

CHAPTER 7

Drawing from memory and the pros and cons of copying photographs

Introductory

Between the middle of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, the practice of training the memory of artists to the degree that they could draw or paint whole scenes from memory, became widespread in France and England. Then, it seems to have more or less completely faded out. The reason given for its demise was the rapid expansion of photography in the years during and after the first world war. Whereas, before, a great deal of rigorous memory training had been necessary for taking what amounted to snapshots of ephemeral material, now all that was needed was a camera. In the future, anybody with one could pass Eugène Delacroix's test of being able to produce an image of a man falling from a sixth floor window before he hits the ground.

However, though photography trumped drawing from memory as a quick and reliable way of making accurate images, it could not replace its potential for helping artists see and feel in new and creative ways, which was the main intention of Elizabeth Cavé and Horace Lecoq Boisbaudran, the two acknowledged pioneers of memory training. This chapter starts with a short history of the methods and influence of these teachers, which later serves to throw light on the advantages and disadvantages of copying photographs.

More generally, photographs have been used by artists to ease the process of achieving accurate renderings of figures, objects and scenes. Earlier, in Chapter 2, using them in this way was included in a list of devices (mirror, tracing glass, perspective frame and camera obscura, etc.) that have been used for this purpose over centuries. All of these enable artists to make more or less mechanical transfers of information, from the scene that interests them, onto canvas or

other picture support. Also in Chapter 2 it is pointed out that photographs, like all images on paper, can be squared up, and that the resulting grid, consisting of horizontal and vertical reference lines, can ease the task of enlarging images.

The question is, since none of these manoeuvres provide room for personal expression, why do they appear in this section of this book dedicated to practices inspired by Modernist developments? It is important to confront this question for two reasons. Most obviously, because the practice of copying photographs is far too widespread to be sidestepped. But also, because too many people, having been influenced by half-digested Modernist ideas, have an obscure feeling that, if they copy photographs, they are somehow cheating. The argument put forward in this chapter is that, although this can be the case, it is by no means necessarily so. To clarify matters, the advantages and disadvantages of copying photographs are discussed under three headings, namely: "popularity", misplaced guilt" and "seeing in new ways".

But first we turn briefly to training the memory.

TRAINING THE MEMORY

History

In the middle of the nineteenth century, two books were published almost simultaneously. Both introduced methods of training the memory of artists pioneered by the authors themselves. One was by Elizabeth Cavé (1809-1883), an artist and friend (mistress) of Eugène Delacroix, and the other, by Horace Lecoq Boisbaudran (1809-1897), *Director of Painting* at what is now known as the "École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs".

The Cavé book "*Drawing without Teachers*" advocated a method that involving tracing subject matter on gauze and using the result as a guide to making and correcting normal copies from observation. In the process, students not only learned about the nature of the visual distortions that make the task of accurate copying so difficult, but also stocked their memory to the degree that they could reproduce the objects of their analysis without further looking. The book was reviewed enthusiastically by Delacroix, went through many editions and was taken up by the state school system.

The book by Lecoq Boisbaudran, "*The Training of the Memory in Art*" is

a more thoroughgoing affair. It shares every step of its author's method with the reader, giving his reasons for each of the exercises as well as detailing both their outcomes and the introspections of his students upon them. In essence, the idea was to use careful analysis of specified subject-matter as a preparation for reproducing it from memory. The method involved progressing from simple elements, such as straight lines, to more and more complex ones. Each stage had to be thoroughly mastered before going on to the next. The final test the students had to pass was that of being able to produce a veridical copy of a painting that they had analysed in the Louvre, after returning to the studio. At every stage, the most exacting levels of accuracy were insisted upon: All mistakes however small had to be corrected, no matter how many false attempts had to be made in order to put them right (more on Lecoq Boisbaudran's methods and ideas in the next chapter).

In 1913 Auguste Rodin, who was a student of Lecoq Boisbaudran, contributed an short introductory piece to the 1913 English edition of his teacher's book. After starting with the point that, despite the originality of his ideas, Lecoq Boisbaudran was rooted in tradition, he went on, "*At the time Legros,¹ myself and the other youngsters in his studio did not understand what luck we had to fall into the hands of such a teacher. The greater part of what he taught remains with me to this day.*" In addition to Legros, the "*other youngsters*" included, Henri Fantin-Latour, Eugene Carrière, Jules Chéret (the celebrated poster maker) and Felix and Marie Bracquemond. Most, if not all, of these artists were active in spreading Lecoq Boisbaudran's ideas amongst their artist friends and students, who included Édouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, James McNeil Whistler, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas and John Peter Russel. Russel, though less celebrated for his artistic achievement, was particularly important as a conduit of ideas. Thus, after spending two years as a student of Legros at the *Slade School of Fine Art* in London, he joined Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and Emile Bernard in the studio of Fernand Cormon in Paris. All the four became long standing friends. As a group they tapped into other friendship networks of important figures in the development of *Modernism in Painting*, most immediately Paul Gauguin and Pierre Bonnard both advocates of working from memory. Later, when Russel went to live in Brittany, he was discovered by Henri Matisse, who acknowledged him as one of his most important influences, and no doubt brought some of his ideas to the Fauves. Also, I have read, Lecoq Boisbaudran influenced Picasso.²

¹ Lecoq Boisbaudran's star student, whose memory drawings were used as illustrations in book.

² Whistler, Degas, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh and Picasso all made notable explo-

The methods advocated by Lecoq Boisbaudran are of particular interest to readers of this book because they have a great deal in common with those advocated in the "*Feeling Based Drawing Lesson*" presented later, in *Chapters 9 - 11*. One of the many commonalities is that for neither of us was our goal that of achieving accuracy for its own sake. We both believe in the value of memory training as a means of helping students to see in new and potentially more creative ways. However, the fact remains that both Lecoq Boisbaudran's and my methods do provide extremely efficient means of obtaining *accuracy*, and it is the ability of Lecoq Boisbaudran's ideas in this respect that leads to his place in this chapter on *photography*.

In summary, while Lecoq Boisbaudran recognised the value of his *memory training* method as a means of dealing with the ever-changing nature of appearances, his goal was never slavish copying as an end in itself. Rather, he promoted his method as a tool for deepening appreciation of the unique and defining characteristics of appearances in ways that fostered the individuality of artists.

REASONS FOR POPULARITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

There are several reasons why the use of photographs has proved to be so popular amongst artists today. As mentioned in *Chapter 2*, it was not long after they became available in the middle of the *nineteenth century*, that artists discovered a number of advantages provided by the photographic process that other methods were not able to do either at all, or nearly so well. For example:

- Photographs can capture momentary expressions, gestures and movements that are over before the human eye/brain has time to analyse them (for example, fleeting smiles, grimaces and people or animals in motion).
- Photographs can capture poses of human or animal models that are difficult to sustain (for example, the position adopted by the model when posing for Degas' painting illustrated in *Figure 7, Chapter 2*).
- Photographs taken in any location (for example, in the landscape) can be easily carried back to the studio to work upon at leisure.

However, the main reason why photographs are so widely used today is that many artists, particularly beginners, find it much easier to produce their idea of "*satisfactory results*" when they copy from them than they do when confronted

rations of the power of drawing from memory. For more on this see the *Glossary*.

by real, three-dimensional scenes. The remainder of this section is dedicated to answering the two questions: “*In what ways are they easier?*” And, “*Are there any disadvantages in using them?*”

In what ways easier to copy?

Photographs are easier to copy than the scenes they represent because:

- Being images on flat surfaces, they inhibit a number of the most powerful of those visual systems which separate objects from their background in ways that make visual analysis more difficult. These include, *stereopsis, motion parallax and focus-based systems.*
- They are small enough for their contents to be analysed without moving the head.³ Also, they can be rotated (see below, for how this can help).
- Typically, they have straight-edge borders and are rectangular in shape. These provide convenient vertical and horizontal referents which can be used to help assessments of both *relative length* and *orientation of features* within the image.



Figure 1 : Face and shoulders in grid

- It is easy to use them for the time-honoured practice of “*squaring up*”

³ “*Drawing with Knowledge*”, which deals with *linear perspective*, explains how an observer’s body and head movements can play havoc with linear relationships and curvatures.

and, thereby produce useful sets of vertical and horizontal referents. For example, the vertical and horizontal referents provided by the grid, make it is easy to see the angles of the critical, character-giving slopes of the eyes, mouth, jaw and neck, as illustrated in *Figure 2* by means of sloping straight grey lines.



Figure 2 : Some critical angles indicated.

Disadvantages

One of the main reasons for the *Modernist* revolution in painting was the threat of the photograph. One click of a button on a brainless black box could produce more realistic results than pretty well any human. In reaction to this sobering state of affairs, artists looked for things that they could do which a camera could not, and they had little difficulty in finding them. In general, what they concluded was that photographs could not match the productions of artists with respect to:

- Personal mark-making.
- Creative deviations from literal appearances based on exaggeration, distortion or abstraction.
- Imagined scenes of all sorts, including those made on the basis of linear-perspective constructions.

- Images or arrays of marks constructed without any reference to nature, such as those produced by *Abstract Expressionist* or *Constructivist* artists.

However, in this section, we will leave all these aside and concentrate our attention on disadvantages of using photographs when making more straightforward representations of nature. Here are five of them:

- Due to their small size, degraded colour, two-dimensionality and static nature, photographs lack the *vitality* and *feel* of nature. This is important because these qualities frequently provide a highly significant part of the motivational force for wanting to copy nature in the first place.
- For the same list of reasons, much information available in nature is not available in photographs. In particular, it is often difficult to interpret details in photographs that can easily be analysed in nature, if necessary by moving closer to have a better look.
- There is plenty of evidence to show that, even when copying photographs, it is only too possible for people to overlook a significant number of shapes and relationships. However, there are also advantages for those copying from nature. This is because the fact that natural scenes are three dimensional provides ways of bringing characteristics of overlooked features to attention. If used these enable artists to see relative lengths, angles and complex curvatures more accurately. The most useful of these requires head movement.

Unfortunately, as we will see in *PART 3*,⁴ the use of head movement as aid to accurate analysis is more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

Incidentally, although colour and shading are not dealt with in this book, it is appropriate to mention that the continuously changing lighting conditions, which so frustrate *plein air* artists. These are similar in effect to head movement in the context of outline drawings, in the sense that they serve to draw attention to aspects of appearance that would otherwise go unnoticed. The difference is that, in the one case, our attention is drawn to the properties of contours, while, in the other, we are made aware of properties of surfaces. There can be little doubt that an important part of our appreciation of colour in nature is due to

⁴ Also in “*Drawing with Knowledge*”.

the fact that each of the ever recurring succession of transformations, due to changes in lighting and viewing conditions, catches the eye, both turning it in unpredictable directions⁵ and stimulating otherwise never experienced feelings.

- People copying photographs are less likely to make mistakes.

To many, the last of these listed disadvantages may not be seen as one at all, since the very reason for using the photograph as a model is to reduce the number and size of mistakes. However, as already pointed out, the fact of perceiving a mistake means that attention has been drawn to an unpredictable aspect of appearances. In this way mistakes provide an important source of *learning opportunities* and for this reason their reduction is far from necessarily a good thing, particularly in the longer run. It is to everyone’s advantage to be on a learning journey.

A lack of perceived mistakes can also have a negative effect in the teaching context since their absence means that teachers are left with a significantly smaller number of openings for directing attention in new ways of looking and, more generally, for sharing their knowledge.

MISPLACED GUILT

Many people feel that copying photographs is somehow cheating, but this is quite a new development. When the young *Impressionists* started their careers as artists, nobody would have felt guilty as a result of using mechanical means to ease the task of achieving accuracy, particularly since at that time paintings that succeeded in deceiving the eye (*trompe l’oeil*) were widely acclaimed. It was not until later that the search for better ways of expressing feelings and of representing “*experienced reality*” were accompanied by a radical change in attitude towards realism. Van Gogh thought it important to “*exaggerate*”, Toulouse-Lautrec explored “*distortion*”, Cézanne tried to capture the *constants* that lay beneath the ever-changing surface of appearances, and their successors explored even greater extremes of *expression*, *distortion* and *abstraction*. By the mid 20th century, the big brush and the dramatic gesture had become commonplace. In the face of all these developments, *photographic realism* came to be seen by many as the opposite of what artists should be seeking to achieve.

Today, we can stand back and look at matters from a revised perspective. We

⁵ For more on the attention-capturing properties of movement and *comparisons between similar but nevertheless different things*, see the *PART 3* and the *Glossary* under “*Movement*”.

can remember the drawings by Michelangelo, Dürer and Degas, reproduced in *Chapter One*, which show that accuracy is not incompatible with expression. We can also think of artists like Matisse who used accuracy as a tool for finding out about his subject matter as a preparation for radical abstractions, exaggerations and distortions. In neither case would the use of photographs as models have necessarily been incompatible with the final outcome. Indeed, one of many examples of major Modernist artists using photographs is illustrated in *Chapter 2, Figure 7*. It shows a painting of a nude woman by Edgar Degas next to a photograph that he clearly used as a model for it. The value of using photographs as models will always depend on why the method has been adopted by the artist and how it is made use of. If it is used for a good reason and produces good results, it is ridiculous to feel guilt.

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS AN AID TO SEEING IN NEW WAYS

In the previous chapter, great significance was given to the importance of comparison as an aid to seeing in new ways. It was suggested that a fruitful way of getting the most out of CLAM drawings is to make comparisons between:

- The CLAM drawings and drawings of the same subject produced “normally”.
- The CLAM drawings and the model.
- Different CLAM drawings of the same subject.

All three possibilities can be seen as examples of a more general strategy, namely that of looking for objects that are similar but different and making comparisons as a way of drawing attention to aspects of them that would otherwise be overlooked.

Clearly photographs are not the same as the objects they portray. People may remark on their fidelity to natural appearances, but they are always unreal in many ways. Some of these are listed above in the two sections entitled “advantages” and “disadvantages”. In particular comparisons between a photograph and the scene it represents will always take place after the photograph is taken, often hours, days or weeks later. Such factors as changes in lighting conditions, wind characteristics and growth ensure that nature is never static. Accordingly, there will always be differences between the photographic image and the current reality. This means that taking the photograph back to the place it was taken comparing the image with the reality, will almost always draw attention to aspects of appearances that

would otherwise be overlooked.

Also, it is worth noting that the best degree of similarity between the photograph and the scene it represents can only be achieved if the trouble has been taken to find the exact location and viewpoint from which it was taken. Accordingly there must be a process of bringing the two images into register. Even if the two were to be identical from this position, the process of finding it will invariably provide many a rich source of small differences and, accordingly, a multiplicity of learning opportunities.

Consider also the case of a photograph of an object that has changed its location, such as a life model who has taken a break. The only way of bringing the photograph and the model into register would be to get her to imitate the photograph. Doing so would involve a great deal of trial and error, a process that will, as always, be brim full of learning opportunities. These could well be just as valuable if it turns out to be impossible to reconstruct the original pose accurately.

We can likewise produce a fruitful learning situation by comparing a photograph with a drawing from observation of the same subject-matter. If we do, we will find that, while having features in common, the two will be full of differences. Because the task of copying the photograph is both different and easier than drawing from nature, the errors will be in different places and very likely smaller. Accordingly, comparisons between the two types of copy will attract attention in unpredictable directions. As a consequence, awareness will be extended in a range of ways that would otherwise have been neglected.

In summary, whether the task is to align the photograph with nature or nature with the photograph, a process of aligning and homing in will be necessary. In either case, these will necessarily involve looking for smaller and smaller differences, each of which attracts attention to something that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Upside down images

Finally, photographs have the advantage that they are easy to rotate. One of the tricks used by teachers as a means of demonstrating the role of *familiarity* in drawing from observation involves copying an image of a familiar object (such as a human figure), first the right way up and, then, upside down. I was introduced to the idea of doing this using photographs of faces in the 1960s. More recently and more famously, Betty Edwards employed a line drawing of Igor Stravinsky

by Pablo Picasso. Typically, it is the same less advanced students, who are most helped by *negative shapes* and *contour drawing*, that make the biggest improvements when copying upside down images, as compared with the right way up ones.

The reason for the improvement is the same in all three cases, namely the different degrees of familiarity: Everyone has had a enormous amount of experience of looking at people and their faces the right way up, but little, if any, of looking at them upside down. This means that the *information in long-term memory* that enables *recognition* and drives the *analytic-looking* behaviour is very different. As always, the familiarity of the subject matter will encourage generalisations and therefore *intellectually realistic* images, while the lack of it will push the focus of attention onto details and, thereby, facilitate a greater degree of accuracy.

But in the end this is just a trick. What we need to find is ways of facing up to the very real problems associated with *familiarity* and dealing with them head on. The best results will be obtained when we are able to analyse the parts at the same time as being confronted by the whole, whether they are upside up or upside down. The drawing lesson in *PART 3* is designed to help us do this.

Advantages of training memory as compared with copying photographs

The best statement that I know of the philosophy of Lecoq Boisbaudran with regard to accuracy for its own sake was almost certainly influenced by him. It comes from Degas, who was a great friend of Alphonse Legros, the student of Lecoq Boisbaudran and publicist for his ideas.⁶ What Degas said was, “*It is always very well to copy what you see, but much better to draw what only the memory sees. Then you get a transformation, in which imagination works hand in hand with the memory and you reproduce only what has particularly struck you.*”

But can this be taken as a criticism of copying photographs? After all, there is no reason why Lecoq Boisbaudran’s method of training students to memorise progressively complex shapes, objects and scenes should not be used to improve memory for photographs. Indeed, as already mentioned, one of the proofs given for its efficacy was that, after completing their training, his students could reproduce from memory paintings analysed on the walls of the *Louvre*, when back in

⁶ Who was a friend of Alphonse Legros, a star student of Lecoq Boisbaudran and publicist for his ideas.

the studio. Presumably, they could just have done just as well if the painting had been a photograph.

In short, Lecoq Boisbaudran’s methods will work perfectly well for reproducing images on flat surfaces, including photographic ones. The same is true of the methods I am advocating in this volume. Both are designed to help artists enrich their awareness, stock their imaginations and trigger their creativity, and to achieve these objectives for largely analogous reasons, and both have the capacity to do all these things for people copying photographs.

This is a very interesting subject and there will be much to say on it later in:

- The chapter on “*Fast Drawing*”, which comes next.
- The “*feeling based drawing lesson*” presented in *PART 3*.
- Many parts of “*Drawing with Knowledge*”, *BOOK TWO* of this volume.

It should be made clear at this point that the main disadvantage of copying photographs is reserved to those who believe that doing so will make life easier for themselves. In other words, it is not necessarily the photograph that is the problem, but the way it is used.

Despite this qualification, the potential disadvantages of copying photographs listed earlier, are still potential disadvantages. I therefore finish this chapter with a reprise of the first entry on the list:

“Due to their small size, degraded colour, two-dimensionality and static nature, photographs lack the vitality and feel of nature. This is important because these qualities frequently provide a highly significant part of the motivational force for wanting to copy nature in the first place.”

Summary and conclusions

Though photographs are indispensable for some purposes and useful for others, they can only too often be a snare and delusion. It is up to each of us to decide their value for the purposes in hand, taking into account the way we have prepared ourselves to make the best use of them.