

Hello everybody and Happy New Year,

2017 is upon us. For my part I am hoping that it will be as full of excitements as 2016, which, for me, hidden away in my lovely corner of France, has been an amazing year. I hope the same has been true for you.

One landmark resulted from being persuaded by my service provider to transfer the Painting School website to a new platform, a move which opened up an opportunity to rejuvenate its contents. Although the overall design is similar to the old website, every page has many changes both to text and images. One of biggest transformations has been the massive expansion of the slideshow of student work on the “*Student Work*” page. At the time I started to gather together images for possible inclusion, I was only too aware of serious limitations in my store of them, both in terms of coverage and of quality. However, despite the too many regretted absences, I managed, with considerable help from others, to gather together over 200 images of paintings and drawings made by 122 students. I have to admit that I felt quite chuffed at the result, reflecting as it does on the quality and range of work done in the 28 years of the Painting School of Montmiral’s existence. It brought home to me how privileged I have been to have such a wonderful lot of students to work with on my courses. Thanks also to all those who provided images for the various slideshows and who made comments on the provisional text, particularly Ken and Sylvia who were responsible for the most substantial improvements.

High on the list of other excitements has been the repercussions of coming across *The Training of the Memory for Artists*, a book by the French artist and teacher Horace Lecoq Boisbaudran. It was published in 1850 and directly or indirectly influenced many celebrated Modernist artists, including Rodin, Manet, Degas, Whistler, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin, Bonnard, Matisse and, possibly, Picasso. Although, I very much enjoyed the detective work involved in tracking down this web of influences, a far greater source of excitement was Lecoq Boisbaudran’s detailed description of his teaching philosophy and method. I was incredulous to find how much it had in common with mine. With respect to philosophy, we both emphasise the benefits of starting at the most basic level and insist on the combination of rigour and accuracy, not for their own sake but as tools for opening up new levels of awareness and fuelling personal creativity (not to mention their potential for enabling meaningful fast drawing). Later in the year, I came across another book, this time published in 2016, the title of which is, *The Brain’s Way of Healing: Stories of Remarkable Recoveries and Discoveries*. The purpose of its author, Norman Doidge, is to provide encouraging messages for people whose neural message-conveying systems have been damaged by accident or illness and who, consequently, need to regenerate or replace the malfunctioning ones. Although the book never mentions artistic practices, its contents provided

me with reasons for taking my conception of “*the basics*” to even more primitive levels, and totally inspired me with new ideas about how to help people of all levels to revitalise their efforts at drawing with feeling.

Other excitements came from the unexpected consequences of setting out to produce a “*Glossary*” to the two books on painting and drawing. What started in 2015 as a last brief chore before declaring my books finished turned into a recurring pleasure, for it was not long before I had to change the whole conception of its nature. I found myself abandoning my original, simplistic conception and coming to accept that what I had embarked upon was something quite different. It turned out to be an extended journey down many artistic and scientific memory lanes, replete with opportunities to rethink ideas in exciting ways. For example, one of the lines of enquiry led to Horace Lecoq Boisbaudran and the trails and new insights mentioned above and the consequent rewriting of important sections of *Drawing on both Sides of the Brain*.

Another joy has been having Sarah working upstairs, producing an ever increasing body of work that I can richly appreciate. It has been one of my ongoing regrets that my commitment to writing books has excluded painting from my life, and witnessing the evolution of her work has allowed me some of the excitement that comes with watching paintings in the process of moving towards completion. Now that the books are essentially complete, I am looking forward in the not too distant future to a more personal engagement. With any luck, I will soon be once again experiencing the “*quiet excitement*” that comes with watching paintings that I am working on “*painting themselves through me*”.

Normally I append images of Montmiral and its environs to encourage nostalgia for times spent here, but instead this year I refer you to the slideshows on the “*Setting*” and “*Daily Life*” pages of the new website.

Also, don’t forget to look up the “*Student Work*” page. I feel sure you will enjoy it.

Please keep in contact or, better still, join us in Montmiral in June or July. You could do me the favour of testing the new “*Booking Form*” for me.

Warmest regards,

Francis

PS. Soon I am hoping to add a “*POST*” (Blog) page to the website. On it, apart from Painting School news, I will be publishing chapters and excerpts from my books, including from the “*Glossary*”. I will let you know when it comes on line.