

# Elephants and old masters

At 78, Laurent de Brunhoff has just finished his latest Babar book, the story of a gallery filled with familiar but elephantine works of art. He talks to **Helena de Bertodano**

At first glance, the painting looks familiar enough: Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. There is the monkey playing at the feet of the elegant couple strolling under the trees; and there are the people gazing out at the water. But there is one vital difference. The characters are all elephants, not humans.

For this is a picture in *Babar's Gallery*, the latest in the Babar series, brought to us by Laurent de Brunhoff, the son of Jean de Brunhoff, who created the original Babar books in the 1930s. *Babar's Gallery*, to be published on September 29, tells the story of Babar and Celeste building a museum for their paintings.

Laurent, an accomplished artist himself, hangs their museum with copies of familiar masterpieces that he has recomposed with elephants. So we have elephants rising Venus-like from the waves in his take on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*; an elephant howling in horror – Munch's *The Scream*; an elephant smoking a pipe in his rendering of Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait*. There is even an elephantine version of *The Mona Lisa*.

"Of course it is a little joke," says de Brunhoff, 78, in his pronounced French accent when we meet at his Manhattan studio, just a stone's throw from the Metropolitan Museum of Art where many of the original paintings hang. A tall, thin man with a gleeful laugh, he is an appropriate human exponent of Babar. In his navy polo shirt and pressed beige slacks, he exudes the elegance one associates with Babar and speaks in a soft chalky voice, gesticulating constantly.

"It's funny to have elephants as human beings, but my main point

was to do something as faithful as possible to the original painting – so I have to catch the movement of the human body with the elephant, which is not always very easy, especially as you see in the *Birth of Venus*, which is a little bit sexy."

Few children, of course, will get the artistic jokes, but the accompanying story describes Babar's children – Pom, Flora, Alexander and Isabelle – touring the gallery and responding to the paintings. "I think it can help children look at art," says de Brunhoff, "because Babar is their friend." While it may not be one of Babar's most exciting adventures, it does have charm, features all the original Babar characters (including the Old Lady

**'The heart of the books is a human story. Babar is no longer an elephant, but a human being'**

and Zephir the Monkey), and the illustrations are as adept as ever.

It is Laurent, not his father, who has brought us the bulk of the Babar books – nearly 40 to date, and it was Laurent's mother, Cecile – who died in May aged 99 – who invented Babar. One night, when Laurent was five and his brother, Mathieu, was four, she came into their room and sat down to tell them a story. "She told us about a little elephant whose mother is killed and he escapes to the city, dresses as a human being, and then returns to the forest. The next day we repeated the story to

my father – a painter at that time – he was very excited and started to do a book for us. He developed the story, added the character of the Old Lady and invented the name Babar because in my mother's story it was Bébé."

Encouraged by his brother, Michel, a publisher, Jean worked on the book and in 1931 *L'Histoire de Babar* appeared. Two years later the first British edition was published, with a preface by A.A. Milne, author of *Winnie the Pooh*.

"My father discovered himself with Babar," says Laurent; he would also consult his children as he worked on the books, soliciting their opinion about everything from the colours he used to their suggestions for storylines.

But in 1937, just six years and five books after the first Babar, Jean de Brunhoff died. The publishers, however, were keen to continue the Babar series. "They asked my mother if she would agree to someone else doing more books and she said 'Never!'" So for several years the series lay dormant, until Laurent, having himself trained as a painter, took up the challenge. And in 1946, nine years after his father's death, Laurent's first Babar book was published – *Babar's Cousin: That Rascal Arthur*.

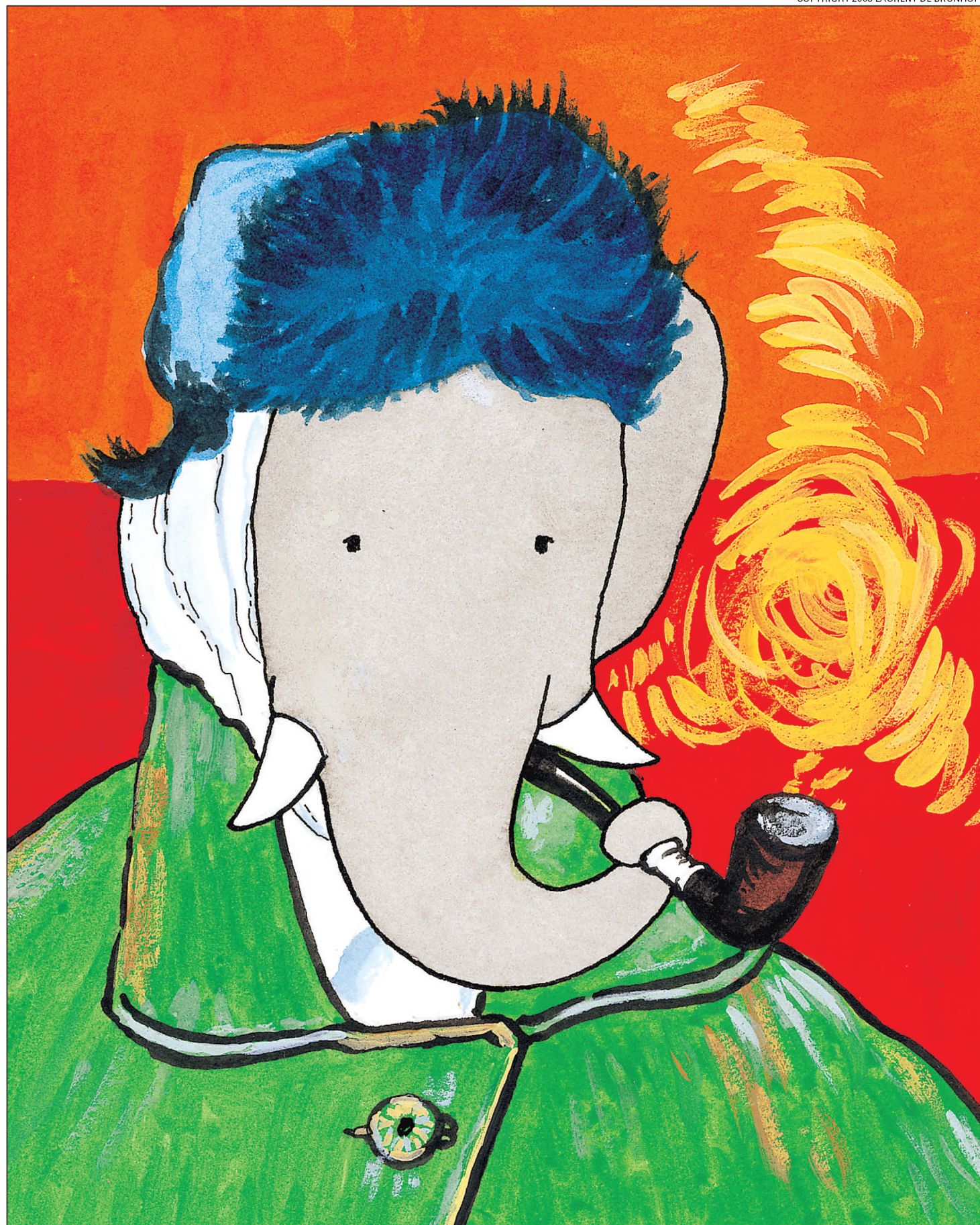
Today Laurent's studio is a shrine to Babar. Stuffed Babar toys sit on his desk amid the paintbrushes, and posters and paintings of Babar line the walls. Carefully preserved in a drawer are his father's original Babar sketches and paintings.

Laurent opens the drawer to reveal Jean's painting of Babar giving the Old Lady a farewell hug as he returns to the forest. The only mark of the passage of time is the colour of Babar's suit, which has faded from vibrant green to pale beige.

"At the start it was a way of getting my father alive again," says Laurent. "I wanted to be faithful. I didn't want to touch the heart of the Babar books – which is a human story."

Nevertheless, there were differences. Jean's paintings were very precise, whereas Laurent's were more fluid. "There may be some differences because we are not the same man. He was more well-balanced, symmetrical and there is maybe more movement in my composition."

Gradually, Laurent appropriated Babar: "After a while it was like Babar was my own and I didn't think of my father any more." His first wife Marie-Claude, with whom he has two children, helped him come up with story-lines within the original framework. But in 1985, after Laurent had married for the second time – to the author Phyllis Rose, who also helps him



**'Babar, c'est moi'** An illustration from *Babar's Gallery*, inspired by Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait* – 'It can help children look at art,' says Laurent de Brunhoff

with the books – he felt brave enough to make some changes. "I said: 'Well, my life has changed. Babar and Celeste can have another child.'" So Isabelle was added to the Babar offspring and the adventures started to become more outlandish.

Indeed, a couple of years ago, he

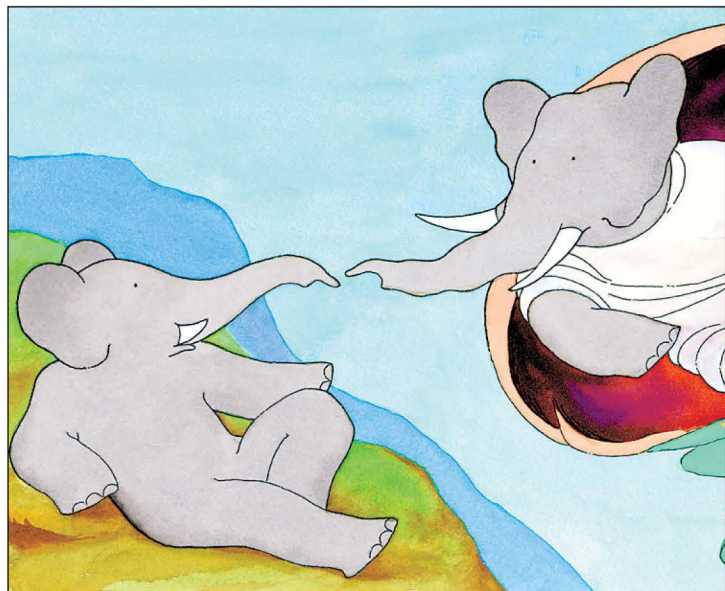
produced *Babar's Yoga*, less a book for children and more an instruction manual for yoga beginners trying to find their inner elephant. Now he is in the throes of a book about Babar touring the world. On his easel is a painting of Babar in Egypt, dwarfed by giant elephants hewn out of stone.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that for Laurent the line between elephants and humans has become blurred. When he sees a real elephant. Underneath, in loopy black handwriting, he has written the words: "Babar, c'est moi."

He shows me a diary sketch

book, in which he has included a panel of pictures depicting himself metamorphosing from man to elephant. Underneath, in loopy black handwriting, he has written the words: "Babar, c'est moi."

■ *Babar's Gallery* (Harry N. Abrams) is available for £9.95 + £2.25 p&p. Call Telegraph Books Direct 0870 155 7222



**'A little joke'** An illustration inspired by Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*