

The Story of Art

E.H. Gombrich

Phaidon 1989 [1950]

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2014 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Gombrich's *The Story of Art* is *the* great classic of art history and the reasons for its popularity are clear. It is gloriously illustrated, with about 60% of this edition taken up by colour photographs, covering all the works discussed and located in just the right places in the text. And it is written without jargon and presents relatively straightforward ideas without any complex theoretical overlay. The opening is the famous "There is really no such thing as Art. There are only artists." and the focus is on the latter, on their ways of seeing and representing, and on the technical challenges they faced, not on general principles or abstractions.

The limitations of the work are also pretty obvious. There is almost nothing on non-Western art and what there is has been included because of its influence on or contrast to aspects of Western art. (There are also some uses of "primitive" that now seem dated, along with traces of Orientalism.) There's a narrow focus on "high" art, above all on painting and secondarily on architecture and sculpture, with forms such as woodcuts making occasional appearances. The works and artists covered are predictable, with only and all the most familiar featuring. And there is only a little social history, touching for example on the changes in the status of (at least some) artists that came with the Renaissance.

Gombrich maintains an upbeat mood throughout, emphasizing the positive features of all the art covered. And when he is a bit negative, he tends to distance himself from his criticism, writing of Tiepolo's *The banquet of Cleopatra*, for example: "Frescoes like this must have been fun to paint and they are a pleasure to look at. And yet some may feel that these fireworks are of less permanent value than the more sober creations of earlier periods. The great age of Italian art was ending."

There is also a teleological feel to *The Story of Art*, as "the story of a continuous weaving and changing of traditions in which each work refers

to the past and points to the future". Gombrich has "tried to select, from the mass of buildings, sculptures and paintings still known to us after thousands of years, a very small number that could figure in a story that dealt first and foremost with the solution of certain artistic problems, solutions, that is, that determined the course of future developments." This kind of retrospective coronation of course breaks down for recent art. The original final chapter, written in 1950, covers the first half of the 20th century, and additions to that include "the triumph of modernism" (1966) and "a new turning of the tide" (1989) as well as a look at recent archaeological discoveries; these take a broader approach, with less of a focus on individual artists and works.

As well as being a lot of fun, *The Story of Art* is essential reading for anyone curious about Western art: even the critics of canons need to know what is in them, and it has been influential enough that it comes close to defining one.

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