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This book is a study of a recurring phenomenon in the history of changing taste in the visual arts, namely the feeling that older and less sophisticated (i.e. 'primitive') works are somehow morally and aesthetically superior to later works that have become soft and decadent. Gombrich traces this idea back to classical antiquity and links it both with Cicero's observation that over-indulgence of the senses leads to a feeling of disgust, and with the profoundly influential metaphor comparing the development of art to that of a living organism.