COMMENTS ON CLOUD STUDY NOTEBOOKS

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My paintings of the western landscape have focused on the patterns and forms in the land created by roads, cultivated fields, masses of foliage, or different geographical features. In my work I have minimized the area occupied by the sky, treating this space as a simple bright area which serves as a foil for the darker and more complex land forms. Recently it occurred to me that this focus on the land, to the exclusion of the sky, was not in keeping with one important facet of my experience of the landscape -- the sense of awesome spaciousness. This feeling of openness and vastness of space is unique to the Rocky Mountain west and is one of the most compelling reasons for my choice of landscape imagery. This feeling of space is due in large part to the huge amount of sky that occupies one's visual field when viewing the western landscape. Thus, by not including more of the sky in some paintings, I was excluding a large part of my experience of the landscape.

Upon further thought, I realized that I was not depicting the sky in my work for two reasons. The first was because I was intimidated by the sky; I could not imagine how to depict the massive, chaotic, constantly changing cloud forms. Secondly, I feared turning my sky images into hackneyed clichés of sky that have been present in less successful landscape paintings throughout the ages. At the time that I realized I had "sky-phobia", I was studying the work and working methods of the 19th century English landscape painter, John Constable. I was impressed by his cloud studies and by how he conceptualized them. At the same time, I was reading E.H. Gombrich's book, Art and Illusion, in which a recurring theme is the issue of "seeing and knowing", i.e., how our vision is influenced by knowledge. Thus, the cloud study notebooks are a result of combining Constable's approach to depicting clouds in his painted studies with Gombrich's concept of the relationship between "seeing and knowing". My notebooks became a working paradigm in which textbook knowledge of the scientific classifications of clouds (stratus, cumulus, cirrus, etc.) provided a system for me to categorize basic cloud forms, the knowing element of Gombrich's theory. This knowledge became the starting point for an empirical exploration of the infinite variations of cloud forms in the skies of northeastern Colorado, the seeing element of Gombrich's theory.

A more detailed explanation of Gombrich's ideas and Constable's approach to cloud studies will clarify the ways in which their ideas influenced the development of the notebooks. Gombrich suggests that what we see is often clearly influenced by what we know and what we know affects how we see the world. This is described by Gombrich as the "the role of judgment in the process of vision."[1] An example of seeing being influenced by knowing would be how one might look at an exhibition of Pre-Columbian art. Without any knowledge, one might walk into an exhibition and see just a "bunch of stone figures." A person with knowledge of this art and its different periods would notice many nuances and stylistic differences. Likewise, a botanist might walk in a forest and see a rich variety of trees and plants. A person ignorant of botany might walk in the same forest and see just a "bunch of trees."

My example of work with the cloud studies provides further evidence of the relationship between seeing and knowing. When I knew nothing about clouds, I looked at the sky and saw complete chaos, which I was unable to translate into a visual image. As I gained some knowledge of basic cloud forms, I looked at the skies and began to see order. Large bulbous shapes stacked in the sky are no longer another unknown cloud form; rather, I can identify those shapes as cumulus clouds. These will not be exactly like the cumulous clouds pictured in my text on clouds, but they will be similar and thus give me a starting point for investigating the individual variations possible within the class of cumulus clouds. Gombrich would describe this process as my fulfilling the need for "schemata" which allows our "minds to classify and register our experience in terms of the known". He further describes the "influence which acquired patterns or schemata have on the organization of our perception."[2] In my case, the knowledge of the "acquired patterns" of cloud forms strongly influenced my perception of them; instead of feeling that the skies were filled with unfamiliar, chaotic forms, I was able to differentiate classes of clouds and thus have a basis for approaching the visual representation of individual clouds.

Constable's cloud studies (done primarily between 1821 and 1822) fit well into Gombrich's seeing/knowing theory because Constable relied on empirical observations of clouds "en plein air" as well as on contemporary meteorological knowledge of cloud classifications. Critics are quite certain that Constable was familiar with the work of Luke Howard, a man who published his new cloud classification system (nimbus, stratus, cumulus and cirrus) between 1818 and 1820.[3] But Constable did not rely solely

on scientific classifications or the paintings of other artists to learn about clouds. Coming from a family of millers, he was accustomed to watching the weather carefully and he knew the country around his home of Stour very well because he often painted the sky and land forms outdoors.

Gombrich refers to Constable in his chapter on the seeing/knowing relationship. He compares some original cloud drawings made by Alexander Cozens with copies that Constable made of Cozens' work 15 years later. Constable made the copies to try learn about different cloud formations. Gombrich writes: "We know by now what Cozens teaches Constable. Not, indeed, what clouds look like, but a series of possibilities, of schemata, which should increase his awareness through visual classification... It matters little what filing system we adopt. But without some standards of comparison we cannot grasp reality. "[4]

Inspired by the ideas of Gombrich and the working methods of Constable, I decided to approach my cloud education from several angles. First I found an excellent reference on cloud classification, Cloud Types for Observers published by the Meteorological Office of England. I used the book to classify cloud formations that I saw in the course of outdoor observations. I also copied pictures of specific clouds into my notebook because I find that when I observe something carefully enough to draw it, I remember the form better than if I just look at it. This was the part of the process that involved knowing . The seeing component came in the form of cloud drawings based both on outdoor observations and slides taken on-site.

My exploration of cloud forms resulted in drawings and paintings recorded in four notebooks. In the fourth volume, I included some areas of land with the sky because the movement and shapes of the clouds appear to be more dynamic when seen in relation to the earth. In the course of making the notebooks, it became clear that there are several elements which define the visual characteristics of most cloud forms. These elements are listed here with a brief explanation.

Cloud Edges The edges of the clouds can be sharp and well-defined, wispy, ragged or faded.

Contrast At times, the edges of the clouds are bright white and contrast strongly with the deep blue of the sky. Often, there is little contrast between the clouds and their background. This can be due to a hazy sky, or can occur when there are other

clouds behind the first set of cloud formations. At times, the strong darks and bright lights within the clouds provide the contrast.

Light Source The location of the sun with respect to the clouds has a strong impact on the contrast and coloration of the clouds. For example, when the sun is overhead, the tops of the clouds are bright and the bottom of the cloud is dark. When the sun is behind the clouds there are edges of strong light around dark centers of clouds. The setting sun creates the most spectacular effects on the clouds: clouds lit from below glow with light on their bottom edge, and there are often amazing color changes and rays of light emanating from the cloud formations.

Relative Size Cloud formations are incredibly variable with regard to size. Sometimes it appears that there is one very large cloud form which then appears to be breaking into smaller pieces. The sky can be filled with a few or many very small clouds (usually cumulus) layered into the distance. There are often blankets of flat clouds (usually stratus and cirrus) or mixtures of variously-sized clouds.

Placement of Clouds The apparent location of the clouds in the sky can vary. At times, they are close to the horizon. Cloud formations can also be separated from the horizon by large expanses of clear sky or appear to be directly overhead.

Characteristics of the Sky The characteristics of the sky are very important to the appearance of the clouds. If the sky is hazy or gray, the contrast between clouds and sky is less. A bright blue sky filled with clouds creates an entirely different impression. At times, none of the sky is visible because the cloud layers are so thick.

General Structure of the Sky Clouds fill the sky at different angles. Clouds can appear to be at a diagonal with the earth, shooting up vertically or spreading horizontally across the sky. At one site near Walden, large cumulus clouds appeared to be bubbling over the top of the mountain and moving vertically into the sky.

Cloud Movement Clouds move in different directions and at different speeds, depending on the wind. Clouds pull apart and re-form. It is very interesting to watch cloud formations for an extended period of time as their position in the sky changes and as they change within themselves.

Mood The sky seems to have a mood which is dependent on cloud types, weather, time of day and time of year. The mood of the sky can be turbulent, angry, energetic, calm, ebullient or threatening.

In summary, the knowledge that I acquired about cloud classifications has enabled me to see the skies with a new understanding of the forms and allowed me to translate what I see into visual images with paint and drawing materials. I now have the insight to include clouds in a painting when it is important to my vision and experience of a place. I believe that one can avoid the cliché of clouds in art by looking carefully at the skies and responding honestly to what is seen.[5] This approach to cloud studies -- a combination of looking carefully at cloud forms and learning about cloud types -- has heightened my understanding of cloud forms and my ability to utilize them in landscape painting.

1. Gombrich, E.H. Art and Illusion, Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 15.
2. Gombrich, p. 168.
3. Novak, Barbara. Nature and Culture, American Landscape Painting 1825 - 1875, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 80, 81.
4. Gombrich, p. 178.
5. I discovered that the process of trying "to respond to what is seen" does not mean that one must slavishly copy exactly what is in the sky. This is, in fact, impossible (unless one works from a photographic image) because cloud forms are so vast , very detailed and change quickly. Rather one can record the general shapes, value structure, light, movement and forms in the sky. When this is done without artifice, it is possible to capture the feeling and mood of the sky without resorting to clichéed models of skies or to a literal reproduction of what is seen.