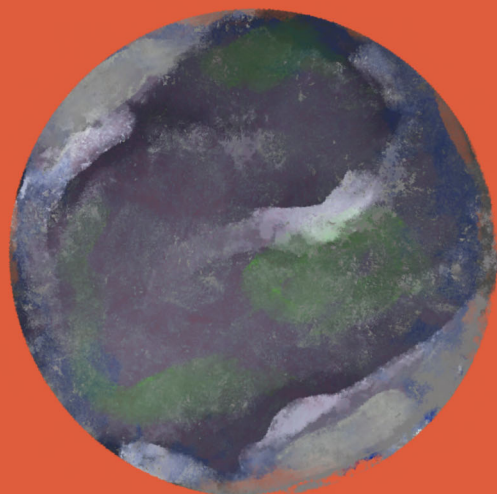




GLOBAL CULTURE **AFTER GOMBRICH**

ART, MIND, WORLD

EDITED BY

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Preface

John Onians, Nicholas Penny and Cao Yiqiang

Art, Mind, World

The three words of our subtitle are deceptively short, considering that they well express this book's material and conceptual range. They were originally chosen to suggest the width and depth of Ernst Gombrich's distinctive concerns with human culture and its history, concerns which still inspire its contributors. Other scholars have written productively about art, but no-one else has focused so consistently on the problematic nature of the mental activity with which its production and reception have been associated, and no one has been so clear about the need to ask questions about the factors behind its worldwide distribution.

Some might be nervous about juxtaposing such big concepts. Not Gombrich. When, soon after the foundation of the Association of Art Historians, he was invited to address their annual conference on the relationship between 'art' and 'history', he offered them a teasing riff on the possibility of a conference of geographers collectively considering the relationship between 'geo', *earth*, and 'graphy', *writing*. In a similar spirit, our title invites readers to join our authors in an equally expansive and engaging enterprise.

As a map of how a group of leading thinkers today understand the relationship between three significant dimensions of culture, this book is a wise measure of what has been achieved in the past, but it should be experienced as more than that, a challenge to embark on a new enquiry. Inspired by the example of Gombrich, who fearlessly exploited the insights of such new fields as perceptual psychology, information theory and neuroscience, the editors present the title of this volume as a provocation to think beyond its modest revelations and visualise the contents of a future, more ambitious product, whether single or multiple, material or virtual, printed book or digital artefact.

This future project would draw inspiration from each element of our title – art, mind and world – and would imagine its fullest possible treatment in a new setting. Acknowledging the necessary limitations of this small volume, it would transcend them. 'Art' would suggest a grasp of the greatest possible variety of the

things that humans have made and which might, whether in the past, present or future, be deemed visually interesting. 'Mind' would suggest the widest possible variety of conceptions of mental activity, from universals in the history of ideas to the firing of neurons in the animal brain. Finally, mention of the 'world' would invite contemplation of the fullest possible record of humans' manifold engagement with their earthly environment.

Each element of this project would separately inspire an expansion of our vision of what is possible in a different domain of human knowledge. Each would also recognise the problematic status of such knowledge, as it is fought over by different constituencies, and studied using competing approaches. But the real magic of these presentations would be wrought by their combination and integration in a mental artefact whose complexity would as far surpass this volume as this volume does its predecessors. It is to the experience of such an artefact, still beyond our imagination, that we would wish our title to become the gateway.

Introduction

Cao Yiqiang

In 2019, scholars from all over the world assembled in Hangzhou for a symposium to mark the occasion of the 110th anniversary of the birth of Ernst Gombrich. Although they were all familiar with Gombrich's publications, few of them were aware of his relationship with China, which is traced in this volume by his granddaughter, Leone Gombrich, and by myself. Some of them may not even have known beforehand that the China Academy of Art, where the symposium took place, housed Gombrich's personal library.

It is of course well known that Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1950) has been a global success, translated into numerous languages, including Chinese. But what the symposium in Hangzhou proposed is that his ideas, his approach and indeed the questions he asked have the potential to affect new thinking about those exalted and intimidating topics embodied in the title of the symposium and of this book.

Gombrich himself recalled the dilemma he experienced as a child when poised between the prospect of a visit either to the museum of fine art or that of natural history, which stands facing each other in his native Vienna. Among the art lovers who stream into the former institution today, there are many, from all over the world, whose interest in European art was first stirred by reading Gombrich – but his ideas are of equally great interest to the latter's visitors, and potentially greater significance for its curators.

His reputation had, long before his death, begun to divide. There was a marked tendency among art historians to ignore the *Story of Art*, on the mistaken supposition that it was an unsophisticated elementary text, and to disdain his more theoretical writing because of his impatience with some fashionable ideological trends. However, in other parts of the university campus where psychologists, anthropologists and archaeologists pondered such matters as the nature of mimicry among primates, the gratifications of patternmaking for children and the possible influence of our biological inheritance on our aesthetic preferences, Gombrich's texts have continued not only to be esteemed but also to provoke by suggestion, and to encourage by example. The papers delivered at the symposium in Hangzhou and published here will serve, we hope, to mend this reputational division, re-establish

the unity of Gombrich's intellectual endeavours and encourage art historians to appreciate their value.

Not all the papers arise directly from Gombrich's writing. Carlo Ginzburg's paper addresses the nature of connoisseurship, reminding us that the methods of the greatest connoisseur of the nineteenth century owed much to the work of palaeontologists and were to be of great interest to psychoanalysts. The connoisseur is now disparaged as a servant of the art market, or as a pedant adjusting the labels in a museum, but the practice of connoisseurship, Ginzberg contends, could have a new pedagogical value, as a way of assessing a great variety of visual evidence to be found in both of those museums which beckoned to the young Gombrich in Vienna.

Since Gombrich has been falsely associated with the defence of a Eurocentric cannon, it is worth emphasizing that he, in fact, provided a powerful analysis of how ideas of progress had been imposed upon the history of art. Partha Mitter develops this critique in his paper, investigating how modernism, claiming universal values no less ardently than had the apostles of classicism, has invalidated non-western traditions. The alternative model he goes on to propose dismantles the imposed barriers between western centre and non-western periphery.

Gombrich was an enemy of fashionable ideas who defended the values of tradition, but perhaps because he understood the need for discipline and standards in artistic training, he was able to provide new insights into the history of doodling and caricature. Indeed, little of importance had been written on these topics before him. Bill Sherman in his paper explores some aspects of doodling as the marginal, the personal and the whimsical. Sybil Moser-Ernst in her paper revisits the history of caricature, examining its reception, origin and significance.

Gombrich's conception of tradition gave a new complexity to its character, not least because of his understanding that it was constantly evolving. Nicholas Penny's paper explores how, in the nineteenth century, the value attached to ideals embodied by ancient Greek sculpture – which was challenged first by the new appreciation of mediaeval art and then by the appeal of modernity – survived, sometimes by assimilation and sometimes by the reaction. Penny also emphasizes the interplay between art and literature. Such an emphasis, together with the religious character of the ideal and the political character of realism, is characteristic of cultural studies.

Peter Burke, in his survey of the concept of culture, notes that the word began to be used by eighteenth-century thinkers who strove to see art – especially the art of ancient Greece – as interconnected with religion, poetry and politics. This was to give a new importance to visual art in the history of mankind. Burke notes how the concept of culture has been discredited but proposes that shared symbols – which are inevitably visual – may validate the use of the term. In the

original understanding of culture and in its possible revival, there is a rejection of the tendency to suppose that the ‘principal currency of culture’ is language (82).

The above phrase is taken from the chapter by John Onians, who proposes new ways to understand the Chauvet cave paintings, as well as the nature of Greek statuary and the appeal of the Mona Lisa’s smile. These are all topics that interested Gombrich; the approach Onians takes, informed by developments in neuroscience, would have deeply interested him as well. Whitney Davis also discusses the Chauvet cave paintings. His paper is the broadest in its scope, dwelling as it does on the aesthetic responses of our most ancient ancestors and on some aspects of modern art, including the most radical forms of abstraction.

It has often been claimed by artists that some great achievements result not from the exercise of the rational mind but from its very relaxation, or even sleep, which somehow lets the work of art create itself, as if spontaneously or by inspiration. There is, it seems, a sort of artistic intelligence, operating in part unconsciously, inseparable from a deep sympathy with the medium and materials employed, inseparable from skills exercised, habits learned and memories accumulated. Something of the sort was certainly acknowledged by early Chinese writers on art such as Zhang Yanyuan in the Tang dynasty. But this awareness, contrary to the early nineteenth-century French slogan *l’art pour l’art*, is deeply rooted in the idea hidden in an ancient Chinese belief: that images and words are two intellectual tools for us to express and explore humanity and the world. Although they have the same origin, they have their own indispensable functions that cannot replace each other.

In any case, it seems appropriate that we should be reminded, particularly considering this volume’s Chinese origin, of the many ways in which Gombrich has enabled us to understand that art has its own intelligence and its own equivalent to language. Many of the papers in this book either develop this idea or depend upon some recognition of it; the topics discussed gain much from us reflecting on the limitations of language. This is one good reason why, if we are to think globally about art, then there is no better guide than Gombrich.