

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES
Jean and Laurent de Brunhoff

Jean de Brunhoff (1899–1937)

Jean de Brunhoff, the French artist who created one of the most enduring fictional characters of all time, was born in Paris in 1899. When he was in his early thirties, the father of two young boys, de Brunhoff wrote and illustrated *Histoire de Babar, le petit éléphant* (1931), the story of an orphan who makes his way to the big city and learns the ways of humankind before returning home to become king of the elephants. De Brunhoff's elegant story, told in simple prose and clear, lush images, was embraced by French readers and was soon translated into English. In six sequels written before his untimely death at the age of thirty-seven, de Brunhoff continued the story of the good-hearted elephant in the green suit who lives well, rules benevolently, and does his best to be a good father.

Jean was the youngest of four children born to Maurice de Brunhoff, a successful Parisian publisher, and his Alsatian wife, Marguerite. All Jean's siblings followed their father into the publishing industry: his brother Michel was named editor-in-chief of the Paris edition of *Vogue* in 1929; his brother Jacques was the founding editor of *Le décor d'aujourd'hui*, a magazine of art deco-era home design; and his eldest sibling, Cosette, a photographer, was the wife of Lucien Vogel, a highly influential figure in French magazine journalism. As director of Condé Nast's style magazine *Le Jardin des modes*, Vogel made possible the publication of *Histoire de Babar* in 1931. Jean de Brunhoff's first four Babar stories were published by Editions du Jardin des Modes and the fifth by Hachette; the final two appeared first in black-and-white in the British newspaper *The Daily Sketch* before being published posthumously in book form. Shortly after the first Babar story book was published, Jean was commissioned to decorate the children's dining room on the French luxury liner *Normandie*.

In the years before creating Babar, Jean was a skilled painter of portraits and landscapes but had never before tried his hand at writing for publication. In 1924 he married Cécile Sabouraud, the sister of a friend and fellow painter, and their sons Laurent and Mathieu were born a year apart, in 1925 and 1926. It was Cécile de Brunhoff who invented the outline of the tale that would grow into *Histoire de Babar*. In 1930 she told her two sons a bedtime story about an unnamed baby elephant and the delighted boys repeated it to their father. Jean named the protagonist Babar, augmented the story substantially, and illustrated it in watercolor. When the first book was published, Cécile declined to be listed as the co-author, and she did not collaborate with Jean on any of his later Babar stories. A graduate of the *École Normale de Musique de Paris*, she taught piano for many years and lived to the age of ninety-nine.

The de Brunhoffs had a third son, Thierry, in 1934, and just a few years later Jean was diagnosed with spinal tuberculosis. He died in 1937, at the age of thirty-seven, and was buried in Paris in Père-Lachaise cemetery.

(over)

Laurent de Brunhoff (b. 1925)

Laurent de Brunhoff has been creating books about the elephant Babar for sixty years, continuing the story invented by his mother and written and illustrated by his father. When he was a young boy in 1930, Laurent and his brother Mathieu were settling down to go to sleep when their mother, Cécile, told them a bedtime story about a little elephant. The boys were enchanted and repeated the story to their father, Jean de Brunhoff, a painter, who expanded and illustrated it. *Histoire de Babar* (1931) was the first of seven story books by Jean de Brunhoff.

When Laurent was a boy, he and his family split their time between their apartment in Neuilly, a suburb northwest of Paris, and Cécile de Brunhoff's parents' country house outside Paris, with skiing holidays taken regularly in the Swiss Alps. When Jean de Brunhoff died in 1937, Laurent was twelve years old. Throughout his childhood he had watched while his father drew elephants and wrote of their adventures. When his Uncle Michel (the Paris editor of *Vogue*) asked Laurent to assist with the coloring of Jean's last two Babar stories, which had been published in a newspaper in black line only, Laurent was happy to assist.

Like his father, Laurent aspired to be a painter and in 1945 enrolled at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Montparnasse, studying with his father's own teacher, Othon Friesz. He soon took a studio nearby and began to exhibit his abstract work, very different from his father's more traditional landscapes and still life compositions. After the second World War, when Laurent was in his early twenties, he returned to the family story he had heard as a boy. He tried his hand at his own Babar story book, *Babar et ce coquin d'Arthur* (1946), choosing as his protagonist Babar's mischievous little cousin Arthur, with whom Laurent identified. The book was well received by readers, many of whom did not recognize a new author at work and assumed that the hiatus in the Babar series was due to the war.

In the decades to come Laurent wrote and illustrated dozens more books in the Babar series, which has continued to enjoy enormous popularity in France and throughout the world. Though he continued painting for awhile, Babar eventually became his principal artistic endeavor. During the late 1950s and early 1960s he published several illustrated books that did not feature elephants, including *A tue-tête* (1957), *Bonhomme* (1965), and several stories about the giraffe Serafina, but he always returned to Babar.

In 1985 Laurent de Brunhoff moved from France to the United States and began collaborating with his second wife, the writer Phyllis Rose. Together they discuss the concept for each new Babar book; Phyllis then writes the text while Laurent continues to illustrate. They live in New York City and Key West, Florida. One of Laurent's most recent books, *Babar's Museum of Art* (2003), features his renderings of well-known paintings with the subjects wittily replaced by elephants. The latest in the Babar series, *Babar's USA*, will be published by Abrams in fall 2008.