reviews

Analytical history of ornament

N. K. Humphrey

The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art. By E. H. Gombrich. Pp. 411. (Phaidon: Oxford, 1979.) £15.

The Psychology of Decorative Art is the title of a book which has still to be written. That Gombrich should have used it as the sub-title of his latest essay in Art History is a pity for two reasons: first because it will mislead the reader as to what the book is really about; and second, because it has apparently misled the author into biting off more than he can chew. Despite its pretensions this book has very little of value to say about psychology. It has, however, a great deal to say about the more traditional subject matter of the art historian: craftsmanship, style, symbolism, tradition, patronage, and especially about what other critics have had to say about these things.

The body of the book is an analytical history of ornament. From time immemorial *homo faber*—man the serious-minded maker of useful artefacts—has openly cohabited with a more flippant mistress: where he might otherwise have been content with objects which were merely functional, she, his playful (and sometimes tiresome) muse, has persuaded him to decorate them. Her nature, it seems, abhors a visual vacuum; wherever she sees an empty surface, a hard edge, a simple corner, she yearns to overlay it or surround it with decorative patterns. So floors and walls are covered with geometrical designs; an arabesque runs around the cooking pot; the hilt of a sword is decked with jewels; stone columns are fluted and topped with a wreath of acanthus leaves; even the letters of the alphabet are adorned with knots and flourishes.

Gombrich brings to bear on these and related examples of human eccentricity his unrivalled combination of erudition, curiosity and taste. The first chapters deal with the criticism of ornament, the cult of purity and the debates about design in Victorian England. Next the craftsman's practice of pattern making is discussed as a response to the challenges of material, of geometrical laws and visual constraints. And, in perhaps the most intriguing sections of the book, the origins and fate of certain traditional motifs are followed through (the Paisley pattern,

Perspective of an interior

Drawing by M. Wenzel (taken from the book)

the acanthus scroll, and others). An Epilogue reviews some of the analogies between the spatial orders of decorative design and the temporal patterns of the dance, of poetry and, notably, of music.

Amidst all this there is, let it be said, a sprinkling of psychology, or what might less kindly be called 'psychologising'. Reference is made (particularly in three middle chapters) to "gestalt formation", "selective attention", "information theory", and so forth. But—and I do not think it is merely the closed-shop mentality of a professional psychologist which makes me say it—I found these excursions into experimental psychology for the most part trite, irrelevant or amateur. Although no-one has yet made a good job of linking art and psychology, Gombrich himself in his earlier book, *Art and Illusion*, has already made a much better job of it than he does here.

To the reader looking for a psychological explanation of design, however, the biggest disappointment will come with the vacuity of the 'biological' arguments which Gombrich propounds at the beginning of the book. It may be true that man and other animals have an innate 'sense of order', and that they find order relaxing and a mild

degree of disorder interesting (*ergo* pleasurable?). But Gombrich does not present a convincing case for why this should be so; nor, having set out the thesis, does he draw any but the most banal conclusion from it—that people like what we already know they like. For me at least, it adds nothing to the understanding of man's love of order to point out that "Nature around us is throbbing with complex rhythms, and these rhythms serve the purpose of life". True, man's heartbeat is rhythmical, and he would be dead if it were not; but, equally, his blood is red and he would be dead if it were not—and that surely does not explain why he prefers the colour red to blue.

The book is finely illustrated, and, as always, Gombrich proves a brilliant guide as to what to see and why. I shall never look at the roof of King's Chapel, or a William Morris wallpaper or a Paisley pattern tie in quite the same way again. But the way in which Gombrich succeeds in deepening our perception of these patterns is by telling us more about their makers rather than by telling us more about ourselves. □

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