vailing throughout the rest of America, with varying degrees of success. Given the image of New Orleans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an exotic place of loose morals and rampant miscegenation, there was not the slightest chance that Americans could have learned something from this multicultural and multiracial society. Today, two hundred years later, perhaps we are ready to be taught.

Christopher S. Wood
The Unmodern Modern

The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art
By E.H. Gombrich (Phaidon Press, 324 pp., $59.95)

Perhaps no scholar in any field has ever enjoyed a wider readership than Ernst Gombrich. The latest catalogue of books from Electa, the international art publisher based in Milan, is organized by categories, such as "Painting in Italy," "Painting in Europe," "Dictionaries of Art," "Modern Architects," and so on; but embedded among all the general rubrics is the name "Ernst H. Gombrich," a category in his own right. The Story of Art, which appeared in 1950, a book written for teenagers but read mostly by adults, has been translated into twenty-nine languages. Gombrich had a gift for plain prose and lucid exposition—a dangerous gift, for he tended to oversimplify. But he was much more than a popular writer. He published many dozens of books and articles on Italian Renaissance painting, and the history of aesthetics and art theory, and art and the psychology of perception—many of them seminal texts that set the course for future research. "Professor Gombrich has paid his dues!," a teacher of mine, chaperoning Gombrich into an art museum, gallantly protested when an official tried to extract the admission fee from the great scholar.

The miracle of Gombrich was his prose style. He persuaded his readers with reassuring sequences of confident but relaxed remarks, tuned by a keen ear for syntax and idioms and sauced with wit. Of course, there is nothing common about common sense. The authority of Gombrich's verbal plain-dealing was a brilliant illusion. It is astonishing that a non-native speaker of English should have been able to pick up so quickly the rhythms of the language. Gombrich told of a ride on a London bus with his publisher Bela Horovitz, the founder of Phaidon Press, at a time when they "had both begun to discover the pitfalls and powers of English prose, and he recommended Bacon's essays to me, while I drew his attention to David Hume's."

Gombrich came to London from Vienna in 1936, at the age of twenty-seven. He found a post at the Warburg Institute, the new research center built around the famous interdisciplinary library of Aby Warburg, which had been packed into six hundred crates and shipped from Hamburg to London in December 1933 to escape the Nazi bonfires. Except for the war years, when he worked for the BBC Monitoring Service, Gombrich spent his whole career at the Warburg Institute. From 1959 until his retirement in 1976, he was its director. Gombrich brought Germanic Kunstwissenschaft—art historical scholarship grounded in philosophy and aesthetics—to Britain. In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, art history had been taught at the universities since the 1840s. But not until 1932, with the founding of the Courtauld Institute of Art, was it possible to earn an advanced degree in art history in the United Kingdom. Oxford did not name its first professor of art history until 1935. Art historical research in Britain had been mostly pursued by museum curators and private scholars, or sponsored by dealers and collectors interested in settling the value of a picture or a drawing. Gombrich intellectualized British art history. In his writings on Renaissance art, he did not trouble himself with attributions or chronologies. Instead he made a place for art within a history of ideas. Most influential and original were his reflections on representation and the psychology of pictorial illusion. In Art and Illusion (1960), Gombrich argued that
Western art history was built around a constant oscillation between “making,” representation according to conventional schemas, and “matching,” critical adjustment of the schema on the basis of comparison with perception. Perception could not function at all, he had learned from experimental psychology, without such schemas and categories. All art, Gombrich announced, was “conceptual” art.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Gombrich dominated art history in Britain. His faith in the natural sciences suited the English and corroborated their mistrust of German metaphysical philosophy. Gombrich agreed with his friend Karl Popper that Hegel’s conception of history as the progressive disclosure of Spirit brought us all nothing but trouble. Gombrich was interested in experimental psychology, but not in the ideas of Freud. In fact, Gombrich seems not to have admired any of the more abstract thinkers of the last two centuries. His inquiries into the psychology of perception and the psychology of taste bring us back instead to the Enlightenment, to the hard-edged inquiries of Locke or Hume. With his skepticism, his grumpy humor, and his bluff tendency to dismiss anything that he did not immediately understand as cant or nonsense, Gombrich was the Dr. Johnson of art history.

American intellectuals, by contrast, from Ralph Waldo Emerson forward, have tended to have a greater tolerance for cant. Metaphysics, the quest for meaning, and the Nietzschean trust in the dark truths of art have traditionally found more of a foothold in this country than in Britain. One need only consider the largely hospitable reception of modern French and German thinkers—Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Gadamer, Adorno, Habermas—in American universities. For American art historians, therefore, Gombrich has never been quite as crucial as he is for the British.

Indeed, it is possible that one cannot speak at all about art without some tolerance for cant. The appeal of a poem or a painting is an imponderable mystery, which will not yield to the instruments of common sense. One often has the sense that Gombrich underrated this mystery. He did not know what to make of modern art, that is, painting and sculpture after Impressionism. His model of art history as the pursuit of perceptual illusion simply breaks down in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gombrich had little to say about the deeper drives that compel people to make art, to look at art, to possess art.

All the shortcomings of Gombrich’s art history spill out, unfortunately, in his last book, *The Preference for the Primitive*, which has appeared a year after his death at the age of ninety-two. Gombrich himself saw the text into press; this is not a posthumous compilation. His contempt for modern art and his impatience with abstract thought emerge in such high relief that we can only think of this book as a kind of parting shot. Certainly he was sharp and irritable until the end. (I had the chance to speak with him at length in 1996, when he was eighty-seven, and was taken aback by the agility of his wit and the precision of his bibliographical memory.) *With The Preference for the Primitive*, Gombrich joins an exceedingly small company of nonagenarian authors: Bertrand Russell and Ernst Jünger, for instance, but also the tragedian Sophocles, who, we are told by the satirist Lucian, was put on trial for feebledmindedness in his nineties. To exonerate himself, he read aloud to the jury his last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Since Gombrich tells the story of art as a progressive mastery of the technology of pictorial illusion, he has difficulty explaining why artists at some moments have chosen to move the other way, to revert to less accomplished representational modes. This book is an attempt to make sense of this perverse rejection of the achievements of civilization. Gombrich compares advanced mimetic art to the technology of flying. To draw in perspective is to overcome a natural, “gravitational” pull back to the childlike devices of the stick figure, the base line, and the decorative filling of the picture surface. Why would we ever again crawl like infants once we have been taught by the great masters of the Renaissance how to fly?

But the history of art reveals that many artists have indeed preferred to crawl. Already in the eighteenth century, when painters were still cowed by the lofty ideal style that was established by Raphael and perpetuated by the Carracci, collectors and connoisseurs were turning their attention to the so-called “primitives,” the masters of the late Middle Ages, with all their clumsy charm. The early painters had “a stiff, lame manner,” in the words of the English connoisseur Jonathan Richardson. But “this bad style,” Richardson concedes, “had something manly, and vigorous; whereas in the decay, whether after the happy age of Rafealle, or that of Annibale [Carracci], one sees an effeminate, languid air.” Later in the century Goethe praised the sinewy strength of the cathedral of Strasbourg, which was an affront to classically trained eyes. “Art is creative long before it is beautiful,” he argued, “indeed often more true and more great than when beautiful.”

In the early nineteenth century, artists themselves began to defy the classical imperative and to revive the long-obsolete styles of the Middle Ages. The Nazarenes, a clan of German painters living in Rome, found in medieval frescoes the virtues of stillness, linear clarity, and flat primary colors. The Pre-Raphaelites in England rediscovered the hallucinatory detail of fifteenth-century Flemish panel painting. The Neo-Medievalists strove for simplicity, sweetness, naïveté, piety. Through Byzantine, Islamic, and Japanese art, later nineteenth-century architects and painters...
re-discovered the virtues of decorative flatness, repetition, and abstraction.

Gombrich narrates these enshrining chapters in the history of taste with his usual clarity and ear for the eloquent quotation. But in the early twentieth century, when the “preference” for the primitive flares up in a full-scale rebellion against mimetic art, Gombrich begins to flail. In the last chapters of his book, he summarizes with sneering condescension the struggles of Picasso, the German Expressionists, and the Surrealists to reactivate art through engagements with tribal art, folk art, or the art of children or the insane. He regrets the rash and regressive “infantilism” that led some artists to abandon the technology of pictorial mimesis, the refined product of five centuries of experimentation. Why would we wish to return to earlier stages of development in which we are no longer masters of ourselves?”

Gombrich’s mistrust of primitivism, he openly grants, was rooted in his horror of the vulgar and perilous predilection for the archaic, the barbarian, and the volkisch that was cultivated in early twentieth-century Germany. He deplored—he remembered very well—the facile paths of the popular art historians of the 1920s and 1930s who stoked the memory of a vigorous and pious medieval German culture. At the same time, Gombrich concedes that his contempt for the Modernist appreciation of the art of tribal peoples, children, and the insane uncomfortably resembles the National Socialist condemnation of modern art as a perverse threat to public morality, expounded sensationally in the notorious propagandistic exhibition of “Degenerate Art” of 1937. “It is a matter of history,” he grants, “that these tendencies of twentieth-century art produced the most violent reactions, particularly in Germany, where modern art was identified with degeneracy. The insanity of these charges need not conceal the fact that many artists of the era longed indeed to express such exceptional states that would inspire and inform their art.”

At this point in his narrative Gombrich tempers his argument and switches to an indulgent and resigned tone, smiling forgivingly on the “noisy tomfoolery,” the naughty “spoofs,” of Dada artists such as Marcel Duchamp, perpetrator of shocking pranks designed to defy taboos and unsettle the bourgeois public. In the wake of World War I, after all, one needed to have a bit of fun. Gombrich observes optimistically that the taste for the barbarous and the archaic seems finally to be waning in our own time, although what would lead him to say this is a mystery to me. In these pages, and whenever he writes on modern art, Gombrich loses his rhetorical touch. His reassuring catchphrases—“we can hardly be surprised that . . . it will probably be clear to the reader that . . . — suddenly come across as desperately grasping, even menacing. And any reader who takes twentieth-century art at all seriously will feel insulted by Gombrich’s patronizing tone.

Gombrich offers an overall explanation for primitivism, a homemade psychological explanation. He found it in a quote from Cicero: “The very things that move our sense most to pleasures and appeal to them most speedily at first are the ones from which we are most quickly estranged by a kind of disgust and surfeit.”

We become fatigued, in other words, with perfection and beauty, and we “tend to mobilize our defenses against what is too obviously seductive.” With this psychological “law,” Gombrich reduces modern art to little more than a series of reflexive, even capricious responses to local circumstances and random challenges. “Certain developments in the history of art,” he remarks, “can best be seen as the results of competition, with rivals outbidding each other, leading to the dominance of given aspects and the neglect of others.” And near the end of the book he asserts that “we need not describe in detail how the regressive phenomenon in defying taboos escalated in the course of the century.”

This is a discouraging approach to the writing of art history. Where does Gombrich’s argument go wrong? What might we salvage from this book? I am convinced that the analogy between illusionistic painting and aeronautical engineering is a fallacy. Flying is useful because it collapses distances. It is hard to imagine a civilization willingly renouncing this power. But is mimetic painting permanently useful in the same way? Painted illusions have had their uses: they have re-inforced cultic devotion, generated political spectacle, and described strange animals and plants and distant lands. But in the last century and a half, many of these functions have been taken over by other representational technologies, above all by photography and film. And painters developed a new conception of art that entailed freedom from any practical or communicational tasks. The twentieth-century artist simply wanted to make things to fabricate dense artifacts that would mysteriously attract or repel or even disorient their beholders. The twentieth-century artist might exploit illusionism to generate such effects; but for artists the simulation of perception was new a means to an end, and never again an end in itself.

Gombrich is mistaken if he thinks our civilization has abandoned illusionism. Even mimetic painting still flourishes, especially in the commercial realm. There are many more square yards of high-level illusionistic painting—admittedly not always handmade—on our billboards and cereal boxes than there were in all of Renaissance Italy. What has happened is that art has disengaged itself from the technology of illusionism; or, rather, art insists on the right to engage with illusionism only when it chooses to engage with it. So Gombrich’s “story of art,” the rise and fall of mimetic painting, turns out to be just a subplot of a larger tale. Since he is unwilling to say what that framing story might be, he can only interpret the Modernist challenge to illusionism as a caprice, an infantile regression, or at best an intriguing experiment.

This conclusion is doubly unfortunate because it prevents Gombrich from taking the full measure of the European engagement with the “primitivistic.” Since the sixteenth century, every European colonial conquest, every technological triumph over nature, and every new refinement in artistic taste has been met by a self-critical primitivist response. Montaigne, in his essay “On Cannibals” in 1580, turned on its head the reflexive European contempt for the barbaric ways of the indigenous peoples of the New World. We call the people of Brazil “wild,” wrote Montaigne, as we do those fruits produced by nature without the artifice of agriculture, but it is really those cultivated fruits that we ought to call “wild.” For the natural fruits retain their genuine and useful virtues and properties, whereas we Europeans have “debased” those fruits “in adapting them to gratify our corrupted taste.” The Brazilians eat their enemies, admittedly. But is that more barbarous, Montaigne asked, than our practices of torture and burning alive? In 1750, in his Discourse on the Science and the Arts, one of the founding manifestos of modernity, Rousseau dismissed the grand achievements of European civilization as a corruption of our original simplicity and a
descent into slavery. “Before art had new molded our behaviors,” Rousseau asserted, “and taught our passions to talk an affected language, our manners were indeed rustic, but sincere and natural.” He urged the fashionable painters of the day, Carle van Loo and Jean-Baptiste Pierre, simply to drop their brushes and commit no more crimes. We take more delight, Rousseau insisted, in “the simplicity of primitive tastes; it is a beautiful coast decked by the hands of nature, towards which we still turn our eyes, whilst with regret, we find ourselves moving from it.” Meanwhile, pastoral poetry from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, remembering the fictional Arcadian shepherds described by Theocritus and Virgil, cast an ironic eye on the sophisticated ways of city and court. The preference for the primitive would take a thousand forms in modernity, from the Romantic cult of wilderness to the ecology movement, from Henry David Thoreau to the Unabomber, from Wordsworth and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads to the American minimalist short story.

Even this briefest of sketches suggests that primitivism is not so much an episode in Western culture as one of its underlying structures. The taste for medieval art that developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the absorption with African art that emerged in the early twentieth century belong to this pattern of civilization’s self-criticism. These shifts in taste were motivated not by a fatigue with sweet perfection, but by a desire to reconnect with the deepest roots of art-making. The medieval altarpiece and the ritual mask were artifacts that, in their home cultures, had supposedly called forth primordial responses of fear, longing, exhilaration, and piety. Those were exactly the responses that any modern painter was also hoping to elicit—except that the available tools, the Neoclassical tradition and the technique of mimetic painting, suddenly no longer seemed up to the task.

In The Preference for the Primitive, Gombrich is no longer a reliable guide to the subject. So does this last book cast a shadow over his entire scholarly project? Gombrich was a reductionist. He sought the most parsimonious explanation for any phenomenon, and if need be he was content with no explanation at all. He was reluctant to assign ideological content or historical meaning to any episode or achievement in the history of art, or to perceive any shape to history as a whole. Instead he reduced art history to a series of responses, in themselves meaningless, to social pressures to conform, or to collective expectations. Kant could only arrive at his idealistic notion of artistic judgment as “disinterested,” Gombrich once proposed, because he lived in an isolated milieu and had no “occasion to see the pathetic desire of the socially insecure to ‘like’ the ‘right thing.’” In 1967, in an essay designed to deflate the Italian Renaissance, Gombrich argued that the most pressing concerns of the humanist scholars who revived antiquity were philological and orthographic, and that Renaissance architects were mostly occupied with fancy corrections to local building traditions. Perhaps, he slyly mused, the Renaissance “had its origins not so much in the discovery of man as in the rediscovery of diphthongs.”

This approach has enjoyed great success in the study of the history of science. In the 1960s and 1970s, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend rewrote the history of scientific progress as a series of arbitrary choices between one paradigm (Gombrich would have said “schema”) and another. Both these philosophers of science drew on the work of Gombrich’s ally Popper, who was the first to introduce the concept of mere “preference” into intellectual history. These skeptical theories have since generated an entirely new scholarly field, the social history of science, a field that misses the inevitability of scientific progress and the parade of inspired geniuses, and instead focuses on the sociology and the politics of scientific research.

Not everyone is content to see this approach transferred to the study of art. The artwork and its creator enjoy a protected status in our culture. They are treated as irreducible, inexplicable singularities, by art historians but also by collectors, dealers, and indeed by museumgoers generally. Few are ready to see the work and the artist melt back into the flow of history. Gombrich’s reductionism swept aside whole dense tangles of prejudices, received ideas, and wishful thinking about art. It was a disillusioned and pragmatic view, and it offended the elitist and aristocratic myths about art and creativity that for so long contaminated all thinking about Old Master painting. The democratic implications of Gombrich’s rationalism should not be underestimated.

Once Gombrich is seen as a materialist and a demystifier, he appears less isolated. He comes to resemble other twentieth-century thinkers who were similarly intent on puncturing complacent and idealistic truisms. Behaviorism shifted psychological research away from the mysteries of consciousness and experience and instead toward objectively observable responses. Structuralism, whether applied to kinship hierarchies or literary texts, holds that “meaning” is a fiction generated by the manipulation of arbitrary switches within a closed system. The field of artificial intelligence demystifies human thought processes and the very notions of subjectivity and interiority. In recent decades there has been a tendency to reduce the great narratives of human history to their concrete psychological elements, or to unmask them as blind struggles for power.

In 1974, Gombrich published a chilling essay called “The Logic of Vanity Fair,” in which he argued that art had always been tethered to the vagaries of taste and fashion, idle impulses better understood as forms of competition or “social testing” than as meaningful choices. Styles or aesthetic principles are merely “polarizing issues” that allow people to organize themselves sociologically. I am tempted to say that Gombrich in this nihilistic mode was beginning to sound like Andy Warhol, who in the following year published his own Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again). Warhol summed things up this way: “In the ‘60s everybody got interested in everybody. In the ‘70s everybody started dropping everybody.” This is a way of think-
ing about art history that must have made sense to Gombrich.

Gombrich is best understood as a negative thinker. He was a contrarian, and the aftereffect of his project is a restless, corrosive, and impious mental energy, the impression of an immense critical turbulence that he himself set in motion. Certainly his scholarly work can only be understood as a response, a retort even, to modern art. Art and Illusion objected to the idea of the manifest destiny of abstract painting, a common assumption in the 1950s. When Pop Art emerged in the years immediately following the publication of his book, Gombrich must have felt vindicated. Gombrich and Warhol and the Pop artists were all skeptical of the metaphysical pretensions of abstract painting. But Pop Art was not simply re-embracing the mimetic tradition, even when it simulated realistic commercial imagery or news photography. Pop Art was a complicated commentary on the relationship between art and consumer society, and on the difference between art and other forms of communication and expression. Gombrich’s theory of art had failed to predict the future of art, and with each passing decade after 1960 this became ever clearer. His last book was a frustrated protest against this fact.

Looking back at Gombrich’s celebrated essay “Meditations on a Hobby Horse,” which appeared in 1951, I find that he knew all along what aesthetic primitivism was really aiming at. He was simply pessimistic about the chances of art ever finding its way back to its roots. “That strange pre-cinct we call ‘art,’” Gombrich wrote, “is like a hall of mirrors or a whispering gallery. Each form conjures up a thousand memories and after-images. No sooner is an image presented as art than, by this very act, a new frame of reference is created from which it can never escape.” Picasso may well have hoped to recover some of the magic of the tribal mask, but the attempt was doomed to failure. Picasso would never re-create what the mask meant to its first creator, for “that way is barred,” Gombrich concluded, “by the angel with a flaming sword.”

But what do people make of Fields today, when grown men are to be seen in every city following their dogs and carrying small plastic bags at the ready, and when something called The Lizzie McGuire Movie is bursting out as fulsomely as the actress’s blooming bust, which has made the continuation of her kidvid show on the Disney Channel an embarrassment? Perhaps I will be stoned in the letters column, but I think this baggy job with dogs is among the most humiliating sights in this proud, Rumbytoting empire. (Would any man follow a wife, or anyone he was fond of, with such a bag?) As for the blind adulation of children, what can be said except that there seems to be an unstoppable craze on the part of anyone over forty in the United States of Amnesia to behave as if they were fifteen? (Could Warhol have meant—he did his best to show the way—that one day everyone will be fifteen forever?)

Curtis does his best to claim that Fields, while bored by dogs, actually had a soft spot for children. But that is a thankless argument to pursue when one reflects on the immense, abused gravitas—it is nearly Mahlerian—with which Fields just refrains from infanticide in several of his films. (Even the correspondence column of The New York Times Book Review has sustained the legend that he was inclined to add gin to Baby Le Roy’s milk.) At the very least Fields is a stalwart of the old notion that children should be kept in their place, if only a sufficiently dark and soundproofed hovel can be found. And as I write this, I see the likelihood of being misunderstood by sober citizens (let alone my own children). After all, this is now a land where smoke-free sobriety has taken vicious root and childish sensibilities rule. Worse still, I begin to see and to feel a distinct lack of interest in sex, especially illicit sex, revoltingly masked by the guilty parties with their sly use of that lofty bowler “disinterested.”

So it is hard to recommend W. C. Fields today in all but whimsical situations. It does occur to me that nearly every household in America would welcome a Bill Fields whose sole job it was to answer those phone calls at strange hours soliciting for this or that. Such a Fields would not simply dismiss the telemarketing intruders; he would engage them in prolonged, learned, and increasingly surreal conversations that would destroy their time and maybe their sanity while keeping the family entertained at dinner (and giving

David Thomson is the author of The New Biographical Dictionary of Film (Knopf).

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David Thomson Fields of Dreams

W. C. Fields: A Biography by James Curtis (Alfred A. Knopf, 593 pp., $35)

As early as December 1905, here is Bill Fields, aka William Claude Dufenfield, on the road in vaudeville, writing to his wife Hattie. It is so crushing a letter, it seems more fictitious than domestic. You have to wonder at the grim stew of revenge and self-abuse in Hattie that she kept the paper instead of feeding the furnace with it. Perhaps she had thought of the law even then.

Dear Wife, Your letter to hand. Wired you $100 so you won’t have to walk the Streets with the boy. Had you answered when you should have you wouldn’t have had to wait a minute for your money. . . . I also want to know from time to time how the boy is. Now don’t go fooling too much as you may regret it. . . . Love to my boy, Your Husband.

Yes, it is a cruel or callous letter, and it is surely proof of a five-year-old marriage irretrievably broken down. More than that, I think, it is the self-conscious, drawing insult of an artist experimenting with his voice and his character, with talking pictures on no known horizon.

This is the second big book on W. C. Fields in six years, and it wouldn’t trouble me if we were only getting started. As a matter of fact, the passage that I have just quoted comes not from James Curtis’s new biography, but from Simon Louvish’s Man on the Flying Trapeze, which appeared in 1997. Don’t expect me to take sides: in fact, get ready to shell out for both books, so don’t be giving any money away yet to wheeling children, starving savages, or plump pupils. Just to establish my liking for Curtis’s book, let me note that he trumps Louvish with the discovery that the young Fields stammered. I welcome that news, for it helps us to appreciate the uncommon beauty of Fields’s very slow, amically considered, and flagrantly offensive dismissal of others in words. I mean his amazing talk.