Book review


The immediate merit of this immaculately produced volume lies in its appeal to the worlds of science and of creative art. Trevor-Roper introduces the subject by tracing the evolution of the visual senses and stressing the major importance of the eye in the sensory hierarchy. This applies not only to the interpretation of environment but also to the expression of personality through a picture or a written word. It is this intermediary role of vision, whether transferring that which is seen to the mind, or the mental image to paper, that is considered in this book. A variety of eye defects is considered, including myopia, hypermetropia, presbyopia, astigmatism, colour blindness, cataract, squint, and glaucoma. Indirect cerebral effects, such as thrombosis, tumours, and schizophrenia, as well as the effects of hallucinatory drugs, are added for completeness; this adds considerably to the value of the book, but it is a pity that the title does not hint at their inclusion. Indeed, the whole gamut from normal vision to total blindness (as well as the complications of making the return voyage) are dealt with most thoroughly. Of necessity, perhaps, this gives an impression of slight imbalance, as the relative importance of these aspects varies considerably. However, each section is sprinkled liberally with delightful anecdotes and facts of historical or mythological interest so any unease is soon dispelled by the sheer enjoyment of reading.

The first half of the book is the most significant from the standpoint of convincing the reader that certain characteristics seen in paintings may be rationally explained in terms of defects in the eye per se. These sections are devoted to aberrations in the shape of the eye and abnormal colour vision. The contrast between the intellectual myopic child and the physical hypermetrope is fascinating, and the significance of the former condition in the impressionist school of painting is convincing. It is perhaps a little unkind, however, to hint at an analogy between the impressionists and the “lazy or immature child”!

It is very difficult in a work of this type to avoid the pitfalls of attributing every artistic deviation from the norm to some inherent defect in the eye or mind of the creator. It is commendable that, in general, the author manages to do so. He accepts, for example, that certain shapes and colours may be currently in vogue, the ideas often being distilled from other artists. The attenuation characteristic of El Greco’s paintings was probably artificially superimposed for aesthetic reasons, and not attributable to astigmatism and so on. A disadvantage of this liberal attitude is that the reader is occasionally left confused and uncertain as to the final conclusions.

The section on astigmatism provides ample material for a parlour game. The question posed is whether astigmatism in the artist will result in unnatural elongation in one plane of the picture. When drawing from life this would not occur since any aberration in the mental image will be reversed on return to canvas. It has been suggested, on the other hand, that drawing from memory would produce abnormal elongation. The obvious argument against this is that the stored “memory image” of the astigmat will already be elongated, and thus on transfer to paper will again be corrected. I am not happy about Trevor-Roper’s slender evidence suggesting the possibility of attenuation through astigmatism. He points out that if an astigmatic lens is placed before a normal eye, any attempt to draw a circle from memory will inevitably result in an oval. But this is because the memory image of the normal is indeed a circle, whereas that of the true astigmat is an oval. In the former, therefore, it is a “one-way” process with no compensatory correction. It is also possible that a similar reversal process would invalidate the theory that cataract might produce a preponderance of reddish tones.

There is an obvious but interesting section on the effects of colour blindness, particularly the resort to rather pallid, insipid colours in an attempt to mask their inadequacy. Chapter 4 discusses
squint and eye dominance. This is largely of academic interest and is I think the least interesting of the six chapters. The remainder of the book makes fascinating reading, but encompasses a variety of circumstances, cerebral or visual, which affect the personality or the creative art. The final chapter, for example contains a delightful essay relating sight and sex, in the best Freudian manner, as well as some interesting observations on the effect on the personality of a blind man who is allowed to see again. Rather irrelevant in some ways, but as with the whole book, very enjoyable.

Trevor-Roper, with commendable modesty, avoids over indulgence in his own theories, and presents an excellent critical analysis of those of others. A tremendous amount of background research has gone into this unique volume, and every section is entertainingly provocative. The standard of the illustrations is high, and the general lay-out and print appropriately clear. No basic knowledge is required before reading this book, each condition being simply explained, and thus should have a very wide appeal.

A final point. A curious fact that emerges is that in many cases the artist with defective vision is reluctant to use artificial aids to enable him to see normally. There must be a moral. As an amateur artist myself, my only complaint about this book, is that a minor visual defect of my own does not evidence itself in the same inspired manner as those numerous examples cited in the text.

Note

Faculty of Ophthalmologists

Study Tour, 1970

A party of fifteen British ophthalmic registrars began a 12-day tour of Ophthalmic Clinics in Germany and Switzerland on September 5. The programme had a particular bias towards centres specially interested in detachment surgery and culminated in attendance at a meeting of the Gonin Club.

At Düsseldorf, the first centre visited, we were given a warm welcome at the University Eye Clinic by Prof. Pau and his colleagues, who had arranged a full and diverse programme including attendance at operating sessions, visits to the outpatient clinics, and a series of lecture-demonstrations by members of the staff. Prof. Pau gave an illustrated talk on his views on the aetiology of retinal detachment, which was followed by an animated discussion. A charming evening was spent in meeting and being entertained by Prof. Pau and his family at his home.

The party then moved to Essen where we visited Prof. Meyer-Schwickerath in his beautiful new department at the University Eye Clinic. The resources and imagination poured into the building are most impressive, the whole creation being enhanced by an elaborate display of modern paintings and prints.

A full programme of discussions, operating sessions, and demonstrations had been arranged and this was combined with a full social programme, including a visit to see the impressionist paintings at the Museum Folkwang and most generous hospitality from Prof. Meyer-Schwickerath.

After two busy days in Essen, the scene changed to Zürich, where Prof. Witmer and his colleagues had arranged an equally full timetable, including theatre sessions, lectures on such wide-ranging subjects as the aetiology of uveitis, microsurgery, pharmacology of the intra-ocular muscles, and detachment techniques, and an interesting review of fluorescein in photography.

An excursion to the factory at Schaffhausen of Grieshaber, the famous ophthalmic instrument makers, was arranged for us. Here we were given a fascinating display of craftsmanship and most generous hospitality by Herr Grieshaber.

An eventful week came to a close with a delightful evening spent at the home of Prof. and Mrs. Witmer.

After a welcome weekend rest at Nyon by Lake Geneva, the tour was brought to a successful conclusion by attendance at the Gonin Club Meeting at Lausanne.