



# The Art Historical Critique of Hegel's Aesthetic Philosophy by Gombrich

Yuan Liu\*

Northwest University, Illinois, United States

2482516799@qq.com

**Abstract.** Hegel posited the notion that history represents the progression of human self-awareness and actualization, but Gombrich contended that Hegel's philosophy fosters an excessive emphasis on systematic approaches in the examination of art, thereby impeding the advancement of both art and social history. Gombrich expressed his opposition to Hegel's concepts of the "spirit of the age" and the "spirit of the nation," and instead delved into the examination of the aesthetic worth of the artist from an individualized perspective, with a particular focus on the "artist" as the central figure. By focusing on the "artist," investigating the aesthetic value of the artist himself from an individualistic perspective, and criticizing the "relativism" of Hegel's school of thought, he insists on the position of artistic tradition and norms, replacing his "capitalized art," thereby eliminating the influence and potential harm of Hegel's aesthetic thought. This study aims to examine the disagreement between Gombrich's and Hegel's aesthetic theories within the field of art history, highlighting its relevance and practical implications in contemporary academia.

**Keywords:** Gombrich; Hegel; Art Historical Perspective; Relativism

## 1 Introduction

Philosophers have always discussed the good and evil of art, and art theorists and aesthetes are unable to avoid the issue. Gombrich wrote in *The Story of Art*, "Capitalized art has become a monster to be feared and an idol to be worshipped." Hegel's artistic expression of the spirit of the nation and the spirit of the age is considered the "primary spiritual source of capitalized art." To a significant degree, Hegel's aesthetic thought reflected a philosophy of art, which he viewed as an essential element allegorizing the evolution of human reason. "What is human constitutes the central element of true beauty and art." Hegel was a completely developed rationalist philosopher who examined all aspects of humanity. In addition to philosophy, religion, and logic, he is revered as the "Father of Art History" in the fields of art and aesthetics. The "epoch-making" significance of Hegel's aesthetic thought in the field of art is also evident, as it ushered in a new era of "philosophy of art" that is highly esteemed in the history of art. However, some of Hegel's aesthetic doctrines are both well-known and controversial in Western

and even Chinese academic circles, and Hegel will be harshly criticized in future art histories.

"The era of c.bell is over, people care more about culture, and the era of Gombrich has begun." Since the 1990s, Gombrich's art historical theory has become the focal point of contemporary art historical research, while art theories that emphasize the metaphysical concepts of art have been progressively abandoned. Gombrich, a staunch anti-Hegelian, had a great deal of criticism of Hegel in his art writings, so we need to comprehend its "harmfulness", to better understand and evaluate Hegel's aesthetic thought, and then to reflect on the methodology of art historical research.

## **2 Hegel's view of art history**

### **2.1 Theory of national spirit and expression of the spirit of the times**

Hegel's concept of "capital art" can be attributed to his aesthetic philosophy and perspective on the progression of art history. According to Hegel, art undergoes a developmental trajectory encompassing stages of infancy, maturity, and decline. Hegel posits that the decline of art catalyzes its subsequent advancement towards more advanced forms. The art styles of various eras derive from the "spirit of the times," which is influenced by unique historical and cultural contexts. Art styles are the manifestations of an era, and avant-garde art represents the progression of history. Artists ought to not alone mirror the prevailing societal conditions, but also actively lead and shape contemporary cultural developments. According to Gombrich, the presence of historical determinism can be perceived as a repetitive and irrational sequence of mythical beliefs and apprehension regarding societal deterioration, ultimately impeding the advancement of the humanities. The author posits that art research must challenge the authoritative influence of Hegel, dismantle the lingering impact of Hegel's aesthetic ideology, critically examine Hegel's perspective on art history and his overarching philosophical framework, and assess the detrimental effects of these on the field of art research.

Hegel asserted that the progression of history is governed by the logic of necessity and purpose, leaving the historian with no agency but to passively witness the manifestation of the world spirit and achieve self-realization. Consequently, the course of history represents an inexorable development of the "spirit of the world". The individual holds the belief that the course of history, the advancement of civilization, and all phenomena in the world are indicative of a "spirit of the world," with cultural manifestations serving as representations of spirituality. The fundamental nature of art can be characterized as the embodiment of the divine, and it exhibits a strong connection to historical context and the prevailing zeitgeist.

In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel staged history by dividing the history of Greece into three periods: "The first period is the period of 'individuality'; the second period is the period of prosperity and triumph; and the third period is the period of extinction." And in history, the development of both a people and a nation, as well as art, has passed through these three stages, so that even though Greek art had attained its zenith, it was destined to decline. According to this view of historical development, art has distinct phases and categories, including symbolic art, classical art, and romantic art. Symbolic

art investigates the unity of inner meaning and outer image. The primitive peoples used wooden blocks and stones to represent the gods, and the pyramids and temples of Ancient Egypt reflected the ambiguous conceptions of mortality held by the Egyptians. In the second stage of the development of art, the specific content of the [Aesthetics] personality, expressed in the sensual object, and the achievement of unity, the ancient Greek and ancient Roman arts are the most prominent representatives. In the third stage of romantic art, compared to classical art, the focus has shifted to the interior life, with the external image serving as an expression of the inner theory of the means. Again, this unity is transcended when spirituality is emphasized. It can be observed that spirituality is progressively increasing as symbolic art evolves into romantic art. Hegel believed that every work of art must express its spirit and mind, and that "these three types begin to pursue, then attain, and finally transcend the concept of true beauty" The mission of the times must be borne by art. To produce the essential meaning of the time's content as well as its necessary image, everyone, notably great artists, should be a "son of the time." Artists are tasked with expressing all that is interior and spiritual in human beings. In short, Hegel insisted on the Purpose Theory's philosophical stance that the nature of history is a process, the spirit drives the development of history, and everything in human society, including national spirit, national will, and the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, is manifested in the spirituality of unity. The mission of the artist, according to Hegel's view of art, is to express all spirituality.

Contrarily, Gombrich held the view that the correlation between art and the ethos of a nation or era was not a necessary one. Instead, he posited that shifts in artistic style were primarily driven by factors such as trends and enjoyment, underscoring the influence of fame and financial success in the realm of art. The emergence and waning of artistic forms, conversely, are attributed to the depletion of aesthetic pursuits rather than being influenced by the progression or regression of society. In this context, the significance of the artist's contribution surpasses any external influences.

## 2.2 "Artistic finality"

Hegel's Aesthetics encompasses a comprehensive examination of the veracity of art, whereby he introduces the concept of the "finality of art". Hegel's formulation posits that religion and philosophy serve as means to acknowledge and articulate the concept of the Absolute Spirit. Religion emphasizes an individual's internal needs and manifests through emotional and conceptual devotion. However, Hegel argues that the best form of cultivation lies in the exercise of independent thought. The discipline of philosophy employs independent and critical thought to establish a connection between art and religion, incorporating the objective aspects of art and the subjective elements of religion. The differentiation between art, religion, and philosophy reveals that art employs sensory imagery, religion relies on epiphenomenal consciousness, and philosophy engages in free reasoning. The spiritual nature of these three manifestations progresses in ascending order, with the ultimate level of consciousness being attained through a gradual process that transcends sensuous experiences and embraces intellectual contemplation. Additionally, within this context, there exists a process of excessive transformation from the preceding entity to the subsequent one. Specifically, art will be supplanted by

religion, and subsequently, religion will be superseded by philosophy. The present discourse pertains to the comprehensive understanding of Hegel's philosophical framework, specifically focusing on the concept of self-knowledge. [2]

### **"Classical art of the past".**

One of Hegel's assertions regarding the "finality of art" refers to "the past of classical art." He noted that contemporary thought was more rational and that art was not as dazzling as it once was. And what Hegel regarded as the most dazzling period of classical artistic development has also passed away. From the absolute spirit's logical perspective, the grandeur of classical art has limitations. Classical art contains forms of sensual externality and immediacy, as well as the prescriptive nature of nature, and it accomplishes nature and spirit unity rather than spiritual unity. The art of beauty represents a nominal spirit, which is a self-existent universality that develops and is prone to division and instability in terms of spiritual prescriptiveness, leading to the demise of classical art.

### **"The Disintegration of Romantic Art".**

Subjectivity is the most significant factor in the disintegration of Romantic-style art. Art achieves the Romantic stage and subjectivity reaches absolute freedom according to the logic of absolute spirituality. [36,334] The freedom of conceptual subjectivity exceeds the external image, resulting in a rupture between form and content and a disparity between the concept and the image. Romantic art is characterized by the spirit's return to itself, the inability of external reality to demonstrate the existence of the spirit, and the disconnection and rupture between spiritual beauty and external form. Due to the increasing subjectivity of romantic art, its expression and content became subjective, and this led to the demise of romantic art. The "disintegration of romantic art" reflects Hegel's criticism of the subjectivity principle from an artistic standpoint.

### **"The End of Poetry".**

Hegel considers poetry to be the universal art form. All elements of poetry are imagined, and all forms of art require imagination [1,114]. Additionally, poetry is the ultimate form of art. And the decline of poetry is due to the tendency of modern society to lose its cultural heritage. Formalization, abstraction, and constraints of civil society are in opposition to the independent individuality necessary for the development of art, particularly the legal power and moral and ethical aspects that impose restrictions on artistic freedom. Modern society's reflective atmosphere impedes the cohesion of reason and sensibility, the universal and the particular.

## **2.3 Gombrich's criticism of Hegel's view of art history**

Gombrich stated in "The Father of Art History"-Reading Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics that "Hegel is the father of art history" because Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics are the foundation of art history. The Lectures on Aesthetics by Hegel is the founding text of

modern art studies, which investigates the history of art throughout the globe. Then, Gombrich initiated a vicious assault against Hegel. He once said, "I have already mentioned five such giant enemies, which I call by eccentric names: aesthetic transcendentalism, historical collectivism, historical determinism, metaphysical optimism, and relativism." According to Gombrich, Hegel's articulation of philosophical and artistic concepts lacks substance and fails to evoke inspiration. Furthermore, Gombrich dismisses the notion that art is obligated to reflect the prevailing zeitgeist as nothing more than a fallacious belief in historical determinism. Gombrich criticized Hegel's perspective on art history and aesthetic theory, labeling it as "capital art" and expressing strong disapproval by asserting that "Anyone who reads German and is compelled to read Hegel's writings immediately realizes that they have no taste at all." [3]. He contends that Hegel's historical determinism and zeitgeist have fostered his cult among art historians and art critics, influenced people's artistic judgment, and impeded the development of art itself. He has analyzed this in-depth in several articles, extending his critical vision to the entire history of art, emphasizing that art research must be rationalized, that Hegel's historical-philosophical values must be abandoned, and that a rational and pragmatic research method must be developed, thereby removing the influence and harm of Hegel's historical determinism and zeitgeist.

Gombrich said, "The life of our civilization has been threatened from the beginning by various forces of irrational fanaticism and deep-rooted fear, and the scholar has to implicate this force utilizing rational inquiry and scientific impartiality." [4] He believed that Hegel's aesthetics theory would not only affect art but also imperil human civilization, and that art history should exorcise the ghost of Hegel's philosophy.

### 3 Gombrich's view of art history

#### 3.1 "Artist" at the core

The statement "There is no capital art, there are only artists" can be considered the most contentious sentence in Gombrich's renowned work, "The Story of Art." Gombrich posits that the concept of art lacks a definitive essence, as individuals from diverse backgrounds and races possess distinct interpretations of art across various historical periods. Consequently, he argues against the notion of evaluating art through a standardized criterion. The evolution of artistic focus can be observed from prehistoric rock frescoes to contemporary design. During the Impressionist era, the production of artworks faced criticism from the art community upon their exhibition. However, ultimately, these works were recognized as a pinnacle of visual arts. This recognition highlights the inherent fallacy of assessing artworks based on a rigid and singular standard.

In addition, he suggested that aesthetics, art history, and art criticism should oppose "capitalized art" and rely on our awareness of art's scenario and the creativity of the artists, and that the root cause of art research is not to discover the spirit of the nation, the spirit of the times, or the advancement of the times in the works of art, but to investigate the aesthetic value contained in the artists themselves in order to preserve the precious memory of civilization. The aesthetic value of these works of art is to preserve the invaluable memory of civilization throughout the globe. It can be seen that his view

of art history is very distinct from Hegel's. Gombrich emphasized that artistic advancement is contingent on the artist's mentality, creative abilities, and accomplishments. He believed that "art" literally means skill, that the history of art is the history of humanity's mastery of technique, and that therefore the history of art should be a study of the accomplishments of artists in the development of their skills. Vasari documented in the history of art the artistic styles, expressive methods, and creative conceptions of Renaissance artists, as well as several technological innovations. In *The Story of Art*, Gombrich said, "The Western world should indeed be greatly indebted to the ambition of artists to outdo one another, without which there would be no story of art." [5] From this, it is clear that innovation is the essence of art. Artists can only distinguish themselves by continuously pursuing novel forms of artistic expression. These artists who have continuously surpassed their predecessors have contributed to the evolution of art.

Gombrich argues that Hegel's historical determinism and concept of progress have always influenced Western art and have even become the dogma of art historical research. History does not define everything in the world, nor is the development of history determined by the "spirit of the times" or the "spirit of the nation," but only through the development of creativity and the pioneering spirit of the people can the historical process be advanced. Art history is not an abstract will let alone a history that expresses the spirit of the times and the spirit of the nation, and although traditions in art have a temporality, they cannot be summed up as a shared spirit. If the study of art history is based on abstract concepts such as "nation," "era," and "spirit," it will lead to totalitarianism in art and cause substantial damage to human civilization. Gombrich's criticism of historical determinism and the theory of progress demonstrates the damage that Hegel's theory of art aesthetics caused to society during a particular period.

### **3.2 Critique of Relativism - from Hegelianism to Deconstructionism**

Gombrich espouses a stance that aligns with artistic heritage and conventions, advocating for the preservation of traditional values inherent in human civilization, while persistently opposing inclinations towards relativism. The individual conveyed his discontent and disapproval of relativism through several public addresses and interviews. Relativism, also known as radical subjectivism, promotes the equalization of artistic accomplishments and contributions across various historical periods and geographical locations. It argues for adopting a dynamic and diverse viewpoint, while simultaneously rejecting cultural conventions and classical artistic norms. Relativism is a philosophical perspective characterized by a dynamic and subjective inclination to assign value based on variations in perception and cognition. It posits that all entities are inherently relative, and thus, notions of truth and moral principles lack absoluteness. Instead, they are contingent upon the individual or entity that espouses them, subject to change following their holistic nature.

The concept of relativism reached its zenith during the transformative culmination of the modern art and avant-garde movements in the twentieth century. This period not only challenged the established norms and traditions of art history but also impeded its advancement and hindered the progress of the humanities. Gombrich authored a collection of articles that offered a defense of the origins, manifestations, and fundamental

tenets of relativist philosophy. These essays encompassed not only the domain of art but also extended to the broader sphere of the humanities. The individual in question exhibited a preoccupation with morals and artistic norms, always advocating for the preservation of traditional Western culture to save the value and dignity of classical works of art. In the field of art history and aesthetics, the researcher expresses a deep concern over the existing obstacles faced by the humanities. These issues encompass financial backing, the social milieu, and the underlying principles that guide the discipline. Additionally, the researcher highlights the detrimental consequences of relativism, which has impeded the progress of research traditions, beliefs, and attitudes. [6]He once lamented that "the humanities would commit suicide if they lost interest in values." Hence, Gombrich maintained a steadfast opposition to relativism and expressed pointed criticism against it.

In *Ideals and Icons*, Gombrich provides a comprehensive analysis of Hegelianism. He contends that Hegel's fundamentals are founded on a metaphysical system derived from Kant's critique of metaphysics and that existing cultural history is founded on Hegel's fundamentals. According to Hegel, everything in the universe is the history of God's creation of himself, and the history of mankind is in the same sense the history of the continuous concretization of spirit. Two major concepts of the philosophy of art can be derived from Hegel's system: the expressionism of the spirit of the nation and the spirit of the age, which sees art as a manifestation of both; and the cyclical determinism of artistic development, which sees art as originating from and returning to theory, in a cycle. This Hegelian historical determinism views scientific achievements as the inevitable manifestation of spiritual development and artistic advancement as a byproduct of time.

Gombrich once said in his speech for the Hegel Prize: "The greatest tribute to a scholar is to think seriously and constantly about his ideas, and this cannot be repeated too often. Yet I will probably be the last person to demand that the history of art and culture should abandon the search for connections between phenomena and remain categorized according to content ..... The grand structure of Hegel's aesthetics can even be seen as proof of such a proposition. Despite his skill, we can see how, in order to fit his historically sequential structure of the various arts, he tried to slip from metaphor to concrete fact in his interpretation of Egyptian art, and how he deposed figures like Apelles to the margins of Greek art." [7] Therefore, it appears that the decline of Hegelianism cannot be swiftly resolved, and for those who have the audacity to challenge the philosophical mindset, it is also an endeavor that paves the way for novel avenues in the exploration of art.

Deconstructionism is additionally distinguished by its association with relativism to some extent. Deconstructionism promotes the dismantling of established structures, employing contemporary elements to disassemble and recreate the interconnections among different discourses. It entails a logical rejection of the established principles of classical aesthetics and instead seeks to generate novel meanings through the utilization of innovative compositional approaches. Nevertheless, the disregard for established traditions and ideals diminishes the significance of the extensive historical lineage of art. Consequently, the aesthetic concepts, artistic standards, and evaluative frameworks that have evolved over millennia must be dismantled and reassembled. Gombrich highlights

that the adoption of cultural relativism undermines the significant intellectual inheritance of the work, namely the pursuit of truth, while also diminishing the stature of art through the process of deconstruction. According to Gombrich, there should be a comparable artistic effect or spiritual resonance experienced by individuals from diverse social and cultural contexts when encountering exceptional works of art. Furthermore, Gombrich suggests that imagination serves as a coping mechanism, albeit insufficient in countering the pervasive influence of relativism. Nonetheless, it remains a valuable instrument for comprehending the shared aspects of artistic expression.

#### **4 The significance of Gombrich's critique of Hegel's aesthetic thought**

Gombrich consistently presents a critical analysis of Hegel's philosophical framework of art and aesthetic theory in his scholarly investigations and evaluative discourse. The primary emphasis of his critique centers on Hegel's aesthetic perspectives, contending that Hegel's philosophical framework on art exhibits excessive abstraction and idealization, hence neglecting the corporeal and tangible manifestations inherent in artistic endeavors. Gombrich's academic accomplishments are diverse, encompassing not only a comprehensive study of the visual arts but also a significant influence on the scholarly examination of various art genres. His contributions extend beyond the realm of art studies themselves, encompassing the fields of art psychology, literary criticism, and the broader scope of human cultural history. The critique of Hegel's theory raises some fundamental inquiries of the field of philosophy. Hegel's philosophical framework is a towering structure within the annals of cultural history. It not only elucidates the extent of human understanding and the interconnected nature of its reality, but also presents a comprehensive framework for comprehending human society as a whole. [8] Hegelian philosophy placed significant emphasis on the significance of history as the dynamic progression and actualization of human self-awareness. The spirit of a nation encompasses shared characteristics manifested in scientific advancements, artistic expressions, and institutional frameworks. Consequently, every entity has the potential to serve as a symbol of this collective spirit. According to Gombrich, Hegel can be considered a potential progenitor of the discipline of art history. The individual endeavored to comprehensively analyze the entirety of global art history and establish a cohesive framework. In the essay titled "Aesthetics," the author uses the discipline of art history to delineate the progression of artistic expressions over distinct evolutionary phases, namely the symbolic, the archaic, and the romantic. This framework is utilized to elucidate the spiritual advancement inherent in these various art forms, as they transition from periods of flourishing to eventual decline. Two pertinent conceptions of art concerning the central inquiry of historiography have been previously discussed: the theory of expressing national or zeitgeist characteristics, and the theory of art's ultimate purpose, which can be applied to all current styles or theories of artistic development.

Despite the recognition of the potential hazards associated with Hegel's ideas and the lingering unresolved inquiries he has left behind, individuals involved in the examination of artistic disciplines acknowledge that comprehending the fundamental essence



of a cultural expression, in the absence of a structured framework and a coherent historical perspective, renders progress unattainable, resulting in a fragmented amalgamation of past cultural elements. The challenge presented by Hegel is to discern the underlying principle inherent in each phenomenon by examining its specific characteristics. For instance, it is not imperative to ascertain the ascent or decline of a historical epoch solely by an examination of its artistic style. Instead, we can direct our attention towards the uncharted territory of the future, relinquishing our attachment to the collective ethos of a nation or era, which has now assumed a mythical status.

In his seminal work on art research, Gombrich introduced a novel framework aimed at challenging Hegel's deterministic perspective. This framework aims to illuminate the limitations of our approach to in-depth research and prompt us to acknowledge that even individuals of immense stature can significantly shape the trajectory of human civilization due to their inherent vulnerabilities. The critique in question exerted a significant influence on the advancement of art theory, introducing novel avenues of thought and research methodologies for following investigations in the field of art. Moreover, it played a constructive role in fostering the growth of art theory and the cultural progress of society.

## References

1. Aldouri, Hammam. "Search for a method: A reassessment of Hegel's dialectic in art history." *Journal of Art Historiography* 20 (2019): 1-25.
2. Taufeeq, Mariam. "Oscillating Ideologies: Kantian and Hegelian Influences on Art History."
3. Moland, Lydia L. *Hegel's aesthetics: the art of idealism*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2019.
4. Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History-Updated Edition*. Vol. 10. Princeton University Press, 2021.
5. Carroll, Noël, and Jonathan Gilmore. *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophies of Painting and Sculpture*. Taylor & Francis, 2023.
6. Squire, Michael. "Hegel, 'The Father of Art History'?" *Philosophy Now* 140 (2020): 14-18.
7. Verstegen, Ian. "Otto Pächt, 'Hegelian' Exile in Cold War England." *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 88.3 (2019): 113-133.
8. Kozbelt, Aaron. "Gombrich's cosmos of thought: past and future." *Journal of Art Historiography* 20 (2019): 1-14.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

