THE CASE FOR MEMORY DRAWING

KEITH FERRIS

Team Mates by Keith Ferris, 1986 (USAF Art Collection)

Probably thirty years ago, John Clark visited the Ferris studio and viewed my sketches in preparation for a painting for a General Electric advertisement featuring the CFM 56 powered KC-135R refueling the F-110 powered B-1B. The completed painting, "Team Mates," was presented to the Air Force by General Electric in an exciting Pentagon ceremony. It has resided since in the United States Air Force Art Collection.

John, on viewing the various views of the aircraft in the sketches, asked, "how do you do that?" My response was, "do what?"

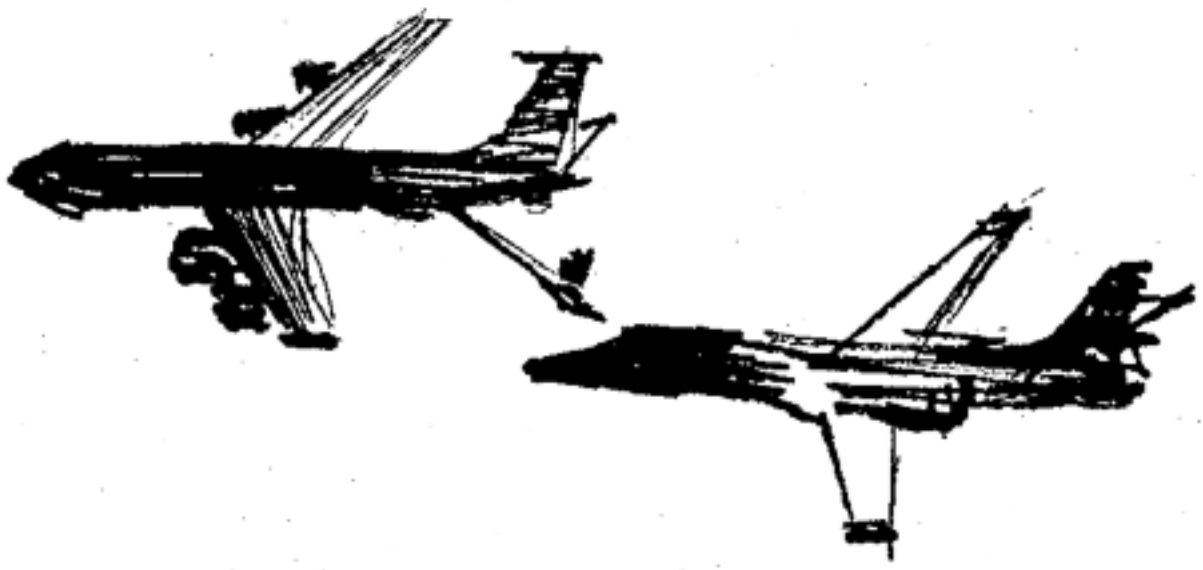
What John wanted to know was how does one go about seemingly effortlessly drawing an aircraft from any aspect as if viewed while maneuvering around the scene in an accompanying aircraft. He must have expected to see photographs of the aircraft, taken of all of those different views, tacked up all around me.

It did not occur to me that this might be unusual. For years, my standard approach to every client requirement had been to first thoroughly study the subject before proceeding. I examine photographs; three-view drawings; analyze proportions, structures, materials, shapes and idiosyncrasies of the subject aircraft, and other elements to be included in a painting. The purpose is always, first to commit the subjects to memory so as to be able to draw them from any desired view for compositional purposes.

When I explained this, John said, as though a light bulb had just come on, "Oh that's memory drawing." John immediately called my attention to the 19th Century methods of "Training of the Memory In Art" as taught by French artist/professor LeCoq De Boisbaudran. John had access to De Boisbaudran's 1862 edition of his LETTERS TO A YOUNG PROFESSOR in which he laid out his principles.

De Boisbaudran was well aware of the classical methods of teaching art, which consisted of the student copying existing works, or drawing and painting from life or still life, all of which involved the copying of what one sees. Plein Air Painting and drawing are examples of copying what one sees, as is the copying of photography or of models today. Some artists create marvelous art using these methods.

The problem is that these methods do not much exercise the memory, as the subject is right there to copy.

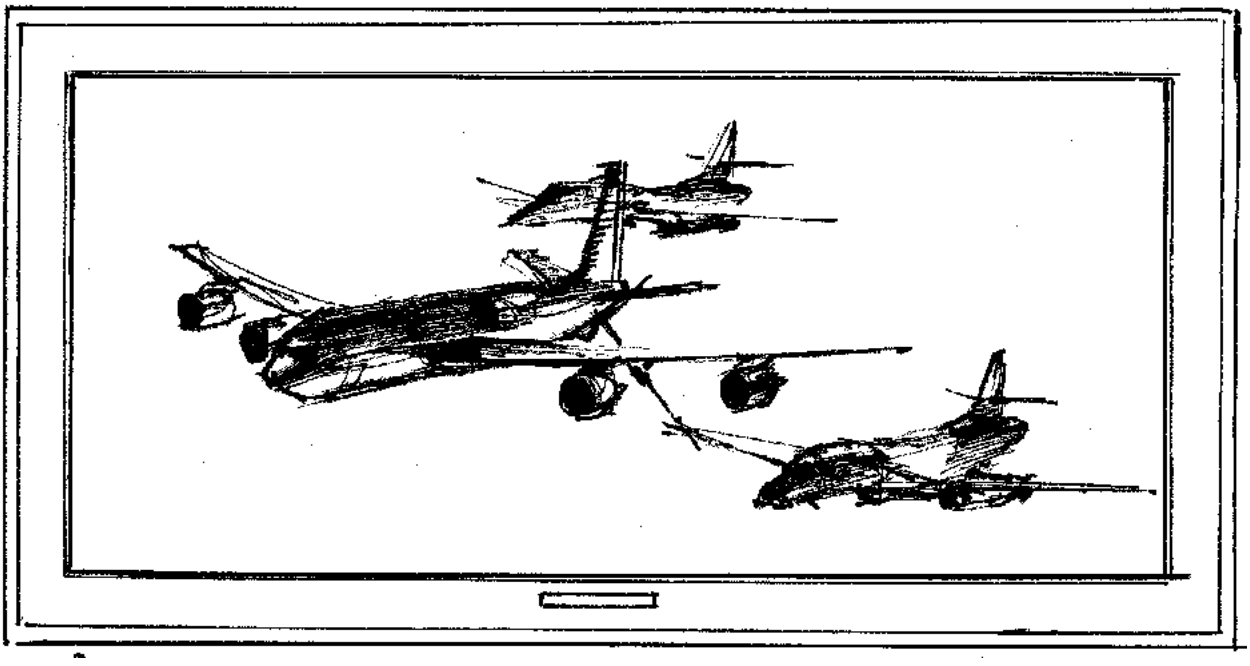


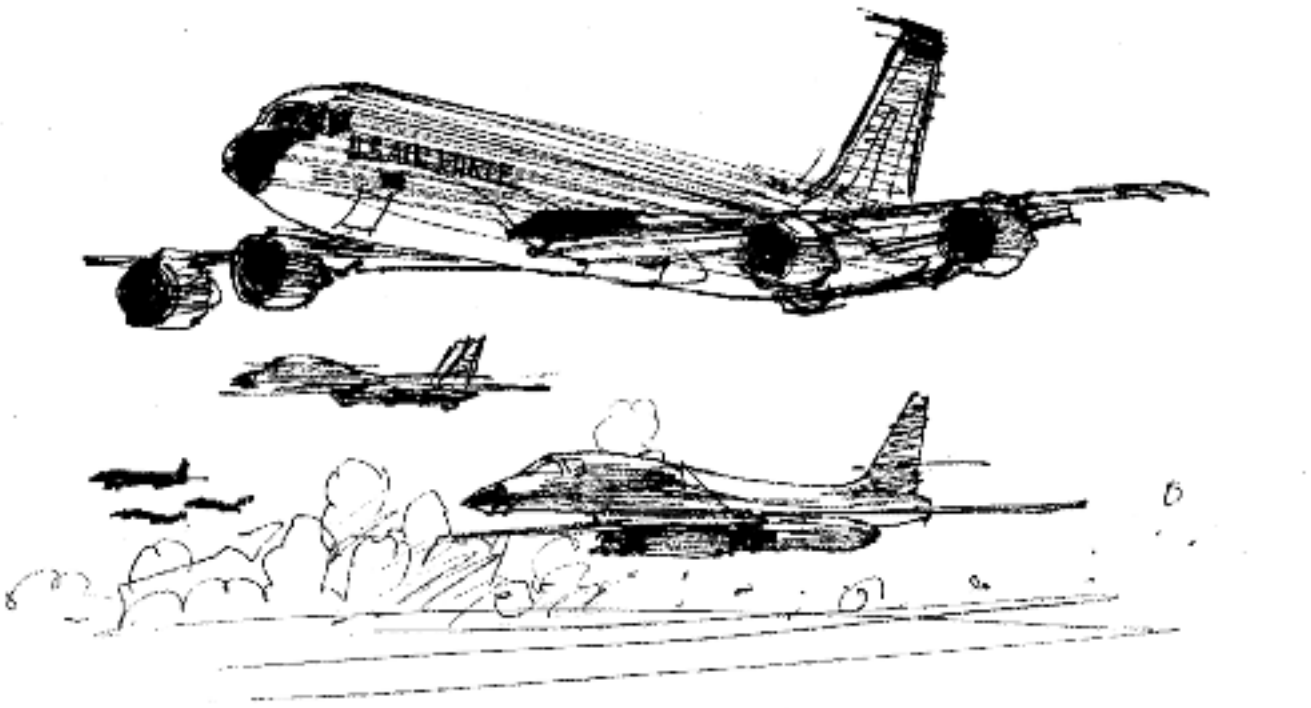
I maintain that the artist can be equipped to "see" and remember much more than the average person. This can be a real plus under certain circumstances.

The camera may not be available when you wish, or it may well be banned when most desired, which is often the case when documenting an event for Air Force Art. We often see wonderful painting subjects when time is not available to paint on the spot. The ability to use Memory Drawing and Painting makes it possible for us to return to these subjects. The artist can consistently outperform the camera, especially in the air-to-air arena.

During my years as Air Force Art Chairman for the Society of Illustrators, artists occasionally complained to me, that they had not been permitted to photograph an event for security reasons, I simply reminded them that I had sent an artist to observe the scene, not a photographer!

Most of us have realized at some point that seeing the world through a camera lens is like observing a scene through a soda straw. I, for one, would rather soak up all of what is going on than be limited to that small part seen through a viewfinder.





I agree with Leonardo da Vinci who, in one of his notebooks, made the observation that "You draughtsmen should always practice things which may be of use in your profession. That is, by giving your eye accuracy of judgment, so that it may know how to estimate the truth as to the length and breadth of objects." Da Vinci recommended a game whereby one artist draws a straight line on a wall, while other artists, sitting a required distance from the wall, break a reed or straw to the length seen on the wall. Each artist would then take the straw up to compare with the line on the wall. The artist whose measure comes closest to the length on the wall wins a previously agreed-upon prize.

The keys to drawing from memory:

De Boisbaudran's methods involve the study and analysis of the subject. One breaks an object down into its simplest components, observes the lengths, positions, proportions and characteristics of straight lines, curved lines, angles, shapes of structures, and relative placement of each by asking one's self such questions as, "What makes up the shapes? What are the relative dimensions? How many components are there? How far apart are they?" Why do they look this way? How do they fit together? Asking these questions helps us to commit shapes to memory.

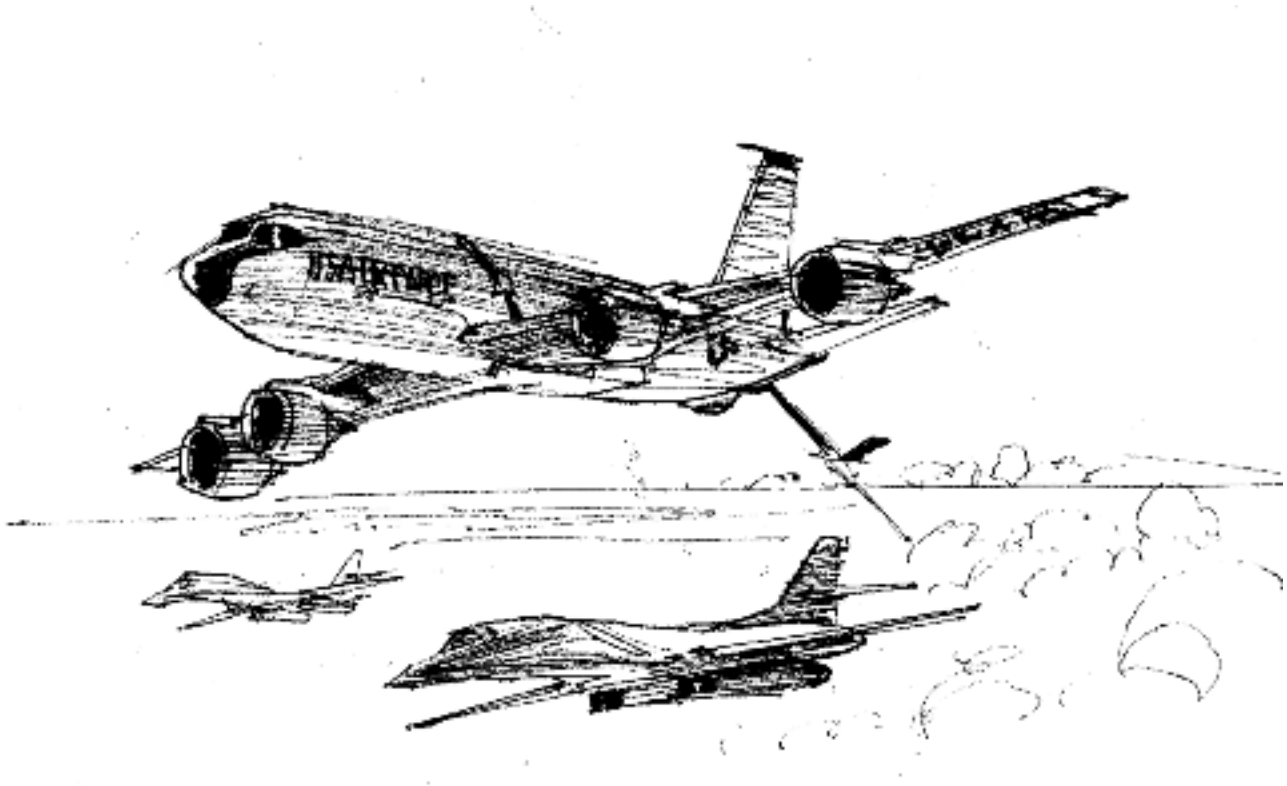
In the ASAA Dayton 2004 Forum session, we began by taking Leonardo's advice by placing a horizontal line on bond paper exactly in proportion and position to match that on a projected slide. We worked completely by eye, using no measuring or straight-edge device. We then showed the methods used in estimating the length and position of the line on the page. We found that if you place dots at each end of your intended line it is fairly simple to connect the dots giving you a straight line. We continued by developing a perfect square, followed by plotting a circle in the square, and then moved on to analyzing curved shapes.

Once we had exercised our analysis of lines and shapes, we proceeded to show photos of biplanes, piston monoplanes, and jets, pointing out what to look for in analyzing them. Detailed analysis was demonstrated on general arrangement drawings of the aircraft.

We closed the session with the assignment to study four actual aircraft at the Air Force museum. These represented three different eras in aviation. The aircraft included the newly restored WW I S.P.A.D. XIII, the pre-WWII North American 0-47, and the Korean War F-86A and MiG 15 sitting next to each other for comparison of the two designs.

The National Museum of the USAF found artists studying these aircraft in detail for several days in preparation for drawing them from memory in our Friday morning session. That was an interesting exercise with varying levels of success.

In retrospect, I wish I had followed De Boisbaudran's lead. He had established a four-story school in which he placed the first-year students on the fourth floor with the model.



Second-year students were placed on the third floor, the students having to climb to the fourth floor to view the model. The third year students were placed on the second floor while the fourth year students were placed on the first floor. The more advanced the student, the more difficult the climbs and the greater the incentive to mentally record the subject matter in the fewest number of visits.

If we revisit Memory Drawing, we will set up and draw in locations out of sight of, and many yards from, the assigned subject aircraft. Artists will be able to view the aircraft as often as necessary to complete their drawings or paintings. The object will keep the visits to the aircraft to a minimum.

This should accelerate our ability to see, record and be able to depict what we have seen.

Memory drawings on pages 51, 52, and 53 by Keith Ferris, courtesy of Keith Ferris.

The Case for Memory Drawing is adapted from the ASAA Dayton 2004 Forum presentation by Keith Ferris and first appeared in Aero Brush V17N3, Summer 2004.

Paul-Emile Lecoq de Boisbaudran, in the 19th century, taught a method of memory drawing that was meant to liberate the artist from strictly working imitatively. He found that memory only retains those things that have produced an effect on the mind and the emotions.

He developed a system of teaching based on visual memory training, where his students would be trained to memorize lines of differing lengths and angles and then more complex models, including paintings, sculptures and scenes observed from every day life. Lecoq first outlined this method in 1848 in a pamphlet entitled *L'Education de la mémoire pittoresque.*