

## The fallibility of memory: a natural experiment

*Red roofs in Paris in the rain — I can “see” them clearly*

Much has been written about false memories — memories that are a distortion of an actual experience, or a confabulation of an imagined one. Memory and its reliability or otherwise have profound implications for us all, not only in our daily lives, but clinically and medicolegally. How often does a medical negligence or misconduct allegation boil down to “he said, she said” evidence? And we have all experienced the mismatch of memories of events shared in the distant past by more than one person. This personal anecdote records the same event as recalled by two people. Quite fortuitously in this instance, objective contemporaneous evidence settled the disagreement.

Being a borderline student in Chemistry I, my poor performance in the practical examination was enough to secure a fail mark and a repeat of first-year medicine. During my rerun of Chemistry, I consistently failed to identify the colours of certain metals when held in the Bunsen flame. The Ishihara chart confirmed partial red–green colour blindness.

Four years later, in 1959, I bumped into a medical school colleague in Paris, and we visited an art gallery together. Throughout the ensuing 45 years, my memory has been that the gallery was the Louvre. I have a clear memory of our standing before an impressionist painting by Manet, with mainly blue to purple hues, of Paris in the rain. My companion commented how wonderfully the red roofs contrasted with the overall bluish colours. I asked, “What red roofs?”. I could not see them until she pointed them out, and was intensely disappointed by this aesthetic consequence of my red–green handicap. That night I recorded the unhappy event in my diary. I have since visited perhaps no more than two or three art galleries, and then only as a reluctant companion to my wife.

Fast forward to 2002. By chance, I re-established communication with my student colleague, now a psychiatrist in England. I commented how she had been someone I had always remembered, in large measure because of our joint experience at the Louvre. She replied that our gallery visit had made its mark on her, too. In subsequent decades of lecturing, she had taken care, when preparing slides, overheads and PowerPoint presentations, to avoid colours that might be confusing to men like me. However, the painting had not been in the Louvre, she said, but at a museum of impressionist art near the Place de la Concorde. Furthermore, the red I had not been able to see in the painting was not Parisian roofs in the rain, but the red heads of birds!

Quite fortuitously, at the time of this correspondence, I was transcribing my 1959 European travel diary into typescript. I quickly checked my entry for the day at the art gallery. Yes, my colleague was right: it was a museum at the Place de la Concorde, not the Louvre. (The museum was, in fact, the Musée du Jeu de Paume at the Place de la Concorde, which housed the collection of

Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles



Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles (oil on canvas — Musée d'Orsay, Paris; photo RMN © Gérard Blot) — one of three versions of the same painting, and most likely the one I saw. This one, painted while Van Gogh was voluntarily confined to a mental asylum in Saint-Rémy, includes a self-portrait as one of the paintings above the bed. In a letter to his brother, Théo, Vincent wrote "... it's just simply my bedroom, only here colour is to do everything ..."

impressionist paintings of the Louvre before they were relocated to the Musée d'Orsay in 1986.) But the painting in question? No red roofs in a rainy Paris. No birds with red heads. It was the famous Van Gogh painting of his bedroom in Arles, with the large, red coverlet on his bed!

I had been familiar with Van Gogh's bedroom painting for many years before going to Europe. But my memory, over nearly five decades, remains of rainy red roofs. No matter that I have searched the catalogues of the Impressionists and have not found such a painting. No matter that I now *know* that the painting with the invisible reds was the Van Gogh pictured here, my memory remains undiminished — red roofs in the rain! I still “see” them clearly. As for my colleague, despite my presenting her with the contemporaneous evidence of my diary, she, in turn, “knows” that the picture was of birds with red heads!

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