

Ernst H. Gombrich on Abstract Painting

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1. *The Vogue of Abstract Art*

Ernst H. Gombrich famously criticized abstract painting in his essay “The Vogue of Abstract Art” (1958) – and in some passages scattered around his wide oeuvre¹. Note that the 1958 paper is about abstract paintings, which are referred to with the expressions ‘abstract art’ or ‘modern art’. The four quotes below sum up the core of the view put forward in the paper:

There are conservative critics who think that the main trouble with modern art is that painting has become too easy, a mere splashing about of colours. But the true objection [...] may be that it has become impossibly difficult to be an artist at all [...] It is a commonplace of psychology that nothing is harder to bear than complete freedom from any restraint. (Gombrich [1963]: 144)

All education [...] starts with *don'ts*. We first learn what to avoid if we are not to disgrace ourselves in public. In matters of behaviour this is as it should be. In matters of art it leads to an unthinking acceptance of mere taboos. These fashionable *don'ts* are so easily picked up. Anyone can learn without much trouble that a picture must no longer be ‘photographic’, ‘anecdotal’, or even immediately pleasing. (ivi: 146)

It is of course right that [...] [the experiments of ‘abstract’ art] were made. We owe it to the spirit of the modern movement that artists dared to explore the potentialities of shapes and colours with greater boldness than their Victorian ancestors. But how are we to decide which experiments are successful and which are not? (ivi: 148)

When I seriously compare my reactions to the best ‘abstract’ canvas with some work of great music that has meant something to me, it fades into the sphere of the merely decorative. [...] Painting, of course, lacks the dimension of time. In fairness, therefore, its combina-

¹ Gombrich (1963): 143-150. Other remarks on abstract art can be found in Gombrich (2006): 429-463; Gombrich (1950): 465-502; Gombrich (2002); Gombrich (1965); Gombrich (1979a); Gombrich (1979b); Gombrich (1979c); Gombrich (1979d); Gombrich (1985); Gombrich (2002): 201-268.

tions of shapes and colours should not be compared to a symphony, but to a chord. (ivi: 148)

Let me clarify Gombrich's points with reference to the broader context of the whole paper:

(1) Artists who are committed to the suppression of many traditional norms of pictorial art and to the practice of abstract painting ("modern art") risk to reach an impasse, because creativity, rather than enhanced, is actually inhibited by the lack of norms characteristic of abstract painting;

(2) On the one hand, artists producing abstract paintings reject positive norms of painting, while, on the other hand, they accept many negative norms, which establish what an abstract painter should refrain from doing with his art; following such negative norms is sufficient for producing an abstract painting or knowing how to appreciate one;

(3) The practice of abstract painting is a relevant and positive feature of our culture, but we need criteria for understanding which abstract paintings are good ones;

(4) Music is a form of abstract art analogous to abstract painting; however, musical works are richer in content than abstract pictorial works, and, unlike musical works, abstract pictorial works have a marked decorative character.

There appears to be a conflict between (1) and (2): is abstract painting excessively free of norms or is it mostly ruled by negative norms? The conflict dissolves if one looks at the whole paper: it is clear that Gombrich lamented the excessive freedom from *positive* rules in abstract painting, as opposed to freedom from rules altogether, and the equally excessive abundance of negative norms, of taboos, which seemed to serve the mere task of distinguishing abstract painting from traditional forms of painting. Gombrich feared that producing original abstract paintings would have proved extremely difficult because, on the one hand, the new school of abstract painting had clearly established what was to be avoided, while, on the other hand, it required the painter to face "that existentialist nightmare, the responsibility for every decision, every move, without any convention to guide him, without any expectation to live up to except the one of creating something recognizably his own and yet significantly different" (1963: 144). Moreover, Gombrich suggested that it was quite easy to produce abstract paintings that followed various negative rules but were scarcely original. Abstract painting could easily turn into a "vogue", and not an interesting one.

Gombrich also expressed more general scepticism toward abstract painting as an art form (4), suggesting that, unlike music – an equally abstract (i.e. non-descriptive and non-representational) form of art – abstract painting is distinguished by its decorative character, and is unable to convey rich contents and arouse complex experiences in the viewer. However, despite his negative remarks, Gombrich considered the emergence of

abstract painting a positive phenomenon in western culture and urged for the individuation of criteria to evaluate the products of this new form of art (3).

In what follows, I argue that Gombrich's remarks on abstract painting are coherent with the account of pictorial representation he put forward in *Art and Illusion* (1960) – just a couple of years after the publication of “The Tyranny of Abstract Art” – and with some remarks that can be found in a later volume of his, *The Sense of Order* (1979). I show the limits of his take on abstract painting and I argue that, although several of his criticisms of abstract painting should be rejected, some of his remarks are insightful and worth of consideration.

2. *Abstract painting in Art and Illusion and in The Sense of Order*

That the discoveries and effects of representation which were the pride of earlier artists have become trivial today I would not deny for a moment. Yet I believe that we are in real danger of losing contact with the great masters of the past if we accept the fashionable doctrine that such matters never had anything to do with art. The very reason why the representation of nature can now be looked upon as something commonplace should be of the greatest interest to the historian. (Gombrich [2002]: 6)

This quote is from the introduction to *Art and Illusion* (where Gombrich mentions “The Vogue of Abstract Art” in a footnote); it can be divided into three claims:

- (1) It is true that what in the past were key advancements in the understanding of how representation works are now facts that contemporary artists can take for granted;
- (2) If we claim that such key advancements did not play a central role in art-making we won't be able to understand the art of the great masters;
- (3) The art historian should seek to understand the reasons why the representation of nature is considered trivial by contemporary artists.

To clarify appropriately these three claims would require engaging in an elaborate reading of the views illustrated in *Art and Illusion* – a task that cannot be accomplished here. I shall then limit myself to a minimal recapitulation of Gombrich's view². The main thesis defended in *Art and Illusion* is that the history of pictorial art could be described as the history of the experiments conducted by artists in order to find new ways to represent the visible world. A visual representation of the visible world in a picture is successful in so far as it arouses in the observer an experience of recognition of the objects depicted. Gombrich's understanding of such experience was shaped by a variety of

² For a more detailed analysis see Caldarola (2013).

works on the psychology of visual perception. His recognition view of pictorial representation offered an alternative to the resemblance view, according to which a picture visually represents an object in so far as it resembles it. Gombrich argued that picture-making is a matter of “making and matching”: a painter traces on a two-dimensional surface a certain configuration of lines and colours (making), which is meant to arouse an experience of recognition of certain objects in those who look at it; in order to lead to the recognition of the objects the painter intended to depict, the experience of recognition must correspond to the visual experience one would have while looking at such objects in the three-dimensional world (matching). According to Gombrich, the history of the development of various pictorial styles is the history of the development of various experiments in “making and matching”, aiming at reaching different recognition experiences, depending on what aspects of the visual world image-makers and their publics were interested in representing. Through the method of “making and matching” artists learned to represent many objects in many styles, up to the point when little room seemed to be left to innovation. At the beginning of the XX century, the artists’ interest in “making and matching” faded: on the one hand, photography provided a much more effective means for naturalistic rendition of the visual world in two-dimensions; on the other hand, many painters concentrated on expressive and evocative features of pictures, disregarding issues concerning figurative depiction. According to Gombrich, however, there remained an interesting link between the art of the past and that of the present, as the following passage from *Art and Illusion* shows:

In cubism even coherent forms are made to play hide-and-peek in the elusive tangle of unresolved ambiguities. It is important to distinguish these contradictions from non-figurative art. . . . [Unlike in cubist painting, in abstract art] There is no possible test by which we can decide which reading to adopt. [...] The function of representational clues in cubist paintings is not to inform us about guitars and apples, nor to stimulate our tactile sensations. It is to narrow down the range of possible interpretations till we are forced to accept the flat pattern with all its tensions. Even non-objective art derives some of its meaning and effects from the habits and mental sets we acquired in learning to read representations. Indeed, we have seen that any three-dimensional shape on the canvas would be illegible or, which is the same, infinitely ambiguous without some assumptions of probabilities that we must bring to it and test against it. (Gombrich [2002]: 242)

Gombrich argues that cubist painting differs from non-figurative painting. Cubist paintings show ambiguous forms, open to various, and mutually incompatible, interpretations. We are never sure whether we should ‘read’ a given cubist painting as the image of a “guitar” or of an “apple”. We are left hesitating between multiple readings. According to Gombrich, in order to produce such ambiguous images, cubist painters rely on ex-

periments of “making and matching”, just like painters of non-ambiguous figurative paintings. Whereas the latter look for configurations that produce univocal recognition experiences in the viewers, the former look for configurations that arouse experiences of recognition of different objects. The passage on cubist painting is followed by these remarks on Jackson Pollock’s paintings:

The painter who wants to wean us from these assumptions [those about the content of an image qua pictorial representation] has perhaps only one way open to him. He must try to prevent us from interpreting his marks on the canvas as representations of any kind by compelling us to [...] read his brushmarks as traces of his gestures and actions. This, I take it, is what the “action painter” aims at. He wants to achieve an identification of the beholder with his Platonic frenzy of creation, or rather with his creation of a Platonic frenzy. It is quite consistent that these painters must counteract all semblance of familiar objects or even of patterns in space. But few of them appear to realize that they can drive into the desired identification only those who know how to apply the various traditional consistency tests and thereby discover the absence of any meaning except the highly ambiguous meaning of traces. (Gombrich [2002]: 243-244)

According to Gombrich, the painter who rejects the “making and matching” method is left with just one alternative strategy for producing objects, which deserve to be called ‘images’, namely, tracing on a two-dimensional surface signs meant to be read as “the traces of his gestures and actions”. This, he claims, is the method of Jackson Pollock, the *action painter*, who encourages the viewer of his works to identify with himself, to share his “platonic frenzy” (i.e. his anti-mimetic frenzy, I suppose). How can a viewer identify with the action painter? Gombrich, I believe, is alluding to the fact that a viewer can imagine that “the traces” of “gestures and actions” she sees on a Pollock’s drip painting are the traces of *his* gestures and actions.

Gombrich also stresses that only a viewer who is familiar with figurative painting and therefore used to applying the “making and matching” test to paintings can understand that Pollock’s goal is to defy the composition rules of figurative painting and be open to reading the drippings as signs of the artist’s gestures. Gombrich’s view is that non-figurative painting is parasitic upon figurative painting: we would not understand how non-figurative painting works if we were not to understand it as a reaction against figurative painting³.

It seems to me that the main limit of Gombrich’s remarks on abstract painting in *Art and Illusion* is the idea that the production of signs as traces of the artist’s gestures is the only alternative to painting based on the “making and matching” method for artists who

³ For similar remarks see Hamilton (2009).

work with the two-dimensional pictorial medium⁴. Applying C. S. Peirce's famous jargon to Gombrich's view, we can say that "making and matching" paintings are *icons*, images that stand for the objects they resemble, whereas Pollock's drip paintings are *indexes*, images that, qua effects, stand for their causes, i.e. the artist's gestures. In Gombrich's understanding of figurative and abstract paintings, where some works in the abstract tradition are linked with figurative works because of their reliance on the method of "making and matching", while other works are interpreted as traces of the artist's gesture, there seems to be little room for works such as, for instance, Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1951), produced in the years immediately preceding the publication of *Art and Illusion*. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is a huge red canvas, a monochrome longitudinally cut through by lines in yellow, white, and red (of a different hue). It is an abstract painting by a preeminent artist, which does not engage the viewer in the "making and matching" game and, at the same time, it seems to me, could hardly be characterized as a painting that aspires to be read as the recipient of the traces of the artist's gesture. Newman's painting explores the relationship between the canvas and the viewer, who feels overwhelmed by the vast red surface looming upon him. This is an experience of the sublime. Newman experimented with a new way to arouse this experience in the viewer, through the sheer materiality of the pictorial surface, rather than through a certain depictive content. The title alludes to the fact that the experience of the sublime is somehow definitive of the human condition, adding a further layer of meaning to the work: in its relation to the viewer, the work exemplifies an experience that is specifically human, it then invites the viewer not only to experience the sublime but also to reflect upon the human condition.

In *The Sense of Order* (1979) Gombrich offers some remarks which might help to cast some light on his conception of the relationship between traditional figurative painting, cubist painting and other kinds of abstract painting relying on "making and matching", and 'radical' abstract painting such as Pollock's. Gombrich claims:

Only the 20th century has witnessed the final elevation of pattern-making into the autonomous activity of 'abstract art'. (Gombrich [1984]: vii)

It is the advantage of the concept of projection that we do not have to ask too insistent-

⁴ In a footnote to the passage I have quoted, Gombrich refers to Harold Rosenberg's work. Rosenberg described, in existentialist fashion, post Second World War abstract painters as engaged in a solitary and desperate fight against western pictorial tradition. He claimed that the abstract painter aimed to perform an ultimate, supreme act with his works, and that he acted more as a performer than as a picture-maker (see Rosenberg [1962]: 23-29).

ly where in pattern designs geometrical motifs end and representational ones begin. The very names we tend to give to some basic configuration indicate that there is a no man’s land between abstract and figurative design. We speak of star-shapes, of wavy lines, vortices, radiating forms, of networks, chequerboard patterns, egg-and-dart, rosettes, without implying any representational intention [...] Our response to different decorative styles is governed by the way we read their motifs. (Gombrich [1984]: 158)

From the first passage we can infer that, according to Gombrich, at least some works of abstract art (painting, and, perhaps, sculpture) present “patterns” of signs, which before the XX century were the exclusive domain of decorative art – Gombrich, who was writing at the end of the 1970s, might have thought of 60s and 70s op-art works. As in the 1958 essay, then, we see Gombrich tracing a link between abstract art and decoration. In the second passage, Gombrich distinguishes between designs that are intended to represent and designs that are not intended to represent. A decorative pattern can be capable of depicting something while not being intended to work as a figurative image, he claims. If we bring together this remark and Gombrich’s claims in *Art and Illusion*, we have the following schema:

	Decorative image (non-representational)	Pictorial representation	Pictorial abstraction (non-figurative representation)
depicts	x	x	
does not depict	x		x

The schema illustrates the conceptual distinctions Gombrich’s claims in *Art and Illusion* and *The Sense of Order* are based on, I believe. There are three kinds of art images: decorative images, which are not accompanied by representational intentions, and pictorial representation and pictorial abstraction, both representational kinds of images. Pictorial representations represent in virtue of their depictive character, while pictorial abstractions represent qua traces of the artist’s actions and gestures. That an image has depictive character does not entail that it has been intended as a representational image: there are decorative images that present patterns which can be read figuratively, but this, by itself, does not establish that they were intended as representational images.

Let us focus on two distinctions: (i) the distinction between images with depictive character and images without depictive character; (ii) the distinction between pictorial representation and pictorial abstraction. With respect to such distinctions, three points emerge from Gombrich’s claims in *Art and Illusion* and in *The Sense of Order*. (1) That an

image has depictive character is not *sufficient* for it to count as a pictorial representation: somewhat like the horse-shaped cloud which presents the shape of a horse, but was not intended to be a pictorial representation of a horse (since it is a natural object, and not an artefact, obviously), a decorative image might present the shape of an horse, while not being intended to be a pictorial representation of a horse (although it might have been intended merely to present the horse-shape). A decorative image, then, might have depictive character, without being intended to exploit depiction as a means of representation. (2) That an image has depictive character is *necessary* for it to count as a pictorial representation. A pictorial representation is meant to be regarded as a depiction. (3) Non-depictive abstract pictures represent, although non-depictively. It seems to me that Gombrich's points are insightful, although his understanding of the forms of representation available to abstract painters as an alternative to depiction is too poor. In particular, Gombrich does not take into consideration expression and exemplification as strategies to convey content (i.e. represent, in a broad sense) through pictures⁵.

3. *Gombrich on abstract painting. A critical assessment*

Gombrich's understanding of abstract painting is poor. However, as I shall argue, some of his remarks have a point. Finally, I shall explain why I am sceptical towards the criticisms recently raised against Gombrich in a monograph by Caroline Jones (2006).

Let us go back to Gombrich's claims in "The Vogue of Abstract Art". As we have seen, Gombrich believed that the making of abstract paintings was at risk of being governed by purely negative rules, which established what artists had to do in order to take distance from traditional, figurative painting. He urged for the individuation of positive criteria for the critical evaluation of abstract paintings. Moreover, he claimed that the only form of representation available to the abstract painter as an alternative to depiction was that of leaving traces of his gestures on the canvas, and that abstract paintings, in general, tended to work as decorative patterns, with very little content. Notwithstanding these mostly negative remarks, Gombrich acknowledged the cultural relevance of the practice of abstract painting, which allows for improving our understanding of the potentialities and limits of pictorial practice.

As I have already stressed, Gombrich had a limited understanding of abstract painting. Perhaps abstract painting has been, for some, a mere vogue, a practice that consisted in following unquestioned taboos, but this is not because abstract painting, *as such*,

⁵ For seminal remarks on exemplification and expression see Goodman (1976).

lacked representational potential, or because it was doomed by a supposed affinity to decoration. It is because Gombrich did not understand the expressive richness of abstract painting that he lamented the lack of standards to judge the quality of such artworks. Gombrich, however, understood the affinity between figurative painting and less radical forms of pictorial abstraction: his claim that cubist paintings, for instance, should be read as peculiar experiments with the “making and matching” technique strikes me as insightful. More generally, his understanding of the distinction between decorative images, pictorial representations and radical pictorial abstractions, which I have tried to describe in the previous section, is worth of consideration.

Caroline Jones has recently suggested a reading of Gombrich’s remarks on abstract paintings. To conclude, I shall raise some perplexities on such reading. Jones writes:

Rejecting the Hegelianism of Wölfflin in favour of the neo-Kantianism of the positivists, Gombrich positioned his *Kunstwissenschaft* (a scientifically formulated theory of art) against a metaphysical *Kunstgeschichte* (a normative art history). (Jones [2005]: 119)

Gombrich’s dismissal of abstraction was powerful, because it was based on “scientific philosophy”, and the failure of non-objective art to meet positivist criteria for art itself. [...] The role and mechanism of tradition motivated all of Gombrich’s arguments against abstraction (for having no discernible relation to the illusionistic traditions of making and matching). [...] Gombrich employed tradition [...] as evidence for an inevitable evolution in art, and as a necessary rein on that process. Tradition, in his analysis, provided both a shared vocabulary and the basis for standards in judging artistic quality [...] Abstraction, like “pseudoscience,” played no part in this tradition. (Jones [2005]: 123-124)

As I have briefly explained above, Gombrich’s “making and matching” theory is a theory about pictorial representation: it seeks to understand how figurative images represent, suggesting that they allow for an experience of recognition of what they represent in the viewers looking at them. According to Gombrich, the history of figurative pictorial art is the history of the development of a number of experiments in “making and matching”, experiments which tested our abilities to recognize depicted objects in configurations on pictorial surfaces. Gombrich, as I have stressed, believed that figurative painting was a much richer representational practice than abstract painting, and it is likely that he had a poor understanding of modalities of visual representation alternative to the depictive one. Jones, it seems to me, overstates the case against Gombrich when she claims that Gombrich’s theses are the outcome of a “positivist” view of art history. Gombrich did not aim to provide a “scientific” foundation (whatever this might mean) of art history, but to understand how a peculiar kind of representation, i.e. the depictive kind, works and how

its peculiarities have influenced the development of different styles of figurative image-making throughout the history of art. On the one hand, Gombrich put forward a view of pictorial representation, with his theory of “making and matching”; on the other hand, he claimed that images can represent visually either as pictorial representations, or as traces of the gestures of artists. The latter view did not offer much insight into abstract painting, and the limit of Gombrich’s proposal is that he did not have an understanding of expression in pictorial art that could match in perspicacity his understanding of pictorial representation. To claim that he did not have such an understanding because of his “positivistic” stance on art history would be, it seems to me, mere speculation.

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