Old master

EH Gombrich's simple yet rigorous guide The Story of Art inspired Charles Saumarez Smith as a student. Years later, and the director of the National Gallery, he finds the work as essential as ever

I was given my copy of Ernst Gombrich's The Story of Art, first published in 1950, when I was 15. I was studying for history of art A level and the person with whom I was sharing a study at school rightly thought that it might be useful. It has travelled with me ever since, alongside Art and Illusion and Norm and Form and Gombrich's other collected writings, beginning with Meditations on a Hobby Horse and including his brilliant short essay, In Search of Cultural History. They all still sit in my office on the top shelf, the cornerstone of my art historical library.

Mine is a reprint of the revised and enlarged edition published in 1966. Opening The Story of Art again after so many years sets off a train of associations. It is partly the smell of postwar art paper, which is slightly of sick. It is partly the typographic layout, so characteristic of Phaidon Press, the publishing house set up by Béla Horovitz in Vienna in the 1920s and responsible for so many of the books that I read as a student. It is partly the illustrations, many of which may have been selected from the Warburg Institute's photographic archive where I worked one day a week as a postgraduate student in the late 1970s. But, perhaps most of all, it is the tone of voice of the author, which I remember very well from occasional brief encounters and from hearing Gombrich lecture - a certain glottal intensity of trying to make the complicated simple, the allusions to music, the slightly laboured humour, the use of cartoons from the New Yorker to illustrate difficult points (without necessarily recognising that their humour relies precisely on the implausibility of what they depict), above all, the strength of belief in the value of high culture, which comes out of the very first sentence: "There is no such thing as Art. There are only artists."

Right at the beginning of The Story of Art, Gombrich establishes that he is writing about important issues: how people perceive and appreciate works of art and how works of art depict and represent the world in language that is deliberately and brilliantly straightforward. In the preface, he announces that in planning and writing the book he "thought first and foremost of readers in their teens who had just rediscovered the world for themselves". But I suspect his idea of the average teenager was based on a combination of his own upbringing in a highly educated Viennese family (his parents were friends of Schoenberg, Freud and Mahler) and that of his son, Richard, who was later to become professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. In other words, the teenager is expected to be precocious and intelligent, interested in the history of ideas as well as art, and certainly male.

In his introduction, Gombrich explores two very characteristic themes essential to an understanding of his subsequent work, and which it is slightly surprising and pleasing to find announced so unequivocally close to the beginning of his scholarly career. The first is the need for the artist to experience freedom from political or religious constraints. He describes this by comparing the two versions of Saint Matthew that Caravaggio undertook as a commission for the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. The first version was a great work of realism in which the angel is leaning a long, spindly arm towards the relatively rustic hand of Saint Matthew. The work was rejected as being too naturalistic and was later destroyed by bombs during the second world war. Caravaggio then painted a slightly more idealised and conventional version, still in San Luigi in Rome. Gombrich describes how "The outcome is still quite a good picture, for Caravaggio had tried hard to make it look lively and interesting, but we feel that it is less honest and sincere than the first had been." Given that Gombrich was commissioned to write the book while working as a translator for the BBC's monitoring service, it is impossible not to recognise his profound belief in the moral freedom of the artist from any form of coercion.

Gombrich's second introductory description is of the intense compositional struggle that lay behind Raphael's painting Madonna of the Meadow in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Art was viewed not as a product of aesthetics, but more as a result of visual observation, which is then ordered and structured by graphic experiment, closely akin in terms of visual procedure to the work of caricature. This announces some of the themes and intellectual interests that later led to his greatest work in Art and Illusion, and was a consequence of his close friendship with the art historian and psychoanalyst Ernst Kris.

Rereading the new edition of The Story of Art, still published by Phaidon but now in a convenient pocket edition in which the text is printed on India paper, with the illustrations at the back, I cannot help but be impressed by its extraordinary intellectual range. Gombrich had the best possible training in art history in Vienna, studying under Julius von Schlosser at the Institut für Kunstgeschichte and writing his doctoral dissertation on the architecture of the Palazzo Te in Mantua. When he was writing, he had in front of him the complete set of the Propyläen Kunstgeschichte, volumes intended to give an impression that the study of art could be digested into a narrative which a single individual could encompass. In 1935, he was invited by Fritz Saxl, the then director of the Warburg Institute, to write a biography of Aby Warburg as a research fellow. This gave him access to the incomparable resources of the Warburg Institute's research library, which was organised precisely in order to encourage what would now be described as interdisciplinary research, moving easily between the history of art and the history of ideas. This background made him completely comfortable writing about primitive art, classical art, medieval art and Renaissance art, and helped to provide the sense of powerful intellectual confidence that pervades nearly every sentence of the book.

The second thing to strike me now about The Story of Art is how well it is written. I have not thought of Gombrich previously as a prose stylist, partly because English was not his native language, and partly because his drive was towards narrative clarity, not polish. But like Nikolaus Pevsner, another art historical refugee (although one who was regarded with slight suspicion by those associated with the Warburg Institute), Gombrich writes in a strong, idiomatic and unexpectedly vital prose style, as when, for example, he describes the construction of a Greek temple in admirably un-technical language, or the characteristics of medieval art in terms of the conventions of musical performance or the qualities of the Wilton diptych.

The fluency of his writing and its quality of narrative directness were probably helped by the fact that it was not written, but dictated, and nearly all his work - certainly his best work - derived from public lectures, starting with Art and Illusion, which began life as the AW Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, which he was invited to deliver on the recommendation of Kenneth Clark in 1956.

The third characteristic of The Story of Art, both a strength and a weakness, is the extent to which Gombrich views art exclusively as a product of the western European tradition. The first chapter provides some reference to the activity and practice of art in other, more primitive cultures. He then embarks on a narrative that begins in Egypt and passes to fifth-century Athens, which he regards as responsible for the great innovations in the depiction of the human form that have dominated all subsequent artistic activity, at least in western Europe. The Romans, by contrast, are viewed simply as rather coarse interpreters of the Greek tradition, strong in portraiture and engineering, but lacking refinement and sensitivity in both architecture and sculpture. Then, after a brief glimpse eastwards to India and China in a chapter that is revealingly described as "Looking Eastwards", the narrative reverts to western Europe and specifically to Germany, France, Britain and Italy. It is a consistently Eurocentric view of the development of art and does not, for example, include the development of Romanesque architecture in Italy - the cathedral of Trani or the church of San Miniato al Monte in Florence - nor Islamic architecture in Spain.

Gombrich is much more interested in the history of architecture than I had remembered and begins each chapter with a discussion of a significant monument, which helps to anchor one's understanding of the art of the period in its physical context (although he rather surprisingly says that there are no surviving Anglo-Saxon churches in England, which is certainly not true). He is extremely good in writing about the changing status of artists, from working in guilds to being in demand in the courts of Italy. Most of all, I am surprised by the sense of Hegelianism in each chapter. He was passionately opposed to anything that might smack of Hegelianism in all his theoretical writings about the history of art (that is, the idea of a Spirit of the Age) and, instead, aligned himself intellectually with his friend Karl Popper in opposing all suggestions that art forms might be interrelated in style and character according to the era in which they were produced. And yet, chapter by chapter, what comes out of The Story of Art is a powerful sense of the intellectual and spiritual coherence of artistic endeavour country by country and century by century.

The last time that I met Gombrich was at a party held by his former pupils to celebrate his 85th birthday and the publication of Sight and Insight, a festschrift in his honour. I had been familiar with him as an ancient, rather sage figure shuffling round the book stacks of the Warburg Institute. He gave

a speech after dinner in which he was contemptuous of his portrait by RB Kitaj in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, and offered to stand in front of it once a week to demonstrate the fallacy of it as a model of representation (I tried to take him up on this offer without success). What I remember with extreme vividness is the sense of him as a Grand Old Man who represented to an extraordinary degree the European tradition of study of the humanities, which he knew perfectly well had become deeply unfashionable under the onslaught of postmodernism, but which he refused to renounce. It was a heroic performance, impressive precisely for his absolute confidence in the validity of his views. The same can be said of The Story of Art.

The Story of Art by EH Gombrich, pocket edition, is published by Phaidon, £12.95.

The Guardian, Friday 1 December 2006