

Experiences in Drawing From Nature

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Abstract. This paper discusses some advantages of learning to draw, focusing on landscapes. These advantages are considered to be 1. learning to observe; 2. learning to appreciate beautiful landscapes; 3. learning to concentrate and to coordinate hand and eye; 4. strengthening memory; 5. learning to appreciate the drawings of great masters. It proposes some examples of the author's own activity and focuses on the differences between drawing from nature and from memory. Finally, the relevance of drawing for a more sustainable way of life is briefly discussed.

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I have always loved drawing ever since I was little boy. My schoolbooks were full of doodles (most of them caricatures of teachers and schoolmates). I also liked drawing animals (mostly birds or fish, easier to execute than mammals). But my favourite subjects were (and still are) landscapes.

I love landscapes above all because of my contemplative character, but also because they are easy to draw in comparison to animals and much more so than human faces or bodies. But even when dealing with my favourite subject I don't consider myself as an artist. So, why do I expect that somebody may be interested in what I am scribbling down here?

In fact, what I really want is to promote the activity of drawing (essentially from life, but not only). My wish is that after reading these few lines some people may say: "Ok, I want to try".

Drawing offers from my point of view some considerable benefits:

First: when drawing from life you can learn to see things you had never noticed before. Small details as well as great harmonies. If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. (William Blake) Example: a tree growing on a steep slope. Roots like claws desperately clutching the terrain.

Second: you may learn to love a beautiful landscape and to experience sorrow and rage if you see it spoiled. Emotions are just as important as scientific knowledge for defending our poor planet.

Third: drawing from nature means discipline. You have to concentrate on what your eye is looking at and on what your hand is doing and to coordinate the two activities. But paradoxically it also can be a very relaxing

activity. When I am drawing, all my unpleasant and fearsome thoughts just evaporate. Photography is an immediate reaction, drawing is a meditation. (Henri Cartier-Bresson) Meditation seems just the right word to me. Indeed, when you are drawing a line or doing a brushstroke with the utmost attention you feel as if your whole existence were precariously suspended at the tip of your pencil or paintbrush.

Fourth: drawing may strengthen your memory. What you have drawn, you remember for a long time afterwards. This at least is my experience. I often find that I recall an event (e.g. a trip to Rome) by relating it to a drawing I made in that occasion. Learning to see and to defend our environment, concentrating and relaxing at the same time, remembering: all these things imply the activity of drawing more than the final product. So, don't worry too much if your drawings don't correspond to your far-flung expectations. Throw them away and start anew.

Fifth: you may learn to appreciate the drawing of great masters of past and present times (Rembrandt, Corot, Van Gogh, Tullio Pericoli, Alvaro Siza - just to name some of my favourites - and many others too...). Appreciating the drawing of a great artist is not an obvious matter. Drawing is generally considered a minor type of art; it may look quite poor in comparison to a painting. But it may outdo a painting in its capacity for evocation, even more so if it is a simple sketch rather than an elaborate artwork. At the outset of abstract art, many painters (one example: Paul Klee) declared that art should not reproduce reality, but just evoke it. According to them a work of art should be a sort of trigger eliciting in the viewer a personal image based on his/her own experiences, phantasies, recollections.

In the Odyssey, Odysseus evokes the ghosts of the dead and the phantoms appear, swarming out from an ocean of darkness:

*...brides, and young men yet unwed, old men
worn out with toil,*

*and tender maidens with hearts yet new to
sorrow,*

*and many too, that had been wounded with
bronze-tipped spears,*

*men slain in fight wearing their blood-stained
armours.*

*These came thronging in crowd around the pit
from every side,*

*with wondrous cries, and I turned green with
fear.*

With Odysseus I have perhaps gone too far. Now I'll try to explain with a practical example what evocation may mean in the case of a simple drawing. Some years ago I drew a small group of people and heavily laden animals crossing a raging mountain torrent in Ladakh. The landscape in the background is suggested by a thin serrated line. This simple line may be sufficient for evoking in your mind a typical mountain landscape: jagged peaks and the deeply cut valley.

For my landscape drawings I generally use a thin-pointed roller ball pen (Pilot G-tech C4) with brown ink, but also fountain pens with black ink, several types of pencils (black, brown, other colours) and often also watercolours. But I feel at ease with lines more than with colours. I prefer rapid sketches to detailed drawings. It is not because of lack of time: if a time span sufficient for a detailed and accurate drawing was granted to me, I would prefer to use it for many, many rapid sketches.

Generally I tend to draw nearly every day, everywhere. I always keep a notebook in my pocket with strong yellowish paper. Drawing needs constant exercise, much like playing an instrument. If I have not drawn for a while my

hand becomes clumsy and my eyes lose some of their capacity of looking and observing. But there are also comparatively long periods when I do not draw at all. However, when visiting an art exhibition during such a period, I am instantly captured by the desire to start drawing again - at once... So I take out my pocketbook and begin to sketch something that is on display in the exhibition...

My favourite subjects:

- mountains, wooded slopes, glaciers, a landslide with large rocks that have tumbled down long ago...
- a flat landscape with some small vertical element marking a far away horizon (e.g. the two bell towers of the Chartres cathedral) and a very large sky with clouds above...
- micro environments, such as a partly rotten tree stump that has been colonized by some plants (mosses, a tuft of grass, a strawberry sending around long runners. ...) or the animal world represented by a snail and three ants...

Generally, I prefer natural landscapes, but I also love drawing the heavily built-up and industrialized countryside of the Po plain between Milan and Venice. A crane or a water reservoir emerging behind a line of poplars may be an interesting background while a good foreground is provided by tall weeds like mullein or by long arched blackberry branches or by the common Ailanthus (tree of heaven) that looks like a small palm tree when young. These plants are very common along railroad tracks. It is indeed from the train that I look at this heavily anthropized landscape during my frequent trips from Milan to Trieste



I love drawing from the train. This special type of drawing partly involves your eyes and partly your short-term memory. Indeed, there is very little time left before the object you are drawing vanishes before your eyes; so your hand must be quick in fixing its main outlines and your mind must be able to remember some details that you are still able to draw once your subject has disappeared. Such an ultra rapid, barely outlined, sketch may acquire a nearly abstract character.

Another step away from immediate perception is drawing entirely from memory (long-term memory in this case). Many artists and travellers used to draw and paint that way. I remember my beloved Corot who painted from memory when he was too old to wander around as he had done during most of his life. One of his most beautiful pictures is entitled *Souvenir de Mortefontaine*.



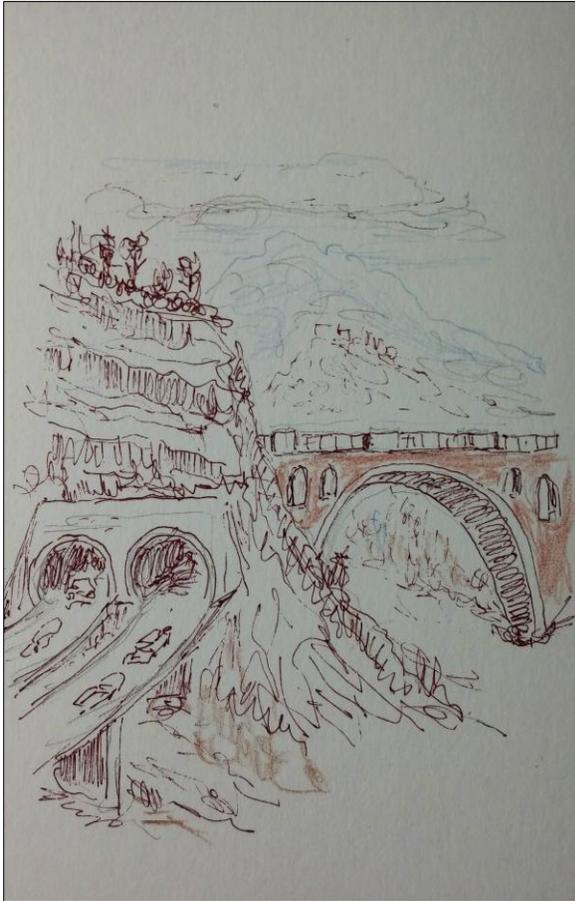
In this case too, hand, mind and eyes are all engaged together. But the eye does not need to wander to and fro from the landscape to the paper; it has only to control what the hand is doing. As a result, the movement of the hand is more fluid and the brush strokes are more relaxed.

During my travels by train (less so by car) I have sketched a sort of reservoir of basic objects I can use when drawing from memory: different trees, a bridge, a quarry, an electricity pylon, a farmhouse, a bell tower, a wooded hill, a road, a smokestack, a small island in a river, a field with regular furrows, a hedge.... These simple elements (some horizontal, some vertical, some neither) can be composed in many different ways. According to the degree of detail, the drawing may have an abstract or a more figurative character...

...but here I am sliding into another argument: putting fantasy in your drawing (why not a dinosaur walking on this road instead of a truck?) However, I don't want to dwell on this fascinating argument because it would lead me too far away from my original subject...

I end with a quotation of Tullio Pericoli (rather clumsily translated from Italian). Tullio Pericoli is an Italian artist who has represented in many different ways the hilly landscape of the Marche, his native region.

When painting or drawing I ignore not only my arm and my hand [...] but also the tool I am holding in my hand. All that happens is between myself and the extreme tip of the paintbrush or of the pencil that is tracing that definite line.



Funny! I had written here almost the very same words, before knowing that Tullio Pericoli had already used them in an interview with Domenico Rosa (Tullio Pericoli "Pensieri della mano", Adelphi 2014) This concordance of ideas with the famous artist fills me with joy.

Still another quotation from Pericoli (same book). The interviewer says: We take it for granted that the drawing exists "by itself". Pericoli answers:

No, it does not exist, there is no line that contours and defines things in nature. I think that the invention of the line has been one of the most upsetting for humanity. Outlining on a wall the profile of an animal is a vertiginous mental jump.

As someone who is passionate about lines, I fully agree.

And finally let us consider the main topic of this journal: sustainability. Drawing, if practiced by many people, can make a considerable contribution to this cause. There are two possible effects of this activity: on our interior world and on the world outside.

In the first case, consider some aspects of drawing I mentioned before:

- concentration and coordination (eye, brain, hand)
- ... but also relaxation
- becoming aware of details never noticed before

- becoming more sensitive to beauty and experiencing sorrow when seeing it spoilt

All of these characteristics induce a person to attribute less importance to possession, wealth, money...

As for the material aspect, drawing does not require spending much money. At one extreme, the limit of simplicity may be drawing on the back of a used sheet of paper with the stump of a pencil. But even if you are using Winsor & Newton watercolours, the finest sable brushes and the best paper, this is still but a trifle if compared to other much more expensive hobbies. And the energy and matter required to produce these items are just as trifling. And also what remains - worn-out brushes, pencil stumps, empty containers of colours ... that you throw into the garbage bin.

Compare this with photography, a hobby that is in some ways similar to drawing. Imagine an average tourist walking in a beautiful area (it could be Venice or somewhere in the Dolomites....) One step - click!, another step - click!..., barely stopping when taking a picture. Like eating a refined dish in a few greedy bites instead of savouring it slowly.

This means wasting a landscape. Its material counterpart could be soil consumption by urbanisation.

And now imagine that our photographer-tourist has just bought a higher performing camera than the one s/he owned before. His new purchase makes him happy. But after a year or two, when the new model appears (more megapixels, a wider range of functions) s/he is no longer satisfied with the camera that was perfect until yesterday. The result is a gnawing desire for the new object and discontentment with the present one.

I think these feelings are less present in drawing (I don't say they are absent, only not so strong). You don't need to crave for the most up-to-date equipment. The technology (of pencils, colours, chinks, brushes, papers...) does not advance as quickly as in photography. So, if you are drawing during a trip instead of photographing, you have made a small step towards interior freedom:

One who abandons all desires and becomes free from longing and the feeling of "I" and "my" attains peace. (Bhagavad Gita 2:71)