

Remembrances of Paul Locher

Empirical Studies of the Arts

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Abstract

Paul Locher passed away on 20 August 2024. Paul was an outstanding scientist and a central figure in the field of empirical aesthetics. He made important contributions to numerous areas including the study of symmetry, balance, facial attractiveness, museum behaviour, artwork composition and restoration, and aesthetics of food, but in particular to the study of eye movements in aesthetic appreciation of artworks. Indeed, his research on eye tracking is a touchstone for visual perception in empirical aesthetics. Here, a group of Paul's colleagues remember and celebrate him through a set of recollections that honour how he shaped their research and lives. It is hoped that this will offer a glimpse into the wonderful scholar and human being that Paul was, and why he will be sorely missed.

Keywords

Paul Locher, history of empirical aesthetics, eye tracking, visual perception

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The loss of Paul Locher is a significant one not only for his friends, but also for our field. He will be missed on many levels. Paul was active as a researcher during times when empirical aesthetics was just beginning to adopt the methods of cognitive psychology and the increasingly sophisticated approaches of physiology. In doing so, he developed a very unique profile. Inspired by his work on decoding X-ray images, together with Calvin Nodine, he rediscovered eye movement analysis for a contemporary, empirical study of art. He was also a pioneer in the field of museum research. Often forgotten was his published study on the perception of facial beauty in fractions of a second! Institutionally, and probably most important, he took over our journal *ESA* and made it an influential outlet in our field. And of course, he also served as President of the IAEA from 2004–2008 and organized and co-organized the IAEA conferences in New York. But all those who knew him personally will remember him as an extraordinary person. He was very modest, but always scientifically opinionated; he had exquisite politeness and a fine sense of humor. His early eye movement studies from the 1980s already showed his love for Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, and this is not surprising, as he also spent much of his life in Paris, where he enjoyed his summers for decades. He was thus an ideal bridge builder between old Europe (his ancestors came from Switzerland) and the influential American cognitive psychology.

I was lucky enough to meet Paul when I persuaded my then girlfriend Loni in 1989 to travel from Aachen to Italy in her Volkswagen to attend an eye tracking conference as students in Pavia, Italy. I had seen in the program that Locher and Nodine would be speaking. They were the two researchers who published state-of-the-art empirical research on art, and now I hoped to see them in person! It was a special trip, because we saw their talk and had a chance to speak with Paul. We introduced ourselves and he explained his studies, and from then on we met him again and again. During his sabbatical in Leuven, he visited us in Fribourg, and we exchanged ideas about our studies on art. I would never have dared to hope that one day I would have a research focus on the subject because my previous teachers had always advised against art psychology. They said there was too little proper psychological research and too much nonsense. Paul Locher was proof to me that there could be a successful empirical aesthetics. He has accomplished a lot and we will not forget it.

Anjan Chatterjee

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Paul Locher is the reason for my engagement with IAEA. In the late 1990s, while exploring the stacks of U Penn's library, I found *ESA* and learned about IAEA. I decided to attend the 2002 Congress in Takarazuka, Japan. The senior members of IAEA at the time included Paul, Holger Höge, and George Shortess. All three were smart, warm, and welcoming; I had found an intellectual home. They were concerned about the future vitality of the organization as titans like Colin Martindale and Dean Keith Simonton were receding in their involvement. Paul, particularly attuned to the potential of technological applications in empirical aesthetics, likely recognized that

neuroscience could invigorate the field. He requested a review from me, which in 2003 resulted in *Prospects for a Cognitive Neuroscience of Visual Aesthetics*. He also knew that I was thinking about art and neuropsychology, ideas which were published in 2004 as *The Neuropsychology of Visual Artistic Production*. Paul invited me to give a keynote on this topic at the 2004 Lisbon Congress. His encouragement in both projects cemented my commitment to the field and to IAEA. Around that time, Paul was collaborating on eye-tracking experiments with Cal Nodine, a radiologist at Penn. After several conversations, during his visits from Montclair State University, we submitted my first aesthetics grant application on visual rightness. Paul's ideas inspired my lab to create a test for visual balance, published in *ESA* in 2005. Returning to 2002, I remember clearly traveling together in a bumpy van along the Japanese countryside and then chatting with Paul as we meandered through a stunning temple in Kyoto. As was true in 2002, what remained true through the last time I saw him in 2022 in Philly, Paul was meticulous in dress, comportment, and thought. While his gentle, kind, and profound decency was always evident when in his presence, what may not be obvious from a distance or known to younger scientists is that his quiet influence on the field and on many of us ran deep.

Oshin Vartanian

University of Toronto, Canada

I met Paul at IAEA's biennial congress in NYC in 2000. That was my first IAEA congress, and it proved hugely formative as I tagged along with my PhD supervisor Colin Martindale and met many of the greats in the field, including Nathan Kogan, Ravenna Helson and Dean Keith Simonton, among others. However, Paul left the deepest impression on me because despite his stature in the field, he took the time to discuss with me aspects of composition related to visual rightness theory. A number of weeks after I had returned to the University of Maine, I received in the mail a handwritten letter plus an article and a chapter from him. In his letter he encouraged me to pursue research on the topic, which is precisely what I did. Not only did we start a new line of research on visual rightness in Colin's lab, but later with Vinod Goel at York University we implemented the methodology of compositional alteration in our first fMRI study on aesthetic preference. Afterwards, at every IAEA congress, meeting and spending time with Paul was a highlight. He was the picture of the gentleman scholar—perceptive, smart, inquisitive, and caring. My interactions with him became more frequent when I was given the honour to follow in his footsteps as the Editor of *ESA*. Given that his attention to detail is legendary, I tried my absolute best to maintain his high editorial standards, knowing full well that it was a nearly impossible task. I saw him for the last time at IAEA's congress in Philly in 2022. He gave a wonderful presentation on the mechanics of a study to examine aesthetic appreciation in the elderly, an important topic about which we know very little. Despite his failing health, his razor-sharp instinct as a vision scientist was at full display, as he maintained his keen sense for studying relevant topics. He set an example for how to embody exceptional intellect and humanity in the same person.

Pablo P. L. Tinio

Montclair State University, USA

Paul Locher was a constant figure in my career. He was often talked about endearingly by friends and colleagues and I consumed the many small and curious details in his papers. We met countless times at various IAEA and APA Division 10 events, we collaborated on research, and with Aaron Kozbelt, we co-organized the 2014 IAEA Congress in New York. Through all of this, one conversation stands out. We were discussing an eye-tracking study I was doing at the time as a young graduate student, and I was grumbling about how challenging it was to do this type of research—there were so much data, so much noise to sort through, and such a tedious methodology to contend with. In his distinctively gentle and elegant way, Paul acknowledged my “pain and suffering” the best he could and then told me how they used to do eye-tracking: head restraints, manual video recordings, manual cleaning and organizing of data, grids, mind-numbing computer programming, and so on. He also described a non-eye-tracking study in which they gathered hours and hours of data from each participant (years later I discovered the Locher & Smets [1992] study where “Each subject completed 576 individual trials in two sessions, each lasting approximately 2 h.”) I quickly learned that my tedious barely scratched the surface of his tedious! That conversation still makes me laugh inside, but it grounded me, and I still think about it when the going gets tough. Paul’s scientific contributions in eye-tracking, aesthetics theory, and symmetry perception were numerous, significant, and pioneering. His work on pictorial balance and visual rightness was as theoretically-sound and rigorous as the Mondrian paintings that he favored as research stimuli. In 2014, I felt my career come full circle when I assumed my professorship at Montclair State University, the exact institution where Paul spent his entire professional career. I still smile every time I pass by the University Ice Arena that he loved so much. Paul was an interesting, sharp, gentle, and kind person, who in conversation, would listen to you with his whole being. He will be truly missed.

Marcos Nadal

University of the Balearic Islands, Spain

Paul Locher was a towering figure in the field of empirical aesthetics, rigorous and committed to advancing the science of how we perceive and appreciate art. His contributions as a researcher, mentor, and editor shaped the field and the careers of many of us. He played a pivotal role in my academic development at two crucial points in my career. The first was at the 2008 IAEA conference in Chicago. After my presentation on visual complexity, Paul approached me and introduced himself. As editor of *ESA*, he was looking for conference-based submissions, and he expressed interest in mine. Having just received my PhD less than a year earlier, it was thrilling to have a senior figure in the field, and the editor of one of its flagship journals, take notice of my work. Through the submission process, Paul proved to be a true editor—not just seeing submissions through the publication process, but actively engaging with the text. He provided numerous comments and pushed me to reanalyze the data without a variable for

which I had no hypothesis. His editorial approach was kind but firm, and I learned an invaluable lesson in clarity and rigor. Thanks to his guidance, for the first time I produced what felt like my own work. In 2017, when I took over as Editor-in-Chief of *ESA*, following Oshin Vartanian, the challenge felt immense. Paul had left behind a legacy of excellence in editorship, and the journal had a prestigious history. Even though he was no longer the editor, Paul remained a generous and guiding figure, still caring for *ESA*'s standards. He was always available to review papers and offer his experienced advice on editorial decisions. His influence, both through his own work and his mentorship of younger researchers, was profound and far-reaching, and he played an essential role in moving the field of empirical aesthetics forward. Paul's character was evident in every encounter. He approached everything with care, precision, and a genuine warmth. Whether through his research, his guidance to younger academics, or informal conversations at conferences, he was always thoughtful, insightful, and supportive.

Debra Zellner

Montclair State University, USA

I first met Paul in the summer of 2001 when I moved to Montclair State University after 17 years at another university. At that point Montclair State was in the process of transforming from a state teacher's college to a research university and few of the faculty were actively engaged in research. Much to my delight, Paul occupied the office two doors down the hall from mine and we quickly bonded over our love of research, teaching, and good food. Paul introduced me to the psychology of art over many good meals and glasses of wine, while I introduced him to the psychology of food, in particular what factors (other than flavor) influenced how much people liked the taste of the food they were eating. During one meal we wondered if making food visually beautiful would also make people like the flavor more. So, we did some research to determine if using color (complexity) and balance would increase the attractiveness of food presented on a plate and, in turn, increase liking for the taste of the food. Those variables did, indeed, increase visual attractiveness but not liking for the taste of the food, probably because other visual features (e.g., messiness) proved more influential. In addition, to being an excellent researcher, Paul was an all-around excellent academic. He put a lot of effort into his teaching and was loved by his students, even though he had a reputation for being demanding. He selflessly served on department committees and also served his research community. Most significantly to me, Paul was an excellent colleague and friend. He was always there to celebrate an accomplishment or give advice with a problem, usually over a good meal. I will miss him.

Lisa and Jeff Smith

University of Otago, New Zealand

Paul Locher came to visit us at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1990s and changed our lives. He convinced us to use our positions at The Met to study the

psychology of aesthetics and to have us join as a team to do such research. We never looked back. Not only did we plan and execute studies, we traveled to France and Switzerland together, organized the New York City Congress of IAEA, and when Colin Martindale decided to give up editing *The Bulletin of the Psychology of the Arts*, it was Paul who suggested to Colin that the two of us might take it over. Joining with James Kaufman, *The Bulletin* later became *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*. Paul's research was rigorous, meticulous, and creative, and his support for colleagues in the field was unflinching. But we thought, in this tribute, we might instead focus on his subtle but wicked sense of humor. A sideways glance in your direction meant, "Can you believe this person?" A single raised eyebrow was, "Seriously?" And a head tilted forward and to the side with both eyebrows raised was, "I know the *real story* behind this." We have a picture of Paul and Lisa working on the NYC IAEA Congress Proceedings. Lisa was recovering from surgery and is wearing a bathrobe. Beau, our African Gray Parrot, was sitting in his favorite perch – on top of her head. Paul was nicely attired, as usual. It was on seeing this picture that Paul remarked, "I guess we can start referring to one another as 'tu' instead of 'vous'." Paul's talents went well beyond the academic. He was a member of the 1960 Olympic Figure Skating Team, and later skated in the Ice Capades. When we learned these fun facts, Jeff noted that he couldn't skate. Paul replied, "Challenge accepted!" We duly went to the ice rink, where Paul's skating dazzled all who were there. And in roughly 15 min, Jeff was not only skating, but skating backwards (intentionally). When the Fifth Edition of the APA Manual of Style came out, Lisa called Paul to make sure he knew that they were available ... and that she had gotten her order in on the first day. Paul responded, "Yes. The lady at APA told me I was the first person in the world to put in an order." So many IAEA and Division 10 gatherings, so many dinners at great restaurants, so many glasses of champagne, so many great stories with great friends. We loved him dearly and miss him terribly.

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