

E. H.  
GOMBRICH

A LITTLE  
HISTORY



*of*



THE WORLD



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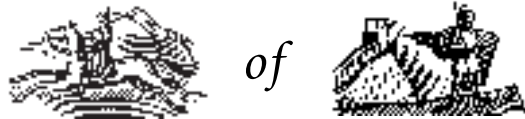
A LITTLE HISTORY OF THE WORLD



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E. H.  
GOMBRICH

A LITTLE  
HISTORY



THE WORLD

TRANSLATED BY CAROLINE MUSTILL

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Gombrich.

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*Für Ilse*

*Wie Du stets Dir's angehört  
Also stets Dir's angehört*



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## PREFACE

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

c. 1935.

My grandfather, Ernst Gombrich, is best known as an art historian. Besides many important academic publications, his popular introduction to art history, *The Story of Art*, has made him known to millions of readers around the world. But had it not been for *A Little History of the World*, *The Story of Art* would never have been written.

To understand how it happened – and why this, his very first book, has never appeared in English until now despite being available in eighteen other languages – we need to start in Vienna in 1935, when my grandfather was still a young man.

After Ernst Gombrich had finished his studies at the University of Vienna, he was unemployed and, in those difficult times, without prospect of a job. A young publisher with whom he was acquainted asked him to take a look at a particular English history book for children, with a view to translating it into German. It was intended for a new series called *Wissenschaft für Kinder* ('Knowledge for Children') and had been sent by a mutual friend who was studying medicine in London.

My grandfather was not impressed by what he read: so little so that he told the publisher – Walter Neurath who later founded the publishing house Thames & Hudson in England – that it was



probably not worth translating. ‘I think I could write a better one myself,’ he said. To which Neurath responded that he was welcome to submit a chapter.

It so happened that, in the final stages of writing his doctoral thesis, my grandfather had been corresponding with a little girl who was the daughter of some friends. She wanted to know what was keeping him so busy, and he enjoyed trying to explain his subject to her in ways she would understand. He was also, he said later, feeling a little impatient with academic writing, having waded through so much of it in the course of his studies, and was convinced that it should be perfectly possible to explain most things to an intelligent child without jargon or pompous language. So he wrote a lively chapter on the age of chivalry and submitted it to Neurath – who was more than happy with it. ‘But,’ he said, ‘in order to meet the schedule that was intended for the translation, I will need a finished manuscript in six weeks’ time.’

My grandfather wasn’t sure that it could be done, but he liked the challenge and agreed to try. He plotted out the book at speed, selecting episodes for inclusion by asking himself simply which events of the past had touched most lives and were best remembered. He then set out to write a chapter a day. In the morning, he would read up on the day’s topic from what books were available in his parents’ house – including a big encyclopaedia. In the afternoon, he would go to the library to seek out, wherever possible, some texts belonging to the periods he was writing about, to give authenticity to his account. Evenings were for writing. The only exceptions were Sundays – but to explain about these, I must first introduce my grandmother.

Ilse Heller, as my grandmother was then called, had come to Vienna from Bohemia about five years earlier to pursue her piano studies. She was soon taken on as a pupil by Leonie Gombrich, after whom I am named. Leonie introduced Ilse to Ernst, and encouraged my grandfather to show her pupil some of the galleries and architectural splendours of Vienna. By 1935 their weekend outings together were well established – and in fact, they married the following year. And one Sunday, as my grandmother

remembers it, they were walking in the Wienerwald and had stopped for a break – ‘Perhaps in a sunny clearing,’ she says, ‘sitting on the grass or on a fallen tree . . .’ – when my grandfather pulled a sheaf of papers from inside his jacket and said, ‘Do you mind if I read you something?’

‘Well, it was better that he read it,’ says my grandmother now. ‘Even then, you know, Ernst’s handwriting was very difficult.’

That something, of course, was the *Little History*. Evidently she liked it, and the readings continued for the next six weeks until the book was done – for he delivered it to Neurath on time. If you read it aloud, you will find how beautifully those readings shaped the telling of it; the dedication gives an idea of how he appreciated them. The original illustrations were produced by a former riding instructor, and my grandfather liked to point out that the numerous horses he included in his pictures were more skilfully drawn than the people.

When the book came out in 1936, titled *Eine kurze Weltgeschichte für junge Leser*, it was very well received, reviewers assuming that my grandfather must be an experienced teacher. Within quite a short time, it had been translated into five other languages – but by then, my grandparents were already in England, where they were to remain. In the end, the Nazis stopped publication, not for racial reasons but because they considered the outlook ‘too pacifist’.

However, the seed had been planted and, despite his other concerns, my grandfather eventually responded to requests for a sequel, this time focusing on art history. This became *The Story of Art* – not for children because, my grandfather said, ‘The history of art is not a topic for children,’ but for slightly older readers. It has remained in print since 1950 and continues to make new friends in more than thirty nations.

But the first edition of the *Little History*, which preceded its better-known cousin, lay in a drawer in North London. Some time after the war had ended, my grandfather managed to reclaim his copyright, but by then the world in which he had written the book seemed very far away. So nothing happened until, more than thirty

years later, he received an enquiry from a German publisher who, on reading the book, was captivated by its energy and vivid language. A second German edition was published with a new final chapter – and once again, my grandfather was surprised and delighted by the book's success and the many translations that have followed. He took a cheerful interest in tailoring editions for audiences of different nationalities, and was always ready to listen to the suggestions of the various translators. There was one caveat, though. Apart from the *Little History*, my grandfather wrote all his books in English: if there was ever to be an English edition, he was going to translate it himself.

Then, for ten years, and despite repeated approaches, he refused to do so. It wasn't just that he was busy, although that was also true. English history, he said, was all about English kings and queens – would a European perspective mean anything to English-speaking children? It took the events of the 1990s, and Britain's increasing involvement in the European Union – as well as my grandmother's tactful encouragement – to convince him that they might.

And so, at the very end of his long and distinguished life, he embarked on producing a new, English version of the book with which he had started. 'I've been looking at my *Little History*,' he told me with modest surprise, shortly after he began, 'and there's actually a lot in it. You know, I really think it's good!'

Of course, he made corrections. He added new information about prehistoric man. He asked his son – my father – who is an expert on Early Buddhism, to advise on changes to Chapter 10, while his assistant, Caroline Mustill, helped with the sections on Chinese history. It is our great good fortune that Caroline worked with him so closely, for he was still engaged in the task of translating and updating when he died, at the age of ninety-two. With his blessing, she has completed this difficult task meticulously and beautifully. Clifford Harper produced new illustrations, which I know my grandfather would have loved to see. But some changes, of course, could not be made without him: we know that he intended to add chapters about Shakespeare and about the Bill of Rights, and no doubt he would have expanded on, for example, his

very brief treatment of the English Civil War and the birth of parliamentary democracy, which carried less weight for the Viennese graduate who wrote the book than for the British citizen he became. But how he would have explained these things we could not guess, and so the areas he did not revise himself have been left as his thousands of readers in other countries already appreciate them.

Revisions, in any case, are perhaps beside the point. What matters is his obvious sense that the pursuit of history – indeed, all learning – is an enquiry to be enjoyed.

‘I want to stress,’ he wrote, in his preface to the Turkish edition a few years ago, ‘that this book is not, and never was, intended to replace any textbooks of history that may serve a very different purpose at school. I would like my readers to relax, and to follow the story without having to take notes or to memorise names and dates. In fact, I promise that I shall not examine them on what they have read.’

*Leonie Gombrich*  
April 2005

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

With Carl and Leonie, 1972.

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*The Estate of E. H. Gombrich would like to thank, for information and advice:  
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## ONCE UPON A TIME



All stories begin with ‘Once upon a time’. And that’s just what this story is all about: what happened, once upon a time. Once you were so small that, even standing on tiptoes, you could barely reach your mother’s hand. Do you remember? Your own history might begin like this: ‘Once upon a time there was a small boy’ – or a small girl – ‘and that small boy was me.’ But before that you were a baby in a cradle. You won’t remember that, but you know it’s true. Your father and mother were also small once, and so was your grandfather, and your grandmother, a much longer time ago, but you know that too. After all, we say: ‘They are old.’ But they too had grandfathers and grandmothers, and they, too, could say: ‘Once upon a time’. And so it goes on, further and further back. Behind every ‘Once upon a time’ there is always another. Have you ever tried standing between two mirrors? You should. You will see a great long line of shiny mirrors, each one smaller than the one before, stretching away into the distance, getting fainter and fainter, so that you never see the last. But even when you can’t see them any more, the mirrors still go on. They are there, and you know it.

And that's how it is with 'Once upon a time'. We can't see where it ends. Grandfather's grandfather's grandfather's grandfather . . . it makes your head spin. But say it again, slowly, and in the end you'll be able to imagine it. Then add one more. That gets us quickly back into the past, and from there into the distant past. But you will never reach the beginning, because behind every beginning there's always another 'Once upon a time'.

It's like a bottomless well. Does all this looking down make you dizzy? It does me. So let's light a scrap of paper, and drop it down into that well. It will fall slowly, deeper and deeper. And as it burns it will light up the sides of the well. Can you see it? It's going down and down. Now it's so far down it's like a tiny star in the dark depths. It's getting smaller and smaller . . . and now it's gone.

Our memory is like that burning scrap of paper. We use it to light up the past. First of all our own, and then we ask old people to tell us what they remember. After that we look for letters written by people who are already dead. And in this way we light our way back. There are buildings that are just for storing old scraps of paper that people once wrote on – they are called archives. In them you can find letters written hundreds of years ago. In an archive, I once found a letter which just said: 'Dear Mummy, Yesterday we ate some lovely truffles, love from William.' William was a little Italian prince who lived four hundred years ago. Truffles are a special sort of mushroom.

But we only catch glimpses, because our light is now falling faster and faster: a thousand years . . . five thousand years . . . ten thousand years. Even in those days there were children who liked good things to eat. But they couldn't yet write letters. Twenty thousand . . . fifty thousand . . . and even then people said, as we do, 'Once upon a time'. Now our memory-light is getting very small . . . and now it's gone. And yet we know that it goes on much further, to a time long, long ago, before there were any people and when our mountains didn't look as they do today. Some of them were bigger, but as the rain poured down it slowly turned them into hills. Others weren't there at all. They grew up gradually, out of the sea, over millions and millions of years.

But even before the mountains there were animals, quite different from those of today. They were huge and looked rather like dragons. And how do we know that? We sometimes find their bones, deep in the ground. When I was a schoolboy in Vienna I used to visit the Natural History Museum, where I loved to gaze at the great skeleton of a creature called a Diplodocus. An odd name, Diplodocus. But an even odder creature. It wouldn't fit into a room at home – or even two, for that matter. It was as tall as a very tall tree, and its tail was half as long as a football pitch. What a tremendous noise it must have made, as it munched its way through the primeval forest!

But we still haven't reached the beginning. It all goes back much further – thousands of millions of years. That's easy enough to say, but stop and think for a moment. Do you know how long one second is? It's as long as counting: one, two, three. And how about a thousand million seconds? That's thirty-two years! Now, try to imagine a thousand million years! At that time there were no large animals, just creatures like snails and worms. And before then there weren't even any plants. The whole earth was a 'formless void'. There was nothing. Not a tree, not a bush, not a blade of grass, not a flower, nothing green. Just barren desert rocks and the sea. An empty sea: no fish, no seashells, not even any seaweed. But if you listen to the waves, what do they say? 'Once upon a time . . .' Once the earth was perhaps no more than a swirling cloud of gas and dust, like those other, far bigger ones we can see today through our telescopes. For billions and trillions of years, without rocks, without water and without life, that swirling cloud of gas and dust made rings around the sun. And before that? Before that, not even the sun, our good old sun, was there. Only weird and amazing giant stars and smaller heavenly bodies, whirling among the gas clouds in an infinite, infinite universe.

'Once upon a time' – but now all this peering down into the past is making me feel dizzy again. Quick! Let's get back to the sun, to earth, to the beautiful sea, to plants and snails and dinosaurs, to our mountains, and, last of all, to human beings. It's a bit like coming home, isn't it? And just so that 'Once upon a time' doesn't



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