

E.H. Gombrich

THE STORY OF ART

13th edition, enlarged & revised - 398 illustrations, 100 in colour



Some opinions on
THE STORY OF ART

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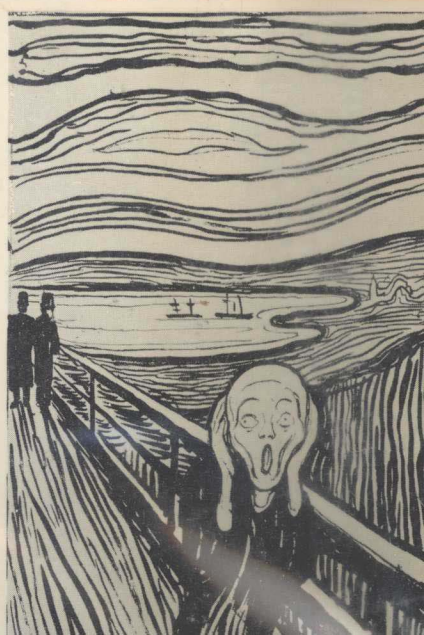
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E. H. Gombrich

THE STORY OF ART

With 398 illustrations

PHAIDON

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Preface to the twelfth edition

THIS BOOK was planned from the outset to tell the story of art in both words and pictures by enabling the reader as far as possible to have the illustration discussed in the text in front of him, without having to turn the page. I still treasure the memory of the unconventional and resourceful way in which Dr Bela Horovitz and Mr Ludwig Goldscheider, the founders of the Phaidon Press, achieved this aim in 1949 by making me write another paragraph here or suggesting an extra illustration there. The result of these weeks of intense collaboration certainly justified the procedure, but the balance arrived at was so delicate that no major alterations could be contemplated while the original lay-out was retained. Only the last few chapters were slightly modified for the eleventh edition when a Postscript was added, but the main body of the book was left as it was. The decision of the publishers to present the book in a new form more in keeping with modern production methods thus offered fresh opportunities but also posed new problems. The pages of *The Story of Art*, in its long career, have become familiar to a far greater number of people than I had ever thought possible. Even the majority of the twelve editions in other languages have been modelled on the original lay-out. It seemed to me wrong in the circumstances to omit passages or pictures which readers might want to look for. Nothing is more irritating than to discover that something one expects to find in a book has been left out of the edition one takes from the shelf. Thus, while I welcomed the chance of showing in larger illustrations some of the works discussed and of adding some colour plates, I have eliminated nothing and only exchanged a very few examples for technical or other compelling reasons. The possibility, on the other hand, of adding to the number of works to be discussed and illustrated presented both an opportunity to be seized and a temptation to be resisted. Clearly to turn this volume into a heavy tome would have destroyed its character and defeated its purpose. In the end I decided to add fourteen examples which seemed to me not only to be interesting in themselves—which work of art is not?—but to make a number of fresh points that enrich the texture of the argument. It is the argument, after all, that makes this book a story rather than an anthology. If it can again be read, and, I hope, enjoyed, without a distracting hunt for the pictures that go with the text, this is due to the help given in various ways by Mr Elwyn Blacker, Dr I. Grafe and Mr Keith Roberts.

E.H.G.

November 1971

Preface to the thirteenth edition

THERE ARE many more illustrations in colour in this than in the twelfth edition, but the text (except for the bibliography) remains unchanged. The other new feature is the chronological charts on pp. 491–7. Seeing the positions of a few landmarks in the vast panorama of history should help the reader to counteract the perspective illusion which gives such prominence to recent developments at the expense of the more distant past. In thus stimulating reflections on the time scales of the story of art, the charts should serve the same purpose for which I wrote this book some thirty years ago. Here I can still refer the reader to the opening words of the original Preface on the opposite page.

E.H.G.

July 1977

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Preface | 1 |
| Introduction: <i>on art and artists</i> | 4 |
| 1. Strange beginnings: <i>prehistoric and primitive peoples; ancient America</i> | 19 |
| 2. Art for eternity: <i>Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete</i> | 31 |
| 3. The great awakening: <i>Greece, seventh to fifth century B.C.</i> | 46 |
| 4. The realm of beauty: <i>Greece and the Greek world, fourth century B.C. to first century A.D.</i> | 65 |
| 5. World conquerors: <i>Romans, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians, first to fourth century A.D.</i> | 80 |
| 6. A parting of ways: <i>Rome and Byzantium, fifth to thirteenth century</i> | 94 |
| 7. Looking eastwards: <i>Islam, China, second to thirteenth century</i> | 102 |
| 8. Western art in the melting pot: <i>Europe, sixth to eleventh century</i> | 113 |
| 9. The Church militant: <i>the twelfth century</i> | 125 |
| 10. The Church triumphant: <i>the thirteenth century</i> | 137 |
| 11. Courtiers and burghers: <i>the fourteenth century</i> | 155 |
| 12. The conquest of reality: <i>the early fifteenth century</i> | 167 |
| 13. Tradition and innovation: <i>the later fifteenth century in Italy</i> | 183 |
| 14. Tradition and innovation: <i>the fifteenth century in the North</i> | 202 |
| 15. Harmony attained: <i>Tuscany and Rome, early sixteenth century</i> | 217 |
| 16. Light and colour: <i>Venice and northern Italy in the early sixteenth century</i> | 247 |
| 17. The new learning spreads: <i>Germany and the Netherlands in the early sixteenth century</i> | 260 |
| 18. A crisis of art: <i>Europe, later sixteenth century</i> | 277 |
| 19. Vision and visions: <i>Catholic Europe, first half of the seventeenth century</i> | 301 |
| 20. The mirror of nature: <i>Holland in the seventeenth century</i> | 325 |
| 21. Power and glory: <i>Italy, later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries</i> | 342 |
| 22. Power and glory: <i>France, Germany and Austria, late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries</i> | 352 |
| 23. The age of reason: <i>England and France, eighteenth century</i> | 360 |
| 24. The break in tradition: <i>England, America and France, late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries</i> | 375 |
| 25. Permanent revolution: <i>the nineteenth century</i> | 395 |
| 26. In search of new standards: <i>the late nineteenth century</i> | 425 |
| 27. Experimental art: <i>the first half of the twentieth century</i> | 442 |
| The changing scene: <i>a postscript</i> | 476 |
| Chronological charts | 491 |
| A note on art books | 498 |
| Index and glossary | 503 |

Preface

THIS BOOK is intended for all who feel in need of some first orientation in a strange and fascinating field. It may serve to show the newcomer the lie of the land without confusing him with details; to enable him to bring some intelligible order into the wealth of names, periods and styles which crowd the pages of more ambitious works, and so to equip him for consulting more specialized books. In writing it I thought first and foremost of readers in their teens who had just discovered the world of art for themselves. But I have never believed that books for young people should differ from books for adults except for the fact that they must reckon with the most exacting class of critics, critics who are quick to detect and resent any trace of pretentious jargon or bogus sentiment. I know from experience that these are the vices which may render people suspicious of all writing on art for the rest of their lives. I have striven sincerely to avoid these pitfalls and to use plain language even at the risk of sounding casual or unprofessional. Difficulties of thought, on the other hand, I have not avoided, and so I hope that no reader will attribute my decision to get along with a minimum of the art historian's conventional terms to any desire on my part of 'talking down' to him. For is it not rather those who misuse 'scientific' language, not to enlighten but to impress the reader, who are 'talking down' to us—from the clouds?

Apart from this decision to restrict the number of technical terms, I have tried, in writing this book, to follow a number of more specific self-imposed rules, all of which have made my own life as its author more difficult, but may make that of the reader a little easier. The first of these rules was that I would not write about works I could not show in the illustrations; I did not want the text to degenerate into lists of names which could mean little or nothing to those who do not know the works in question, and would be superfluous for those who do. This rule at once limited the choice of artists and works I could discuss to the number of illustrations the book would hold. It forced me to be doubly rigorous in my selection of what to mention and what to exclude. This led to my second rule, which was to limit myself to real works of art, and cut out anything which might merely be interesting as a specimen of taste or fashion. This decision entailed a considerable sacrifice of literary effects. Praise is so much duller than criticism, and the inclusion of some amusing monstrosities might have offered some light relief. But the reader would have been justified in asking why something I found objectionable should find a place in a book devoted to art and not to non-art,

particularly if this meant leaving out a true masterpiece. Thus, while I do not claim that all the works illustrated represent the highest standard of perfection, I did make an effort not to include anything which I considered to be without a peculiar merit of its own.

The third rule also demanded a little self-denial. I vowed that I would resist any temptation to be original in my selection, lest the well-known masterpieces be crowded out by my own personal favourites. This book, after all, is not intended merely as an anthology of beautiful things; it is meant for those who look for bearings in a new field, and for them the familiar appearance of apparently 'hackneyed' examples may serve as welcome landmarks. Moreover, the most famous works are really often the greatest by many standards, and if this book can help readers to look at them with fresh eyes it may prove more useful than if I had neglected them for the sake of less well-known masterpieces.

Even so, the number of famous works and masters I had to exclude is formidable enough. I may as well confess that I have found no room for Hindu or Etruscan art, or for masters of the rank of Quercia, Signorelli or Carpaccio, of Peter Vischer, Brouwer, Terborch, Canaletto, Corot, and scores of others who happen to interest me deeply. To include them would have doubled or trebled the length of the book and would, I believe, have reduced its value as a first guide to art. One more rule I have followed in this heart-breaking task of elimination. When in doubt I have always preferred to discuss a work which I had seen in the original rather than one I knew only from photographs. I should have liked to make this an absolute rule, but I did not want the reader to be penalized by the accidents of travel restrictions which sometimes dog the life of the art-lover. Moreover, it was my final rule not to have any absolute rules whatever, but to break my own sometimes, leaving to the reader the fun of finding me out.

These, then, were the negative rules I adopted. My positive aims should be apparent from the book itself. In telling the story of art once more in simple language, it should enable the reader to see how it hangs together and help him in his appreciation, not so much by rapturous descriptions, as by providing him with some pointers as to the artists' probable intentions. This method should at least help to clear away the most frequent causes of misunderstanding and to forestall a kind of criticism which misses the point of a work of art altogether. Beyond this the book has a slightly more ambitious goal. It sets out to place the works it discusses in their historical setting and thus to lead towards an understanding of the master's artistic aims. Each generation is at some point in revolt against the standards of its fathers; each work of art derives its appeal to contemporaries not only from what it does but also from what it leaves undone. When young Mozart arrived in Paris he noticed—as he wrote to his father—that all the fashionable symphonies there ended with a quick finale; so he decided to startle his audience with a slow introduction to his last movement. This is a trivial example, but it shows the direction in which an historical appreciation of art must aim. The

urge to be different may not be the highest or profoundest element of the artist's equipment, but it is rarely lacking altogether. And the appreciation of this intentional difference often opens up the easiest approach to the art of the past. I have tried to make this constant change of aims the key of my narrative, and to show how each work is related by imitation or contradiction to what has gone before. Even at the risk of being tedious, I have referred back for the purpose of comparison to works that show the distance which artists had placed between themselves and their forerunners. There is one pitfall in this method of presentation which I hope to have avoided but which should not go unmentioned. It is the naive misinterpretation of the constant change in art as a continuous progress. It is true that every artist feels that he has surpassed the generation before him and that from his point of view he has made progress beyond anything that was known before. We cannot hope to understand a work of art without being able to share this sense of liberation and triumph which the artist felt when he looked at his own achievement. But we must realize that each gain or progress in one direction entails a loss in another, and that this subjective progress, in spite of its importance, does not correspond to an objective increase in artistic values. All this may sound a little puzzling when stated in the abstract. I hope the book will make it clear.

One more word about the space allotted to the various arts in this book. To some it will seem that painting is unduly favoured as compared to sculpture and architecture. One reason for this bias is that less is lost in the illustration of a painting than in that of a round sculpture, let alone a monumental building. I had no intention, moreover, of competing with the many excellent histories of architectural styles which exist. On the other hand, the story of art as here conceived could not be told without a reference to the architectural background. While I had to confine myself to discussing the style of only one or two buildings in each period, I tried to restore the balance in favour of architecture by giving these examples pride of place in each chapter. This may help the reader to co-ordinate his knowledge of each period and see it as a whole.

As a tailpiece to each chapter I have chosen a characteristic representation of the artist's life and world from the period concerned. These pictures form an independent little series illustrating the changing social position of the artist and his public. Even where their artistic merit is not very high these pictorial documents may help us to build up, in our minds, a concrete picture of the surroundings in which the art of the past sprang to life.

This book would never have been written without the warm-hearted encouragement it received from Elizabeth Senior, whose untimely death in an air raid on London was such a loss to all who knew her. I am also indebted to Dr Leopold Ettlinger, Dr Edith Hoffmann, Dr Otto Kurz, Mrs Olive Renier, Mrs Edna Sweetman, to my wife and my son Richard for much valuable advice and assistance, and to the Phaidon Press for their share in shaping this book.

Introduction

On art and artists

THERE REALLY IS no such thing as Art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave; today some buy their paints, and design posters for the hoardings; they did and do many other things. There is no harm in calling all these activities art as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places, and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence. For Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish. You may crush an artist by telling him that what he has just done may be quite good in its own way, only it is not 'Art'. And you may confound anyone enjoying a picture by declaring that what he liked in it was not the Art but something different.

Actually I do not think that there are any wrong reasons for liking a statue or a picture. Someone may like a landscape painting because it reminds him of home, or a portrait because it reminds him of a friend. There is nothing wrong with that. All of us, when we see a painting, are bound to be reminded of a hundred-and-one things which influence our likes and dislikes. As long as these memories help us to enjoy what we see, we need not worry. It is only when some irrelevant memory makes us prejudiced, when we instinctively turn away from a magnificent

1. (left) RUBENS:
Portrait of his
son Nicholas.
Drawn about
1620. Vienna,
Albertina



2. (right)
DÜRER: Portrait
of his mother.
Drawn in 1514.
Berlin, Kupfer-
stichkabinett





picture of an alpine scene because we dislike climbing, that we should search our mind for the reason of the aversion which spoils a pleasure we might otherwise have had. There *are* wrong reasons for disliking a work of art.

Most people like to see in pictures what they would also like to see in reality. This is quite a natural preference. We all like beauty in nature, and are grateful to the artists who have preserved it in their works. Nor would these artists themselves have rebuffed us for our taste. When the great Flemish painter Rubens made a drawing of his little boy (Fig. 1) he was surely proud of his good looks. He wanted us, too, to admire the child. But this bias for the pretty and engaging subject is apt to become a stumbling-block if it leads us to reject works which represent a less appealing subject. The great German painter Albrecht Dürer certainly drew his mother (Fig. 2) with as much devotion and love as Rubens felt for his chubby child. His truthful study of careworn old age may give us a shock which makes us turn away from it—and yet, if we fight against our first repugnance we may be richly rewarded, for Dürer's drawing in its tremendous sincerity is a great work. In fact, we shall soon discover that the beauty of a picture does not really lie in the beauty of its subject-matter. I do not know whether the little ragamuffins whom the Spanish painter Murillo liked to paint (Fig. 3) were strictly beautiful or not, but, as he painted them, they certainly have great charm. On the other hand, most people would call the child in Pieter de Hooch's wonderful Dutch interior (Fig. 4) plain, but it is an attractive picture all the same.

3. (left)
MURILLO:
Street arabs.
Painted about
1670. Munich,
Alte Pinakothek

4. (right) PIETER
DE HOOCH:
Interior with a
woman peeling
apples.
Painted in 1663.
London, Wallace
Collection

The trouble about beauty is that tastes and standards of what is beautiful vary so much. Figs. 5 and 6 were both painted in the fifteenth century, and both represent angels playing the lute. Many will prefer the Italian work by Melozzo da Forli (Fig. 5), with its appealing grace and charm, to that of his northern contemporary Hans Memling (Fig. 6). I myself like both. It may take a little longer to discover the intrinsic beauty of Memling's angel, but once we are no longer disturbed by his faint awkwardness we may find him infinitely lovable.

What is true of beauty is also true of expression. In fact, it is often the expression of a figure in the painting which makes us like or loathe the work. Some people like an expression which they can easily understand, and which therefore moves them profoundly. When the Italian seventeenth-century painter Guido Reni painted the head of Christ on the cross (Fig. 7), he intended, no doubt, that the beholder should find in this face all the agony and all the glory of the Passion. Many people throughout subsequent centuries have drawn strength and comfort from such a representation of the Saviour. The feeling it expresses is so strong and so clear that copies of this work can be found in simple wayside shrines and remote farmhouses where people know nothing about 'Art'. But even if this intense expression of feeling appeals to us we should not, for that reason, turn away from works whose expression is perhaps less easy to understand. The Italian painter of the Middle Ages who painted the crucifix (Fig. 8) surely felt as sincerely about the Passion as did Reni, but we must first learn to know his methods of drawing to understand his feelings. When we have come to understand these different languages, we may even prefer works of art whose expression is less obvious than Reni's. Just as some prefer people who use few words and

5. (left)
MELOZZO DA
FORLI: Angel.
Detail of a fresco.
Painted about
1480. Vatican,
Pinacoteca



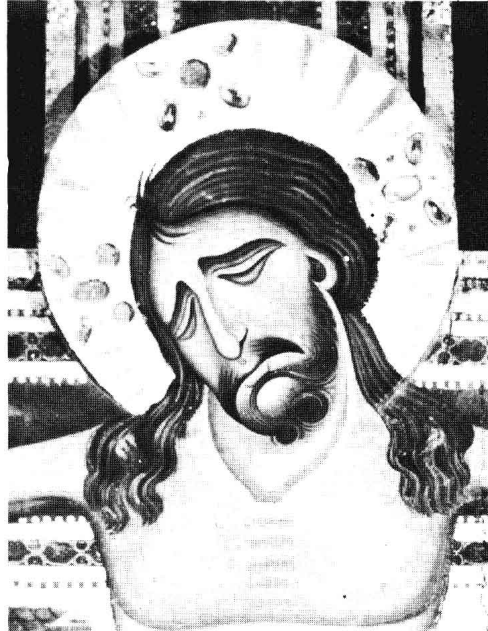
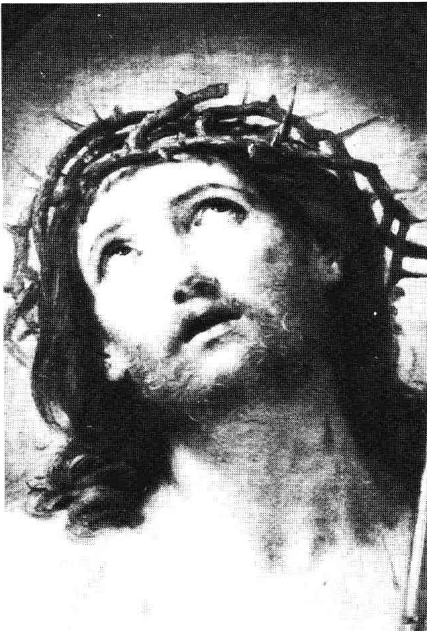
6. (right)
MEMLING:
Angels. Detail of
an altar. Painted
about 1490.
Antwerp,
Museum



gestures and leave something to be guessed, so some people are fond of paintings or sculptures which leave them something to guess and ponder about. In the more 'primitive' periods, when artists were not as skilled in representing human faces and human gestures as they are now, it is often all the more moving to see how they tried nevertheless to bring out the feeling they wanted to convey.

But here newcomers to art are often brought up against another difficulty. They want to admire the artist's skill in representing the things they see. What they like best are paintings which look 'like real'. I do not deny for a moment that this is an important consideration. The patience and skill which go into the faithful rendering of the visible world are indeed to be admired. Great artists of the past have devoted much labour to works in which every tiny detail is carefully recorded. Dürer's water-colour study of a hare (Fig. 9) is one of the most famous examples of this loving patience. But who would say that Rembrandt's drawing of an elephant (Fig. 10) is necessarily less good because it shows fewer details? Indeed Rembrandt was such a wizard that he gave us the feel of the elephant's wrinkly skin with a few lines of his chalk.

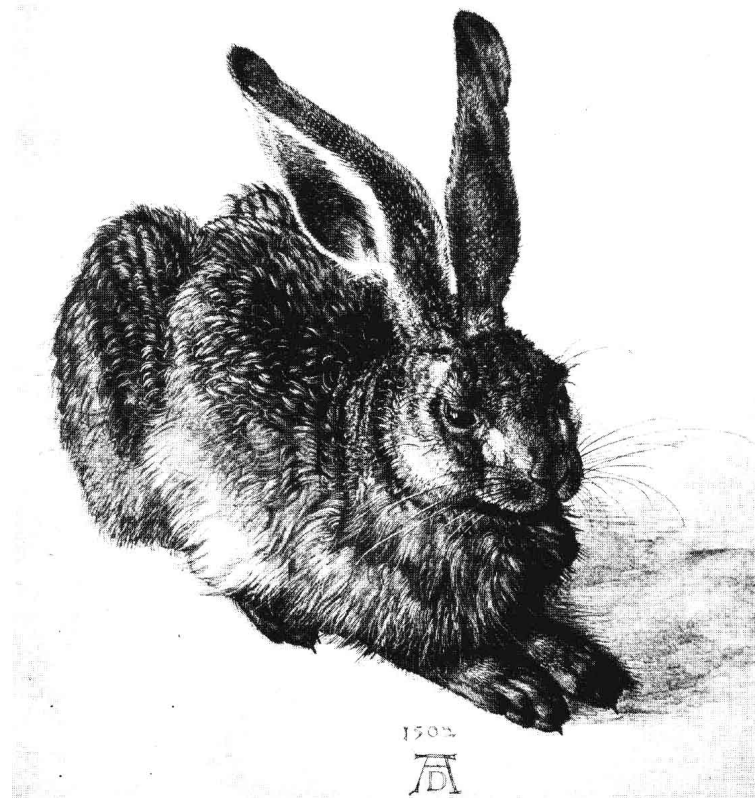
But it is not sketchiness that mainly offends people who like their pictures to look 'real'. They are even more repelled by works which they consider to be incorrectly drawn, particularly when they belong to a more modern period when the artist 'ought to have known better'. As a matter of fact, there is no mystery about these distortions of nature about which we still hear complaints in discussions on modern art. Everyone who has ever seen a Disney film or a comic strip knows all about it. He knows that it is sometimes right to draw things otherwise than they look, to change and distort them in one way or another.



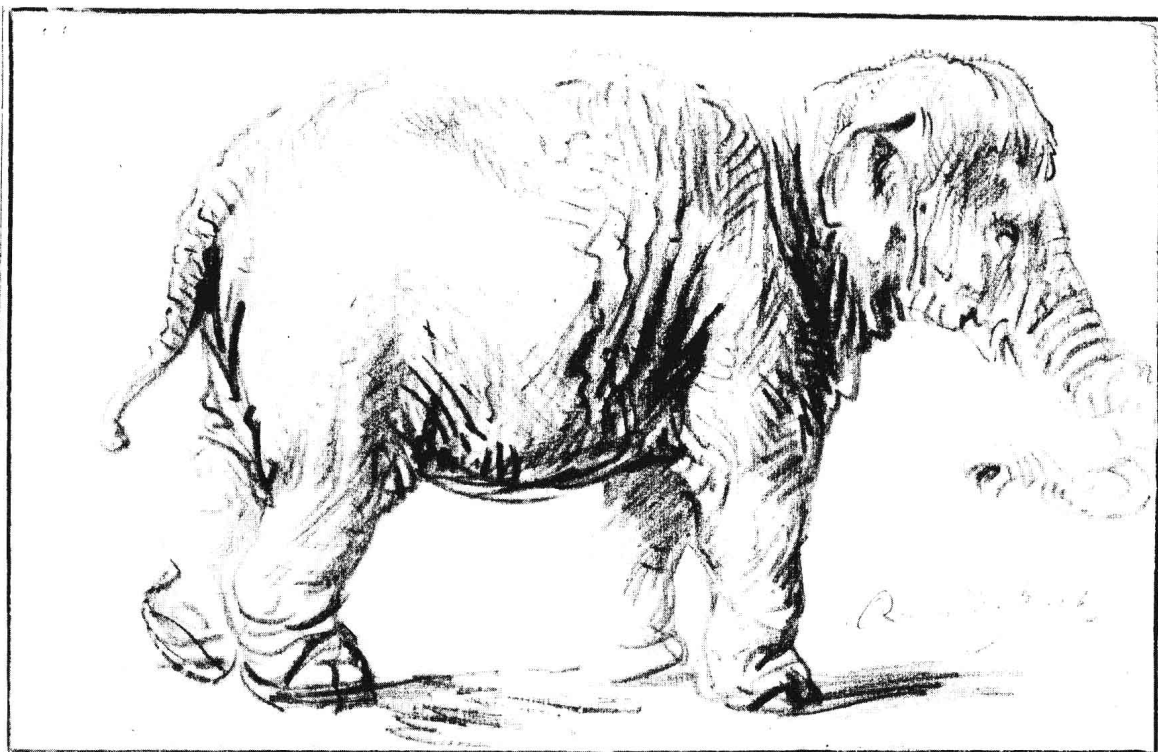
7. (left) GUIDO
RENI: Head of
Christ. Detail
of a painting,
about 1640.
Paris, Louvre

8. (right)
TUSCAN
MASTER:
Head of Christ.
Detail
of a crucifix.
Painted about
1270. Florence,
Uffizi

9. DÜRER: A hare.
*Water-colour.
Painted in 1502.
Vienna, Albertina*



10. REMBRANDT: An elephant.
Drawn in 1637. Vienna, Albertina



Mickey Mouse does not look very much like a real mouse, yet people do not write indignant letters to the papers about the length of his tail. Those who enter Disney's enchanted world are not worried about Art with a capital A. They do not go to his shows armed with the same prejudices they like to take with them when going to an exhibition of modern painting. But if a modern artist draws something in his own way, he is apt to be thought a bungler who can do no better. Now, whatever we may think of modern artists, we may safely credit them with enough knowledge to draw 'correctly'. If they do not do so their reasons may be very similar to those of Walt Disney. Fig. 11 shows a plate from an illustrated *Natural History* by the famous pioneer of the modern movement, Picasso. Surely no one could find fault with his charming representation of a mother hen and her fluffy little chickens. But in drawing a cockerel (Fig. 12), Picasso was not content with giving a mere rendering of the bird's appearance. He wanted to bring out its aggressiveness, its cheek and its stupidity. In other words he resorted to caricature. But what a convincing caricature it is!

There are two things, therefore, which we should always ask ourselves if we find fault with the accuracy of a picture. One is whether the artist may not have had his reasons for changing the appearance of what he saw. We shall hear more about such reasons as the story of art unfolds. The other is that we should never condemn a work for being incorrectly drawn unless we have made quite sure that we are right and

11. (left)
PICASSO: A hen with chickens. Illustration to Buffon's *Natural History* published in 1942

12. (right)
PICASSO: A cockerel. Drawn in 1938. Formerly in the artist's possession

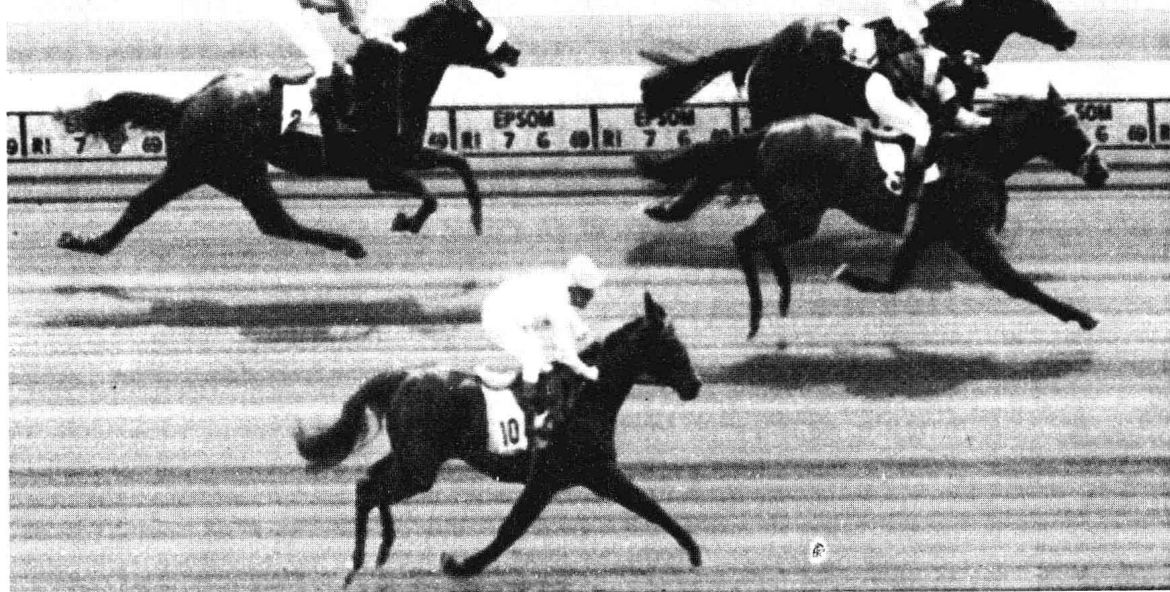


the painter is wrong. We are all inclined to be quick with the verdict that 'things do not look like that'. We have a curious habit of thinking that nature must always look like the pictures we are accustomed to. It is easy to illustrate this by an astonishing discovery which was made not very long ago. Generations have watched horses gallop, have attended horse-races and hunts, have enjoyed paintings and sporting prints showing horses charging into battle or running after hounds. Not one of these people seems to have noticed what it 'really looks like' when a horse runs. Pictures and sporting prints usually showed them with outstretched legs in full flight through the air—as the great French nineteenth-century painter Géricault painted them in a famous representation of the races at Epsom (Fig. 13). About fifty years later, when the photographic camera had been sufficiently perfected for snapshots of horses in rapid motion to be taken, these snapshots proved that both the painters and their public had been wrong all the while. No galloping horse ever moved in the way which seems so 'natural' to us. As the legs come off the ground they are moved in turn for the next kick-off (Fig. 14). If we reflect for a moment we shall realize that it could hardly get along otherwise. And yet, when painters began to apply this new discovery, and painted horses moving as they actually do, everyone complained that their pictures looked wrong.

13. GÉRICAULT:
Horse-racing at
Epsom. Painted
in 1820.
Paris. Louvre

This, no doubt, is an extreme example, but similar errors are by no means as rare as one might think. We are all inclined to accept con-





ventional forms or colours as the only correct ones. Children sometimes think that stars must be star-shaped, though naturally they are not. The people who insist that in a picture the sky must be blue, and the grass green, are not very different from these children. They get indignant if they see other colours in a picture, but if we try to forget all we have heard about green grass and blue skies, and look at the world as if we had just arrived from another planet on a voyage of discovery and were seeing it for the first time, we may find that things are apt to have the most surprising colours. Now painters sometimes feel as if they were on such a voyage of discovery. They want to see the world afresh, and to discard all the accepted notions and prejudices about flesh being pink and apples yellow or red. It is not easy to get rid of these preconceived ideas, but the artists who succeed best in doing so often produce the most exciting works. It is they who teach us to see in nature new beauties of whose existence we have never dreamt. If we follow them and learn from them, even a glance out of our own window may become a thrilling adventure.

There is no greater obstacle to the enjoyment of great works of art than our unwillingness to discard habits and prejudices. A painting which represents a familiar subject in an unexpected way is often condemned for no better reason than that it does not seem right. The more often we have seen a story represented in art, the more firmly do we become convinced that it must always be represented on similar lines. About biblical subjects, in particular, feelings are apt to run high. Though

14. *The same subject, as the modern camera sees it. Photo finish*