

**E. H. Gombrich, (with Jill Tilden) *Viollet le-Duc's 'Histoire d'un dessinateur', Discovering Child Art (ed. Jonathan Fineberg), Princeton, 1998, pp.56-69 [Trapp no.1995 G(ENG).1]***

In their important study *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz have collected many anecdotes about the drawings made by children who later became famous masters.[1] We are not told, however, what the sheep looked like that Giotto is supposed to have drawn on a stone as a shepherd boy, though it is implied that it must have been very lifelike to attract the attention of Cimabue, who took the boy into his workshop to teach him.

Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's *Histoires d'un dessinateur* of 1879 fills that lacuna.[2] This didactic novelette written and richly illustrated by the great architect toward the end of his life describes a similar discovery which determines the subsequent life and career of Jean Loupeau, a gifted country lad whose growth into a designer of promise is told on 302 lively pages.

We are first introduced to M. Mellinot, a university professor with painfully conventional attitudes on art and education, and his equally unimaginative son André, who serves throughout the book as a foil to his *frère de lait* Jean, the gardener's boy. The key episode is the encounter between M. Majorin, a well-to-do manufacturer with an independent mind who has a passion for science, nature and art, and eleven-year-old Jean, or rather a drawing Jean has made of his cat as it played around the porch of his house. André, with his academic arrogance, is immediately moved to criticize the flaws in the drawing. The charm of the ensuing dialogue warrants a full quotation:

"That's not how you do it," André was saying.

"But I saw it!" protested Jean, abandoning his role of pupil and turning rebel. Since André clearly could not convince Jean he turned to his father.

"Papa! You don't draw a cat like that, do you?"



Fig. 1. — Dessin de petit Jean.

"Let's have a look" And André handed M. Mellinot a crumpled scrap of paper containing this sketch [shown in fig.25].

"If it's a cat all then it's a two-legged cat. And what's that growing out of its head?"

"That's its tail," ventured Jean shyly.

At this M. Majorin suddenly took notice.

"Ha! May I see?"

He directed so searching a gaze at both the cat and little Jean that the latter began to blush and hang his head, suddenly feeling he had no idea what to do with his hands.

"How old are you?" demanded Majorin.

"Eleven at All Hallows, sir!"

"Do you go to school?"

"Yes, sir, when papa doesn't take me with him to weed the gentlemen's gardens."

"Do they teach drawing at your school?"

"No, sir. Well only sometimes, circles and squares, not very often."

"And do you enjoy doing circles and squares?"

"Not much."

"You like drawing cats better."

"Yes sir."

"Where did you draw this one?"

"By our front door where I was sitting."

"And what was the cat doing?"

"Just going around looking for something."

"And did you ask him to stand still so you could draw him?"

"Oh no sir! He wouldn't have wanted to."

"Well then, how did you manage to draw him?"

"Just by looking... He was coming up to me so nicely, as if he wanted me to feed him – I was just having my tea – and he looked really so funny – just like a real person. I was very careful not to laugh though because cats hate to be laughed at. So I was just looking at him and he was looking at me as well and then I found a bit of paper in my pocket and the pencil André gave me, but when the cat noticed them he went off. Anyway I could still remember how funny he looked and I did this picture."

"But surely you know that cats have four legs."

Jean made no reply to this.

"Why did you give him two?"

"Oh gosh, sir, I just didn't notice,...I just didn't see the others."

"Come and give me a hug!"

If Jean was taken aback by this abrupt conclusion, M. and Mme Mellinot were utterly astonished.

"May I keep your cat?" asked Majorin.

"Oh yes sir! I'll do lots of others."

M. Majorin was visibly moved. The walk was resumed and the children ran off to play in the woods.

"If only I had a child like that", Majorin said finally, speaking almost to himself.

"Are you saying that because he drew a two-legged cat with a plumed head?" asked Mellinot.

"No. It's because he's a born observer, and with that quality – faculty if you like – you can go far and avoid a multitude of pitfalls."

"I just can't see – I must admit – how drawing a two-legged cat..."

"Exactly. You don't see. Or rather like so many people you've never seen.. except through the eyes of other people who've never been able to see either. You see a cat is a four-legged feline

with a tail, whiskers and two ears that stick up and flick about. If one of these items is missing you're not prepared to admit that what you see is a cat at all. Jean isn't bothered by any of that because he's never seen 101 dreadful pictures of supposedly complete cats. He sees that cat in a certain position, thinks it looks interesting and simply notes down the main outlines needed to convey the position he sees. From where he's sitting the cat's head obscures its back and due to this foreshortening the tail appears on the same plane. He doesn't notice the hind legs, which are more or less completely hidden by the front legs, anymore than he notices its belly or its sides. His eye managed to take in the shape of the cat and its general outline in a few seconds, and once his mind had grasped this information his hand did its best, though clumsily, to get it down on paper."[3]

Thus, after a few peremptory questions, M. Majorin makes a sudden and uncompromising proposal to Jean's father. For a trial period he will both tutor and support Jean, and if he continues to show the qualities displayed in the drawing, this arrangement will continue until Jean's education is complete.

After some natural hesitation on the part of Jean's father, received rather impatiently, it must be said, by a man in many ways so enlightened as Majorin, and not without the shedding of many tears by his loving mother, Jean embarks on his new life with Majorin.

The book then follows his pilgrimage through geometry, trigonometry, botany, anatomy, zoology, perspective, etc. Much of this is an admirably clear account of these disciplines and their practical application, substantially illustrated with careful and detailed diagrams and drawings, such as the one in which we see little Jean tracing the contour lines of a sandheap while M. Majorin sternly watches him, measuring rod in hand (fig 26).



26 "Practice lesson," from Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'un dessinateur* (Paris, 1879)

We learn that Jean was required from the start to keep his own sketch and notebooks, and in the event of their being spoiled or lost, to recopy everything from the start. Indeed the discipline imposed on the boy is certainly no less strict than that demanded by the orthodox academic curriculum.

M. Majorin, whom little Jean is asked to address as *bon ami*, is altogether rather a martinet most unwilling to indulge his ward. But the author does not entirely forget that he is telling the story of a

child with its own emotional needs. Asked to forego a pleasant walk and visit to his family for the sake of practicing his drawing skills, the boy is directed to a corner of the garden where he falls in love with the young shoots he decides to study.

“Well, asks the tutor on his return, you have drawn in the garden all day... are you pleased with what you have done?”

“Oh, not too much, *bon ami*, it is rather hard.. and then I had to lie down to see all the plants from close by...you will tell me their names, won't you?”

“Yes, certainly, have you examined them carefully?”

“yes, very much, the tiny ones among the dead leaves which tried so hard to push, I freed the very gently of those that were in the way.”

“And they thanked you?”

Little Jean blushed a little and did not reply. He did not dare to reveal the experience of that morning even to his friend, it would have seemed a profanation. M. Majorin though he understood, did not insist further and asked to see the sketches. It was all rather imperfect, but it contained good observations passably rendered, an effort at analysis which did not escape the master. The child had evidently looked with the desire to realize what he saw and to understand it.”[4]

Thus even this romantic little episode rapidly returns to the theme of the book, the need to acquire the faculty of observation. As Majorin had explained to his sceptical friend: “I do not want to turn little Jean into an artist, if he has the gift he will become one. I only aim at teaching him how to see correctly, to realise what he sees and to bring him to a point where his observation will serve him in good stead in whatever career he will embark one.”[5]

Was, then, the observant little boy who drew the two-legged cat still not quite able to see? We have seen that Viollet-le-Duc's answer to this rhetorical question would have been “certainly not”. Little Jean saw slightly more than most children do, but he still had to undergo a long and laborious apprenticeship till he could fully use his eyes.

No nineteenth-century critic has stated the theory underlying this approach with more force than John Ruskin in an early chapter of *Modern Painters* entitled “That the truth of nature is not to be discerned by the uneducated sense”. Ruskin deals at some length with the “influence of the imagination over the senses” which is “peculiarly observable in the perpetual disposition of mankind to suppose that they see what they know and vice versa, in their not seeing what they do not know.” It is in this context that Ruskin presents an early version of that theory of children's drawings which remained dominant well into our century:

Thus, if a child be asked to draw the corner of a house, he will lay down something in the form of the letter T. He has no conception that the two lines of roof, which he knows to be level, produce on this eye the impression of a slope. It requires repeated and close attention before he detects this fact, or can be made to feel that the lines on his paper are false.[6]

Naturally, we need not assume that Viollet-le-Duc derived his conviction from Ruskin. In fact, both the form and the content of his didactic novel appear to be modelled on one of the great classics of educational literature, Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). It is in *Emile* that we read of the care taken by the boy's tutor to teach him to see (or rather to observe) by making him draw:

Since sight is, of all the senses, the one from which the mind's judgements can least be separated, much time is needed to learn how to see...Children, who are great imitators, all try to draw. I would

want my child to cultivate this art, not precisely for the art itself but for making his eye exact and the hand flexible... I will, therefore, carefully avoid giving him a drawing master who would give him only imitations to imitate and would make him draw only from drawings.[7]

An aversion, incidentally, fully shared by M. Majorin. Like Jean, Emile is "to have no other master than nature and no other model than real objects." He should not even be asked to draw "from memory..for fear [of]..substituting bizarre and fantastic shapes for the truth of things." [8]

Not surprisingly, Rousseau reveals himself not only as the better writer but also as the more inspired educator than Viollet-le-Duc. Reading him we become aware of an element that is utterly missing in the *Histoire*: a sense of humour and playfulness. I am thinking of the delightful episode in *Emilie* in which the tutor deliberately lowers himself to the level of the child – something of which M. Majorin seems utterly incapable. Wanting to wean Emile of the childlike style he adopts it himself:

I will begin by sketching a man as lackeys sketch them on walls: a line for each arm, a line for each leg, and the fingers thicker than the arm. Quite awhile later one or the other of us will notice this disproportion. We will observe that a leg has thickness, that this thickness is not the same all over, that the arm has its length determined by relation to the body, etc.[9]

To add zest to the game the tutor arranges a competition with the boy in which the worst drawing is awarded the most sumptuous frame while the best only stands in need of an austere black surround. This spirit eluded the great French architect, but whether he remembered it or not, he had taken his cue from Rousseau, and that for good biographical reasons.

Like Rousseau, Viollet-le-Duc was a determined nonconformist all his life.[10] Born in 1814 into a highly intellectual milieu he refused at the age of eighteen to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and opposition to academic art teaching was to form a constant theme throughout his life. With that colossal energy that marks the giants of nineteenth-century culture he found time, apart from his incessant activities as an architect and restorer, an archaeologist and author, to turn his attention to the weaknesses of artistic training as he saw it. Having published a series of articles on the subject in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* of 1862, he was appointed in the following year to the Chair of Art History and Aesthetics in the course of the reorganisation of the art schools, but he was soon compelled to resign by student riots allegedly fomented by Ingres and his followers. In a number of spirited articles that still make good reading [11] he castigated the traditional methods of drawing from plaster casts and posed models and explained the convictions, which he later exemplified in the *Histoire d'un dessinateur*.

There is only one method: to develop the student's faculty of observation, to open his understanding to the ever changing spectacle of nature, to analyze the appearance it presents..to see to it that by practice drawing becomes a constant means of translating one's thoughts or impressions, just as the words or the pen become it for the orator or for the man of letters.[12]

In the course of these polemics he accused the establishment of ignoring the teachings of the great outsider Lecoq de Boisbaudron who advocated the systematic training of the memory by work in the open air.[13] That partisanship is significant, for it is in the writings of that zealous reformer that we find another telling precedent for the approach to children's drawings to be found in Viollet-le-Duc's book:

Almost all children, long before they begin really to draw, make what they call pictures of people. These are mostly confused scribbles, to which no one attaches any importance: Leonardo da Vinci, however, with his wide perception and his great good sense, did not think the subject unworthy of his attention. He made a great distinction between the gifts of the child that always draws the same profiles and one that also draws figures full face and three-quarter, for this shows much more observation.[14]

Maybe it was the alleged authority of Leonardo that emboldened Viollet-le-Duc to begin his didactic novel as he did, though strangely enough Lecoq de Boisbaudron appears to have made up this story. Maybe the champion of memorizing misremembered a passage from da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting* that says something similar but does not mention the drawing of children:

A painter must make every effort to achieve universality for if he can only do one thing well he will never attain a high reputation. There are some for instance who apply themselves to draw well from the nude but they do it always with the same proportions without ever introducing variations while it happens that one man is well proportioned, another fat and short and so on.[15]

It is worth remarking here that Leonardo was also M. Majorin's hero and model: "Leonardo da Vinci" – he explains to Jean at a later stage of his training – "whom I consider the greatest artist of the sixteenth century, completely gives the life to all those who claim that art and science are incompatible.. maybe the main fault of our artist today, despite their undeniable qualities, rests in their not asking that support from science that it can render to art"[16]

Whether or not it was this reference Viollet-le-Duc may have found in Lecoq de Boisbaudron that gave him the idea for the initial episode of his story, its main message must be seen in a different light. Ever since his failure at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts he looked for an alternative method of convincing the French public. Already in February 1864 he had written to Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve who had championed his views, "Let us work for the young, the truly young youth, let us live with them and for them, that is the best method of never aging...We have only achieved half of the way...We must arrive at an absolute freedom for all that concerns art."[17]

He was convinced as he wrote in a letter of 1874, that there was nothing to be gained by addressing the older generation and so we find him negotiating with the publisher Hetzel in 1874 for a series of books that would compel the young to think.[18] He wished these books to be cheap and accessible to artisans who could buy them for their children, for, as he put it, "it is among the so-called lower classes that one can still find the elements to combat prejudice and routine."[19]

The first fruit of this collaboration was *Histoire d'un mason*. [20] Here the subject is the apprenticeship of a young man – somewhat older than Jean – who is drawn into the project of building a house for his newly married sister by a visiting architect who has no time for the academic curriculum and patiently initiates his pupil into the actual practice of building. The contrast between honest craftsman and pretentious architects would have pleased Adolf Loos, as would the fictional architect's maxim "I believe that art – at any rate architecture – consists in being truthful and simple" Some comic relief is accordingly offered by a snobbish acquaintance who constantly parades his useless knowledge of the history and the terminology of architecture. Set in an idyllic corner of France but against the somber background of the Franco-Prussian war, the book contains a few more elements of human interest than the later work and can almost be read as a novel in its own right.

There is nothing idyllic in the next of these books, *Histoire d'une forteresse*,[21] it may rather be described as a historical epic graphically recounting the vicissitudes of a particular fortified place, which in the course of the centuries had experienced six sieges and had recently succumbed to the advancing Prussian armies, a tragedy that gives the author the opportunity of deploring the decline of the military spirit among his countrymen and appealing for its renewal for the sake of France. He followed it with a companion piece, *Histoire d'un hotel de ville et d'une cathédrale*, which is no less imbued with patriotic fervor and celebrates the spirit of independence that marked the history of French cities in a variety of vivid episodes.[22] Yet another weighty volume was devoted to the *Histoire de l'habitation humaine*, in which we follow two contrasting observers on their magic journey through many periods and places, including ancient China and India, so as to absorb the lesson that the classical style of building is but one of many possibilities and should not be forced on nations and races for whom it is not suitable.[23] Miraculously these long and ambitious books did not take up all the author's time; he also published a geological account of the Mont Blanc massif and a book on Russian art in these years, [24] but in the end he returned to the question of art education in *Histoire d'un dessinateur*, the last he completed before he died at Lausanne in September 1879.

In the figure of M. Majorin, the tough-minded industrialist, he embodied for a last time his twin ideals of hard work and intelligence. But many of the other themes and preoccupations that marked the earlier volumes are again aired in that book. The cosmopolitan outlook manifests itself in a few remarkable pages on the excellence of Japanese drawings. Like nature itself the Japanese artist creates poetry without even knowing it, because he has acquired the gift of seizing the essential (fig 27).

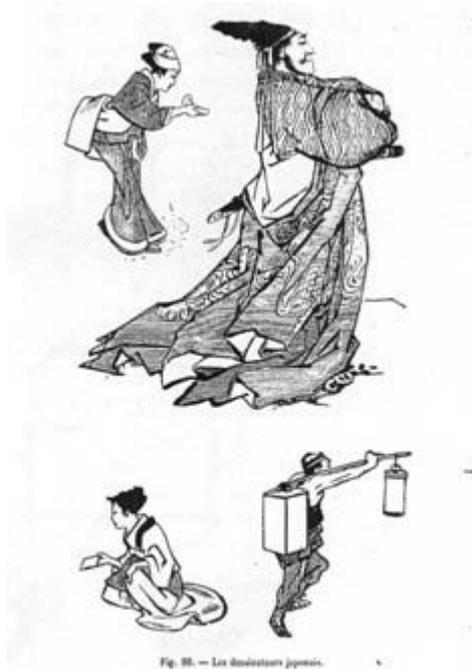


Fig. 27. — Les architectes japonais.

27 "The Japanese draftsman," from Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'un dessinateur* (Paris, 1879)

We are also treated to a visit to the Alps with plenty of geological digressions that would have appealed to Ruskin. But most surprising, perhaps, at least to those of us who have always considered Viollet-le-Duc an uncompromising champion of the Gothic style, is the chapter in which M. Majorin seeks to decide where his pupil's gifts really lie. Possibly to disabuse his readers of their prejudice we are treated to a glorification of the arts of Pompeii (fig 28).

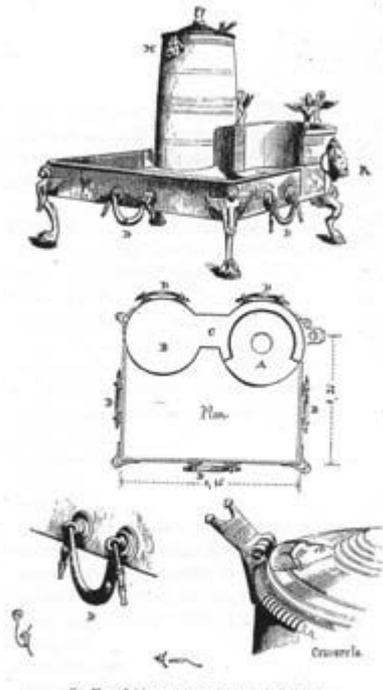


Fig. 85. — Cuisine portative antique, musée de Naples.

28 "Antique portable kitchen," from Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'un dessinateur* (Paris, 1879)

What Jean is to learn there most of all is the extent to which people have formed a mistaken idea of the ancients ever since the Renaissance. The people of Pompeii followed no rules but those demanded by common sense and practice. Their houses and their utensils are adapted to their needs. Maybe the elegant Romans looked down on Pompeii as provincial, but how superior are their interiors to those of the French *petite-bourgeoisie*! Which offers the author another opportunity to inveigh against the academics, whom he blames for the fatal divorce between "high art" and "applied art", a divorce largely due to Louis XIV, "that great King who did so much harm to our country from which we still have to pay." [25] It was this divorce that led to the lower classes being engulfed in barbarism, a barbarism unknown to the Middle Ages, and it is to the reform of this deplorable state of affairs that Jean will contribute in becoming a designer rather than an artist. The battle against academic prejudice had still to be won, but in the end our hero dreams of organising a school of design serving the industries of Paris whose decline would be a calamity for the country.

Everybody is thus happy...because little Jean had the imagination to draw a cat. This is only part of the moral to be drawn from this truthful story. The other is this: Drawing, taught as it ought to be taught .....is the best means of developing the intelligence and training and judgement, for in this way one learns to see and to see is to know (*voir c'est savoir*). [26]

*Histoire d'un dessinateur* may well be the first publication in which the drawing of a child is reproduced (or reconstructed) without any patronizing or humorous intention. It was not before the next decade that the literature on children's drawings developed in earnest. [27]

Admittedly what the French architect looked for as evidence of talent was not what attracted later students to that topic. He was not concerned with the innocent eye of the child, let alone with its creativity, only with its power of intelligent observation. But few would deny today that this aspect also merits our attention.

The author would like to thank Jill Tilden who greatly helped me in the writing of this essay, though she modestly disclaims the designation of co-author.

[1] Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979)

[2] Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'un dessinateur, comment on apprend à dessiner* (Paris: Hetzel, 1879) reprinted as *Learning to draw, or the story of a young designer*, trans V. Champlin (New York, 1881)

[3] *Ibid.*, 5-8

[4] *Ibid.*, 105

[5] *Ibid.*, 67

[6] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, part II (London 1846) section 1, ch 1

[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emilie or an Education* (1762), Allan Bloom, trans (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 143-44

[8] *Ibid.*, 144

[9] *Ibid.*, 144-45

[10] Two exhibition catalogues offer the best access to the life and work of the architect: Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, 1814-1879, with a preface by Max Querrieu (Paris: Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques, 1969) and Viollet-le-Duc, eds. Bruno Foucard et al., *Galleries Nationales du Grand Palais*, 19 Feb-5 May 1980 (Paris Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication).

[11] *Intervention de l'Etat dans l'enseignement des Beaux-Arts* (Paris A. Morel, 1864); *Réponse à M. Vitet, à propos de l'enseignement des arts du dessin* (Paris A. Morel, 1864) is a response to Vitet's article: "De l'Enseignement des arts du dessin", in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1 Nov 1864)

[12] *Réponse à M. Vitet*, 41

[13] Lecoq de Boisbaudron, *L'éducation de la mémoire pittoresque*, 1847, 1867; *Un coup d'oeil sur l'enseignement des Beaux Arts*, 1872, 1879; *Lettres à un jeune professeur*, 1877. All three works are published in English translation as *The Training of the Memory in Art and the Education of the Artist*, trans L.D. Luard (London 1911). For reasons no longer obvious, Viollet-le-Duc does not mention Lecoq de Boisbaudron by name but merely praises his efforts.

[14] Lecoq de Boisbaudron, *Training of the Memory*, 149

[15] Leonardo da Vinci, *Traité de la Peinture* (Paris 1716) ch XXI

[16] Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'un dessinateur*, 208

[17] *Lettres inédites de Viollet-le-Duc*, Recueillies et annotées par son fils (Paris 1907) 44-45

[18] *Ibid.*, xii

[19] *Ibid.*, 150

[20] Eugène Viollet-le-Duc *d'une maison* (Paris: Hetzel, 1873) reprinted as *The Story of the House* trans G-M Towle (Boston 1874)

[21] Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'une forteresse* (Paris: Hetzel 1874) reprinted as *Annals of a Fortress* (London : S Low, Murston, Low, Searle, 1875)

[22] Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'un hotel de ville et d'une cathédrale* (Paris: Hetzel, 1878); reprint, facsimile ed (Paris Beger-Larault, 1978)

[23] Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire de l'habitation humaine depuis les temps préhistoriques jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Hetzel 1875) reprinted as *The Habitations of Man in All Ages*, trans B. Bucknall (London 1876) reprint facsimile ed (Paris: Berger-Levrault 1978)

[24] Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Le Massif du Mont Blanc, étude sur sa construction géodésique et géologique, sur ses transformations et sur l'état ancien et moderne de ses glaciers* (Paris: Baudry, 1876) reprinted as *Mont Blanc : A Treatise on its Geodesical and Geological Construction, its Transformations*, trans B. Bucknall (London 1877) *L'Art russe, ses origines, ses éléments constitutifs, son apogée, son avenir* (Paris: A. Mroel, 1877)

[25] Viollet-le-Duc, *Histoire d'un dessinateur* 245

[26] *Ibid.*, 302

[27] George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, vol 29 (London 1966)  
79,88