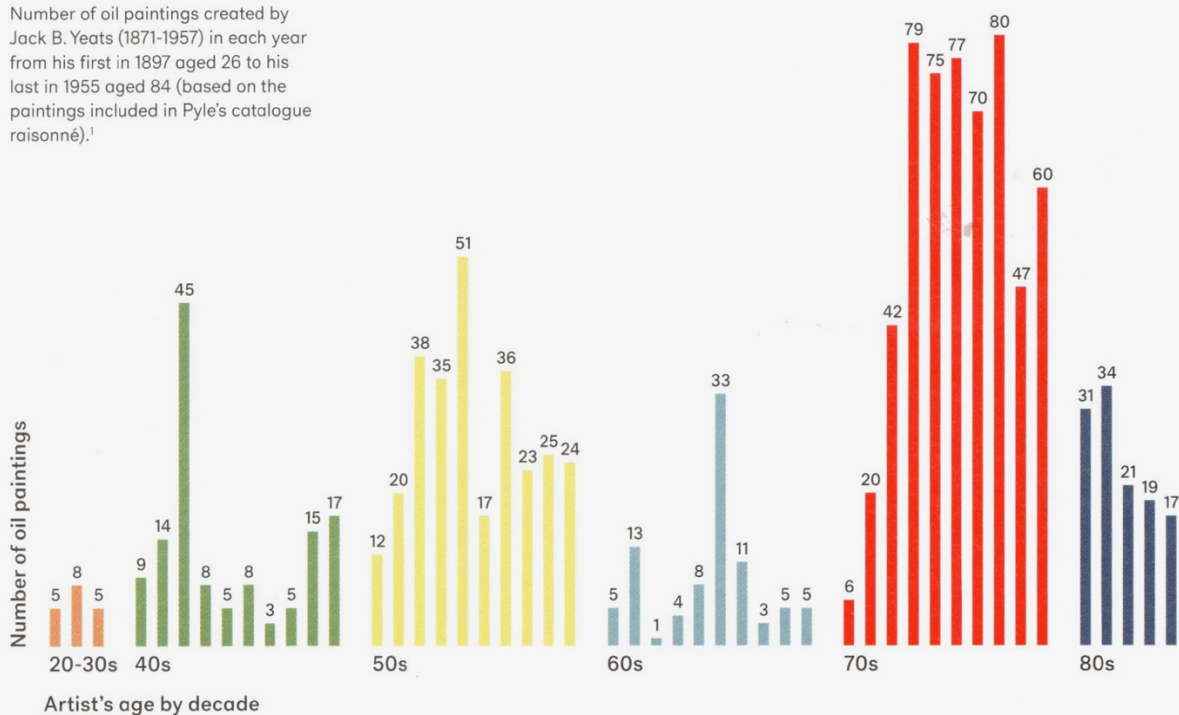


LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK: IMAGINATIVE COGNITION IN THE PAINTINGS OF JACK B. YEATS

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Jack B. Yeats created many of his most iconic and critically acclaimed oil paintings when he was in his seventies and early eighties. During some of these years, he completed more than seventy paintings – as many as eighty in 1948 – about one every four or five days.¹ The paintings provide an ongoing record of his reflections, a mature echo of the pictorial diaries he kept as a boy in Sligo and a resonance of his prolific sketching as a younger man. They offer a rare glimpse of his creative thoughts during his later years – he did not allow anyone to observe him painting, he had no students, and he rarely gave lectures or interviews. As a result, the process by which he approached his later paintings is largely unknown and is inferred from his letters and sketchbooks and the paintings themselves.² The creation of great works of art can seem, at first sight, to be entirely unrelated to the way you think in your daily life. Yet, the extraordinary creativity exhibited by ground-breaking artists lies at one end of a continuum, and at the other end are the mundane sorts of creative thoughts you experience every day, for example, when you improvise dinner from an incongruous set of ingredients or make up a new excuse to get out of doing something you dislike. Creativity has sometimes been characterised as a mysterious, even chaotic, process, but empirical studies

Number of oil paintings created by Jack B. Yeats (1871-1957) in each year from his first in 1897 aged 26 to his last in 1955 aged 84 (based on the paintings included in Pyle's catalogue raisonné).¹



indicate that it depends on the same sorts of cognitive processes that underlie problem-solving, decision-making, and reasoning. It arises from a mix of fast, immediate intuition and slower, controlled deliberation, powered by attention and memory. Analyses of the relationship between artists' sketches and their final paintings, not unlike those of scientists' laboratory notebooks and their subsequent discoveries, provide important clues about the systematic nature of the creative process. They show that creative achievements emerge from the planned exploration of possibilities, guided by expertise and knowledge, which results in unpredicted, and unparalleled, outcomes.³

Yeats's later paintings are profoundly beautiful, full of expressionist vigour, with striking, translucent colours that communicate figures, landscapes, seas and skies in energetic motion together. By the time of his later paintings, Yeats had amassed a lifetime of many thousands of sketches, but more than half had been made during his thirties, with comparatively few during his later years.⁴ The content of some of his later paintings can be traced directly to former sketches; others revisit them, or previous drawings or paintings, to develop an idea in a new way. For example, his earlier works illustrate various quay workers in Sligo, familiar to him from his grandfather's shipping company. His repeated representations of the pilots who guided ships into Sligo port changed significantly from initial depictions of workers engaged in their daily jobs to subsequent characterisations of a solitary figure, bearded with a peaked cap, in contemplation of the sea and sky, as in *Pilot, Sligo River* (1927).⁵ Later portrayals are evocative of loss, such as *We Shall Not Meet Again* (1952), in which the pilot looks on, as an old man and a younger one face each other near the sea. Repeated efforts to advance an idea are characteristic of the process of many original breakthroughs. An artist, like a scientist, rarely experiences insight in a single 'eureka' flash; instead, such insight results from a gradual restructuring of the interpretation of a problem, which may occur over a prolonged period of time. It is not uncommon to make recurring attempts at a novel solution, but to reach an impasse when no further progress towards a satisfactory outcome seems possible. The question is often set aside, and no conscious efforts to address it are made for a time. After a period of incubation, the conceptualisation of what has to be achieved changes, usually unconsciously. The problem is reassessed, with a creative leap forward.⁶



Jack B. Yeats
Peter [Sketch of Peter Gillen],
 1903, NGI Yeats Archive
 Y1/JY/1/1/65

Jack B. Yeats
Pilot Sligo River
 1927

Yeats's frequent returns to subject matter such as the pilot are consistent with a continuing interrogation of the underlying significance of certain observed individuals and events, the extraction and communication of their potential meaning from the different perspectives of time and history.

Yeats chose to paint from memory. When he was in his early fifties, he wrote: 'A picture which is true is the memory of a moment which once was as it appeared to the artist.'⁷ Many of his paintings are remembered scenes, sometimes at a distance of decades – city walks and train journeys, fair days and horse races, boxing rings and circuses – and he asserted at this time, 'I never make up my pictures. All my people are people I have actually seen.'⁸ Painting from memory presents significant cognitive challenges. When you remember an event, whether spontaneously or cued by a shared reminiscence or a sketch or photograph, the recalled memory is an active reconstruction, rather than a passive recorded copy. Your mind assembles retrieved fragments into a coherent simulation. A memory, recollected seemingly effortlessly, is the output of a set of mechanisms that operate mainly outside your conscious awareness. Your repeated experiences of similar events, such as your walks in the city, are distilled into a mental schema, an amalgam of comparable episodes. Schemas are very useful: they provide you with a framework for assimilating and interpreting new instances in relation to your previous experience, and they offer a structure to cue your retrieval of related memories. But experiments show that schemas render episodic memory fallible on several fronts. One fallibility of memory is that you forget parts of an event: a schema preserves the 'gist' of an experience, such as the sense of a busy city junction teeming with young women and men going in different directions in *Girls and Boys* (1925). But the gist is preserved at the expense of detail, omitted by the incorporation of the specific event into a generic memory structure. When you try to reconstruct a memory of a scene you saw on a specific day on a walk you regularly take, you may have lost some aspects unique to that day and that walk. Another fallibility of memory is that you misremember parts of an event: a reconstructed memory is informed as much by what you expected to observe as by what was available to be observed. The process of reassembling a memory adds common characteristics shared by similar events, such as scenes you usually observe on your regular walk, but which you may not have observed on this day and

this walk. And a third fallibility is that you change your interpretation of a remembered episode over time: your subsequent experiences mould a schema, leading you to reinterpret an event as you re-examine it. You add new explanations and alternative perspectives formed through reminiscing, sometimes with others, and the emotional tone associated with the event may fade. Accordingly, your memory of a past episode may or may not coincide entirely with reality and your reliance on memory repositories, such as external images, photographs and other people's narratives, can contribute to the development of fictional memories.⁹ Reality-monitoring processes track your internal representations to distinguish a remembered episode that actually occurred from alternatives – memories of events that you imagined, dreamt or intended – but sometimes confusions occur. Yeats appreciated the fallibility of memory, and considered that 'the artist should not be a model-maker attempting to make an exact model of what *is*, because it is impossible for him to do so perfectly, as his own eye backed by his own memory and his own character, will make him unconsciously emphasize some parts of his picture more than others.'¹⁰ Instead, his response to the challenges of painting from memory was distinctive: he prioritised the emotional interpretation of an event and relied on reviving the feeling of a scene in his simulation of it: '...if the artist succeeds in making us feel that we are present, looking at the scene and feeling about it as he felt, then the picture is a success.'¹¹

When Yeats was in his eighties, he reflected: 'Every painting which I have made has somewhere in it a thought of Sligo.'¹² He lived in Sligo with his grandparents for much of his childhood until he was sixteen years of age and returned there often for holidays when he lived in England during his twenties and thirties, and after he returned home to live in Dublin. Studies of autobiographical memories reveal a pronounced 'reminiscence bump' – you tend to recollect most readily events that occurred during your adolescence and early adulthood, from when you were about ten or fifteen years old to about twenty-five or thirty years old. New and distinct events occur during these years, important for the formation of your beliefs and your self-identity, and relevant to your life-shaping decisions. Autobiographical reminiscences allow you to relive an event, sometimes experiencing it almost as if it were happening again. They also enable you to examine the relevance and implications of the event, to provide retrospective

narrative coherence to your life story. Yeats was of the view that 'The true artist has painted the picture because he wishes to hold again for his own pleasure – and for always – a moment, and because he is impelled – perhaps unconsciously, but nevertheless impelled – by his human affection to pass on the moment to his fellows, and to those that come after him.'¹³

Usually autobiographical memories, particularly from the reminiscence-bump years, are of home and school, family and friends. But few such moments of close personal life are shown in Yeats's paintings. Although his sketchbooks sometimes represent domestic scenes – his dog, his kitchen table – or family episodes – his wife standing outdoors, picnics with friends – his paintings rarely commemorate such private memories. Instead, the remembered events he chose to immortalise, from his times in Sligo and elsewhere, are generally public ones – of performers in full view in circuses, theatres or sports arenas, or of ordinary people engaged in everyday interaction in communal places. The moments he holds forever in his paintings are often the incidental intimacies of strangers, as in *Held up by a Shower* (1945), in which a young man leans towards a young woman as she looks at a stall. And his later paintings increasingly dwell on absence, such as *The Old Landing Place* (1943), with its derelict buildings and dilapidated wooden jetty by the sea, bereft of any person or event, a moment lost.

Among the variety of themes in Yeats's paintings, a salient one is the solitary figure in a vast landscape, or pair of pre-Beckettian decrepit wanderers walking into the distance on an empty country road. In some of them, nomadic characters stretch out beside structures, as in *Shelter* (1947), or on the ground in the open countryside, such as *Sleep by Falling Water* (1948) and *Sleep Sound* (1955). In others, travellers raise their faces to the dawn sky as night draws to a close, as in *Morning Glory* (1945) and *Grafter's Glory* (1954). Many of Yeats's paintings were created during bleak times in history: World War I, when Yeats was in his forties; the Irish War of Independence and Civil War, which continued into Yeats's fifties; World War II, when Yeats was in his sixties and seventies. He also lived through bleak times personally – incapacitating depression for several years in the middle of his life, the deaths of most of his close family in the later years of his life. He was married to Mary Cottenham Yeats for fifty-four years before she died in 1947. They had no children and he wrote to a friend, at the time: 'There will be plenty of lonely times to



Jack B. Yeats
Held up by a Shower
1945



Jack B. Yeats
Sleep by Falling Water
1948



Jack B. Yeats
The Derelict Ship
1946

come...'.¹⁴ His paintings in the following decade sometimes appear to reimagine events from his past. When you ruminate about the past, there is frequently an irresistible allure to imagine how events could have turned out differently. There are remarkable regularities in the alternatives to reality that you create when you think 'if only...' or 'what if...'. For example, participants in studies tend to become ensnared by 'fault-lines' in their mental representation of an event, such as things they failed to do: 'If only I had spent more time with this family member...', 'What if I had kept in touch with that friend ...', or 'If only I had pursued my favourite hobby...'. Mental time travel allows you to place yourself again in the past, to probe how an event came about and to assess its consequences, and it gives rise to complex cognitive emotions. When you imagine how a past episode could have turned out better, you experience regret or despair.¹⁵ Nostalgia, too, emerges from the comparison of reality to an alternative. You experience the wistfulness of fond recollection, but tempered by yearning, a bittersweet recognition of the impossibility of recreating the past in the present.¹⁶ Many of Yeats's paintings convey such complex emotions. For example, children appear with increasing regularity in his later paintings, among them *The Derelict Ship* (1946), in which a blond-haired child plays by a decaying ship alongside the quay, and *The Child of the Sea* (1948), in which a dark-haired child, in a boat with a sailor, looks out at the sea. Yeats seems to shift to painting from imagination, rather than painting from memory. When he was in his late seventies, he wrote of the people in one of his paintings: 'They are not painted from actual people, or from standard types. They are just people who walked into my imagination. I generally begin a picture... and let the people walk in.'¹⁷ His paintings evoke emotions such as nostalgia through content that requires you to imagine alternative possibilities to understand the portrayed event, possibly in the context of your own similar or analogous recollections. You infer Yeats's own experiences of these emotions and feel empathy or compassion. The beauty of some of his paintings is amplified by this sense of a shared understanding of life.

The comparison of reality to an imagined alternative can also give rise to joy and hope – when you imagine how a past event could have turned out worse you experience relief or happiness. Some of Yeats's most uplifting paintings contain joyous figures who raise their faces to the sky to sing or shout or laugh, agile and lively characters who

dance and jump and twirl. Anticipation, too, emerges from the comparison of reality to an alternative, when the imagined event is in the future. In some paintings, Yeats's subject matter appears not to be what is happening now, but what is about to happen next, as in *Now or Never* (1930), in which jockeys and horses gather just before a race begins. His capture of the moment of tension and potential before an event draws on skills acquired when he was a young journalist illustrator, recording sports. They are deployed in his paintings with a psychological sophistication, requiring you to make inferences and to entertain multiple possibilities. His portrayal of anticipation encapsulates an essential intensity of human experience that arises not from an event itself, but from the suspense and hope before it, the promise of possibility.

Some of Yeats's paintings go beyond reflection and reimagination of past events to encapsulate the essence of experience in other ways. For example, horses feature in some of his best-known and best-loved oil paintings and they are the main theme in over 100 of them.¹⁸ He lived at a time when horses were commonplace, as up close and personal in daily life as other people, even in cities. He encountered many other animals in Sligo and elsewhere – cows and sheep and pigs – but he chose to commemorate the horse in his paintings. His portrayal of them is unique and distinctive. Yeats's horse is a recognisable member of the general category of horses, but a fresh and original version. To create a new instance of a well-known category is a challenge faced by designers, inventors and innovators of all sorts. It is severely constrained by knowledge of an existing category and its known exemplars. To expand a familiar category requires you to overcome the limitations imposed by the 'tyranny of the specific'. For example, when volunteers in experiments were asked to design new objects, such as a new coffee cup, or imagine new items, such as a fruit found on another planet, their familiarity with existing cups or fruit limited the novelty of their creations. They could overcome these limitations when they were asked, instead, to focus on function rather than form, for example, to design a receptacle for holding hot liquid; and to conceive of the purpose of the new instance at an abstract level, for example, to draw a sweet nutritious food from another planet.¹⁹ Similarly, Yeats sometimes depicts horses carrying out their routine work, performing at races or in circuses, but more often he portrays them as independent, spirited individuals at play, cantering free,

in fields or through woods. They are shown alone or with other horses, or engaged in sociable interactions with people, as in *For the Road* (1951), in which a horse gallops through trees towards a person.²⁰ They are typically at their peak – energetic, rounded, and fine-boned – and they are presented as personalities, with affections and fears, curiosity and exuberance. Their vibrancy and sensitivity are conveyed not only by their form and posture but also by the swirling circular marks of Yeats's impasto technique, with his palette-knife strokes visible in the thick layers of paint. The sweeping linear textures of their landscapes enrich the sensory simulation of winds blowing, trees swaying, clouds gathering around them. Their beauty is enhanced by their luminous colours, white and golden figures etched from their landscapes. Increasingly in later paintings, they are illustrated without bridles or saddles, even when ridden, with human companions who appear to have no means of controlling them and no need or desire to do so, as in *The Singing Horseman* (1949) and *Above the Fair* (1946). Their portrayal embodies a purity of purpose – freedom, enthusiasm, kindness – consistent with Yeats's view that 'There is only one art and that is the art of living.'²¹

New ideas also emerge from conjoining together several existing ones. When you combine familiar concepts, novel perspectives emerge, not present in either concept independently. For example, participants in experiments were asked to list the characteristics of a combination of two familiar but separate concepts, such as 'university-educated carpenter'. They included properties such as 'non-materialistic', that do not tend to be listed for either of the component concepts, 'university-educated' or 'carpenter', on its own. The results indicate that they tried to construct an explanation of the combination, from which new characteristics emerged. Yeats gave some of his paintings provocative titles that reach beyond a description of their visual content. Some titles suggest a narrative, such as a painting of a figure walking before an immense sky called *He Seeks his Fortune* (1947). Others invite a potential symbolic interpretation, such as *Looking Forward, Looking Back* (1945), in which an old man and a younger one face each other, beside what appears to be a train window. Some make literary, poetic or historical reference, as in *And so My Brother Hail and Farewell for Ever More* (1955), in which an old man is walking, while looking out to sea. Concept combination results in new ideas most often when dissimilar concepts are juxtaposed, because understanding

the combination requires you to entertain potential explanations that align the two distinct ideas. Yeats's combination of a seemingly separate verbal concept with a visual one elevates some of his paintings beyond their apparent subject matter. It engages you in cognitive effort to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation, which enriches your appreciation of the painting's substance.

Some of Yeats's paintings contain figures so diffuse and ephemeral in their landscape that their portrayal appears to reflect not just a remembered or imagined event, but how it is remembered, how it is imagined – faintly and tenuously. A mental image, whether of a remembered or imagined scene, typically lacks the clarity and richness of visual perception. In contrast to looking at a real scene before you, an image in your mind is impoverished in sensory detail and diminished in the subjective experience of vividness. You can close your eyes and create an image, say, of a figure wearing a striped scarf, which can feel realistic. But you probably would not be able to answer questions of detail about, say, the number of stripes on the part of the scarf around the figure's neck. Such questions would be straightforward to answer if the figure were really in front of you. A visual image is often more like a rudimentary and incomplete sketch than a visual perception. Nonetheless, people are adept at manoeuvring mental models just as they are at manoeuvring physical ones. You can mentally rotate an image to observe a scene from different perspectives and mentally animate aspects of it to create a dynamic simulation.²² And even the weakest mental image can evoke the strong emotions associated with the original percept. In one of Yeats's most exquisite paintings, *Leaving the Far Point* (1946), a woman and two men walk together. They are indistinct and slight, the furthest figure fading into the landscape, transparent and indeterminate. Yeats seems to carve them out of their environment, with their countryside visible through them, communicating a poignant beauty in their pale transience. The recollected event appears to give the painting not just its subject matter, but also its form; the fragility of its rendition conveys the very nature of the memory itself. Yeats's paintings capture the vulnerable contours of remembered mental life, yet communicate its enduring emotive command. Their beauty lies in his luminous expression of a profound insight: our experiences are fleeting, our memories of them are frail, but our feelings about them seed our imaginations, to transform a moment into an understanding of life.



Jack B. Yeats
Leaving the Far Point
1946

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- 1 The number of oil paintings Yeats created in each year of his life is illustrated in the graph on page 24, based on those included in Pyle, 1992. For a discussion of peaks in creative accomplishment, see Simonton, 1988, 251-67 and Lindauer, 2003.
- 2 For biographical information about Yeats, see Arnold, 1998.
- 3 For an introduction to alternative views of creative cognition as either chaotic or systematic, see Weisberg, 2004, 23-54 and Simonton, 2007, 329-344.
- 4 Maguire and Swords, 2013.
- 5 Images of this painting and subsequent referenced paintings are included in the exhibition publication, Maguire and Rooney, 2021.
- 6 For an overview of cognitive processes in insight and creative discovery, see Dunbar, 1997, 461-493.
- 7 J.B. Yeats, 1922, 2.
- 8 Quoted in Arnold, 1998, 208, from an interview, 'Mr Jack B. Yeats and his Art', in the *Daily Express (Dublin)*, 12 October 1919.
- 9 For an introduction to cognitive processes in autobiographical memory see: Williams, Conway and Cohen, 2008, 21-90.
- 10 J.B. Yeats, 1922, 2.
- 11 J.B. Yeats, 1922, 3.
- 12 J.B. Yeats, 1953. Letter from Jack B. Yeats to the Mayor of Sligo (1953), Sligo Central Library.
- 13 J.B. Yeats 1922, 3.
- 14 Quoted in Arnold, 1998, 331, from a letter to Thomas MacGreevy (25 March 1947).
- 15 For a discussion of cognitive processes in the creation of alternatives to reality, see Byrne, 2016, 135-157.
- 16 For an analysis of nostalgia see de Brigard, 2017, 155-181.
- 17 Quoted in Pyle, 1992, II, 794, from a letter to William McQuitty (18 March 1948), in reference to *People Walking beside a River* (1947).
- 18 Pyle, 1992, II, 1135-1136.
- 19 For an introduction to creative processes in category expansion and concept combination see Sifonis and Ward, 2016, 91-110.
- 20 This painting and the next two referenced paintings are in the National Gallery of Ireland collection.
- 21 RTÉ Interview with Jack Yeats (10 October 1947).
- 22 For a discussion of different views about mental imagery see Pylyshyn, 2003, 113-18; and Kosslyn, Ganis and Thompson, 2003, 109-111.