

'Landscape painting & the role of memory: an artist's approach', Dr Angela Summerfield, in *Affecting perception: art & neuroscience*, AXNS, Oxford 2013.

One of the earliest and most widely translated guides to the role of memory in landscape painting was *'L'Education de la mémoire pittoresque'* by Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, published in 1862; these ideas had first appeared as a single pamphlet in 1847, and in 1911, they formed part of an accumulation of Boisbaudran's writings, published in English, as *'The Training of the Memory in Art and the Education of the Artist'*. This system of pneumonics emphasized the use of previous knowledge (semantic knowledge) as the guide to the artist's selection and storage of observed visual effects and distinctive small details; semantic knowledge was identified by Boisbaudran as facilitating a process of comparison and observation. Boisbaudran also stated that memory was to be directed, i.e. purposeful, in order for the artist to acquire useful knowledge. As part of this process, an artist had to acquire three specific faculties: the accuracy of the eye; skill of the hand; and a trained useful memory, so as to achieve in a drawing the "retention of impressions"⁽¹⁾. Boisbaudran also acknowledged the role of an individual artist's imagination and invention in art, by stressing that memory was both the source of imagination and reinforced the artist's ability to imagine ⁽²⁾. Following Plato's primacy of sight precept, Boisbaudran maintained that sight was the only sense of importance and, unsurprisingly, placed a strong emphasis on the formal and descriptive qualities of a work of art, such as drawing and colour.

His passing reference to the inclusion of feeling, i.e. memory as an expressive experience, remained to be explored by other theorists and artists. The concept of *Empfindung* and the *Stimmungsbilder* (loosely translated as “atmospheric or mood pictures”) , for example, were developed as significant aspects of 19th-century German landscape art, while the term “poetic mood” painting was associated with, for example, the influential Russian landscape painter, Isaac Levitan. Boisbaudran had also identified the creative significance of memory as a process and one, for the artist, whereby sensory input relied on the role of repetition and familiarity. This was pursued by Whistler, one of Boisbaudran’s followers, who would regularly undertake night-time walks of the reaches of the River Thames, so as to imbue a sense of place, atmosphere and significant detail. His rough notational pictorial notes can also be related to earlier practices of landscape artists on the Grand Tour, or exploring the wilds of the British Isles; Turner’s vast body of sketchbooks reveal, for example, his own highly idiosyncratic notational system of “memory recall” for forms, colour and its associate, light. The experience of emotional expressive forces linked to memory also informed the large-scale, so called “blue paintings” of the 1890s, by the Swedish painter, Eugène Jansson, who regularly undertook nocturnal “memory walks” around Stockholm.

While artists associated with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism broadly maintained the primacy of sight, there were also landscape artists, for example, Gauguin, Hodler and Kandinsky, who were also interested in capturing multi-sensory impressions. In visual terms this involved a rejection of traditional landscape compositional forms and devices, concepts of reportage and mimesis, local i.e.

descriptive colour, and Western Renaissance spatial relationships and perspective. The resultant landscape paintings were often defined in terms of the minimalisation of detail, a sense of openness, emphatic contours and a dominant horizon line.

Whether we are artists or not, for all us memory defines a sense of self and our individuality from which we build our “thinking” landscape. My own practice, as a landscape painter, involves purposeful wanderings of forests, woodlands, meadows, farmland, moorland and heaths, mountains and hillsides, coastlines and promontories. Back in the studio, specific motifs such as trees, flowers, clouds, the sun and moon, church-spires, wayside markings or crosses, take on symbolic, metaphoric, or associative meanings, alongside explorations of colour modulation, scale and spatial geometry. In practical terms, familiarisation and authentic experiences are reinforced by an assemblage of visual, auditory, haptic and somatic material: sketches, notations, maps, guide-books, old postcards, poetry, music, photographs, and “found” natural objects, such as leaves, pine cones and sea-salt pebbles. The resultant paintings are carefully conceived re-presentations and re-compositions, which retain a figurative presence, involving a selective-interpretative process. Complex colour arrangements and applications, particularly involving the hues, blue and yellow, and degrees of luminosity, are often used by me so as to evoke both the experience of memory and “that grateful sensation of inner peace and clarity” in the viewer. (3)

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(1) Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, ‘The Training of the Memory in Art and the Education of the Artist’, trans. L. D. Luard, Macmillan & Co., London, 1911, p.19.

(2) Carl Gustav Carus, 'Carl Gustav Carus: Nine Letters on Landscape Painting', trans. David Britt, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2002, p.88. Originally published in 1831 as 'Neun Briefe über Landschaftsmalerei, geschrieben in den Jahren 1815-1824', Leipzig.