

## Review of The Story of Art

Art History and the Public Schools  
BY WILFRID BLUNT

AFTER more than twenty-five years as Art Master at two Public Schools I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that to-day the very large majority of boys – even of intelligent boys – will not read an art book that is well illustrated and will not so much as open one that is not. As a rule, the most that they can stomach is a line or two of caption beneath the illustration – and even this with obvious reluctance and distaste. *Ad hoc* reading for examinations and relatively frivolous reading for recreation constitute the bulk of their literary endeavour. It is not that all such boys are potentially incapable of being made interested in Art History; rather that in an age of cinemas, magazines and picture papers, film strips, comic strips – potted knowledge and spoon-fed pleasure – recreation is no longer associated with any degree of intellectual effort, and the pill of learning has to be ever more liberally coated with sugar. In brief, it seems that under present conditions most boys can only acquire an interest in Art History in one of two ways – by means of the spoken word, or by making the subject compulsory in the curriculum. Both these courses present serious difficulties.

There is no doubt that a certain number of boys can be persuaded by means of lantern lectures or films on art to take some interest in paintings. Such demonstrations if given 'in school', will of necessity be interspersed with anecdote and local colour, for in any average collection of boys – grouped, as they inevitably will be, by their efficiency in mathematics, history or classics – it must be assumed that some eighty or ninety per cent. are inherently philistine. (Have those who habitually move in artistic circles any conception of the abysses of ignorance with which schoolmasters have to contend? At an exhibition of reproductions of paintings by Rembrandt I was asked, in all good faith, by a boy of seventeen whether the pictures were 'all by boys'.) Moreover, it is doubtful whether this instruction has, in general, any permanent value or effect: whether the boy who is momentarily stimulated or diverted will, in fact, visit the National Gallery in the holidays or trouble to pursue the subject further on his own initiative.

Any attempt to make History of Art a compulsory part of the curriculum for certain categories of senior boys would be fraught with difficulties. For such a scheme to have any value, it would be essential for the subject to be given a *serious* place in the school time table and, as in America, made a compulsory part of the first year course at the University. Failure to qualify in Art History would have to be comparable in schools to failure to qualify in any other branch of history. Promotion would have to be dependent on it. The history of art would have to become what is known as 'work', with all the disagreeable overtones that this word holds for the schoolboy. Even if such a policy were desirable, it is highly doubtful whether it is practicable. To-day, when the time table is becoming increasingly overcrowded, any attempt to introduce a new subject would arouse the antagonism of the entire staff – at all events of all those whose subjects were curtailed in order to make it possible. The quart of milk just cannot be squeezed into the pint bottle.

I pose the problem, but I cannot offer a real solution. Given the conditions, I think that lectures to voluntary audiences are the most satisfactory. Yet here again, in a large school it is extremely difficult to find times when boys who wish to attend are able to do so. An Art Society obviously constitutes a sensible nucleus for such a purpose, and for expeditions to galleries in London or elsewhere. Periodical compulsory lectures to large groups of senior boys, preferably under conditions where politeness will demand some concealment of boredom, may have some value and may be made to interest temporarily as much, perhaps, as a quarter of the audience under favourable circumstances –

if, for instance, the lecturer knows how to strike the happy mean between obscurity and condescension. Lastly, a library of well illustrated books – in a room where the art master is not infrequently to be found, ready with a suggestion, an explanation or a provocative remark – is perhaps the most valuable of all. In such a library, the publications of the Phaidon Press will, of course, be strongly represented.

Dr Gombrich's *The Story of Art* [1] is a quite admirable book. At a guinea, its production is a miracle. The author defines in his preface his aims and the audience for whom he is writing: 'This book is intended for all who feel in need of some first orientation in a strange and fascinating field ... The readers I had first and foremost in mind were boys and girls in their teens who had just discovered the world of art for themselves.' While restricting himself to 'the minimum of art historian's conventional terms', he is on guard against 'talking down'. His self-imposed rules are: (1) to discuss no work that he cannot illustrate in the text; (2) to limit himself to real works of art; and (3) to include famous masterpieces however hackneyed. His intention is 'to tell the old story of art once more in simple language, and to enable the reader to see how it hangs together', and his emphasis is on painting rather than on sculpture and architecture. The book is written almost in lecture form, and should for this very reason prove invaluable to art masters. But my own experience leads me to believe that it is by the adult – especially the adult who feels that he has 'missed something' by never 'learning about art' – that *The Story of Art* will be most widely read. I only hope that I shall be proved wrong, and that some of my pupils will not merely glance through, but actually *read* the copy that I have placed in our art library; no history of art could be more lucidly written or, for its size, more comprehensive.

*History of World Art*, by Everard Upjohn, Paul Wingert and Jane Mahler, [2] while also mainly conceived as a book for students, aims at a more sophisticated audience – the American undergraduate in his first year. The emphasis is often different, oriental art in particular receiving fuller treatment than that accorded to it by Dr Gombrich. Though at least twice as long, and containing almost twice the number of illustrations, *History of World Art* does not in general succeed in giving a fuller picture of the vast field covered. The book is certainly well done, but one is more aware of jargon, of cliché (Titian is, of course, the 'grand old man of Venetian painting'), and of that particular brand of formal analysis so popular in America. Let us consider the American authors at work. Of El Greco's full-length portrait of Nino de Guevara, they write:

Significantly, El Greco places the sitter in an armchair neither facing the observer, nor in profile; rather the chair is at an angle, which introduces diagonal planes for the front and sides of the figure, and thus enhances the space by which the figure is surrounded. This is combined, however, with a linear pattern of curves in sequence, each leading to the head, a succession of drop-shaped loops to establish a harmony of line. The patterned leather background completes the design, so that even the incidental setting becomes an integral part of the scheme.

Contrast this with Dr Gombrich's comments on Raphael's *Galatea*:

But what is more admirable is that all these diverse movements are somehow reflected and taken up in the figure of Galatea herself. Her chariot had been driving from left to right with her veil blowing backwards, but, hearing the strange love song, she turns round and smiles, and all the lines of the picture, from the love-gods' arrows to the reins she holds, converge on her beautiful face in the very centre of the picture. By these artistic means Raphael has achieved constant movement throughout the picture, without letting it become restless or unbalanced. It is for this supreme mastery of arranging his figures, this consummate skill in composition that artists have ever since admired Raphael. Just as Michelangelo was found to have reached the highest peak in the mastery of the

human body, Raphael was seen to have accomplished what the older generation had striven so hard to achieve: the perfect and harmonious composition of freely moving figures.

Dr Gombrich is equally successful in bringing to life the pictures that he describes. Of Van Dyck's *Charles I* (Louvre), he writes:

The portrait of Charles I, just dismounted from his horse on a hunting expedition, shows the Stuart monarch as he would have wished to live in history: a figure of matchless elegance, of unquestioned authority and high culture, the patron of the arts, and the upholder of the divine right of kings, a man who needs no outward trappings of power to enhance his natural dignity.

In brief: with Dr Gombrich, visibility is always good; in the American work, though it contains much excellent matter, we must prepare to encounter occasional patches of local fog. But both books fully deserve a place in any educational library.

1 *The Story of Art*. By E. H. Gombrich. 462 pp. (350 ill.) + 21 colour pl. (Phaidon Press)

2 *History of World Art*. By Everard M. Upjohn, Paul S. Wingert and Jane Gaston Mahler. xx 560 pp. (654 ill.) New York and London (Oxford University Press; Geoffrey Cumberlege).