

Me and my Moleskine: a personal memoir

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One of my first steps towards becoming a serious artist (I was then in my mid twenties, a copywriter with the big New York ad agency Benton & Bowles) was to sign up for evening life drawing classes at the Art Students League on West 57th Street. The teacher was the white maned John Groth, a legendary war artist and friend of Ernest Hemingway. (Hemingway wrote the introduction to a book on his work). John insisted that his students carry sketch books at all times, and at each weekly class he would go round to look at our work, and see how many of us had managed to reach his target of 50 sketches per week.

We were supposed to draw all the time, in restaurants, on the bus, watching television, trying our best to catch the action as it moved on. John believed that this constant practice was the only way we could develop the connection between eye and hand which would in time lead to a truly assured draughtsmanship.

My sketchbooks of choice at that time were A5 sized, bound in black. The paper was not particularly good quality, and watercolour tended to make it buckle. But the book was not too big to carry around in a handbag, and one could draw in it easily without attracting the kind of attention a larger book might have brought.

John's teachings set me on a lifetime path of having a sketchbook handy at all times, and also awakened an enduring interest in the sketch books of other artists. These books so often reveal a freshness and intimacy lacking in the large works intended for the official art world. They contain ideas, half formed, phrases which might, or might not develop into larger ideas, a drawing of a nose, a neon sign, a puddle, a strange looking woman seen across a room. They are not made for the art market but for the future reference of the artist. I would rather have Henry Moore's quirky sketchbook of ink drawings of sheep in meadows than one of his acclaimed small bronzes.

When I am traveling, nothing can put me in a worse mood than arriving in a new place with nothing to draw in. The immediate next step is to find a shop which sells an appropriate book of blank pages, and it was on one such foray in Brooklyn in 2001 that I first came across Moleskine notebooks, (not nearly as ubiquitous then as they are now, when every Cape Town bookstore has a handsome rack on display).

I picked up that first Moleskine and carefully extracted the leaflet from the useful back pocket. It was entitled 'The history of a legendary notebook', and I smiled as I read that the original Moleskines had been the notebooks of choice by such

luminaries as Ernest Hemingway. I thought back to my long ago classes with John Groth, which were key to my eventually switching careers from writing to artmaking. A circle had been completed.