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Gombrich, Sir Ernst

E.H. Gombrich, art historian and the famous author of *The Story of Art* (1950) and *Art and Illusion* (1960), was born in Vienna in 1909 into an assimilated bourgeois family of Jewish origin. He received no formal religious education beyond that given to pupils at his school, the Theresianum. The Bible was not a topic of family conversation but its prohibition of image worship was a major stimulus to his interest in the semantics of the image, discussed in *Art and Illusion* and his seminal essay ‘*Icones Symbolicae*’. When asked, three years before his death, about the problem of ‘the relationship between the idea and its representation’ he replied ‘All this has to do with and takes us back to the basic root of the whole question, to the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments. You should not make yourself a graven image because God cannot and should not be represented and he shouldn’t even be named’. (Putnam 1986)

The relation between *The Story of Art* and *Art and Illusion* was that the second offered a commentary on the evolutionary theory proposed in the first: as he described it, the evolution from an art based on knowledge to one based on perception. He described the production of naturalistic imagery as a specific feature of the Western European tradition of image making based upon discoveries about the appearance of the natural world and how that may be simulated by figurative imagery. An unremarked character of both books was the long term transition from magic and idolatry to secular naturalism and the production of Art. Gombrich was preoccupied with the double phenomenon of image magic and the magic of the image throughout his long and productive life: “the universal belief in the power of images.” (1995, 413)

In its Anglophone reception *Art and Illusion* was understood in two fundamentally contradictory ways: that the image stood in both a conventional and realist relation to the natural world. The issue was treated as philosophical and Gombrich himself referred to the argument in Plato’s *Cratylus* “which considers language in the light of the problem so dear to the Greeks – the problem of what exists by ‘nature’ and what by ‘convention’.” (1982, 183-4) The same issue can, though, be treated within an alternative tradition, that stemming from the Decalogue: “You should not make yourself a graven image because God cannot and should not be represented and he shouldn’t even be named.” (1998). How can a lump of inert matter, such as a stick or a stone, possibly be taken for a god? How was His representation possible?

Gombrich established the link between the philosophical and religious traditions in the introduction to his essay ‘*Icones Symbolicae*’. (1948) He remarked that as a student he had been inclined

to believe that the great Baroque church ceiling paintings showed figures in allegorical paintings as real presences, or 'true representations', rather than 'pictographs' or 'conventional images'. Thus the paintings worked in the same way as pagan imagery before the advent of the Christian Middle Ages. Their function was to work as illusions. This would have been a perfectly acceptable thing to say within the milieu of the Warburg Institute, dedicated as it was to the *Nachleben* of antiquity. It was an ivory tower, a world apart from the *hoi polloi* of everyday life. However, public lectures were another matter. Given the prevalent latent anti-semitism and anti-catholicism of England and America in the 50s, Gombrich would respond to the misunderstandings of *Art and Illusion* by sidelining the contentious issues of religious debate to focus on matters of secular psychology. Nevertheless he was haunted by the title of his book *Art and Illusion*, by critics who claimed that the work of art was not a work of illusion. There was no delusion involved. Gombrich knew this. Paintings could be considered as works of art once they had lost their religious functions. What he could not admit was that they had lost their illusory powers. If Riccio's *Box in the shape of a crab* were on a desk "I might well be tempted to play with it, to poke it with a pen, or to warn a child, most unpsychologically, not to touch any paper on my desk or the crab would bite it. ... [it] would belong to the species crab, subspecies bronze crab." However, in a museum case it "belongs to the species Renaissance bronzes, subspecies bronzes representing crabs." (*A&I*, 98)

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See also → Idolatry