

論宮布理希對中國繪畫的看法

David Carrier *

摘要

宮布理希宣稱提供一個具象藝術發展的普遍理論。他只討論了歐洲藝術，但如果他的解釋是正確的，則這個解釋應該也可以施用於中國藝術。在簡述其分析概要後，我使用一系列的例子來評估這個解釋如何能施用於中國繪畫。同時我也討論一些中國作者對圖式幻覺主義所提出的說法。接著我轉而分析宮布理希這套解釋（或理論）的政治意涵。根據宮布理希，追求幻覺的藝術出現在高度關注實驗科學與科技發展的文化中。那麼，中國無法持續一致地發展出自然寫實繪畫，和中國在科技發展上的停滯（這為中國從十八到二十世紀帶來許多問題），此二者間是否有關連呢？對這個問題的探討，讓我們能夠將宮布理希對於藝術史的解釋連接上更廣的世界藝術史。

（翻譯：謝佳娟）

* 作者自 2001 年起，擔任美國 Case Western Reserve 大學與 Cleveland 藝術學院合聘之 Champney Family 講座教授。

Ernst Gombrich's Account of Chinese Painting

David Carrier*

Abstract

Ernst Gombrich claims to offer a general theory of the development of figurative art. He only discusses European art, but if his account is correct it should apply also to the art of China. After sketching his analysis, I use a sequence of examples to consider how this account could apply to Chinese painting. And I discuss the accounts of pictorial illusionism developed by writers in China. I then turn to analysis of the political implications of this account. According to Gombrich, illusionistic art is found in cultures with an interest sympathetic to experimental science and development of technology. Is there a connection, then, between the failure of China to consistently develop naturalistic painting and the stasis, which in the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries created such problems for that country? Discussion of that question allows us to link Gombrich's account of the story of art with a broader world art history.

* Champney Family Professor, Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Institute of Art, 2001-present.

Ernst Gombrich's Account of Chinese Painting

David Carrier

Art history requires a narrative, a story line linking earlier and later art. So, for example, when modernist historians explain how Impressionism and cubism led to Jackson Pollock's Abstract Expressionism they construct such an explanation of how these paintings are connected. All historians of European art are indebted to Giorgio Vasari, whose pioneering account, published in 1550, traces the development of painting and sculpture from Cimabue to the art of his contemporary, Michelangelo. Ernst Gombrich, Vasari's heir, extends Vasari's basic history into the nineteenth-century, to include Constable and Impressionism. *Art and Illusion* offers a challenging way of understanding the entire development of European art. According to Vasari and Gombrich, this is the story of the gradual perfection of naturalism. Vasari's remarks about naturalism comprise a very small portion of the *Lives*. Mostly he tells stories about artists, and describes individual works of art. Only occasionally, as in the famous, often quoted remark that Giotto, good in his day, could not compete with Michelangelo, does Vasari discuss progress. But appeals to the development of realism hold together his larger narrative. A similar point applies to Gombrich's *The Story of Art*.

Today, one hundred years after his birth, Gombrich's writings still attract attention because they present a grandly ambitious vision. But notwithstanding his fame, Gombrich has recently been neglected. His sweeping master history, his lack of sympathy with modernism and his focus on European art make him politically incorrect. And his fascination with

experimental psychology also is a problem. Gombrich says that the development of European figurative art is science-like. Just as physicists propose testable theories, so too do visual artists. That way of thinking now is dismissed without discussion. Few art historians take seriously the belief that scientific studies of perception are relevant to their discipline. When recently John Onians argued that neuroscience provided the best way to understand visual art, he had to defend that plausible claim.

A tradition means, a linked sequence of works of art. For Vasari and Gombrich the history of illusionistic art is a story about visual progress. Did any other culture develop a similar tradition? If anyone did, the Chinese did. Like the Europeans, they had a long, sophisticated artistic tradition. They too represented nature, they too had collectors and connoisseurs, and like the Europeans, they had a serious sustained interest in science and technology. China is the one place you would reasonably look for another naturalistic artistic tradition. A great deal of Chinese painting would seem to be naturalistic. You can compare Chinese paintings to the sites they depict in the way that Gombrich displays *Wivenhoe Park* alongside images of that park. Doing landscape paintings encourages naturalism. And if the Chinese developed naturalism, they did it essentially on their own, without being much influenced by Europe. Arthur Sowerby's old-fashioned *Nature in Chinese Art* develops such a parallel, comparing a photograph of a mountain in Southern Anhwei with an anonymous painting showing a similar site.¹ But so far as I know, more recent commentators do not present such accounts.

The Greeks in antiquity, and the Europeans from the Renaissance onward developed illusionistic art. The Chinese too have a very long, almost

¹ Arthur de Carle Sowerby, *Nature in Chinese Art* (New York: John Day, 1940), pp. 162-163.

entirely self-sufficient artistic tradition. Do they also develop such art? The title of Gombrich's masterpiece is *Art and Illusion*, not *Art and Illusion in Europe*, for his analysis claims to be general, like a scientific theory. And so if the Chinese created naturalistic art, his account should describe it. Gombrich claims to offer a general theory of representation. But he only applies it to one case, art in Europe. If the theory is correct, it should apply everywhere. If Gombrich's account applies also to Chinese art, then it allows us to write a history of that tradition. If, however, it fails to describe art in China, then maybe we have reason to revise or even reject his account.

Does Gombrich's account apply also to China? This seems to be a simple question for his theory is meant to be testable. But as we shall see, answering it is not easy. Western art historians tend to be specialists, focused on a period and place. Experts in the Italian Renaissance do not normally comment on art from other cultures. And eminent scholars of Chinese art mostly focus exclusively on that tradition. Coming at this subject from the outside, as a philosopher, my goal is to understand the relationship between European and Chinese art. My most recent book *A World Art History* compares and contrasts narrative histories of art in Europe and China. In this essay I develop one of its themes, narratives of Chinese art history with reference to Gombrich. I am very conscious of the dangers involved in my highly overextended analysis, which depends entirely upon the essential labor of the specialists. But we need to have an overview of the history of art if we are to be properly oriented.

My title will initially seem paradoxical. Gombrich, who wrote about so many topics, scarcely discussed Chinese painting. He has a brief, unsatisfying chapter in *The Story of Art* grouping Chinese painting together with Islamic decoration and medieval Christian art. The Chinese, he writes, "consider it

childish to look for details in pictures and then to compare them with the real world.”² His illustration is Kao K’o-kung’s *Landscape after rain* in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. And his review of Michael Sullivan’s *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* links absence of perspective with the Chinese “view that any concession to mere realism was vulgar.”³ But he didn’t develop that claim. Gombrich never visited China. In my *Artforum* interview, done near the end of his life, he explained that, scheduled to visit, after Tiananmen Square he cancelled.⁴

This essay uses Gombrich’s published writings, then, to imagine what he could have said about Chinese painting. When many years ago, I wrote a doctoral thesis in part about him, he responded generously.⁵ In 2002, I published a tentative account of Gombrich on Chinese art.⁶ My recent *A World Art History* develops this material. What gave me the courage to again tackle this hard subject was an accident of timing. When this invitation reached me last Fall I was reviewing Wang Hui (1632-1717)’s retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷ This exhibition offers a serious challenge to Gombrich.

² Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (London: Phaidon, 2001), p.153.

³ “Chinese landscape painting,” reprinted in his *Reflections on the history of art: Views and reviews*, ed. Richard Woodfield (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), Ch. 2, quotation 21.

On perspective, see Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting* (New York: Hacker, 1973), vol. 1, 11. “With the exception of some of the large wall-paintings, the Chinese pictures were not made to be seen or contemplated from a fixed point of view.” See also Wu Jing, *A Comparison between Chinese and Western Paintings* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2008).

⁴ “The Big Picture. David Carrier Talks with Sir Ernst Gombrich,” *Artforum*, February 1996: 66-9, 106, 109.

⁵ My “Gombrich on Art Historical Explanations,” *Leonardo*, XVI,2 (1983):91-6 summarizes this material.

⁶ See my “Meditations on a scroll, or the Roots of Chinese Artistic Form,” *Word & Image* 18:1 (January-March 2002): 45-52.

⁷ See my “Landscapes Clear and Radiant: The Art of Wang Hui. The Metropolitan Museum of New York,” Published www.artcritical.com/ 12.2008.

Let us begin with a sketch of Gombrich's analysis. My synopsis is brief and so dogmatic. Any account of his complex theory will be controversial. If mine provokes productive discussion, and leads to better readings, then I shall be satisfied. Much has been said about the meaning of Gombrich's use of the word "illusionism." I think that debate unproductive, and so avoid it. Whether we speak of illusionism, naturalism or realism is, in my judgment, a minor point. As Gombrich observed, his title, *Art and Illusion*, caused unnecessary confusion. Nelson Goodman and Norman Bryson developed very different semiotic theories, which, they argued, should change the terms of analysis entirely.⁸(Recently Bryson has abandoned his account.) As, however, has often been noted, the semiotic approach seems obviously counter-intuitive. I see what Chinese scrolls represent but since I cannot read Mandarin, I cannot read the words in these pictures. We therefore need some explanation of the difference between visual and verbal symbols. Here in treating scroll paintings as visual art with words I bypass the highly subtle argument of Alfreda Murck's *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent*, which offers much convincing evidence that inscriptions decisively influence how this art was intended to be seen.⁹The words, expelled early on from European art, reappear in comics, a regressive art form that deserves more attention from art historians. Any adequate theory of visual representation must account for this obvious difference in kind between visual and verbal symbols. Gombrich's tries to do that.

Let us envisage an individual artist making a naturalistic representation, in that process which Gombrich calls making and matching. The act of

⁸ See my "Perspective as a Convention: On the Views of Nelson Goodman and Ernst Gombrich," *Leonardo*, 13 (1980):283-7.

⁹ (Harvard-Yenching Institute: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000).

representation begins with play-acting, a process like that in which a child uses a stick to stand for a hobbyhorse. An artist making an image starts with some marks, a schema, which stands for some represented element, say a tree. Then the artist compares his schema with the tree he sees, and modifies it. So, for example, he might elongate his mark, modify it to indicate branches and otherwise match it to what he sees. Until you make an image, you cannot know if it will work. Speaking of making and matching emphasizes the experimental nature of this process. Gombrich's argument that the history of art in Europe is a story of making and matching draws upon both the visual evidence and art writing. He gives many examples of schemata. And he quotes many commentaries by artists and critics praising illusionism.

Sometimes Gombrich appeals to experimental psychology. But he also adopts what might irreverently be called the 'how else argument', how else could representations be made. That philosophical way of thinking needs to be used with caution. Gombrich believes that making a representation must be done in stages. He offers two different, interrelated arguments. First consider, as I have just done, how an individual makes pictures. Second, look at the development of European art, which, he argues, is just this process writ large. Think, if you will, of successive generations of artists as one individual, who engage making and matching, as if all the European art from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the triumph of Christianity and then from Cimabue to Constable were made by one very long-lived person. Constable made better naturalistic pictures than Cimabue because he was heir to a long tradition of experimentation. *Art and Illusion* moves very naturally from one individual representation-maker to the long history running from Cimabue and Giotto through Vasari's period up to Constable and Impressionism. The central goal of European art was to create illusionistic representations. In this process, each

artist takes up the inheritance and develops it further, inventing new schemata. *Art and Illusion* reconstructs the natural history of representation, what happens if the development of making and matching is not interrupted by outside forces.

Making and matching commences when a culture decides to make naturalistic images. Then this process continues unless it is interrupted from outside. It was interrupted in Europe with the Fall of Rome, and the rise of an iconoclastic Christian culture. This process is analogous to the development of scientific theories. Just as scientists change their theories in response to experimental results, so artists modify their images in making and matching. Frequently Gombrich makes reference to Karl Popper's philosophy of science. Like any good scientific theory, his account of representation should be testable. There are obvious problems with that analogy. The development of illusionistic art starts with Cimabue and Giotto, long before the rise of experimental science. There is no intimate relationship between the great European scientists, Copernicus, Galileo and Isaac Newton and European art. And so the causal connections here are elusive. Still, Gombrich's parallel is suggestive. Cultures that create successful experimental science also make naturalistic art, for both such art and science involve testing of representations.

Some details of European art's history are obviously parochial. Gombrich's story, which follows Vasari, has two stages: the development of illusionism by the ancient Greeks; and its rebirth in the Renaissance. Both these pagans and the Christian heirs to their tradition did making and matching. The Greeks and the Christians had very different religions, and so their art shows different subjects. The modern Europeans make history paintings, landscapes, portraits and also still lives. During this long history, the political culture, the system of patronage and much else changed dramatically. Still there is in Europe one basically continuous narrative taking us from Cimabue to

Constable.

China has a very different history and political institutions, and so their art shows different subjects. The classical Chinese artists were gentlemen, and so the concern of Renaissance figures like Leonardo to differentiate themselves from craftsmen was not their problem. The ancient Romans and, since the founding of the Louvre, in 1793, modern European societies have public displays of art. For China, the public art museum is a twentieth-century creation coming from the West. But notwithstanding these differences, it may be that Chinese artists also practice making and matching. Certainly local factors affect the development of naturalism. But a proper account should be general, applying to every representation-making culture.

My argument here will seem less exotic if we compare our concerns as art historians with those of historians. The history of China is very different from that of Europe, for the role of religion, natural science and much else is very different. China, often unified, had to contend with Northern barbarian invaders; Christian Europe, always divided, mastered the skills of adventuresome seaborne Imperialism. And yet, historians do not doubt that their basic strategies, which allow emplotting the history of Europe permit, also, telling the story of civilization in China. China, the Cambridge History of China says, “is not (to) be understood by a mere transposition of Western terminology. It is a different animal. Its politics must be understood from within, genetically.”¹⁰ And yet, it is not impossibly exotic. Mao believed that “China’s revolutionary doctrine . . . must be rooted in her culture, and in her

¹⁰ John Fairbank, “The reunification of China,” *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 14*, eds. Denis Twitchett and Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.14.

past, if borrowings from the West were to be put to good use.”¹¹ Art historians can learn from their colleagues who deal with history proper, who never doubt that the story of the consecutive dynasties can be rationally reconstructed.

Gombrich's account of European art is convincing because it matches our immediate visual experience. What is familiar seems natural. If English is your mother tongue, then its grammar seems natural. But of course Chinese speakers find the grammar of their language natural. When Gombrich speaks of making and matching, he argues that successful illusionistic pictures are true to what they depict. That we can see the sequence Giotto-Masaccio-Constable to be the natural order is evidence for his theory. The picture sequence is not merely natural in the way that Chinese grammar is natural to native speaker. It really is natural, for Masaccio builds upon the achievement of Giotto, and Constable advances that tradition. When properly cued, anyone, Western or Chinese can see that Giotto, Masaccio and Constable come in that order. Making and matching is the basis for the real history of art making. China's art is unfamiliar to Westerners. But if Chinese artists also engage in making and matching, then with proper cuing we should be able to see that their pictures form a natural historical sequence. If they made naturalistic art, then we should be able to see that Chinese paintings fall into a sequence, like that found from Giotto to Constable. And just as Gombrich's view of European art's history is confirmed by commentary from writers who discuss the importance of visual progress, so too we might find evidence that Chinese commentators saw their art in these terms.

Consider two Chinese case studies, which show progress. Ku K'ai-chih's fourth century *Nymph of the Lo River*, seen here in a twelfth or

¹¹ Stuart R. Schram, "Mao Tse-tung's thought from 1949 to 1976," in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 15* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.102.

thirteenth century copy, shows the figures in a landscape presented in a very primitive way. Progress, I quote James Cahill, “remained for landscapists of later centuries to achieve.”¹² When then we get to the anonymous eighth century *Emperor Ming’huang’s Journey to Shu*, in a eleventh century copy. Surely we can see that it comes later. This artist, Cahill says, “is limited to a world sharply defined and without shadows, made up of cleanly fractured rocks, hard-edged clouds, solitary trees and bushes.”¹³ When, finally, we reach Fan K’uan in the eleventh century, clearly his *Traveling among Streams and Mountains* comes from a different world. There has been real progress.

In a similar spirit, follow Fong’s comparison of the second century *Flying Horse* with the great Han Kan eighth century *Night-Shining White* which he describes, with reference to Gombrich, as showing progress in making and matching.¹⁴ And he shows a sixth century carving “an intermediate, or transitional, stage of development.” When the tenth century painter Fan K’uan, said, “I would rather take the things themselves as my teachers than a man,” which led him to live and work in the mountains, then we have the spirit of naturalism.¹⁵ A eleventh century Chinese critic Shen Kua *described* some paintings which, “seen at a close view the objects . . . do not seem right, but when one looks at them from a distance, the scenery and all the objects stand out clearly and beautifully, arousing deep feelings and carrying the thoughts far away, as if one were gazing upon some strange land.”¹⁶ He too admires naturalism. According to Fong the full cycle of development was completed in

¹² James Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p.26.

¹³ Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, p.26.

¹⁴ Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th-14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), p.18.

¹⁵ Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, 189, p.202.

¹⁶ Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, p.209.

the second half of the eleventh century.¹⁷ In his summary of Sung dynasty art theory, Sirén writes: “The criterion of a work of art does not pre-eminently depend on the correct representation of the objects in nature and their relative sizes and proportions.”¹⁸ In context, he is interested in how the landscape scrolls describe “a reality beyond material forms.”¹⁹ Spiritual vitality, these aestheticians said, “cannot be conveyed through any kind of formal beauty of outward resemblance.”²⁰ Naturalism is no longer the goal.

These examples are fragments of a Gombrichian history of art in China. Earlier than their European peers, the Chinese artists developed sophisticated naturalism. “In China,” Michael Sullivan writes, “the painter’s purpose shifted many centuries ago from representation to expression, or to the creative reworking of the tradition itself.”²¹ He implies that earlier the Chinese did pursue naturalism. “The search for absolute truth to nature . . . reached its climax in the eleventh century . . .” According to Gombrich, the European naturalistic tradition ended in the nineteenth century when artists realized that no mere representation could capture every feature of the world. Hence the turn in the twentieth century to the other, very different concerns of cubism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. In China, the naturalistic tradition ended earlier and so what came afterward was different.

The Wang Hui exhibition supports this analysis.²² Contrast another recent retrospective, also at the Metropolitan in New York, of the landscapes of

¹⁷ Fong, *Beyond Representation*, p.103.

¹⁸ Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, p.189.

¹⁹ Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, p.184.

²⁰ Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, p.188.

²¹ Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p.17.

²² See my “Landscapes Clear and Radiant: The Art of Wang Hui. The Metropolitan Museum of New York,” www.artcritical.com/ 12.2008.

Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), a near contemporary of Wang (1632-1717). Poussin developed in the customary way of a European old master. A late developer, when he arrived in Rome in the 1620s he created frankly eclectic pictures. Once, however, he found himself he did unmistakably personal pictures such as the Met's *Blind Orion*. Minor painters borrow, but great ones are deeply original. We expect that a European old master transcend eclecticism to create an individual style.

Wang had a very different career. He performed earlier Chinese artists. The very performed nicely brings out the analogy with music. As pianists perform Schumann, displaying virtuosity by performing him in their distinctive styles, so Wang performs earlier paintings. His *Landscape after Fan Kuan's "Travelers amid Streams and Mountains"* (1671) imitates an early eleventh century picture by Fan K'uan. And his *Mist Floating on a Distant Peak, in Imitation of Juran* (1672) performs a tenth century picture formerly attributed to Juran, *Seeking the Dao in Autumn Mountains*. It's easy to appreciate in a safely vague way Wang's extraordinary landscapes. The attractiveness of the towering, tree covered mountains in *Landscape after Wang Meng's "Travelers amid Autumn Mountains"* is self-evident. But if you cannot also see how this is a copy of an earlier picture, then who knows what you are missing.

It is natural to associate this Chinese reworking of earlier art with the economic stasis, which caused two centuries later caused grave political problems. But here we should be cautious. Decaying cultures produce weak art. This frequently invoked generalization is surely not correct. When Tiepolo painted, the Venetian Republic was on its last legs. And Wu Guanzhong, China's great living modernist, developed his great late style immediately after the Cultural Revolution. It is important, then, not to tie the history of art in

China to closely to its political history.

The Greco-Roman development of illusionism was interrupted by the Christian Middle Ages, but in China there was no equally serious long-term break in tradition. And so by the seventeenth-century, the historical development was finished. But whereas twentieth-century Europeans and Americans then turned to post-naturalistic art, the Chinese of Wang's time worked in the style of earlier masters in the way that a pianist performs canonical musical works of art. James Cahill makes this claim when he argues that the best late Ming artists were able

To make the materials of their pictures seem to correspond closely to the sensory data of nature, so that the viewer does not read them merely as artistic forms adopted from some pre-existing stylistic system.²³

Making and matching is a prerequisite for aesthetic interest. Late in his career Picasso performed many old masters. But within our Western tradition, and even for Picasso, performing is of marginal importance.

The European pursuit of naturalism, was doomed to failure. Ultimately artists discovered that making and matching could never match all the features of what is depicted. In the end, a picture is just a picture. Alfreda Muck adds:

This was not an instant discovery. Su Dongpo led the way in the late 11th century. By the end of the 13th century Qian Xuan was painting archaistic works that plainly said "This is a Picture!" It is closely tied up with concepts of "truth" (zhen) in both the Daoist and the Zen Buddhist traditions.²⁴

To the extent that the Chinese discovered this earlier, they were in advance of

²³ James Cahill, *The Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.97.

²⁴ Correspondence.

the European rivals. But when then happened was very different in China.

In Europe, after the end of naturalism artists developed very different concerns which grew, still, out of Western tradition. Picasso's cubism was certainly influenced by African art. And Henri Matisse's all over color owes something to Islamic decoration. But these influences only entered European art when it was ready to receive them. By contrast, the affect of Western on Chinese art is more of a radical interruption of an external force. Lin Fengmian's *Nude* (1934). It seems impossible to cite any precedent in Chinese art for this picture, which is associated with a distinctively Western practice, working from nude models.²⁵

What prompts European discovery of the ultimate limits of naturalism, Gombrich says, is the realization that every artist represents in a personal style. You can paint nature in the style of Poussin or in the style of Claude, but there is no way that you can paint nature as such, subtracting your personal response. To say that Chinese painters also responded to nature in a personal way, not merely making illusionistic representations, seems to suppose that they could have made such pictures, but chose not to. And to speak of a response as being subjective presupposes that, by contrast, an objective one is possible. Wen Fong makes this point. "Looking to nature," he says, the Chinese landscape painter "carefully studied the world around him, and looking to himself he sought his own response to nature."²⁶ Chinese conceptions of individual artistic style treat representations as akin to handwriting. There are different individual ways of writing the characters, varied personal styles of handwriting, but no single best, objectively valid way of writing.

²⁵ See *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.106.

²⁶ Fong, *Beyond Representation*, p.76.

Why is the history of art after the end of naturalism so different in China and Europe? There is absolutely no Chinese equivalent to the Western development of cubism and abstract art. Here, perhaps, we must appeal to sociology. In nineteenth-century Europe, photography replaced painting. But in China, after the end of the developmental cycle, art making continued. As has often been noted, abstraction is not a common Chinese concern, not even today. Wu Guanzhong's paintings often look abstract, but he remains, always, tied to figuration.²⁷ That Chinese artists typically were concerned with literal use of ink perhaps explains why they felt no temptation to paint abstractly.

If Gombrich's analysis is correct, then maybe long ago Chinese painting reached the same point as Europe did in the nineteenth-century. The Chinese learned that any image involves a personal response.

formal resemblance was not enough in itself; the painter had to convey a sense of life appropriate to living things. . . . In later times, formal likeness was never claimed as the true artist's goal; he was concerned instead with the real nature of things or with the description of mood.²⁸

Wen nicely summarizes this idea when he says: "In describing a Chinese painting, it is necessary to refer both to the work and to the physical and spiritual condition of the painter."²⁹ Artist must achieve convincing self-expression. But that has nothing to do with progress in illusionism.

There is more to the story of Chinese art. Craig Clunas's *Art in China* offers a highly stimulating challenge to the older accounts. His central concern is to place landscape scrolls, the art form most valued in Western museums,

²⁷ See my review "With Liu Haiping, Wu Guangzhong," National Art Museum of China, *Burlington Magazine*, CLI (May 2009): 348-9.

²⁸ Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.18.

²⁹ Fong, *Beyond Representation*, p.4.

within a larger framework. Chinese ancestor portraits are marginalized in the older histories. Valued for religious purposes, they were treated more like temple images than works of art, unlike the landscapes, which, traditionally, were identified as the paradigmatic Chinese visual art. Portraits were realistic. According to Jiang Hingke (1556-1605), a portrait painter

wishes one thing only: to paint a portrait which is totally like, so that when the son sees it, he says, "This is really my father!" ...In his portrait of a real person he comes as close as possible to the real appearance of that person.³⁰

What is confusing to Western observers is that these portraits adopt a frontal pose, which we associate with a lack of interest in naturalism. In context, however, this "signifies the sitter's separation from the earthly realm and promotion to a privileged, quasi-godlike state."³¹Focusing on portraits might change our view of Chinese art.

Here, then, is one history of Chinese art. It developed using making and matching. And when, early on, the Chinese discovered that successful illusionism was impossible, they turned to other goals. But I am not confident that it is plausible analysis. Part of the problem is that the visual evidence is thin. Our account relies heavily upon reworkings of early paintings. Because so much early Chinese art has been destroyed, it is hard to know how much trust to place in later copies. We have, of course, the same problem with the Greek and Roman paintings described by Pliny. The larger problem is that Gombrich's account of European art provides no way to understand what happens in China after the end of the search for illusionism. In Europe, the end in modernism of

³⁰ Jan Stuart, "The Face in Life and Death: mimesis and Chinese Ancestor Portraits," *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, eds. Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsang (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), p.212.

³¹ Jan Stuart, "The Face in Life and Death," p.219.

the figurative tradition involved the rise of photography and the development of abstract art. Gombrich's presentation of that part of the story of art is obviously unsatisfactory. Jackson Pollock's abstractions, he suggests, are in reality representations of urban debris. Gombrich believes that whenever we look, we always seek visual order. And so, for him it is impossible that any art be strictly non-representational. His account of modernism provides no place for abstract art.

When in the seventeenth-century European Jesuits came to Beijing, the Chinese found their paintings unsatisfactory. The Europeans, in turn, did not think that the Chinese painted fully successful naturalistic images. Any adequate analysis needs to explain what happened in this complex cultural exchange. Since my *A World Art History* sketched an account, I will not take up that problem here.

Gombrich's history of European art draws on two sources: the visual evidence; and art writing. China created an elaborate literature devoted to its visual art, and so we should study that evidence. I consider Sirén's *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Texts by the Painter-Critics, from the Han through the Ch'ing Dynasties* and Susan Bush's more recent *The Chinese Literati on Painting* and the Bush/Hsio-yen Shih anthology *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*. Bush's discussion of the translations makes one aware of the enormous difficulties.³² Here I must generalize recklessly, omitting discussion of historical development and blurring regional differences.

The "Six Elements" of Hsieh Ho (active 500-535) have been much discussed. First, Spirit Resonance which means vitality; second, Bone Method which is a way of using the brush; third, Correspondence to the

³² See also the very brief account of the Six Principles in Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), pp.94-96.

Object which means the depicting of forms; fourth, Suitability to Type which has to do with the laying on of colors; fifth, Division and Planning, that is, placing and arrangement; and sixth, Transmission by Copying, that is to say the copying of models.³³

As in European commentaries, realism has a modest role. When Ching Hao (870-930) says that after much sketching, “my drawings came to look like the real trees” he sounds like many Europeans.³⁴ It is revealing that this text immediately goes on to talk about spirit; creating a mere likeness leaves out spirit, without which the image is dead.

When we read the many stories about the competitiveness of Chinese painters, it is natural to believe that we are in a world very much like Vasari's. Like Renaissance Italians, the great Chinese masters are stubborn individuals. Some drink too much, many are personally difficult and often they are highly competitive. Just as Europeans tell stories about pictures that seem alive, so do the Chinese. Li Ch'ih (late 11th-early 12th century), an artist who put on a tiger skin and imitated actions of tigers, did a painting of tigers which frightened animals.³⁵ There was well-developed connoisseurship, and collecting, with sophisticated historical awareness and analysis of regional differences. But in China the role of illusionism is very different.

Chinese art writers speak frequently about illusionism, always treating it as a danger, but never as a desired goal. Children and simple-minded people

³³ *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, eds. Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 40. See also Jia Xianggou, *Chinese Figure Painting for Beginners*, trans. Wen Jingen with Pauline Cherrett (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2007), 25, which offers a simpler account.

³⁴ Bush/Hsio-yen Shih anthology *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.145.

³⁵ Bush/Hsio-yen Shih anthology *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.214.

like naturalistic pictures, but the more sophisticated artists and viewers aim to go beyond creating mere likenesses. Like their European peers, the Chinese painters observe nature closely. But the goal of the artist is to use his experience of nature as a starting point for making a representation that reveals how he is in harmony with the visual world. A merely literal image would not be poetic. To say that naturalism is for children maybe presupposes that it can easily be done. The illusionistic image is only a starting point, because merely naturalistic images fail to reveal the artist's personality. In stories of European art, the individuals can be set within a framework referencing this larger history. The Chinese artists are not.

A comparative study of Chinese art writing and classic early European account by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, book 35 would be very interesting. In her book *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the Natural History* Sorcha Carey describes Western naturalism. "There is always the possibility that artists will not simply challenge Nature through the skill of their representation, but will try to improve on her, and even supplant her."³⁶ Chinese writers, by contrast, tend to say that artists should supplant nature.³⁷

If the Chinese painters do not pursue naturalism, like their European peers, how then would Gombrich understand their art? He offers two models: naturalism, which we have discussed; and decorative art. For Gombrich there is a very basic distinction between those many cultures that engage in mere making, creating visual artifacts that have magical qualities, and those whose art matches appearances. Within his writings, this contrast corresponds to the

³⁶ Sorcha Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p.107.

³⁷ See also John Onians, "Rome and the Culture of Imagination," Ch. 6, *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999).

division between the commentary devoted to European art and the books about decoration and primitivism. Islam, the cultures of the old Americans, and medieval Europe only create only art doing making. His book, *The Sense of Order*, a sympathetic account of decorative art, reveals the ultimate limits of that tradition. Gombrich's two models for art making identify two very different kinds of visual traditions: the development of illusionism in Europe; and the story of decoration, which you find in many places, including also medieval Europe and, also the West after the pursuit of illusionism was abandoned.

The Sense of Order attracts less attention than *Art and Illusion*, because its argument is harder to unpack; because carpets and other decorative works of art attract less attention than paintings; and because this intellectual tradition in which Gombrich criticizes Rieg and, in turn, has been critiqued by Oleg Grabar, is judged less challenging or, at least, less interesting to most art historians, than commentary on figurative art. Gombrich claims, often, that these two opposed traditions, making and matching or European naturalism and mere making, decoration are separate but equal. In my opinion, however, that claim is ultimately indefensible. Only the cultures of making and matching try to understand the world as it really is. Societies that only practice matching treat representations in a regressive, magical way.

This division between two traditions reappears in Gombrich's last book, *The Preference for the Primitive*, posthumously published in 2002. How odd to see Raphael's High Renaissance painting as the frontispiece. Nowadays politically correct writers who still use the word 'primitive' put it in scare-quotes. Gombrich does not. That is no accident, for the inescapable implication of his analysis is that the European tradition is superior. After all, thanks to its experimental attitude the West conquered the rest of the world. Its

science, and so also its military technology were superior. That is simply the historical fact. Cultural imperialism casts a long shadow on art history. Gombrich doesn't enter this political debate. On the contrary, he notes that many cultures contributed to the development of the experimental attitude. The Muslims translated and developed the ideas of Greek science, China invented paper, and so on. Still it is true that only Europe synthesized these ideas and so was able to conquer the world.

Suppose that the Muslims had conquered medieval Europe, or that in the 1420s the Chinese navy had continued its exploration of Africa. A minor branch of literature is devoted to such alternate histories. One novel imagines an alternative world in which, China not the West having conquered all other cultures, so that conferences like ours are held in Mandarin. As it is, *The Story of Art* is translated into many languages, including Chinese but no book on visual art written in Chinese has an even remotely equivalent international readership. The Europeans developed naturalistic art. And they created the technology required to travel across the globe and conquer other cultures.

If you think that art and science develop essentially independently, then there is no reason to link the history of European art with imperialism. According to Gombrich, however, artistic naturalism and experimental science are connected. And so it is natural to offer a political reading of his account. The very same process that made European imperialism successful was responsible for the development of artistic naturalism. In the past, Europeans concluded that the society with the best science deserved to rule. Nowadays we are more politically correct, and so do not speak in these terms. In any event, since now everyone has access to the same technologies, the playing field has been leveled. The weakness of China meant that it became victim to European imperialism and only rescued itself thanks to a Western worldview, Marxism as

Sinified by Mao. Had the Chinese developed better science, this history would be different.

Gombrich was a liberal, opposed to both the authoritarian regimes of the right and to state socialism, the Marxist heir to Hegel's worldview. He quotes Nietzsche sympathetically; but he doesn't undertake a political evaluation of that philosopher. Gombrich's liberalism is a response to the troubled Vienna of his youth, with the battles between fascists and communists. His liberalism is linked in an obvious way to concern with the experimental process of making and matching. Neither the fascists nor the communists tested their claims. Just as art and science advance by testing theories, and rejecting those that fail, so liberal democrats advance by critically evaluating their institutions. That the study of modernism and contemporary art is dominated by academic Marxists is one reason why Gombrich is thought to be politically incorrect.

This connection between Gombrich's politics and his history of art is weak. He is not concerned with political evaluations of individual works of art, nor, as art historian, with practical politics. And in one way the political situation of visual art and science is very different. In the end, Europeans discovered that making naturalistic images, which fully matched the visual world was impossible. But science and the technology it inspires continues to advance. We may, still, admire the grand Western artistic tradition, even though ultimately it failed. The political implications of Gombrich's account thus are difficult to evaluate. Here, then, in linking his art history to politics I extend this analysis, in ways he himself did not.

The first volume of Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilisation in China* contains some very brief remarks about cultural exchanges in the visual

arts.³⁸ And the last volume, he contrasts Chinese and Western views of nature. That this first great history of Chinese science and technology was written in England in English reveals, again, the balance of power. It is tempting to link our problems with developing a Gombrichian history of Chinese art to Needham's elaborately detailed account of the surprising strengths but ultimate limitations of Chinese science. China developed an experimental attitude, but failed in the end to create competitive science and technology. No one would reasonably deny that a comparative history of astronomy, meteorology, geography, geology, physics, mechanical and civic engineering, military technology, textile technology, and so on is possible. (This is Needham's original tentative list of planned topics. As he notes in the last volume, by the time he finished, list expanded.³⁹) But a comparative art history seems more difficult to develop.

James Cahill speaks of "that uniquely Chinese way of renunciation," including such examples

proto-science and landscape painting, include exploration of the world by sea, and woodblock color printing, which advances to an unparalleled splendor in the late Ming-early Qing and then is pretty much given up, to be taken up and carried to very different heights in Japan. They carry some great cultural project to a point way beyond any others, then collectively decide not to go on doing it, leaving it for others to continue.⁴⁰

And Murck writes: "The Chinese demonstrated early on that they could

³⁸ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 1. Introductory Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp.163-8.

³⁹ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 7 Part II. General Conclusions and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.215.

⁴⁰ Correspondence.

painting naturalistically, but it was not consistently a priority.”⁴¹This plausible generalization is difficult to align with Gombrich’s analysis, which focuses on the inevitable development of illusionism. The historian will probably be uneasy with the might-have-been implication of her statement. “once scholars made the correlation between painting and poetry,” she adds,

the course of Chinese painting forever changed. Natural phenomenon were read as symbols and in scholar-painting the goal was not illusionism or naturalism, but presenting what was true.

I worry about this way of speaking of truth. When Gombrich describes illusionism, then the truth of paintings is, at least in principle measurable. We can compare *Wivenhoe Park* with a photograph. But when we say that an artist presents the world according to his standard of truth, then how is that image to be judged?

Northern Sung scholars found that painting nature was not merely the recording of the visual world, but was also a way of interpreting and structuring the social order. More comfortable with the literary tradition than with professional draughtsmanship, scholars could sketch nature subjects with relative ease, especially if verisimilitude was not a priority.

To a Gombrichian, this sounds like Hegelian cultural relativism. The relationship between this social history and a strictly Gombrichian analysis is not clear. Here we get to deep, not easily resolved philosophical issues.

Historians note that the Europeans had to be competitive, while China remained isolated until, fatally weakened, it fell victim to the West. But I hesitate to conclude that this history explains the history of Chinese painting. We can compare and contrast the ways that the Chinese and the Europeans

⁴¹ Correspondence.

discovered the nature of the world, for they were studying the same animals, plants, rocks, skies and stars. The ghastly American invention, Fat Boy, the atomic bomb dropped on Japan, was soon copied, thanks to spies, by the Russians, the Chinese and others. This technology, and the accompanying physics, they are universal. Does the development of art also reveal universal laws? That question remains still to be answered.

Developing a world art history, an account that does justice to Chinese and European art, is very difficult. But it is also very important, for unless we have an adequate pictures of other cultures, we cannot fully understand our own. And that is true as much for the West as for the Chinese. That we are debating Gombrich's ideas one hundred years after his birth shows the importance of his legacy.⁴²

⁴² This lecture is for Ivan Gaskill. I thank Alfreda Murck and James Cahill, unusually generous specialists who have corrected errors and suggested how to develop my argument; and Liu Haiping. A version was given as "Gombrich on Chinese Art," E. H. Gombrich auf dem Weg zu einer Bildwissenschaft des 21. Jahrhunderts, March 31, 2009, Greifswald, Germany.

References

- Bush, Susan. *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang(1555-1636)*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Bush, Susan. and Shih,Hsio-yen. *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, eds., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Cahill, James. *Chinese Painting*, New York: Rizzoli,1990.
- Cahill, James. *The Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Carey, Sorcha. *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the Natural History*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Carrier, David. "Gombrich on Art Historical Explanations," *Leonardo* , XVI,2 (1983). pp. 91-6.
- Carrier, David. "Landscapes Clear and Radiant: The Art of Wang Hui. The Metropolitan Museum of New York," Published www.artcritical.com/ 12.2008.
- Carrier, David. "Meditations on a scroll, or the Roots of Chinese Artistic Form," *Word & Image* 18:1, January-March 2002, pp. 45-52.
- Carrier,David. "Perspective as a Convention: On the Views of Nelson Goodman and Ernst Gombrich," *Leonardo*, 13,1980, pp. 283-7.
- Carrier, David. "With Liu Haiping, Wu Guangzhong," National Art Museum of China, *Burlington Magazine*, CLI (May 2009),pp. 348-9.
- Clunas, Craig. *Art in China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

- Fairbank, John. "The reunification of China," *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 14*, eds. Denis Twitchett and Fairbank, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.14.
- Fong, Wen C.. *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th-14th Century*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992.
- Gombrich, Ernst. *Reflections on the history of art: Views and reviews*, ed. Richard Woodfield, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987.
- Gombrich, Ernst. *The Story of Art*, London: Phaidon, 2001.
- Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 1. Introductory Orientations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.
- Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 7 Part II. General Conclusions and Reflections*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Onians, John. "Rome and the Culture of Imagination," Ch. 6, *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome*, New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999.
- Schram, Stuart R. "Mao Tse-tung's thought from 1949 to 1976," in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 15*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 102.
- Sirén, Osvald. *Chinese Painting*, New York: Hacker, 1973.
- Sowerby, Arthur de Carle. *Nature in Chinese Art*, New York: John Day, 1940.
- Stuart, Jan. "The Face in Life and Death: mimesis and Chinese Ancestor Portraits," *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, eds. Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 212,219.

- Sullivan, Michael. *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979.
- Sullivan, Michael. *The Arts of China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973.
- “The Big Picture. David Carrier Talks with Sir Ernst Gombrich,” *Artforum*, February, 1996, pp.66-9, 106, 109.
- Woodfield, Richard. “Chinese landscape painting,” *Reflections on the history of art: Views and reviews*, ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987.
- Wu, Jing. *A Comparison between Chinese and Western Painting*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2008.
- Xianggou, Jia. *Chinese Figure Painting for Beginners*, trans. Wen Jingen with Pauline Cherrett, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2007.