Art on Focus

I have been hooked, by art.

Just having survived my five weeks in the sea of art, I feel the blood of art is galloping in my vessels. And the referrer’s footprint even reinforces my determination to pursue the core of art, which is also the secret of beauty, the enigma of the human and the world.

‘The Story of Art’ is quite a gigantic 1044-page work. Her author, Sir Ernest Hans Gombrich, is unquestionably a giant among art historians. As a vivid history of visual art originally published in 1950 and currently in her 16th edition, aimed mainly at the adolescences, she breaks the barrier between connoisseur and common readers. Starting with the Wound Bison in Lascaux Cave with ritual purpose for more chances of a harvest of hunting, followed by the practical appliance of showing off the authority and domination from the gadget like Palette of King Narmer to the tremendous work like Pyramid of Khafre, then with the idealized body and symmetrical temples in Greece and Rome, the accessible introduction discusses comprehensively about the origin of art-making. And then comes the Age of Religion—Middle Age when religious artworks, from rose windows to the towering Gothic cathedrals, while zeitgeist changes along with the purposes of art-making, which are greatly transited from representing as the tool of the divine dominator whoever named Pharaoh or Pope, the art finally turns its way to serve the human beings. Discussing Renaissance Age as a transition and a turning point with the emergence of spectacular masterpieces, Gombrich put emphasis on the artists and the significance of every single works. Symbolism of Renaissance, dynamism and drama of Baroque, genre painting of Netherland and exquisiteness of Rococo are combined together to form a monarchy era. The relative peace was interpreted by the revolutions all throughout Europe and America, one right to the next, during which time the changes accompanied the changing of arts, Neoclassicism and Romanticism, Realism and Impressionism, Pre-Raphealism and Post-Impressionism. The new artists who inspired by the former artists treated their works in a trendy ways.

The author himself is a Jewish and was born in a family with a sophisticated social and musical background. Influenced by his mother who was a distinguished pianist and his family’s friends such as Arnold Schoenberg, Gustav Mahler, Hugo Wolf and Johannes Brahms, he grew up in an ideal atmosphere for artists. Gombrich is a psychologist as well as an art critic. The sensible and critical ways of thinking inherited from his lawyer father allowed him to interpret art in an unprecedented way.

The highlight of this book is the appliance of perception psychology in art interpretation. Unlike the mainstream point of view that art is a product of a certain era and is usually sympathetic and perpetual, I have long believed that the psychological turbulence caused is in fact a chemistry reaction in human brain and the artists are the chemist on the earth. Whereas the book provides a new perspective of explaining Art that the art appreciation is after all a perception procedure. Unlike the previous theory describing viewing art as moving ‘from what ancient artists "knew" to what later artists "saw"', he regarded the appliance of science and psychology is the key to understand how the individual art makers ‘saw’, and how they absorbed the knowledge of the ancient time. Gombrich sought to down-to-earth artistic development on more universal truths, closer to those of science, than on what he regarded as fashionable or vacuous terms such as 'zeitgeist' and other 'abstractions'. Take one of the Impressionism works, Luncheon on the Grass by Manet as an example, the daring look of the nude woman is always a controversial topic among experts. Textbook always says that the 19th century when the noble society places much emphasis on the overelaborated formalities, this painting was a torpedo against the conservative convention. While for Gomrich, the unidealized nudity which itself is a visual shock, suggesting seduction or aggression, contrasts with the two well-dressed gentlemen sit next to her, rise the suspension and mystery of the whole painting. Their posture are static, which referred to the engraving of Rapheal and the subject was adopted from the Tempest by Giorgione, which were two masters of female body in High Renaissance, which suggested Manet's looking back to the antiquity and as well as his innovation to stir the perception of the modern brains. The unfinished quality of middle ground depicting the grass and pond behind add to the mystery and the purposeful confusion of time and space. The painting itself is an enigma by all means, but the sense of enigma is a sophisticated perception process coming from every elements of the painting. Since the science at Gomrich's time was not so advanced, he did not explain it thoroughly in a totally scientific way. Whereas today we have so highly developed neuroscience that we can detect every noisy point in the human brain, the decipherment of mental movement when art appreciation is likely to be settled in a sooner future.

Another attraction of the book is the relation between art and propaganda. Gombrich once worked in the BBC World Service during the World War II, which is the one of main fields of propaganda battle, and he was in charge of German radio broadcasts, which was closely observed by both sides. This working experience probably changed his view of art and inspired him to put art in a calm way, just like the war. It reminds me of the Neoclassic works of Jacque-Louis David, which largely served to the propaganda that the state is over the individual. The Oath of Horatti, the Death of Marat, both are holding a slogan that individual should put the state ahead of themselves and both are instigating and efficient. Nowadays, many people still enjoy collecting the propaganda painting designed and distributed by the both sides. The viewers are simple and vulnerable while the artists are wily and byzantine. As for me, I did not regard these booklet pictures as ‘art’ before, but the book has changed my prejudice. Those exaggerated art works may be more complicated than some so-called ‘Fine Art’ due to they require more persuasive capability. At the class during the summer session, the professor sometimes showed some posters and advertisement with the element of Fine Arts. I cannot think of a better example than the reaching hands in ‘The Creation of Adam’ in Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo, which deserves ‘the most adoptable gesture’ in the history of art. Now we can see the two hands in the advertisement boards hand the energy bar, apple or even, tissue paper. These applications in the modern day even prove the everlasting charm of the classics.

A crazy artistic dream has always been rooted my deep mind. My grandfather is an amateur artist of calligraphy and Chinese painting, who taught me Chinese calligraphy when I was in the 2nd year of elementary school. I covered the wall in my grandparents’ old house with my ‘Post-Modernism’ graffiti, added an elephant on the Chinese ink and water landscape by my grandfather and was proud of it for a long time. My mom fed me with the biographies and albums of Renaissance Giants even when I was too young to tell the fresco from the oil painting. I prefer Da Vinci due to his idea of flying wings cater my temporary dream to travel to whatever place without practicing piano. I also watched the albums of many artists after Renaissance, and gained the sense of achievement by guessing the painter of a totally strange painting in the bookstore, which built a basement and an obstacle of my further study of art history: I can identify the artist at the first sight but it is a kind of instinct without any reasons. As a matter of fact, every serious study relies more on reasons than ‘instinct’. This book itself opens a split new thinking of the reasons of art, the relation of art and science. Art is not just a passion but a matter of sense.

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