

## *The Case of the Colour-blind Painter*

Early in March 1986 I received the following letter:

I am a rather successful artist just past 65 years of age. On January 2nd of this year I was driving my car and was hit by a small truck on the passenger side of my vehicle. When visiting the emergency room of a local hospital, I was told I had a concussion. While taking an eye examination, it was discovered that I was unable to distinguish letters or colors. The letters appeared to be Greek letters. My vision was such that everything appeared to me as viewing a black and white television screen. Within days, I could distinguish letters and my vision became that of an eagle – I can see a worm wriggling a block away. The sharpness of focus is incredible. **BUT – I AM ABSOLUTELY COLOR-BLIND.** I have visited ophthalmologists who know nothing about this color-blind business. I have visited neurologists, to no avail. Under hypnosis I still can't distinguish colors. I have been involved in all kinds of tests. You name it. My brown dog is dark grey. Tomato juice is black. Color TV is a hodge-podge. . . .

Had I ever encountered such a problem before, the writer continued; could I explain what was happening to him – and could I help?

This seemed an extraordinary letter. Colour-blindness, as ordinarily understood, is something one is born with – a difficulty distinguishing red and green, or other colours, or (extremely rarely) an inability to see any colours at all, due to defects in the

of the paintings that they made sense. The contours were accurate, but the colours were all wrong. 'No one will get your paintings,' one of his friends said, 'unless they are as colour-blind as you.'

'Stop pushing it,' said another. 'You can't use colour now.' Mr L reluctantly allowed all his coloured paints to be put away. It's only temporary, he thought. I'll be back to colour soon.

These first weeks were a time of agitation, even desperation; he was constantly hoping that he would wake up one fine morning and find the world of colour miraculously restored. This was a constant motif in his dreams at the time, but the wish was never fulfilled, even in his dreams. He would dream that he was about to see in colour, but then he would wake and find that nothing had changed. He constantly feared that whatever had happened would happen again, this time depriving him of all his sight completely. He thought he had probably had a stroke, caused by (or perhaps causing) his accident in the car, and feared that there could be another stroke at any moment. In addition to this medical fear, there was a deeper bewilderment and fear that he found almost impossible to articulate, and it was this that had come to a head in his month of attempted colour painting, his month of insisting that he still 'knew' colour. It had gradually come upon him, during this time, that it was not merely colour perception and colour imagery that he lacked, but something deeper and difficult to define. He knew all about colour, externally, intellectually, but he had lost the remembrance, the inner knowledge, of it that had been part of his very being. He had had a lifetime of experience in colour, but now this was only a historical fact, not something he could access and feel directly. It was as if his past, his chromatic past, had been taken away, as if the brain's knowledge of colour had been totally excised, leaving no trace, no inner evidence, of its existence behind.<sup>6</sup>

6. The question of 'knowing' colour is very complex and has paradoxical aspects that are difficult to dissect. Certainly Mr L. was intensely aware of profound loss with the change in his vision, so clearly some sort of comparison