

# Unit **1** History





# Introduction

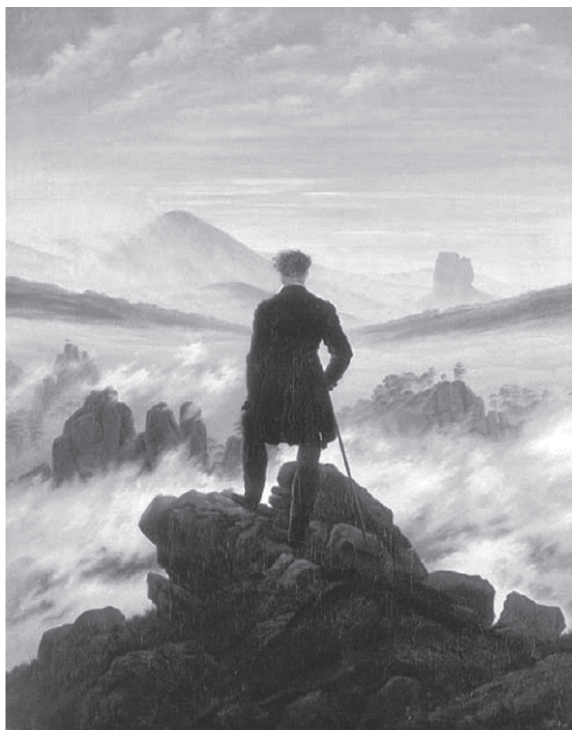
Historians are most often confronted with such a paradox in probing into the past: on the one hand, the past is something inaccessible and it is very hard to present the truth of it; on the other hand, a certain distance and detachment from the past provide them with an expanded horizon and wider view, hence a new perception of the past and a clearer vision of the tapestry of the past. While most would agree that historians can predict the future only by the past, agreement ceases when it comes to the relationship between the past and the present, involving two seemingly paradoxical statements: the past produces the present; the present produces the past. The latter addresses the creative or analytical imagination with which historians today view the past, and during this process, memory, whether individual or collective, operates on various levels.

## Pre-reading Tasks

- 1 In your view, how can historians portray the past?
- 2 Do you think the past events could be fully represented by historians?
- 3 What is the relationship between history and memory?



## The Landscape of History



Caspar David Friedrich. *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*.  
c. 1818. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.

- 1 A young man stands hatless in a black coat on a high rocky point. His back is turned toward us, and he is bracing himself with a walking stick against the wind that blows his hair in tangles. Before him lies a fog-shrouded landscape in which the



fantastic shapes of more distant promontories are only partly visible. The far horizon reveals mountains off to the left, plains to the right, and perhaps very far away—one can't be sure—an ocean. But maybe it's just more fog, merging imperceptibly into clouds. The painting, which dates from 1818, is a familiar one: [Caspar David Friedrich's](#) *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. The impression it leaves is contradictory, suggesting at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of an individual within it. We see no face, so it's impossible to know whether the prospect confronting the young man is exhilarating, or terrifying, or both.



2 [Paul Johnson](#) used Friedrich's painting some years ago as the cover for his book *The Birth of the Modern*, to evoke the rise of romanticism and the advent of the industrial revolution. I should like to use it here to summon up something more personal, which is my own sense—admittedly idiosyncratic—of what historical consciousness is all about. The logic of beginning with a landscape may not be immediately obvious. But consider the power of metaphor, on the one hand, and the particular combination of economy and intensity with which visual images can express metaphors, on the other.

3 For me, the posture of Friedrich's wanderer—this striking image of a back turned toward the artist and all who have since seen his work—is “like” that of historians. Most of us consider it our business, after all, to turn our back on wherever it is we may be going, and to focus our attention, from whatever vantage point we can find, on where we've been. We pride ourselves on not trying to predict the future, as our colleagues in economics, sociology, and political science attempt to do. We resist letting contemporary concerns influence us—the term “presentism”, among historians, is no compliment. We advance bravely into the future with our eyes fixed firmly on the past: the image we present to the world is, to put it bluntly, that of a rear end.



4 Historians do, to be sure, assume *some* things about what's to come. It's a good bet, for example, that time will continue to pass, that gravity will continue to extend itself through space, and that [Michaelmas term](#) at Oxford will continue to be, as it has been for well over seven hundred years, dreary, dark, and damp. But we know these things about the future only from having learned about the past: without it we'd have no sense of even these fundamental truths, to say nothing of the words with which to express them, or even of who or where or what we are. We know the future only by the past we project into it. History, in this sense, is all we have.

5 But the past, in another sense, is something we can never have. For, by the time we've become aware of what has happened, it's already inaccessible to us: we cannot relive, retrieve, or rerun it as we might in some laboratory experiment or computer



simulation. We can only represent it. We can portray the past as a near or distant landscape, much as Friedrich has depicted what his wanderer sees from his lofty perch. We can perceive shapes through the fog and mist, we can speculate as to their significance, and sometimes we can even agree among ourselves as to what these are. Barring the invention of a time machine, though, we can never go back there to see for sure.

6 Science fiction, of course, has invented time machines. Indeed, two recent novels, Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* and Michael Crichton's *Timelines*, feature graduate students in history at, respectively, Oxford and Yale, who use these devices to project themselves back to England and France in the fourteenth century for the purpose of researching their dissertations. Both authors suggest some things time travel might do for us. It could, for example, give us a "feel" for a particular time and place: the novels evoke the denser forests, clearer air, and much louder singing birds of medieval Europe, as well as the muddy roads, rotting food, and smelly people. What they don't show is that we could easily detect the larger patterns of a period by visiting it, because the characters keep getting caught up in complications of everyday life that tend to limit perspective, like catching the plague, or being burned at the stake, or getting their heads chopped off.

7 Maybe this is just what it takes to keep the novel exciting, or to make the movie rights marketable. I'm inclined to think, though, that there's a larger point lurking here: it is that the direct experience of events isn't necessarily the best path toward understanding them, because your field of vision extends no further than your own immediate senses. You lack the capacity, when trying to figure out how to survive a famine, or flee a band of brigands, or fight from within a suit of armor, to function as a historian might do. You're not likely to take the time to contrast conditions in fourteenth-century France with those under Charlemagne or the Romans, or to compare what might have been parallels in Ming China or pre-Columbian Peru. Because the individual is "narrowly restricted by his senses and power of concentration", Marc Bloch writes in *The Historian's Craft*, he "never perceives more than a tiny patch of the vast tapestry of events... In this respect, the student of the present is scarcely any better off than the historian of the past."

8 I'd argue, indeed, that the historian of the past is much better off than the participant in the present, from the simple fact of having an expanded horizon. Gertrude Stein got close to the reason in her brief 1938 biography of Picasso: "When I was in America, I, for the first time, travelled pretty much all the time in an airplane and, when I looked at the earth, I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on earth the mingling



lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves.” What was happening here, quite literally, was detachment from, and consequent elevation above, a landscape: a departure from the normal that provided a new perception of what was real. It was what the Montgolfier brothers saw from their balloon over Paris in 1783, or the Wright brothers from their first “Flyer” in 1903, or the Apollo astronauts when they flew around the moon at Christmas 1968, thus becoming the first humans to view the earth set against the darkness of space. It’s also, of course, what Friedrich’s wanderer sees from his mountaintop, as have countless others for whom elevation, by shifting perspective, has enlarged experience.

- 9 This brings us around, then, to one of the things historians do. For if you think of the past as a landscape, then history is the way we represent it, and it’s that act of representation that lifts us above the familiar to let us experience vicariously what we can’t experience directly: a wider view.

(1,247 words)



## WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

<b>compliment</b>	/ˈkɒmpləmənt/	<i>n.</i>	a remark that shows you admire someone or something 赞扬, 称赞
<b>dissertation</b>	/ˌdɪsəˈteɪʃən/	<i>n.</i>	a long piece of writing on a particular subject, especially one written for a university degree 学位论文
<b>dreary</b>	/ˈdriəri/	<i>adj.</i>	dull and making you feel sad or bored 令人沮丧的; 沉闷的
<b>elevation</b>	/ˌeləˈveɪʃən/	<i>n.</i>	a height above the level of the sea 高度; 海拔
<b>evoke</b>	/iˈvəʊk/	<i>vt.</i>	to produce a strong feeling or memory in someone 引起; 唤起 (感情、记忆等)
<b>exhilarating</b>	/ɪgˈzɪləreɪtɪŋ/	<i>adj.</i>	making you feel happy, excited, and full of energy 令人兴奋的, 使人激动的
<b>gravity</b>	/ˈɡrævəti/	<i>n.</i>	the force that causes something to fall to the ground or to be attracted to another 重力; 引力
<b>idiosyncratic</b>	/ˌɪdiəsɪnˈkrætk/	<i>adj.</i>	having strange or unusual habits, ways of behaving, or features 特殊的; 特质的
<b>imperceptible</b>	/ˌɪmpəˈseptəbəl/	<i>adj.</i>	almost impossible to see or notice 无法察觉的, 感觉不到的
<b>inaccessible</b>	/ˌɪnəkˈsesəbəl/	<i>adj.</i>	difficult or impossible to reach 难达到的; 不可得到的
<b>lofty</b>	/ˈlɒfti/	<i>adj.</i>	very high and impressive 巍峨的; 高耸的
<b>merge</b>	/mɜːdʒ/	<i>vt. &amp; vi.</i>	to combine, or to join things together to form one thing 合并; 并入

<b>metaphor</b>	/ˈmetəfə/	<i>n.</i> a way of describing something by referring to it as something different and suggesting that it has similar qualities to that thing 隐喻; 暗喻
<b>mingle</b>	/ˈmɪŋɡəl/	<i>vt. &amp; vi.</i> to mix together with each other 混合
<b>perch</b>	/pɜːtʃ/	<i>n.</i> a high place or position, especially one where you can sit and watch something 高座; 高处
<b>plague</b>	/ˈpleɪɡ/	<i>n.</i> a very infectious disease that produces high fever and swollen places on the body, and often leads to death (死亡率高的) 传染病; 瘟疫
<b>posture</b>	/ˈpɒstʃə/	<i>n.</i> the way you position your body when sitting or standing 姿势
<b>prospect</b>	/ˈprɒspekt/	<i>n.</i> a particular event which will probably or definitely happen in the future 前景; 展望
<b>retrieve</b>	/rɪˈtriːv/	<i>vt.</i> to find something and bring it back 取回; 找回
<b>speculate</b>	/ˈspekjəleɪt/	<i>vt. &amp; vi.</i> to guess about the possible causes or effects of something, without knowing all the facts or details 猜测; 推测
<b>summon</b>	/ˈsʌmən/	<i>vt.</i> to try very hard to have enough of something such as courage, energy, or strength, because you need it 鼓起; 振作
<b>tangle</b>	/ˈtæŋɡəl/	<i>n.</i> a twisted mass of something such as hair or thread (线、毛发等的) 缠结一团, 乱团



## EXERCISES

### Cognitive Reading

- I. Select from the following statements one that best expresses the main idea of the text.
  - a. This text talks about the amazing sea landscape in the history.
  - b. This text describes a valuable landscape painting and its significance in art history.
  - c. This text elaborates on the author's personal understanding of historical consciousness: a wider view.
  - d. This text explores the relationship between the past, the present and the future.

**II. Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) according to the text.**

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Paul Johnson's book <i>The Birth of the Modern</i> signifies the start of romanticism and the industrial revolution.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. The author uses many metaphors to demonstrate the power of language and achieve a combination of economy and intensity.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Historians expect to know the future on the basis of the past, but the past, as a matter of fact, is inaccessible to us since we cannot relive, retrieve or return it.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. A time machine is a good device that can help researchers go back to the past to have a real and comprehensive knowledge of the ancient society.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. The author holds that even for those who were present at some historical events, there is no one ultimate "correct" history. Instead, each account simply provides a singular perspective and it is the job of the historians to put this perspective into broader context. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**III. Answer the following questions according to the text.**

1. Why does the author start his essay with the description of Friedrich's painting?
2. In Para. 3, the author says "the posture of Friedrich's wanderer is like that of historians". What does "that" refer to? What similarities lie between them?
3. How do you understand the sentence "the past, in another sense, is something we can never have" in Para. 4?
4. According to Para. 7, what is the author's attitude towards the direct experience of events?
5. Why does the author mention "the Montgolfier brothers, the Wright brothers and the Apollo astronauts" in Para. 8?

**IV. Paraphrase the following sentences.**

1. His back is turned toward us, and he is bracing himself with a walking stick against the wind that blows his hair in tangles. (Para. 1)
2. But maybe it's just more fog, merging imperceptibly into clouds. (Para. 1)
3. We know the future only by the past we project into it. (Para. 4)
4. Barring the invention of a time machine, though, we can never go back there to see for sure. (Para. 5)
5. Marc Bloch writes in *The Historian's Craft*, he "never perceives more than a tiny patch of the vast tapestry of events... In this respect, the student of the present is scarcely any better off than the historian of the past." (Para. 7)



## Critical Reading

### I. Answer the following questions according to the text.

1. How do you understand the title “The Landscape of History”?
2. How do you understand the sentence in the last paragraph: “For if you think of the past as a landscape, then history is the way we represent it, and it’s that act of representation that lifts us above the familiar to let us experience vicariously what we can’t experience directly.”?
3. What do you think is the most important thing that history studies?

### II. Have a group discussion based on the following question.

Some students think that history is more concerned with the people and places and times. Others think that history is not all about memorizing facts and dates, of who did what and when, and why. Discuss with your classmates the purpose and focus of studying history and express your viewpoints.

## Language Enhancement

### A Vocabulary

Choose from the given words one that best completes each sentence.

1. Nobody wants to \_\_\_\_\_ to others, or to themselves, that they were not capable of doing something they tried to do.  
a. reveal                      b. conceal                      c. expose                      d. uncover
2. Despite years of searching for earthquake precursors, there is currently no method to reliably \_\_\_\_\_ the time of a future earthquake.  
a. contradict                      b. addict                      c. predict                      d. verdict
3. A strong impetus was given to the reform by the appearance of the \_\_\_\_\_, or the Black Death, which swept over the country in the year 1519.  
a. plague                      b. disease                      c. ailment                      d. malady
4. The way you \_\_\_\_\_ the external world is filtered through your beliefs and hence what you see is always congruent with your beliefs.  
a. receive                      b. deceive                      c. perceive                      d. retrieve
5. Due to the limitation of human being’s brain, language used to \_\_\_\_\_ the objective world is bound to be fuzzy.  
a. display                      b. portray                      c. represent                      d. depict

6. Poetry often uses particular forms and conventions to expand the literal meaning of the words, or to \_\_\_\_\_ emotional or sensual responses.  
a. invoke                      b. evoke                      c. provoke                      d. revoke
7. The accumulation of rules, procedures and institutions sounds like \_\_\_\_\_ work but it is what global civilization is built on.  
a. boring                      b. monotonous                      c. plain                      d. dreary
8. We all enjoy our freedom of choice and do not like to see it \_\_\_\_\_ when it is within the legal and moral boundaries of society.  
a. restricted                      b. restrained                      c. refrained                      d. constricted
9. It is characteristic of city life that all sorts of people meet and \_\_\_\_\_ together who never fully comprehend one another.  
a. fuse                      b. blend                      c. mingle                      d. combine
10. Tolerance helps to \_\_\_\_\_ communication space, nourish interpersonal relationship and eliminate interpersonal tension and contradiction.  
a. extend                      b. enlarge                      c. widen                      d. broaden

## B Usage and Grammar

- I. Fill in the blank in each sentence with a word taken from the box in its appropriate form.

tangle	simulate	imperceptible	evoke	idiosyncratic
advent	stake	project	exhilarating	elevate

1. Great changes have taken place in information management with the \_\_\_\_\_ of the information age.
2. The scientist developed one model to \_\_\_\_\_ a full year of the globe's climate.
3. He was eager to return to a more entrepreneurial role in which he had a big financial \_\_\_\_\_ in his own efforts.
4. These changes, \_\_\_\_\_ to the human eye, occur as the heart pumps blood through the body.
5. Her comment \_\_\_\_\_ protests from the shocked listeners.
6. It's scary, \_\_\_\_\_, and powerful, like the moment on a roller coaster when you're just starting a free fall.
7. He is so \_\_\_\_\_ in his literary judgment that it is impossible to think of him as a sound critic.