

The Tradition of Drawing From Memory

Artists who wish to improve their drawing skills would do well to consider the crucial role that memory plays in even the most straightforward drawing from life. As Kimon Nicolaïdes wrote in his classic book, *The Natural Way to Draw*, "With the exception of the [blind] contour study, there is no drawing that is not a memory drawing because, no matter how slight the interval is from the time you look at the model until you look at your drawing or painting, you are memorizing what you have just seen."

Various exercises for cultivating the visual memory have been practiced at least since the time of the Renaissance, and, no doubt, some form of memory training was used by artists long before that. For example, Leonardo da Vinci recommended that artists, before going to sleep at night, review in their imagination the outlines of forms they had studied during the day. Similarly, in the 18th century, Sir Joshua Reynolds told his students to redraw from memory figures that they had previously drawn in the life class. Continual practice in this exercise, he said, would soon enable the student to draw "tolerably correct" human figures "with as little effort of the mind as is required to trace with a pen the letters of the alphabet."

Probably the most comprehensive approach to memory training for artists was devised in the 1840s by a wonderfully gifted teacher with the unwieldy name of Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran. While a professor at the School of Decorative Arts in Paris, Lecoq conducted some experiments involving a group of enthusiastic 12- to 15-year-old students in his drawing class. He wanted to find out whether his pupils' varying natural abilities to recall visual forms could be improved through a series of logically graduated tasks of increasing complexity.

Lecoq began by asking his students to memorize straight lines of different lengths, then angles of different degrees, followed by curves varying in difficulty. He moved on quickly from these abstract shapes to "one of the simplest details of the human face, a nose drawn in profile," as he wrote in *The Training of the Memory in Art*, published in 1847. He pointed out some salient characteristics of the form and lectured on the nose's anatomical construction, then allowed the pupils to study the image for a few days before asking them to draw it from memory.

Lecoq took care not to require his students to use a particular method in committing the image to memory. He wanted them "to have free scope for their own natural and individual ways of working." Some simply looked at the nose very attentively, others drew repeated copies until they could remember the nose's modeling, proportions, outline, and details exactly. Lecoq was surprised at how rapidly the young artists progressed. After three months, they could draw an entire head accurately from memory, even down to details of the hair. The later stages of the experiment involved the memorization of engravings of classical sculpture, Old Master paintings and drawings, and finally, the copying of three-dimensional casts and original sculptures and paintings in the Louvre.

Lecoq insisted on accuracy; only when the memory drawings at each stage were flawless could the students move on to the next level. One pupil recalled having to make a copy of an engraving from memory five times before the teacher was satisfied. The exercises led eventually to the making of memory drawings from a live nude model, which Lecoq considered a necessary, but dangerous, phase. In many ways a traditionalist in his teaching practice, he believed that too-accurate copying of the imperfections of the human body would fill his students' memories with ugly forms and spoil their taste for the ideal. He therefore asked them to make idealized, rather than exact, memory drawings of the figure, after having first drawn it accurately from life.

All this preliminary training prepared Lecoq's students for what he called the "true artistic application of memory," the accurate recall and reproduction of figures in motion and transient natural effects. He took his students to a secluded outdoor location—"a beautiful spot, a sort of natural park"—where hired models, both clothed and unclothed, walked, ran, sat, or stood about in full sunlight or deep shadow. Lecoq allowed his students "entire liberty to choose the impression that had most vividly struck them," then had them reproduce the remembered images as exactly as possible. The exercise, he said, "made them really understand the purpose of this unusual training, for without it all their fine impressions would have faded away rapidly like dreams."

Lecoq never intended that his memory-drawing exercises should replace traditional methods of instruction. They were a supplement, not a substitute, and Lecoq recommended that students not undertake his memory training until they could draw reasonably well from casts and engravings. The purpose of memory drawing was to force artists to use their own eyes and develop their powers of observation. Lecoq was reluctant to prescribe any hints or tips to facilitate memorization, because he suspected that such tricks would be applied mechanically by teachers who did not take into consideration their students' individual aptitudes and intellects. Nevertheless, in an appendix to the second edition of his book, published in 1862, Lecoq offered some general ideas to guide artists in their memory work.

In observing any subject, he noted, there are five principal points to keep in mind: dimensions, position, form, modeling, and color.

? To determine dimensions, choose some part of the subject (in a figure, the head, for example) as a unit of measure, and use it to compare the proportions of different parts to the whole.

? To fix position, establish "landmarks"—prominent points of the subject—and imagine horizontal and vertical lines passing through them. The points and the intersections of the lines form a simplified grid that can be easily remembered and referred to when drawing the subject from memory.

? In observing forms, imagine them enclosed within simple geometric shapes—circles, squares, and triangles—and then decide how far the observed form deviates from the imaginary shape superimposed upon it.

? Modeling, or three-dimensionality, is best remembered by noting the pattern of light and shade on the subject. Pick one part of the subject, either the darkest or the lightest, to use as the unit of comparison to measure the relative values of all the other parts.

? Color observation requires judgment of both value and intensity of tones. In an advanced course of training, after they had mastered memory drawing in black and white, Lecoq's students memorized a series of pure color tints, which they then could use as fixed points of comparison to judge the intensity of colors observed in the subject.

These general methods are especially important in the early stages of memory training, but with practice, such conscious guidelines become gradually less necessary, according to Lecoq. "For then the proportions, points, shapes, modeling, and color are calculated by what I may call the inner eye of the memory, without recourse to previous calculations and reasoning, much as they are judged by the eye in ordinary vision."

Finally, Lecoq recommended one overwhelmingly successful method of committing any object to memory: the "formula," he called it, despite his own distrust of formulas. With the object in view, he said, trace its outline or major forms in the air with the tip of your finger or a pencil. Then look away from the object, close your eyes, and draw it again in the air. Repeat the process rapidly, as often as it takes to fix the object clearly in your mind.

Lecoq noticed that his students applied the formula in different ways, depending on their abilities to grasp essential qualities of structure, mass, and light. "The abler ones may begin with the big lines of the mass, that is, the simplified impression of the whole effect, before attending to details. The weaker ones, being unable to grasp the whole subject at once, will have to make imaginary drawings of one part only over and over again, and stroke by stroke, in order that the impression may be, so to speak, incrustated on their mind."

Repetition and rehearsal, either by actually copying the image on paper or by making imaginary drawings in the air, were evidently key components of Lecoq's method, which was geared to turning the visual memory into a precision instrument. Surviving works by his students show that they learned to record and retain vivid impressions of complex objects and scenes with near-photographic detail. Such training paid off handsomely for some of Lecoq's pupils, who included the sculptor Auguste Rodin and the painter James McNeill Whistler. Their art forms were based on their ability to understand and remember transient effects: the human body in motion, in Rodin's sculpture; subtle atmospheric moods, often nocturnal, in Whistler's paintings.

In his later years, Rodin often had models moving around him in his studio while he drew them, a practice reminiscent of Lecoq's exercises with moving models in the open air. Rodin's drawings and watercolors of dancers are made with confident, sweeping contours that are accurate, not because

they were painstakingly rendered from life, but because they are so well observed and remembered that Rodin could draw them with his eyes closed?which he sometimes did.

Whistler developed an interesting idiosyncratic variation on Lecoq's memory techniques; he depended on verbal, rather than visual, cues to help him visualize a scene. Happening upon a subject he wished to remember, he observed it intently for a few minutes, then turned his back and described its essential points out loud, as if reciting a poem. Lecoq would have heartily approved of Whistler's adaptation. His greatest desire was to empower his students to discover their own inventiveness, to unlock the powers of their own imagination. As another of Lecoq's pupils, Henri Fantin-Latour, said in honoring his teacher, "cultivating the memory, as he especially recommends, means nothing less than cultivating more intensely the personality of each one of us."

Lecoq's influence, direct and indirect, was greatest among the generation of artists who came of age in the middle to last part of the 19th century. The Impressionists' interest in painting figures in the open air may have been stimulated by Lecoq's exercises using models posed outdoors in the early 1860s. Édouard Manet's famous *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a studio painting of an outdoor subject that combines elements of direct observation and references to the grand tradition, is very much in the spirit of Lecoq's teaching, though Lecoq probably would have objected to the inclusion of so much observed "ugliness."

Manet would have known of Lecoq's methods through his friendship with Fantin-Latour, as would another member of their circle, Edgar Degas, who shared Lecoq's belief in the importance of cultivating the memory. Alone among the Impressionists, Degas scoffed at the idea of painting directly from nature. Though he did make life studies of his beloved dancers, laundresses, and horseracing scenes, Degas relied on his memory when composing his finished oils and pastels, drawing and redrawing the lines of his figures until they satisfied the demands of his inner eye.

The connection between memory and the creative imagination, so abundantly demonstrated in Degas' achievements, is a theme that Lecoq emphasizes again and again in his book. Lecoq's vision was holistic. His insistence that students in his class initially produce exact copies of memorized models was but one step in a long process, the ultimate goal of which was?paradoxically?to free the artist's imagination from the grip of literalness.

"In the execution of such drawings and paintings in our heads," he wrote, referring to the formula of tracing in the air with a finger, with eyes closed, "our ideas and feelings are unhampered by material difficulties and have free play to follow their natural inclination. They need not be slavishly bound by the exact appearance of things, which they may modify at pleasure by selection, by abstraction, by adding to them or taking away from them, by emphasis or embellishment, in short, by grafting, as it were, the ideal upon the real.

"Is not that truly an act of assimilation, whereby an artist, once he has made nature his own, is able, so to speak, to infuse her with his own personal sentiment?"

"Thus the procedure that I advocate must be admitted to exercise and cultivate simultaneously artistic memory, artistic intelligence, and artistic feeling. It is equally well adapted for advanced as for elementary study. Besides tending to develop the memory and the higher faculties, it will lead to the early formation of the excellent habit, only too rare, of devoting a few moments of head work to considering the model, before the hand work is allowed to begin."

Lecoq's book was translated into English in 1911, and his methods had some impact on art education in Great Britain and the United States during the early 20th century. But artists' increasingly widespread use of mechanical memory?that is, photographic reference material?made the arduous training of the visual memory seem like a waste of time. Why go to the trouble of committing a complex subject to memory when you can simply take a picture of it? Lecoq's elegant system fell into disuse in the schools, and today, is all but unknown except among scholars of 19th-century art and a handful of perceptive teachers.

That's unfortunate, because there are real advantages to cultivating the visual memory, and serious disadvantages to an overreliance on photographic material. As he demonstrated, Lecoq's methods, when practiced conscientiously over a long period of time, can be a way of growing those "higher faculties" of art: not only memory, but imagination, intelligence, and feeling. Relying on photographs may be a shortcut, but ultimately, it's a shortcut to nowhere. Not only are the "higher faculties" not stimulated, they might actually atrophy in the long run.

In contemporary society, awash with generic mechanical memories?photographic and electronic

imagery?there is less occasion than ever to exercise and develop our natural powers of visual recall. As we witness a growing epidemic of memory loss among the aging in our general population, is there a connection? Studies have shown that memory training can benefit patients in the early stages of Alzheimer's. It couldn't hurt those of us who don't have an organic brain disease, but want to improve our drawing skills?or maybe just remember where we put the car keys. As with physical fitness, the lesson for memory fitness is simple: Use it or lose it.

There is, potentially, a lot to lose. Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran understood that the ability to remember is not merely a mechanical aptitude, a parlor trick; it is the key feature of our individuality, as artists and human beings. Without our memories, we literally don't know who we are.

Artists and instructors Carol Allison and Joan Irely use Lecoq's methods to teach children and adults how to draw. Read how [here](#).

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