

Kim H. Veltman

Review:

Michael Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

In: *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Cambridge, Vol. 24, (1988), pp. 79-80.

Professor Kubovy is a psychologist concerned with the phenomenon of perspective during the Renaissance. Following an introductory chapter on the metaphor of the eye during the fifteenth century, he outlines the elements of perspective, referring to camera obscuras and distance points. He argues (p.38): "that Alberti and not Brunelleschi invented perspective as a communicable set of practical procedures that can be used by artists." Nonetheless, he examines the effectiveness of Brunelleschi's perspectival peepshow, giving two reasons why it produced (p.49): "a compelling experience of depth."

Professor Kubovy claims that perspectival pictures, even if they be not seen under the controlled conditions of a peepshow, have a surprising "robustness", that is, they maintain their spatial effects even when seen from positions other than the central vanishing point. Noting that perspectival pictures are illusionistic by nature, he next offers an insightful classification of *trompe l'oeil* pictures, exploring also the "underpinnings" of these illusionistic effects caused by the "robustness" of perspective, and considers the "bounds" of perspective: extreme conditions under which marginal distortions play havoc with perspective. Awareness of these conditions does not, however, lead him to reject perspective as a mere convention. Indeed, he challenges such relativistic views as championed by Nelson Goodman and rightly notes (p.122) -- as has the present author on an earlier occasion (1980) -- that Goodman's examples (1976, pp.15-16), betray his non-comprehension of even the basic laws of linear perspective. In chapter eight Professor Kubovy returns to the peephole demonstrations, offering two reasons why Brunelleschi abandoned them (p.128): "one is the gimmicky effect of a peepshow which transforms it into mere entertainment, the other is the robustness of perspective which has as its consequence the potential for the creation of extraordinarily powerful psychological effects."

He cites Andrea Mantegna's *Saint James led to Execution* (Padua, Erimitani Church) and Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (Milan, Santa Maria delle Grazie) as two examples of great paintings, which were deliberately constructed to be viewed from positions other than that of the principle vanishing point. He offers an intriguing explanation why this was done (p.159): "These effects achieve the goal of divorcing the viewer's felt point of view in relation to the scene represented in the painting from the viewer's felt position in relation to the room in which he or she is standing". He believes that these discrepancies (p.159): "induce a feeling of spirituality, perhaps one conducive to a religious experience: a separation of the mind's eye from the bodily eye." This, and the notion of "robustness" of perspective on which it hinges, are the two claims which make the book provocative and stimulating.

In a final chapter Professor Kubovy reviews the claims of three other scholars concerning the significance of perspective: Goodman, Gablík and Panofsky. He begins by rejecting Goodman (cf.122-125) insisting that perspective is not just a convention. He also rejects Suzi Gablík's views on the grounds that (p.172) "sophogeny does not recapitulate ontogeny." He does not, however, make any reference to his former Yale colleague, Professor Sydney Blatt, who has since provided a considerably more subtle approach to debates on the evolution of art in *Continuity and change in Art* (Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1984). Nor has he even considered the possibility of evolution in light of multiple goals of art as considered by Gombrich (1970) or suggested by the present author (1986).

Professor Kubovy's view of Panofsky, informed by Edgerton (1975), is one of respect. We are left with a suggestion that perspective was more than a convention or something which merely achieved illusionistic tricks. Rather, it helped the Renaissance artist (p.173): "to cast the deeply religious views of his art in a form that could produce in the viewer spiritual effects that could not have been achieved by any other formal means. In that sense perspective should be viewed as a 'symbolic' form."

The book is to be praised for its clear thesis, cogently argued. Only a few problems deserve mention. In the introduction claims are made for "the importance of perspective and the metaphor of the arrow in the eye." Passages from Alberti, Filarete and Leonardo da Vinci are cited as, for example, (p.14) that "the eyes act with the rays of their image after the manner of many archers." In all his examples simile rather than metaphor is involved. Nor are these similes between archery and vision new. They are clearly stated in Witelo's great optical treatise of the thirteenth century (e.g. Bk. V.5). Hence to claim that the arrow in the eye metaphor had become (p.15): "part of the imagery involved in thinking about perspective, a metaphor they lived by" is somewhat misleading. Nor do I find convincing the author's claim for a connection between these metaphors (similes) and Mantegna's painting showing the king of Samos being struck in the eye with an arrow.

While discussing the camera obscura he claims that (p.19): "there is some evidence the device was invented by Alberti." This is simply not true. The device was well known by Al-Kindi in the ninth century, was discussed at length in Witelo's optical compendium (c.1270-1280) and was being used by William of St. Cloud in observing eclipses of the sun. (Cf. J.H. Hammond's *The Camera obscura*, London, 1981 or the important bibliography by J. Fyffe in the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

Such minor problems should not, however, obscure the importance of this work. Ever since Panofsky's seminal article (1927) there has been a tendency to dismiss perspective as simply another convention. Maurice Pirenne (1952) took a firm stand against this tendency claiming that there is an objective basis to perspective, a position which Sir Ernst Gombrich has increasingly supported and which Samuel Edgerton, Jr. has also taken up. Professor Kubovy has provided us with new reasons for taking seriously the phenomenon of perspective. At the same time he has reminded us that this objective, scientific method nonetheless had subjective, religious implications.