his senior.

This collaboration is important because it represents not only Gombrich's entry into art history, but an immersive introduction to a *psychoanalytically-inflected* art history. Gombrich's first experience of writing as a fully-fledged art historian cannot but be coloured by the uniquely psychoanalytical prerogative of the caricature endeavour. This research, undertaken until 1936 (when Gombrich's emigration disrupted work), was crucial in shaping the early development of his lifelong interest in the psychological. The full implications of the caricature project have been underestimated however, because publication of the manuscript was never realised. An article, 'The Principles of Caricature', appeared in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology*<sup>25</sup> in 1938, and a pamphlet entitled *Caricature* was printed by Penguin in 1940, but the expansive, original project never saw the light. Kris and Gombrich's interest in the topic, however, remained undimmed despite wartime disruption. 'During the Second World War they never stopped working on the project, and in the early Cold War years they soon returned to the manuscript'.<sup>26</sup> Their correspondence and reworking of the material continued right into the 1950s, so that the endeavour survives today in four different versions.<sup>27</sup> The unfinished, much extended, caricature work represents two decades of collaboration between Gombrich and Kris. A duet between art historian and psychoanalyst, the project is tribute to their joint intrigue for an issue that intertwined their disciplines: the application of Freud's formulations on the joke to visual material – the understanding of wit in visual terms.

## The caricature project

The extracts of the project that are published give a good sense of the body of research Gombrich and Kris hoped to present in full. In *The Principles of Caricature* the scholars open with the 'startling fact that portrait caricature was not known to the world before the end of the sixteenth century'.<sup>28</sup> The attempt to understand this phenomenon leads to an exploration of caricature as a form of image-magic, tied to

24 Louis Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism: Ernst Kris, E.H. Gombrich and the Politics of Caricature', unpublished manuscript, 2010, 3. I would like to thank Dr Louis Rose for allowing me access to and permission to quote from his book manuscript, *Psychology, Art and Antifascism: Ernst Kris, E.H. Gombrich and the Politics of Caricature*, which considers the implications of the project as a whole.

25 Their appearance in a psychoanalytic journal is important; the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* and the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* were both publications in which Gombrich appeared a number of times throughout his career, publishing reviews, his *Ernest Jones Lecture* and work on caricature.

26 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 4.

27 'The pre-war book manuscript; the abbreviated wartime manuscript probably intended for the Warburg Journal; the outline that incorporated a new emphasis on the psychology of vision; and the outline that gave greater prominence to questions of social psychology', in Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 446.

28 Ernst Gombrich and Ernst Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature' in Ernst Kris, ed., *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, New York: International Universities Press, 1952, 189



beliefs in the transformative power of the portrait. For play with likeness to be licit in society, faith in the magical power of these images must be subsumed by rational understanding of their symbolic quality. As the scholars conclude, 'whenever it is not considered a joke but rather a dangerous practice to distort a man's features, even on paper, caricature as an art cannot develop'.<sup>29</sup>

Caricature, as a psychoanalytic and art historical subject, takes direct inspiration from Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, from 1905. 'Even in his first contribution to the psychology of the comic, Freud proceeded from a...demonstration of the parallels existing between wit and dreams, which he was able to derive from the operation of the primary process',<sup>30</sup> more commonly referred to as the unconscious. Freud's book refers to verbal wit,<sup>31</sup> but Kris and Gombrich made the connection to visual comedy explicit by stating that 'the formal language of caricature, like that of dreams, owes its nature to the operation of the primary process'.<sup>32</sup> From the start, the art historical puzzle of caricature is couched in uniquely psychoanalytic terms, and the Gombrich-Kris project becomes a direct successor of Freudian explorations into wit.

The psychoanalytic issues with which the caricature research grappled presented seeds of problems Gombrich would pursue throughout his career. His lifelong interest in the beholder, for instance, arguably has its roots in the caricature work. In their manuscript Kris and Gombrich write that 'caricature gives direction for seeing, initiates a visual re-interpretation ('Umsehen'). Here we are invited to pass from visual reinterpretation to visual recreation [their underline]'.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the power of the caricature portrait derives not purely from the visual creation of the artist but from the mental picture constructed by each beholder in response to it. The idea of artwork as 'invitation' for the beholder is one Gombrich extended in the *Ernest Jones Lecture*, 1953, already introduced. He writes, 'the connoisseur wants to identify himself with the artist; he must be drawn into the charmed circle and share in his secret. He, too, must become creative under the artist's guidance'.<sup>34</sup> And in the 1988 dialogue with Sandler, Gombrich maintains that 'the act of concentration that mastery requires is one which, in a way, the beholder also should share'.<sup>35</sup> The importance of the beholder's role in looking is probably the most recognisable issue – nascent in the caricature project – with which Gombrich would continue to engage throughout life. Its basis is not inherently psychoanalytic – though its mention of projection makes use of analytical theory – but 'the beholder's share' represents for Gombrich a challenge that intrinsically implicates psychoanalysis. The challenge reaches a zenith in *Art and Illusion*, where his theories of 'making and matching' using schema and correction are fully developed. Gombrich explains how:

29 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 196.

30 Ernst Kris, 'The Psychology of Caricature', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 17 1936, 290.

31 Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious', in J. Strachey, ed., with Anna Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 8, 1905.

32 Kris, 'The Psychology of Caricature', 290.

33 Kris and Gombrich, quotation of their manuscript in Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 245-6. Copyright the Literary Estate of E. H. Gombrich.

34 Gombrich, 'Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art', *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse*, 35

35 *Dialogues*, 10.

Gainsborough's frequently unfinished and rather vague indications are little more than those schemata which serve as a support for our memory images...they are screens onto which the sitter's relatives and friends could project a beloved image.<sup>36</sup>

The role of projection, or as Gombrich details in his dialogue with Sandler, *identification*,<sup>37</sup> with an art-object is crucial for the beholder. In caricature, the element of beholder projection is important not in creating a 'beloved image', but in reconciling distorted likeness with a pre-existing mental image of the subject.

Furthermore, in their manuscript Kris and Gombrich also discuss caricature, as Rose writes, in terms of 'a visual shortcut – a quick, unexpected connection between a familiar likeness and its unfamiliar distortion. Modern psychological theory explained the mechanism of reconfiguration as the "surprising realisation of a similarity in the apparently dissimilar"'.<sup>38</sup> This idea is one Gombrich appears to rework in *Art and Illusion* and *A Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. In the former he states:

"Perception", it has recently been said, "may be regarded as primarily the modification of an anticipation". [...] We notice only when we look *for* something, and we look when our attention is aroused by some disequilibrium, a difference between our expectation and the incoming message.<sup>39</sup>

While caricature turns likeness into unfamiliar distortion, Gombrich here articulates the inverse consequence of the anticipation and expectation involved in looking – namely, that within pattern it is the unexpected detail that snaps the human brain out of generalised looking into conscious regard.

Again it is clear that the caricature project thus provided a catalyst for Gombrich's exploration of perception, and a precedent for examining art historical challenges in psychoanalytic terms. In the manuscript the most central psychoanalytic issues explored were those of the ego, violence, pleasure and – above all – regression. In *The Principles of Caricature* Kris and Gombrich identify caricature 'as a process where – under the influence of aggression – primitive structures are used to ridicule the victim. Thus defined, caricature is 'a psychological mechanism rather than a form of art'<sup>40</sup>. This latent aggression means caricature combines an outlet for violence with 'playful transformation of the likeness'.<sup>41</sup> For this to be a socially acceptable art form the distortion must be considered funny, rather than threatening [see figure 1]. As Rose points out however, even if public caricature can

36 Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon Press, 1962, 169.

37 *Dialogues*, 9.

38 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 209.

39 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 148.

40 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 197.

41 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 192.

be enjoyed within a consciously rational society, 'in the world beyond the artist's workshop there always loom[s] the possibility of violent retrogression'.<sup>42</sup> Kris and Gombrich structure caricature as an art form that appears comical and superficial on the surface, yet which, at a deeper level, is charged with hostility. The pair combine the historical role of caricature – in 'unmasking' truth and poking fun – with the psychoanalytic insight into the function of the unconscious in its creation.

Important for both writers was this belief in caricature as an outlet for aggression, and an invitation to regress. They articulate the way in which the role of the primary process inherent in both verbal and visual wit signifies a mental shift on the part of the artist to a level on which unconscious, and perhaps more primitive, emotions and thoughts can be accessed. This movement is explained as a key facet of the caricature-making process: 'The caricaturist's secret lies in the use he makes of controlled regression. [...] His scribbling style and his blending of shapes evokes childhood pleasures'.<sup>43</sup> Kris and Gombrich complicate this regressive instinct by implying its instability. On the one hand caricature is associated with (childhood) pleasure, representing another reference to Freud:

Freud has shown us – in all play with words, in puns as well as in nonsense talk, there is a renewal of the child's pleasure when it just learns to master language. [...] At bottom caricature, too, renews infantile pleasure. Its simplicity (as Hogarth knew) makes it resemble the scribbling of the child.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, humans retain an intense emotional connection with images – 'the visual image has deeper roots, is more primitive [than language]'<sup>45</sup> – and this means that in moments of stress it is possible to revert to the repressed belief in the magical elements of representational likeness:

The lover who tears up a photograph of his faithless love, the revolutionary who pulls down the statue of a ruler, the angry crowd burning a straw dummy of a hostile leader – all testify to the fact that this belief in the magic power of the image can always regain its power whenever our ego loses some part of its controlling function.<sup>46</sup>

The above – derived from Kris' work on regression in the service of the ego – shows how the caricature project transcended specific concern with cartoons and satirical portraits, in order to explore the eternal power of the image in human culture.

Discussion of the caricature project is intended to contextualise the foundation of Gombrich's engagement with psychoanalysis. It remains the first formal book research he ever undertook, and a project he continued to develop until the late 1950s. The political implications have already been mentioned by Rose: the joint study of portrait caricature 'reactivated the visceral emotional power of images.

42 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 226.

43 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 202.

44 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 197.

45 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 200.

46 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 201.

Here Kris and Gombrich followed both Freud and Warburg in giving primal psychological significance to visual signs'.<sup>47</sup> Gombrich was a young man in the middle of an exciting juncture of scholarship, and one interested in Daumier, Hogarth, caricature, the ego, violence and regression – a uniquely psychoanalytical art history. One can barely reconcile the man Richard Gombrich claimed 'just thought it wasn't true,'<sup>48</sup> and for whom Anna Wolff insisted psychoanalysis was of no interest, with this 25 year-old Gombrich. The caricature project proves that from the earliest stages of his career Gombrich knew that psychoanalysis was not all Oedipal obsession. He did not choose, like Kris, to undertake analysis, become an analyst himself, or to ever engage with psychoanalytic theory for its own sake. From his experience with caricature however, he appreciated the potential value in the application of certain elements of psychoanalysis to the history of art. The caricature project 'offered a model of dynamic integration that approached image-making and creative experimentation as evolving processes moved by intersecting and conflicting currents from art, psychology, and politics'.<sup>49</sup> It was with this academic model in mind that Gombrich moved to London in 1936.

In his emigration, Gombrich became for Kris representative of a potential bridge between the schools of discipline within which Kris operated: Freud in Vienna, and Warburg in London. It was Kris who, before the Anschluss, strongly pressed Gombrich to move to the Warburg Institute. In a letter to the Director, Fritz Saxl, Kris writes, 'You know how my work, divided between art history and psychoanalysis, converges towards a place of connection...'<sup>50</sup> This connection Louis Rose perceives to be situated in Gombrich:

Kris reemphasised to Saxl that he intended to advance collaboration between the Freudian movement and the Warburg school along several fronts – most immediately through the caricature project – and hoped to draw members of the international psychoanalytic movement closer to the Warburg Institute.<sup>51</sup>

On the cusp of a move to London, Gombrich represented – in the eyes of his mentor – a figure who might at that time 'combine Warburgian and Freudian projects'.<sup>52</sup> Whether or not Gombrich achieved or fulfilled this is perhaps matter for a different debate. The point of highlighting it here is to contextualise the ways in which Gombrich's academic life in Vienna was psychoanalytically rich; a richness his emigration was not intended to lessen, but to develop, through the continuing work on caricature.

Gombrich took up a post at the Warburg Institute and began compiling a biography of Aby Warburg. Not long after his arrival he was drafted into the BBC Monitoring Service, to intercept, decipher and translate Nazi broadcasts. This

47 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 215.

48 Richard Gombrich, conversation with the author, 30 October 2010.

49 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 264.

50 Kris-Saxl correspondence, 7 December 1934. Translation by L. Rose from the document in the possession of the Warburg Institute, London. With permission to cite from the Estate of E. Kris.

51 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 138.

52 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 130.

experience offered him alternative terms in which to articulate his burgeoning theory of schema and correction. In *Some Axioms, Musings and Hints on Hearing* he writes, 'the mechanism of "projection" plays a major part in hearing',<sup>53</sup> applying the necessity of projection for the beholder confronted with caricature, to the beholder confronted with a fuzzy foreign broadcast:

A configuration of sounds evokes some vague association of words and we start projecting them into the medley. If then the sense does not fit we must beware. [...] Rather than pressing the data of sound into our pet projection, we must discard the projection and start again.<sup>54</sup>

This making and matching process would continue to develop until the publication of *Art and Illusion* in 1960. While psychoanalytic ideas simmered away quietly in his academic work on perception, Gombrich became a powerful presence at the Warburg Institute, assuming the role of Director in 1959. It was in the 1950s that Gombrich came to engage with psychoanalysis on an important social and symbolic level, when he became member of a private group of psychoanalysts about which very little has been written.

### **The Imago Group**

Towards the end of the dialogue with Sandler with which we began, Gombrich reveals something of fundamental interest:

I was part of a group called *The Image Group*, which met regularly, and often in Winnicott's home. I enjoyed that very much, Adrian Stokes was of that group, Anton Ehrenzweig was, and a number of other people.<sup>55</sup>

Archival research at the Tate Gallery and Warburg Institute reveals that, founded by Adrian Stokes and Robert Still c.1953, the *Image Group* – as Gombrich remembers it – was actually called the Imago Group.<sup>56</sup> Still was a composer, Stokes an art critic, and were both devotees of Kleinian psychoanalysis. Their aim was to establish 'a group of analysts and non-analysts who met to use psychoanalytic ideas to illuminate non-clinical dimensions of life'.<sup>57</sup> A meeting of psychoanalysts seems an unlikely place to find an art historian who 'just thought psychoanalysis was wrong'.<sup>58</sup> But as we are coming to understand, Gombrich had more time for psychoanalysis than has been previously appreciated. Indeed, Richard Read writes that Imago Group 'membership

53 Ernst Gombrich, 'Some Axioms, Musings and Hints on Hearing' in O. Renier and V. Rubinstein, eds, *Assigned to Listen: The Evesham Experience 1939-43*, London: B.B.C. External Services, 1986, 75-79.

54 Gombrich, 'Some Axioms, Musings and Hints on Hearing', 77.

55 *Dialogues*, 25.

56 Stokes-Gombrich correspondence, 4 January 1955.

57 S.W. Nichol森, *Adrian Stokes on Carving, Modeling, and Stone*, (2003) Website URL: [http://home.earthlink.net/~snichol森/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/Adrian\\_Stokes\\_and\\_Stone-Carving.doc](http://home.earthlink.net/~snichol森/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/Adrian_Stokes_and_Stone-Carving.doc) Viewed: 6 February 2011.

58 Richard Gombrich, conversation with the author, 30 October 2010.

was usually restricted to analysands, thus an exception is being made for Gombrich'.<sup>59</sup> Betty Joseph, an analyst who attended a couple of Imago Group meetings in the 1950s, also recalls that 'people only went if they had been in analysis',<sup>60</sup> but Gombrich certainly never had been.

The Group was resolutely private and unofficial, and while its history remains sketchy, research has allowed me to piece together a list of members from across the psychoanalytic community. Alongside Stokes and Still, members included Kleinian analysts and analysands Roger Money-Kyrle, Donald Meltzer and Wilfred Bion; Freudians Anton Ehrenzweig, John Wisdom and Richard Wollheim, the Middle-Group analyst Eva Rosenfeld, and artist Marion Milner.<sup>61</sup> Gombrich's involvement positions him socially within a circle of the leaders of psychoanalysis in mid-twentieth century Britain.

The correspondence between Gombrich and Stokes, held in the Gombrich Archive at the Warburg Institute, sheds light on both the society's activity and Gombrich's involvement.<sup>62</sup> In 1955, Stokes writes on three occasions with reference to Gombrich's potential membership:

About the Imago Group. The intention is to study the broader psycho-analytic 'applications'. Not only your scholarship and wide interests but your common sense would be a great asset. The question is what it would give you. You would hear, for what it's worth, a great deal of theoretical bickering, on many subjects.<sup>63</sup>

In another letter Stokes again pursues the subject:

It was such a tremendous help to the meeting the other night that you were there that I cannot resist writing to ask if you would be so very good as to come regularly as a member. Not that the papers read are usually as attractive as Mrs Rosenfeld's, & there are bound to be boring evenings. Even so, since you are deeply interested in analysis, you may find it some slight stimulus to your own thinking while we, for our part, would have great benefit.<sup>64</sup>

Gombrich's 'deep interest' in psychoanalysis appears to have been piqued by the invitation, as his diaries suggest he became a regular member from 1955 until at least

59 Richard Read, 'Art Criticism Versus Art History: The Letters and Works of Adrian Stokes and E. H. Gombrich', *Art History*, 16:4, December 1993, 539.

60 Betty Joseph, conversation with the author, 11 February 2011.

61 Gombrich's above claim that Winnicott was present appears to be a mismemory, explored in this article later.

62 These letters are published as an appendix to Richard Read, 'Art Criticism Versus Art History: The Letters and Works of Adrian Stokes and E. H. Gombrich', *Art History*, 16:4, December 1993.

63 Stokes-Gombrich correspondence, 26 October 1955, Gombrich Archive, Warburg Institute. Copyright the Literary Estate of E. H. Gombrich.

64 Stokes-Gombrich correspondence, 14 October 1955, Gombrich Archive, Warburg Institute. Copyright the Literary Estate of E. H. Gombrich.

1961<sup>65</sup>, with gaps in attendance for trips abroad. Stokes' initial invitation tells us that – like the Sandler dialogue in 1988 – by 1955 Gombrich was considered friendly enough with psychoanalysis to be induced to join the monthly meetings of a group of analysts. It is his acceptance, however, that makes his involvement truly intriguing.

Gombrich's explicit and conscious motivation for joining the group appears straightforward; presumably he found the idea of discussing the application of psychoanalysis to other aspects of culture stimulating – as is clear from his work with Kris – and the company interesting. Though he and Stokes could clash in opinion – once heatedly following a paper Stokes read on Romanesque architecture<sup>66</sup> – Gombrich spoke highly of those in the group, particularly Anton Ehrenzweig: 'an immensely nice man... Very wrong-headed, but that is a different matter'.<sup>67</sup>

However, there may also have existed a number of subconscious, less rational, motivations behind Gombrich's engagement with the Group which, while remaining speculative, hint at the broader implications of his membership. In 1988 and 1999, Gombrich refers to Imago as 'the Image Group' in interviews. Asked in the latter why it was so-called, he answers, 'Because it was interested in images!'<sup>68</sup> This appears, however, to be a mismemory, for the few papers I have found that were read to the group are not particularly preoccupied with images. They range from the role of the father in psychoanalytic theory<sup>69</sup>, to megalomania<sup>70</sup>, Gustav Mahler<sup>71</sup> and pre-historic cave painting.<sup>72</sup> What was Gombrich – a man whom we know was not a devotee of orthodox theory – doing going regularly to a room full of psychoanalysts? His position as a relative outsider, coupled with his hazy memory of the Group's real name and activity, suggests it offered engagement with something that transcended the theoretical psychoanalytic content of the meetings themselves.

The theory that dominated the group was Kleinian, a branch of psychoanalysis that had broken off from, but owed a great deal to, original Freudian formulations. The Group's culture, as with all psychoanalysis, stemmed back to Freud. Yet 'Freud' in the context of the Imago Group represents more than simply

65 Cross-referencing Stokes' correspondence with Gombrich's diaries highlights the dates of the first Imago Group meetings Gombrich must have attended (after Stokes' letter of 14 October). 8 November and 6 December, 1955, contain an appointment at R. Money-Kyrle's address. Stokes says Money-Kyrle was a frequent host of the Group. Those days are both Tuesdays, suggesting a first-Tuesday-of-the-month pattern exists for the society's meetings. In 1956, they appear to move to Wednesdays, etc. In a letter of 1961 Stokes writes to counter criticism Gombrich had given of a paper Stokes had read in a meeting, suggesting Gombrich was still part of the Imago group at that time, and had been for 5 years.

66 Read, 'Art Criticism Versus Art History', 539.

67 Interview with Ernst Gombrich, 1999, part of the 'National Life Story Collection: Artists' Lives', in the British Library's Archival Sound Recordings.

68 Interview with Gombrich, 'National Life Story Collection'.

69 John O. Wisdom, 'The Role of the Father in the Mind of Parents, in Psychoanalytic Theory and in the Life of the Infant', *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 3, 1976, 231-139.

70 Roger Money-Kyrle, 'Megalomania', *American Imago*, 22, 1965, 142-154.

71 Robert Still, 'Gustav Mahler and Psychoanalysis', *American Imago*, 17, 1960, 217-240.

72 In his article, 'Megalomania', in the *American Imago*, 22, 1965, Roger Money-Kyrle attaches a footnote to the title. It reads: 'The title and to a great extent the theme of this paper was suggested to me by a phrase in Dr. D. Meltzer's paper on prehistoric cave paintings, delivered to the Imago Group, London, in the Spring of 1962. The present paper was read to the same group in the Spring of 1963'.

psychoanalytic thought. In Gombrich's paper *Art History and Psychology in Vienna Fifty Years Ago*,<sup>73</sup> 1983, the work of 'my revered teacher Schlosser', 'Loewy, that infinitely lovable scholar' and 'Ernst Kris whom I value so highly', is tied together. These men, to whom Gombrich dedicates *Art and Illusion*, are positioned by Gombrich – along with Freud – as representing the epicentre of European thought in the worlds of art history and psychology in the early twentieth century. What unites them all is their Viennese origin. For Gombrich, Freud and the other scholars he revered remained touchstones to the world whence he came, which was ultimately destroyed. Naim Attallah asks Gombrich in an interview of 1994, 'How important were the place of your birth and the culture of your upbringing in determining the pattern of your life?' Gombrich answers: 'Immensely important. I'm still an Austrian, of course, I am a product of the Viennese middle class and culture, and I have never tried to conceal this'.<sup>74</sup> While Gombrich was Viennese by nationality, arguably every member of the Imago Group was indirectly – but inescapably – 'Viennese' in cultural terms, through the psychoanalytic heritage they had adopted. Anton Ehrenzweig was from Vienna, and Eva Rosenfeld moved there from Berlin, but even Roger Money-Kyrle, a British analyst, spent four years in the city from 1919, earning his PhD and undergoing analysis with Freud. Imago's scholarship thus arguably offered symbolic engagement with the cultural moment at the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of which psychoanalysis, and Gombrich himself, were products. The death of Ernst Kris in 1957 must have affected Gombrich deeply and the connection with the Group perhaps in part replaced the kinds of conversations and debates he conducted with his mentor. The profoundly Freudian associations with the name Imago augment the connection with Vienna, and particularly with Kris, who from 1933 edited the journal *Imago* Freud himself had established.

Betty Joseph was a young analyst in the years in which the Group operated, and today perceives herself as having been on the periphery of the Group's activity. She remarks that, 'the fact that you could have membership is new to me',<sup>75</sup> suggesting that there existed quite a large pool of analysts who attended meetings occasionally, but – as the Stokes-Gombrich correspondence proves – there were a select number at the heart of the Group who made up its permanent 'members'. For Gombrich to be accepted by and assimilated into this community of psychoanalysts, without being one of them, must have been an extremely empowering experience.

Gombrich's mismemories of the Group extend beyond its name. In the Sandler dialogue of 1988 he recalls Donald Winnicott as a regular host,<sup>76</sup> but there is no evidence of Winnicott ever attending, while Roger Money-Kyrle's house was the most frequent meeting-place. It suggests that, in Gombrich's mind by the 1980s, 'the *Image Group*' was all but an abstraction. Winnicott – as an heir to Kleinian succession

73 Ernst Gombrich, 'Art History and Psychology in Vienna Fifty Years Ago', read at the XXVth *International Congress for the History of Art*, Vienna, September 1983. From Gombrich Archive Online. Viewed: 21 February 2011. URL: <http://www.gombrich.co.uk/showdoc.php?id=22>

74 'Interview with Ernst Gombrich', in Naim Attallah, ed., *Speaking for the Oldie*, London, 1994. From Naim Attallah Online. Viewed: 3 February 2011.

URL: <http://quartetbooks.wordpress.com/2010/06/16/no-longer-with-us-ernst-gombrich/>

75 Betty Joseph, conversation with the author, 11 February 2011.

76 *Dialogues*, 25.



in Britain – existed conceptually within Gombrich's memories of Imago, whether or not he was ever actually present. In 1999, Gombrich even refers to the cryptic Imago member 'Medleycott'<sup>77</sup> – a slip which appears to amalgamate (make a 'medley' of) 'Money-Kyrle' and 'Winnicott'. Speaking thirty years after his involvement, Gombrich's memories construct a part-factual, part-fictional Imago that indiscriminately unites the major figures in psychoanalysis of the 1950s and 1960s. For Gombrich the Imago Group was not defined by its members, but presented a space in which his interest in the psychology of images was validated by the inheritors of Freudian succession in London.

### Cicero and psychoanalysis

So far it is clear that Gombrich experienced an introduction to psychoanalytically-inflected art history in Vienna; developed thoughts on perception with Kris as well as during the War, and began to interact socially and intellectually with a circle of psychoanalysts in London in the 1950s. It was about this time – the 1950s and 1960s – that his concerns with psychoanalysis as a possible tool for the understanding of art were channelled and explored in his writing. One could, at this juncture, lay before the reader every psychoanalytically-related piece of writing Gombrich completed after his work on caricature. These might include *Freud's Aesthetics* or *Seeking a Key to Leonardo*,<sup>78</sup> *Verbal Wit as a Paradigm of Art: the Aesthetic Theories of Sigmund Freud*.<sup>79</sup> One might cite Gombrich's *Tribute to Anna Freud*,<sup>80</sup> his *Eighth Annual Freud Memorial Lecture: Expression and Communication in Art* for the Philadelphia Association for Psychoanalysis,<sup>81</sup> 1961, or discuss the significance of the inclusion of his *Psychoanalysis and the History of Art* lecture in texts such as *Sigmund Freud: On Creativity and the Unconscious*.<sup>82</sup> A search for Gombrich's name on the digital archive Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP Web), which contains hundreds of thousands of psychoanalytic texts, yields 158 results. These comprise reviews of his ideas, reference to his writings and citations of his work. Not only does Gombrich grapple with psychoanalysis, but the psychoanalytic world grapples with Gombrich.

Instead of presenting a swathe of material from isolated instances, the next section will follow the development of Gombrich's exploration and adaptation of psychoanalytic theory in a number of interconnected contexts. The six sources highlighted range from 1953 to 2002, and are united by one common denominator: a quotation.

For it is hard to say why exactly it is that the things which most strongly gratify our senses and excite them most vigorously at their first appearance,

77 Interview with Gombrich, 'National Life Story Collection'.

78 Both found in Ernst Gombrich, Richard Woodfield, ed., *Reflections on the History of Art*, Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1987.

79 Found in Gombrich, *Tributes*.

80 Found in M.W. Piers, ed., *Anna Freud Remembered*, Chicago: Erikson, 1983.

81 See 'News and Proceedings of Affiliate Societies and Institutes', *Bulletin of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 17, 1961, 745-754.

82 B. Nelson, ed., *Sigmund Freud: On Creativity and the Unconscious*, New York: Harper, 1958.

are the ones from which we are most speedily estranged by a feeling of disgust and satiety. How much more brilliant, as a rule, in beauty and variety of colouring, are the contents of new pictures than those of old ones! and nevertheless the new ones, though they captivated us at first sight, later on fail to give us pleasure [...] In singing, how much more delightful and charming are trills and flourishes than notes firmly held! and yet the former meet with protest not only from persons of severe taste but, if used *too* often, even from the general public. This may be observed in the case of the rest of the senses – that perfumes compounded with an extremely sweet and penetrating scent do not give us pleasure for so long as those that are moderately fragrant...and that in touch itself there are degrees of softness and smoothness. Taste is the most voluptuous of all the senses and more sensitive to sweetness than the rest, yet how quickly even it is likely to reject anything extremely sweet! Who can go on taking a sweet drink or sweet food for a long time? whereas in both classes things that pleasurably affect the sense in a moderate degree most easily escape causing satiety. Thus in all things the greatest pleasures are only narrowly separated from disgust which makes this less surprising in the case of language.<sup>83</sup>

This passage, from Cicero's *De Oratore*, is one that fascinated Gombrich. It is this quotation that Gombrich warned Sandler he would 'inflict' on the audience of the British Psycho-Analytical Society, but its use went back much further than 1988. 'It sums up something which I hinted at in my *Ernest Jones Lecture*, to which you so kindly alluded. But in fact I did not know at the time that Cicero had put it much better than I had...'<sup>84</sup> The excerpt recurs time and again in Gombrich's writing. It is published in *The Debate on Primitivism in Ancient Rhetoric*,<sup>85</sup> 1966; and included in *Primitive and its Value in Art*,<sup>86</sup> read aloud on BBC Radio in 1979. It is discussed again in *A Lifelong Interest: Conversations on Art and Science with Didier Eribon*,<sup>87</sup> of 1993, and it comprises the opening quote to the preface of *Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art*,<sup>88</sup> 2002. Unwittingly prefigured in *Psychoanalysis and the History of Art*, 1953, the contexts in which the passage subsequently appears are thus defined by their inherently psychoanalytic concern. A consideration of these will expose the ways in which Gombrich worked to understand the roles regression and gratification play in determining taste, as part of the broader insights and challenges he believed psychoanalysis to offer art history.

In his *Ernest Jones Lecture, Art and Psychoanalysis*, 1953, Gombrich prefaces his discussion of taste with:

83 Cicero, *De Oratore*, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 1940.

84 *Dialogues*, 6.

85 Ernst Gombrich, 'The Debate on Primitivism in Ancient Rhetoric', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29, 1966.

86 Ernst Gombrich, 'The Primitive and its Value in Art': 1. 'The Dread of Corruption'; 2. 'The Turn of the Tide'; 3. 'The Priority of Pattern'; 4. 'The Tree of Knowledge', *The Listener*, 101 1979, hereafter cited from Richard Woodfield, ed., *The Essential Gombrich*, London: Phaidon Press, 1996.

87 Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest*.

88 Ernst Gombrich, *Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002.

The question What is wrong with perfection?—has a greater chance of being answered by psycho-analytic thought than...the question of what is right with perfection. Why do we really abuse the masterpieces of Bouguereau and his school as slick and perhaps revolting? I suspect that when we call such pictures...insincere, for instance, or untruthful, we are talking nonsense. We screen behind a moral judgement which is quite inapplicable.<sup>89</sup>

The issue he addresses is *why* certain images cause a reaction in the viewer that is uncomfortable – a discomfort not caused by horrific or traumatic subject matter – but by the sensation of them being ‘syrupy, saccharine, cloying’.<sup>90</sup> He asks, why does the technical ‘perfection’ of Bouguereau [figure 2] trouble us? Gombrich then proposes an answer he finds later to have been articulated by Cicero: ‘oral gratification as a genetic model for aesthetic pleasure’.<sup>91</sup> By basing aesthetic judgment on biological experience, those ‘moral judgments’ he believes to obscure taste – adjectives such as ‘insincere, or untruthful’ – cannot apply. In the lecture, Gombrich begins to construct a formula for taste that both maintains its subjectivity, and finds roots in common experience – that of oral sensation:

For it is here [ie. in eating] that we learn first that too much of a good thing is repellent. Too much fat, too much sweetness, too much softness—all the qualities, that is, that have an immediate biological appeal—also produce these reaction formations which originally serve as a warning signal to the human animal not to over-indulge. [...] I mean that we also develop it as a defence mechanism against attempts to seduce us. We find repellent what yields too obvious, too childish gratification. It invites regression and we feel not secure enough to yield. [...] My impression is that such reaction increases with increasing age and civilization. The child is proverbially fond of sweets and toffees, and so is the primitive, with his Turkish delight and an amount of fat meat that turns a European stomach. We prefer something less obvious, less yielding’.<sup>92</sup>

Gombrich here connects sophistication with ‘less obvious’, more complex experience, and primitivity with the easier gratification undiluted sweetness offers. There seems to exist a paradox in this however, which Gombrich begins to develop in the Spencer Trask Lectures he wrote in 1961, which would be published as *The Primitive and its Value in Art*.<sup>93</sup> In these four essays, Gombrich complicates the idea of sophisticated versus primitive taste, by pointing out that the more complex visual stimulus the sophisticate requires is often to be found in the realm of the primitive itself. ‘Some people get tired of beauty, and it is this moment of fatigue that makes them open to

89 Gombrich, ‘Psychoanalysis and the History of Art’, 407.

90 Gombrich, ‘Psychoanalysis and the History of Art’, 407.

91 Gombrich, ‘Psychoanalysis and the History of Art’, 407.

92 Gombrich, ‘Psychoanalysis and the History of Art’, 407.

93 These were written and developed in 1961, as the Spencer Trask Lectures, Princeton, and published in *The Listener*, 1979.

alternatives such as the rough sublimity of early art'.<sup>94</sup> He uses the example of Jacob Epstein's expressive carving *Cursed Be The Day Wherein I was Born*, 1913-14, and the work of Henry Moore [figure 3], 'whose keen awareness of tradition has prompted him to grope in his works for the aura of mystery that surrounds the strange and weathered idols of a lost world'.<sup>95</sup>

There exists a problematic here that Gombrich does not explore explicitly. He states that it is possible to deride someone who enjoys simple pleasures for having 'an undeveloped, that is, a primitive taste'.<sup>96</sup> What he does not manage however, is to reconcile this social norm with the idea that the true sophisticate will also turn to primitive art for more difficult – but ultimately more fulfilling – gratifications. Is the pleasure thus derived from primitive art itself 'primitive' without conscious awareness of the supposed sophistication of the action?

*The Debate on Primitivism in Ancient Rhetoric*, 1963, is typically Gombrichian, in that he aims to establish a classical precedent for the understanding of this turn to primitive taste. He cannot simply accept and invest in the psychoanalytic principles, but feels compelled to give them a history.<sup>97</sup> It opens,

The great reversal of taste that began when the Romantics sought out the primitives and that led a hundred years later to the enthusiasm for Negro sculpture among the Cubists owed much of its impetus to a reaction against the classical doctrine. Yet, paradoxically, the arguments and ideas on which it thrived were largely derived from the tradition it attacked. For it was the classical tradition which contrasted the idea of perfection with the dangers of corruption...<sup>98</sup>

He cites Plato, Quintilian and the passage from *De Oratore*. 'Cicero has here analysed the reactions which are almost inevitably bound up with an increasing mastery of effects. The more an artist knows how to flatter the senses, the more he will mobilise defences against this flattery'.<sup>99</sup> As expressed in the *Ernest Jones Lecture*, the primitive is made a psychoanalytic defence in the face of 'attempts to seduce us'.<sup>100</sup> Gombrich sets up glossy artistic 'perfection' as a seduction – an attack – and rugged, rough 'primitivism' as a defence. He constructs the artist as a mind battling with these opposing forces. A further complexity in this dichotomy exists in the dual sense of the word 'regression'. Gombrich establishes that 'we find repellent what yields too obvious, too childish gratification. [Glossy, 'perfect' art] invites regression [to a childhood state] and we feel not secure enough to yield'.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, in order to access more stimulating and sophisticated forms of gratification, the mind has to regress – to forget what it has been taught about what constitutes 'perfect' art – and

94 Gombrich, 'The Primitive and its Value', 303.

95 Gombrich, 'The Primitive and its Value', 295.

96 Gombrich, 'The Primitive and its Value', 327.

97 Interestingly, this need to ground psychoanalysis in culture and give it a history is precisely why Freud founded the *Imago* journal in the first place.

98 Gombrich, 'The Debate on Primitivism', 24.

99 Gombrich, 'The Debate on Primitivism', 32.

100 Gombrich, 'Psychoanalysis and the History of Art', 407.

101 Gombrich, 'Psychoanalysis and the History of Art', 407.

seek pleasure in the simplicity of 'primitive' African sculpture. Regression seems to face the artist, and beholder, from both sides. This reveals Gombrich's debt to Kris, whose work on regression in the service of the ego found that:

Regressive mental processes did not necessarily lead to inward dissolution. Instead, through controlled regression or mental play the ego achieved an integration of psychological functions and impulses, a developmental process that Kris described as *restitution of the self*.<sup>102</sup>

Gombrich recognised that the perfection in art – towards which Vasari and Winckelmann originally saw art history moving in a cycle of technical development and decline – caused, at its peak, a conflict in the viewer and the artist. He implicitly questions *why* periodic decline occurs across a culture, positing that perfection-as-seduction prompts regression-as-defence in all cultured humans. The sophisticated beholder or artist's need for complex gratification requires 'liberation of the unconscious primary process [which] strengthen[s] rather than undermine[s] the functioning of the ego'.<sup>103</sup> By dissecting the concept of broad decline in taste Gombrich moves beyond the individual. In *A Lifelong Interest*, 1993, Gombrich considers the beholder as product of a particular cultural context. He unites Cicero's biological, oral model for taste with the regressive, unconscious aspect of man's reaction to art. He explains:

Our reactions in front of a work of art are simply too complex to be analysed scientifically. [...] We react as members of our civilization who have absorbed its values through our education and society. I have explained that some of these values are purely biological, including perhaps eroticism, to which psychoanalysis attaches so much importance. But others belong to the sphere that psychoanalysis calls the 'superego', such as ideas of nobility, or heroism or tenderness. Or generosity or the sublime. Or even love, insofar as it is distinguished from sexuality. These values enter into all our sensations, into our reactions when we admire a picture by Raphael or Michelangelo, when we read Shakespeare or listen to Mozart.<sup>104</sup>

In the context of this section, Gombrich considers regression (one of our 'reactions') not merely as the product of conflict aroused in the individual's ego, but as a consequence of the superego's contextual development within society. Here Gombrich appears to come closer to understanding why taste – apparently subjective – finds continuity within cultural contexts, and has the ability to 'decline' in Vasarian terms. People in African societies do not make rough carvings because they are 'primitive' people, but because the objects they create are conditioned by their common reactions to stimuli; reactions which are in turn influenced by myriad aspects – what Gombrich terms 'values' – of their culture. People in European

102 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 6.

103 Rose, 'Psychology, Art and Antifascism', 6.

104 Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest*, 175.

societies have – broadly speaking, up until the twentieth century – created objects that looked like the world they saw around them, because this is what people enjoyed seeing. This psychoanalytic insight into cultural contingency must, however, have presented a problem for Gombrich. In a letter to Stokes in 1960 he writes passionately:

I am convinced that we so-called Intellectuals are partly responsible for the misuse of history that has darkened our century, the racial reading by the Nazis, the economic by the marxists, etc. etc. are all pseudo-historical religions. It was with a considerable shock that I discovered how much art history had been misused for the propagation of these myths. [...] What all these things amounted to, the basic assumptions on which they rested was a denial of the unity of mankind.<sup>105</sup>

For Gombrich a rejection of Spenglerian ideology is crucial; belief in the possibility of the Hegelian 'Der gotische Mensch'<sup>106</sup> 'weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind'.<sup>107</sup> A duty of twentieth century scholarship is to resist this reductive ideology. On one hand, psychoanalysis seems to support Gombrich's cause: the psychoanalytic/biological reaction to art (perfect or otherwise) takes all human reaction to be universal. On the other hand, Gombrich's belief in the role of the 'super-ego' structures human reaction in cultural terms, suggesting that reactions are contingent upon context. The multi-levels on which psychoanalysis operates – literally as *id*, *ego* and *superego* – perhaps contributed to Gombrich's ambivalence. While psychoanalysis added a new layer of meaning to his understanding of why and how humans react to images, the contradictions it implicated were also evidently a challenge.

In *Preference for the Primitive*, a work published posthumously in 2002, Gombrich's exploration of regression and the primitive reaches an apotheosis. The Cicero passage is the first thing one reads, at the beginning of the preface, immediately implicitly associating the problems explored therein with psychoanalysis. As well as reiterating that 'what I call the "preference for the primitive" may be tantamount to a rejection'<sup>108</sup> of the perfect, Gombrich extends the idea of the superego and culturally contingent reactions to art, to mass psychology:

Regressive behaviour can indeed prove contagious. We only need think of an excited mob, of revelling drunkards or other manifestations of crowd behaviour which Freud analysed in his study of mass psychology and the analysis of the *ego*. Here the manifestations of primitive emotion serve indeed as a bridge between individuals.<sup>109</sup>

105 Gombrich-Stokes correspondence, 15 June 1960, Gombrich Archive, Warburg Institute. Copyright the Literary Estate of E. H. Gombrich.

106 Gombrich mentions this in the letter to Stokes, 15 June 1960.

107 See Ernst Gombrich's 'The Visual Arts in Vienna c. 1900: Reflections on the Jewish Catastrophe', on the occasion of the seminar *Fin De Siècle Vienna and its Jewish Cultural Influences*, 17 November 1996.

108 Gombrich, *Preference for the Primitive*, 7.

109 Gombrich, *Preference for the Primitive*, 264.

This example seems to formulate a compromise between the ideal of the universal human response and contextually contingent taste. Gombrich implicitly acknowledges that while taste may be dependent on cultural nurture, the unity of man – its nature – is manifested in regressive behaviour. This behaviour, by implication, is not only visible in revelry and recklessness, but in the 'play with words'<sup>110</sup> and 'scribbling of the child,'<sup>111</sup> which, like 'caricature, too, renew infantile pleasure'.<sup>112</sup>

The return to the importance of regressive behaviour suggests that Gombrich's psychoanalytically-inflected work represents – knowingly or not – an extension of his and Kris' research on caricature. The comparison with the drawing of a child makes this evident: 'The caricaturist's secret lies in the use he makes of controlled regression. [...] His scribbling style and his blending of shapes evokes childhood pleasures'.<sup>113</sup>

In *The Tree of Knowledge*, Gombrich applies precisely the controlled regression inherent in caricature to Picasso's primitive, abstract work:

I believe the great artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who admired the primitive and appeared to reject the skills of tradition, knew equally well how to use regression in play or in earnest without surrendering to its pull. Take Picasso, whom I quoted for his alleged desire to draw like children. He never did. But in one instance, at least, where we find him deliberately regressing to the methods of child art, we can guess his purpose. I am thinking of one of the preparatory drawings he did for *Guernica*.<sup>114</sup>

Thus Gombrich decisively extends the caricature project into the twentieth century, by implying that caricature is now not only an acceptable form of expression, but a *necessary* one:

I do not think I am over-interpreting if I say that Picasso tried to revert to elementals precisely because he found his skill obtrusive. He wanted to get away from what threatened to become a facile stereotype; he wanted to learn to draw like children. His fury and grief at the violation of his country may have demanded of him something more genuine, more intense.<sup>115</sup>

The latent aggression and violence that existed, *repressed*, in sixteenth century caricature are, in the twentieth century, required, controlled and *expressed* by artists like Picasso. 'Just as the great actor can scream or roar without losing control of his faculties, so Picasso gave vent to his fury without becoming inarticulate. This seems to me the decisive point in the use and abuse of regression as cultivated in our

110 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 197.

111 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 197.

112 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 197.

113 Gombrich and Kris, 'The Principles of Caricature', 202.

114 Gombrich, 'The Primitive and its Value', 327.

115 Gombrich, 'The Primitive and its Value', 328.

century'.<sup>116</sup> The controlled regression to childhood scribbling, of which early caricaturists were unaware, Picasso harnessed for greatest artistic impact [figure 4]. From his introduction to a psychoanalytically-aware art history in the caricature research in the 1930s, to *Preference for the Primitive* in the 1990s, Gombrich's exploration of regression brought his and Kris' unfinished project full-circle.

### **Conclusion: debate with the past**

Archival research supplies Gombrich's use of Picasso's *Guernica* in 1979 with a fascinating twist, and a long history. Anton Ehrenzweig – the 'wrong-headed' scholar of the Imago Group, of whom Gombrich was fond – writes to him on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1953, to offer praise and criticism of Gombrich's *Ernest Jones Lecture*, given just a few days earlier. He writes:

Even where I disagree I never fail to learn a great deal from your work. The genesis of "Guernica" was one of such sudden eye-openers of which your discourse abounds. Again, however, I could not fail to see the powerful ingestion of the Id at a critical moment of "regression", suggesting that – as probably always – the Id and its symbolism plays its due part in regressions. After the indeed unbelievably infantile doodling of the horse marking the maximum in formal regression, there appears with enormous power the thrust of the torch-armed woman. [...] When you showed the final version of the dying horse's head I saw the frightening closeness of the flaming torch thrust as it were "against" the horse.<sup>117</sup>

Cross-referencing this with the *Ernest Jones Lecture* as it appears published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* in 1954 and in *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse* of 1963, other Picasso references remain, but there is not one mention of *Guernica* itself. Why did Gombrich remove all discussion of *Guernica* when he came to publish, not many months later? Ehrenzweig's reference to 'the indeed unbelievably infantile doodling of the horse' suggest Gombrich showed the same slide in the *Ernest Jones Lecture* as he did in his *The Tree of Knowledge* essay, published 1979 [see figure X]. Perhaps Gombrich's confidence in his ideas about the regressive psychoanalytic reaction to art was disturbed by Ehrenzweig's criticism, and he removed the image, and all discussion – aware that it needed greater development. Seemingly, it was only once he had developed his ideas over years of writing, and perhaps experienced the validation of the Imago Group, that his formulations on *Guernica* – whose implicit anti-fascist message contributed to its status as Picasso's most important work – could come to light. The dual problem of modernism and psychoanalysis continued to develop in Gombrich's mind for decades. Yet his engagement with psychoanalysis was about more than understanding the unsolvable problems of perception, taste and regression. His grapple with its potential constituted a debate with his past.

116 Gombrich, 'The Primitive and its Value', 328.

117 Ehrenzweig-Gombrich correspondence, 23 November 1953, Gombrich Archive, Warburg Institute.



The caricature work, with which Kris and Gombrich – as metaphorical brothers – started the latter's career, may be seen as a continuation of the research their metaphorical father – von Schlosser – undertook on drawing and the model book.<sup>118</sup> Invested in the importance of the graphic for understanding the essence of the artist, Schlosser would have considered Picasso's preliminary sketches to be as important an agent for his unconscious as Gombrich perceives. Robert Scheller summarises Schlosser on drawing: 'it is not so much a matter of copying external example as recording something which Schlosser typified as a "mental image" (*Gedankenbild*)'.<sup>119</sup> Scheller then notes that 'Schlosser's notion of the 'Gedankenbild'...calls for special treatment, involving the history of the theories of the senses and a study of the semantics...The most authoritative treatment of the problem is, of course, E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*'.<sup>120</sup> Schlosser's work itself descends from Riegl's research on the transmission of motif.<sup>121</sup> Gombrich's psychoanalytically-inflected art history chimes with the Vienna culture and scholarship of which he became the most famous mouthpiece.<sup>122</sup>

The ultimate point of this study is to illustrate the potential for which the great scholars of the recent past may be underestimated. Hopefully it is now clear that Gombrich – while no closet Kleinian – engaged with psychoanalysis, developed it as part of his own theory and benefited from the insights it offered. Psychoanalysis and modern art – two things he was thought to loathe – are interestingly entwined in Gombrich: it was in his attempt to understand the modernist impulse that psychoanalysis offered its greatest response. Gombrich's engagement with the field, while not always positive, was sensitive, nuanced and consistent. If psychoanalytic theory was merely ridiculous to Gombrich he would have ignored it entirely. However, whether he liked it or not, it was part of his heritage. In a letter to Adrian Stokes, in 1967, Gombrich perfectly characterises his relationship with psychoanalysis: as a challenging, but ultimately rewarding dialogue between two disciplines. He writes:

I imagine we both try to drill a tunnel through the same mountain, even though we may be working from the opposite ends. Sometimes, I suppose, the rock is so hard and dense that I can hear you tapping on the other side only faintly, or not at all, but then I can make it out again. You must have a similar experience.<sup>123</sup>

118 Julius von Schlosser, 'Zur Kenntnis der künstlerischen Überlieferung im späten', *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhochsten Kaiserhauses*, 23, 1902, 279-339. 'Model books, Schlosser argued, are the leitmotiv of artistic transmission in the Middle Ages, and this served as a point of departure for many subsequent researchers' in R.W. Scheller, *Exemplum: Model-Book Drawings and the Practice of Artistic Transmission in the Middle Ages (ca.900-ca.1450)*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1995, 6.

119 Scheller, *Exemplum*, 16.

120 Scheller, *Exemplum*, 7.

121 Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin, 1893

122 See also Johannes Wilde, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Michelangelo and his Studio*, London, 1953, for another Vienna-trained art historian preoccupied with the graphic.

123 Gombrich-Stokes correspondence, 2 January 1967, Gombrich Archive, Warburg Institute.

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