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The Role of the Five Senses in Cultural Transmission

In his *De Anima* Aristotle associated senses with objects rather than with the perceiver of the sensation.¹ Similarly, even today, works of art are usually described in terms of the visual characteristics that strike the viewer, as if the sense of sight originates in the object. But there is a difference between seeing and observing, for observation involves an active engagement with what is seen. The sensory impact has to enter the brain as well as the eye in order to gain emotional affect.

The experience of viewing a work of art depends on the overall sensory landscape of the surroundings. An altarpiece viewed in a cool, dimly lit church, in which the setting is enhanced by flickering candles, the ritual movements of devotees, the smell of incense and the sound of a priest's chant, makes a deeper impact on the viewer than the same work would do in a bustling, noisy, crowded, stuffy art gallery. The richer sensory stimulation transforms the way the viewer perceives the image because the five senses work together rather than separately. In the case of a work designed for the specific location, the context is not often enough considered by scholars as an integral property of the work itself.

An infant uses all five senses to discover the world round about: looking, licking, touching, smelling, and listening. Gradually, through education, the child then learns to describe objects, people and places through text and image – the media through which travellers commit to posterity their memories of strange lands.

All the same, it is important to remember that the five senses are not recalled or transmitted in the same way. Memories of smells, tastes, and tactile qualities can be described in words, but they are harder to recreate in the mind than sights and sounds. By closing the eyes and concentrating on a recollection, a returning traveller can see in the mind's eye a remembered place or thing, or replay a tune silently through mental effort. On the other hand, although one can easily recognise a familiar taste or smell, it is almost impossible to recreate these in the imagination in the absence of the source. Yet scents and odours are some of the most potent triggers of memory, as if they penetrate more deeply into the cognitive experience.

1 R. Sorabji, "Aristotle on Demarcating the Five Senses", *The Philosophical Review*, 1971, 80, no. 1, pp. 55–79.

In the early modern period, returning pilgrims communicated to friends and family the direct experience of far-away holy sites. During transmission, however, the processing of information became entwined with the content of biblical narratives. Before the journey, the believer had already acquired a mental picture of the destination through sacred reading, and therefore, on arrival, viewed the place itself through a process of mental comparison with earlier expectations.

Returning home, the pilgrim could relay memories to others, but the narratives were always deformed both by the traveller's subjectivity and by the expectations of the listener. Unless the words were deliberately copied from another source, accounts differed widely in their descriptions of the same holy places. Writers of travel accounts often tried to guarantee the authenticity of their information ('as I saw with my own eyes'), but the selectivity of the author and the fallibility of memory coloured every traveller's tale.

Physical objects such as relics and souvenirs were just as likely to be inauthentic, but were less easily deformed in transit. Metrical records of the sizes of things, such as ropes with measurements of the Holy Sepulchre, helped to suggest exactitude and tactile encounter. Indeed, the five senses were more vividly evoked by transmitted things than by verbal accounts, for as every infant knows, an object has a sensual potency that goes far beyond the visual aspects of size, shape, and colour.