

Discovery or invention? The difference between art and communication according to Ernst Gombrich

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This paper addresses an issue raised, though never fully discussed, by Ernst Gombrich in many of his studies: what conditions need to be satisfied for a form of communication to become art?

Gombrich's interest in the image as a form of communication is well known.¹ He never identifies art with communication, nor does he create hierarchies. Therefore, what are the 'symptoms' of art? That is, the distinguishing features and modes whereby art can be recognised as such.² The difference is not one of principle: Gombrich would never have dreamt of separating the creation of art and advertising in ontological terms, based on provenances, corporations, materials and target audiences. The difference is not dictated by the self-proclaimed identity of the 'artwork' compared to that of the 'advertising poster', but is decided on 'local' grounds, taking into account the internal dynamics: a poster may thus also be artistic. What I aim to do here is to disentangle and consider more generally some properties that appear to connote the artistic text in Gombrich's epistemological world.

In several of his interpretations of the effectiveness of the visual image, Gombrich raises the issue of how communication works in artistic processes. Distinguishing between a 'poetry of images' and 'the artistic use of visual media', he places the accent on the 'arousal functions' in the field of art, which he believes to be 'observable in more complex interaction'.³

¹ While James Elkins lists ten reasons why he believes Gombrich is not an art historian, in mapping out the world of twentieth-century art criticism, Gianni Carlo Sciolla includes him in the chapter entitled 'The Fortune of the Iconological Method'. The page on Gombrich, however, has its own title, 'Ernst Gombrich: from Iconology to the Theory of Communication'. 'Developing the thesis of *Art and Illusion*' – Sciolla writes – 'Gombrich produced a thoroughgoing theory of the visual image. In the book *The Image and the Eye*, he studied the properties of the image as an artwork and its specific functions as regards the onlooker: capacity to communicate, appeal, inform and involve emotionally; allusive, symbolic and aesthetic value.' See James Elkins, 'Ten Reasons Why E. H. Gombrich Is Not Connected to Art History', *The Gombrich Archive*, www.gombrich.co.uk/commentary 2005 and Gianni Carlo Sciolla, *La critica d'arte del Novecento*, Turin, UTET, 1995, 290.

² Starting from epistemologically different premises, Nelson Goodman recognised some 'symptoms of the aesthetic' useful in describing an object as an artwork: syntactic density, semantic density, syntactic repleteness, exemplificationality and multiple and complex reference.

³ Gombrich, 'The Visual Image: Its Place in Communication', *Scientific American*. Special Issue on Communication, 272, 1972, 82-96. Reprinted in E. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, London: Phaidon 1982, 137-161, 155.

The juxtaposition of propaganda and art dates back to 1939 and was justified in the name of a common drive to 'propagate' ideas or values.⁴ Even then, Gombrich wondered if propaganda only affected ephemeral production, and if not, how it might have a say in the creation of great art. He also hinted at the problem while reviewing Charles Morris' *Signs, Language and Behavior* (1949): 'The distinction between poetry and language has always been accepted as natural; the distinction between art and imagery is only gradually becoming familiar.'⁵ The time is now ripe to map out the issue, which could be useful in highlighting the relevance also in contemporary practice of a 'non-essentialist' vision of art, like that of Gombrich.

'Something with a skill'

'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.'⁶ The opening remark in the *Story of Art* is clearly a statement of intent. It is important to grasp the meaning of this claim. According to Arthur Danto, Gombrich 'was not among those who took Duchamp seriously' and therefore would appear to be disqualified from explaining the art of our time. For Danto, the incriminating evidence is Gombrich's comment that: 'there are horribly many books, that I read, about Marcel Duchamp, and all this business when he sent a urinal to an exhibition and people said he had "redefined art" (...) what triviality!'⁷ The problem here is an incompatibility of visions. Gombrich is not getting at Duchamp, but at an ontological definition of art in the canonical philosophical manner: all this striving to find necessary and sufficient reasons why Warhol's *Brillo Box* or Duchamp's *Fountain* have been elevated from everyday objects to works of art. The rebellion against beauty is thus complete and art, on its last legs, acknowledges its own metaphysical capacity for self-reflection: what is 'trivial' for Gombrich is not Duchamp's action but this approach to knowledge.

Danto senses this, but convinced that the 'horrible book' was also a reference to himself – 'he was letting me know that he had not read *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Or he had read it enough to consider it trivial'⁸ – he goes on the defensive by claiming that the contemporary is beyond Gombrich's ken. He attempts to demonstrate it, however, with an ill-chosen example, belittling the meaning of a very clear passage in *Art and Illusion*. Seen through Danto's

⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Art and Propaganda', *The Listener*, 7 December, 1939, 1118-20.

⁵ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Review of Charles Morris, *Signs, Language and Behaviour*', *Art Bulletin*, 31, 1949, 68-75. Reprinted in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Reflections on the History of Art*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1987, 246.

⁶ Ernst Gombrich, *Story of Art*, London, 1950, 1995 edn.

⁷ Ernst Gombrich in *A Lifelong Interest: Conversations on Art and Science with Didier Eribon*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993, 72. See Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*, Princeton, 1997. On the subject of a conversation between Gombrich and Bridget Riley, Richard Woodfield points out that Gombrich was not hostile to contemporary art. He only rejected certain ideologies, particularly those designed to venerate and to claim that our new should 'keep up with the times'. See Richard Woodfield's notes to '(With Bridget Riley): The use of colour and its effect: the how and the why' (1994), in R. Woodfield, ed., *The Essential Gombrich*, London: Phaidon, 1996.

⁸ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 218, note 4.

'essentialist' lens, Gombrich putatively 'speaks of the pictures on the sides of cereal boxes, which would have caused Giotto's contemporaries to gasp, so far would they have been beyond the power of the best artists of the time to capture them'. Danto goes on: 'It would be like the Virgin taking pity on Saint Luke and manifesting herself on the panel on which he had at best been able to set down a wooden "likeness".'⁹ However, the comparison of cereal boxes with a Platonic virgin and the panel with 'a wooden likeness' is Danto's own invention. Here is what Gombrich actually wrote:

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. Never before has there been an age like ours when the visual image was so cheap in every sense of the word. We are surrounded and assailed by posters and advertisements, by comics and magazine illustrations. We see aspects of reality represented on the television screen and in the movies, on postage stamps and on food packages. Painting is taught at school and practiced at home as therapy and as a pastime, and many a modest amateur has mastered tricks that would have looked like sheer magic to Giotto. Perhaps even the crude coloured renderings we find on a box of breakfast cereal would have made Giotto's contemporaries gasp. I do not know if there are people who conclude from this that the box is superior to a Giotto. I am not of them. But I think that the victory and vulgarization of representational skills create a problem for both the historian and the critic.

The Greeks said that to marvel is the beginning of knowledge and where we cease to marvel we may be in danger of ceasing to know.¹⁰

What is striking in this passage is the remoteness from any aesthetic conception of art, whereby the beauty of the painting coincides with the beauty of the subject. The passage chosen by Danto, to corroborate his own thesis is inappropriate. On the contrary, the passage shows the potential and the open-mindedness of a line of thought focused on the methods of the artistic 'craft', and especially the development of illusionistic means. Gombrich also reads works of Pop Art in this key and, noting the marvel that they elicit, deduces that in this case too there is room for conjectures and reflection.

Ever since 1928-33, when Gombrich attended the Vienna Institute of Art History directed by Julius von Schlosser, he looked to the *realia* of a given culture,

⁹ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 50.

¹⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, New York-London: Phaidon 1959, 2004 edn, 8.

systems of 'notation' to be investigated by replacing supra-individual History with the storytelling of movements both breaking with and continuing a tradition.

We need only walk through any major gallery to see that in the end Constable's method found acceptance. Green is no longer considered 'nasty'. We can read much brighter pictures, such as the landscapes by Corot and, what is more, enjoy the suggestion of light without missing the tonal contrasts which were thought indispensable. We have learned a new *notation* and expanded the range of our awareness.¹¹

It was in Vienna that the critique undermining the German approach of the *Geistesgeschichte* began to take root, i.e. the attack on notions such as the strict dependence of cultural elements on the social in the assumption of a 'Spirit of the Time' (*Zeitgeist*), which *a priori* explained everything from the outside. Gombrich opposed this view with a *Kulturgeschichte* in which 'a picture is a hypothesis which we test by looking at it. I don't ask myself how we look at the world, but how we look at pictures.'¹² In his view, 'in the Western tradition, painting has indeed been pursued as a science. All the works of this tradition that we see displayed in our great collections apply discoveries that are the result of ceaseless experimentation.'¹³ And so 'the problems and values of art (...) have emerged from the problems and values of craft. It is a fact of history that most of the great artists of the western tradition have felt involved with the solution of problems rather than with the expression of their personality.'¹⁴ Art is investigating problems. The theory of 'Art as Such'¹⁵ is completely alien to his mentality.

¹¹ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 48.

¹² 'Un tableau est une hypothèse que nous testons en le regardant. Je ne me demande pas comment nous regardons le monde, mais comment nous regardons les tableaux.' Didier Eribon and Ernst H. Gombrich, *Ce que l'image nous dit, Entretiens sur l'art et la science*. Paris, [1974] 1991. As Richard Woodfield says, 'for Gombrich perception of form could not be divorced from perception of meaning. Recognizing that pictures mediated experience of their created world, he emphasized the necessity of understanding the nature of that mediation and the function of imagery at the time that it was produced'. See Richard Woodfield, 'Gombrich, Formalism and the Description of Works of Art', *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Formalism held by the Slovenian Society for Aesthetics*, Ljubljana, 2 May, 119-131.

¹³ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 34.

¹⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Art and Self-Transcendence', in Arne Tiselius et al., eds, *The Place of Value in a World of Facts* (Nobel Symposium 14) Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1970, 125-133. Reprinted in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols. Essays on Values in History and in Art*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1979, 125-6.

¹⁵ 'I don't know if you know the wonderful paper by M. H. Abrams, "Art-as-Such" in his volume *Doing Things with Texts*, in which he discusses the coming of the new conception of art in the 18th century. As he rightly says, people in the 17th century admired paintings and sculptures, but no one talked about art as such. That's the philosophical background of the quote. In a sense, it is quite relevant in all those discussions about Leonardo, art and science. For Leonardo, art was a skill, applied both to his scientific experiments and to painting'. Ernst H. Gombrich (with David Carrier), 'THE BIG PICTURE: David Carrier talks with Ernst Gombrich', *Artforum*, 66-69, Vol. 34 (6), 1996, 66.

In the folds of language

On this solid epistemological ground the first seed of the difference between art and communication was sown, as is illustrated by the case of verbal wit raised to a 'paradigm of art'. In an argument, comparing the processes in these activities rather than their 'nature', Gombrich demonstrates an analogy between dream, joking and art. He rediscovers in the pun the 'mechanism of the primary process', as interpreted by Sigmund Freud ('condensation, displacement and transformation into an image').¹⁶ The possibility of sharing represents the decisive difference between the pun and the dream, since the joke is 'the most social of all psychic achievements'.¹⁷ Gombrich refers directly to Freud:

'the work on the joke manifests itself (...) in the choice of such verbal materials and such imaginary situations which make it possible for the old game with words and ideas to withstand the test of criticism, and for this purpose all peculiarities of the vocabulary and all constellations of associated connections must be most skilfully exploited.'¹⁸

Gombrich deduces that a good joke is not an invention but a 'discovery': it 'demands a brief descent into the cellars of the unconscious, but also an elaboration by the preconscious of the finds made down there.'¹⁹ In contrast to mere punning, a successful witticism must satisfy at least two standards, that of meaning and that of form. In this case, language meets us halfway, just as coincidences meet us halfway. However, 'both coincidences and language only meet those half-way who are already on the road.'²⁰

Nothing automatic, therefore, nor totally new: with fewer difficulties than a dream, a witticism appears as a minor 'miracle' of assembly, which Gombrich sees as being able to exemplify artistic procedures. If the occasion arises, he establishes a boundary:

In questioning the proposition that artistic creation can be identified with communication, I do not want to deny that the artist is concerned with the effect of his work on others. But this effect results from the manipulation of his medium, the lines, colours or tones through which he can move the human heart (...) What concerns me is only that all arts make systematic use of such effects and that the artist therefore builds on observations he has

¹⁶ Ernst. H. Gombrich, 'Verbal Wit as a Paradigm of Art: the Aesthetics Theories of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)', 93-115, 1981, in Ernst. H. Gombrich, *Tributes. Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1984, 104-107.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens', in *Monatsschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie*, 1901, *Gesammelte Werke*, Frankfurt am Main, 1940-68, London 1953-74, VI, 204.

¹⁸ Freud, 'Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens', 146.

¹⁹ Gombrich, 'Verbal Wit as a Paradigm of Art', 106.

²⁰ Here Gombrich refers to a letter from Freud to Ernst Jung, 16 April 1909. Gombrich, 'Verbal Wit as a Paradigm of Art', 106 and note 11, 256.

made on himself and on others. That is why I like to insist on the formulation that the artist must be a discoverer. Just as the verbal joke is discovered in the language, so the masters of other artistic media find their effects prefigured in the language of style which – to return to Freud's words – 'meets us half-way'. Even if Freud was right in accepting Merežkovskij's intuition that Leonardo had developed his ideal on womanhood out of memories of his childhood – something that can neither be proven nor refuted – the artist must in any case discover it among the female types of his master Verrocchio, which he varied and refined.²¹

Communicational forms are only required to come up with an idea, whereas art forms modify in the wake of schemas and conventions. This is the first distinction: discovery versus inventing a clever idea. It explains why the psychology of perception is congenial to Gombrich. It is useful in giving meaning to both the production and reception of the message: for example, the study of illusionism cannot overlook the artist's actions of aiming and grasping, which intercepts given combinations and then adjusts them: 'making and matching'. Gombrich also explored the theory of the perception of symbolic material from firsthand experience. During the 1939-1945 war, he worked in the BBC monitoring service: 'we kept constant watch on radio transmissions from friend and foe (...) You had to keep your projection flexible, to remain willing to try out fresh alternatives, and to admit the possibility of defeat.'²²

Although founding elements of this theory, psychology and practice, however, do not teach us how to understand the articulation of messages. Here Karl Bühler's linguistics takes over.

The right relations

While Gombrich was pursuing his Schlosserian interest in *Kunstprache* (artistic language), he also attended Karl Bühler's lectures at the University of Vienna. A professor of psychology who advocated rethinking Gestalt within a *Sprachtheorie* (theory of language),²³ Bühler has adopted an approach that was crucial to and fully met the requirements of Gombrich, who had eschewed any purely aesthetic or formalistic interpretation of the image:

It has become clearer and clearer to me since I defended it against Husserl in 1918 that thinking this model through correctly to its logical conclusion will

²¹ Gombrich, 'Verbal Wit as a Paradigm of Art', 108-111.

²² Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 204.

²³ Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie*, Jena, 1934 (English trans., *Karl Bühler. Theory of Language: the Representational Function of Language*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990).

breach certain limitations of phenomenology and provide epistemology with a new approach derived from linguistics as a science (...).²⁴

According to Bühler, the right scientific approach for a theory of language is sematology. Starting from a biologically grounded outlook, there is no animal social life, nor exchanges between members of a collectivity, without sign systems or sense organs guiding, indicating and controlling behaviour. These 'deictics' are both vocal and gestural (i.e. visual). They are an *analogon* of language through the body. Semiotizing presupposes reciprocity. For Bühler, the function of human language is threefold: expression (notifying), appeal (calling) and representation. Gombrich grasped from Bühler that 'the meaning of signs is conveyed not by their overall appearance, but by what are called distinctive features'.²⁵ In the preface to the sixth edition of *Art and Illusion*, entitled 'Images and Signs', Gombrich reflects on the processes leading from images to signs. He observes the cases of presentation able to 'mobilize our imagination', when a conventional sign is re-transformed and replaced by an image: 'Iovem velut praesentem intuens motus animo est.'²⁶ This fascinating topic lies outside the scope of the current paper, but I mention it to demonstrate just how far Gombrich had metabolized Bühler's *Organonmodell*. He admits that:

the visual image is supreme in its capacity for arousal (...) The power of visual impressions to arouse our emotions has been observed since ancient times (...) The succulent fruit, the seductive nude, the repellent caricature, the hair-raising horror can all play on our emotions and engage our attention. Nor is this arousal function of sights confined to definite images. Configurations of lines and colours have the potential to influence our emotions.²⁷

In the 2001 Preface to *Art and Illusion*, he also offers a new criterion for distinguishing art from the 'triumphs of the entertainment industry': i.e. art gives 'breath and movement'. Although shifting the goalposts, he claims that art has to be

²⁴ As Gombrich was later to admit, 'I do think I have been one of those people who tried to get away from a purely aesthetic or formalistic appreciation of the image, and to treat what I called the linguistics of the visual image, the poetics of the visual image'. Gombrich (with Carrier), 'THE BIG PICTURE', 69.

²⁵ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 'Preface to the 2000 Edition: Images and Signs', XXVIII-XXIX. They are stable elements, something rather like the nuclear semes in Algirdas Julien Greimas's *Structural Semantics*. See Algirdas Julien Greimas (1966), *Structural Semantics*, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

²⁶ 'Beholding Zeus as if face to face moved his spirit.' Titus Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, XVI.xxviii.5, in Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, XXXII. See the variety of artistic versions of the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea or the debate on the Eucharistic enunciation begun at Port-Royal which culminated in Louis Marin's theories. Victor Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect. From Ovid to Hitchcock*, University of Chicago press, 2006; Louis Marin, *La parole mangée*, Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1986.

²⁷ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'The Visual Image: Its Place in Communication', *Scientific American. Special Issue on Communication*, 272, 1972, 82-96. Reprinted in Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 138-140.

achieved within the limits of the medium and pleases by reminding, not deceiving.²⁸ At this point he reiterates his comments on the colour of light in John Constable's landscapes.²⁹ This is worth dwelling on. An illusionistic device like the diorama is very entertaining, but its aim is to deceive. In the case of Constable, on the other hand: 'Exactly how he does it in any particular instance is his secret, but the word of power which makes this magic possible is known to all artists – it is relationships.' Bühler called this assessment of the right relations 'relational fidelity', i.e. fidelity not to the material aspect of the object, but to its syntactic relations.

Using the words of Winston Churchill, Gombrich describes these relations as 'transmitted in code', 'turned from light into paint' and 'cryptograms'.³⁰ Not until each detail has been placed in correct relation to everything else that is on the canvas can it be deciphered, or retranslated from simple pigment into light. And the light in question is not the light of nature but the light of art. Klaus Lepsky³¹ rightly points out that Gombrich saw that artworks and language both convey contents through the possibilities of expression. He thus confirms the benefits to be had when art historians show an interest in linguistics. In terms of Greimas's semiotics, which are close to Bühler's sematology, one would say that the artwork, especially as regards its plastic, abstract dimension, conserves the traces of its production, and therefore that the 'cryptograms' are often intelligible. But this is not sufficient. An analysis of the semantics must be complemented by a theory of rhetoric, which for Gombrich is 'the exemplary art',³² a breeding ground for the even very subtle strategies that the artist uses to prescribe responses and effects for his 'cryptograms'.

Arousing emotions

Gombrich complains about the fact that aesthetics has not acknowledged the status of rhetoric. Widely exploited in artistic practice as *de facto* the 'realm where poetry and propaganda meet', rhetoric has not enjoyed an equivalent role in theories.³³ In defining rhetoric, Gombrich turns to a wider definition of art, as skill or mastery, a

²⁸ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, XXXIV-XXXV.

²⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 'From Light into Paint', 38.

³⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 'From Light into Paint', 39.

³¹ See Klaus Lepsky, 'Art and Language: Ernst H. Gombrich and Karl Bühler's Theory of Language' in R. Woodfield, ed., *Gombrich on Art and Psychology*, 27-41, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, 39. Lepsky, however, has many reservations about the concept of language which, in the wake of Nelson Goodman's partial discussion, he describes as a 'pure symbolic system'. His reading of Goodman evidently stopped at *Languages of Art* (1969), since he does not consider his change of view, thanks to Ernst Cassirer, in *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978). See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Arts*, Indianapolis-New York: Hackett, 1969; Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett, 1978; and Paolo Fabbri, ed., *Nelson Goodman. Arte in teoria arte in azione*, Milan, 2010.

³² Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Review of David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*', 6-9, *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 15, 1990, 9.

³³ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Art and Propaganda', 1118.

know-how which is never intangible, as in 'the art of war' or 'the art of love'.³⁴ He makes it coincide fully with oratory:

In art this kind of distinction is now labelled elitism, an ugly vogue word which still points to a real problem as long as you look at art as an instrument designed to create a psychological effect. In this respect the model for the ancient world was not painting nor even poetry but oratory, the art of gaining friends and influencing people, which was of such vital importance in the ancient democracies.³⁵

Art, therefore, is the exercise of a power, found in action, for example, in the cases of associations between image and word.³⁶ Of the practice of labelling artworks *Untitled*, Gombrich observes that 'the term is not merely a negative instruction. I do not recall having seen a flower piece or a landscape with that appellation. Like Whistler's titles, it is also an instruction to adopt a given mental set.'³⁷

The rhetorical dimension requires more due distinctions. Thus, while the most talented masters continued to repeat time-honoured formulas, Leonardo saw the painter as a rival to the poet, and with his *Grotesque Heads*, he tried out the effectiveness of art in eliciting fear, laughter or compassion. 'A painter made a picture in such a way that anyone seeing it immediately yawned and this incident was repeated as long as his eyes stayed on the picture, which was moreover a feigned yawning.'³⁸ For Gombrich, Leonardo's *Trattato* provides evidence at several points of the importance that the great artist attributed to the power to amaze, frighten or make the flesh creep. We find the same kind of emphasis in his sketches for the *Flood*, which, according to Kenneth Clark led to the 'frank and uninhibited' demonstration offered by Giulio Romano in the Sala dei Giganti.³⁹ On the subject of

³⁴ Gombrich reminds us that 'the word style comes from *stilus* which first meant an instrument of writing and then a mode of writing, and then a mode of architecture, and later a mode of painting'. Ernst H. Gombrich (with Hayden White et al.), 'Interview: Ernst Gombrich', *Diacritics*, 47-51, Winter, Vol. 1 (2), 1971, 47.

³⁵ E. Gombrich, 'Experiment and Experience in the Arts', *Proceedings of the Royal Institution of Great Britain*, 1980, vol. 52, 113-114. Reprinted in Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 223.

³⁶ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Image and Word in Twentieth-Century Art', *Word and Image*, 1, 1985, 213-241, reprinted in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Topics of our Time*, London: Phaidon 1991, 162-187.

³⁷ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Image and Word in Twentieth-Century Art', 172. A few pages earlier Gombrich had discussed James Abbott McNeill Whistler's painting, *Arrangement in Gray and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871) and concluded that the title, despite the picture, predisposed the onlooker psychologically towards the sensorial qualities of the paint. Gombrich, 'Image and Word in Twentieth-Century Art', 169.

³⁸ 'Uno pittore fece una pittura che, chi la vedeva, subito sbadigliava, e tanto replicava tale accidente, quanto si teneva l'occhi alla pittura, la quale anchora lei era finta sbadigliare.' Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, edited by Amos Philip McMahon, Princeton (NJ), 1956, no. 33, quoted in Ernst H. Gombrich, 'The Grotesque Heads', 1954, in Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Heritage of Apelles. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 57-75, Oxford: Phaidon, 1976, 70.

³⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'The Grotesque Heads', 70-72. See Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci: An Account of His Development as an Artist*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939. See also Ernst H.

Giulio Romano, Gombrich goes so far as to suggest that the architecture of the Palazzo Te in Mantua is entirely founded on the doctrine of rhetoric.⁴⁰ Conceived by drawing on ancient sources, this example suggests a valid alternative to the theory of the *Zeitgeist*. In the Italian Renaissance, the ancient treatises on oratory were still referred to for the purposes of forging a link between form and meaning. Sebastiano Serlio's opinion was that the 'mixture' with the rustic in the palace 'is very pleasing to the eye and represents per se great strength'.⁴¹ According to Gombrich, Serlio is making a precise reference to the Treatise of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60–07 BC) known in English as *On the Arrangement of Words*. Dionysius speaks about the impression of strength that can be achieved through the absence of refinement by using hard or even harsh sounds. He compares these effects with the crudeness of primitive constructions: 'not unlike those ancient buildings made of uncut square blocks, not even arranged at right angles, which give the impression of an improvised piling-up of rough stones'.⁴² Giulio Romano accordingly introduced the concept of the non-finite work in nature. The process of constructing the palace forced him to improvise and so he adopted a *negligentia diligens* which brought an apparent disdain for the rules to the practice of improvisation.

At the 'dramatic and rhetorical' level – Gombrich concludes – the work is not propaganda in the ordinary sense of the word, as a preaching to the masses that attempts to convince them or proclaim a truth. Rather, it is 'man-made dream for those who are awake':⁴³ the transcendency of a power in the immanence of the work, insofar as it is a symbolic dimension outside current existence and reintroduces new potential. In its own autonomous way art shapes alternative versions of the world, which at times are very influential.

An exemplary case study: Raphael's *Madonna della sedia*

In one enquiry Gombrich explicitly describes the feature of artistic communication as opposed to mere visual communication: i.e. his interpretation of Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* (Fig. 1) and the 'scandalous' interference of a poster advertising a Philips razor by Frédéric Henri K. Henrion (Fig. 2).⁴⁴

Gombrich, 'Leonardo and the Magicians: Polemics and Rivalry' (1982), in Ernst H. Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance IV*, Oxford and Chicago, 1986, 61-88.

⁴⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Architecture and Rhetoric in Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te', in Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters*, 161-170.

⁴¹ Sebastiano Serlio, *Regole generali di Architettura*, Venice, 1537, 1. IV, p. 133v: 'è molto grata all'occhio et rappresenta in se grande fortezza'.

⁴² Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On the Arrangement of Words*, 22, 2.

⁴³ Plato, *The Sophist*, L, 266c, in Gombrich, 'Architecture and Rhetoric', 170. See also Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 8.

⁴⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia*', *Charlton Lectures on Art*, King's College in the University of Durham, Newcastle upon Tyne, 7 November 1955, Oxford, 1956. Reprinted in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Norm and Form. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, I, London: Phaidon, 1966, 64-80.

Again, Gombrich does not tackle the issue systematically. But his preoccupations *ex post facto* with how and why Raphael's *tondo* is a masterpiece⁴⁵ enable us to explore the work and then consider his findings more generally. To avoid any misunderstandings, Gombrich admits being sceptical about the potential results of a formal analysis. This is of crucial interest:

The idea of the underlying *Gestalt*, the structure of the work of art which determines all its parts, provides no explanations for that mystery of unity we are after. On the contrary, it frequently tricks us into confusing explanation with mere descriptive devices. We stand in front of our lantern slides and talk of diagonals and triangles, of spiralling movements filling the frame. We know all the while that the diagonals are not diagonals, and the triangles not triangles, and we also know that there must be countless pictures organized on such same principles which are not masterpieces. But do we always make sure that we are not misunderstood?⁴⁶



Fig. 1 Raffaello, *Madonna della Sedia*, 1513-1514, oil on panel, 71 × 71 cm, Palazzo Pitti, Firenze.

Fig. 2 Frédéric Henri K. Henrion, Advertisement for Philishave, a Philips Razor, 1955.

Any study which fails to connect expression to content or – to use Gombrich's terms – which does not consider the way the artist 'translates the concept into visual forms

⁴⁵ Like Karl Popper, Gombrich rejects the idea that history has a preordained course. From Popper he borrows the new definition of scientific discovery: 'we can and must formulate hypotheses. Only their confutation, however, is definitive (...) this was one of my life aims, my programme: to be able to rely on not merely subjective knowledge, knowledge that was recalcitrant to the art history tittle-tattle. Concepts are merely paper money to be exchanged for cash. Putting forward illuminating hypotheses, this has come to me from my epistemologist friend Karl Popper'. 'Quando avete qualcosa di serio da dire (...) Mutamenti nel modo di guardare l'arte' [1990], in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Dal mio tempo*, edited by Richard Woodfield, Turin: Einaudi, 1999, 99.

⁴⁶ Gombrich, 'Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia*', 73-74.

and applies it'⁴⁷ is bound to generate misunderstanding. Gombrich thus aims to supply a description that is as rigorous as possible. He argues that the circular image of the Madonna and Child, with its calm, relaxed simplicity, actually conceals a complex composition, which is a 'tour de force'. The same idea of the rotational movement is found in Henrion's poster of the man shaving while he sees himself in a convex mirror. Gombrich explains this type of inspiration, both for Raphael and Henrion, in terms of the tendency of the unconscious mind to condense images, as happens in the previously mentioned case of wit: from the id's swirling chaos, the ego chooses what best fits its purposes.

However, this is not enough to make a work of art. Henrion – Gombrich points out – merely solves his problem: to persuade men how easy shaving is with this razor, he 'invents' the clever idea of the spiral. He is not interested in fitting this dynamic figural principle into a figurativeness that is ultimately harmonious.⁴⁸ He finds the principle and simply applies it: 'wit illuminates and evaporates'.⁴⁹ The power of Raphael's painting, on the other hand, lies in the self-contained systematic unity of the figural and the figurative, achieved by exploiting the symbol of the circular diagram and harmonising it perfectly with the representation of the mother and child. The artist achieves coherency between two types of arrangement, made at different times. He sets the circular structure, previously used in the Vatican rooms, in the rigid format of the *tondo* and applies it to the group of the Madonna and Child. He then combines the intimacy of this 'genre' group with the formula of a direct eye contact with the onlooker, previously only usually found in altarpieces and in Raphael's case, only in the Sistine Madonna. This additional direct relationship with the onlooker in a small-size painting for private use is a bold move that supports rather than undermines the overall unity, thanks to the strong welding between elements.

The work of art is such insofar as it transforms a traditional schema, no matter how hieratic. The *tondo* has a history as a created convention that developed through the discoveries of predecessors (Leonardo, Michelangelo and Gianfrancesco Rustici) and culminated in the *Madonna della Sedia*. This is a consolidated approach in Gombrich's theory. His analysis of Raphael, however, shows how the *inventio* in a given tradition cannot transcend the modes of its *dispositio* and *compositio*, and indeed, 'we ought to know more about the way complex orders are created'.⁵⁰ Gombrich delves back as far as Aristotle's *Poetics*:

⁴⁷ Gombrich, 'Raphael's Madonna della Sedia', 77.

⁴⁸ On the figural as dynamics of the onlooker's desires, see Jean-François Lyotard *Discours, figure*, Paris 1971. French semioticians more often endorse Claude Zilberberg's theory. The distinction between /figurative/ and /non figurative/ lies within the figure and introduces two modes of figuration. The /figurative/ is content. At the level of expression it corresponds to an element in the natural word. The /figural/, on the other hand, is the geometry of underlying tensions that are triggered off between the components at the figurative level and the qualities at plastic level. From the epistemological point of view, the figural is constant, while the figurative is variable. See Claude Zilberberg, *Raison et poétique du sens*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988.

⁴⁹ Gombrich, 'Raphael's Madonna della Sedia', 78.

⁵⁰ Gombrich, 'Raphael's Madonna della Sedia', 77.

In Aristotle we not only read that art is imitation, mimesis, but also that it must be an imitation of one thing entire, 'the parts of it being so connected that if any of them be either transposed or taken away, the whole will be destroyed or changed; for if the presence or absence of something makes no difference it is not a part of the whole.'⁵¹

He admits that unlike in Henrion's poster, in Raphael's painting 'compact grouping and life-likeness cease to conflict and are discovered to interact: the formal symmetries impart a sense of ease to the intricate group that, in its turn, reinforces our feeling of balance.'⁵² In practice the embodiment of the spiralling movement in the masses of the bodies is so successful that it envelopes the enunciatonal counterpoint of the direct gaze 'into the camera' without jarring. This gaze positions the onlookers in front of the painting and prescribes their reactions. Here Gombrich is re-elaborating Bühler's lessons on the syntax of gestures.⁵³ Drawing attention to a *pentimento* in the painting, he dwells on the description of the exact degree of torsion of the Madonna's head towards us, which is the rhythm of its beat, if a musical comparison is allowed. The torsion is echoed by the child's eyes, aligned and in rhythm with the central linchpin of the embrace, highlighted by the child's projecting elbow. A semantic field defined by the direction of the gaze extends to the whole body, articulating the quality and emotional intensity of the elements.

In short, Gombrich suggests at least five criteria to distinguish art from non-artistic communication i) *its heuristic scope*. A work of art is constructive but invents nothing. It implies the study of models and problems and making discoveries, rather than mere invention of a clever idea. It is like wit, in which the ancient word/concept takes on a new lease of life in a different guise; ii) *imprinting* in the onlooker's memory, i.e. the capacity to leave traces that are more powerful than the surprise effect, illusion as an end in itself or the practice of trickery; iii) *organic unity*, the result of syntactic actions of *dispositio* and *compositio*, which are not immediately perceptible; iv) *an enigmatic aspect*, an artwork appears as a 'cryptogram'; v) a *symbolic dimension*, which is effective because it transforms so-called reality into a system of multiple universes by revealing new spheres of meaning.

To test the theory that these properties not only connote institutionalised art, I will now turn to the case of Saul Steinberg, an author whom Gombrich often studied and whose work doesn't feature in the handbooks of art history.

The Wit of Saul Steinberg

Gombrich explicitly acknowledges and explains Saul Steinberg's value as an artist as early as *Art and Illusion* (1959). According to him, he constitutes a sophisticated

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Poetics* VIII, 9, in Gombrich, 'Raphael's Madonna della Sedia', 71.

⁵² Gombrich, 'Raphael's Madonna della Sedia', 78.

⁵³ Karl Bühler, *Ausdruckstheorie. Das System and der Geschichte aufgezeigt*, Jena, 1933.

example of the capacity not to differentiate between what belongs to the picture and what belongs to the intended reality.⁵⁴ Significantly, many of the cases dealt with by the Romanian-born artist and then presented by Gombrich concern the art system. Again, in 1959, Gombrich describes a drawing reproducing an enlarged fingerprint. On the grounds of several correspondences, he parodistically interprets it like a Van Gogh, mainly referring to the *Road with Cypresses* (1889). He ends by adding that: 'Steinberg discovers here that you can see a thumbprint as a thumbprint or as a Van Gogh. Van Gogh's own discovery, of course, was immeasurably greater. He discovered that you can see the visible world as a vortex of lines.'⁵⁵ Gombrich assesses both Van Gogh and Steinberg according to discoveries, which earn both men the title of artist, but he has an order of preference: in this specific 'competition' Van Gogh outdoes Steinberg.

The name Steinberg doesn't feature in the canon of 20th-century art and yet: 'it has often been said that the real or dominant subject matter of twentieth-century art is art itself. If that is the case, Steinberg's contribution to the subject must never be underrated.'⁵⁶ After Gombrich, the humourist excels in catching us in the traps of the visual contradiction of the idea of art as such. This contradiction arises from a capacity to forge 'the world itself into an image of its meaning (...). His drawing of *Now!* (Fig. 3), which always rushes ahead, contains a warning to any historian who ventures to deal with the "now" in art.'⁵⁷



Fig. 3 Saul Steinberg, *Now!*, 1973, ink on paper

© The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

⁵⁴ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 'Conditions of illusion', 239.

⁵⁵ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 'Conditions of illusion', 240-241.

⁵⁶ 'The Wit of Saul Steinberg', 377. Gombrich stresses that Steinberg is not only a master of graphic art. He also uses all the nuances of the *trompe-l'œil* both in his cartoons and in his ingenious meticulous drawings. See Gombrich, 'The Wit of Saul Steinberg', 379.

⁵⁷ Gombrich, 'Image and Word', 187.

Steinberg himself avows: 'What I draw is drawing [and] drawing derives from drawing. My line wants to remind constantly that it is made of ink' (Fig. 4).⁵⁸ In another of the most famous Steinberg works (Fig. 5), a woman looking at a painting goes inside to become part of it or vice versa the painting contains a figure coming out. The instrument of this enjambment is the proliferating quality of the line. Man and objects are linked by a common trait, in the most literal sense, a trait whose forms constitute writing. Hence, 'painter and caricaturist don't make us see things, they can teach us new categories of recognition'.⁵⁹

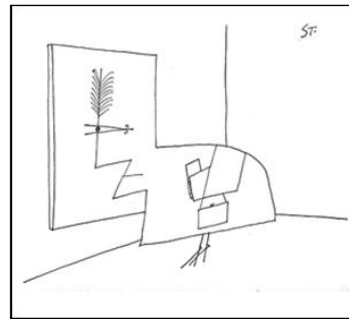
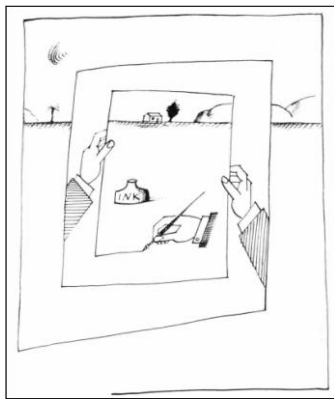


Fig. 4 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1963, ink on paper, originally published in *The New Yorker*, November 30, 1963 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Fig. 5 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1960-61, ink on paper, 30 x 37.6 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of an anonymous donor, originally published in *The New Yorker*, February 4, 1961 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

In 1965 the artist dedicated a collection of plates called *The New World* to Gombrich (Fig. 6). According to the author, the book is 'about numbers, concentric circles, discourse, geometry, parodies of parodies, Descartes, Newton, question marks, Giuseppe Verdi, drawings, the disasters of fame, signs, and allegories.'⁶⁰ Here Steinberg frees languages – visual and verbal, word and image – from their obligations.

⁵⁸ Saul Steinberg, in Harold Rosenberg, *Saul Steinberg*, exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and London 1978, 19.

⁵⁹ Ernst Gombrich, 'Visual Discovery through Art', *Arts Magazine*, November, 17-28, now in Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 11-39, 38.

⁶⁰ 'Introduction', in Saul Steinberg, *The New World*, New York: Harper and Rowe, 1965.

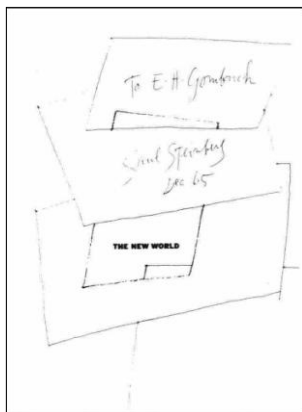


Fig. 6 Saul Steinberg, Copy of *The New World* (1965), with Steinberg's dedication to E.H. Gombrich
 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Many writers have discussed Steinberg's work, such as Gilbert Lascault, Roland Barthes, Italo Calvino, Michel Butor, Hubert Damisch, Harold Rosenberg, Jacques Dupin and John Hollander.⁶¹ After having previously mentioned him several times, in 1983 Gombrich published the essay 'The Wit of Saul Steinberg', in which he further explains the claim made in *Art and Illusion* that: 'There is perhaps no artist alive who knows more about the philosophy of representation.'⁶² Steinberg is an artist who scrambles the normal circuits between signs and meanings. Yet again Gombrich alludes to the parallel between the verbal and the visual in how wit functions, and indeed in his opinion, Steinberg's visual jokes 'make their point so much better than words ever could'.⁶³ For example, if the signified is the intangible part of the sign, actually touching the signified (Fig. 7) – titles of different nature and therefore supported in different ways – becomes an iconoclastic operation in which Steinberg strips away all the solemnity to mock the contents. Gombrich quotes him: 'I appeal to the complicity of my reader who will transform the line into meaning by using our common background of culture, history, poetry. Contemporaneity in this sense is a complicity.'⁶⁴

⁶¹ Cf. Marco Belpoliti and Gianluigi Ricuperati, eds, *Saul Steinberg, Riga*, 24, Milan, 2005.

⁶² Gombrich, 'The Wit of Saul Steinberg', 377.

⁶³ Gombrich, 'The Wit of Saul Steinberg', 378.

⁶⁴ Saul Steinberg in Gombrich, 'The Wit of Saul Steinberg', 378.



Fig. 7 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1950-52, ink and rubber stamp on paper,
Private collection, originally in Steinberg, *The Passport* (1954)
© The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

In his coining operations, the great common denominator in Steinberg's works are clichés, which require a shared imagination. The war against clichés is fought between living modes and dead modes of using language, by changing the repetitive part in the matrix and deviating from the norm. Barthes⁶⁵ also sees Steinberg as constantly about to renew the meaning of things that we believe to be natural. He does so through a parodistic manipulation of art media and their reference system, the history of art, which he lampoons. His drawings often contain parodies of other drawings. They are metalinguistic procedures that act as a form of art criticism.⁶⁶ Enunciation is always impersonal – it is the pen that acts in first person – and so there is no direct apostrophizing.⁶⁷ In his adopting the discursive register of parody, however, there is clearly also a sign of a shrewd appropriateness.

For Jacques Dupin, 'Steinberg goes back through the history of art and dismantles its pieces and mechanisms, which makes the underlying prejudices explode. But while everything collapses, nothing has shaken.'⁶⁸ Look, for example, at *Who did it?* (Fig. 8), on the subject of authorship in art. The blame for the collapse is laid with the *H* of *WHO*, depicted in the act of pushing the *D* of *DID*. And who asks the question? The personified question mark itself observes and judges the event. The writing has a body not because it looks like objects, but because it addresses the onlooker. *Life* (Fig. 9), on the other hand, plays with the problem of dates and the historians' obsession with timelines. It is an allegory of the artist's life, in which the year of birth is the foundation of everything. To this foundation stone more years have gradually been added (don't dare miss any!) in the form of other stones, of identical weight and material, apparently with the aim of guaranteeing lasting stability. But in this inverted pyramid, the further you go up, the greater the danger of collapse, while the artist himself simply remains a shadow.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, 'All except you', (1976), Paris, Galerie Maeght, 1983.

⁶⁶ See Saul Steinberg in Rosenberg, *Saul Steinberg*, 39.

⁶⁷ Italo Calvino, 'La plume à la première personne', *Derrière le miroir*, 224, May, 1977.

⁶⁸ Jacques Dupin, *Steinberg 1971*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Maeght, Paris. Reprinted in *Derrière le Miroir*, 192, June 1971.

⁶⁹ In evolutionary historicism the individual phenomenon is of value for its position in an evolutionary chain, in which each thing is carried forward by previous phases and is preparation for subsequent

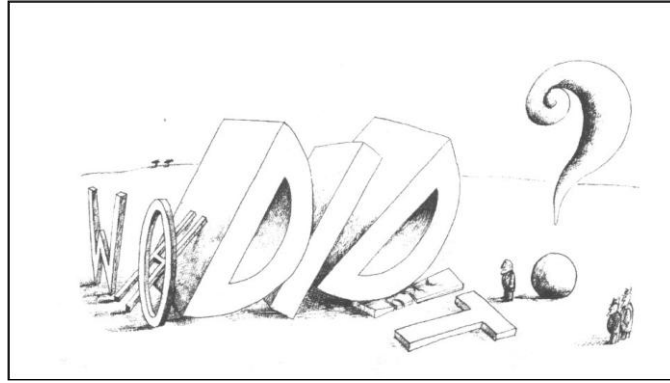


Fig. 8 Saul Steinberg, *Who Did It?*, 1969, ink on paper, originally published in *The New Yorker*, November 8, 1969
 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.



Fig. 9 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1962, Cover of *The New Yorker*, July 22, 1962, Cover reprinted with permission of The New Yorker magazine, All rights reserved © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

phases. Each artistic event dissolves in a progression of styles and currents, which follow on as ineluctably as natural laws. This has given rise to that jumble of 'isms', whose increasingly rapid sequences verge on the grotesque. All of this is partly due to a kind of hypertrophy of art history. According to Hans Tietze, even artists have been unable to escape the power of rampant historicism. As a consequence, many have striven to follow a style rather than create artworks. Tietze's definition of *Historismus* is the same as what was to come in for radical criticism from Karl Popper under the name of *Historicismus*. See Hans Tietze, *Lebendige Kunstwissenschaft. Zur Krise der Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*, Vienna, 1925. Compare Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Ideas of Progress and Their Impact on Art*, New York: Cooper Union School of Art & Architecture, 1971.

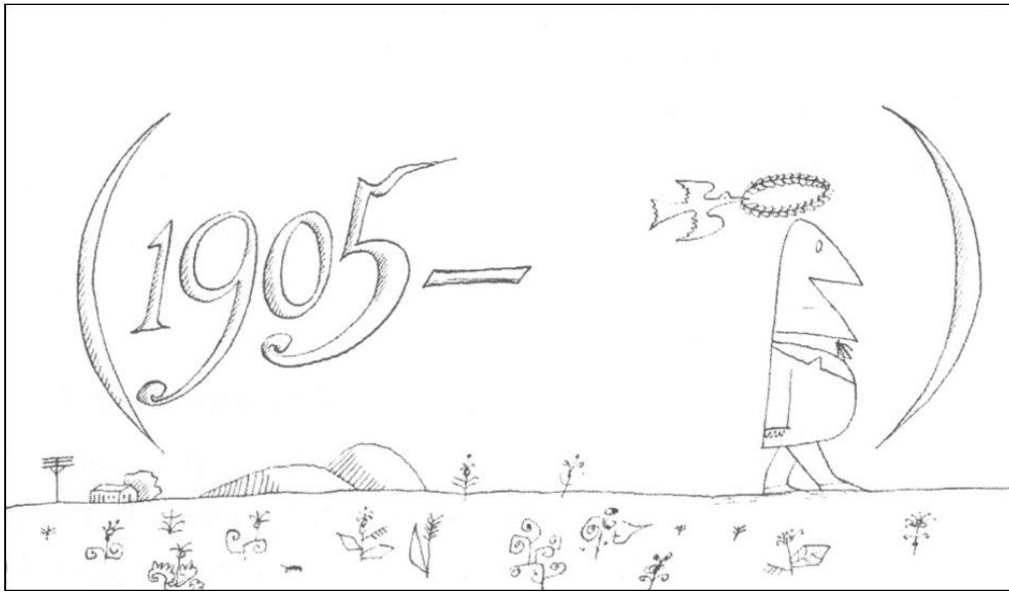


Fig. 10 Saul Steinberg, *Between Parentheses*, 1962, ink on paper, originally published in *The New Yorker*, July 28, 1962 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

In *Between Parentheses* (Fig. 10), continuing the logic of *Life*, Steinberg scoffs at the idea of 'periods'. He depicts a famous man: 'He walks, followed by his birthday and facing his death day. That dash hints at his end, eagerly awaited by historians who can thus officially close the parentheses.'⁷⁰ In another drawing, the artist is overwhelmed by the consequences of success (*Fame*, Fig. 11): the goddess Fortune heaps so many riches on him from her cornucopia that he's prevented from painting. In *Biography* (Fig. 12), on the other hand, Steinberg seems to share Gombrich's point of view: artistic development is achieved not through imitation, but by translating one's own background into the discovery of new regions. This drawing is echoed by the cover of *The New Yorker* of 16 May 1964 (Fig. 13), in which ornamental plant forms are treated like real plants.⁷¹ Traditional floral motifs in the decorative repertory are depicted being watered and cultivated. Which will flower and which will fade? How will they change? Gombrich defends Steinberg against the advocates of a purely lofty vision of art: 'The idea persists that the comedian or caricaturist is a mere entertainer, hardly worthy of the attention of the superior persons who study and analyse the creations of serious "artists".'⁷²

⁷⁰ 'Straight from the Hand and Mouth of Steinberg.' *Life*, 10 December 1965, 60.

⁷¹ See Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, London: Phaidon, 1979.

⁷² Gombrich, 'The Wit of Saul Steinberg', 380.



Fig. 11 Saul Steinberg, *Fame*, 1962, ink on paper, 36.8 x 58.4 cm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, originally published in *The New Yorker*, September 15, 1962
 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

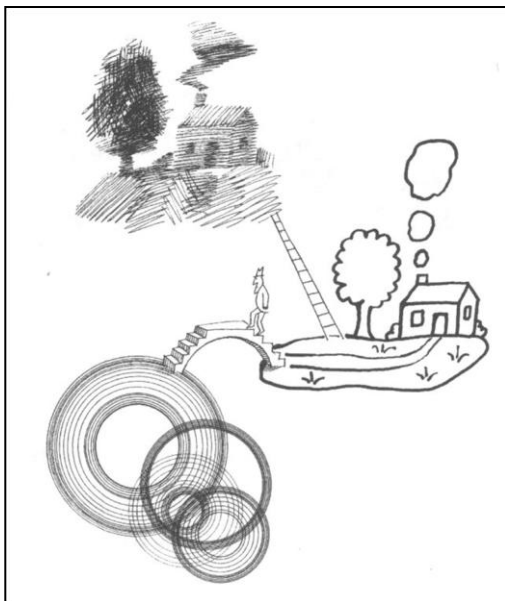


Fig. 12 Saul Steinberg, *Biography*, c. 1960-65, ink on paper, originally published in Steinberg, *The New World*, 1965 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Fig. 13 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1964, collage and ink on paper, 43.2 x 38.7 cm, Private collection, Cover of *The New Yorker*, May 16, 1964, Cover reprinted with permission of *The New Yorker magazine*, All rights reserved © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

A work like *Tuscarora Sphinx* (Fig. 14) is the umpteenth proof of Steinberg's mastery of the tricks of the trade. Here he pokes fun at iconology by messing with patriotic symbolism. Uncle Sam with his typical top hat and Lincoln beard sits up as a Sphinx guarding a pyramid and facing some Native Americans (the tribe of the Tuscarora). An eagle with outstretched wings is reflected in a lake. These are emblems from the one dollar bill, including the Sphinx, which has quietly migrated from the masonic imagination into this well-known image to represent the United States' new world order. Lastly, the memorable solemn procession of stereotyped greybeards in *National Academy of the Avant-Garde* (Fig. 15), provides an oxymoron of the concept of avant-garde; it too now historicised. Significantly, following Karl Popper's situational logic, Gombrich uprooted the avant-garde from the early twentieth-century and replanted it in the age of humanism; he suggested that the avant-garde began in the Italian Renaissance with the advent of public competitions.⁷³

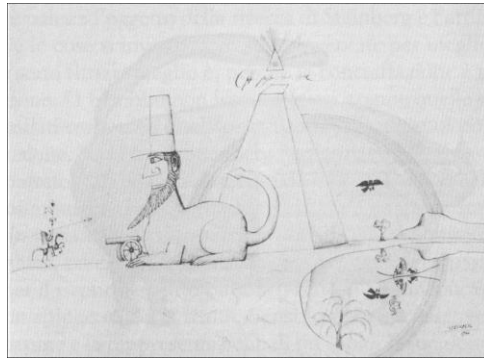


Fig. 14 Saul Steinberg, *Tuscarora Sphinx*, 1966, ink and colored pencil on paper, 57.2 x 72.7 cm, Portland Art Museum, Maine © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.



Fig. 15 Saul Steinberg, *National Academy of the Avant-Garde*, 1969, ink on paper, originally published in *The New Yorker*, June 28, 1969 © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

⁷³ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'The Leaven of Criticism in Renaissance Art' in Gombrich, *The Heritage of Apelles*. See also E. Gombrich, 'The Logic of Vanity Fair. Alternatives to Historicism in the study of Fashions, Style and Taste', in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Co, 1974, 925-957, reprinted in Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 60-92. Compare Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1936), London: Routledge, 1957.

Steinberg's distortions seem primarily to affect content; thus renewed, it will then influence the figurativeness of things and so justify disproportions, overloading, accentuations and plastic rhymes that could never be constructed in real space and always make us seek for meaning which has been removed. Steinberg uses the rhetorical device of autonymy, which in the visible world is able to abolish the boundaries between the use of the word – the mouse eats cheese – and mentioning the word: the mouse is a term with one syllable. In this way the stave (Fig. 16) is both a page for musical notation and part of the sloped background on which the artist has drawn it.



Fig. 16 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, c. 1950-52, ink and pencil on sheet music paper, 48.6 x 35,9 cm, The Saul Steinberg Foundation, New York © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Roland Barthes is certain that Steinberg is an artist because: 'he offers me a report at the same time illogical and irrefutable. He has told YOU ALL and still the tale goes on (...) I'm closer to him without stopping (which is where I get great pleasure) and I'll never reach him, like Achilles with the turtle.'⁷⁴ Art as paradox. Danto has also written on Steinberg:

Steinberg is our national treasure, his hand the hand through which the nation inscribes itself in order to discover its true soul. He is an allegory of the corrupted innocence and of the way the terrible war in which the nation has moved stumbled in the streets (...) vision of a nation in full decline, the Sleep of Reason, the Sabbath of the American soul (...) He doesn't illuminate much about the Reagan years, perhaps because America

⁷⁴ Barthes, 'All except you', 71.

had internalized the language of Steinberg to a living picture of his most delirious representations (...) It recalls the ancient meaning of truth, 'Aletheia': what is not hidden.⁷⁵

But if this is the way to use contemporary art, in the meshes of a sociology indifferent to the signification of artworks, then Gombrich really is not qualified to study it. From this point of view he would appear to be afflicted by Steinberg's question marks (Fig. 17).⁷⁶ Balanced on scales, a woman (Fig. 18) is unaware that by violently striking and destroying the question mark, she herself will be thrown into the abyss by the hammer stroke. People usually remain in equilibrium precisely because of a problem.



Fig. 17 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1961, ink on paper, 36.8 x 29.2 cm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, originally published in *The New Yorker*, July 29, 1961

© The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Fig. 18 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1961, ink on paper, originally published in *The New Yorker*, July 29, 1961

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Unclassifiable in the history of art and usually only labelled as cartoonist or caricaturist, Steinberg is a champion from Gombrich's point of view – a 'record-breaking' artist. In fact he provides the best example of what the symptoms of artistic activity are for Gombrich. i) using well-worn railway lines, he discovers how to manipulate the rails and send us off the track; he constructs attractive traps; ii) he challenges laziness and routine, which would seem to lead people only to read familiar language and he induces the onlooker to raise questions, bringing

⁷⁵ 'Introduction' in Arthur Danto, *Saul Steinberg. The Discovery of America*, New York: Knopf, 1992.

⁷⁶ 'Art is a sphinx. The beauty of the sphinx is that you yourself must do the interpreting. When you have found an interpretation, you are already cured. The mistake people make is to believe that the sphinx can give only one answer. Actually, it gives hundred of answers, or maybe none at all. Interpretation probably does not give us the truth, but the act of interpretation saves us'. Saul Steinberg in Pierre Schneider, 'Steinberg at the Louvre', *Art in America*, 55, July-August 1967, 82-91, reprinted in P. Schneider, *Louvre Dialogues*, New York 1971, 81-98, 81.

awareness; iii) he gambles on the power of analogy and oppositions in visual syntax, playing on the contrast between figure and ground and varying the intensity of the line; iv) he drives us to decipher messages; v) he draws heavily on the western symbolic imagination and takes delight in 'defrosting' it. These criteria, which are obviously not the only possible ones, highlight the advantages to be gained from Gombrich's approach to interpreting contemporary art. His distinction between artwork and communicational image takes up the thread of an interrupted discourse in the hope that others will continue it.

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