



web www.leoalmanac.org

email info@leoalmanac.org

phone +90 216 483 9292

address Sabancı University, Orhanli - Tuzla, 34956 Istanbul, Turkey

LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Art is Long. . . .

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Author: Ernst Gombrich, Leonardo Honorary Editor

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"Art is long and life is short." That famous saying was coined more than 2,000 years ago by Hippocrates, the founder of Greek medicine, and subsequent developments have proved him right. For the "art" to which he refers is the art of healing that has indeed been long in growing and developing and, in the process, incidentally, made life gradually a little less short. In his period and long after, the notion of art denoted any skill based on knowledge; in other words, both what we now call "science," and what we call "art."

It may not be inappropriate to recall these origins in a journal that has set itself the aim of bridging the rift that has meanwhile come to separate these two branches of human creativity. It is precisely those of us who welcome this effort who sometimes feel that artists would do well to remember the words of Hippocrates. No scientist has to be told that any progress at which he aims must take as its starting point the present state of knowledge. Artists sometimes appear to hope that they can start from scratch and create a new art by one leap of the imagination. One may admire the ingenuity, wit and courage of such attempts, and yet feel that this new art will remain stillborn precisely because it lacks the background and support of a tradition. I fully realize that to some the very word tradition is like a red rag to a bull, but to emphasize the role of tradition-in art as well as in science-is not tantamount to a longing for the good old days. It can be supported by purely theoretical considerations: our aesthetic no less than our cognitive experiences are inseparable from our expectations. Both the thrill of surprise and the satisfaction of familiarity rest on our previous knowledge, belief and experience. Whether we read a scientific paper, watch a game or visit an exhibition, we can never understand what is going on without a minimum of information previously acquired. Learning to understand is a complex process, hard to explain in a few words, but we all have experienced its difficulties and its pleasures. I do not want to be misunderstood. New art forms may certainly emerge in the future as they have emerged in the past-I am thinking of calligraphy in China or instrumental music in the West. No doubt, also, science and technology may still contribute to such developments, as has indeed happened with photography and the cinema, but in all these cases it has taken time for standards to develop and

A decorative graphic in the top left corner. It features a dotted crosshair with a central dot. Below the crosshair, the letter 'L' is rendered in a large, solid, serif font. The letter 'L' is positioned such that its top horizontal bar is aligned with the bottom horizontal bar of the dotted crosshair. The letter 'L' is a dark red color, matching the color of the dotted lines.

L.

creativity to be appreciated. It was for this reason that I concluded my book on decoration and pattern-making, which I called *The Sense of Order*, as follows:

The study of the pattern-maker's craft no less than the study of any other art suggests that what we need is patience. It takes time for a system of conventions to crystallize till every subtle variation counts. Maybe we would be more likely to achieve a new language of form if we were less obsessed with novelty and change. If we overload the system we lose the support of our sense of order [1].



L_{ea}.

Endnotes

[1] Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979).

Bio: Sir Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich, OM, CBE (1909 --2001) was an Austrian-born art historian who became naturalized British citizen in 1947. He was the author of many works of art criticism and art history, including *The Story of Art*, a book regarded as one of the most accessible introductions to the visual arts and *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, which led to a series of debates in *Leonardo* with James. J. Gibson