

The Art History Context of Gombrich's Design Concept

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Abstract

Sir E.H. Gombrich's *A Sense of Order – A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* is a supposedly-exceptional design theory book. The decoration theory described in the book makes people see that the design behavior tracing back to the genetic genes of life is the common desire of human beings and also a kind of order developed for survival. It's not hard to see that the theory of "A sense of order" and Gombrich's innumerable classical works have an inseparable relation with the ideological pulsation produced in his student days. The basic historical model left by the Vienna School to Gombrich is a part of his exploration on his own design concept, which is worth tracing and exploring.

Key words: A sense of order, Vienna School, Problems of Style

1 Introduction

"I have an ambitious scheme for a triptych. This plan has already begun and some progress has been made." ⁱThe triple scheme mentioned by Gombrich includes the painting theory of imitating nature (*Art and Illusion – A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*), the decoration and design theory (*A Sense of Order – A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*), the archetype image and Symbolism (*Symbolic Images*), etc. In this system, Gombrich tried to reproduce his great ideas with the tools of psychology about perception and expression and form a complete and organic art system. It is noteworthy that as a masterpiece on design and decoration, the broad and unique perspective of *A Sense of Order* also originates from the profound historical background of Gombrich in the same way.

Gombrich's psychology-based art history research method is precisely derived from the inheritance and mutual benefit of art historians who try all ways to approach psychology on the towering tree of Vienna School. When studying art history at the University of Vienna, he followed Schlosser and mastered the research methods of documentary research and historiography. What's more, he naturally absorbed the School's academic tradition combining physical appreciation and historical research developed from museum work. Schlosser also attached great importance to the book report on solving problems related to art history. He hoped that Gombrich would re-study Riegl's *Problems of Style – Foundation for a history of ornament*, even though he kept a contradictory attitude towards Riegl. Obviously, Gombrich was quite willing to and even took the initiative to take the special research task assigned by his teacher, which was connected with his early interest in Vienna architectural decoration. When conducting a long-term study on Riegl, Gombrich boldly expressed his own views on Riegl. It was exactly his original views on Riegl that helped him find its context, think about its methods, and apply its essence, and then he wrote the book *A Sense of Order* with the study on decorative art from a psychological perspective.

2. Discussion

From the beginning of studying the *Problems of Style*, Gombrich had noticed Riegl's intuition. He spared no effort to prove that the hypothesis was untenable about the earliest surface decoration first appearing in fabric materials and technologies. Also, he believed that the earliest patterns did not come from the weaving technology, so as to deny the theory that art originated from technical materials. ⁱⁱ Furthermore, he also denied that the heraldry originated from the materialistic interpretation of tapestry weaving. He quietly put forward a new concept named *Kunstwollen*, and kept clarifying its conceptual outline.

Secondly, Riegl discussed the traditional formula of change and innovation by reproducing the development of patterns like tendrils. Under the catalysis of W. H. Goodyear's *The Grammar of Lotus*, Riegl decomposed the incomprehensible effects of decoration into simple and constitutive components with rigorous analysis. He used a large number of meticulous style and realistic pattern cases to deny the opinion that that pattern art is a product of imitating nature. He believed that decoration creation is the product of art self evolution, and the classical formula will manifest its eternal charm in various patterns. There is no doubt that the novelty of Riegl's practice is making people notice the dazzling pearl necklace strung by the complicated historical clues of decoration, which obviously lays a foundation for Gombrich's more in-depth decorative research.

In addition, as described by Gombrich, he was inspired by the fact that Hans Sedlmayr applied Gestalt psychology theory into the analysis on Borromini's Church thesis, and decided to add psychological explanations to Giulio Romano's architecture analysis paper.ⁱⁱⁱ While Gombrich expounded his design theory, he compared it with Gestalt theory more than once. Gombrich also mentioned the views of his teacher Emanuel Loewy many times.

In the book with study on the transition from antique art to classical art and later stage art, Loewy stressed the schematization characteristics of early stage art and the gradual revision of schemata, which shows the trend of art from psychological images to retinal physiological images. The people who have read *A Sense of Order*, will definitely discover the norms and inspiration it has brought to Gombrich.

Notably, Gombrich's interest in studying different aspects of art from the perspective of perceptual psychology may be mainly influenced by Chris. Chris has been the director of the Applied Art Department of the Vienna Museum for a long time, and his vision and taste trained from that period made him develop his interest in psychoanalysis in the research of the collection. He led Gombrich to consider the problems raised on the Art history by different psychological schools, and these influences were reflected in works such as the *Art and Illusion*, *A Sense of Order* and *Psychoanalysis Exploration in Art*. Under the unstable social situation, Chris assigned Gombrich to work as a monitor at the Warburg Institute. The intense time spent monitoring German radio broadcasts day after day for six years trained Gombrich's auditory and visual responses to changes around him. In the book *A Sense of Order*, we can see the spring water converged by the observation of daily affairs triggered Gombrich's unique design and research style.

It is exactly the academic atmosphere and experience with a direct and inspiring psychic channel that makes Gombrich realize that the decorative design problems related to his interests in the early days also need to be explored and rediscovered. "I am very interested in various styles of Viennese architecture. I am very interested in various styles of Vienna architecture. I have drawn many sketches of different decorative forms, which is a part that I am interested in. I went to the old streets of Vienna, studying the decorative forms of Baroque architecture."^{iv} *"I am very interested in various styles of Vienna architecture. I have drawn many sketches of different decorative forms, which is a part that I am interested in. I went to the old streets of Vienna, studying the decorative forms of Baroque architecture."*

Gombrich's long-term interest in decoration comes from his feelings in the memory and his continuous pursuit of decorative beauty. The rich colors of Slovak peasant embroidery collected by his mother when he was a child and the skillful techniques of craftsmen made him notice the amazing charm of the decorative details around him.

After the representation problem of figurative art was fixed, he naturally returned to the discussion of pure design. This time, Gombrich continued to combine psychological problems with decorative research, so as to complete another part of his ambitious scheme. From the subtitles of *Art and Illusion* and *A Sense of Order*, as well as the discussion methods of other works, we can find that as an interpreter of images or patterns, he used the traditional methods of the Vienna School, which means that he inherited a long tradition but also kept a distance from it.

3. Conclusion

Gombrich presented his memory and imagination in the discussion of decoration problems in a scientific way. His purpose was not to revive decoration, nor to represent the look of decoration at that time, but to re-include decoration into our vision, making us look upon decoration problems from different perspectives. He tried to settle the old problems left by Riegl with new solutions. Gombrich's design theory holds that there is a "sense of order" in human life inheritance, which is manifested in all design styles. It is reflected in the strong demand and the exploration of the organism for regularity, with effects on pattern recognition and creation. He revealed the mechanism and operating principle of decorative creation with perceptual psychology, and replaced the theory of "artistic will" with "a sense of order". It is obvious that Gombrich tried to seek the answer inwards, which is the opposite of method. Therefore, he carried out a meticulous exploration on the problems of decoration and design, as well as the style history problem brought by aesthetic taste of decoration. While explaining the development problem of pattern form, he also opposed Riegl and other forms of collectivism.

The design concept of *A Sense of Order* is full of the observation and perception of Gombrich's personal visual experience, and his acuity and wisdom are displayed by every word and sentence in the book, so that people can't help reading it carefully time and time again. We sometimes review the different views on decoration in the past, sometimes care about the mysterious and changeable visual effects of small decorative objects, sometimes listen to the thought combinations of Western art historians, and sometimes experience the imagination brought by the meaning of patterns. Moreover, We feel the fluctuations of the mind and inner heart in the end of audio-visual comparison.

The memory in the mind is indelible, which only needs to be repositioned and explored. The boat carrying the traditional order has sailed out of the port, which is departing from the glory in former days and heading forward. Just as Gombrich said: "But I firmly believe that every artist must learn to use his artistic language, namely, formula first. Only when he has mastered the language can he get further developed."

The research in this article is funded by General Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences Research in Jiangsu Universities (Project approval number: 2021SJA0243)

1 Seate, 'Autobiographical Sketches of Gombrich', *New Art*, 1998.1, p. 67.

2 Alois Liegel, *The Question of Style - The Foundations of the History of Decoration*, China Academy of Art Press, November 2016, p. 4.

3 Alois Liegel, *The Problem of Style - The Foundations of the History of Decoration*, China Academy of Art Press, November 2016, p. 217.11

4 Gombrich, *Art and Science*, translated by Yang Siliang, Fan Jingzhong and Yan Shanchun, Zhejiang Photo Press, first edition, August 1998, p. 71.