



ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS

THE
REYNOLDS
LECTURE
1990

STYLES OF ART
AND
STYLES OF LIFE

E. H. GOMBRICH

RYU. Fol 000.024

Prof Carlos Montez
for E. H. Gombrich



THE REYNOLDS LECTURE *London*

June 1991

STYLES OF ART
AND
STYLES OF LIFE



E. H. GOMBRICH

Published by the Royal Academy of Arts

© Royal Academy of Arts 1991

All rights reserved

Designed by Sedley Place

Printed by Michaelson

Title page:

Sir Joshua Reynolds's collectors' stamp

The fifth Reynolds Lecture
was delivered by

Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich OM
Honorary Fellow of the Royal Academy of Arts

on 27 November 1990 at the
Royal Academy of Arts

I can best explain what I mean by the title of my lecture with two plates from the late Osbert Lancaster's satirical survey of the history of style, which I consider the best textbook on the topic ever published.¹ The first illustrates the style of life and of art known as the Rococo (fig. 1); the other is entitled 'Twentieth-Century Functional' (fig. 2), and I must leave it open whether it represents the style of a vanished epoch or one of the future.

Though the emphasis of the book is on the architectural setting, the sharp eye of the artist has also encompassed the style of life we associate with the respective periods. The elegant couple in the Rococo interior would have found it as unthinkable to go and sunbathe on the roof of their dwelling as their twentieth-century great-great-great grandson would have found it to carry a sword. Nor do I have to persuade you at length that the painting of a naked nymph attended by a cupid that hangs in the eighteenth-century boudoir would be as much out of character in the functional house as the cactus and the painting we can just glimpse in the downstairs room would be in the Rococo interior.

We tend to say in such cases that both pictures perfectly represent the spirit of their respective ages. It is a cliché that has always worried me, and that I have worried in my turn.² I have never seen a spirit, and I have an instinctive aversion to all forms of collectivism whether they are called racialism, nationalism, or, if you allow the term, periodism. I am an individualist, and I cannot believe that we are no more than puppets dangling from the strings controlled by an invisible puppet master, representing the spirit of the age, or, perhaps, the class conflict. Indeed, I have come to wonder whether we have to postulate such a puppet master as a Super Artist who creates the style or styles of an epoch in their various media. Could it not rather be the other way round? Could not art and artists have at least contributed to what we call the spirit of the age? Would we not all feel different if we were asked to don Rococo costumes, wear

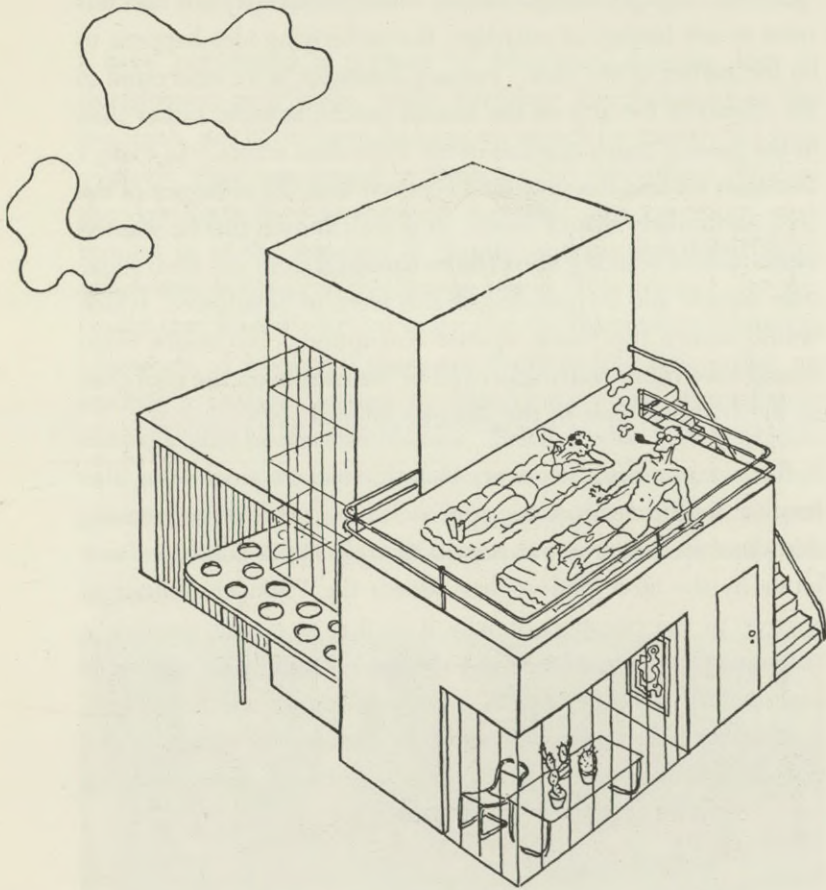
powdered wigs and engage in elegant conversation with a lady sipping chocolate, rather than lie on the functional roof hoping to gain in health and vigour?



1. Osbert Lancaster, Rococo, *Here, of all Places:*
The Pocket Lamp of Architecture, London, John Murray, 1959

I am concerned in this lecture with these two contrasting interpretations of the phenomenon of style. The first, that style is the expression of the age, has become a commonplace here in the West. Eastern Europe is, or was until recently, dominated by the

opposite conviction, the belief that the effects of art are so powerful that they necessitate the central control and censorship of all media.



2. Osbert Lancaster, *Twentieth-Century Functional, Here, of all Places:*
The Pocket Lamp of Architecture, London, John Murray, 1959

If I may use a metaphor taken from medicine: we might call the Western view that style is a manifestation or symptom of the age the 'diagnostic' approach. Such diagnostic skill has been the pride of eminent practitioners of the history of art in the past and, if

I understand it rightly, is still the aim of the so-called new art history. The opposite doctrine, which emphasises the effects of art, be it as stimulant or as tranquilliser, might be dubbed the 'pharmacological' interpretation. Though one may not find this term in any history of criticism, the underlying idea happens to be the earlier of the two. Former centuries were interested in the effects of the arts on the human psyche as such, rather than in the passing states of mind of the individual artists.³ In Plato's *Dialogues* we find this profound concern with the influence of the arts, particularly that of music. It is well known that he wanted sensuous and relaxing music to be banished from the ideal state; only austere and invigorating strains were to be allowed, which would secure the young against corruption. No doubt Plato would have more easily approved of the couple on the roof than of the frivolous pair in the Rococo interior.

It fits my purpose, however, that the ancient world was also familiar with the diagnostic approach, in a context, moreover, that directly concerns our notion of style. It is contained in a letter by the Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger written in answer to the question of why it is that at certain periods a corrupt literary style comes into being. Naturally his answer is moralistic. 'People's speech' - he says - 'matches their lives'; a luxuriant style is a symptom of an extravagant society. Just as the way a man walks or moves reveals his character, so does his manner of writing.⁴

Seneca's telling example was that of the famous Roman tycoon Maecenas, a friend of the Emperor Augustus, whom we still remember and honour as a generous sponsor of the arts. The Stoics saw him in a very different light: for them his style was as undisciplined as his dress was sloppy. Giving examples of his contorted sentences and far-fetched metaphors which are, of course, untranslatable, Seneca exclaims: 'When you read this sort of thing, does it not immediately occur to you that this is

the same man who invariably went around in casual dress...who appeared on the bench or on the platform...wearing a mantle draped over his head leaving both ears exposed, looking just like the rich man's runaway slave on the comic stage?'

I have not found a portrait of Maecenas showing him in shirtsleeves, as it were, while attending the ceremony at the cenotaph, nor have I been lucky in my search for exactly the type of comic slave mentioned by Seneca. But the famous relief of the Ara Pacis (fig. 3) showing Augustus at a ceremony may remind us of the standard of dignity in dress and deportment which was *de rigueur* in the Roman world. It is precisely for this reason that Seneca's strictures present the diagnostic problem in a nutshell. I wonder if there are many people today who, on reading a passage written by Maecenas, would immediately conclude that he showed his ears. Briefly, what Seneca objects to is, of course, any breach of decorum, of the conventions that govern both the style of life and the style of speech; but to spot this breach for the purpose of diagnosis you must first know the convention.



3. Augustus officiating an Imperial Ceremony, 13-9 BC,
marble relief from the Ara Pacis, Rome

The model art for the ancient world was oratory; it was in this art that the theory of decorum was so developed that it retained its importance as long as the classical tradition in Western art survived. It may be said to rest on the observation that linguistic usage reflects the various styles of life in a hierarchical society. The lowly or humble speech of simple folk differs markedly from the grand or elevated language of the man of power. It was a breach of decorum then, as now, to use vulgar slang at a solemn ceremony just as it was felt to be ridiculous to use solemn or grand language on trivial occasions. Seneca's reactions demonstrate the Romans' highly developed sensitivity to any departure from the norm. But mark that it is the departure that he finds telling. The norm, like the toga worn by all the dignitaries, is just a uniform; it would hinder rather than encourage a diagnosis.

An example from daily life will convince you of this conclusion: if it is the convention in an office to say 'good morning' on arrival, failure to do so may be taken as a symptom of bad temper or bad manners. The convention itself should be of no significance to the diagnostic approach. Yet, if our elders did not think that to say 'good morning' inculcates the right attitude to our fellow men, they would not insist on teaching the convention to children. It is good for them, for 'manners maketh man'.

It is high time that I found my way back from styles of life to styles of art, and where could I discover a safer bridge than in the writings of Sir Joshua Reynolds whose name adorns the lecture I have the honour of giving here at this Academy?

The first President (fig. 4), of course, was steeped in the classical doctrine of oratory. It might be said that all his discourses are devoted to the teaching of decorum (fig. 5). Naturally it was the noble style, the grand manner of the canonic Renaissance masters that he endeavoured to inculcate in his students, and he rarely omitted to warn them against its opposite which he saw



4. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Self-Portrait DCL*,
c. 1780, Royal Academy of Arts, London

embodied in Dutch painting: 'It is certain', he says, 'that the lowest style will be the most popular as it falls within the compass of ignorance itself and the vulgar will always be pleased with what is natural in the confined and misunderstood sense of the word'.⁵ But Reynolds never gave up the hope that the noble style of art which he advocated might be carried over into the style of life. He believed that the Royal Academy could assist in creating a better society, but he was not a collectivist. He realised that the agents of this transformation must be individual human beings. Here is the touching conclusion of his Ninth Discourse:

The Art which we profess has beauty for its object; this is our business to discover and to express;... it is an idea residing in the breast of the artist, which he is always labouring to impart, and which he dies



5. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Theory*, c. 1779,
Royal Academy of Arts, London

at last without imparting; but which he is yet so far able to communicate, as to raise the thoughts, and extend the views of the spectator; and which, by a succession of art, may be so far diffused, that its effects may extend themselves imperceptibly into public benefits, and be among the means of bestowing on whole nations refinement of taste: which, if it does not lead directly to purity of manners, obviates at least their greatest depravation, by disentangling the mind from appetite, and conducting the thoughts through successive stages of excellence, till that contemplation of universal rectitude and harmony which began by Taste, may, as it is exalted and refined, conclude in Virtue.⁶

‘Help us to create a virtuous society’. Here is a slogan that may still assist this Academy in raising the necessary funds! Not that the hope that art might contribute to virtue was at all new at the time that Reynolds spoke. But usually the theme of the didactic powers of art was connected with the subject-matter artists were enjoined to paint, or perhaps to avoid. Among the subjects they were expected to paint, the great *exempla* of ancient heroism

ranked second only to religious themes and were especially commended by French academic reformers in the eighteenth century.⁷ What was less common in Reynolds's time was to assign such a didactic role not to the subject-matter but to the style, or manner, of painting, which, so we heard, was to elevate the minds of individuals so that they got rid of what Reynolds called 'the appetites' and preferred the contemplation of rectitude, slowly diffusing this desirable style of life throughout the whole nation.

But Reynolds would not have been the highly intelligent man he was if he had believed that this desirable aim was easily achieved. He said in his last Discourse that men are not born with the relish for arts in their most refined state.⁸ However, it was precisely in this context that he had recourse to a recommendation he found in the writings of a contemporary critic James Harris, a recommendation that may well be found shocking, but which has an important bearing on my subject. In speaking of the rules of art, which he considered to be quite immutable but unpopular, Harris suggested that we should at least pretend to enjoy good art and that this pretence would gradually turn into second nature; in the words that Reynolds quoted, we should 'Feign a relish till we find a relish come; and feel, that what began in fiction terminates in reality'.⁹ In other words, we are asked to practise auto-suggestion. If we are distressed to find that a work of art generally considered to be wonderful really repels us, we need not lose heart. If we say 'isn't that marvellous?' often enough, we may talk ourselves into genuine admiration. We have successfully brainwashed ourselves.

Although I would be the last to recommend attitudinising, not all unwelcome insights into the human psyche are wrong: we are more malleable in matters of taste than we would like to admit. But maybe our reluctance to admit it is, in itself, part of the historical change. In this respect we are on the other side of the

great divide that separates our conceptions of art and expression from those which Reynolds had inherited from the Classical Tradition. For that earlier tradition, as I have indicated, the model art was oratory, the art of arousing emotions. We still assign this role to what are called the performing arts, such as acting or music making. In these arts the relation between emotion and expression may be said to be inverted. The expression may come first and engender the emotion. So that 'what began in fiction, terminates in reality'. Think of Hamlet's comment on the actor who weeps real tears in describing the death of Hecuba: 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her?' The actor, we would say, has talked himself into that grief; the lines have affected him as they were intended to affect the audience. Reynolds had no doubt that this mechanism, which we now describe with an engineering metaphor as 'feedback', should always be taken into account in discussions of his own art. His admiration for the great masters of the past led him to imitate them – a practice he also commended to others – as when he modelled his portrait of *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (Dulwich Picture Gallery) on Michelangelo's *Isaiah* on the Sistine Ceiling.¹⁰ He wrote: 'Our hearts frequently warmed in this manner by the contact of those whom we wish to resemble, will undoubtedly catch something of their way of thinking; and we shall receive in our own bosoms some radiation at least of their fire and splendour'.¹¹ Far from advocating hypocrisy when he proposed that we go through the motions of 'relish till we feel it', Reynolds simply placed his trust in feedback. As a Platonist he firmly believed in the objective validity of the values he admired and hoped we would also be led to discover them.

If you read his *Discourses*, however, you may feel that he fully realised that the tradition he defended was already under threat. This threat came precisely from the alternative theory of expression that was eventually to win the day. You find him

constantly warning his students against a facile belief in inspiration and the fashionable cult of the 'original genius', who has no need to learn from tradition.

We all know that the ideal of art as noble and ennobling that Reynolds defended was unable to withstand the assault of the rival values that clustered around the slogan of sincerity.¹² H. M. Abrams, in his seminal book *The Mirror and the Lamp*,¹³ has traced this momentous shift to the subjectivity that arose in the late eighteenth century, affecting the style of life as much as the style of art. It may be no accident that Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who flaunted his sincerity in his *Confessions*, had himself portrayed by Allan Ramsay (National Gallery, Edinburgh) without the powdered wig which was still *de rigueur* for most of Reynolds's sitters. No doubt, the transformation of society we connect with the French Revolution reverberated in the arts. If ancient rhetoric and its descendents had reflected the social hierarchies extending from the grand to the humble, it is not surprising that the grand manner was now identified with affectation, while the humble had the appeal of sincerity. It is well known that one of the manifestos of this new ideal was the preface added in 1800 by William Wordsworth to the second edition of his *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he described poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and attacked the current ideals of 'poetic diction'.¹⁴ Among painters, of course, it was John Constable who never ceased to criticise what he called 'manner', and who strove all his life to discard artificiality for the sake of sincerity. To what extent this adoption of a deliberately humble style (to speak in rhetorical terms) was felt also to express or manifest a style of life can be discerned in the passage John Ruskin devoted to Constable in his *Modern Painters*. Ruskin, the champion of Turner's Grand Manner and poetic diction, believed that Constable's 'early education and associations were ... against him: they induced in him a morbid preference for subjects of a low order... yet...' - Ruskin grudgingly admits - 'his works are

to be deeply respected, thoroughly original, thoroughly honest, free from affectation, manly in manner ...'.¹⁵ In other words, Ruskin understood him, but did not like him.

Ruskin's preferred form of sincerity was that of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose very name proclaims the rejection of Raphael, the idolised master of the Grand Manner. If proof were needed of the extent to which what is experienced as expression depends on the departure from an expected norm, it might again be found in Ruskin's words. He praises the Brotherhood for 'the principal resistance they had to make ... to spurious beauty, whose attractiveness had tempted man to forget, or to despise, the more noble quality of sincerity'¹⁶.



6. William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851,
Manchester City Art Galleries

We need not doubt that painters such as Holman Hunt, the creator of *The Hireling Shepherd* (fig. 6), felt particularly sincere in rejecting such theatricalities and sensualities as displayed in William Etty's *Venus and her Satellites* (fig. 7); what is relevant to

my subject is only their dubious conviction that the earlier Italians, such as Fra Angelico, may have lacked the technical mastery of later periods but were, for that very reason, more sincere than Raphael. The cult of the so-called Italian 'Primitives' in the nineteenth century was rooted in this conviction. The travellers to Italy stood entranced in front of the frescoes by Giotto (fig. 8) and enjoyed what they took to be the expression of a better age; indeed, a paradise of innocence. Consider the introduction of the chapter on Giotto in Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* of 1846:

— The period we have now to deal with is one, comparatively speaking, of repose and tranquillity – the storm sleeps and the winds are still,



7. William Etty, *Venus and her Satellites*, York City Art Gallery

the currents set in one direction, and we may sail from isle to isle over a sunny sea, dallying with the time, secure of a cloudless sky and of the greetings of innocence and love wheresoever the breeze may waft us. There is in truth a holy purity, an innocent naiveté, a child-like



8. Giotto, *The Rods brought to the Temple*, fresco, Arena Chapel, Padua

grace and simplicity, a freshness, a fearlessness, an utter freedom from affectation, a yearning after all things truthful, lovely and of good report, in the productions of this early time, which invest them with a charm peculiar in its kind, and which few even of the most perfect works of the mature era can boast of.¹⁷

You need not be an historian to recognise in this dream a complete figment of the author's imagination. The period of Giotto was also that of Dante, when the streets of Florence resounded with the clash between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines and the exiled poet painted a fearful picture of the wicked goings on in his native city. No wonder I have so little

patience with the notion that the style of art expresses the spirit of the age. There never was an age to match the majesty of Giotto's paintings.

And yet it may have been the appeal of these fanciful interpretations of the art of the past which contributed to the insistent demand that the artists of the present should also, in their turn, express their own age. Not that it is surprising that Daumier's dictum '*Il faut être de son temps*' gained so much ground among nineteenth-century artists.¹⁸ The change brought about in the style of life by the Industrial Revolution, the coming of the railways, the growth of the cities and the achievements of medicine were bound to raise the question of why artists should continue to paint Greek gods or knights in armour rather than *la vie moderne*,¹⁹ which so enchanted Baudelaire in the paintings of Constantin Guys.

Courbet was one of many to insist that 'art . . . for an artist is merely a means of applying his personal faculties to the ideas and the things of the period in which he lives'.²⁰ But then what is this period, this age? It is a commonplace that at any time the stage of history is crowded with several generations of people of infinitely diverse views, influence, power and taste. Here the theory of progress could come to the rescue by postulating that those who remain stuck in the past do not count. The age is identified by the *avant garde* which alone represents the march of history. It was no doubt this persuasive creed that led to that deification of history which Popper has called historicism,²¹ the faith in an underlying plot or plan that inevitably carries mankind forward into a higher mode of existence.

It was Hegel in Germany who provided a metaphysical foundation for this creed; Karl Marx who attempted to turn it into a predictive science, and Hegel's translator Hippolyte Taine, in France, who popularised it in more sociological terms. By the

turn of the twentieth century this utopian promise had gripped the minds of many artists, none more than that of the architects who particularly felt it necessary to catch up with their time after generations of stylistic eclecticism. The opinions of the American architect Louis Sullivan, who is credited with the creation of the skyscraper, are a case in point: 'The art of a people', he wrote, 'is a reflex or direct expression of the life of that people.... At no time and in no instance has architecture been other than ... an emanation of the inmost life of the people'.²² It was this conviction that turned so many architects into utopian reformers; I am thinking in particular of Sullivan's Austrian disciple Adolf Loos who in vain tried for so long to transform the lifestyle of his Viennese fellow citizens.

I remember a recent lecture by one of our leading architects whose work I frequently admire but whose argument – that we must accept it because it is of our time – I ventured to criticise. Why did he think he was more of our time than the rest of us, I asked. He was genuinely baffled. And in a newspaper article it was recently suggested that in order to educate public taste the Royal Academy should at all times be 'slightly ahead of its time'.²³

You may wonder why I am making such heavy weather over what is apparently a purely intellectual issue. I wish it were. I have alluded at the outset to the consequences of the Platonic view of the effects of art on society which led the Greek philosopher to propose forbidding certain types of music in his ideal republic. Unhappily it has been demonstrated in our century that an even more explosive mixture arises if what I have called the pharmacological interpretation of art is fused with the view of art as a symptom. I think this is precisely what happened in the totalitarian dictatorships of Germany, Italy, Russia and China.

That dismal story has recently been chronicled in a well documented and illustrated book by the Russian *émigré* Igor

Golomstock entitled *Totalitarian Art*.²⁴ No one needs to be reminded of the fact that in National Socialist Germany modern movements were outlawed and branded as 'degenerate art',²⁵ but the tragic element in this episode may still require our attention. What was so tragic was that many of the champions of these movements, especially in Germany, were inspired by the conviction that in rejecting the styles and conventions of the nineteenth century and in turning their back on the study of nature they were preparing the ground for a new epoch of pure spirituality. This goes for Emil Nolde (fig. 9), who flirted with National Socialism, no less than for Wassily Kandinsky, whose book on *The Spiritual in Art* is a manifesto of messianism.



9. Emil Nolde, *The Last Supper*, 1909,
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Instead, of course, the new Messiah in the person of Adolf Hitler decreed that it was he alone who would decide what the future age and the new man of the coming millennium should be like. This may have been Platonism gone mad, but in pillorying the alternative trends as degenerate he was using the language of the

diagnostics of art. Nor is the medical metaphor here inappropriate. In nineteenth-century medicine the problem of heredity and degeneracy had begun to loom large, but what had started in a purely clinical context soon gripped the imagination of writers and critics.²⁶ Heredity was to take the place of destiny. Zola's cycle of novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, set out to trace the fate of a family in terms of heredity, and Nietzsche was to lay down that morality itself was a symptom of decadence manifest no less in Socrates than in Richard Wagner. There is an added



10. Umberto Boccioni, *Dynamism of a Cyclist*, 1913,
Mattioli Collection, Milan

irony in the fact that it was an ardent Zionist writing under the pseudonym Max Nordau who provided ammunition for the Nazis when he made a splash late in the century with a book entitled *Entartung*.²⁷ In it he proved to his satisfaction that all the artists he did not like or could not understand, including Whistler and Cézanne, were decadent. To make things worse, some artists even fell for the slogan and gloried in the idea that decadence was something to be welcomed because it distinguished the

refined and sensitive creator from the stolid and robust bourgeois. No wonder the bourgeoisie was delighted by this confirmation of its worst prejudices, and decided that any departures from accepted norms were symptoms of degeneracy.

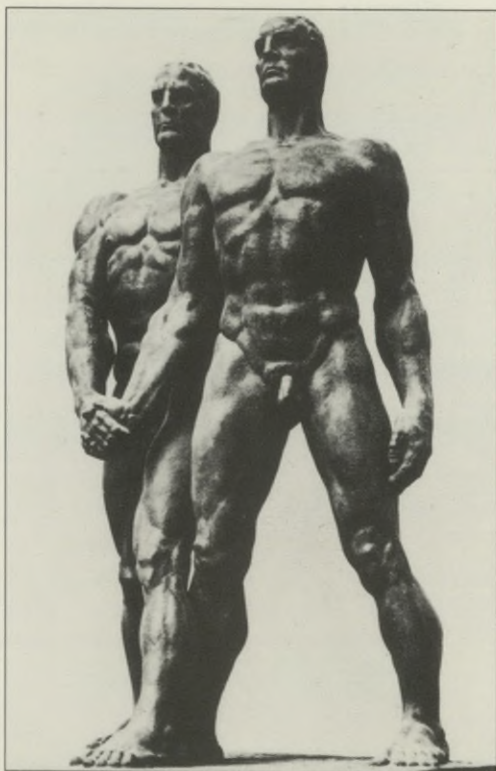
It needed the Platonic ingredient, however, to justify the interpretation that degenerate art was also a poison that had to be destroyed lest it corrupt the health of the nation. This national health could only be secured and fortified by images of heroism and physical beauty. Italy, it seems, was saved from a similar tragedy largely, perhaps, because the Italian Modernists who made the headlines early in the century were in fact precursors of Fascism. I am speaking of the Futurists who loudly proclaimed the need to smash the old and create a utopia of fast cars (or at least bicycles) and glorious wars (fig. 10). I am old enough to have heard their spokesman, Marinetti, in Vienna giving a reading of his Futurist poetry more than sixty years ago. I am afraid I thought he was just a clown, for I was struck by the ludicrous contrast between his dandified appearance – down to his remarkably resplendent shoe-shine – and his wild revolutionary talk as he howled in imitation of the noise of the machines he so admired (fig. 11).



11. Marinetti in Vienna, 1924

It appears from Golomstock's book that the artist of the Russian *avant garde* largely shared his megalomaniac ideology. They, too, aspired to refashioning the human psyche for the coming age. From that book I learnt that a certain Aleksei Gastev, a leading Communist, demanded that 'the art-worker must stand beside the man of science as a psycho-engineer; ... propaganda towards the forging of the new man is in essence the only content of the works of the futurist'. This view was later echoed by Stalin.²⁸

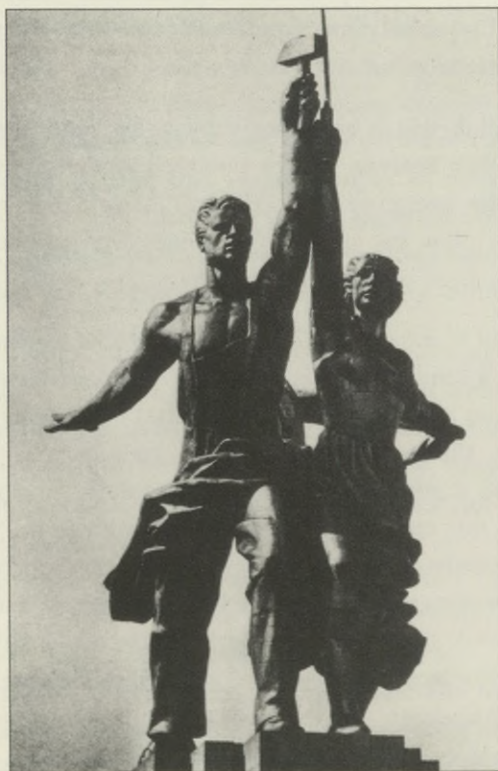
In Russia, no less than in Germany or China, those who held the levers of power had their own ideas about the future utopia and



12. Josef Thorak, *Comradeship*, made for the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition, Paris, 1937

demanded an art that was almost indistinguishable from that of Nazi Germany (Figs 12, 13). Yet, however tightly the frontiers were controlled, alternative views and alternative images could not wholly be kept out. The attractions of forbidden fruit were irresistible. It was precisely the style of art that was banned that seemed to embody a style of life infinitely more desirable than the one to which the majority was condemned.

It would be interesting to trace these influences and effects in more detail – the lure of pop music or of abstract art – but surely the most decisive impact must have been that of Western



13. Vera Mukhina, *Worker and Collective Farm Woman*, made for the Soviet Pavilion at the International Exhibition, Paris, 1937

television programmes that could be watched in East Germany, for these did not simply symbolise a style of life, they appeared to show it, however false and distorted they may have been in detail.

It is a relief to be able to look back on that nightmare as a thing of the past. But one must agree with those who remind us that its consequences are by no means over. In the recently united Germany and elsewhere, both East and West, it will prove far from easy to separate political opportunism from artistic achievement. This Academy, of course, has come to display an admirably even-handed pluralism in its Summer Exhibitions, but elsewhere the unholy link between ideological allegiance and artistic preference has not yet been broken.

I do not think this is a proper subject for moral sermons, it deserves sober analysis. Such unbiased analysis is too rarely found in the literature and criticism of art, but meanwhile another discipline has grown up that may well take its place. I refer to the field of social psychology.

I do not want to introduce a discipline in which I have never been at home as a kind of *Deus ex Machina*. I am not enamoured of its jargon, but at least it offers a fresh start because its preferred instrument, the questionnaire, must take its cue from the individual in a given situation. It is naturally all done in the interest of the market rather than that of the art historian. Perhaps my only credential for mentioning this approach is the fact that one of its pioneers, Pierre Bourdieu, occasionally quotes me in his book significantly called *La Distinction* with the witty subtitle *Critique sociale du jugement*,²⁹ a polemical counter to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. In contrast to Kant, who regarded the aesthetic judgement as wholly devoid of self-interest, Bourdieu seeks to investigate the human urge, and the need of groups to establish their distinctive identity by separating their style of life

from those they consider their rivals, their inferiors or even their superiors.

No doubt this need has always existed. There is no tribe, nation or class that does not want to distinguish itself from its neighbours. Thus, there is an instructive parallel between the belief in the Spirit of the Age and those other forms of collectivism such as racialism and nationalism which I mentioned at the outset of this lecture. Just as the historian learns to distrust the clichés about periods and ages as soon as he delves more deeply into the events of the past, so the serious traveller will come to dismiss the facile generalisation about races and peoples which have always loomed so large in the popular imagination. He will be struck by the differences in the styles of life he encounters, but here as always the question arises to what extent these peculiarities should be seen as the outward 'expression' of some invisible essence that is common to all members of the group. Is it not more likely that what is experienced as 'national character' is rather due to the cumulative 'impression' of shared conventions and traditions, in other words of culture? ³⁰

I was confronted with this question when I was assigned the task of lecturing to Austrian prisoners of war in this country towards the end of the Second World War. Admittedly, these men had every incentive to stress their national identity, since they hoped thereby to be released ahead of the Germans. But the form in which they insisted on *la distinction* still struck me: we are easy-going, they are rigid, we have the waltz, they their military marches. As a born Viennese who has never mastered the waltz I had never taken these stereotypes at all seriously, and I was aware of too many famous and infamous Austrians to whom they never applied. Yet, these simple people evidently believed what they said, and I began to ask myself whether the image they had of themselves was really so irrelevant. Could it not be that dancing to the music of 'their' Johann Strauss would bring out

a different aspect of their personality which might have been suppressed or undeveloped if they had always been exposed to Prussian marches? To be sure, we know to our cost that such feedback effects have their limits; both self-interest and propaganda can blot them out, and so can the change of generations.

It is with these changes over time that we must concern ourselves in returning to the form of collectivism known as the Spirit of the Age. We know that the young can easily be persuaded to establish their identity *vis-à-vis* the older generation by adopting a different type of music, a different language or art. No doubt the ideology of progress facilitated such a break with the past in conservative societies, but there were other social factors contributing to the acceleration of change. To put it briefly, the old pecking order embodied in the hierarchical structure of society has been much weakened through increasing mobility. When Reynolds spoke to his students about vulgarity and grandeur they recognised and accepted the social overtones of these terms, and even when the French *bohémien*s proclaimed their aim to *épater le bourgeois* they knew from which social class they wished to distinguish themselves. Our society is certainly far from classless, but it is much less structured than in the past. Alas, even welcome developments can have less desirable side effects, for man remains a social animal, always seeking the shelter of a group. You need only look out into the world to see how the disintegration of a large power structure has led to the appearance of any number of sub-groups protesting their separate identity. Hence, also, the tendency that we observe nearer home to replace traditional élites by novel groups of anti-élitist élites which mark our so-called youth culture.

I have been interested for some time in the way fashion models are expected to stand or move. These changing conventions seem to me a perfect testing ground for the theory of feedback in expression to which I have alluded. Try to adopt the contrasting

postures of the two models illustrated here (figs 14, 15) and you will know what I mean. The posture not so much expresses a given state of mind as affects it. It might be easier to make polite small talk if you follow the role model of 1910 than if you adopted the stance of the young lady I took from an issue of *Vogue* of 1986.

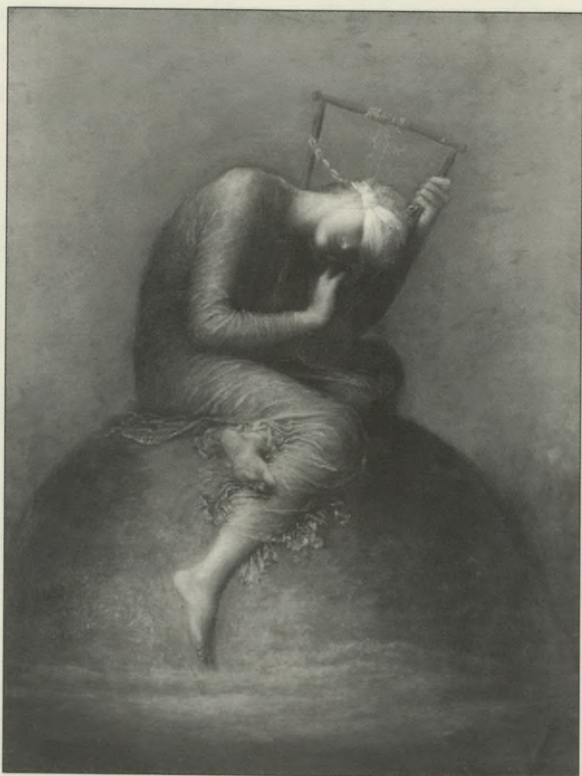


14. Fashion Plate, c. 1910



15. Fashion Plate from *Vogue*,
November 1986

One wonders what Seneca would have thought of that young lady's attire and deportment; maybe he would have been correct in his diagnosis that she had no use for syntax and spelling. But there is still a difference between her appearance and that of old Maecenas censured by the philosopher. The Roman obviously thought he need not care for decorum because, after all, he was on top. His behaviour was rather that of arrogant disdain described and recommended in Castiglione's *The Courtier* as *sprezzatura*. The modern version suggests a strenuous effort to



16. G.F. Watts, *Hope*, The Tate Gallery, London

break all the taboos in the book. Any manual of deportment for young ladies will show what I mean. Here, as always, it is the deviation from convention that is intended to impress you, but as soon as the deviation turns into a convention of its own, what I have called the 'logic of vanity fair'³¹ leads inexorably to its demise. For all I know that development may already have started and we may be in for a post-modern ideal of anti-anti-élitism in fashion as well as in building.

I have little doubt that this kind of process has been accelerated in our time by the medium of television that beams new role models into practically every home, and serves vested interests

in a rapid turnover. But, the psychological and social forces on which it relies govern not only the change of fashions but also the styles of art.

Art takes longer to produce and to market than clothing, but I believe that the desire for *la distinction* has rarely been absent from the movement of artistic styles. I think that in studying contemporary records and memoirs we can sometimes catch these movements on the wing, as it were, and I should like to quote two such examples. The first is a passage written by G. K. Chesterton in 1904. Chesterton was writing a biography of Watts (fig. 16), who was still alive at the time, yet he felt compelled to defend his enterprise of celebrating a master of what was obviously already a bygone epoch:

There is no more remarkable psychological element in history than the way in which a period suddenly becomes unintelligible. To the early Victorian period we have in a moment lost the key: the Crystal Palace is the temple of a forgotten creed. The thing always happens sharply: a whisper runs through the salons. Mr Max Beerbohm (fig. 17) waves a wand and a whole generation of great men and great achievement suddenly looks mildewed and unmeaning.³²



What was that whisper that ran through the salon? I suppose it was the phrase *vieux jeu*. It is sometimes sufficient to adopt a certain tone of voice in pronouncing such words as 'earnest' or 'grand'; the same quality can then easily be termed 'portentous', 'theatrical', 'corny' or 'kitsch' and a whole mode of art can be dismissed as slightly embarrassing. Remember how the words 'sentimental', 'anecdotal' and even, I regret to say, 'academic'

17. Max Beerbohm, *Self-portrait*, from *The Poets' Corner*, London and New York, 1943

changed colour to signify all that has become taboo. It would be interesting to write a history of art in terms of such rejections and pet aversions. It might suggest that really we should reverse the advice Reynolds took over from Harris that we should 'feign a relish till we feel it'. The improved version might read 'mock a relish till no one feels it'. In fact, it is not so much common ideals that mark a period as common aversions. These aversions, luckily, still leave plenty of scope for the young artist to do what he wants – well or badly – provided he heeds those social prohibitions. Thus, in somewhat approximating the history of artistic taste to fluctuations in fashion, we are in no need whatever to surrender to relativism in aesthetics as Bordieu has done. You need only think of the artistic scene in England around 1904, when Chesterton was writing, and of the various gifts and talents displayed by artists such as Walter Sickert (fig. 18), Wilson Steer or Augustus John. They all preserved their artistic integrity, but I would be surprised to see a painting from that period that emulated the high-minded ambitions of Watts.

Naturally, within this wide latitude new nuclei and new antagonisms arise which may turn into trends or even styles. The mechanism is tellingly illustrated in a book by Frank Rutter called *Evolution in Modern Art* dating from the 1920s.³³ The author recalled how at the beginning of the century during his visits to Paris his artist friends would try to wean him from his lazy visual habits which had prevented him from appreciating the Impressionists, and how they ultimately succeeded in convincing him on their joint walks that shadows were not always grey but sometimes purple.

Some ten years later, on another visit to Paris, Frank Rutter found the young artists were no longer interested in the true appearance of nature but only in abstract ideas and theories. 'A new phrase was an inspiration, a new word a joy. One day a painter I knew accompanied . . . a student of science to a lecture



18. Walter Sickert, *Ennui*, The Tate Gallery, London

on mineralogy. He returned from an improving afternoon with a new word – *crystallization*. It was . . . destined to become a talisman . . .’³⁴ Sitting in a café soon after, Rutter recalls that he incautiously remarked that he admired Velázquez. ‘Velasquez’,



19. Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Amboise Vollard*,
1909-10, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

was the outraged reaction, 'but he has no crystallization'. We do not have to accept this story as gospel truth to regard it as an instructive parable. Of course, Rütter was wrong in insinuating that it was this chance encounter that led to the rise of Cubism, but even if he had been right this would not explain the originality and wit with which Picasso and Braque made a new kind of painting out of such an unpromising slogan (fig. 19). As a committed individualist I do not think that the social pressures of which I am speaking can ever determinē or explain the talent that can lead to mastery, but they cannot be left out of the equation when we want to account for their success or failure.

The launching of any innovation can be seen as a social experiment, and the radical departure from the norm represented by Cubism would surely have remained stillborn if the ground had not been prepared by the ideology of historicism, the fear of being left behind in the march towards the unknown future. If Cubist paintings required an effort to relish, the air was full of rumours about other startling novelties in occult creeds, in philosophy and the sciences which appeared to fly in the face of common sense.³⁵ In stressing that a taste for these visual conundrums was an acquired taste I am not trying to suggest that the game was not worth the candle. Indeed, those who discovered its pleasures could experience, in Reynolds's famous words, 'a feeling of self-congratulation in knowing themselves capable of such sensations'.³⁶ The rewards of achieving *la distinction* could not be more neatly summed up.

Aesthetics is not an exact science; neither is social psychology. Who would dare to quantify the proportions of objective and subjective ingredients in the chemical compound of such an experience? Even so, I realise that in assigning the role of a catalyst to the whispers and slogans current in Paris among artists and intellectuals at the time, I may seem to have made concessions to my bugbear, the spirit of the age. I hope, however, that I may insist on the difference between such a causal hypothesis and the claims of our diagnosticians to discern in Picasso's Cubism a symptom of the same *Zeitgeist* that also manifested itself in Einstein's *Special Theory of Relativity*.

Having traversed so much ground, it is surely time for me to return, after the bumpy ride, to our initial examples. It is not difficult to discern the principles of exclusion or avoidance that link the styles of art illustrated by Osbert Lancaster to their respective styles of life. No doubt, the social élite that cultivated the Rococo in eighteenth-century France and Germany (fig. 1) desired to eliminate from their environment and their mode of

life anything that was uncouth, boorish, angular and unrefined, just as the earnest pair on the roof (fig. 2) felt all the better for having shunned the vulgarity of ornament which they considered to be close to crime. It may well be that the fulfilment of this desire also 'brought out' certain tendencies of their personalities, such as playfulness in the one, briskness in the other, tendencies that may conceivably also have coloured their choice of words, their gestures and facial expressions.

But even if, as I suggested at the outset, donning Rococo attire may make us 'feel different', we must not be tempted to conclude, as certain historians have done, that 'Rococo man' was altogether a different species, having nothing in common with his twentieth-century descendent.³⁷ It was this fatal illusion that led to the utopian attempt by the '*terribles simplificateurs*'³⁸ to fashion a 'new man' by controlling the powers of art. Here the puppet master was bound to fail, for human beings exist on many levels. They may yield to social pressures in one respect, and jealously guard their privacy in another. The man in the boudoir may have been a faithful member of the church or an avid reader of Voltaire, just as the pair on the roof may have been devotees of science or members of a cranky cult. We must never forget that style, like any other uniform, is also a mask which hides as much as it reveals.

FOOTNOTES

1. Osbert Lancaster, *Here, of all Places: The Pocket Lamp of Architecture*, London, John Murray, 1959, pp. 52-3; 168-9.
2. See especially my lecture, 'In Search of Cultural History', in *Ideals and Idols*, the chapter on 'The Psychology of Styles' in *The Sense of Order*, both Oxford, 1979, and 'From the Revival of Letters to the Reform of the Arts: Niccolò Niccoli and Filippo Brunelleschi', *The Heritage of Apelles*, Oxford, 1976, pp. 93-110. The bulky German anthology compiled by Peter Por and Sandor Rádnóti, *Stilepoche, Theorie und Diskussion*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, also included one of my contributions to this debate.
3. See my article 'Four Theories of Artistic Expression', *Architectural Association Quarterly*, XII/4, 1980, pp. 14-19.
4. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, CXIV, English translation as *Letters from a Stoic*, selected and translated by Robin Campbell, The Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1969, pp. 212-20.
5. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, edited by Robert R. Wark, Huntington Library, San Marino, 1959; Fifth Discourse, p.89.
6. *ed. cit.*, p. 171.
7. Jean Locquin, *La Peinture d'Histoire en France de 1747-1785*, Paris, 1912, where Berthélemy's painting of 1785, *Manlius Torquatus Condemning his Son to Death*, is illustrated.
8. *ed. cit.*, p. 277.
9. James Harris, *Philosophical Inquiries*, London, 1781, II, p. 234. Only the entire passage from which Reynolds quoted brings home to the modern reader the degree to which the task of the critic was seen to be like that of a nanny trying to coax a recalcitrant child into eating a wholesome but unloved dish: '... if, while we peruse some Author of high rank, we perceive we don't instantly relish him, let us not be disheartened – let us even FEIGN a Relish, till we find a Relish come. A morsel perhaps pleases us – Let us cherish it – Another Morsel, strikes us – let us cherish this also. – Let us thus proceed, and steadily persevere, till we find we can relish, not Morsels, but Wholes; and feel that, what began in FICTION, terminates in REALITY. The Film being in this way removed, we shall discover beauties, which we never imagined; and contemn (*sic*) for Puerilities, what we once foolishly admired.
10. See my article 'Reynolds's Theory and Practice of Imitation' in *Norm and Form*, London, 1966, pp. 129-34.
11. Sixth Discourse, *ed. cit.*, p.98.
12. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, London, 1972.
13. New York, 1958.

14. William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, London, 1859. II, p. 324 and p. 329.
15. John Ruskin, *The Works*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London and New York, 1930-1, III, p. 191.
16. Edinburgh Lecture, IV, *ed. cit.*, XII, p. 158.
17. Letter IV, p. 162.
18. George Boas, 'Il faut être de son temps', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Spring 1941, pp. 52-65.
19. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne, London, 1964.
20. Open letter to a group of prospective students, 1861, quoted after Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, *Artists on Art*, New York, 1945, p. 296.
21. K. R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London, 1957.
22. David S. Andrew, *Louis Sullivan and the Polemics of Modern Architecture*, Urbana and Chicago, 1985, p. 58.
23. *The Observer*, 29 September 1990.
24. London, 1990.
25. Werner Haftmann, *Banned and Persecuted. Dictatorship of Art Under Hitler*, Cologne, 1986.
26. Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918*, Cambridge, 1989.
27. English translation as *Degeneration*, New York, 1985. For the influence of Nordau see John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, Princeton, 1989, pp. 238-43.
28. *loc. cit.*, p. 27.
29. Paris, 1979.
30. The possibility of interpreting national styles as the expression of national character was taken for granted by writers as diverse as J.J. Winckelmann, John Ruskin, Heinrich Wölfflin and Nikolaus Pevsner. For an alternative approach to the whole question see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections of the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1983.
31. *Ideals and Idols*, Oxford, 1979.
32. G. K. Chesterton, G. F. Watts, London, 1904, p. 3.
33. London, 1926.
34. *op. cit.*, p. 83.
35. See my article 'From Careggi to Montparnasse', in *Il se rendit en Italie...*, *Etudes offertes à André Chastel*, Paris, 1987, pp. 667-77.
36. *op. cit.*, p. 282.
37. See my address to the *Seventh International Congress of Germanic Studies in Göttingen*, 1985, 'Sind eben alles Menschen gewesen', English translation in *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 1987, XIII/4, pp. 686-99.
38. The expression is due to Georges Clémenceau.

PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

Fig. 1 & 2: courtesy of John Murray Publishers, printed by permission of the Osbert Lancaster Estate.

Fig. 9: © Stiftung Seebüll Ada und Emil Nolde.

Fig. 10: courtesy of Luca Carrà, Milan.

Fig. 12: courtesy of The Board of Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Fig. 13: courtesy of the Iskusstvo Russian Art Gallery, Moscow.

Fig. 15: courtesy of *Vogue*, © The Condé Nast Publications Ltd, photograph by Steven Meisel.

Fig. 17: courtesy of Eva Reichmann.

Fig. 19: © DACS 1991. Photograph: I. Zotin.

All other photographs courtesy of the owners.

