The History of the Art of Memory

The art of memory and the method of loci, in which we have placed a particular interest in on this website, are said to have been invented around 500 B.C. at a banquet given by the nobleman Scopas of Thessaly. Among the guests was the literal genius Simonides of Ceos, who had been invited to read aloud a poem of praise which he had created for the host. Simonides was a very clever and innovative man and it is said that he was the first of his kind to demand money for his intellectual work. However on this evening Simonides was only given half of the sum agreed by Scopas. Because of that the poet not only praised his host but also devoted half of his panegyric to the twin Gods Castor and Pollux.¹

Now let us try to remember this very informative paragraph and then later put it into our memory palace. One should take himself now a bit of time and calmness in order to really remember the information easily.

The art of memory was invented in 500, so we might imagine a red Fiat 500 convertible cruising along. It might be useful to connect this picture with all of one’s senses, one might feel the freedom connected to this car, or it’s bad taste of CO₂. In order to remember that it was B.C., people could put their favourite Flintstone character in the convertible, or do something else prehistoric to not mistake B.C. for A.D.

The host of the banquet was Scopas, so one might put a picture of a very frightening Scorpion in his or her head.

Now we get to Simonides, which gets a little more difficult to picture. We could try to remember him by imagining someone playing "Simon says…", but that picture is not any more gripping. One might notice however, that Simonides is a very g(reek)y name, so we could try and picture an old-looking man with a long white beard, dressed in a white Toga, reciting a poem from a SIM-card. The SIM is to give on the kick off and then just add the greek "onides" to it, Now we have remembered that SIMonides was a greek poet reciting a poem at the banquet.

Castor and Pollux were also known in Latin as the "Gemini". The second manned space program of the NASA was also called "Gemini". This name was of course given after those two Gods. They were two and this was the second program. They were the sons of Zeus, which of course makes it an even better name for a mission into the sky (Zeus was the God of the sky) or space. Now we might just imagine two Astronauts in Togas, riding on two horses (that makes the picture funnier and is actually, as I will later demonstrate true). Of course some might not be familiar with the NASA space programs, but the more dynamic word "Gemini" is still easier to remember than Castor or Pollux.

Now we combine all those pictures above into a scenario. Although a banquet is easy to imagine, we will now change it into a real wild, but small (as too many people are bad for the memory), house-party with a pool, in front of a villa, as this will make it more exciting and therefore easier to remember.

On the terrace, there is a table at which Simonides with his SIM-card, on which we might put a picture of the Scorpion and the two Astronauts (mark this with a red frame, as it is small and might therefore be overseen). On the other side of the table there is the frightening scorpion, who gives Simonides a black leather case, filled with money. However there is a second case, which Simonides wants.

¹ “The Art of Memory” Frances Amelia Yates 1966
The Scorpion therefore points at the two Greek astronaut-horsemen, who are standing a bit further away from the house party (not any further than 30 feet), as they are carrying the other case. Meanwhile, the scorpion is laughing in a very mean way. Close to the wall there is Fred Flintstone in his red Fiat 500. Imagine a white wall, as this will make a better contrast and nobody can oversee it.

Sadly, we cannot have a house party in our current memory palace (the classroom), so the house party is a little resized. We can put a huge Barbie-house into the room however, which still contains all the details (of the guests).

Castor and Pollux, however, did pay for their part in the poem. After the panegyric Simonides acknowledged that there were two horsemen outside waiting for him. When the poet came outside to greet his saviours, he saw nobody, but in the moment he left the house in which the banquet was held, the roof collapsed and buried everybody, except for Simonides.¹

As Simonides was acknowledged of the two horsemen, he went outside, passing Fred Flintstone. In the moment he leaves the house party, somebody falls on the Barbie-House and we hold that picture of the Barbie-house seconds, before its destruction, as we can now remember the Fiat, the horsemen, The Scorpion, the Simonides and the
The roof was very heavy and the dead couldn't be identified by their relatives. However in this moment of hysteria, Simonides went back in time, in his head. He was back at the banquet and could see its participants clearly. He remembered where all the people were sitting, though he hadn't paid any special attention to them before. As he now knew the position of all the guests, he could lead all the hysterical families standing in front of the wreckage to their departed family members. It is said that at this point in time, when Simonides could remember all the people, the art of memory was born. The last part is quite easy, one just pictures the crushed house, Simonides having a DeLorean DMC-12 as a hat (for that he travels back in time) and that the poet leads some Kens to their dead Barbies and some Barbies to their lost Kens. It might be easier to remember the text if one pictures the Kens or Barbies more beautiful, as well as more human and therefore more exciting, than they actually are.

One might be astonished that Simonides was able to remember all of the guests without even trying, as this feat cannot be repeated by oneself, not with the right techniques or a bit of practice. It is of a great importance however, to know that Simonides saw no difference in the arts and poetry in the head of one, but just in their expression. He was used to thinking in pictures. This of course explains that in the moment the banquet became his memory palace, he was able to do this. The great poet had a kind of intense visualization training before.

Though one must consider that certain people called "savants", often are able to remember inhuman amounts of information, without any training or knowledge of tricks. Though inhuman doesn't describe their abilities correctly, it is human to remember about seven things at once (sometimes a bit less and sometimes a bit more), but "savants" can remember more than hundred things.

"Solomon Veniaminovich Shereshevsk" aka "S" for example was a Russian journalist, who always used the method of loci to never forget anything (that actually caused some trouble, until he figured it out). He wasn't used to make notes on paper, as a Journalist, but just remembered everything. For people who have not come to have studied the history of Russian Mnemonists, I have a more popular example. The savant Daniel Tammet, of whom I will talk later, has high-functioning autism (or had, today scientists can't diagnose the "disorder" for sure anymore, if they wouldn't know about how he used to be).

For his invention of the "artificial memory", Simonides didn't just get good feedbacks. A very popular politician and general of his time, called Themistocles wasn't impressed or astonished in any way by the technique that allows people to remember incredible amounts of information. He accordingly said "I would rather a technique of forgetting, for I remember what I would rather not remember and cannot forget what I would rather forget."
In contrary to Themistocles, the great rhetoric Cicero (January 3, 106 BC – December 7, 43 BC), used and liked the Art of Memory. It is from his time, that we have the first written sources where the "method of loci" is mentioned. One of them is Cicero’s "De oratore", in which he describes the memory technique of Simonides as a part of rhetoric. Funnily a book from about the same time, attributed to the great Cicero, but of unknown authorship (presumably it was written by a teacher to his students), got even more popular and today is the basic literature to read if you one wants to become versed in the art of memory, as the technique used two-thousand years ago hasn’t changed much until today. We still put funny pictures into places we know, though every good Mnemonist has a special tactic on how to remember numbers or cards, which are not mentioned in the Latin scripts, but in the end they all place them, as pictures, into their Loci. Another positive thing about the scripts is that they don’t cost anything and one can read them in one evening as they are not stretched to a whole book. The "Rhetorica ad Herennium" explains as the "De Oratore" all the fields of Rhetoric, being important back then. It covers the memory and the method of loci in just 10 pages, which are also included in this website. About 100 years later Marcus Fabius Quintilianus published his "Institutio Oratoria", the third Latin source of the Art of Memory. In the second chapter of his 11 books he covers the topic of the memory. He has, as our unknown author of the Rhetorica ad Herennium, mastered brevity and discussed the memory as well as techniques like the "Memory Palace" and the story of "Simonides" in less than 4,500 words. A copy of his treaties about the art of memory can be found at the Resource section of this website together with the "Rethorica ad Herennium" Memory chapter and the dialog in the "De Oratore" discussing the artificial and the natural memory.

In the 400’s A.D. the bishop St.Augustine of Hippo also made use of the method of loci, but not much is known of him.²

We might stop here with the memorization of the story, as we only have one palace to our service. It is also easy to get the basic outline. It starts with Simonides then gets lost in the Middle Ages, revives in the Renaissance, gets lost again and is revived today by Championships, geeks, Tony Buzan and Moonwalking wit Einstein. There will be however some memorization of important names, especially from this section in the Resource part of the website.
 Sadly, the art of memory seems to have fading at the beginning of the middle ages. When during that period of time Charlemagne asked the monk Alcuin to come to France to help create an educational system, they had a conversation written down by Alcuin. At a certain point of time the conversation adresses the topic of the memory and goes as follows:

Charlemagne: What, now, are you to say about Memory, which I deem to be the noblest part of rhetoric?

Alcuin: What indeed unless I repeat the words of Marcus Tullius that ‘Memory is the treasure-house of all things and unless it is made custodian of the thought-out things and words, we know that all the other parts of the orator, however distinguished they may be, will come to nothing’. 

Charlemagne: Are there not other precepts which tell us how it can be obtained or increased.

Alcuin: We have no other precepts about it, except exercise in memorising, practice in writing, application to study, and the avoidance of drunkenness which does the greatest possible injury to all good studies.

The artificial memory has disappeared! Its rules have gone, replaced by “avoid drunkenness”!

In the dark ages, the art of memory was not public, but it’s secrets only available to monks, who also were the only ones having the ability to read works about the artificial memory. Although there are some medieval works of Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus and Huhg of St. Victore, they weren’t publicised at the time.

At the beginning of the Renaissance however this attitude greatly changed. In the fifteenth century, the jurist Peter of Ravenna published his _Phoenix_. A very popular book about the memory in which he revived the techniques of the era before the Middle ages. According to Joshua Foer, Peter was a huge self-promoter of his time. He bragged of having 1000 texts written by Ovid in his mind, two hundred of Cicero’s speeches and many more committed to his memory².

The Renaissance and especially the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg had a huge impact on the art of remembering. The long-term one is of course that the technique was rendered irrelevant; as people had all the information they needed in their small library and didn’t need to remember anything. But the short-term impact was a very different one. The revolution of Humanism and knowledge was also a revolution of the memory and people began using the techniques more, but less in religious backgrounds as the monks used to. This less religious thinking had an impact on their memory palaces that is still used today by leading mnemonists. When setting up pictures in one’s memory palace, it is important to make them funny, ugly or bizarre. That is already written in the “Rhetoric ad Herennium”. However Peter of Ravenna (the self-promoter) intensifies that broad description, by first asking for the pardon of all religious men and then revealing a technique that allows him to remember more quickly.

“A secret which I have (through modesty) long remained silent about: if you wish to remember quickly, dispose the images of the most beautiful virgins into memory palaces; the memory is marvellously excited by images of women.” Peter of Ravenna

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In the sixteenth century the Italian alchemist and Philosopher Giulio Gamillo aka “Divine Camilla” or “the Quack”, inspired by the Renaissance, had a great idea. He wanted to materialise what had been only been in ones brain for the last 200 years (his idea is similar to the one of this project). He had the idea of building a room in which he would store all the information available at the time. Sadly he never completed the small theatre and his only work about it is not available in the English language but just in Italian. However in her book “The art of Memory” Frances A. Yates has included some descriptions given by people of the time, which I have implanted into this text. The first description is given by a man called Vigiius who was in the theatre with Camillo and writes about it in a letter to the great author Erasmus.

"The work of wood marked with many images, and full of little boxes; there are various orders and grades in it. He gives a place to each individual figure and ornament, and he showed me such a mass of papers that, though I always heard that Cicero was the fountain of richest eloquence, scarcely would I have thought that one author could contain so much or that so many volumes could be pieced together out of his writings. I wrote to you before the name of the author who is called Julius Camillus. He stammers badly and speaks Latin with difficulty, excusing himself with the pretext that through continually using his pen he has nearly lost the use of speech. He is said however to be good in the vernacular which he has taught at some time at Bologna. When I asked him concerning the meaning of the work, its plan and results—speaking religiously and as though stupefied by the miraculousness of the thing—he threw before me some papers, and recited them so that he expressed the numbers, clauses, and all the artifices of the Italian style, yet slighdy unevenly because of the impediment in his speech. The King is said to be urging that he should return to France with the magnificent work. But since the King wished that all the writing should be translated into French, for which he had tried an interpreter and scribe, he said that he thought that he would defer his journey rather than exhibit an imperfect work. He calls this theatre of his by many names, saying now that it is a built or constructed mind and soul, and now that it is a windowed one. He pretends that all things that the human mind can conceive and which we cannot see with the corporeal eye, after being collected together by diligent meditation may be expressed by certain corporeal signs in such a way that the beholder may at once perceive with his eyes everything that is otherwise hidden in the depths of the human mind. And it is because of this corporeal looking that he calls it a theatre. When I asked him whether he had written anything in defence of his opinion, since there are many to-day who do not approve of this zeal in imitating Cicero, he replied that he had written much but had as yet published little save a few small things in Italian dedicated to the King. He has in mind to publish his views on the matter when he can have quiet, and the work is perfected to which he is giving all his energies. He says that he has already spent 1,500 ducats on it, though the King has so far only given 500. But he expects ample reward from the King when he has experienced the fruits of the work."

This second quote is a translated part from Camillo small work about the theatre called L’Idea del Theatro

"This high and incomparable placing not only performs the office of conserving for us the things, words, and arts which we confide to it, so that we may find them at once whenever we need them, but also gives us true wisdom from whose founts we come to the knowledge of things from their causes and not from their effects. This may be more clearly expressed from the following illustration. If we were to find ourselves in a vast forest and desired to see its whole extent we should not be able to do this from our position within it for our view would be limited to only a small part of it by the immediately surrounding trees which would prevent us from seeing the distant view. But if, near to this forest, there were a slope leading up to a high hill, on coming out of the forest and ascending the slope we should begin to see a large part of the form of the forest, and from the top of the hill we should see the whole of it. The wood is our inferior world; the slope is the heavens; the hill is the supercelestial world. And in order to understand the things of the lower world it is necessary to ascend to superior things, from whence, looking down from on high, we may have a more certain knowledge of the inferior things."

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Although Camillo never fully accomplished his plans, it is still a revolutionary idea which was caused by the Renaissance (of the art of memory). In the picture below we can see a sketch of how his small theatre should have looked like. One notices that all the places where normally a visitor would sit are reserved for all kinds of information. Camillo also thought he could understand and include the whole universe in his palace, by learning some simple rules and constellations. Camillo put a lot of pictures into the theatre too, if one thinks about that was either the hugest encyclopaedia of that time, a picture library or a user-friendly form of the internet.

Besides Camillo there were other revolutionary Mnemonists like Giordano Bruno and Ramon Lull who built something like the first Computer, but they are not included in this work as their ideas would fill up even too much space. Their ideas about the memory can however be found in The Art of Memory.

As already mentioned above, there were not just the good short-time consequences of the Renaissance but also long-term impacts which were not that positive. It was until then a necessity to pass on knowledge by few books but the most important; by mouth. It was therefore important to be trained in the art of memory. After the invention of the printing press however, more people could afford books and those books were written in a way which allowed the reader an easy access to the information he needed. This hadn’t been like that for ever, as before 400 A.D. people wrote on scrolls often writing in a way called "Scriptio Continua". WHICH IS BASICALLY WRITING WITHOUT ANY PUNCTUATIONS, APACES OR RESPECTATION OF SY LABELLES AND LOWERCASE LETTERS. This kind of writing could be only understood when read a loud and in a way had to be read more intensively or memorized as one could not just find the part which contained the information he needed.
Back in the Renaissance however and also today, we don’t need to remember things anymore. If we want to know something we just look it up in the internet with our smartphones which takes just a few seconds more time than painfully remembering everything. We don’t even need to do simple (or complex) maths anymore, as we got calculators being able to draw graphs and do complex algebra in a few seconds. If one thinks about it, he or she will fastly realize that our school system is bad! The only place where we really need to remember something is school! After that time nobody cares if one always misspells the word *verbal diarrhoea* in such a way *verbale diarrhea*, because word will correct it. It is just a matter of time, until machines will not just be the better workers but will also be able to do all the logic jobs better than any human. Therefore it is important that things like creativity should be taught more in school, as they are something no machine will ever accomplish (for a long time).

Humans can’t digest all of the information today anyway, as they cannot remember more than seven units of information, with their short-time memory.

It is in a way understandable that people back then lost grip of the art of memory as they didn’t need to remember books anymore, but it is rather sad that they lost the art completely. Today kids all over the world struggle to remember anything their teachers give them and a few days they wouldn’t be able to do the test anymore. When they look at it again after half a year they don’t even know what they wrote there. This problem could be easily solved if they would learn how to learn. I myself tested the art of memory, by trying to memorize the love poem *How I love thee?* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. As already mentioned in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the memorization ad verbum is more difficult, as one has to literally have one image for a word instead to have one image for 20 words or more. When I went to bed I firstly learned some facial muscles for a presentation I had to the other day and then turned to the poem. Almost in no-time I had filled the house of my grandparents with pictures and could recite the poem. If I had learned it the way people normally would try to remember it, by rote memorization. I would have had a harder and longer time, as there were words in the poem I did not even understand. Also I would have probably forgotten parts of the poem again, whereas with the method of loci I can still recite the poem fluently.

In the graph below one can see the normal Retention of the Memory, when learning the normal way. The units at the bottom are days! It is however said about the Art of memory that people can still remember stuff after years. This however still needs to be tested by myself, as one should only believe the statistics he altered himself.

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5 *Grasp the solution*, Chris Griffiths 2011

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After the art of memory disappeared again, shortly after it retrieval it wasn't rediscovered again until the in the sixties when Frances Armanda Yates wrote a biography of the whole art including a lot of information that is also to be found in this work. It is from the same time that Tony Buzan started reading and writing extensively about the memory. Today he has authored and co-authored over a hundred and twenty books concerning: Speed-Reading (reading with a speed of more than a thousand words per minute), Mnemonics and Mind Maps (A colourful and creative way of structuring and note taking). It is for him that millions of people today use Mind-Maps, which are a kind less spectacular, more structured, written down memory palace. Today Mind Maps are a million-dollar business, being lead by of course the founder and Guru, Anthony "Tony" Peter Buzan.

In 1991 he founded the World Memory Championships, of which Joshua Foer reports two. It is definitely for Buzan, that the Art of Memory is going to have a second rebirth. He claims to have the highest Creativity Quotient and is now in his seventies. In 2006 Buzan launched iMindmap, a software for Mind mapping. It’s key qualities are especially the great graphics layout which allows the user to get very close to drawn Mindmaps. The products range from a free version over an online version and an iPhone App to the 260$ flagship of ultimate creativity, including a 3D-View and a Presentation View. If one ignores the Mind Map stuff though, he will fastly recognize that the art hasn’t really changed. Today people talk more openly about the fact that pictures can be sexy and there are some systems for giving pictures to numbers and cards, but there is no real evolution which means that those techniques must be really good. And it is for me to hope that Tony Buzan will succeed in his educational crusades, to wipe of the old and boring way of learning and to create a state of the art educational system of Creativity.

We have now reached where the Art of Memory is today. As already mentioned above, one can find all the important names of the people mentioned in this document in the "Resource Section". I have included a Mindmap made with iMindmap Ultimate, so that a reader won’t have to reread the whole text but just take a look at the Mindmap.