

ERNST KITZINGER MEMORIAL

Adolphus Busch Hall, Harvard University, April 6, 2003

Irving Lavin, Institute for Advanced Study

I have the rather unsettling suspicion that I may be the oldest extant disciple—I use the word advisedly—of Ernst Kitzinger. Rather than try to encapsulate in ten minutes my relationship to this singular teacher and friend, whom I have admired and loved for more than half a century, I have decided simply to recount the singular episode that first led me to think and feel that way. No doubt others today will speak about him personally. The episode I shall recount was an intellectual experience; I trust its personal implications will speak for themselves; that was his way.

When I enrolled in his seminar as a new graduate student in the fall of 1951, it was also, I seem to remember, the first course Kitzinger had taught at the Fogg. He was then Director of Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, where there was no obligation to teach, and it was quite an act of pedagogical devotion for him to make the weekly trip up from Washington, in those days of course, by train. The same pedagogical devotion, I might add, that led him years later to turn down the offer of a professorship at the Institute for Advanced Study, where teaching was theoretically frowned upon, in favor of a University professorship at Harvard, where teaching was at least tolerated. I had heard people speak of him in glowing terms and I had read enthusiastically, as had anyone with even a passing interest in medieval art, his introductory essay on the subject published in 1940 as a small and unpretentious paperback, *Early Medieval Art in the British Museum*. The work was a veritable tour de force. Instead of the usual guide to the collections arranged as a walk through the galleries, it undertook in a brief text using the rich, but after all

limited selection of objects in the museum as illustrations, to tell the visual story of the epochal shift from the classical to the medieval world. It had become a classic, as for the first time it made sense, visual sense, of one of the most important ideological transitions in human history, that from pagan polytheism to Judeo-Christian monotheism. Visual sense, I mean, because Kitzinger correlated this great ideological upheaval not just with the subjects of the works of art that represented it, but also with the form, the style in which such subjects were represented. With Kitzinger's eyes you could look at a work of art and *feel*, not just *read*, what it was about, and understand that what it was about was no less than the deepest aspirations of our humankind for a better way of life in this world and redemption in the next. This was the level at which Ernst Kitzinger operated, although here as in everything he wrote the observations were sharp, the facts concrete, and he would have been embarrassed by my magniloquence. His prose, once you became aware of it, was also unpretentious, but exquisitely crafted, and suffused with a kind of impassioned lucidity. My expectations were high when I entered that classroom, but I did not expect to be transfigured.

When I left the classroom that day I felt, and finally realized, that I had been touched by an angel. It was a most particular angel, for several reasons. Usually when you are touched by an angel you expect it will be from above, as in those medieval evangelist portraits—also the subject of some of Kitzinger's extraordinary perceptions—who look up at their winged symbols descending as heaven-sent messengers bearing their divinely inspired gospel books. In this case, instead, I was inspired to look down, at the floor, or rather the pavement that covered the earth underfoot. The subject was Ancient Mosaic Pavements, a field about which I had not the slightest understanding—nor indeed

had anyone else compared to Kitzinger who saw these literally humble works (humble comes from humus, earth) in an entirely original and wholly compelling way. Looking down with his eyes I perceived a vast terra incognita of human expression that had been overlooked by historians of art who are, mostly, heaven-bent. It was nothing less than the discovery of an art-historical New World, except that it had all along been plain to see, at our very foot-tips. Of course there had been many collections and studies of ancient mosaic pavements, but Kitzinger's understanding of them was revolutionary, for two main reasons, both of which he formulated at the outset, with the modest reserve, utter simplicity and crystalline clarity that were his wont. He would never say "this is a new idea," he would just say it. I will try to explain.

We perennially lament the loss of the great legacy of ancient visual culture in the form of ceiling, wall, and easel painting—a loss we know about largely from the many lavish literary accounts that tout the achievements of the quasi-legendary masters of ideal beauty and trompe l'oeil illusionism. But it is also the case that, owing to the peculiarities of technique (stone tesserae imbedded in cement) and location (on the solid ground), physical evidence of that great pictorial tradition is still preserved, in vast quantities, thousands of examples, from all over the ancient world and throughout its history, especially its later phases. Simply putting the matter that way—the floor mosaic as a branch of the history of painting—transformed the conceptual framework of the discipline, because the floor mosaic itself was transformed in our mindset from a utilitarian craft into a true work of art able to fill many gaps in our understanding of the nature and history of western civilization. Mosaic pavements became the monumental

late antique counterpart of vase painting for the pictorial legacy of the Greeks; and, like vase painting, having left virtually no trace in the literary record.

The other aspect of the Kitzinger revolution lay in what happened when you did in fact acknowledge the floor mosaic as a work of art, and in particular when you realized that much of its significance as a work lay precisely in that fact that it lay upon the floor. You came to understand that the mosaic pavements were not just ceiling and wall and easel paintings *manqués, faute de mieux*, but immensely sophisticated achievements in their own right, in their own medium and in their own place, and therefore valid indeed as cultural artifacts equivalent to their fabled lost sister-works. One could follow, as in no other medium, the process in which the artist ceased to treat the floor as if it were transparent, but for what it was, a surface, on the floor, where it can be walked on, approached from any direction, and viewed from above. The humble surface under foot could thus, for example, become the analogue of the whole world seen from the all-encompassing perspective of the eye of God—which was in fact the subject of one of Kitzinger's most beautiful and illuminating studies. One had always known the outcome of this process in the middle ages; Kitzinger pointed the way not just to the floor but to a larger and deeper understanding of the nature, history, and meaning of the change.

With respect to all these points, and especially with respect to the meaning of the change, I want to offer in retrospect a speculation of which I am sure he would have been dubious, at least without a great deal of supporting evidence that I cannot provide. In the course of time I realized that Kitzinger's own insight reflected, perhaps unwittingly (although maybe consciously—I never discussed it with him), one of the chief factors in the development of modern art from Cezanne forward, that is, the honest, forthright

acceptance of the surface, of a canvas or any other support, as a surface, and hence the rejection of Renaissance illusionism and the emergence of cubism, abstraction, even of abstract expressionism, perhaps the epitome of direct, unmitigated communication between one human being and another. To the extent that Renaissance illusionism was a revival of classical antiquity, so also modernism was a revival of post-classical antiquity. And, radical as the thought may seem, perhaps modernism's apprehension of the disingenuousness of illusion arose from an analogous spiritual transformation in our own time.

I spent many years working on mosaic pavements, exploring some of the implications of those initial revelations. And, as you can see, although I have wandered off into quite other regions of the art historical landscape, I continue, after more than half a century, to be awed and inspired by what I learned on that first day of creation.