

## 'A time capsule': E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*

### Tom Sperlinger

'Actually I do not think that there are any wrong reasons for liking a statue or a picture. Someone may like a landscape painting because it reminds him of home, or a portrait because it reminds him of a friend. There is nothing wrong with that. All of us, when we see a painting, are bound to be reminded of a hundred-and-one things which influence our likes and dislikes. As long as these memories help us to enjoy what we see, we need not worry. It is only when some irrelevant memory makes us prejudice, when we instinctively turn away from a magnificent picture of an alpine scene because we dislike climbing, that we should search our mind for the reason of the aversion which spoils a pleasure we might otherwise have had.'

This passage is a typically warm introduction to painting, taken from E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*. The book surprised even its author when it became a bestseller after it was published in 1950, and it has gone on to sell six million copies. Gombrich explained its success by referring to the book as a 'time capsule', written in English but with its roots in his own Viennese heritage. That Viennese heritage was, as Gombrich noted, one which operated not only in his own life, but as a potent store of memories in his childhood:

'If you hear 1909 as the year of my birth, you will immediately realize that I was five when the First World War broke out and that, therefore, that period of Vienna... which is now so much discussed, the Vienna of the *fin de siècle*, of the turn of the century, was for me a matter of history... The Vienna in which I grew up, post-war Vienna, was a strife-torn, sad city with a great deal of economic misery... On the other hand, the fact that I was born in 1909 does not yet tell you that I was born into a home where I could hear a lot about that famous period of Viennese life. My mother, who was a pianist, was born in 1873. That is to say, as a young musician she was able to hear Brahms himself.'(from Gombrich, 'An Autobiographical Sketch')

Born in 1909, Gombrich studied at the Vienna University. He came to London in 1936, as Nazism imposed itself in Germany and cast a shadow over neighbouring countries. During the war he worked for the BBC Monitoring Service, before moving to London in 1945 to work at the Warburg Institute, which had also been displaced from central Europe. It was at this time that he wrote *The Story of Art*, though he claims being obliged to do so was an annoyance: 'I was ... a little fed up because I wanted to get back to my real research; but I had this obligation. So I dictated to somebody three times a week, just off the cuff as it were.'

I think one can only understand the success of the book by seeing it in these terms, by understanding why Gombrich was in a position to open that 'time capsule' after the war. In a lecture in 1985, he described his relationship to British academia as making him a 'partial outsider'. He was using the phrase to make suggestions about the 'embattled humanities', from the position of one who had taught in Britain for more than thirty years, but who was originally educated in Austria. The phrase is useful in approaching his work because it not only implies an objective distance from British life, it also suggests a certain intimacy with it. Gombrich was not only an outsider 'in part', he was also an outsider who could not be impartial.

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The copy of *The Story of Art* I have been reading is a first edition, bound in beige cloth, its title and author imprinted in brown and red. On the inside cover it has a small card, with the brown stain of old

glue spilling from under the bottom right hand corner. On the card are printed the words 'Ex Libris Tibor Sperlinger'. My grandfather must have bought it shortly after it was published in 1950.

Tibor Sperlinger was born in Hungary in 1906. He grew up in Vienna, where he studied economics at the Horschule für Welthandel and later worked as a journalist, for the most part for trade newspapers. He met Lisl Mense at the wedding of a mutual friend in the Zionist organisation in 1929. They were married in 1935, and on the last day of May 1938, left Vienna for London. Tibor had worked for a London-based firm, the British Continental Trade Press, who were able to obtain a visa for him. During the war, he worked for the BBC Monitoring Service, where he met Ernst Gombrich; and after the war, was co-director of the same press.

My father, who was born in 1948, tells me that his parents only ever argued in art galleries. Art was a source of continuity for them; a connection between their lives in Vienna and London. They were passionate and knowledgeable about it, and had a large library of books and exhibition catalogues. But their interest also marked them out from many of their English contemporaries. It was not the interest of committed academics (they both studied art history for the first time after my grandfather retired), but of working people with a wide-ranging interest in the culture which surrounded them.

Making progress through some of their books, I frequently find newspaper cuttings they had inserted, including a series of interviews with Gombrich. One fact which many of the interviewers note, with apparent surprise, is that this great art historian should have lived in modest suburban surroundings, in north London. The sentiment, that middle-class London was somehow incongruous with what one expects from Gombrich's writings, is familiar to me. Some of my father's oldest friends have described their surprise, on first visiting his parents' home, at finding a house which was all Osterley suburbia on the outside (they lived in one of the suburbs which sprang up around the Great West Road in the 1930s) but which inside seemed incongruous with west London.

I remember this house very clearly. There was a long, light, sitting room which was full of heavy Viennese furniture, much of it from the pen of a Bauhaus-trained designer; and an opaque window separating this room from one at right angles to it, with blown glass balls in different colours hanging in front of it. There were paintings, small sculptures, pottery throughout the house. The atmosphere of the house, and of the flat my grandmother subsequently moved to, was more than this; an atmosphere which, for me, is evoked by Gombrich's books. This may simply be sentimental association, but I think it is more than that. It is the fact that, like the books, that house seemed to have transplanted a different cultural legacy into an English setting.

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It is difficult to estimate the impact which *The Story of Art* has had, because our view of art history is now mediated so frequently in its terms. In line with the author's hope in the Preface, the book has served as an introduction for many 'in need of some first orientation' in the field. It has inspired not only future art historians and general readers, but artists too. The sculptor Anthony Gormley has acknowledged a 'debt' to Gombrich: 'As with many others, his book gave me a gift - but it was also a challenge. The question he states that strikes me very strongly is: 'What is the adequate challenge to the life of an artist?''

Thus, in some sense, Gombrich has re-phrased the questions that we ask about art; helped us to articulate our responses, given us a new language to think in. The book is not just a story; it is also an

argument for Gombrich's vision of how art history should be conceived: as a 'story of changing ideas and requirements', a story of practising artists encountering and overcoming specific problems.

It is helpful, I think, to understand the text in similar terms; to see it as the product of a writer in very particular circumstances. For it is not a contradiction that Gombrich wrote *The Story of Art* 'off the cuff', while it has been important for so many readers. Just as Gombrich encourages us to see artists as people of skill reacting to the demands of their time, so much of this book's distinctive style emerged from the period in which it was written. The author was a man who was a partial outsider in Britain, writing in a language which was not his mother tongue but which he had made his own. He was required to write a book because he was under contract and thus wrote it not in the usual way, but by dictating. The latter point itself clarifies something of the style. The tone is almost avuncular. Gombrich is telling a story, and he has an irresistible desire to include the reader, manifest in his consistent use of the pronoun 'we' and an exceptional gift for anecdote.

More than this, the author is at pains to be inclusive, commenting in the opening pages that, 'It is infinitely better not to know anything about art than to have the kind of half-knowledge which makes for snobbishness.' I think one can only understand this remark by relating it to the fact that Gombrich was not an insider to the particular kind of English snobbery generated by class. Asked in 1995 whether the British have a strong visual sense, he replied that 'they must have' because of the widespread pre-occupation with gardening; but noted a prejudice against painting. He suggests it has often been seen as an aristocratic taste: 'There is a certain suspicion, still derived from the Puritans, of paint pictures. I think that is undeniable. I think painting here is an aristocratic taste, traditionally. Now, when you see the crowding of the exhibitions, it's obviously no longer true. But it was true, possibly, when I arrived.'

If painting is seen as an aristocratic taste in Britain, then the British aristocracy have, on occasion, tried to keep it to themselves. Clive Bell, a member of the upper class Bloomsbury Group, wrote a book in 1912, called simply *Art*, and his approach manifested the belief that there was such a thing, with a capital 'A'. In his study of 1928, *Civilization*, Bell asserted that Art did not consist in 'what the grocer thinks he sees' and that the only people who could really understand art works were 'educated persons of extraordinary sensibility'. I would not wish to suggest that Gombrich single-handedly changed these attitudes, nor that he was the sole voice of reason against a purely snobbish British establishment. But his awareness of the gulf which can separate the connoisseur and the public in Britain, is the awareness of an outsider. His ability to address the problems created by that gulf, however, comes from being at least a little on the inside too; enough on the inside to assert in the opening sentence, as though in response to a Bell-like reader, 'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.' Indeed, it is an essential subtlety about Gombrich's attitude towards his readers, that although he assumes that his readers may know 'nothing' about art, he does not assume that they understand nothing about the work of the artist:

'... I think we can only hope to understand this if we draw on our own experience. Of course we are no artists, we may never have tried to paint a picture and may have no intention of ever doing so. But this need not mean that we are never confronted with similar problems as those which make up the artist's life. In fact, I am anxious to prove that there is hardly any person who has not at least got an inkling of this type of problem, be it in ever so modest a way. Anybody who has ever tried to arrange a bunch of flowers, to shuffle and shift the colours, to add a little here and take away there, has experienced this strange sensation of balancing forms and colours without being able to tell exactly what kind of harmony it is he is trying to achieve. We just feel – a patch of red here may make all the difference, or this blue is all right by itself but it does not 'go' with the others, and suddenly a little stem

of green leaves may seem to make it come 'right'. 'Don't touch it any more,' we exclaim, 'now it is perfect.' Not everybody, I admit, is quite so careful over the arrangement of flowers, but nearly everybody has something he wants to get 'right'.

Such a ceaseless desire to be inclusive has its effect, and it is hard not to be caught up in Gombrich's enthusiasm. Indeed, he has the rare gift in his prose, of making one want to see the world in the way that he does. Making notes on Chapter 10, I found myself so intrigued by the changes in architecture of the Gothic period, that I began to doodle pictures of 'flying buttresses', trying not just to understand but also to see the changes. My sketches are rather childlike imitations (not up to the standard of Gombrich himself, who once won an *Evening Standard* award for a doodle) but they are likewise an illustration of the childlike enthusiasm Gombrich provokes in his reader. The sense of fun about an essentially serious text, the interplay between writer and reader, is established in the Preface where, having set out his self-imposed 'rules' for the book, he notes, 'Moreover it was my final rule not to have any absolute rules whatsoever, but to break my own sometimes, leaving to the reader the fun of finding me out.'

Gombrich finds us out as well. Indeed, it is important that his approach to a familiar work of art is often to ask that we forget everything that we *think* we know. It is a request that we should come to the artwork not without knowledge, but without assuming knowledge. Knowledge is important to Gombrich, but it should never inhibit the experience of actually seeing what is in front of us; we must let the work of art surprise us. With even the most familiar of paintings, the Mona Lisa, the effect can be extraordinary:

'... it is worthwhile to forget what we know, or believe we know, about the picture, and to look at it as if we were the first people ever to set eyes on it. What strikes us first is the amazing degree to which Lisa looks alive. She really seems to look at us and to have a mind of her own... She seems to mock at us, and then again we seem to catch something like sadness in her smile. All this sounds mysterious, and so it is; that is the effect of every great work of art. Nevertheless, Leonardo certainly knew how he achieved this effect, and by what means... This is Leonardo's famous invention which the Italians call '*sfumato*' – the blurred outline and mellowed colours that allow one form to merge with another and always leave something to our imagination... It is not only vagueness, of course, which produces this effect. There is much more behind it. Leonardo has done a very daring thing, which perhaps only a painter of his consummate mastership could risk. If we look carefully at the picture, we see that the two sides do not quite match. This is most obvious in the fantastic dream landscape in the background. The horizon on the left side seems to lie much lower than the one on the right. Consequently, when we focus the left side of the picture, the woman looks somehow taller or more erect than if we focus on the right side...'

Like the painting he describes, Gombrich's style seems effortless; yet there is within it 'consummate mastership', both of the subject matter and the language. For the prose anticipates our reactions as a viewer of the painting and a reader of the prose; beginning with a reaction to the painting, to Lisa's smile, which seems obvious. But by making us look at this smile, Gombrich is then able to tease out a technical explanation, and feed that back in to what we have seen. How different this paragraph would be, if he began with the technical term '*sfumato*' or with the description of the background. Visual awareness always comes first, and then a careful explanation of that experience. Gombrich has both a sharp visual sense and an extraordinary gift as a word-man. Even this, however, cannot quite explain Gombrich's style. There is something mysterious here too, which I can best describe as a warmth one senses in the author. This mysterious warmth is, again, close to something which

Gombrich describes in the artists he admires. Note, for example, a profile by Russell Davies in the *Daily Telegraph* from 1995:

'Much as Gombrich has insisted on the greatness of the great, he does allow that some great artists may be overpowering in their mastery, and others more 'lovable' in their human warmth.

For instance I have just been to the Poussin exhibition. I find him admirable, but perhaps not lovable. Michelangelo was obviously tremendous, awe-inspiring; Raphael was more lovable. Take musicians: Haydn is immensely lovable; I think Beethoven, one wouldn't dare approach him – he might throw you out of his house.'

Interviewers have noted with surprise how welcoming Gombrich's house was; perhaps they expected to be intimidated, if not quite thrown out. In contrast, it feels reading Gombrich's prose as though, if we were to walk around an art gallery with him, not only would we learn a great deal but he would be interested in our responses, and would help us to see the value in them.

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Tibor Sperlinger died in 1984, when I was four years old. My memories of him are vivid but basic, often silent images of an adult world punctuated by odd, childish events. To fill in the gaps, to put words to his story, I rely on what he himself wrote about the 'story of our families'. There is something appropriate, however, in reading his words, since he was (to borrow from Gombrich) a 'word man'.

Lisl Sperlinger, in contrast, had a distinctive visual sense. She left school at fifteen to go to art college, and as a young woman, designed and made handbags and sold them at a market in Vienna. Had events been kinder, she would have made a good architect, or perhaps a ceramic artist along the lines of her contemporary, Lucie Rie. One of my earliest memories of her is of a train journey from London to Leeds in the late 1980s, for a cousin's bar mitzvah. She was about to move, and had made a scale drawing of her new flat. We were all invited to take turns fitting the cardboard counters representing different pieces of furniture into the available space, arranging and re-arranging them until they appeared to us to be 'right'. She took my brother and I to St. Paul's; and as we stood at right angles from one another in the whispering gallery, I glanced down and saw her sitting below, waiting for us. She could not climb the steps but enjoyed the pleasure of passing this experience on to us. We also visited the Lloyd's building, which she thought fascinating; and she gently mocked the ignorance of Prince Charles.

On the rare occasions that my grandparents argued, it was in art galleries. Tibor was a word man; he wanted to explain the story behind a work of art. For Lisl, this came instinctively: she simply wanted to look at the painting.

It was Gombrich's gift to combine these qualities.

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It has become a cliché to praise a book one likes with the description that it is 'impossible to put down'. Curiously, this article has told the story of a book which for many years I found difficult to pick up. It is a book bearing my grandfather's name, but that I was only aware existed many years after he died. I borrowed it from my grandmother in 1996, when I was sixteen. It sat on my shelves at home, and then in various homes from home. But only recently, at the age of twenty-two, did I read it from

cover to cover. Before that it felt as though the book brought too many memories with it, and because not all of those memories were solely or directly mine, I felt as though I was an intruder when I picked it up; a partial outsider. Only when I read it in full did I discover that this was the right reaction. Only then, perhaps, did I accept that it was now my book. [www.thereader.co.uk](http://www.thereader.co.uk)