

Introduction

During the winter nights of 2016 I felt increasingly despondent, tired and bored. I'd start to read novels only to leave them unfinished, and most of the TV films I recorded wouldn't see through to completion. Was this another symptom of ageing? For close to a decade now, drawing or painting at nights had become difficult on the eyes — I preferred daylight for this. The other keen interest of looking through published chess games, I did rarely.

I needed something to do at nights. As a distraction, I began to re-read a travel diary of my trip to Europe in 2011. Within a week or two, the floor of my shed had been strewn with sheets of written words, maps and travel guide-books. It was time to get more organised, so I moved this situation to the drawing board inside the house. There I was able to unfold maps and retrace the steps of my travel. I told relatives and friends that at nights now "I was writing my memoirs".

In addition to anecdotal observations and experience, the developed version of the diary began to include a greater historical context. I sometimes think this travelogue to be a chronicle of my struggles — albeit smaller ones, but struggles all the same. As no one else is ever likely to chronicle them, I might as well.

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The main purpose of my travel was to visit two of the largest art museums in the world: the Hermitage in St Petersburg and the Louvre in Paris. Also, to Russia I'd never been and knowing the language would be an asset. Ancestry lures, though never overly significant for me couldn't be disregarded.

I'd been to the Louvre on my first and only visit to Paris in 1985. I travelled with a large group of architecture students from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University. At that time I was an architectural draftsman living in Melbourne. I walked into the Louvre museum one door and out the other!

You may very well ask why, as I did myself. Paris was the first foreign language city I'd ever experienced. Overwhelmed by the wall-to-wall crowds in the Louvre, in that thirty minutes or so, I just couldn't adjust and didn't want to. This remained a memory and a sort of regret.

Now approaching 58 years of age I would be more prepared in some ways. This could be my last chance, especially as my mother with whom I lived and cared for was approaching ninety years of age. I was still in good health and reasonable fitness. But at my age was it really worth it — travelling alone for two months or more without any planned human contact?

And other necessary evils such as tourist agents, visa organisation, itinerary planning, crowds, queues, luggage, eating alone at night, airplane travel, jet lag, financial expense, loneliness, theft, security and safety- the list was daunting. Crime in large cities. I wasn't interested to visit quaint little villages. I have a preference for the stimulation of big cities. All this trouble just to see pictures in museums? It was a difficult decision.

“Go to Europa, Volodya,”¹ came my mother’s words from the hospital bed. The eighty-eight year old woman had broken her wrist after a black-out and fall in the back yard of the house, two weeks prior to my departure. These things happen at the worst of times. My sister would have to care for her in my absence.

On the morning of my departure I tried to sit quietly in the big armchair in the lounge room of the house I called home – where I had spent my childhood, youth and the past fifteen years. My sister would soon drive me to the airport. She said she thought I was very courageous. I was tense and anxious. I hadn’t embarked on something like this for fourteen years. It is best to travel at a younger age.

Too late to reconsider. It had been difficult planning the trip, and I’d fallen ill. I was experiencing “traveller’s problems” and I hadn’t even left yet! Gripped with apprehension - in some way I didn’t want to go. In other ways I felt that life here wasn’t stimulating or interesting enough for me. What if things were worse there? A huge waste of money for no purpose? Doubts should all fall away with time - I was single without any dependents or personal ties. My mother had been relatively independent. We kissed and tightly hugged. “Things won’t all go smoothly for you,” she said. Needless to say, she was right, and deep down I felt it. I don’t remember much of the drive to or the processing at the airport. I do remember my sister saying that I rushed the attendant at the entrance to the boarding lounge - restless and impatient.

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Overseas travel is not all as its promoters promise in the sell. The tourist industry persistently pursues and persuades us to part with our money - TV programs, advertising and idealistic portrayals of beautiful imagery. It is a mega multi-million dollar industry. It’s as if you’ve missed out on something if you haven’t travelled to distant lands — distant being very much the case for us in Australia if the destination is Europe. In my late teen years to early youth there existed a phrase, “peer-group pressure”, which was a coercive influence to behave or experience things that others do. The travel experience is in a way similar. Having decided upon the affordable sum we’re willing to part with, it is easy for most of us to step onto a plane.

The question still remains as to whether I really enjoyed myself - I couldn’t say I had fun. But this I anticipated in a way – I was travelling alone. Sure, it has its advantages – you don’t have to compromise on the itinerary and can please yourself a lot more. But having no contact at the other end outweighs these benefits. An author and acquaintance of mine Barry Klemm’s words rang in my ears – “I stopped travelling when I could no longer laugh when things went wrong.” Despite the difficulties, it must be said I’m thankful to have had an opportunity - most likely a final one, to visit and experience these two great cities of the world, St. Petersburg and Paris.

Reference Sources

The references sources used for quotes unless otherwise noted were as follows:

1. St Petersburg City Guide, Lonely Planet (2008)
2. Paris, Rough Guide Publications (2010)

The diary type is a darker font, the quotes from reference sources are lighter font.²

¹ Volodya is the affectionate diminutive name for Vladimir

The Seoul Stopover South Korea May 2011

Recovering from an attack of “shingles” which affected my right arm and a dose of flu, I finally departed Melbourne on a clear morning. Armed with more medication than I can ever remember needing I sat in the central aisle of the Korean Air Bus next to a Jewish man with a “skullcap” and his family. Here we go again, I said to myself as the huge bird lifted into the air. Conversation with the Jewish man should never have started. He said something derogatory about the Russians after I mentioned my destination. Complete strangers who strike at controversial nerve centres in the first few sentences! Relieved to finally arrive at Seoul Airport. I was dead tired and just wanted to sleep. It had also been a long wait for the luggage. I couldn’t remember what time it was.

A bus took us from the airport to the Hyatt Hotel. The bus made a large arc to stop outside a tower I’d seen through the window. A trip of all three minutes. The tourist agent in Melbourne mentioned that the hotel was indeed at the airport. The over extended gestures and broad smiles of polite staff, from the doorman to the porter was overwhelming. How could you not give them a tip when my bags arrived at the door of the fifteenth floor room? The temperature of the room was cold – sealed off from the warm, balmy outside air and the world - a concrete bunker with a low ceiling that looked like roll-on textured paint. Through a large window the dramatic physicality of the airport could be seen – it resembled the shiny metal cladding of aeroplanes. I fell asleep watching the planes come and go. I can’t remember if I heard them.

The highlight of the hotel was the Hyatt dining room - a vast and elegant split-level interior. The designer must have been well paid. The smorgasbord-style food was excellent and the ambience – yes, ambience! – I must have stayed there for over two hours, between polite enquiries from waiters and waitresses, enjoying the warmth, colours, music, lighting, fish tanks, décor, hospitality and general intoxication.

The following morning at breakfast I thought I could easily convalesce here for a few days. I didn’t know the cost for the night’s stay. Probably part of the airfare. If I hadn’t had a night booked elsewhere I would have stayed. On my way to the city in the bus I realised I’d forgotten to take a photo of the Hyatt dining room. I was fatigued, drugged up and hungover. I showed a map I’d been given at the Hyatt to the bus driver, who nodded. It showed my destination with a cross. When it came to my stop the driver swiftly retrieved my luggage from the undercarriage, pointed to where I should go and sped off in trails of diesel exhaust. It was peak-hour rush going on early evening - the air was heavy and full of smog. My throat was still hot - I wasn’t well. In fading light I struggled with my backpack and dragged my suitcase on its small plastic wheels over the rough cobbled footpath towards the city centre. I began cursing the travel agent in Melbourne who led me to believe that luggage would be checked-in and forwarded to St Petersburg at the Seoul airport. I could have left it in a locker at the airport. Didn’t think. These people sit in offices behind desks, not knowing what the hell goes on. I was pissed off and fuming in the extreme and in some panic. On a hill the hotel turned out to be the tallest building in this area of the city - and easy to see after a local shopkeeper pointed it out some two blocks away. He managed to understand my writing or when I said “Hyandai”.

I could not have stayed here too long on the fifteenth floor of the Hyandai Residential Hotel. The room for two nights was just a room, but the rooftop was some respite. It offered some interest with its trees and shrubs and views of the city. The distant hills and buildings looked more interesting than the immediate environment I was in which was nondescript and squalid. More than likely I was in an outer suburb. Of the 10 million population, there weren’t many here. The two or three times I climbed the stairs to the roof I never saw anyone.

Perhaps it was the damp heavy overcast weather. I had to wear my warmest pullover, overcoat and beanie. I was glad to be alone here.

A thankful compensation is this small landscaped park across a narrow street from the hotel where I sit eating a sandwich in the morning sunshine. I bought an apple from a street market place I'd seen from the hotel rooftop. It cost almost an Australian dollar. The sound of sparrows is the same wherever in the world though not common in the parks of Melbourne. Last night's twenty minute walk to a more lively part of town for a meal, found me in a vibrant neon café area not dissimilar to Chinatown, where well dressed young people were enjoying themselves – good to see. It made me feel better – the neon stimulating. The Korean girls are very pretty and amorous. I had a tasty seafood and noodle meal for \$7.50 AUD. Then I walked back to the hotel relaxed. In the hotel foyer three loud, shrill and unattractive Caucasian girls emerged from the lift and passed in giggling disarray. Some tourists let it all hang out when away from home.

The following morning after breakfast I went for a short walk in another direction from the hotel to the previous night. For three blocks at least both sides of the street were lined with shopwindow displays of chairs and chairs and chairs and light and lights and lights. I thought of Seoul's 10 million bums on seats. Lunch was nice, in a cosy café where I asked two guys to take my photo and then a photo with them. Friendly guys.

That afternoon I was on the bus to the airport. I was left wondering whether Korean people are closer to the Japanese or Chinese in their manners of behaviour. The changeover bus driver bowed to the passengers before taking his seat at the wheel.

Arrival in St Petersburg May 2

I amused myself on the plane playing chess on the computer. I won a few games. It was near eleven when the airbus commenced descent. After landing I could see the lights of the airport. It appeared darker than night. *Is this St Petersburg?* I thought as I walked wearily along the passage of a bungalow. What a dreary welcome to a large city. In the poor lighting I could see a few sentry boxes at the head of the queue. At least it moved quickly. I expected some questions – maybe about my planned itinerary – the tourist agent's information had conflicted with the pension manager I'd spoken to on the phone from Melbourne a month ago. He assured me I could travel anywhere I liked through Russia. There were no questions. Just a long searching look from a young uniformed woman behind the glass cabinet, then a stern "Enjoy your stay in St Petersburg" as she slid my passport back to me. Too tired and unwell to care.

A crowd of faces in the sudden flood of light of the arrivals lounge. It had more the look of a tired country railway station. It didn't take long to spot my driver. I noticed my name "Vladimir" on a card then the man holding it. He stood motionless, statuesque, but it was the cropped mohawk hair that shocked me. I introduced myself. I can't remember his name. I was cheerful and almost sober; he was serious and not wanting to be there- just a job. He was about forty. I asked him where the toilets were. It was only when I was in the toilet that I had my first panic attack on Russian soil. I left my bags with him! I quickly returned through the crowd, heart thumping – he was still there. I had judged him by his looks.

Outside it was cold. The damp fog streamed through the overhead lights of the car park. The step up into his car suggested a four wheel drive.

It must have been a long time made longer after I realised my driver wasn't a talkative man. I was restless somewhat apprehensive - uncomfortable silence. Then some lights and dark shapes began to resemble we were near a city.

When I couldn't help myself express awe at the onion-domed church suddenly lit up in all its beauty, he replied in bass monotone "Just like any other church." It must have been a long day.²

Finally, we crossed a bridge over a river and slowed down. It mustn't be far now I thought as we turned into a narrow street lined with dark bare branches of tall trees and three to four storey high buildings. All I knew was that the pension was on an island near the Neva River. We stopped. The façade we entered was tawdry, the stairwell poorly lit with a smell that comes from a lack of ventilation. Only one flight of stairs, thankfully.

On the other side of the door a warm welcome. He was an Englishman by the name of John, an owner-manager who lived at times in the apartment. I found out he had married a Russian woman some years ago and lived in Berlin. *Must be wealthy*, I thought. For past midnight, this man appeared very awake. He spoke Russian reasonably well and practised with me occasionally during my stay. A pleasant man but still something uncomfortable I felt about him in his presence.

The other man I was introduced to that night, a Russian, was also about 40 years of age. He was also as approachable as the driver had been. You can't say what people are really like. Just impressions, their looks and how they behave. At least with the driver I felt he could have helped you out if need be. This guy was a cold fish. I didn't like him. I felt his eyes on me that first night I sat in the kitchen drinking a coffee with John. It wasn't made obvious who he was nor what he was doing here. I never really found out. He would never say much when I spoke to him in Russian. Maybe he didn't understand Russian — but he had a Russian name. After several attempts during my stay, I simply ignored him. He seemed to be maybe a caretaker, maybe a part-owner, who knows. I didn't ask whether he lived here or not.

Before we turned in John showed me around the apartment. Belying the pension's shabby exterior the rooms were clean and warm. It is difficult to tell from photos on the internet when booking. In any case I was desperate to find a few nights accommodation when I was making arrangements in Melbourne. The rent was 60€ a night — 25€ more than the budget bed and breakfast accommodation I had booked for the remainder of my three-week stay.

The morning light through the French doors was aesthetic. Out on the small balcony it was still very cold. Below on the narrow street the black trees I'd seen the night before stood bare against a row of three-storey buildings. Small green buds had begun to sprout from their branches. It must have been a cold Spring. We were in its third month. Picturesque.

The wall radiators heated night and day. The fashionable and practical bifold doors that separated my small bedroom from the large well furnished timber-floored living room had a lock without a key. Despite the warm welcome I received from John I needed security. A key was cut for me, but it felt an awkward request. Just one of those little things one could do without after a long air flight. This was a pension not a hotel I know — but still.

Vasilievsky Island I found out had originally been intended as the city centre. It was built first. It became the intellectual centre - largely due to the presence of the State University not far

² When I returned to Melbourne a few months later, a TV program on "Putins Russia" mentioned an astonishing revival of church building and restoration

from where I stood that first morning. There was a vacant allotment between buildings just across the street which led to the university. For some reason it looked uninviting and I never took the dirt track through it. One time I remember I saw some men standing around a fire on the allotment about fifty metres away. I had the impression they were burning leaves. But how could that be in the third month of Spring? I should have visited the university and its Botanical Gardens. Originally it was the base of the Tsar's bureaucracy. I don't know why I didn't. Maybe at the time I didn't know its history.

The Hermitage Museum

On the first morning at the end of 5th Street - the streets were numbered 1st, 2nd and 3rd like New York Avenues, I reached the river and could already see the faded blue and gold columns of the Hermitage Museum - the main purpose of my visit. Previously it had been the Tsars' palace residence since the early 18th century.

As I crossed Dvortsovy Bridge over the Neva river I was blowing in the wind, still weak and recovering from illness but excited - well rugged up in overcoat and beanie to face the cold wind that blew along the busy main street Nevsky Prospekt. I remembered reading *The Diary of a Madman* by Russian author Nikolai Gogol, whose literary heroes walked the very same windy Nevsky Prospekt. I was in the zone!

Vasilievich Gogol (1809 -1852) was a Russian dramatist of Ukranian origin. Although Gogol was considered by his contemporaries one of the preeminent figures of the natural school of Russian literary realism, later critics have found in his work a fundamental romantic sensibility, with strains of surrealism and the grotesque ("The Nose", "The Overcoat" and "Nevsky Prospekt"). His early works were influenced by his Ukrainian upbringing, Ukrainian culture and folklore. His later writing satirised political corruption in "Dead Souls". The novel "Taras Bulba" (1835), the play "Marriage" (1842), along with the short stories "Diary of a Madman" and "The Carriage" round out the tally of his best-known works.

The Hermitage collection is mainly of western European art, from ancient to the early 20th century. For Russian art, I realised I'd have to look elsewhere. There was only one room in the entire Hermitage that featured paintings of 20th century art: The Russian Avante-Garde. There was however about a fifty-room collection of Ancient Rus (10-15th centuries) and up to the 18th century - artefacts, icons, portraits, and furniture. I was more interested in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The scale of Hermitage and its collection is overwhelming. I missed much of the historical aspects of the Hermitages' architecture. I simply moved through it — I chose to see its European art. You must be selective.

I spent two days in the dreamlike world of the Hermitage, exhausting myself as I climbed the worn marble staircases and walked the timber inlaid floors of the arcades, getting lost in its 120 rooms, until even maps couldn't help me. Then I sometimes asked attendants — in Russian.

The Museum consists of five linked buildings: the former Palace and the four 'Hermitages', built at different times in history. Though it was Tsarina Catherine the Great (1762-1796) who started the collection in the late 18th century to impress and entertain her visitors, it was Tsar Nicholas I who opened the collection to the public in 1852 in the New Hermitage, a building he had specifically re-designed to house and preserve the artistic masterpieces. The buildings are artworks in themselves.

The Winter Palace history

The Winter Palace was from 1732 to 1917 the official residence of the Russian Monarchs. When In 1905, the 'Bloody Sunday' massacre occurred and demonstrators marched toward the Palace, the Imperial Family had already chosen to live in the more secure and secluded Alexander Palace at 'Tsarscoe Selo' and returned only for formal or state occasions. Following the February Revolution of 1917, the palace was for a short time the seat of the Russian Provisional Government, led by Alexander Kerensky. Later that same year, the palace was stormed by a detachment of 'Red Army' soldiers and sailors—a defining moment in the birth of the Soviet state. On a less glorious note, the month-long looting of the palace's wine cellars during this troubled period led to what has been described as "the greatest hangover in history".

The Palace was built and altered almost continuously between the 1730s and 1837, when its interior was severely damaged by fire and immediately rebuilt.

The first Winter Palace for Peter the Great, designed by Domenico Trezzini and built in 1711, was a modest building of two main floors under a slate roof. In 1721, the second version built under the direction of Prussian architect Georg Mattarnovy, was still very modest compared to other royal palaces in Europe - it was two floors above a rusticated ground floor. It was here that Peter the Great died in 1725. In 1727 Domenico Trezzini completely redesigned and expanded Mattarnovy's Winter Palace. The third palace, like the second, was in the Petrine Baroque style. The fourth and final version of the Winter Palace, was to be an ongoing project for architect Francesco Rastrelli (a French-born Russian architect of Italian descent) during the reigns of the Empress Anna (1730-1740) and Empress Elizabeth (1741- 62). It was during the reign of Elizabeth in 1753, that Rastrelli devised an entirely new scheme on a colossal scale — the present Winter Palace. Work on the building continued even in the severest months of winter. The deprivation to both the Russian people and the army, caused by the ongoing 'Seven years' War' were not permitted to hinder the progress. The serf labourers earned a monthly wage of just one ruble. Even so the cost of the project exceeded the budget and work ceased due to a lack of resources. Taxes were increased on salt and alcohol to fund the building costs, not to mention the continuing war tax. By 1759, shortly before Elizabeth's death, the Winter Palace was near completion. The style of architecture came to be known as Elizabethan Baroque style. The green-and-white palace had the shape of an elongated rectangle. Following a serious fire in 1837, the palace's rebuilding left the exterior unchanged, but large parts of the interior were redesigned in a variety of tastes and styles.

In 1764, Empress Catherine the Great commissioned Yury Felton, a Russian architect of German descent, to build an extension on the east of the Palace, which he completed in 1766. This became the Southern Pavilion of the Small Hermitage. Three years later French architect Jean-Baptiste Ballin de la Mothe completed a Northern Pavilion near the river embankment. It was intended as a place of retreat from the formalities and ceremonies of the court. Catherine christened it the Hermitage, a name used by her predecessor Tsaritsa Elizabeth to describe her private rooms within the palace.

The interior of the Small Hermitage wing was intended to be a simple contrast to that of the Palace. It's been said that the concept of the Hermitage as a retreat was suggested to Catherine by that advocate of the simple life, Jean Jacques Rousseau. However, the extension became another palace in itself, connected to the main palace by a series of covered walkways and heated courtyards, in which flew rare exotic birds. It was richly furnished with an ever-growing art collection. The entire neoclassical building is now known as the Small Hermitage. During the time of Catherine, the Hermitage was not a public museum, being reserved for private invitations only.



The art collection and The Hermitage

In 1764 Catherine began her art collection by the purchase of some 300 paintings from Berlin merchant Johann Ernst Gotzkowski. He assembled the collection for Frederick II of Prussia, who ultimately refused to purchase it. The collection consisted of paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Jacob Jordaens, Anthony van Dyck, Paolo Veronese, Frans Hals, Raphael, Holbein, Titian, Jan Steen.

The palace's art collection was assembled haphazardly in an eclectic manner, often with an eye to quantity rather than quality. The Empress' ambassadors in Rome, Paris, Amsterdam and London were instructed to look out for and purchase thousands of priceless works of art on her behalf. As the palace filled with art it overflowed into the Hermitage.

So large did Catherine's collection become, that in 1771 she called on Yury Velten again to build a second and larger extension to the palace, which eventually became known as the Large Hermitage. In her lifetime, Catherine acquired 4,000 paintings from the old masters, 38,000 books, 10,000 engraved gems, 10,000 drawings, 16,000 coins and medals and a natural history collection filling two galleries. Later, she commissioned a third extension, the Hermitage Theatre, designed by Italian architect Giacomo Quarenghi and completed in 1789. This construction necessitated a major demolition of Trezzini's third Winter palace. A few rooms of Peters' original palace were preserved or restored.

Catherine took great pride in her collection, and actively participated in extensive competitive art collecting that was prevalent in European royal court culture. Through her art collection she gained European acknowledgment, portrayed Russia as an enlightened society and went on to invest much of her identity in being a patron for the arts. She was particularly fond of the popular deity Minerva, whose characteristics according to classical tradition were military prowess, wisdom, and patronage of the arts.

The Empress' life within the Hermitage, surrounded by her art and friends, was simpler than in the adjacent Winter Palace. There, the Empress gave small intimate suppers. Servants were excluded from these suppers and a sign on the wall read "Sit down where you choose, and when you please, without it being repeated to you a thousand times." Catherine was also responsible for introducing a lasting affection for all things French to the Russian court. While she personally disliked France, her distaste did not extend to its culture and manners. French became the language of the court. Russian was relegated for use only when speaking to servants and inferiors. The Russian aristocracy was encouraged to embrace the philosophies of Moliere, Racine and Corneille. The sophistication and manners observed inside the Winter Palace were greatly at odds with the grim reality of life outside its externally gilded walls. During her reign she further enslaved over a million peasants. The Palace interiors grew in richness and splendour under Catherine' rule, and continued until her death in 1796.

The fire and the opening of a Public Art Gallery

Tsar Nicholas I, who reigned from 1825-1855, was responsible for the palace's present appearance and layout. He not only effected many changes to the interior of the palace, but was responsible for its complete rebuilding following the fire of 1837. As completed, the overriding exterior form of the Winter Palace's architecture, with its decoration in the form of statuary and opulent stucco work on the pediments above façades and windows, is Baroque. The smaller and more private rooms of the palace were altered and decorated in

various 19th-century contemporary styles by Alexander Briullov according to whims and fashion of their intended occupants, ranging from Gothic to rococo.

The rebuilding of the palace took advantage of the latest construction techniques of the industrial age. The roof was supported by a metal framework, while the spans of ceilings in the great halls were supported by iron girders. Following the fire, the exterior, most of the principal state suites, the Jordan staircase and the Grand Church were restored to their original design and decoration by the architect Vasily Stasov.

Nicholas, conscious of the great art galleries of Europe, transformed Catherine's Large Hermitage into a purpose-built public art gallery. In 1839, German architect Leo von Klenze, drew up the plans and their execution was overseen by Vasily Stasov, Briullov and Nikolai Yefimov. After eleven years of work the museum was opened to the public in 1852.

In 1881, after revolutionaries assassinated Tsar Alexander II, as his carriage drove through the streets of Saint Petersburg, the Winter Palace was never truly inhabited again. The new Tsar Alexander III, was informed by his advisers that it was impossible to make the Winter Palace secure. The Imperial Family then moved to the seclusion of the Palace of Gatchina, some 64 km from Saint Petersburg. By comparison with the Winter Palace, the 600 room, moated Gatchina Palace, set within forests, was a cosy family home. When in Saint Petersburg, the Imperial Family resided at the Anichkov Palace, while the Winter Palace was used for official functions.

The storming of the Winter Palace

In March 1917, after much public protest, general unrest and turmoil, the last Tsar of Russia Nicholas II was advised to abdicate. Nicholas and his family were imprisoned. The Russian Council of Ministers was replaced by a Russian Provisional Government. It was the last time the Winter Palace would be the seat of government of the former Russian Empire. In February 1917, the Russian Provisional Government led by Socialist Revolutionary Minister Alexander Kerensky, based itself in the north west corner of the palace. Most of the state rooms were still occupied by the military hospital. By 25 October 1917, the Provisional Government was failing and realising the palace was a target for the more militant Bolsheviks ordered its defence. All military personnel in the city, led by Lenin, pledged support to the Bolsheviks, who accused Kerensky's Government of wishing to "surrender Petrograd to the Germans so as to enable them to exterminate the revolutionary garrison."

The provisional government, assisted by a few remaining loyal servants, who had formerly served the Tsar, barricaded themselves in the palace. Many of the administrative staff fled, leaving the palace severely under-defended allegedly by some Cossacks, cadets and 137 soldiers of the "Women's Battalion of Death". Food ordered by the occupants of the palace was commandeered by the Bolsheviks, and, in a state of siege, the Winter Palace entered its most turbulent period in history. Three shells from the cruiser 'Aurora' struck the building, bullet holes riddled the walls that faced the square and a window was shattered on the 3rd floor, before the Provisional Government were arrested.

Following the arrest, an alleged eye witness account by an unnamed source records that the Bolsheviks began rampaging: "The Palace was pillaged and devastated from top to bottom...Priceless pictures were ripped from their frames by bayonets. Packed boxes of rare plate and china were broken open and the contents smashed or carried off. The library was forced open and ransacked and the Tsaritsa's salon, like all other rooms, was thrown into chaos. The colossal crystal lustre, with its artfully concealed music, was smashed. Desks, pictures, ornaments—everything was destroyed."

The Soviet history of this largely bloodless battle, reads differently, and would be celebrated for 70 years as “The Most Glorious Moment”:— five thousand sailors newly arrived from Kronsdtadt, were deployed to attack the palace, while the Aurora positioned itself on the Neva, all its guns trained towards the Palace. Across the water, the Bolsheviks captured the Peter and Paul fortress and turned its artillery towards the besieged building. One by one the Government buildings in Palace Square surrendered to the Bolsheviks, leaving the palace seemingly only hours from destruction.

At 7:00 pm, the Government held its last meeting with the telephone and all contact with the outside world disconnected. A short debate determined that they would not leave the palace to attempt dialogue with the hostile crowds outside. With the palace completely surrounded and sealed, the Aurora began her bombardment of the great Neva façade as the Government refused an ultimatum to surrender. Further machine gun and light artillery fire were directed at the palace as the Bolsheviks gained entry via His Majesty's own Staircase. In the ensuing battle there were casualties on both sides until the Bolsheviks finally by 2:00 am. had control of the palace. Leaving a trail of destruction, they searched room after room before arresting the Provisional Government in the private apartment, from where they were taken to imprisonment in the Fortress across the river. Kerensky managed to evade arrest and escaped to Pskov, where he rallied some loyal troops for an attempt to retake the capital. His troops managed to capture Tsarskoe Selo but were beaten the next day at Pulkovo.

In the spring of 1918, with the approval of Lenin, Nicholas was handed over to the local Ural Soviet. Together with his family they were eventually murdered by the Bolsheviks on a July night in 1918. The recovered remains of the Imperial Family were finally re-interred in St. Petersburg, eighty years to the day on 17 July 1998.



The Collection post-revolution

The post revolutionary period saw a threefold increase in the collection. In 1917 the Winter Palace and the Hermitage were declared as state museums. And throughout the 1920's and 1930's the Soviet state seized and nationalised countless valuable private collections, namely those of the Stroganovs, Sheremetyevs, Shuvalovs, Yusupovs and the Baron Stieglitz.

In 1928, the Soviet government ordered the Hermitage to compile a list of valuable works of art for export. In 1930–1934, over two thousand works of art from the Hermitage collection

were clandestinely sold at auctions abroad or directly to foreign officials and businesspeople. The sold items included works by Raphael, Titian, Botticelli, Jan van Eyck, Rembrandt and Van Dyck. In 1931, after a series of negotiations, Andrew W. Mellon acquired 21 works of art from the Hermitage and later donated to form a nucleus of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The Leningrad Siege 1941

On a grim day in the Summer of 1941 the Hermitage Museum staff received an emergency summons. They immediately commenced to take down paintings, roll canvases and pack art treasures into boxes and crates. Artists, professors, historians and art lovers - even those with no affiliation with the museum lent a hand. They worked day and night to load two trains with over 1,118,000 pieces of art. In anticipation of a Nazi attack on the city they were transported some 2,000km to the safety of Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains.³ More than 2,000 people - Hermitage employees, artists and their families moved into the basement of the Winter Palace, which had been converted into a bomb shelter.

Cultural life managed to endure, even the absence of food and temperatures well below freezing. To pass the time scholars engaged in debate, artists painted pictures of their surroundings and residents kept a daily toll of the damage done. Several months later in December 1941, the literati gathered to mark the 500th anniversary of the Uzbek poet Nava'i. As Nava'i's verses were being read, the air shook with explosions of German shells. In June 1942, artists organised their first exhibition of works, as they had seen the city under siege.

Before the siege was lifted, two bombs exploded on Dvortsovaya pl., and more than 30 shells blasted the building. There was extensive damage to the building, all the windows are shattered, while snow and ice filled the rooms. Eighty museum workers died of starvation.

After wars end, the Hermitage staff immediately organised an exhibition. The majority of the valuable art was still in the Ural, but other pieces were brought out of storage and some rooms were hastily repaired. The exhibition opened in July 1944 - a demonstration of the triumph of art and beauty. The inhabitants of Leningrad had the chance to walk the clean, warm floors of the Hermitage.

Since 1991

In 1948, The Hermitage Museum incorporated the renowned impressionist and post-impressionist painting collections of Moscow industrialists Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morosov.

In 1991, it became known that some paintings looted by the Red Army in Germany in 1945 were held in the Hermitage. Only in October 1994 did the Hermitage officially announced that it had secretly been holding a major trove of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings. The exhibition "Hidden Treasures Revealed", where 74 of the

³ Sverdlovsk was renamed Yekaterinburg in 1991. The fourth largest city in Russia it is located on the border of Europe and Asia. Founded in 1723 and named after Yekaterina, wife of Tsar Peter the Great. In the 20th century an industrial city was built of iron in a regular square plan with fortified walls, an iron works and residential buildings at its centre. It has long been a focus of trade between east and west- "a window on Asia".

Following the October Revolution in 1917, the family of deposed Tsar Nicholas II were exiled, imprisoned and finally executed there in 1918. In 1990 the Russian Orthodox Church constructed a memorial chapel in dedication. The altar of the main church is directly over the site of the Romanovs execution.

paintings were displayed for the first time, was opened on 30 March 1995 and lasted a year. Of the paintings, all but one originated from German private collections, including the Otto Krebs collection, the collection of Bernhard Koehler and paintings previously belonging to Otto Gerstenberg and his daughter Margarete Scharf. Some of the paintings are now on permanent display, including works by Manet, Degas, Renoir, Cezanne, Picasso and Matisse — almost all of which had never been publicly displayed.

* * *

St. Petersburg Metro

On the third morning I decided to take the metro from Vasileostrovskaya Station, which was about a 30 minute walk from the apartment. The plan was to get out at Mayakovskaya Metro at the other end of Nevsky Prospekt, and walk the famous street back to the pension on my return later in the day. I had written things I thought would be of interest to visit in my pocket notebook, and marked the *Lonely Planet* guidebook with paperclips.

The **Mayakovskaya metro** stop was named after Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), the Russian Soviet poet, playwright, artist, and actor. During his early pre-Revolution period leading into 1917, Mayakovsky became renowned as a prominent figure of the Russian Futurist movement, being among the signers of the Futurist manifesto. Mayakovsky produced a large and diverse body of work during the course of his career: he wrote poems, wrote and directed plays, appeared in films and created posters in support of the Communist Party during the Russian Civil War. Though Mayakovsky's work regularly demonstrated ideological and patriotic support for the ideology of the Communist Party and a strong admiration of Vladimir Lenin, Mayakovsky's relationship with the Soviet state was always complex and often tumultuous. Mayakovsky often found himself engaged in confrontation with the increasing involvement of the Soviet State in cultural censorship and the development of the State doctrine of Socialist realism. Works that contained criticism or satire of aspects of the Soviet system, such as the poem "Talking With the Taxman About Poetry" (1926), and the plays *The Bedbug* (1929) and *The Bathhouse* (1929), were met with scorn by the Soviet state and literary establishment. In 1930 Mayakovsky committed suicide. Even after death his relationship with the Soviet state remained unsteady. Though Mayakovsky had previously been harshly criticised by Soviet governmental bodies, Joseph Stalin posthumously declared Mayakovsky "the best and the most talented poet of our Soviet epoch."

Vasileostrovskaya Metro station must have one of the steepest and slowest escalator descents in the world. I had to step quickly onto the moving timber steps in the early peak hour commute. The descent was poorly lit, illuminated by the occasional sign that advertised theatrical and cultural events like the Bolshoi Ballet or Victory Day celebrations for World War II which was getting near. Couples even had time for a "heart-to-heart" - they faced each other - the men travelling backwards. Maybe it was the fashion.

The escalator emptied us onto a well-lit long corridor full of people. People were milling around. I was at a loss so I asked a woman where I should catch the train. "Just stand here," she said. Baffled I stood in this low-ceiling corridor where many others stood. Suddenly there was an announcement and people moved to face the corridor wall. Then portions of the wall parted and sliding doors opened to reveal glass doors of a train. The train arrived without a sound - only the doors opening and exit of passengers was heard. The Russian woman

smiled at me before alighting the train. It was all like part of a Kafka novel or Magritte painting.⁴ Later on I found out that these “platform screen doors”, probably for safety, are unique to St. Petersburg Metro stations.

A few minutes later when the train began to hurtle its way deeper and deeper into the earth beneath the river, I realised the need for that long escalator. I stood for what felt like a long ten minutes and watched the regular pulse of tunnel lights on black soot-like walls. The loud rattle and side-to-side shaking of the train felt like an early 20th Century Futurist Art manifesto - and I hadn't even got to Mayakovskaya station yet! None of the other passengers seemed worried and looked relaxed- but I still had a tight grasp on the pole.

This was ordinary everyday stuff after all!

It's long distance between stations on the St Petersburg Metro. Relieved I got off with jelly-like legs at the next stop — Gostiny Dvor Metro before my planned stop.



⁴ Franz Kafka (1883-1924) A German language novelist. His work fuses reality and fantasy, typically featuring isolated protagonists faced by bizarre situations and incomprehensible bureaucratic powers. Themes such as alienation, existential anxiety, guilt and absurdity are explored.

Rene Magritte (1898-1967) A Belgian Surrealist artist his work is known for challenging observers preconditioned perceptions of reality.

One of the first great shopping arcades of the world, **Gostiny Dvor** was constructed between 1757-1785. Gostiny Dvor is a historic Russian term for an indoor market. These structures originated as collections of small shops where Merchants from other cities could come to sell their wares. Built in every large Russian town during the first decades of the 19th Century, they are fine examples of Neoclassical architecture. During post World War II reconstructions, its inner walls were demolished to create a huge shopping mall. The interior still retains a largely Soviet feel, with its endless corridors of counters.

The initial design and construction of the Saint Petersburg Metro began in 1938 before interruptions due to the war. It was opened in 15 November 1955. Further expansion has occurred since then well into the 21 Century. Some stations exhibit typical Soviet designs and feature exquisite decorations and artwork making it one of the most attractive and elegant metros in the world. The stations on Metro line 1 between PI Vosstaniya and Avtovo have particular striking designs. Due to the city's unique geology, the St Petersburg Metro is one of the deepest metro systems in the world.



The Russian Museum

Unlike the Hermitage, this museum's focus is on Russian art and culture alone, from primitive church icons to contemporary commercial art. Mikhailovsky Palace, the museum's main building, was designed by Carlo Rossi and built between 1819 and 1825. It was a gift for Grand Duke Mikhail, brother of Tsars Alexander I as a compensation for missing out on his chance for the throne. Nicholas II opened the building as a public gallery in 1898.

The museum dominates the Arts Square, a quiet tree landscaped area overlooked by a statue of Alexander Pushkin, erected in 1957. On other sides of the square are the Shostakovich Philharmonica, the Mussorgsky-Mikhailovsky Theatre ⁵ and the Brodsky House Museum, which was my next visit. The Russian Museum I visited one other time before my departure.

Alexander Pushkin (1799 -1837) was a Russian poet-playwright and novelist of the Romantic era who is considered by many to be the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern Russian literature. Pushkin was born into Russian nobility in Moscow. His matrilineal great-grandfather was kidnapped from equatorial Africa and raised in the household of Peter the Great. Pushkin published his first poem at the age of fifteen, and was widely recognised by the literary establishment by the time of his graduation.

While under the strict surveillance of the Tsar's political police and unable to publish, Pushkin wrote his most famous play, the drama Boris Godunov. His novel Eugene Onegin was serialised between 1825 and 1832. He lived and died in St.Petersberg. Pushkin was fatally wounded in a duel with his brother-in-law Dantes-Gekkern, a French officer who attempted to seduce the poet's wife Natalia Pushkina.

⁵ Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) Russian pianist and composer of the Soviet period. After official condemnation by Stalin, his 7th symphony (Leningrad Symphony) brought him honour and international standing when it was performed during WWII. A poly stylist, his music is characterised by sharp contrasts, elements of the grotesque and ambivalent tonality. He was also influenced by Neo-Classical style and the late Romanticism associated with Gustave Mahler.

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881) Russian composer, one of the group known as The Five", including Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin, that collaborated from 1856-1870 to create a distinctly Russian classical music - Russian history, folklore and nationalistic themes. Such works include "Boris Gudinov" and the piano suite "Pictures at an exhibition". He was an innovator of Russian music in the romantic period. He strove often to deliberate defiance of the established conventions of Western music.

While alcoholism was Mussorgsky's personal weakness, it was considered typical for those of Mussorgsky's generation who wanted to oppose the establishment and protest through extreme forms of behaviour. One contemporary notes, "an intense worship of Bacchus was considered to be almost obligatory for a writer of that period. "Talented people in Russia who love the simple folk cannot but drink." Mussorgsky spent day and night in a Saint Petersburg tavern of low repute, accompanied by other bohemian dropouts. He and his fellow drinkers idealised their alcoholism, perhaps seeing it as ethical and aesthetic opposition. This bravado, however, led to isolation and eventual self-destruction.

In early 1881 a desperate Mussorgsky declared to a friend that there was 'nothing left but begging', and suffered four seizures in rapid succession. Though he found a comfortable room in a good hospital the situation was hopeless. Repin, the great artist painted the famous red-nosed portrait in what were to be the last days of the composer's life. A week after his 42nd birthday, he was dead. He was interred at the Tikhvin Cemetery, of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St.Petersberg.

Brotsky House Museum

The house in which Isaak Brodsky (1884-1939) lived the last fifteen years of his life opened as a museum in 1949. Over several decades Brodsky had created a unique collection of paintings of Russian artists from the 18th to the beginning of the 20th century. As an artist himself his work provided a blueprint for the art movement of Socialist Realism. He is known for his iconic portrayals of Lenin and idealised, carefully crafted paintings dedicated to the events of the Russian Civil War and Bolshevik Revolution.

Brodsky was born in the village of Sofiyevka in Ukraine. He studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg. He was the first painter to be awarded the Order of Lenin. In 1934 he was appointed Director of the All-Russian Academy of Arts. From 1934 to 1939 he was also a head of personal Art workshop in institute, where his pupils included the well-known Soviet painters Nikolai Timkov, Alexander Laktionov, Yuri Neprintsev, Piotr Belousov, Piotr Vasiliev and Mikhail Kozell. He died in Leningrad in 1939.

* * *

Few of the artist represented here I imagine would be known to the western world. Of the following names I'd only heard of two myself: Ilya Repin, the most famous; Vasily Surikov, realist historical painter; Vasily Polenov, landscape painter; Valentin Serov, portrait painter; and more modern artists such as Konstantin Korovin, impressionist; Mikhail Vrubel, symbolist; and Boris Kustodiev, painter of strange designs. There were even some Soviet-era artists, such as Alexander Laktionov, socialist realist; Yuri Neprintsev, painter of genre and battle scenes; and Victor Oreshnikov.

What occurred upon my entry into the museum is worth retelling. After I paid the small entry fee an attendant introduced himself. When I responded in Russian and announced that I was an Australian artist of Ukrainian parents, he became excited and imparted this information to the two women who were sitting at a table near the entry. "Oh this is marvellous, marvellous, beautiful" they all exclaimed. I was then taken on a whirlwind Russian language tour of this two-storey 19th century furnished apartment by this expressive and animated man in his sixties. He talked quickly and I nodded, especially when I didn't understand – why break the most stimulating conversation I'd had since departing Australia - on top of that, such celebrity status never before experienced!

I was told about the paintings and historical anecdotes. Then he emphasised that as an artist I should also visit three other museums: the Academy of Arts Museum, which was just around the corner from the pension, the Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts, and Ilya Repin's House Museum.

Though many of the artworks collected by Isaac Brodsky were the lesser-known ones of great Russian artists, the experience of this little museum would always have fond memories. Finally, after more than an hour, and somewhat fatigued, I warmly thanked my most hospitable guide. There was much to learn about Russian history.

Ilya Yefimovich Repin (1844 -1930) was a realist painter. He was the most renowned Russian artist of the 19th century, when his position in the world of art was comparable to that of Leo Tolstoy in literature. He played a major role in bringing Russian art into the mainstream of European culture. His major works include "Barge haulers on the Volga" (1873), "Religious procession in the Kursk Province" (1883) and "Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks". (1880-91).

Repin's contemporaries often commented on his special ability of capturing peasant life in his works. In an 1876 letter to Stasov, Kramskoi wrote: "Repin is capable of depicting the Russian peasant exactly as he is. I know many artists who have painted peasants, some of them very well, but none of them ever came close to what Repin does. Leo Tolstoy later stated that Repin "depicts the life of the people much better than any other Russian artist". He was praised for his ability to reproduce human life with powerful and vivid force.

* * *

Meeting Lida

It was a five-minute walk to the theatre events booking office just opposite the Gostiny Dvor department store. A few people made the tiny room look crowded. A middle-aged woman attendant behind a grill was amused when I told her my parents are Ukrainian and I'm from Australia. I bought tickets for a concert of Russian war songs.

It was all very jovial and amusing for them to hear my Russian. Outside, down the few steps and into the hot sun, I noticed the face of a pretty woman I'd brushed past on the way out of the office.

"Did you buy your tickets?" I asked. She replied that she came here just to see what was playing. Soon we engaged in conversation.

She showed me some sights of the city, which was her hometown. I said I needed something to eat, so I followed her to a medium-sized city square – of which the city has quite a few – with seats, lawn and trees.

I ate a sandwich and we talked about various things. We shared an interest in music and art. She pointed out Dom Kino (the House of Cinema) which wasn't far away. It showed Russian and European art films. Her name was Lida. She was animated and interesting, worked in an office, lived with her mother and studied philosophy at night. She may have been a few years younger than myself. She spoke little English so our conversation combined both languages though mostly Russian.

She mentioned that not even professional people such as teachers can afford to visit the theatre or many concerts. I was taken aback when she used the words 'inconsiderate' and 'ignorant' to describe Russian people in general. She said Russians were more respectful towards foreigners like myself than towards their own kind. That has always stuck in my memory.

She wanted to show me the Dostoyevsky Museum which she insisted I visit. We walked along the Fontanka River ⁶ the longest canal in the city. This was no stroll - she needed to get home. When we stopped at a busy intersection near the metro named after the famous novelist, she pointed in the direction of the museum. Across the road was an arresting rust-coloured bronze of the great man. He sat upon a three-metre high plinth, chin resting on hand overlooking his Russian people with brooding despondency. We then descended the

⁶ The Fontanka is a branch of the river Neva, which flows through the city centre. It is 6.7km long. The Fontanka embankment is lined with the former private residences of Russian Nobility. It is one of 93 rivers and channels in St. Petersburg. In 1719 the river received its present name, because water from it supplied the fountains of the Summer Garden — the gardens of the modest 14 room Baroque 'Summer Palace' built for Tsar Peter the Great between 1704 and 1714. In 1780-1789, Andrey Kvasov superintended the construction of the granite embankments and approaches to the river. The river-bed was regularised as well.

elevator to the metro to the train platforms. Before departure, I asked whether she'd like to meet again. She gave me her phone number.

* * *

The following morning I visited the museum. He lived here the final three years of his life, during which time he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*. I had read the two volume novel recovering from a broken jaw in the Mackay Hospital, Queensland, Australia in the summer of 1981. The *Lonely Planet city guide* warns tourists to be careful walking the streets at night around Sennaya, the district where Dostoyevsky lived most of his writing life. I should have visited these streets during the day - or evening while it was still light. The museum seemed enough for me and there is only so much one can do. As an aside Dostoyevsky was Boris Spasskys' (chess player and world champion, born 1937-) favourite author.



Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was a novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist and philosopher. Dostoyevsky's literary works explore human psychology in the troubled political, social, and spiritual atmosphere of 19th Century Russia, and engage with a variety of philosophical and religious themes.

He began writing in his 20s, and his first novel, *Poor Folk*, was published in 1846 when he was 25. His most acclaimed works include *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). His 1864 novella *Notes from the Underground* is considered to be one of the first works of existential literature.

Born in Moscow in 1821, Dostoyevsky was introduced to literature at an early age through fairy tales and legends, and through books by Russian and foreign authors. His mother died in 1837 when he was 15, and around the same time he left school to enter the Nikolayev Military Engineering Institute. After graduating, he worked as an engineer and briefly enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, translating books to earn extra money. Publication of his first novel gained him entry into St.Petersberg's literary circles.

Arrested in 1849 for belonging to a literary group that discussed banned books critical of Tsarist Russia, he was sentenced to death but the sentence was commuted at the last moment. He spent four years in a Siberian prison camp, followed by six years of compulsory military service in exile.

In the following years, Dostoyevsky worked as a journalist, publishing and editing several magazines of his own. He began to travel around western Europe and developed a gambling addiction which led to financial hardship. For a time, he had to beg for money, but he eventually became one of the most widely read and highly regarded Russian writers. His books have been translated into more than 170 languages.

When he died, his body was placed on a table, following Russian custom. He was interred in the Tikhvin Cemetery at the Alexander Nevsky Convent, near his favourite poets, Nikolai Karamzin and Vasily Zhukovsky. It is unclear how many attended his funeral. According to one reporter, more than 100,000 mourners were present, while others describe attendance between 40,000 and 50,000. His tombstone is inscribed with lines from the New Testament.

Victory Day (Den Pobedy) and Concert May 9

At the pension, when I asked John where best to witness the 9th of May Victory Day he replied “everywhere — all over the city”. His reply was curt and appeared not too informative or interested. After breakfast I headed to Nevsky Prospekt. There were red banners stretched between buildings, but no crowds or marches on the road as I'd expected. Maybe I'd missed it. I felt somewhat disorientated, mystified and also jaded. Given my poor health, I couldn't be bothered to find out more or ask anyone. Besides it was a public holiday and the streets were empty. Remembering the end of WWII must still hold a special spot on the calendar in St Petersburg- surely, I thought. When I read in the *Lonely Planet guide* that Piskaryovskoye Cemetery, where people assembled, was a remote and difficult place to get to, it became all too much. The poor maps only made things more difficult. Some days later I did notice a Metro named “Park Pobedy” on the map.

With apologies to the fallen I spent the day following the meander of the picturesque Griboedova Canal, stopping at sites of interest to take photos.⁷ In the emptiness of side streets I noticed an occasional red banner or Russian flag draped from windows. The canal was constructed in 1739 on the basis of the existing river Krivusha. In 1764–90 the canal was deepened and the banks were reinforced and covered with granite. Its length is 5 kilometres with a width of 32 metres. Before 1923 it was called Catherine Canal, after the empress during whose rule it was deepened. The Communist authorities renamed it after the Russian playwright and diplomat Alexandr Griboyedov.⁸

I made a point to seek out the faded green and white façade of the famous Mariinsky Theatre which I was to visit for a concert tonight. By late afternoon after walking for more than three hours and with the onset of fatigue I decided to call it quits. When I took one of the narrow streets leading back to the pension I saw a crowd of people moving across the main road ahead of me. I quickened my stride and as I neared the procession the noise gradually increased. I joined the wayward motion of this throng. It was much like a football crowd going home after a game - a game that was lost. I was swept along amidst this part of sorrowful history. At Leytenanta Bridge before the river the crowd dispersed and fell into disarray going in different directions. The bridge and surrounding roads had been closed to traffic. The heat of the day and alcohol had taken its toll on some Victory Day participants. It was a welcome relief to find shade in the narrower streets of the island. I was glad there was no one at the pension. Exhausted I had a cold lemonade and fell asleep.

Later on I found out that Piskaryovskoye Cemetery was the main burial place for the half million people laid to rest there between 1941 and 1943 — victims of the Nazi blockade. Originally, this area was just an enormous pit where unnamed and unmarked bodies were dumped. Only in 1960 was the remodelled cemetery opened to become an integral part of the city's soul. Every year on Victory Day, the cemetery — Park Pobedy — is packed out with mourners who lunch at the graves, many of whom survived the blockade or lost close relatives to starvation.

* * *

The evening's walk to the Mariinsky Concert Hall across the same bridge now carried cars not people. I had allowed myself about thirty minutes to walk there at a fairly brisk pace. The modern concert hall, opened in 2009, was at the rear of the historic theatre built in 1859. The hall's interior was well lit and the tiered seating comfortable. When the curtain rose at eight very loud enthusiastic applause came from the young people about me. It was a full house.

⁷ Many photographs of StPetersburg were lost with my digital camera, which was stolen in Paris some weeks later. (If travelling always copy your photos!) Fortunately I had two cameras- the other being a 1985 "Ricoh" single lens reflex" camera. Despite being more bulky and visible, I didn't care about "being seen as a tourist". It had an aperture so one could "frame" the shot. It had never let me down - as a cruel turn of luck this time it did - half or more of the photos were underexposed due to a shutter problem.

⁸ Alexander Griboyedov (1795-1829) A Russian diplomat, playwright, poet and composer. He is remembered solely for his verse comedy *Woe from Wit* (1822-24), a satire on Russian aristocratic society. Rejected by the censors, many copies were made and privately circulated, but the author never saw it published. Only once did he see it on stage, when it was performed by the officers of the garrison at Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia.

Griboyedov joined the hussars during the war of 1812 against Napoleon. After the war he lived in St.Petersberg where he joined the diplomatic service and was appointed secretary in the Russian mission in Tehran. A friend of Alexander Pushkin, and a sympathiser with the Decembrist revolt of 1825 against Nicholas I, he was arrested in the following year but soon released. In 1828 he was appointed Russian Minister in Tehran. He died there at the hands of a mob that attacked the Russian Embassy.

The songs were mostly by young female and male soloists with the accompaniment of a 50 piece orchestra. Some of the plaintive melodies I remembered from the days when my parents had guests at home to sing or listen to vinyl recordings made during the 1960s and 70s. I thoroughly enjoyed the concert.

Outside it was now a warm night. I thought about the requiem that had been this day. As an elderly Englishman said to me in the cafeteria of the Hermitage Museum yesterday, "The Russians have much to remember." As I walked along I suddenly realised the street looked strange. I stopped. The buildings in the poor light looked unfamiliar. I'd taken a wrong turn. The streets were deserted. It wasn't yet completely dark under the ink blue sky - the sun sets much later here. I tried not to panic. I stopped under a street light and looked into my *Lonely Planet*. I took my glasses from my pocket. I'd bought new glasses in Melbourne before departure especially to read these small print maps. No wonder people use mobile phones to find their way. I had to retrace my steps back to the theatre. Still not enough light to read. Theatre closed already. It was to be trial and error. I wasn't even sure of the direction. The exit from the theatre had thrown me onto another street and the darkness of a strange St Petersburg night had done the rest. I tried to remember in which direction I'd arrived. Things always look different at night. Just as well I was sober. Finally I recognised something to find my way back to the river. I returned to the pension before midnight.



Nils Budget Bed and Breakfast

5ya Sovetskaya Ulitsa, Smolny

This morning after breakfast John photographed me standing on the small balcony adjoining the room. Then he drove me out of goodwill to Nils Bed and Breakfast pension – home for the next two weeks of my stay. The spartan impression of this part of the city indicated its poorer standing in comparison to Vasilievsky Island. It took John some time to find the street number. Eventually he had to phone the owner. John was a pleasant guy. He helped me with my luggage.

A rank odour of urine hit us when we walked through a dark ten metre long covered walkway before entering a tattered courtyard surrounded by two-storey high walls. The manageress met us at the first floor landing. We shook hands and as John descended the stairs I felt like saying I might come back.

Connie, a German woman in her thirties, informed me I'd have the place to myself except for visits by the cleaning lady and occasionally herself. I was pleased about that. There were three other rooms apart from mine, with shared kitchen and two bathrooms. She showed me the internet and the phone from which I could call her husband Nils if I should need something. Inside the room she showed me the mosquito control device, saying they could be a problem. A power plug heats a toxic tablet into a vapour. For a moment I couldn't take it all in. I imagined the mosquitos breeding under my room in some subterranean lagoon or swamp on which St Petersburg was built.

Sorting out my belongings, I heard the reverberated sound of high heels coming from the courtyard below. Through the window I saw a tall blonde-haired woman in a short black skirt and high boots walking back and forth on the white concrete paving. She was smoking and appeared somewhat anxious. She finished the cigarette and disappeared into the building opposite. A few minutes later the high heel sounds reverberated again. This time she had a mobile phone and another cigarette.

The woman looked like the girls I used to see soliciting clients on the streets of St Kilda, Melbourne, where I had lived. Her demeanour was outwardly very sexual. The decadence of the situation seemed complete. She disappeared then reappeared again, followed by a thickset man who stood framed by the doorway.

* * *

I decided to have an early lunch at a restaurant the manageress recommended opposite the apartment. It was Wednesday and I was able to cross the quiet road.

This very cosy café had tasty Russian food: various bliny (pancakes), pilmeny, pirogy and various salads. The staff were friendly and the prices inexpensive. When in a strange city for some time it's always a godsend to find such a place to which one can return. After lunch I was keen to have a quick look around the neighbourhood.

This southern neighbourhood of Smolny,⁹ where I stayed had ten parallel streets, all named “Sovetskaya” (Soviet Streets) — similar to the street naming system of the previous neighbourhood where I stayed. The area appeared mainly residential with some commercial buildings and corner shops. I later read they were built in the 1930s. The architecture was three to four storey, brown and grey, of a monolithic character and the treeless streets made the neighbourhood feel tough and uncompromising. I was amused to read that a young Vladimir Putin spent his youth playing on these streets.

After walking a few blocks in the sunshine I returned to the courtyard of the bed and breakfast. It was then I experienced my third seniors moment of St Petersburg in less than twenty-four hours. I couldn’t find the entry door into the apartment building! I walked back onto the street and then again into the arched entryway that connected into the courtyard. In desperation I crossed the road, read the street sign, recognised the café at which I had just eaten. It was the same street.

Then I realised there were two courtyards very much similar - the two courtyards were connected. As I walked into the other one I suddenly saw the long-legged blonde woman I’d seen earlier. I walked towards her. Her hair was bleached - she was on her mobile and didn’t want to be disturbed or didn’t understand my Russian and called out, “Serge”. Serge appeared and motioned with his arms where the residence was. My foolishness felt complete. I had walked past the doorway several times. The door was set into a niche immediately to the right of the entry. Having walked into the sunlit courtyard as quickly as possible away from the decrepit dank stench of the entryway, I hadn’t noticed the small niche and door. Just as well this wasn’t at night!

The following morning I encountered a hobo lying on the staircase on my way out. How he got there, I don’t know. Someone must have left the door open. I had one of those key-cards which wasn’t so easy to use. When I phoned the manager Nils to tell him about the hobo, he said “don’t let him in”. He was there for three days.

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⁹ Smolny is the city’s political and diplomatic centre. The City Governor’s office is at the Smolny Institute (built 1800-1808). Also a large number of foreign consulates are located in Smolny. Originally a school for aristocratic girls, the Smolny Institute became the headquarters for the Bolshevik Central Committee. From here Trotsky and Lenin directed the October Revolution. In 1934, popular Leningrad Party chief Sergei Kirov was assassinated as he left the building, sparking the notorious Leningrad purges.

The Tauride Palace (built 1783) and gardens is also found in Smolny. Tsarina Catherine the Great built this baroque palace for Prince and famed General Gregory Potemkin — her favourite lover. The palace takes its name from the Ukrainian region of Crimea, which Potemkin conquered. The palace was a thank you. The Institute is not open to the public. The gardens, on the other hand, are open to all. Once the romping grounds of the tsarina, the gardens have become - in true Soviet style - a park for the people. The tree-lined dirt paths and picturesque pond make for a pleasant place to stroll.

Near the Neva river next to the Institute stands the monumental baroque Smolny Cathedral (built 1748-57). Other famous landmarks are the Sheremetev Palace (1750-55) and Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts (1885-95)

Don Quixote at the Mariinsky

My visit to the historic Mariinsky Theatre two nights after being at the concert hall was made on a bus boarded at the noisy transport stop on Nevsky Prospekt near the Fontanka Canal. On the way I noticed some roads being relaid with new stones, not bitumen — in keeping with the historic charm of the city. They don't allow modernist architecture here.

I had decided to have dinner at the nearby theatre's "official restaurant" called "Back Stage". Despite the tour guide book's mention that the service comes with a "sniff", I found the traditionally attired waiter very obliging. In my dark blue pinstriped suit I was also dressed for the occasion. Only one other table was occupied - no celebrities here I could talk about! I paid 800 rubles for an excellent salmon meal with white sauce, celery and spinach. There was a complimentary appetiser of two warm rolls with butter and cheese. With wine the total cost was below 1200 rubles (approx. \$30 AUD) - and no tell-tale "sniff"!

The \$100 AUD performance of Don Quixote would have made Miguel de Cervantes not only roll but moan in his grave. My choice to see this ballet was influenced by a performance I'd seen on TV choreographed by the legendary Russian ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev. As I sat in the dress circle of this magnificent auditorium I imagined I could hear his cries of despair as well.

* * *

On stage in the theatre, Don was a tertiary background figure parading about with his lance and sometimes a horse — a live one of course — and making wooden gestures towards the dancers. The prima donna was worth much more than a gesture. I watched her float and dance on air like a feather in the pale blue light for close on 2½ hours. The prima donna and horse deserved the greatest applause. Don Quixote was never historically a ballet and I should have chosen a classic such as Swan Lake. During the interval when I mentioned to a large American man next to me that the performance was already too long he retorted that "it was great... just like a tennis match." I couldn't see the parallel. In a larger-than-life tone he made a point to mention that he had hired for his wife and himself the services of "a lovely Russian female guide" to show them the city. Good idea I thought, pompous old arse. I could have asked him how much, but why fuel the fire?

To be part of a performance here was worth the money - and from the balcony at that! To imagine the history of a theatre such as the Mariinsky. Opened in 1860 the theatre became the pre-eminent music theatre of the late 19th Century Russia, where many of the stage masterpieces of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov received their premieres. It was named after Empress Maria Alexandrovna wife of Tsar Alexander II. The theatre's name has changed throughout history. During the soviet era it was known as the Kirov Theatre.



I returned to the apartment the same way. The loneliness has started to kick in after about a week on my own here - especially at night. One does keep interested in the sights of the new world to which one has been delivered. As was my routine, often with alcoholic nightcaps, I scoured the *Lonely Planet* guide and various other information to plan for the following day and wrote them into a notebook.

Anna Akhmatova Museum

The weather here is more changeable than in Melbourne. This morning was cold and damp. I felt somewhat restless. From the pension I strolled through the deserted treeless streets of the Smolny district to the Anna Akhmatova Museum, housed in the south wing of the Sheremetev Palace (built 1750-55).

The Sheremetyev family was famous for the concerts and theatre performances they hosted at their palace, which was the centre of musical life in the 18th Century city. The family was one of the wealthiest and most influential noble families of Russia. They held many high commanding ranks in the Russian military, governorships and eventually the rank of Count of the Russian Empire. The building is now a branch of the State Museum of Theatre and Music. St. Petersburg's most famous 20th Century poetess (1889-1966) lived here from 1924-1952, as this was the apartment of her common-law husband Nikolai Punin.

Akhmatova's tragic masterpiece "Requiem" depicted the Stalinist terror of the time. Her work was condemned and censored by Stalinist authorities and she is notable for choosing not to emigrate, remaining in Russia and acting as witness to the events around her. Her perennial themes include meditations on time and memory, and the difficulties of living and writing in the shadow of Stalinism. Primary sources of information about Akhmatova's life are relatively scant, as war, revolution and the totalitarian regime caused much of the written record to be destroyed. For long periods she was in official disfavour and many of those who were close to her died in the aftermath of the revolution. Akhmatova's first husband Nikolai Gumilyov was executed by the Soviet secret police, and her son Lev Gumilyov and her husband Nikolai Punin spent many years in the Gulag where Punin died.



In the entrance hall I purchased an audio tour from the 'Babushkas' (Russian word for old woman or grandmother) for which I paid a few rubles. The directions to her apartment were very poorly marked and I had to return to the Babushkas. It's frustrating in Russia! The Babushkas' loud voice echoed as they gestured toward the long corridor. I climbed the



stairs to the apartment on the second floor. It was filled with mementos and letters of the poet. A peaceful place for an artist to live I thought. The views through the large windows of the trees and garden looked contemplative. I didn't listen to much of the two hour audio tour. I should have bought it in English. After that, I rushed through the place. My footsteps reverberated through the marbled corridors as I walked to retrieve my bag from the Babushkas. I thanked them and thought that this museum must be part of their history as well. On the way out, I mused about the poets insistence that "man has a need for poetry".

* * *

Outside it was still damp and grey with traffic on the street in gridlock. It seems worse than any place I've seen especially when the streets here are mostly narrow. And the pollution is significant when the air is still.

Tsar Peter the Great didn't have cars in mind when plans for the city were drafted. I had read that freight and passenger boats were the first types of urban transport in the city. Route and recreational steamers would have cruised the river and canals in the late 19th Century. Private horse and cart cab drivers were the land transport until 1847, when the first horse-driven train cars appeared (omnibuses). Afterwards there were steam trams and then our electric trams. It now has 5 million inhabitants.

Apart from the threat of cars when crossing the road - even at designated crossings they don't stop- there is the threat of walking itself. Some of the old pavements have such cracks and unevenness between their slabs, one needs to watch every step.

I walked along the Fontanka Canal to my next destination: The Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts, about a thirty minute walk. It was nearly lunchtime and I was hungry. The wind had sprung up bitterly cold - straight off the Baltic Sea. I entered the museum and climbed the stairs for a quick look. The stone columns and decorative vaulted ceilings reminded me of the old, cool and quiet museums I liked to wander through when it was hot. It was a place to which I'd have to return.

Outside, I spotted a café across the road. Georgian food. A basement café with windows at street level, where all you could see were the legs of pedestrians. It had started to rain. I had prepared for different weather. The weather report had been wrong – or was it yesterday's I had heard? In either case, after my simple meal I returned to the pension on foot.

The Museum of the Defence and Blockade of Leningrad

This museum is a few doors away from the beautiful Museum of the Decorative and Applied Arts. I would visit both today. Firstly I would summon my strength and afterwards pay a visit upon beauty.

The Leningrad Blockade (St. Petersburg was known as Leningrad at that time), was undertaken by the German army in September 1941 and was only lifted in January 1944, two years and four months later - although the Soviets managed to open a narrow land corridor to the city in January 1943. The Germans planned on lack of food being their chief weapon against the citizens. They calculated the city would reach starvation after a few weeks. The siege caused the greatest destruction and the largest loss of life ever known in a modern city. The extreme famine resulted in two to three million deaths. Economic destruction and human loss on both sides exceeded the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It was not until the late 1980's under Glasnost that this museum was established and opened in 1989. A memorial museum was established around this site immediately after the end of the Blockade, and covered an area 30 times the size of the current one. Fearing the unifying power of such a monument, Stalin ordered its destruction during the purge of the Leningrad Party in 1948. The museum director was shot, the larger exhibits were destroyed and the rest were burnt until nothing was left.

The "Road of Life" was the winter transport route across the frozen Lake Ladoga, which provided the only access to the besieged city. Each winter the lake ice route was reconstructed by hand and built according to precise calculations depending on the traffic volumes. In addition to transporting thousands of tons of munitions and food supplies each year, the road served as the primary evacuation route for millions of soviets trapped within the city. The road today forms part of a World Heritage Site.



Flanked by two anti-aircraft guns, I entered through double doors of this modest looking pale yellow façade. The grim but engrossing exhibition contained donations from survivors, propaganda posters and photos that depicted life and death during the blockade. For the remainder of my stay, I wouldn't visit another war monument. My only glimpse was of one of those great heroic monumental sculptures on a passing train on the way to Pushkin to visit Catherine's Palace. It made an impression on me even at a distance. I never found out what it depicted. To see sculpture soar above you would be quite an experience.

The Museum of Decorative Arts and The Academy of Arts

At the Museum of Decorative Arts, a very attractive attendant said I should visit the school. I didn't know about any school. We had talked for some time. When I spoke Russian sometimes I would be asked questions. This time I could have spoken Russian all night. She said to turn right at the top of the stairs. The normal sized door I entered from the second floor landing opened onto a vast palace-like interior. This large and imposing interior belonged to the Academy of Arts.

I found myself on a colonnaded balcony full of students, mostly young women, drawing at their easels! What a strange sight! A palatial stone staircase in the centre led to a marble floor below, the entire atrium lit by a huge glass vaulted ceiling. It was a bit stuffy however as the sun radiated through the glass. In the arched colonnade below the balcony, teachers and students stood looking at large canvasses. The girls weren't distracted by my presence.



They studiously attended to their charcoal and pencil drawings of the architecture. I walked the entire four sides of the atrium balcony with barely a glance my way. Most of the drawings were of a high standard. A particular classical approach was definitely being followed.

I returned the way I had entered to wander through the cooler and quiet rooms of the museum. Medieval handcrafted furniture, 18th century Russian tiled stoves and beautiful glass cabinet displays. The quietness of these traditional museums recalled my youthful experience of Melbourne's once-beautiful city library and museum, which I would love to wander through alone with others who wandered through alone. I didn't want to leave this place. Would I return another time to speak with the beautiful attendant?

The museum had been in 1878 that millionaire Baron Stieglitz founded the School of Technical Design and wanted to surround his students with world class art to inspire them. He began a collection that was continued by his son and was to include a unique array of European and Oriental glassware, porcelain, tapestries, furniture and paintings.

Between 1885 and 1895 a building designed by architect Maximilian Messmacher was built to home the collection, also a masterpiece. Each hall is decorated by its unique style, including Italian Renaissance, Flemish and Baroque. After the revolution the school was closed and most of the interiors brutally painted or plastered over. The painstaking renovation continues to this day, despite receiving no funding from the Ministry of Education under whose direction it falls.

The Vocal Babushkas

I stood almost asphyxiated in a sardine-packed peak time trolley bus on my way 'home' along Nevsky Prospekt. It appears the people of St Petersburg are under siege again, I thought to myself. It was a very warm late afternoon. How can they put up with this? I twice leaned over seated passengers to open a window but couldn't get enough leverage. Finally someone opened a window. It appears today survival is of a different type in St Petersburg. The vocal Babushka conductors don't put up with any rubbish. Their way of law and order is impressive and effective. They would tell younger people to offer seats to seniors, or reproach them for not showing their tickets correctly. Several young women sighed at their admonishments. I'd had a conversation with a 'Babushka' once at a quieter time. I could tell she warmed to me when I told her a little about myself. Yes, we need more Babushkas in the world.

A Calendar Mix-Up

Tonight I was told is Friday, not a Saturday as I've spent the day thinking. I've only just noticed the year 2012 printed on the pocket-sized calendar an attendant gave me two days ago on my way out of the Dostoyevsky Museum. Why? Why would someone give you a 2012 calendar in May 2011? At first I thought it was a printing mistake. I'd been keeping track of the dates, so when I got the calendar I started crossing off the days. Nothing too serious. Just as well I noticed. If anything I've gained a day. As I was told by Connie, the pensione manageress, "Remember – this is Russia!"

I feel I'm beginning to adapt to the conditions that come with being in a strange environment. The weatherman got it wrong in the morning again - or was it me again? I had taken my

overcoat in anticipation of a cold forecast. By midday I was lugging the coat and pullover over my arm as I trudged along. Better than being cold as on the previous day I thought.

Tonight I felt more at home, as I sat eating at the usual very cosy “Ruskie Bliny” (Russian pancakes) Cafe. English-language pop played in the background and the food tasted home-cooked. The usual language exchange with the waitresses- I’d speak Russian while they practiced their English! It requires some give and take- but my Russian was better than their English, so I persisted. Might as well enjoy it - the language in Paris will make life much more difficult than here. I had expected a phone call from Lida about meeting up on the weekend. With the calendar mishap and now being a day earlier, I was hopeful she’d call tonight. She didn’t. I’ll call her tomorrow.

Cruising the Canals

Saturday morning was warm and only got breezy once the tour boat turned from the Fontanka river into the Neva. This time I didn’t have my overcoat. It was a spontaneous decision to dash down the steps from the Anichkov Bridge ¹⁰ where I stood idling away time near one of the four rearing sculpted horses for which the bridge is famous. The city has 340 bridges some adorned by animals or strange creatures. Most are drawbridges that are raised every evening at designated times to let ships pass.



The cold wind that suddenly blew across the river scattered the accented English of the woman delivering our informed tour. I had to brace and rub my arms several times as we passed the Peter and Paul Fortress which had an island all to itself. I noticed a few boys playing on its banks near its walls.

¹⁰ Anichkov Bridge is named after the original timber bridge (built 1715-16) designed by Russian engineer Mikhail Anichkov. The bridge was rebuilt of stone in 1842 and reconstructed again in 1906-08. The “Horse Tamers”(four rearing horses on pedestals at each corner of the bridge) symbolise man’s struggle with nature. Designed by Russian sculptor Baron Peter Klodt Jurgenburg, they were installed 1849-50. In 1941, during the war, when the bridge came under heavy fire from German artillery, the sculptures were removed from their platforms and buried in the nearby Anichkov garden. The bridge suffered serious damage during the war, but has been fully restored. As a memorial, the pedestal of one of the statues retains the effects of artillery fire, with a plaque explaining this to passersby.

Nearby on the Fontanka river is the Anichkov Palace (built 1741-50). Tsarina Catherine the Great presented this palace to her favourite lover General Potemkin. After 1936, the palace became the city’s largest Pioneer Club, and to this day it houses more than 100 after-school clubs for over 10,000 children.

Founded in 1703, the Fortress is the oldest main building in St. Petersburg. It was built as a defence against the Swedes, but they were defeated before the Fortress was completed. It was never utilised in the city's defence. Up until 1917 the main use of the structure was as a prison. One of the first most famous inmates was Tzar Peter's own son Alexei who was tortured and killed for the betrayal of his father. Other famous residents were Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Maxim Gorky, Noi Trotsky, Mikhail Bakunin and Alexander Lenin (Vlad's older brother). It boasts a fine cathedral at its centre,

I was relieved when the boat finally turned off the river into a canal. I hadn't bought a thin waterproof jacket with me, which is indispensable in these situations and can be carried without taking up much baggage room. I'd bought a long grey raincoat — like the ones I'd seen older women wear playing lawn bowls which I didn't like to wear. Very practical it could be scrunched up - but it was still in the suitcase.

“Myr Second” (Second World)

The following morning, in an adjacent street to the pension I passed a grim-looking man burdened with a sandwich board which read “Myr Second”. “Myr” means “world” in Russian. I had thought of the world hereafter and that this was a religious expression of some sort or a crank advertising the occult.

I was on my way to a local travel agent to get information about an out-of-city trip for a day or two to an old Russian provincial town. The place that interested me was called Karelia. The *Lonely Planet* guide's description had fired my imagination:

Karelia is a unique destination, filled with birch forests, inland lakes and historic architecture. The region is tucked between Europe's two biggest lakes, Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega. The former is the site of the age-old town of Staraya Ladoga (Old Ladoga - population 3,000) and the stunning Valaam Monastery. This sleepy village played a crucial role in the very birth of the Russian nation. It dates from the 8th century. In 1704, Peter the Great founded Novaya (New) Ladoga to the north as a transfer point for materials arriving to build St. Petersburg. The town's basic structure and street patterns have remained virtually unchanged since the 12th century. The fortress (Staroladozhskaya Krepost) contains within its partially ruined walls, 12th century frescoes of St. George's Church, the wooden church of Dimitri Solun and the main tower's marvellous views of the winding Volkhov River. Just as the origins of ancient Rus are constantly debated, so is Staraya Ladoga's status as Russia's first capital.

The village was 125km east of St. Petersburg. The tree covered Valaam Island with its 14th century monastery was a further 120 km east, a 6-8 hour trip. The *Lonely Planet* guide's public transport directions didn't infuse confidence. The travel agency was busy. I was told that the lakes were still frozen and they didn't know if the boats were travelling to the island. They would find out for me. The uncertainty of the situation was frustrating. It seemed expensive- or did my imagination inflate the expense in thousands of roubles? The cost of a one day, two night return trip to Valaam Island would cost about 4,000 roubles - an affordable \$100AUD.

Late afternoon that day, I passed the same man with the sandwich board at the same spot on my way back to the B&B. I stopped. It was then that I happened to notice a sign in a nearby basement shop window which read “Myr Sekond Hand” - “Second Hand World” - then it dawned on me - this was what in Australia we call an “opportunity shop”!

I purchased a pair of shorties to wear as pyjamas for 260 rubles (about \$8 AUD) which I told the Babushka was too much, but I couldn't be bothered haggling. Earlier in the week when looking around the shops at Gostiny Dvor, I'd noticed the cost of clothing is very expensive here. I went off happy, laughing at the sensation this "royal" blue glossy number will cause in Paris when I arrive there in a few weeks' time.

In the end I gave up on the out-of-city trip. It seemed too complicated and I felt it required more energy than I had. The mosquitoes were still giving me sleepless nights - I didn't want to use the power point insecticide - perhaps a roll-on repellent would be better.

Pushkin and Catherine Palace

The only time I ventured out the city was a visit to Catherine's Palace, an hours trip 25km south. Thirty minutes to Moskovskaya metro (one stop past Park Pobedy) and another thirty by bus. The choice was either Peter the Great's Palace (often compared to Versailles) or Catherine's'.

A Day Out With Lida

Talking with Lida on the phone the previous night she suggested a visit to the Hermitage Museum. On Sunday we met at Gostiny Dvor near the Metro entrance on Nevsky Prospekt. She was interested to see the "Prado" exhibition of paintings on loan from the great museum in Madrid. She seemed in a hurry. I was swept up in her whirlwind of action. I can't even remember how we got to the Museum.

Inside the entrance foyer booking area was busy as usual. The sound of footsteps and voices scattered over the cold surfaces of polished stone. I mentioned that I'd seen the Prado show earlier and that I'd be prepared to see it again. Indifference may have shown in my voice.

"Then you should see the 'Gold Exhibition' instead," she said. Somehow she managed to organise my entry to join the Russian-spoken tour. We would meet back here in less than an hour. She said I would have to hurry to catch up to the tour group.

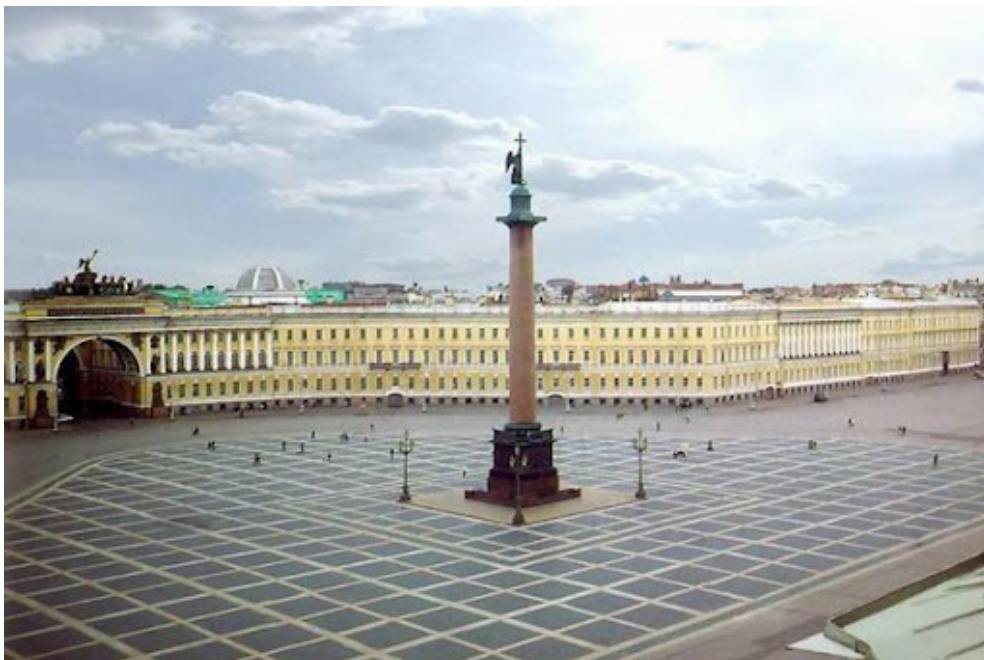
The exhibition was very interesting. It was a varied hoard of Scythian ¹¹ and Greek gold and silver from the Caucasus, Crimea and Ukraine, dating from the 7th to 2nd centuries BC. Various artefacts were displayed behind glass cabinets under light in otherwise dimly lit rooms. These delicate small-scale objects were a relief from the ostentatious gold interiors of tsars and monarchs. When the tour finished, we were given the choice to continue into the Prado exhibition. I returned to the foyer. As I sat waiting, I thought perhaps I should have gone with her to the Prado exhibition after all. It was well after the time we'd agreed to meet. Half an hour had gone towards an hour.

As more time passed I became restless. It suddenly then occurred to me that she had my camera. Photography wasn't allowed, so I'd left it with her before I scurried off. I was seized with panic and then suspicion. I should've known I thought. When I first met her at the Marinsky Theatre booking office, how quickly and naturally she had responded to me – and then offered to show me around the city and how to get back home again. I began to imagine all these "signs" that should have been obvious to me earlier. Leaving the foyer I wandered outside into the sunshine. I was in disarray and furious with myself. I sat under an

¹¹ The Scythians were a large group of Iranian Eurasian nomads who inhabited large areas of the central Eurasian steppes from the 9th to 1st Century B.C.

umbrella at a table. People sat at other tables eating ice cream and drinking coffee. I bought an ice cream.

All this just for a camera, I thought. At least it's only a 1980s analogue and not digital. I wandered back into the Palace Square to walk through this vast expanse bathed in sunshine toward the towering Alexander Column ¹² at its centre. I remembered the written information at Nils B&B that warned guests about thieves who could disarm you without a trace of violence or threat. How could I have got it so wrong about her? No - I had to return one last time to the foyer. As I turned to walk back I suddenly heard my name being called once, then twice. Through the groups of people in the square I saw her moving quickly towards me. "I have your camera," she said. "Where have you been?" was all I could blurt out. I felt a strange mixture of shame and redemption - maybe my instinct about her had been correct afterall? I apologised for not waiting. It was all somewhat ridiculous and awkward. It is natural for travellers to sometimes feel the worse.



We walked across the square toward and through the Triumphal Arch. I was being led again, this time to the Nabokov Museum. The exhibition on show there depicted a number of white-line sketches on black and dark colour backgrounds. There were also captions of Nabakov's writing. I didn't particularly like them and said they were too dark.

The Russian-American novelist Vladimir Nabokov lived in this house which is now a museum with his wealthy family from his birth in 1899 till the 1917 revolution, when they were able to leave the country. He was also known by the pen name Vladimir Sirin.

His first nine novels were in Russian, and he achieved international prominence after he began writing English prose. Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), his most noted novel in English, was ranked fourth in the list of the Modern Library 100 Best Novels. His memoir, *Invitation of a Memory* (1951), was listed eighth on the publisher's list of the 20th century's greatest nonfiction.

¹² The 47.5 metre high Alexander Column was designed in 1834 by French architect Montferrand. Named after Tsar Alexander I, it commemorates the 1812 victory over Napoleon. On windy days, contemplate that this pillar is held on its pedestal by gravity alone! The granite monolith was shipped from Finland. Weighing 600 tonnes it was erected by 3,000 men in less than two hours

He was a finalist for the National Book Award For Fiction seven times. Nabokov was an entomologist (a student of insects), an expert lepidopterist (a student and collector of butterflies and moths) and a composer of chess problems. Nabokov never returned to Russia dying in Montreux, Switzerland in 1977.

When we stepped outside again I felt a bit tired and hungry after all the excitement. We had lunch at an elegant, small restaurant not far away along a narrow side street. We didn't say much after we left the restaurant. She asked me when I was leaving St Petersburg. It was in less than a week. I said I'd phone her. I phoned and spoke with another woman, perhaps her mother, and left my name. Lida seemed a strong-headed practical woman with a delicate appearance.

Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood

I only visited two churches here. There are many. It has long been a tradition in Russian architecture to erect religious buildings in honour of historic events. The Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood stands on the spot where Tsar Alexander II was fatally injured in March 1881 by a bomb, thrown into his carriage by a radical, Ignaty Grinevitsky, a member of a group known as "The People's Will". Partly modelled on St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow it was built between 1883 and 1907. The Bolsheviks opened the doors of the church to the



public, but not built to withstand the wear and tear of thousands of visitors, its interior began to suffer. Following the closure of most churches by Stalin in the 1930s, the church was used to store various items from potatoes to theatre sets. Decades of abuse and neglect finally ended in the 1980s. It reopened in 1997 and is thus famed as the church that took 24 years to build and 27 years to restore, for that's how long it took to refurbish the 7,000 square meters of wonderful mosaics that line the inside walls. These days it functions as a museum, though services are sometimes held here on special occasions.

The Erarta Museum May 19

Just as I was beginning to think I wouldn't see any contemporary art here, I came across this museum. I don't remember how I came to know about it. It wasn't mentioned in the *Lonely Planet* guide.¹³ The museum was located in the southwestern part of Vasilevsky Island. I did notice the *Lonely Planet* guide mention that "there are few reasons to go out to the far northern and western edges of the island ... to want to visit this strangely empty end of the island". One believes most of what's written in these tour guide book - subconsciously or otherwise. I belatedly thought it might have been interesting to visit this "strangely empty end of the island".

I travelled once again by Metro under the Neva river to the island and then by tram. About a 20 minute trip, and a 10 minute walk. I didn't expect to see the massive and imposing Neoclassic-Modernist architecture that confronted me that morning – especially here in this empty somewhat desolate surrounding. Several pine-like trees stood in front of a five-storey plastered façade. I was excited.

The main collection of paintings were to be found on the upper two floors. I'd been feeling dreary, but now I walked enthusiastically up the stairs!



I read the Erarta Museum is the largest private museum of contemporary art in Russia. It houses 2,300 works, mainly paintings, by more than 250 artists from all over Russia, produced between the 1950s and the present time. It represents a strong selection of late Soviet underground art. It opened its doors in 2010. On the first floor, I looked at copied miniatures of the originals I had seen upstairs. The cost was 5500 rubles (\$170 AUD) on canvas or paper. Then I had lunch at the somewhat vacuous basement café-restaurant before I left.

Just to name a few artists I found of interest: Anastasia Bazanova, Pyotr Gorban, Vladimir Parshikov, All Ozhigirey, Nikolay Kopeikin and particularly Vyacheslav Mikhailov, Vladimir Ovchinnikov and Andrey Neganov. The exhibition was highly stimulating.

¹³ After I returned to Melbourne, I was surprised to read that the guidebook on StPetersburg I'd purchased was published in 2008. The Erarta Museum opened its doors in September 2010. I haven't been able to glean any further information about this building's history

Outside, I walked the empty street, a bare park on one side back to the tram stop. I got off the tram at the main Metro and walked along the busy 6th street, full of shops and cafes, and then to the church on the corner of the main road Bolshoy Prospekt, where people often stopped to cross themselves before moving on. Then across Bolshoy Prospekt to walk along the arched arcade as I'd done before, and down the narrow street that ran towards the river and under the small balcony of the small room I stayed in just last week. At the next corner, facing the cold wind off the Neva, stood the Russian Academy of Arts Museum.

Academy of Arts Museum

This monumental three-storey neoclassic edifice takes up an entire city block. It abuts the busy road opposite the river with just a narrow footpath. John, the manager at the previous pension, mentioned that it was a place I should visit, since he knew I had an art background. I'd felt its façade pompous and uninviting – with its far-too-close proximity to the traffic. I'd once stepped briefly into its foyer.

The Imperial Academy of Arts Museum, as it was called when completed under Catherine the Great's monarchy in 1789, was part of an experiment to create a new species of human - the artist. Boys would live here from the age of five until they graduated at age fifteen. Some would be sent to European capitals for further study. I had seen some of these artists' paintings at the Hermitage Museum a week ago – artists such as Vasily Petrov - one of the founding fathers, Rafail Levitsky, Isaac Levitan, Vasily Surikov and Ivan Shishkin. There would be no contemporary paintings by Russian artists on exhibition here.

Training at the academy was virtually required for artists to make successful careers. For the most part, it worked. Many great Russian artists were trained here, including Ilya Repin, Karl Bryullov and Anton Losenko. But the curriculum was designed with the idea that the artist must serve the state. This conservatism led to a reaction against it.

In 1863, some 14 students left to found a new movement, which became known as the Wanderers (Peredvizhniki). They travelled among the people, painting scenes of realism that had never been seen in Russian art. Without the patronage of Pavel Tretiakov, Russia's greatest private patron of the visual arts and a self-made textile baron, the Wanderers would not have survived their first hard years of independence, when the private art market beyond the court and the aristocracy was still extremely small. The name 'Wanderers' derived from the travelling exhibitions organised by their collective in the 1870's. From 1870 to 1923, the Wanderers organized 48 art exhibitions that travelled to the provinces from St Petersburg and Moscow to Kiev, Kharkov, Kazan, Oryol, Riga, Odessa and other cities.

The group were influenced by the public views of the literary critics Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolai Chernyshevsky, both of whom espoused liberal ideas. Belinsky thought that literature and art should attribute a social and moral responsibility. Chernyshevsky supported the emancipation of serfs, which was finally realised in the reform of 1861. Because of Chernyshevsky's political activism, officials prohibited publication of his writings. But it eventually found its way into the art world of nineteenth-century Russia with



the help of the Wanderers, who took some of the pervasive Slavophile ¹⁴ populist ideas of the time and worked out how to display it on canvas.

¹⁴ Slavophilism was an intellectual movement that first appeared in the 1830's. Its followers were determined to protect what they believed were unique Russian traditions and culture, and that "Western" institutions should not be imitated in Russia. They criticised the modernisation of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, rejected individualism, and opposed industrialisation and urban development.

Rural life was praised and "Russian mysticism" was preferred over "Western rationalism". The Orthodox Church was seen as more significant than the State.

For the decades after the Decembrists' uprising in 1825, there existed in Russia a crisis about its national heritage and identity. Russia stood in a sense "out of time", without a past or future, having played no part in the history of the world.

The European Russians (or "Westerners") argued that Russia should absorb more of what the West had produced for the development of her own powers and importance. Peter the Great (Tsar from 1689-1725), had founded St. Petersburg in the gulf of Finland in order to provide access to the West and to create an administrative and bureaucratic capital. He attempted to reorganise Russia on Western lines, modernising the army and navy, reforming the legal system and encouraging education, while bringing the church under state control. By the 1860's Slavophilism had lost much of its impetus.

Their art portrayed aspects of social contemporary life: injustices and poverty, beauty of the folk way of life, suffering and strength of character, natural beauty of landscapes, a wider scope of imagery of lighter palette with a freer manner of technique.

It was on the third and top floor of the museum that I was astonished. Here, in separate rooms stood large extraordinary timber models of the original versions of three great cathedrals: the Smolny Cathedral, St Isaac's Cathedral and the Alexander Nevsky Monastery. I was dumbstruck. I could easily have missed all this – how could it be that this hadn't been advertised in large letters in any of the tourist advertising that lay piled on my table back at the pension? I took photos.

Through the window that looked out over the river to the city I could see the distant dome of St Isaac's Cathedral, as I stood in this room beside its three-metre high wooden replica. I sat in a chair for some time in this well-lit, high-ceilinged room, transfixed in awe at this model. This cathedral is the dominant feature when one stands in the PI Dekabristov (Decembrists' Square) - named after the Decembrists' Uprising on 14th December 1825.

The Decembrists were young military officers who were inspired by the radical ideas from France during their Napoleonic campaigns and wanted to introduce constitutional monarchy. Ineptly they set up their protest on the same day as the swearing in ceremony of the new Tsar Nicholas I. After repeated attempts by Nicholas' ministers to reason with the rebels, they were fired upon. Many officers and bystanders died as a result. Most of the leaders later ended up on the gallows or in Siberia.

* * *

Later, outside the museum in the warm late afternoon light, I waited for a break in the traffic to cross to the famous riverside sphinxes. The architect of the Academy Alexander Kokorinov, had also designed a quayside in front of the building with stairs down to the river. This quay had been adorned with two 3000-year old sphinxes transported from Egypt. I scampered across to the other pavement and took some photos, then stopped in the alcove to look over the water. There was no one on this side of the river — for that matter, few people on the street at all — only cars. A small boat and tourist ferry passed. In earlier times, I imagined people would have walked between quayside and the Academy of Arts building and taken a boat. Now constant traffic disconnects sphinx and museum.



The Constantine Experience

I bumped into Constantine in a “cul-de-sac” on my way to the Rachmaninov Antique Hotel.¹⁵ I was curious after reading a description of the hotel in the *Lonely Planet* guide - “Stuffed full of antiques and paintings adorn the premises. Sometimes host gatherings of artists and musicians who are staying in the city.” Worth a look, I thought.

The street on which the hotel was located had been blocked off by a fence, but it wasn’t visible until you suddenly came upon it. Suddenly, there was this man standing where the footpath abruptly finished. He told me in Russian the same thing he had presumably told the woman who’d just passed me – “the road is closed for repairs”.

I asked him whether he knew of the hotel. He said he could take me there another way. We walked along in amiable conversation. Constantine told me he was Chechen and had worked as an electrical engineer before arriving in St Petersburg. He looked older than his professed 38 years and possessed a streetwise air about him.

Suddenly he stopped and said, “Vladimir – you’re a very good man. I would like for you to have this.” He spoke in English now that he knew I was Australian. He took a worn brown-coloured cardboard binder from his shoulder bag. “I used to work in a library,” he said, “and collected these maps as an atlas.” I noticed several single page maps. They weren’t impressive. He insisted that I have them when I declined. I put them in my bag. He declined my offer to buy him an alcoholic drink. It was then that I smelt alcohol on his breath and minutes later he took a bottle of Kahlua from his bag and took nips as we continued to walk - It didn’t smell like Kahlua.

Soon we arrived outside the rear of the hotel. The narrow street or service lane then opened out upon a squarish courtyard of significant size. The courtyard was of uneven earth, covered in tufts of grass with nondescript buildings surrounding it. We were alone apart from

¹⁵ Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was a Russian pianist, composer, and conductor of the Late-Romantic period. As a member of the Russian bourgeoisie, he did not support Bolshevism, nor did his father manage to keep up with the aristocratic circles he had been born into, so that in due course came the humiliation of selling the family estate - then Rachmaninoff’s own estate, Ivanovka, was seized by the Leninist regime in 1917. At the height of such turmoil, Rachmaninoff received an offer to perform ten piano recitals across peaceful Scandinavia, which he used as an excuse to quickly obtain permits for his family to leave the country. On 22 December 1917, they left on an open sled, travelling north through Finland and on to Helsinki, with some money, a few notebooks with sketches of compositions, and two orchestral scores. The tour lasted from February to July 1918.

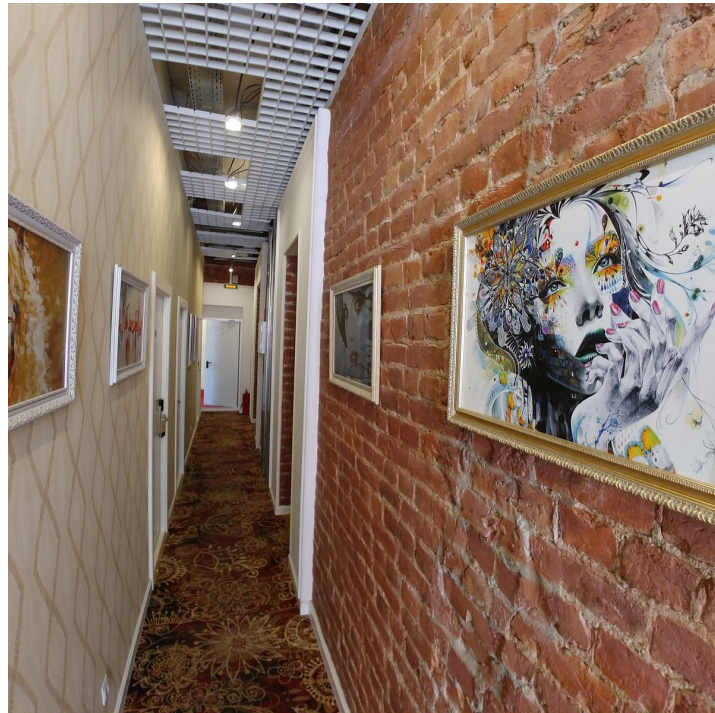
With the war continuing across Europe throughout 1918, Rachmaninoff planned his future. He now saw performing in America as the best solution to his growing financial concerns. In 1918, the family boarded a boat in Oslo, Norway bound for New York City, arriving eleven days later. They settled in West End Avenue and Rachmaninoff accepted a piano from Steinway as a gift, and acquired Charles Ellis as his agent, who secured him forty performances across the following four months. The family recreated the atmosphere of their Ivanovka estate at their new home, entertaining Russian guests, employing Russian servants, and observing Russian customs.

Rachmaninoff sought the company of fellow Russian musicians and befriended pianist Vladimir Horowitz - their first meeting took place in the basement of Steinway Hall in New York City in 1928, four days prior to Horowitz’s debut at Carnegie Hall playing Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No.1. For Horowitz, the opportunity represented a dream come true as Rachmaninoff was “the musical god of my youth ... the most unforgettable impression of my life!” The men remained supportive of each other’s work, each making a point of attending concerts given by the other. Horowitz remained a champion of Rachmaninoff’s solo works and his Piano Concerto No. 3. Rachmaninoff never returned to Russia.

two workmen, who looked at us from time to time as we stood in the warm dull afternoon sunshine and talked about Russia, money and life in general.

The whole thing had a derelict feel about it. I didn't feel threatened but stayed aware. This place we'd come to appeared isolated. I noticed Constantine sometimes rolled his eyes to reveal the whites. Maybe because he spoke English and had to concentrate more. He said he wanted to practice his English. We spoke in Russian and English - a patchwork of coloured language. After some fifteen minutes or so we parted. I thanked him and walked into the hotel.

The hotel was a disappointment. The staircase and corridors were so narrow - two people could barely pass each other turning sideways. The uneven floorboards creaked as I crept along I felt like an intruder. Edgar Allan Poe would have loved it. I couldn't get far enough away from the paintings to see them – even if you wanted to. A man noticed me as he opened his door slightly ajar. I kept walking as if I was a guest myself. Out of the corner of my eye he looked back suspiciously. Best get out of here I thought. Before leaving the hotel, I returned to the desk clerk to enquire about the costs - 102€ per night - 40€ and 65€ more than the places where I resided. It pays to be an artist or musician to stay here I thought.



When I returned to the pension, I took the "atlas" from my bag. It was then that I became somewhat paranoid. I had put the Chechen, the electrical engineer and the atlas, the war with Russia and all the rest to come up with terrorism! I recalled his insistence that I take his gift. His reluctance to take no for an answer. The maps were torn at the edges, dated and had an illegible scrappiness about them. I had visions of the "atlas" exploding. What was this? I won't carry this anywhere. Not knowing what to do with it, I left the atlas on a window sill in the vacant room opposite mine. The following day I attempted to tell Connie the manageress about this. It was a foolishness I regretted but something had to be said. She just threw it in the bin. How could someone believe that an electronic device and detonator could be concealed within the cover or pages of an atlas!

Last Night

I farewell a city by doing or going somewhere different. Connie the manageress told me there was a restaurant not far away. For several days I had yearned for a steak. The restaurant I found in the vicinity was a French restaurant. Steak in a French restaurant - my next destination being Paris. "Yes we have steak" the waiter said.

It was so overheated I had to shed my suit jacket and pullover. Whenever I attend a musical event, as was to be tonight with a visit to a jazz club, I wear a suit. I don't care about the underdressed locals or about appearing conspicuous. I feel good in the suit, and that was that. I enjoyed the meal and two glasses of house red. As usual a very reasonable cost - at that a French restaurant.

The metro was also overheated - was it really so cold outside - or was I overheated? Today had been warmer than predicted. I took a wrong turn trying to find the train platform. I purposely left the maps and notebooks behind. It was only one metro station and then a short walk. I walked quickly to find the club. It was a small place. I stood at the bar not far from the entrance door. It was crowded warm and noisy. It felt good. The jazz was loud — two trumpets duelling - felt avant-garde - people enjoying it. Smoking was allowed. I didn't mind. I was lost in this small crowd. Happy for a short time.

After I ordered my second beer, I moved away from the bar and stood nearby against the back wall. Spontaneous shouts and whistles emanated from the audience in front of me - mostly seated. This track sounded like Miles Davis.

During the break, a younger woman came and introduced herself to me and asked where I was from. How did she know? Was my suit was so out of place - maybe a bit out of mind? We talked briefly and finally she invited me to return next week to hear her sing. I told her I'd like that very much. I didn't tell her I was leaving for Paris tomorrow.

I left the club after an hour or so. The outside night was still light. My steps resonated in the empty treeless street. The dark architecture against the sky smacked of a De Chirico painting. The four-block walk to the metro along Shpalernaya ulitsa with its middle-of-the-road pavement I loved. One of those walks you wish might never end. I must have been getting nostalgic. I crossed Tchaikovskogo ulitsa before I reached the metro.

* * *

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 -1893), was a Russian composer of the Late-Romantic period. He was the first Russian composer whose music made a lasting impression internationally, bolstered by his appearances as a guest conductor in Europe and the United States. Tchaikovsky was honored in 1884, by Emperor Alexander III and awarded a lifetime pension.

Although musically precocious, Tchaikovsky was educated for a career as a civil servant. There was scant opportunity for a musical career in Russia at that time and no system of public music education. When an opportunity for such an education arose, he entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory from which he graduated in 1865. The formal Western-oriented teaching he received there set him apart from composers of the contemporary Nationalist movement embodied by the Russian composers of 'The Five', including Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, with whom his professional relationship was mixed. Tchaikovsky's training set him on a path to reconcile what he learned with the native musical practices to which he had been exposed from childhood. From this reconciliation, he forged a personal but unmistakably Russian style — a task that did not prove easy. The principles that governed

melody, harmony and other fundamentals of Russian music ran completely counter to those that governed Western European music; this seemed to defeat the potential for using Russian music in large-scale Western composition or for forming a composite style, and it caused personal antipathies that dented Tchaikovsky's self-confidence. Russian culture exhibited a split personality, with its native and adopted elements having drifted apart increasingly since the time of Peter the Great. This resulted in uncertainty among the intelligentsia about the country's national identity — an ambiguity mirrored in Tchaikovsky's career.

Despite his many popular successes, Tchaikovsky's life was punctuated by personal crises and depression. Contributory factors included his early separation from his mother for boarding school followed by his mother's early death, the death of his close friend and colleague Nikolai Rubinstein and the collapse of the one enduring relationship of his adult life, which was his 13-year association with the wealthy widow Nadezhda von Mack. His homosexuality, which he kept private has also been considered a major factor, though some musicologists now downplay its importance. Tchaikovsky's sudden death at the age of 53 is generally ascribed to cholera. Also there is conjecture it may have been accidental or self-inflicted.

Departure May 21

It was a 6am rise. The flight departure was 10am. A scheduled 3 hour flight. I had slept a few hours only with that one mosquito in the room. Insect screens had been installed on the windows two days ago. I was thankful. Better late than never — somehow one got in.

Outside it was barely light and very cold. The driver was a burly man - more normal-looking than the previous one. During the drive to the airport I pondered upon the incredible failure of not being able to seek out a chess club. Three occasions I tried to find the Chigorin Chess Club.¹⁶

Its address had been given to me by a pretty woman at one of the tourist information centres. At the address, my enquiries with shopkeepers and workers shed no light to its whereabouts. Maybe I'd been there when it was closed. I even climbed stairs to upper floors. No sign. Even several street chess players I'd met couldn't tell me. I surely expected there to be several clubs here and that I wouldn't have any difficulty whatsoever. Maybe times had changed in contemporary interest in chess clubs. The strange thing was the chess club was mentioned on the internet at that address.

¹⁶ Mikhail Chigorin (1850-1908) was the last great player of the Romantic chess style and a major source of inspiration for the 'Soviet chess school', which dominated world chess in the mid to late 20th Century. The romantic style of chess was prevalent until the 1880s. It was characterised by swashbuckling attacks, clever combinations and brash piece sacrifices. Chigorin played two World Championship matches against Austrian Wilhelm Steinitz losing both encounters. He lived in St. Petersburg.

Although Steinitz became "world number one" by winning in the all-out attacking style that was then common, he unveiled in 1873 a new positional style of play, and demonstrated that it was superior to the previous one. His new style was controversial and some even branded it as "cowardly", but many of Steinitz's games showed that it could also set up later attacks as ferocious as those of the old school.

The debate was so bitter and sometimes abusive that it became known as the "Ink War". Steinitz was the target of anti-Semitic abuse, and moved to the United States to escape this. By the early 1890s, his approach was widely accepted, and the next generation of top players acknowledged their debt to him, most notably his successor as world champion, Emanuel Lasker.

I also regretted having missed Ilya Repin's House Museum in Repino and the nearby forgotten provincial town of Vyborg on the Finnish border. I never did take that one day trip out of the city.

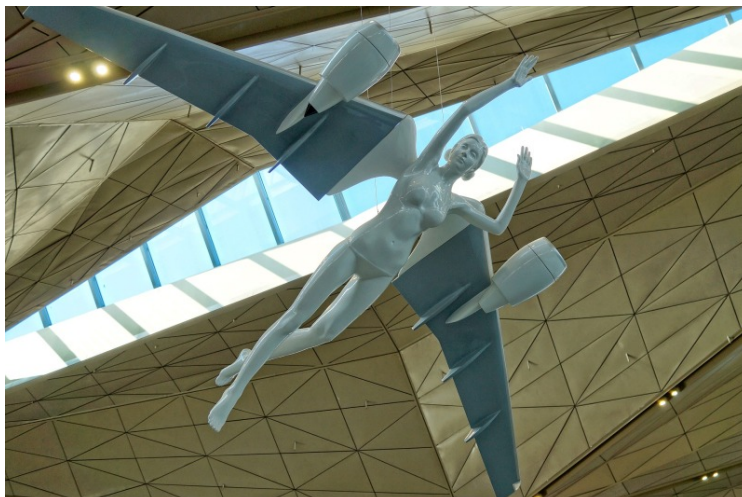
The 17km trip seemed shorter back to Pulkova airport. Inside the main gallery of the airport several Americans were making quite a noise. Then an agitated man asked me if I knew where the International terminal was. I quickly walked to an attendant at the desk to ask. We would have to drive there - ten minutes away - another Russian Moment! Didn't my driver know I was departing for Paris? Never assume - another oversight. We all hurried back outside to the taxi rank. The angry American was already haggling a fare before getting in the cab.

I took the next cab. An old car with an ageing, unshaven face of a driver. The windows were wound down as we took off. The air still cold. I had my Hugo Boss overcoat on. He was smoking. The weak sunlight had broken through the pale sky. It was a slow short drive - a long ten minutes. The motor struggling - seemed I was inside the cabin of a chaff-cutter soon to be left to rust in a paddock. I looked at the grim, determined and somewhat desperate face of the driver. Blessed holy Saint Vladimir! I thought - the Russians really know how to make the tourist experience unforgettable. When we finally arrived he barked his charge - 600 roubles (\$20 AUD for a kilometre or so drive). "That's too much," I replied angrily. He was gruff and dogged. Better not argue - the luggage is in the boot. I threw the money on the seat and slammed the door. He didn't care. He helped me with the luggage. A poor man most likely. When I later told a young Russian guy on the plane about the incident, he replied, "That's angry Russian capitalism."

A final airport incident occurred when a woman burst into the toilet cubicle I occupied - the door couldn't be locked - presumably she couldn't wait in the long queue outside the "women's" - and I couldn't wait to be out of here!

Groups of us were driven in a van some hundred meters or so to a small and older looking aeroplane - Russian Aeroflot Airlines. We then climbed steps from the tarmac onto it. I felt more nervous than usual about all this. At least it didn't have propellers I thought. Despite the cramped conditions the flight was smooth in clear weather. It was made more enjoyable by a Russian guys regular offers of Scotch whiskey from an aisle seat across from mine.

He and his two associates were documentary film makers and ventured each year to locations outside of Paris or Argentina to make videos for Russian TV programmes. He also mentioned that if I wanted to experience "real Russia", I should have to visit the interior. What he meant was that St. Petersburg's Russians are more "Western" than Moscow's or those further east. It's said if you're fortunate enough to be invited into a Russian's house, you will discover genuine Russian hospitality. Well, this meeting on the plane was as close as I got. We both enjoyed the intoxicated Russian conversation. There was no computer entertainment, so I was thankful to meet these guys from Moscow.



Paris Orly Airport

It was a long wait at Orly Airport for my luggage to arrive. I recognised the Russian guys who poured whiskey for me on the plane. They also waited for some time. I walked over and wished them a good trip. Off the plane the tone of conversation is different - everyone is going their own way. With little sleep the previous night I was running on nervous energy.

My plan was to take a train or bus to Gare Montparnasse and then walk to Hotel Mistral which I'd booked for two nights. Then a short walk from there to the apartment I'd call home for three weeks.

After passing through customs I walked up and down the long main gallery of the airport several times. I noticed buses standing outside on the other side of the huge curtain wall. I found the Korean Air office - it wasn't attended - I asked about the buses at another desk - "Bonjour, parlez vous Anglais?", in the formal manner rather than the informal "Parlez tu..." Then to wash up, get some Euros and have lunch. It was all a struggle even with these few things. Some two hours later I was on the bus. I took in the sights for about an hour and a half. I met a pleasant American- an ecclesiastic on business in Paris - good omen!

Late afternoon we were dropped off at Gare Montparnasse - I'd read it was one of six large rail terminals. I had a vinyl covered pocket sized book map of Paris, purchased in Paris 1985 all those years ago but no mobile phone. Maps always look simple but can be deceptive, especially topography- straight along Avenue du Maine, a busy wide road then to Rue Cels near Montparnasse cemetery and the hotel. Now time for the "mule act" - a rucksack bag and a luggage case on small wheels - of course it was uphill - I seldom take cabs if in walking distance. After a few hundred metres, I walked into an Indian Restaurant and showed them the address - the proprietor phoned the hotel then gave me directions. Not far, he said. I felt assured - a further twenty minute walk.

Hotel Mistral was tiny in all ways - the rooms, very tight staircase, and budget. Passing people on the staircase could be amusing. Generally young people and typically tired or vacant expressions of tourists - perhaps mine was similar. For dinner the concierge recommended Rue de la Gaite an attractive narrow street full of cafes and restaurants - about a ten minute walk. I walked the length of the street both sides before returning to an Italian restaurant for a Spaghetti Bolognaise. As expected the price rise compared to St. Petersburg was significant.

* * *

Rue de la Gaite, crammed full of small theatres since 1818 - when the Montparnasse Theatre first opened its doors, ran along the outside of the Farmers' General tax wall. This made it a good location to drink wine that was not subject to the Paris tax, and the number of music halls, theatres and restaurants that sprang up gave its name - gaite meaning gaiety. It was absorbed into Paris in 1863.

Sometimes Political meetings were held in the cafés in the street. Gustave Courbet and many of Paris' bohemian intellectuals and artists used to drink at the Cafés des Mille Colonnes, next to Bobino at No. 20 in the 1860s. In 1904 all the Russian revolutionary groups in Paris would meet there

Bobino was a music hall theatre that had seen most of the biggest names of 20th century French music perform there. Started by Lisa Bennie, Bobino began as a dance hall in 1800, became a theatre in 1873, and was converted back to a music hall in 1926.

Bobino was one of the most popular entertainment spots in France during the 1920s and 1930s. Edith Piaf sang there at the end of the 1930's. After 183 years, Bobino closed its doors in 1983, but reopened in 1991. In 2007, Gerard Louvin and Stéphane Cherki turned Bobino into a cabaret named Bobin'o. Entertainers who performed there were Charles Aznavous, Georges Brassens, Gilbert Becand and Josephine Baker.

During 1870 - 1871 the dance hall, Bal du Jardin de Paris, at No. 21 was used to hold public political meetings. The Montparnasse Theatre you now see at No. 31 was rebuilt in 1886 and is on the list of historic monuments. It staged the Paris premiere of Bertolt Brecht's 'Threepenny Opera', in 1928.

I was not aware of this history during my visit. There were little or no recognisable physical remnants, unless one was made aware of it. Probably I had walked past the Montparnasse Theatre at No.31 without knowing.

Meeting Alexandre May 23

At ten in the morning I returned to the apartment building I visited yesterday to meet the manager. The entrance to the four storey corner building was on Rue du Texel, a quieter narrow side street, compared to the other very busy but not much wider Rue Raymond Losserand.

We entered an old timber door which abutted the pavement, then into a tiled entry area about three metres wide with many mailboxes on one wall. About fifteen or so metres in front of us at the end of the entry was an old and narrow timber spiral type staircase. He took one of my bags before we made our way up very worn timber steps to the third floor. At a small landing, he opened a door into an entry hall no more than a metre square. The two doorless openings on right and left opposite to one another were kitchen and bathroom. There were a few clothing hooks on the wall. Beyond an open door was a spacious sunlit room and a solid dark timber cabinet with drawers. A large window flooded the room with light. There were rugs on the timber floor. Apart from an ordinary looking sofa, the room had an old fashioned look to it, with high ceilings. To the left of this dining-living room was a dark large bedroom. On the floor was a double size mattress, a wardrobe, a writing table, and two large heavily draped windows which probably overlooked Rue Raymond Losserand.

Alexandre was a slim dark haired Frenchman forty to forty-five years of age. He spoke English reasonably well. His parents used to live in the apartment and had moved to the countryside a few years ago. His introduction was brief. He'd done this many times before and he was hurried and efficient without being friendly. "What more can I show you - it's all here," he replied, when I asked him to "show me around". I wanted something more. "...and you can buy everything you need on Raymond Losserand" he added.

He needed to show me the front door security, so we returned down to the street. Entry required a four digit code. "Call me if you need anything," he said. There was a cordless phone in the apartment. We shook hands.

Back in the apartment I stopped at the kitchen - the dreadful smell of old cooking fat on the frying pans and general mess of the previous tenants. Budget accomodation! Also annoyed

by the absence of a bed sheet - it's the simple things that matter the most. Fifteen nights for \$450 works out to about \$35 a night! For this I was prepared to clean the kitchen.

Rue Raymond Losserand

It was time for a reconnaissance. Rue Raymond Losserand was narrow, about two kilometres long, and like most Parisian streets carried one way traffic. Nearby cafes, butchers, bakeries, cheese shops, cake shops, small supermarkets, grocer shops, three metro stations - as Alexandre said it was all here.

Due to the four to five storey walled apartments, traffic was more noisy than busy, especially the motor scooters, which sometimes jumped the curb and onto the pavement - some feeling of safety offered by the metre high bollards along the street. This seemed to be a local custom.

I had lunch in a small Turkish cafe and simply pointed to what I wanted - three toasted cheese sandwiches with lettuce, tomato and prosciutto with a glass of beer came to \$AUD 20. Maybe Middle Eastern but menus cross borders.

Afterwards I walked the main street again to soak it all in - the architecture, warm sunshine, chatter, the aromas of pastry and cheese. Seemed an authentic busy French neighbourhood street with few or no tourists. Echoes and imaginings of a past bygone time when Montparnasse was a village in the 1930's teeming with artists and writers. I chose to stay in this part of the city for that reason.

I can't say I prefer the twentieth century art more or less than art that preceded it. What happened in Paris is the stuff of legend that fired my imagination many years ago when I read about it as a student. What began in Montmartre continued with greater international impact to Montparnasse. What occurred at that time is unlikely to happen again. The sheer number and density of artists and writers that lived here staggers belief.

The Artists of Montparnasse

Early eighteenth century legends of Paris cite that students used to drink and declaim poetry from the top of a pile of spoil deposited from Denfert-Rochereau quarries. They called the mound "Mount Parnassus" (16) after the legendary home of the muses of poetry and song, and of drunken Bacchus. This may not have been how the area got its name, but the reputation of Montparnasse for carousing persists to this day. As mentioned earlier, its status as a nightspot was largely due to the construction of the Murdes Fermiers, the Customs Wall (17), built in 1784-91 by the Corporation of Tax Farmers. Intended to enforce payment of toll on goods entering Paris to the General Farm, it split the highly taxed city from the poorer less regulated township areas to the south.

(16) Mount Parnassus (Parnassos) is a mountain of limestone in Central Greece that towers above Delphi, north of the Gulf of Corinth, and offers scenic views of the surrounding olive groves, and countryside. According to Greek mythology, the mountain was sacred to many of the gods and it was the home of the Muses. Bacchus was the Roman god of agriculture, wine and fertility copied from the Greek god Dionysus. He was the last god to join the twelve Olympians; Hestia gave up her seat for him. His plants were vines and twirling ivy. He often carried a

pinecone-topped staff, and his followers were goat footed Satyrs and Maenads, wild women who danced energetically during his festivals.

(17) The wall was 24 kilometres long and crossed many districts. The toll on goods was abolished on 1 May 1791 in the early stages of the French Revolution, but was restored in 1798 by the French Directory. Public perception of the tolls improved under Napoleon. The majority of the toll barriers were destroyed during the expansion of

Paris in 1860. Some portions of the wall still exist, such as the rotunda at Place de Stalingrad and the Barrière du Trône (now Place de la Nation). The wall itself was replaced by the route of several Boulevards.

Montparnasse was essentially cut off from its northern-central riverside districts, though being only some three kilometres from the Seine. Bohemians and left-leaning individuals abandoned the city centre for Montparnasse's inexpensive cafes and nightspots.

From the early years of the twentieth century Paris' artists moved to Montparnasse as an alternative to the Montmartre district, (18) which had been the intellectual breeding ground for the previous generation of artists. The romantic Paris of Emile Zola, Manet and Degas in Montmartre was a "world away" economically, socially and politically from the gritty, tough-talking, uncompromising emigrant artists who inhabited Montparnasse. During WWI artists received a stipend from the Government and have frequently been quoted remembering this as a beautiful great time. The district became the most prosperous and prolific art colony and community of the twentieth century - and maybe of all time. It was the centre of the art world for almost three decades, till the outbreak of WWII.

Paris was transformed into the home of avant-garde art with the advent of Cubism, Surrealism and Dadaism – Picasso and Matisse were the poster-boys of modern art, for a scene that included Chagall, Giacometti, Miró and Calder.

When Europe came alive again after the Great War, people were drawn to the City of Light like a flame. They came to Montparnasse from all over the globe - from Europe, Russia, Hungary, Ukraine, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and from as far away as Japan.

They fled conservative Anglo-Saxon cultures in search of the intellectual, artistic and sexual freedom that only the French capital could offer. Living without running water, in damp, unheated "studios", seldom free of rats, many sold their works for a few francs just to buy food. Jean Cocteau once said that in Montparnasse poverty was a luxury. The poet Max Jacobs came to Montparnasse to "sin disgracefully"

Though some did, not all artists "starved romantically" in freezing garrets. Many of them achieved fame and fortune in their lifetime as some still do. Jean-Paul Laurens, painter and sculptor, could afford to have a private house with studio built.

In the 1920s, referred to as les Années Folles (the Crazy Years), Montparnasse became famous and by the 1930s it had become the heart of intellectual and artistic life in Paris. Virtually penniless painters, sculptors, writers, poets and composers thrived in the creative atmosphere and had cheap accommodation at artist communes like La Ruche, one of the most famous.

Cafes rented tables to poor artists for hours at a stretch. The cafés and bars of Montparnasse were a meeting place where ideas were hatched and mulled over. The cafés at the centre of Montparnasse's night-life were in the Carrefour Vavin, now renamed Place Pablo-Picasso.

(18) Montmartres' well known Sacre Coeur church is about three kilometres north of the Seine. The apartment at Montparnasse where I stayed was about the same distance south to the river. Historically Paris was a collection of villages. Many people would seldom leave their neighbourhood, maybe only to visit.

In Montparnasse's heyday - from 1910 to 1920, cafes such as La Closerie des Lilas, Le Select and La Coupole – all of which are still in business – were places where starving artists could occupy a table all evening for a few centimes. If they fell asleep waiters were instructed not to wake them.

Arguments were common, some fuelled by intellect, others by alcohol and if there were fights police were never summoned. If you couldn't pay your bill, people such as La Rotonde's proprietor, would often accept a drawing, holding it until the artist could pay. As such there were times when Café walls were full of artwork.

World War II forced the dispersal of the artistic communities, though it continued in a smaller vibrant manner till the 1970's.

* * *

When I returned to the apartment the key wouldn't open the door. What is this habit of not finding the door – another “seniors moment”! Must be on the wrong floor. The floors had no identification and the doors weren't numbered and all looked the same. I had to descend to count the floors - a Russian saying is “a head and two ears.” My steps on the timber stairs resounded throughout the building, I tried to step lightly - I never wear sport shoes. They're probably all at work I thought – not a soul. Finally the key fitted a lock.

After dinner at a Japanese restaurant and a read of “The rough guide to Paris” to plan the next day I went to bed. I fell asleep to the sounds of cars and motor scooters from the street below and the echo chatter of Parisians enjoying their Friday nightlife.

* * *

In the morning I made my way to the tiny cafe around the corner I'd noticed yesterday. Even though less than a fifty metre walk I felt somewhat unsteady on my feet and jaded. Traffic and scooters were moving. I had two short blacks and a few croissants – a bit light but that seemed the French way.

I kept it simple with “bonjour”, “si vous plait” and “merci.” With the cost of things I would show the digits of my hand to verify the amount and there was always the small notebook with a few phrases and questions I had written out. Thankfully the price of food for the most part was displayed.

This cafe became my breakfast spot where I'd perch myself on a stool at the bar or simply stand. Later I had lunch in a small room with tables at the other side of the bar. A late lunch became my main meal of the day.

Two or three blocks further along Rue Raymond Losserand was where the bus ran along Rue de Gergovie. The maps at bus stops were very helpful. All I said to the driver was “Bonjour, Palais du Louvre si vous plait” after which I understood how many euros he required. Those two years of high school French study gave me some confidence.

The best way to see a city is by bus. The trip to the right bank of the Seine river took about thirty minutes, it skirted the famous Luxembourg gardens then meandered some narrow streets through the quarter of St. Germaine. I tried to catch some street names but each time

was distracted by the beauty of Paris' architecture. Finally out of the shadows and into the light of day, the bus lurched towards one of the many bridges that cross the river. I walked along the river to see where the Louvre was. I'd revisit another day.

Sunday in the apartment May 25

Here I am writing at the large rectangular dining room table, drinking a cheaper Bordeaux red wine and listening to a French compact disc of jazz songs. Sunshine filters through the large windows that face the common courtyard, around which the building is wrapped. There is an old sofa with large pillows, a buffet cabinet, various small objects d'art, souvenirs and pot plants outside the window which barely look alive.

I had to consume more alcohol before I could face the kitchen clean up. "What sort of Frenchman is this Alexandre?" I thought when I searched high and low in the kitchen for a corkscrew. It's the little simple things that matter. I plunged a knife into the bottle.

From across the courtyard Arabic or Turkish music began to play and conversation. It doesn't take much for sound to reverberate within a courtyard of this height. I could see two men standing on a small balcony on the next floor below drinking. Some of the dark skinned women here are very beautiful.

I'll have to take my small pocket flashlight when I go for dinner tonight – the stairwell is unlit and the tapered steps could be dangerous – especially if tired after a few drinks. When one looks at maps of the city, especially the large one I have, one recognises the web that is Paris. Like an octopus with a central eye around which are lashed in spiral orbit twenty districts - called arrondissements. Getting lost or disorientated here would be much more likely than the Renaissance grid-like streets of St Petersburg – especially at nights. Paris has already created a powerful and somewhat intimidating effect upon me. It is exciting; extremely busy and difficult to find one's way about.

After visiting a small nearby supermarket, I returned to clean and disinfect the kitchen. As I expected things are much more expensive here. I discretely took a lid off a jar to make sure that "mielle" meant "honey" - didn't look like it - the taste seemed like honey. The small jar cost six Euros (\$AUD 9).

Crowds and Gare Montparnasse

Though I like the excitement of large cities, St Petersburg had more "air" due in part to its Baltic Sea location. It feels more claustrophobic here – I shouldn't be surprised — the population of Paris is twice the number. Then add tourists on top of that.

I like to walk the busy, wide and open Avenue du Maine to Gare Montparnasse rail station and when inside inside along its moving walkway. It's handy to shop there or make phone calls to Australia. I can't seem to use the phone at the apartment for long distance calls.

The interior of Gare Montparnasse is a Modernist confusion of railway platforms, with levels of concrete and glass built over one of Paris' largest interchanges. It was here that I experienced a disturbed sensation of "crowd phobia" on one of its concourses. Each time it was the same when I approached this particular mass density concourse space, a long corridor where people moved or stood shoulder to shoulder to look at the destination boards

and departure times. I came here to buy tickets from a person at the window rather than from a machine. The environment and roads that surround the rail interchange are no less chaotic. Avenue du Maine intersects two other major boulevards - Bld. de Vaugviand, Bld. Edgar Quinet – and then with Bld. du Montparnasse just around the corner, the misaligned intersection could be imagined a labyrinth of despair.

The Louvre Museum

The Palais du Louvre was a feudal fortress begun by Phillippe-Auguste in the 1190's. Charles V was the first French king to make the castle his residence in the 1360's. In 1545, a year before the death of Francois I, the first stones of the Louvre were laid as we see them today. The origins of the museum lie in the personal art collection of Francois I. In 1516 he summoned Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) to Paris to add some prestige to the French Renaissance. (19)

These were private collections of Art or salons until 1793, the year of Louis XVI's execution. The "revolutionary gesture" to turn the palace into a public museum was largely influenced by Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), later to become Emperor Napoleon I.

In 1803, the Louvre was "rebaptised" the Napoleon Museum. It remained until 1814 the most prestigious museum in the world, owing its reputation to the size and quality of its collections. The exhibits included not only the previous royal collections and confiscated riches of the Church, but also the spoils taken by the army in Belgium, Italy, Prussia and Austria. In 1815, when Napoleon abdicated, nearly 5,000 works of art were sent back to their country of origin.

Although Napoleon has been seen as responsible for this policy of pillaging works of art, he was not in fact the instigator. The Convention Nationale had suggested such action as early as 1794 as a solution to the defeated party's inability to pay its war debts. The Directoire pursued the same policy and encouraged Napoleon when engaged on the Italian campaign in Italy, to "endow the capital of freedom with the masterpieces to which Italy owes its reputation".

Under Napoleon's rule, the requisitioning of art expanded to take place on a grand European scale. The Emperor consequently ordered a series of alterations to the Louvre including a museum devoted to Antiquity for its opening in 1800.

The collections grew as a result of many donations, purchases, and commissioned works. The restitution of the stolen goods to the coalition in 1815 however significantly reduced one of the Empire's greatest achievements.

* * *

(19) The word “Renaissance” was first used in the 16th century by Giorgio Vasari in his book “Lives of the most excellent painters”. Later it was prominently used by the French historian Jules Michelet in 1858, as a French word meaning “rebirth.”

Visits to The Louvre have been the highlight. I choose several sections of interest only. Otherwise it's overwhelming and one can be left with “nothing to remember” at all. True, you can always buy a book or postcard before the exit.

Parts of the crowd that wander the galleries for a “quickie” remind me of sleepwalkers or sheep – moving without genuine interest or curiosity – or maybe they're simply overwhelmed? They can always say “I've been to the Louvre”!

The second and third visits have been at night, when the entry queue is shorter, the crowds smaller and the cost three euros less! Also the “Louvre Pyramid” at the main entrance, can reflect much light and glare during the day. It radiates much heat inside the foyer beneath. I don't like it - its only function is to serve as a landmark to the entry. At night it fades away like most ugly things and looks more sympathetic.

19th Century European painting came first – French, Italian and Spanish. Then the Northern European Art – German, Flemish and Dutch. In truth, it should have been Italian then Spanish and French – in the historical order of ‘Art’ development.

Theodore Gericault (1791-1824) and The Raft of the Medusa, 1819

(Excerpt from ‘Theodore Gericault’ by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, 2010)

This anti-heroic historic genre painting was an incredibly moving experience. I sat for some time in front of this artist's great painting “The Raft of the Medusa” of 1819. The huge canvas measures 7x5 metres! A cinematic still of a dramatic and tragic episode in French colonial history. The human figures are probably about half-size scale.

The painting depicts the ordeal of shipwrecked passengers of a government ship The Medusa, a frigate, who were cast adrift on a makeshift raft off the coast of West Africa on the way to Senegal in 1816 - some 150 men, a medley of French, Italian, Spaniards and blacks from the colonies. Officers in lifeboats, to which the raft was connected, severed the ropes, because it impeded the boat's progress. The raft floated adrift for 13 days. Exposure to heat, cold, hunger and thirst, the passengers resorted to cannibalism and drinking their own urine, among other abject horrors. Only 15 men were still alive when the raft was sighted by the “Angus” – a British vessel that had been sent to find them.

The painting's macabre realism is portrayed as an epic-heroic tragedy, and with its sense of dignity carries it far beyond mere contemporary reportage. It shows a moment of false hope, when the sight of the tiny mast of the ‘Angus’ on the horizon raises the expectation of the survivors, only for it to disappear. It took Gericault almost 100 sketches and studies – he travelled to Le Havre to observe boats at sea, was provided with a miniature model of a raft, and drew from life models. The painting aims at a type of Romantic aesthetic ideal of the ferocious beauty of horror. Only Gericault's paintings of ‘Guillotined Heads’ and ‘Severed Limbs’ (1818 - 1820) exhibit a greater emotional horror.

The scandal resonated for several years. French troops who were to take formal repossession of Senegal from the British, also had a motive to perpetuate the slave trade.

A naval court eventually found the ship's captain, the aristocratic de Chaumareys, in 1817 guilty, and dismissed him with a light prison sentence.

The French Revolution (1789-1799) greatly stimulated interest in the depiction of contemporary events, but after the fall of Napoleon in 1814 few artists were disposed to paint such subjects. Gericault was something of an exception. He lived a short life but painted some very interesting pictures.

After being shown at the 1819 Paris Salon, the painting was awarded a gold medal, but was not given the greater prestige of selection for the Louvre's national collection. His unsold work was rolled up and stored in a friend's studio, until exhibited in London in 1820. For six months it was viewed by some 40,000 visitors. In Paris it had been hung too high. Gericault earned close to 20,000 Francs, his share of the fee charged to visitors, and much more than would have been paid had the French Government purchased it.

Finally, the painting was championed by the curator of The Louvre, comte de Forbin, who purchased it for the museum from Gericault's heirs after his death in 1824."

The Bourbon Restoration 1814 and the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848

After the fall of Napoleon in 1814 the Monarchy returned to France, when the two brothers of the executed King Louis XVI successively took the throne. This is known as The Restoration.

During a period of relative peace and stability King Charles X abdicated in 1830, essentially as a result of not having the necessary support in Government to implement his policies.

Louis-Philippe took the throne in 1830 more as a national leader than a King, until the 'final Revolution' of 1848, when the French Second Republic was formed with the election of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte as President (1842-1852).

Louis declared himself Emperor Napoleon III of the Second Empire which lasted 1852-1870.

The Macabre and Horror in Art

A taste for the macabre and horrific that invaded art expressed itself in the 1820's and 1830's. Crime, sickness, rape, murder, prisons and the guillotine became favourite topics in art, literature and the theatre. English 'Gothic' tales of terror, suspense and magic, lurid plays called 'melodramas' brought in the crowds. A significant feature of that trend was the use of suspense, where the ordinary or real was suddenly transformed by the intrusion of horrific or supernatural happenings. Sensational current events such as murders, love affairs, thefts and suicides were popular. Horror was in fashion and people from all walks of society delighted in it. Delacroix was an avid reader of English Gothic novels. Gericault was no exception to this trend.

The infatuation with horror had a far reaching aesthetic and political agenda. For the embattled Romantics, it was a vocabulary and provocative act of transgression, intended to upset "bourgeois morals" and upset established aesthetic canons. Victor Hugo (1802 - 1885) defined this taste for horror as the sympathy of rebellion against 'the Ancient Regime' in literature and politics.

Eugene Delacroix (1798 - 1863) and the 1890 Revolution

Briefly I will mention Delacroix's painting "Liberty Leading the People" (1830) which hung near Gericault's 'Raft of the Medusa':

The painting depicts a contemporary event of 1830 that ousted King Charles X and installed a more moderate Monarch Louis-Philippe. Paintings of this size, like Gericault's, were normally reserved for historic subjects not contemporary ones.

It shows fighting at the barricade on the streets of Paris. 'Liberty' is an allegorical figure and symbol of an ideal, whose form was taken from Ancient Greek antiquity and supposedly represents "Democratic" values. The two male figures in the foreground represent the idea of all classes coming together, one a worker with a revolver, the other a "gentleman" with a shotgun, i.e. a revolutionary event in which the middle class Bourgeoisie and working class poor are side by side. The other armed figure is that of a schoolboy.

The figures closest to us in the foreground are the sacrificial victims of the Revolution – a turbulent and allegorical painting structured by a compositional pyramid of main figures.

* * *

The Revolution of the Commoners and Bourgeoisie (The Third Estate Revolution)

(Excerpt from 'Ride the Tiger' by Julius Evola, 1961. Chapter 26: Society and the crisis of patriotic feeling)

Before The French Revolution the very word "patriot" was unknown. When we turn to the ideas of homeland and nation, the crisis that such ideas are suffering is evident, especially after World War II. On the one hand, it is a consequence of objective processes - the great economic and political forces in motion are such as to increasingly relativize the frontiers and to reduce the principle of national sovereignty. One tends to think in terms of large spaces and blocs or supranational systems, and given the growing uniformity of mores and ways of life, given the transformation of the population into masses, and given the development and ease of communications, everything that has a solely national reference is assuming the quasi-provincial character of a local curiosity.

On the other hand, the crisis regards the way of feeling itself - for it is connected to the decline of yesterday's myths and ideals, to which men respond less and less after the upheavals and downfalls of recent times, and which are ever less capable of awakening the old enthusiasm in the collectivity.

As in so many previous occasions, it is also necessary here to see clearly what exactly is suffering the crisis, and to define its value. Again, it is not about the reality of the traditional world, but of conceptions essentially born and introduced with its destruction, and above all with the revolution of the Third Estate. The worlds "homeland" and "nation," in the modern sense of political myths and collective ideals, were virtually unknown in the traditional world. The traditional world knew "nationalities," ethnicities, and races only as natural facts, devoid of that specific political value that they would receive in modern nationalism.

In addition, it is well known that in the West, political nations and nation-states emerged from the decline of the medieval ecumenical unity, due to a process of dissociation, a freeing of particular units from a whole. The process replicates on the international and continental plane the same features as would give rise within every state

to the freeing of individuals, to social atomism and the dissolution of the organic concept of the state.

To an extent, the formation of nations has run parallel with the revolutionary idea. Already in the oldest historical example, that of the France of Philip the Fair (1285 -1314), one can see how the move toward a national state went hand in hand with a process of anti-aristocratic levelling, an incipient destruction of the articulations of an organic society due to absolutism, and the constitution of those centralised "public powers" that would become ever more prominent in modern states. We are well aware of the close relationship between the dissolution corresponding to the declaration of the "rights of man and the citizen" of 1789 and the patriotic, nationalistic, and revolutionary idea. The very word "patriot" was unknown before the French Revolution; it first appeared between 1789 and 1793 to indicate one who supported the revolution against monarchies and aristocracies. Similarly, in the European revolutionary movements of 1848 and 1849, "people," "national idea," and "patriotism" on the one hand, and revolution, liberalism, constitutionalism, republican and anti-monarchical tendencies on the other, were concordant and often inseparable elements."

It was in this climate, on the eve of the bourgeois or Third Estate revolution, that "homeland" and "nation" took on a primarily political meaning and that mythical value that would become ever more evident in the openly nationalistic ideologies that followed. Thus "patriotic" and "national sentiments" are tied to the mythology of the bourgeois era, and it was only then, during the relatively brief period from the French Revolution to the First or perhaps the Second World War, that the idea of nation actually played a determining role in European history, in close connection with the democratic ideologies. The same idea is now playing the same role for the non-European peoples as they become emancipated, following the same presuppositions, or rather following the internal anti-traditional and modernising dissolutions.

When bland patriotism turned into radical nationalistic forms, the regressive character of such tendencies and the contribution from the emergence of the "mass-man" in the modern world became clearly evident. For the essence of nationalistic ideology is to hold homeland and nation as supreme values, conceiving them as mystical entities almost with a life of their own and having an absolute claim on the individual; whereas, in reality, they are only dissociated and formless realities, by way of their negation of any true hierarchical principle. And of any symbol or warrant of a transcendent authority. In general, the foundation of political unities that have taken form in this direction is antithetical to the traditional state. The cement of the latter was a loyalty and fidelity that could dispense with the naturalistic fact of nationality; it was a principle of order and sovereignty that, by not being based on this fact, could even be valid in areas including more than one nationality. It was the dignities, particular rights, and castes that united or divided individuals "vertically," beyond the "horizontal" common denominator of "nation" and "homeland." In a word, it was unification from above, not from below.

Medieval Sculpture

I returned downstairs to the basement before leaving the Museum to look again at the Medieval timber sculpted figures of the 13th Century. These devout representations of saints impressed me deeply. The red, blue, green, white and gold would have been the applied colour of that time. The underlying wood had now decayed and split, imparting the carvings with an "unintended expression" more akin to our time – or a Rodin sculpture, than the devotional care of the craftsman's expression in their time.

Gothic architecture and sculpture has a power of expression, imagination, and technical innovation that leaves one struck with awe. Then I took a final look at the sublime Ancient

Greek sculpted marbles – figures from the miniature to monumental and the beautifully painted narratives depicted on pottery.

I believe ancient and medieval sculpture served a significant meaning and purpose to their civilization more than our modern art can earnestly hope to create.

Eating Out

For some reason going out for dinner is becoming a chore. I felt much less self-conscious and much more relaxed in St Petersburg. I waited a long time for my meal before storming out of a noisy cafe in Rue Raymond Losserand, then returned for a third time to Rue de La Gaité. There I noticed an almost empty Japanese restaurant.

After I'd eaten something, I apologised to a young waitress for my earlier "rudeness" or brashness. She was a Chinese student who spoke English and seemed inquisitive to talk. Then came the question as to why I travel alone, where my wife is and why I'd never married. Lida, a woman I'd met in St Petersburg had asked similar questions.

I usually reply that I didn't want to feel tied down or have the responsibility of children or family reasons. I tried to finish the theme of conversation by saying it was a personal matter – and that a stranger shouldn't ask such things immediately. She said that being an artist I probably wanted my freedom. In a way she was right. Freedom is another thing altogether, not necessarily to do with marriage, I replied. She was an interesting person. I decided to start cooking meals at the apartment more often.

About the Apartment Block

In the first week I've only seen two people in the apartment building. There are twenty or so letter boxes. A woman quickly passed by me on the stairs one morning on my return from breakfast. Then yesterday evening after entering the building, I noticed a young woman in the entry hall press a timer-controlled light switch before climbing the stairs. From that time on I never used a flashlight again.

Alexandre, the apartment manager, had said to call him if I needed anything. It took me much trial and error to work out how to even get a line out using the damned phone! I made most of my phone calls to Australia from Gare Montparnasse public phones, using phone cards. In St Petersburg I'd bought a mobile phone because the public phones most of the time didn't work (or else I was a "dumbo" in using them). The mobile phone here was useless. When Alexandre happened to phone one time, I asked him which button to press and which prefix numbers to get a line out. It wasn't a major issue, just one of those little things that sometimes make a big difference - especially to a busy tourist.

Rodin Museum and meeting Natalie

Today I visited a museum of the celebrated and controversial sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840 - 1917). It is located in the Eiffel Tower Quarter, several metro stops north of the apartment, toward the river. Though tempted I didn't visit the nearby monumental government and military edifice which houses the war museum and tomb of Napoleon - I had enough of war in St. Petersburg. To the north-east on the other side of the Seine the Palais de Tokyo was

the other museum of interest - it dates back to the 1937 world fair when the German and Russian pavilions faced each other like “ an architectural version of a Mexican standoff”. It also housed the Musee d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which I should get to before my departure. The Eiffel Tower, built for the 1889 world fair was much further west of the Rodin museum on the left bank of the river.

The museum's setting is elegant, the Hotel Biron – a beautiful eighteenth century mansion, which the sculptor leased from the state, on condition that upon his death the building become a museum dedicated to his work,. He used the Hotel Biron as his workshop from 1908. He died in 1917, the museum opened in 1919. The extensive gardens around the museum contain many of his famous sculptures - The Burghers of Calais, The Thinker, and The Gates of Hell. Rodin also donated to the State his entire collection of paintings by Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet and Pierre Auguste Renoir. There's also a room devoted to Camille Claudel – Rodin's pupil, model and lover of many years. Her sculptures are of white stone, Rodin's are mostly dark bronze.

While having a snack in the sunshine at a long table in an empty outside cafe, I noticed a young woman had sat down not far from me at the same long table. I said my usual “bonjour”, then followed up with “Parlez-vous Anglais?” When she replied with an American accent I was so pleased – my first conversation in English since arriving here. Her name was Nathalie. She had a Russian father, for whom she'd purchased a miniature of one of Rodin's sculptures. A wax candle of The Thinker emerged from her bag. “It's a gift for him, because he's a thinker himself,” she said, smiling. “It would be a pity to light it,” I replied. The idea of thought melting away had strange connotations.

Nathalie had been here two weeks of a three month work experience venture. She worked part-time in a hospital laboratory. She also spoke Russian, which I found unbelievable given my ancestry and having just been to St Petersburg - the first person with whom I'd have a conversation with in Paris!

I will mention another historical coincidence – that of the Russian and Soviet sculptor Sergey Konenkov (1874 - 1971), who was often referred to as “the Russian Rodin”. Konenkov sculpted mostly in wood, some of his stonework being in “the character of Rodin”. In 1924, after the Revolution and Civil War, he and his recently married wife travelled to New York City where they stayed for 27 years. In this time he created a large body of work on Biblical themes. In 1945, after World War 2, under direct orders from Joseph Stalin, the sculptor was brought back to the U.S.S.R., where he was given a large studio in the centre of Moscow, to create sculptures of famous Russians.

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After a meal we spent the afternoon together. She knew very little French, hadn't met many people here; so enjoyed our conversation. Presumably she didn't need much French where she worked.

We strolled around the sculpture garden. At the circular pond looking back down the lawn toward the house, I was suddenly seized by the panic that I was missing my bag.

Embarrassed by my absentmindedness, I rushed back to the cafe. I sighed with relief it was still there. On my way back to the pond I chastised myself to be more mindful. The excitement to spend some time with an attractive young woman had gotten the better of me.

We walked all the way to the Seine which was quite some distance, but I wasn't tired. Across Le Petit Pont bridge we stood before the magic that was Notre Dame Cathedral. Like a magnet we joined the queue to enter the darkness of this weighted stone interior. No words for this time of silent awe.

Before departing Nathalie agreed to meet again on her next free day - at the Luxembourg Gardens near the Palais du Luxembourg and have dinner somewhere.

Montmartre Visit

From the Pigalle Metro on Bld De Clichy looking up the hill - or butte as it's called, is Montmartre - meaning "Hill of Martyrs or Saints". The Catholic Basilica Sacre-Coeur is on the plateau of the hill and stands like a white Basilica-beacon, visible from the lower parts of the Right Bank. The hill is 130 metres tall. I took the steep steps up to the monument, maybe some 200 metres, with quite a few others. It was morning, there was sunshine and it was of medium difficulty.

Montmartre retains its quiet village-like medieval streets, and it became part of Paris only in the mid-nineteenth century, when under Emperor Napoleon III and engineer George-Eugene Haussmann, Paris underwent a vast public works programme. This included the demolition of medieval neighbourhoods - which were deemed overcrowded and unhealthy, and the building of wide boulevards, parks and squares.

Montmartre survived, its populations swollen by the poor communities displaced as part of the programme. Its heyday was from the last years of the century to World War I (1872 - 1914), when its rustic charm and low rents attracted crowds of artists. Since then, the quarters' physical appearance has changed little, thanks largely to the warren of plaster-of-Paris quarries that perforate its ground and render it unstable for new building.

Most of the artists left after the outbreak of World War I, the majority of them going to the Montparnasse quarter, on the other side of the Seine river. Among the last of the neighbourhood's gathering places was 'R-26', an artistic salon frequented by Josephine Baker, Le Corbusier and Django Reinhardt.

A remnant of this time had survived - there was a square near the Basilica where artists had set up easels to paint and sell their work to tourists from stalls around the square, somewhat like an arts and crafts souvenir market.

Sacre-Coeur is the second-most visited monument of Paris after the Eiffel Tower.

The site for the church was very controversial since Montmartre was also the site for the beginning of the Paris Commune in 1871, a revolutionary movement that "seized power" for two months following the defeat of the French Army by the Germans during the Franco-Prussian War (1870 - 1871). Soldiers of the National Guard who had defended Paris during the War seized control on the high ground of the Butte Montmartre, refusing to accept the authority of the Third Republic.

When two Generals and regular Troops were sent to take possession of 170 guns which the National Guard controlled on the Butte, the Generals were shot and mutilated in a garden, now located behind the Basilica.

The national French Army eventually suppressed the Commune, in what is referred to as "The Bloody Week" when tens of thousands were killed. Events of the Commune had significant influence on the ideas of Karl Marx (1818 - 1883) and Frederick Engels (1820 - 1895).

The site for the church was chosen because it was the highest and most visible of the City and had a long connection with Christian Martyrs, not because of its connections with the Commune, though that can't be ignored. According to early Christian tradition it was the place where the patron saint of Paris, Saint Denis, was beheaded by the Romans, his tomb eventually being located in the Basilica of Saint Denis, several miles away.
(Excerpt from 'The Rough Guide to Paris', R. Blackmore and James McConnachie, 2010)

* * *

I descended the Butte by way of a winding street around its rim, with several grand vistas that overlooked Paris on the way. A small charming bakery provided me with fresh rolls and pate which I ate in the sunshine with some wine, sitting in a small park on a bench.

Extension of my stay

I have decided to extend my stay, so I can visit London. Being so close it would be a shame not to. That would make it twelve days more before a return to Paris for the flight to Melbourne. To at least listen and speak some English before returning home. The French language has gotten the worse of me!

This sudden desire had been made all the more tempting when I noticed a Korean Air Tourist Agency on Boulevard Haussmann. I was on my way to Galeries Lafayette, one of the large and famous clothing department stores of Paris, and not far from the Opera House.

This part of the city is known as the Grands Boulevards, a collective name given to the eight streets that form one continuous thoroughfare some seven to eight kilometres. It is located in the 2nd arrondissement, two metro stops north of the Louvre on the right bank.

The Grand Boulevards are busy and vibrant, lined with classic nineteenth century apartment blocks, imposing banks, cinemas, brasseries and neon-lit fast food outlets. The streets off the Grands Boulevards comprise the city's main commercial and financial district.

I entered and left the Department Store because I was too hot and bothered. My first priority had been to visit the Opera House (Opera Garnier) and some of the elegant and more quiet passages – nineteenth century shopping arcades with glass roofs and tiled floors.

A night out with Nathalie

As I've mentioned the loneliness gets to you, so I was happy to have company, especially a woman's. I sometimes notice a resemblance in a stranger's face to friends back home – a desire for familiarity. We were to meet late afternoon at the Luxembourg Gardens, at the Palais Du Luxembourg.

The Luxembourg Palace was built by French architect Salomon de Brosse to be the royal residence of the regent Marie de Medici, mother of Louis XIII of France (1610-1643).

In 1799 after the Revolution it was refashioned into a legislative building and later enlarged and remodelled 1835-1856. Since 1958 it has been the seat of the French Senate.

I arrived earlier so as to locate the bus stop for the trip back to Montparnasse, not far from the Garden's entry gate. It was a sultry, warm to hot day, with a still blue sky. Also, I wanted to see where the chess was played in the gardens. When I found it, there were some twenty or more tables of chess players. I walked from table to table. It was too hot to sit in the sun without a hat so I went into the shade to where a man and woman sat playing. When the woman finally resigned she suggested I give her opponent a game as he was too good for her - we had three games, all of which I won.

Near the Palace I had a refreshing drink at a beautiful cafe with outdoor tables under the dappled sunlight that fell through the foliage of the trees onto the sandy gravel. Then I went to wait for Nathalie. After some Russian greeting phrases we went to the bus stop. I guessed Nathalie was in her mid-twenties and very pretty.

We had dinner outdoors at a cafe in a small cul-de-sac on Rue Raymond Losserand Montparnasse. The jazz music venue 'Le Petit Journal Montparnasse' we were to visit was within walking distance. Pressed for time we took the train to Montparnasse rail station.

The small venue was packed. A small table was brought out for us and placed within a crowd of others. It was noisy, exciting and a bit hot, but I didn't care. I knew the place was a cafe and that it wasn't cheap. We were happy that they made room for us. The night was a tribute to a well known French male singer. I wouldn't have been surprised if we were the only two English-speaking patrons.

It was near midnight when we walked back along Rue Losserand, and past my apartment towards the bus stop. The street was more quiet than usual. Nathalie mentioned the buses might not be running at this time which surprised me for a city like Paris. She was right. I walked her to Ponte de Vanves metro though she said she'd be alright. I felt like her paternal figure. It turned out to be quite a distance. We farewelled before I took the train back to Montparnasse.

When I exited the huge labyrinth of Gare Montparnasse back onto the streets I felt I'd never been here before. Beneath the high, dark modernist tower. (20) I stood disorientated at a five way main road intersection. It wasn't busy - the darkness had done its trick again. Extremely tired after the long hot day I desperately tried to get my bearings. I was on the other side of Avenue du Maine, my usual road home. The only other thing of recognition were the significant construction works around the station. After walking around for quite some time, I was so desperate I entered a bar for a beer and to ask directions towards Rue Losserand. On my way "home" I wondered if Nathalie's father would even light Rodin's 'The Thinker' candle?

Musée d'Orsay and Grand Palais

My two visits to the Musée d'Orsay to look at the Edouard Manet exhibition were thwarted by the long, very slow, four-fold snaking queue. I took a photo of the queue before grumbling my way across the river to the Grand Palais Museum on the busy Champ-Elysees Avenue.

Tourists that ride on pedestrian walks on motorised scooters should be shot.

Fortunately I was surprised by an exhibition of Odilon Redon on display at the Grand Palais – unadvertised, not in anything I saw anyhow. To sit in this strange dimly-lit quiet salon was

an added luxury - difficult to find quiet at cultural venues anymore. Redon was an artist disinterested in the new experiments of the impressionists. I read that he admired Delacroix.

His late paintings of flowers, some extremely large - in stark contrast to the dark black lithography and mezzotints earlier in his career - influenced the art movement known as "Fauvism". These paintings were not naturalistic representations of flowers but more imagined.

(20) Montparnasse Tower which dwarfs its surrounds, is a 60 storey office building, constructed 1969-1973. It was the tallest skyscraper in France till 2011. In 2017 the facade was redesigned. The 56th floor houses a restaurant and top floor a viewing terrace.

After its completion, construction of buildings in the city centre of over seven stories were banned. It is said that the tower's observation deck enjoys the most beautiful view of Paris because it is the only place from which the tower cannot be seen. French urban climber Alain "Spiderman" Robert, using only bare hands and feet and no safety devices, climbed the tower in 1995 and 2015.

Odilon Redon (1840-1916) painter and printmaker, is one of the most important and original of all the Symbolist artists. His visionary works concern the world of dreams, fantasy, and the imagination. He first became famous for his noirs series, monochromatic compositions that exploit the expressive and suggestive powers of the color black. He was particularly drawn to the Romantic and Symbolist works of Poe, Flaubert, and Mallarmé. Later, Redon began to adopt a more colorful palette, pastels and oil paintings of portraits and floral still lifes. His encounter with the Nabis introduced him to a more decorative aesthetic, and his late works incorporate Japonism as well as an attention to flat, abstract patterns, and decorative ensembles. Redon would have an enormous impact on the art of his contemporaries, such as Paul Gauguin, as well as later modern artists like Marcel Duchamp. His lithographs and noirs were admired by the Symbolist writers of the day and later Surrealists for their often bizarre and fantastical subjects.

Redon's use of non-naturalistic colour in his late pastels and oil paintings prefigure the development of Expressionism and abstraction. Redon explored the expressive and suggestive powers of colour. Many of these works include passages that are purely nonobjective.

One of the main themes in Redon's oeuvre is the decapitated or disembodied head. Often shown free-floating, and sometimes reduced to a mere eyeball, the severed head encapsulates the Symbolist desire to free oneself from the shackles of the ordinary, mundane world, and achieve a higher state of consciousness through the exploration of dreams and subjective vision.

When asked in an interview about his favourite artistic subjects, Redon replied, "My monsters. I believe it is there that I have given my most personal note." While Redon's depictions of "monsters" - often hybrid human-plant or human-animal creatures - were the product of his vivid imagination, they also owed a great deal to his knowledge of the natural sciences, and especially new theories of evolution put forth by Charles Darwin, which suggested a connection between humans and our animal ancestors.

One particular picture titled Guardian Spirit of the Waters shows a large head held aloft by wings above a tranquil sea, gazing upon a small sailboat with enormously expressive eyes. Seagulls flit through the air and skim the water's surface, which the water stretches out toward the distant horizon. A delicate halo surrounds the head, giving the strange creature a benevolent, divine aura despite its brutish features. With its realistic depiction of dreamlike imagery, Guardian Spirit of the Waters anticipates 20th century Surrealism.

The artist often regretted that he was not born at sea, "a place without a country on an abyss," which he felt would have better suited the origins of his visionary sensibility.

Grand Palais Museum (Great Palace) was constructed for the 1900 Paris Exposition. The former Palace of Industry was demolished to make way for it. A pediment on the building reads "a monument dedicated by the Republic to the glory of French Art". It is built of the "new materials" of its time - iron, steel and a glass Art Nouveau barrel vaulted pavilion, reinforced concrete and ornate stone facades.

It has had to endure many structural problems due to the water table, and subsequent renovations. It served as a military hospital during World War I and the Nazis put the Palais to use during the World War II occupation as a truck depot and propaganda exhibitions. The Parisian resistance used the Palais as a headquarters during the liberation in 1944. Today it has resumed its role as the city's premier special events venue, hosting music festivals, art exhibitions, trade fairs and fashion shows. The building's west wing contains a science museum. It hosted the 2010 world fencing championships.

* * *

World Fairs or Expos were International exhibitions to showcase achievements of nations.

Prague organised the first World's Fair in 1791, to celebrate its industrial manufacturing methods of the time. France had a tradition of exhibitions culminating with the Industrial Exposition of 1844. Other cities that held World Fairs were London in 1851, the first international exhibition of manufactured products. It influenced art-and-design education, International trade, and tourism.

Three eras can be identified in the development of these Fairs or Expos: Industrialisation (1851-1938), Cultural Exchange (1939- 1987) and Nation branding (1998 - present).

Recently, Expos have been used to improve a national image – pavilions became a kind of advertising campaign, and the Expo served as a vehicle for "nation branding" and "democratic" members of the European Vision for "Global Community".

Since 1995, the interval between two World Expos has been at least five years. World Expo 2015 was held in Milan, Italy, from 1 May to 31 October 2015.

At Expo 2000 Hanover, countries created their own architectural pavilions, investing, on average, €12 million each. Given these costs, governments are sometimes hesitant to participate, because the benefits may not justify the costs. However, while the effects are difficult to measure, an independent study for the Dutch pavilion at Expo 2000 estimated that the pavilion (which cost around €35 million) generated around €350 million of potential revenues for the Dutch economy. It also identified several key success factors for world-exposition pavilions in general.

Musée d'Orsay revisited

For the third time to Musee d'Orsay - and an early morning breakfast at a nearby cafe . I could see through the window that a queue had already begun. This time there were only thirty or so before me.

The museum was undergoing renovations and inside the noise could be heard almost everywhere. As in St. Petersburg you can't scratch a stone in Paris without permission. Though here there are a greater number of modern buildings the preservation of Paris' homogenous beauty is vital.

It was a surprise to read that this was the first retrospective exhibition of Manet's work to be shown in Paris. Many times a Claude Monet exhibition had come to Australia - a great pity only a rare few of Manet's paintings ever travelled. He was an interesting and inventive painter and one of the first that didn't shy away from using photography as a compositional aid to his painting.

Thankfully, it seemed this show was more of a "side-show" as most of the crowd came to see the permanent Impressionist Collection - making my experience more pleasant. The other exhibition of note was a Pre-Raphaelite display.

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The Pre-Raphaelites were a group of English painters, poets and art critics founded in 1848. A seven member-strong "brotherhood" developed, modelled in part on an earlier 19th century German Romantic movement in Vienna called the Brotherhood of St Luke, a name for Medieval guilds of Painters.

Raphael (1483-1520), the Brotherhood believed, had been a corrupting influence on the academic teaching of art, hence the name 'Pre-Raphaelite'. The group were particularly fascinated by medieval culture, ideas that later clashed with 'realist principles', which stress the independent observation of nature with man at the centre of the world, rather than a "spiritual integrity". They sought a return to the colours and compositions of the Italian 'Quattrocento' period of artistic expression of the late Middle Ages (most notably International Gothic) and the early Renaissance, that is for most of the 15th century.

By the mid 1850's, the original members of the group had virtually dissolved, but the term "Pre-Raphaelite" stuck to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Later artists, among others, influenced by the "Pre-Raphaelites" include Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), and Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898). Rossetti came to be seen as a precursor of the wider European Symbolist movement.

In the 20th century, art moved away from representing 'reality', especially after the First World War, when Pre-Raphaelite art was devalued for its religious and literal qualities. It was revived in the 1960s.

* * *

France and Paris' main gift to the Modern World of art appears to be Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting, which is still most popular even today. One must remember that this art was scorned during the time of its appearance though it was collected by several astute businessmen. The French revere their artists of the past and are excellent promoters.

I wonder if the next two generations will continue to be attracted to this “time-bubble” of late 19th and early 20th century art?

* * *

Musée d'Orsay holds the largest collection of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, 1848 to 1914. The renovated museum opened in 1986. Originally a railway station designed by three architects Lucien Magre, Emile Benard and Victor La Louxite, it was finished in time for the 1900 Paris Exposition - a world's Fair held to celebrate the achievements of the past century and to accelerate development into the next. The Beaux-Arts architectural style of design, imposing and often decadent, combined many of the main features of classical architecture, particularly columns and symmetry, with eclectic and decorative elements drawn from other historical styles. Beaux-Arts Architecture was intended to be a French national style, but the approach also found prominence in the United States, and a handful of other locations throughout the world. It was most commonly used for public and civic buildings such as museums, art galleries, libraries, and university campuses.

By 1939 the station's short platforms became unsuitable for the longer trains. After 1939 it was used for suburban services and part of it became a mailing centre during World War II. Charles de Gaulle made it a backdrop for the announcement of his coup d'état of May 19, 1958.

After being listed as a Historic Monument in 1978, the Government decided to build a museum to “bridge the gap” between the Louvre and the National Museum of Modern Art at the Georges Pompidou Centre. There are four levels under the museum's original barrel vaulted metal frame.

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Edouard Manet (1832-1883), a forerunner of French Impressionist painting, was the son of a rich magistrate who at first opposed his son's ambition to be a painter. Manet travelled in Holland, Italy, and later in Spain, studying and copying the work of old masters. In this way he built up a remarkable technical skill: he has been called ‘the greatest manipulator of oil paint who ever lived’. He was particularly interested in the work of the Dutch painter Frans Hals and the Spaniards Velazquez and Goya, who were pioneers in realistic painting.

Manet, like Gustave Courbet (1819 -1877), preferred to paint those things which he could actually see before his eyes, and he was one of the first open-air painters. He delighted in painting contemporary scenes, race courses, bars, and crowded public gardens.

When in 1863 Manet exhibited his large painting ‘Luncheon on the grass’ (Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe) it attracted outrage and criticism for its depiction of a nude woman casually lunching with two fully dressed men. Her body is starkly lit and she stares directly at the viewer. The two men dressed as young dandies sit with her. In front of them, the woman's clothes, a basket of fruit, and a round loaf of bread are displayed as in a still life. In the background, yet too large in comparison with the figures in the foreground, a lightly clad woman bathes in a stream. The man on the right wears a flat hat with a tassel, a kind normally worn indoors. Manet's brilliant colours, which were then so unusual as to appear garish and crude, also aroused criticism.

The painting was rejected by the Paris Salon, the official Government art exhibition of the Academie des Beaux-Arts, a product of the Enlightenment since the early 18th Century -

a highly prestigious event which attracted many international artists. The Salon opposed the Impressionists' shift away from "traditional" painting styles. In 1863 it had turned away a high number of submitted paintings, including Manets'. In order to defend the democracy of the Salon, Napoleon III instituted the Salon des Refusés (Exhibition of Rejects). Between 1874-1886 the Impressionists were to hold their own independent exhibitions. By 1881, the Government had withdrawn official sponsorship from the annual Salon, which left the artists themselves responsible to organise exhibitions, the first of which was known as "The society of French artists". Various splinter groups emerged thereafter.

'The pastoral concert', an oil painting by the Venetian artist Giorgione (1477-1510), is often cited in connection with Manets' 'Luncheon on the grass', which undoubtedly Manet had seen on his travels to Italy. It also depicts two nude women sitting with shepherds in the countryside.

Another of Manets' nude portraits 'Olympia', which was exhibited at the Salon in Paris, aroused such anger that the public had to be restrained from attacking it with umbrellas - men not excluded. But, in spite of the public indignation, Manet's originality inspired an important group of younger painters.

Constantine Brancusi (1876 - 1957)

At the turn of the 20th century, artists were drawn to Paris like moths to a flame: Picasso moved there from Spain in 1904, Modigliani from Italy in 1906, Diego Rivera from Mexico in 1909, and Marc Chagall from Russia in 1910. But perhaps the most dramatic arrival story is that of Constantin Brancusi. He left his native country of Romania in 1904 and walked all the way to Paris, crossing Austria and Germany and nearly dying of pneumonia along the way.

In Paris he worked for two years at the workshop of Antonin Mercié of the École des Beaux-Arts, and was invited to enter the workshop of Auguste Rodin. Even though he admired the eminent Rodin he left the Rodin studio after only two months, saying, "Nothing can grow under big trees."

Decades later, Brancusi's Parisian studio would become a destination in its own right. Tucked away on an alley in Montparnasse known as the Impasse Ronsin, the sculptor's atelier became the heart of a vibrant community of French post-war artists that included Yves Klien, Max Ernst, Jean Tinguely, and Niki de Saint Phalle. Most people hadn't a clue about the Impasse Ronsin. A hidden artistic world in the middle of modern Paris, but guarded like a well-kept secret. His studio was located near Montparnasse in a district made up of alleyways that lent it a private character, surrounded by other studios.

As an old man, Brancusi was concerned about preserving his studio, which had become in many ways his final work of art. At the end of his life, the sculptor made a deal with the landlords and the French government that his atelier be preserved in its entirety. It now lives outside the Centre Georges Pompidou, in a Renzo Piano-designed enclosure that opened in 1997. He also promised the other artists that lived on Impasse Ronsin that they would be allowed to remain there after his death—a promise he wasn't able to keep. He thought the City of Paris would make an enclave with all the old studios, but it was not made clear in his will that they would have to stay.

* * *

During my two week stay in Montparnasse I never knew about the Impasse Ronsin.

I didn't seek out these "historic studios." In my youth Brancusi was a type of hero for me. His remains are in Montparnasse Cemetery through which I walked several times on my way elsewhere. It wasn't far from the apartment. I am not interested to visit grave sites of people I haven't known. Among others buried there are Jean Paul Satre, Simone de Beauvoir, Charles Baudelaire, Samuel Beckett, and Ossip Zadkine. Sometime later I found out his studio wasn't far from the Jazz club 'Le Petit Journal', which I visited with Natalie. I wasn't able to find out the whereabouts of Impasse Ronsin even at the Pompidou Centre when I visited Brancusi's "recreated" studio.

Dissolution in Modern Art - Excerpt from 'Ride the Tiger', by Julius Evola 1961

When speaking of modern art, the first thing to mention is its "intimate" quality, typical of a feminine spirituality that wants nothing to do with great historic and political forces; out of morbid sensitivity (sometimes brought about by a trauma), it retreats into the world of the artists' subjectivity, valuing only the psychologically and aesthetically "interesting." The works of Joyce, Proust, and Gide mark the extreme of this tendency in literature.

In some cases, the trend with "pure art" as its slogan is associated with the above specifically in the sense of a pure formalism of expressive perfection; the "subject" becomes irrelevant, so that any intrusion of it is considered a contamination. In these cases an even greater degree of dissociation is present than in the fetishism of the artist's own interiority.

There is no point in speaking of the current desire to hold on to a "traditional art." Today no one has any idea of what can rightly be called traditional in a higher sense. We find here only academicism and the withered reproduction of models, which lack any original creative force. It is a variety of the "regime of residues" - the so-called great art relegated to the past is merely the stuff of rhetoric.

In the opposite, avant-garde trend, value and meaning are reduced to those of a revolt and an illustration of the general process of dissolution. Its works are often interesting, not from an artistic point of view but rather as indices of the climate of modern life. They reflect the critical situation already alluded to in speaking of European nihilism, but give rise to nothing constructive, permanent, or durable. We should note amidst the chaos of styles the cases of rapid retreat from the most advanced positions: almost all those avant-gardists who were most revolutionary in an existential situation that was originally authentic have accepted a new academicism, a new conventionality, and the commercialization of their work.

Equally typical is the subsequent turn, on the part of some of those artists, in an abstract, formal, and neoclassical direction, which is an evasion that puts an end to the relentless tension of their former, more authentic, revolutionary phase. One could speak here of an "Apollonism," in the admittedly arbitrary sense in which Nietzsche used the term in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Nonetheless, from the differentiated man's point of view the process of dissolution found in the most extreme art with its atmosphere of anarchic or abstract freedom, may actually have a liberating value, as opposed to much of yesterday's bourgeois art. Aside from this, after the exhaustion of expressionism as a shapeless eruption of the disassociated, psychic contents, and after the exhaustion of dadaism and surrealism, if their attitudes had persisted we would have witnessed the self-dissolution of modern art, which would have left an empty spiritual space.

In a different epoch, it is precisely in that space that a new “objective” art might have taken shape, in that “grand style” to which Nietzsche referred: “The greatness of an artist is not measured by the beautiful sentiments that he arouses - only girls can think along these lines - but by the degree to which he approaches the grand style. This has in common with great passion the disdain of pleasure; he forgets to persuade, he wills ... To make himself master of the chaos that one is, to force his own chaos to become form, mathematics, law—that is the grand ambition. Around such despotic men a silence is born, a fear, similar to what is felt at a great sacrilege.” But to think this way in the present world is absurd - our epoch lacks any centre, any meaning, any objective symbol that could give soul, content, and power to this “grand style.”

The French Language: “Je suis Australien... et Russe!”

I did a two week course in French before I departed Australia. Also two years during my student years when I was fifteen and sixteen. A few words only returned.

So I’m not so inclined to attempt French. An acquaintance advised me before I departed to say “Je suis Australien” so the French do not think I’m English. So this is what I say if a French person asks from where I’ve come. Or sometimes I just simply say it straight out after my “Parlez-vous Anglais?”. The additional “...et Russe” conjures further allure and mystification, or confusion!

So for directions my opener is “Bonjour Monsieur or Madam, vous parlez L’Anglaise? Je suis un peu La Française.” Je suis Australien “et Russe”. And then the fun starts. I continue until I find someone who speaks English, which is frequently the case. If I need to ask for directions I choose dark skinned people. I pick my targets - well dressed working people. It seldom fails.

I returned to the nearby Japanese restaurant because the food was tasty, the prices moderate and the Asian waitress, who I found out was a student, spoke good English, and seemed interested to talk. The place was quiet. The visit coincided with another development – a toothache. One of the lower molars has loosened somewhat. I haven’t sought advice. I’ll try to bear the discomfort. I could have gone to the supermarket or chemist but haven’t. I’ll rinse with salty water and eat on the other side. In two weeks I’ll be back in Melbourne. I never returned to the restaurant following the Asian waitress’ probing curiosity to know why I had never married. I think we decided the answer had more or less to do with wanting my freedom.

The only other English I’ve spoken during my stay in Montparnasse was with an English man who was eager to tell me his life story. He overheard me in the small bistro where I have morning coffee and croissants. Perhaps in his mid forties he mentioned that he had come to Paris for a holiday fifteen years ago and stayed ever since. He spoke as if he hadn’t spoken to anyone for years. I consumed two coffees during our conversation. I don’t remember too much of what he said. If I wanted to talk again he said he was often here around this time. I sometimes looked for him through the bifold doors on my way back to the apartment for lunch.

I wouldn’t return to Paris alone again without good reason, especially because of the language problem. One wants to speak French with the locals, not English with the tourists. The French people’s nature is outwardly effervescent and cheerful. They seem to know how to enjoy themselves.

Le Select French Cafe

A few days before I was due to leave for London the apartment owner Alexandre phoned to invite me for a drink at a Cafe on Boulevard Du Montparnasse.

I set off by foot to meet him at five, by way of the Montparnasse Cemetery. I had to make haste for it was further than I thought – maybe three kilometres.

The Select is one of the few remaining traditional cafes with an outdoor area facing the street. It was crowded with tables, very noisy, stimulating, and there were still no bans on smoking here. We had two beers each in the still, warm evening sunlight. A blanket of smoke hung between the umbrellas and tables, somewhat of a discomfort – I'd stopped smoking in my mid thirties. I felt it was business as usual for Alexandre – he told me to leave the key in the mailbox when I departed, then he had to go. He also recommended a traditional French restaurant for my farewell dinner to Paris, where I could have a beef steak.

The number of restaurants, cafes, bistros and brasseries is astounding. It's as if no one can cook for themselves anymore. "Bistro" is a Russian word meaning "quick" which supposedly was adopted by the French following the Napoleonic Wars when many Russian soldiers ended up in Paris. It's fair enough for the tourists to believe they're having an authentic French experience even if they're not. Local knowledge is worth 50 laptops. Tourists connect with other tourists on the internet for meetings.

Final Day

If I wanted English I certainly found it on the last day before my departure to London. I was on my way to the Metro at Place Denfert-Rochereau for a reconnaissance visit. I happened to notice beyond the footpath in the warm sunshine a large outdoor eating area. I indeed had to rub my eyes when I read the banner high above the diners "Authentic Australian Food" and then the name of the restaurant. I sat down and spoke to the waiter, an "Aussie" for the first time in more than six weeks. I ate a meat pie with tomato sauce.

* * *

Every day now feels a struggle. The energy that comes of a new and unpredictable environment is still present. It would be folly to come all this way and return home in a week or so. I won't be doing this for some time. So I persevere – and hope the tooth doesn't worsen. Definitely more of a life-experience than a "holiday".

A crowded noisy restaurant – Farewell Paris!

I was back in the narrow Rue de La Gaité on Alexandre's suggestion. You could have touched the tables through the open roll-up doors from the footpath into the cafe. A long narrow indoor eating area was already crowded and more noisy than 'The Select'. A male waiter in traditional formal attire – a pleasant change I thought – showed me to a table just a step up from street level where there were two rows of tables. I could have touched the people that passed by in the fading light on the footpath.

It was a late dinner. A large beef steak arrived on a plate and a huge bowl of mashed potato with a carafe of red wine. The cost was around \$50 AUD. Though somewhat extravagant, I felt this was simply good value. At times I like the din of conversation - especially when the language isn't English - I don't have to understand any of it.

To London via Calais to Dover

I rose at six in the morning and kept to my plan – take the ferry across the channel like I had some twenty-five years earlier. That first time had been from London to Calais and I remember vividly lying on my back in the warm sunshine with students. This ferry I imagine would be larger and faster. Nothing was pre booked. If I missed the train to Calais I thought I would take the Eurostar fast train under the channel.

Waiting at Denfert-Rochereau Metro I had to let the first train to Gare du Nord go as it was overcrowded. I jammed my way with my suitcase into the next one which wasn't much better. At Gare du Nord I asked at Information – I only had five minutes and didn't know where to go and was directed to the lift up one level. Having found the ticket office I was told to look on the TV screens for the platform number – a hectic place is Gare du Nord. Running down a ramp to the main corridor where the platforms were, I desperately looked for Calais as I passed the screens. Finally "Voix 13 - Calais" I still might make it – I ran fast as I could up the ramp to the platform. The announcer made his last call as I hauled my suitcase onto the train. I drew deep breaths, found the luggage rack and then fell into a seat as the train moved slowly out of the station.

When I'd calmed down I took a flask from my jacket pocket and had some Scotch. After all, it was almost nine o'clock in the morning. A pleasant mannered French attendant issued me a ticket on the train. The journey north should take less than two hours. How my experience would be enriched if only I spoke French.

On the train to Dover

Other museums I found of interest in Paris were Musée Carnavalet Histoire de Paris, The Grande Gallery of Evolution, which I visited twice, and the Pantheon.

Musée Carnavalet Histoire de Paris is located in Marais on the Right Bank, just west of the Bastille. Largely untouched by Baron Haussmann's three decade long modernisation program begun in 1854, the district has preserved its Renaissance mansions and narrow streets. The area was little more than a riverside swamp (marais) till the thirteenth century, when the Knights Templar moved into its northern section, now known as the quarter du Temple, and began to drain the land. It became a magnet for Aristocracy in the early 1600's. This "golden age" was relatively short-lived, for the aristocracy started to move away after the King took his court to Versailles in the latter part of the seventeenth century, leaving the grand houses to the Merchants and 'trading classes', who were in turn displaced during the late eighteenth century Revolution. From then on, the mansions became slum tenements and the streets degenerated into squalor. Now it is one of the most "desirable" areas of the city.

I got lost going to the museum from the metro, so I asked a couple who were English and turned out to be also going to the museum. The woman said "just follow us – my husband knows where he's going – he always knows everything!"

In the foyer I sat on a bench seat to look at a map of the museum, before leaving my bag at the luggage area nearby. The foyer was quiet and empty. When I turned back to the seat my camera had disappeared! Shocked that this happened at such an "idle" place early morning. I asked the luggage room attendant - he hadn't seen anyone. I was angry. I had many photographs – the camera was obtained free of charge at an Opportunity Shop where I'd worked. A more "digital-person" would have downloaded them onto another device. Need to be vigilant!

This museum has a collection of paintings, sculptures, decorative arts and archaeological finds. It is set in two beautiful Renaissance mansions - Hotel Carnavalet and Hotel Le Peletier, surrounded by gardens.

There were fantastic models of Paris that showed how Haussmann's boulevards changed the city – as well as artefacts and tapestries rescued from the buildings destroyed for the boulevards.

Impossible to take it all in – rooms full of mementos of the French Revolution: execution orders, a room of the temple prison where Louis XVI and his family were locked up had been recreated; original Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and sculpted allegories of Reason.

I spent two hours at the Museum before having lunch. A very interesting place of over a hundred small rooms – would have to return I thought.

Upon leaving when I stepped outside, I happened to bump into the English couple again. I told them of the theft to which they appeared matter of fact or indifferent. Probably had their problems. Who knows it may have been them.

* * *

When tired I visit gardens and so I found myself at Jardin des Plantes in the Latin Quarter - the “neighbour” to St Germaine. Mostly I take the Metro. I have had some trouble with buying tickets and the ticketing system in general. Sometimes I simply overstep the turnstile after having a quick look around.

The **Jardin des Plantes** was founded as a medicinal herb garden in 1626 and has retained botanical and scientific roles. In the nearby physics laboratories overlooking the gardens, Henri Becquerel discovered radioactivity in 1896, and two years later the Curies found radium. The more leisured side has hot houses, shady avenues of trees, lawns and a zoo. A great museum, **La Grande Galerie de L'Evolution** is also housed the gardens. Stuffed animals and deep ocean creatures are displayed at the Museum as well as marvellous savannah scenes of African animals – visual displays of great interest, originality and artistic skill.

At the museum something came to my attention printed on one of several timber display boards – about urban populations – that the largest cities and megacities of the world account for 60% of total global habitation. An alarming statistic in itself – as well as for the maintenance and quality of human habitation. Greater densities of urban settlements must be logistic nightmares to maintain as well as the decline in the qualities of life due to overcrowding and law and order. Larger challenges for the future.

* * *

The Pantheon, a towering mausoleum and the most visible of many domes on the Left Bank, tops Montagne Saint Genevieve – the patron saint who protected the city from the barbarians in 512 AD, and for whom a basilica was built, as well as a tomb for King Clovis, France's first Christian King and his Queen Clotilde.

In 1744, Louis XV attributed his recovery from serious illness to prayers made to Saint Genevieve. The ruined abbey was replaced by the current church, finished in 1790 under direction of architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot (1713-1780), whose ambition was to outdo St. Peters of Rome.

The Revolution promptly transformed it into a mausoleum, to which the words "The nation honours its great men" were chiselled beneath the pediment of the building's portico. The remains of French "heroes" such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Hugo and Zola are now entombed in the barrel-vaulted crypt below. There are others as well: Marie Curie, Andre Malraux, writer and Minister for Culture C20th, and novelist Alexandre Dumas.

The physicist Leon Foucault (1819-1868) installed a pendulum in the Pantheon in 1851, to demonstrate in visual form the rotation of the earth - while the pendulum appears to rotate over a 24-hour period, it is in fact the earth beneath turning. Huge crowds turned up to watch the "ground move under their feet". A difficult concept to grasp for the lay-person, maybe as difficult as the existence of God himself.

Studios of some prominent twentieth century artists I would have liked to visit included the painter Seurat (1859-1891), and the sculptors Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) and Ossip Zadkine (1885-1967).

Calais

I had a coffee in a quaint older style glass walled cafe overlooking the ocean and bought a ham & cheese roll – it had a pleasant cafeteria feel. I sat down on a bench outside in front of a row of pretty coloured two-storey mansard roofed houses with balconies. I imagined that seafarers or fishermen had lived here, or maybe even artists in garrets. Calais must have been some port. In Europe, when you turn over a pebble, you find a story.

* * *

Calais was virtually razed to the ground during World War II. Since the Middle Ages it has been a major port and centre for trading and transport with England. It began to stagnate during the 18th Century when other ports began to rise and compete. After World War II there was little rebuilding of the historic city and most new buildings were modern in appearance.

Since the late 1990's an increasingly large number of migrants and refugees started to arrive in the vicinity of Calais living in the "Calais jungle", a nickname given to a series of makeshift camps.

These people, a mix of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, attempt to enter Britain by stowing away on lorries, ferries, cars or trains. To discourage migrants from jumping on train shuttles at Calais, the British government supplied fencing to install in the Euro-tunnel where the vehicles are loaded onto train shuttles. In October 2016, French authorities announced that the camp had been cleared.

Across the Channel

I've just drank a beer on the third level of the PRO Ferry, which is moving about quite a lot already in the choppy sea and strong headwind. Low hanging dark vaporous clouds, drizzle and a grey green sea blur an invisible horizon.

The Captain announced that stabilising pins would be used and that the crossing would take some twenty minutes longer than usual - about an hour and fifty minutes. From here the swell looked about two to three metres. I felt like conversation so I took my lunch and another beer to sit opposite a couple, perhaps a little younger than myself.

"Is it always this rough?" I blurted out.

"We've seen worse than this", came the reply that relaxed me a little.

We talked for quite some time. I hadn't spoken English in proper conversation for more than two weeks.

The most memorable comment of our conversation came when I asked where they lived in London. "We'd never live there", the man replied, "You wouldn't know it was England anymore" he continued, "too many people now. We left fifteen years ago."

I haven't forgotten their remark largely due to the rancour with which they were expressed.

When I walked off the ferry at Dover onto Terre Ferme I still felt buoyant. The one solitary Customs Officer at a small narrow shelter certainly brought me back to earth.

When I asked him was there a train to London, as I imagined there would be, he asked me how was I planning to get there. He was even less impressed when I answered that I didn't know as yet where it was that I intended to stay. Then things turned from bad to worse when I didn't have a date of departure.

This hard-nosed "welcome" came as a shock. An old Major-General type, his voice was stern, his expression serious. I had expected this in St. Petersburg not England.

He appeared more satisfied after I showed him my return air ticket from Paris to Melbourne on request.

"If I came to Australia and said I didn't know where I was staying" he said, "I wouldn't get a foot in". I thanked him for his leniency to which he replied "It's not leniency, it's just the powers to be".

Blood pressure up I quickly walked along the corridor of the terminal. Through the glass doors at the curb I suddenly saw a bus with "PRO Ferry" written on the side moving out of sight. Another time to curse! I imagine it was on its way to London. Damn that Major-General. After having found a small nearby bus shelter, an elderly lady was able to give me some welcome information about the buses. We talked until the bus finally arrived some time later.

* * *

Here I am sitting on a public bus to London, a journey of about 1¾ hours at a cost of £15. So damn tired that I've strapped my seat belt on just in case I fall out the seat.

An Indian sounding bus driver with bad teeth, who didn't really look Indian at all, apologised when I told him I wasn't yet sixty years of age. I said that's ok – I should have said yes of course to get the cheaper fare. Oh the vanity – right now I probably looked ten years older. What a journey it's been. Nearly all day. The fast train from Paris to London is probably not longer than this winding bus trip. I reclined my head and I drifted off. Was that Major-General's grilling due to the number of illegal migrants seeking passage from Calais to Dover...?

London

I got off the bus with my bags. The light was fading. The driver said I would find many hotels here. The name of the area was Pimlico Central London. There were several tall narrow houses with lit signs advertising accommodation along the narrow street I now found myself in. Unfortunately they were all booked.

It was dark when I finally found one. The proprietor may have sensed my desperation. We

climbed several flights of very narrow stairs to a tiny room. I had memories of another similar attic “storeroom cupboard” in Barcelona back in 1997 – found in the dead of night as well. Surely it must have been a bathroom or a broom cupboard in a past life. It had a small overhead window. He said he could only do one night. It wasn’t cheap. £80 – more than \$100 AUD.

* * *

The next morning I was told to visit Victoria Rail Station. A tourist travel agent there booked me three nights at a Residential Hotel in Earls Court, some fifteen minutes by train. When I asked a middle-aged Londoner if I was on the right platform for Earls Court he responded with “You’re from Australia aren’t you?” – recognition at last I thought, before he bellowed out – “How about the England cricket team’s Ashes tour victory 3-1 In Australia Eh!” His face beamed with delight - “I was there” he said - “Welcome to London!”. I thanked him as the train rushed into the tube. That would be right, I thought and chuckled to myself.

Philbeach Gardens

Philbeach Gardens is an attractive semi-circular street on Earls Court lined with mostly two to three storey Victorian style terraces and pruned, gnarled and knotted trees. The streets of London are spared the ugliness of overhead power lines. The crescent shaped street is wrapped around a residential private garden, which lends the street its name. Access to the private communal rear gardens (of which there were several in Earls Court) were restricted for private use.

The crescent shaped Philbeach Garden street was laid out in the early 19th Century and from its beginning was designed for use by wealthy tenant residents. In 1928 the garden was owned by Lord Iveagh. After the rights to the garden’s use expired in 1975, it was maintained by a garden Committee made up of those people entitled to have access with rules and regulations approved by Lord Iveagh as ground landlord, who made a yearly allowance to cover expenses. Today the secluded gardens are completely enclosed by large four-storey houses.

* * *

The heavy accented voice of the manageress at the Beavers Hotel was perhaps Polish. One of the two front rooms with a bay window view onto the street was mine for £90 or 110€ a night with breakfast (compared to 35€ in St. Petersburg and 50€ in Paris). That the Hotel is rated by two stars only became obvious on the following day when the toilet cistern failed and I had to use a bucket and fill it with water from a basin in the room. At least I had a view onto the street from the pan – what a selling point.

Following my visit to “the cellar”, a windowless basement breakfast room with a low ceiling, I quickly dropped its rating to one star. By the third and final breakfast I couldn’t finish my meal and leave quickly enough - the stars had all fallen!

You could say the menu was quite “varied” – one could have “eggs scrambled”, “eggs poached”, “eggs fried”, or “eggs boiled” – of course with or without bacon. Was it unreasonable of me to want more?

On the second morning I was pleased that sausages were on the menu. When the plate arrived with two sausages the size of my forefinger - that’s what I felt like giving them -

I couldn't help myself saying "Is that all?!" I felt like Oliver Twist when he asked innocently "Could I have some more please?"

"Vot else vould you like?" the sullen Eastern European or Polish waitress replied. I thought their English was restricted to the menu items - couldn't blame them. Just another example of the imported slave trade of Globalisation. People needing money to improve their life.

"I better have eggs scrambled", I said. I felt the young burly cook I'd seen yesterday out the corner of my eye behind me in the kitchen was getting a laugh at my expense!

I should have known better. The previous morning after I'd asked for eggs and sausages I had to search for the lonely sausage under the eggs!

Everyone always sits at the same tables in these type of rooms - it's not that we have to, it's just something we as humans are accustomed to do. There was another person alone apart from myself who sat at a corner table not far but not near to me.

I couldn't help saying to him after this episode "Do you believe those sausages?!" He was from Australia, a little older than me and not as boring as his impression suggested – who could blame him – he'd been here a week!

The Tate Modern

All in all I was happy to be only four kilometres from the city centre. On the first morning I took the tube under the Thames to the Tate Modern. One of the largest museums of modern and contemporary art in the world. It also holds the national collection of British art from 1900 to the present day.

It is housed in the former Bankside Power Station dominated by its huge chimney. The power station closed in 1981. It was built between 1947 and 1967. The redevelopment project for the Tate commenced in 1995 and was completed by 2000, the same year the Millennium footbridge across the Thames River was completed to "link" Bankside and the Tate with the city of London, St. Pauls Cathedral and the City of London School.

My visit to the Tate Modern was brief. I couldn't persevere with the crowds and the vacuumous acoustics. Besides, I'd seen many or knew of many of these 20th Century artworks. I walked around for an hour or so to revisit this snapshot of history. I was tired and nearing the end of my trip. The humid and murky weather of London didn't help my lethargy.

I sat to have lunch on a bench which overlooked the Thames, a straight line of sight across the Millennium footbridge, over which throngs of people continually moved. I wondered if a dome that rose above other buildings in the distance was Sir Christopher Wren's Cathedral. I knew it was one of the largest domes of the world from my architectural student days but had forgotten its name. I'd seen many photographs of it. After lunch I took a photo of St Paul's Cathedral from the bridge before returning to Earls Court.

Reflections on the Modern World and Art

Much of twentieth century Modern Art appears to have a tendency to exhibit feelings and various associations with disagreement, alienation, degeneration, loss of soul and meaningfulness. Some appear even infantile and "embrace" the commercial characteristics of the Modern Contemporary world, which are sometimes so meaningless they can be read as "ironic" or "empty" and be considered still as part of the "Modern World of things" or be "celebrated" for their indifference, as if the artist can only make "token gestures".

Modernity has created a large number of artists - as well as non-artists - who “feel they don’t belong” or don’t identify with the spirit of the age (the zeitgeist) or just become part of this spirit of absurdity as if it is a given, and that it has always been so.

The above mentioned feelings or emotions can be seen in a broader historical development – even by way of “recent” upheavals, such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolutions, Societal Revolutions, the violent destruction of aristocracy and add to that the mechanised technological world wars of the twentieth century.

For those souls who “feel they don’t belong” to Modernity’s way, I have included the following excerpt from another reference source. The author refers to such people as a “differentiated human type” - a translation from the Italian which I guess refers to those who have a discriminating orientation:

The Sickness of European Culture

Excerpt from ‘Ride the Tiger’, by Julius Evola 1961

In my discussion of personal values and the new realism, I have mentioned the nature of culture and art in the modern world. I return to that subject but from a slightly different point of view, in order to define the potential significance of this realm for the differentiated human type.

When speaking of the relationship between recent art and culture and the entire dissolutive process, one can call upon the principal thesis expounded by Christoph Steding. (21) in “The Empire and the Sickness of European Culture”- a good study of the genesis of the cultural characteristics that took form in Europe after the decline of its traditional unity. Steding emphasizes that present culture had its point of departure in the dissociation, neutralization, emancipation, and absolutisation of particular realism, which therefore ceased to be more or less organic parts of a whole. He refers especially to a formative centre of all existence that gave a meaning to life, a centre that also guaranteed a sufficiently organic character to the culture. The positive and necessary manifestation of this center on the political level corresponded to the principle Empire, not only in its secular significance (that is, political in a limited sense), but spiritual as well, which it preserved in the medieval European ecumene and which was marked by a political theology of high Ghibellinism, as supported by Dante himself.

In Europe, this process of dissolution, which always follows the disappearance of any higher point of reference, had two connected causes. The first was a kind of paralysis of the idea of European tradition as a centre of gravity - which also corresponded to an obscuration, materialising, and decline of the Empire and its authority. Then, as if by counterpoint, there ensued the second cause - the centrifugal motion of the parts, the dissociation and autonomisation of parts, conditioned precisely by the weakening and disappearance of the originating force of gravity. From the political point of view, there was the well-known consequence that we need not dwell on” the end of the unified whole that the preceding European world still presented politically and socially, despite a system of ample regional autonomies and multiple tensions. Steding calls this a “Swissifying” and “Dutchifying” of areas previously organically included in the complex of the Empire, and the fragmentation consequent on the rise of national states. But on the intellectual level the effect was necessarily the formation of a divided, “neutral” culture, devoid of any objective character.

This is indeed the genesis and the predominant character of culture, science, and art that have come to prevail in the modern era. It is not necessary to make a detailed examination of that realm here. If I continued the discussion of modern science and its technical applications, it would be easy to highlight this process of increasing autonomy, a process neither checked nor restrained by any higher limits or guidance” hence one often has the impression that technical-scientific development takes man in hand and faces him with difficult, unexpected situations full of unknowns. I need not dwell on the specialized fragmentation, the lack of the higher and unifying principle of modern knowledge, as it is quite evident. These are the consequences of one of the dogmas of progressive thought, the unassailable “freedom of science” and of scientific research, which is a simple euphemistic way to indicate and legitimise the development of one activity dissociated from the whole.

That “freedom” is not unlike the “freedom of culture” celebrated as a victory, with which the active processes of dissolution likewise manifest in an inorganic civilization - as opposed to what Vico recognised as proper to all the “heroic periods” of preceding civilizations. One of the most typical expressions of the “neutralisation” of such a culture is the antithesis between culture and politics” - pure art and pure culture are supposed to have nothing to do with politics. In the direction of literary liberalism and humanism, separation has often turned into overt opposition. There is a well-known intellectual and humanist type who fosters an almost hysterical intolerance for anything referring to the political world—state ideals and authority, strict discipline, war, power, and domination—and denies them any spiritual or cultural value. Accordingly, there are those who have dealt with a “cultural history” carefully separated from “political history,” making it a realm in itself. Naturally, the apolitical pathos and alienation of this “neutral” art and culture have been largely justified by the degradation of the political sphere, by the low level to which political values have fallen in recent times. But it is more a case of an orientation on principle, which excludes any consideration of how anomalous this situation is - in modern culture the “neutral” character has in fact become a constituent feature.

Here, to anticipate any misunderstanding, it is prudent to emphasize that the opposite condition, the normal and creative one, is not that of a culture at the service of the state and of politics (politics in the degraded, modern sense). It is that in which a unique idea, the basic and central symbol of a given civilisation, shows its strength and exerts a parallel, positive action, often invisible, both on the political plane (with all the values, not just the material ones, that should concern every true state) and on that of thought, culture, and the arts: it excludes any major schism or antagonism between the two realms, as well as any need for outside interventions. Precisely because an organic type of civilisation no longer exists, precisely because the processes of dissolution have penetrated every realm of existence, all of that has ceased to exist. Today we seem fated to have the alternative, false and deleterious in itself, of either a “neutral” art and culture devoid of every higher warrant and meaning, or of an art and culture subject to pure and simple, degraded political forces, as is the case in totalitarian systems, and chiefly in those informed by the theories of “Marxist realism” and the corresponding polemic against the decadence and alienation of bourgeois art.

The separation of art and culture is a direct consequence of subjectivism, the disappearance of any objective and impersonal style, and the general lack of the dimension of depth, following what has already been stated in broad terms about the “values of the personality” and overcoming them.

(21) German Historian (1903-1938)

Millennium Footbridge

Londoners nicknamed the bridge the “Wobbly Bridge” after pedestrians experienced alarming swaying motions. The bridge was closed late on opening day, and then for almost two years while modifications were made.

The risks of lateral vibrations in lightweight bridges are well known and documented. On opening day the bridge was crossed by 90,000 people, with up to 2000 on the bridge at any one time.

The greater number of people, the greater the amplitude of the vibrations. The Albert Bridge in London has a sign dating from 1873 warning marching ranks of soldiers to break step while crossing. The lateral motion caused the pedestrians loading the bridge to directly participate with the bridge, a situation similar to soldiers marching in lockstep.

St. Pauls Cathedral

An Anglican cathedral, the dome is among the highest in the world, and it sits on Ludgate Hill, the highest point of the City of London. Its dedication to Paul the Apostle dates back to the original church founded in AD 604. The present Cathedral, dating from the late 17th century, was designed by Sir Christopher Wren and was part of a major rebuilding programme following the Great Fire of London in 1666. The cathedral is a working church, with hourly prayer and daily services. The tourist entry fee at the door is £18, but no charge is made to worshippers.

Services held at St. Pauls have included the funeral of Admiral Nelson, Sir Winston Churchill and Baroness Thatcher, Jubilee celebrations for Queen Victoria, peace services marking the end of the First and Second World Wars, and the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer.

The cathedral survived the Blitz although struck by bombs on October 1940 and April 1941. On 12 September 1940 a time-delayed bomb that had struck the cathedral was successfully diffused and removed by a bomb disposal detachment of Royal Engineers. Had it detonated it would have destroyed the cathedral. It left a 30 metre crater. At the height of an air-raid on 29 December 1940 during the “Second Great Fire of London”, Winston Churchill telephoned the Guildhall to insist that all fighting resources be directed at St. Pauls. The cathedral must be saved, he said, damage to the fabric would sap the morale of the country.

The Tate Britain

Not to be confused with the Tate Modern Museum, this gallery is situated on Millbank, on the site of the former Millbank Prison. Construction commenced in 1893 and opened July 1897 as the National Gallery of British Art. It was commonly known as the Tate Gallery, after

its founder Henry Tate, and in 1932 it officially adopted this name. Before 2000, the gallery housed and displayed both British and Modern collections, but after the launch of Tate Modern, the Millbank gallery became dedicated to the display of historical and contemporary British art. As a consequence, it was renamed **Tate Britain** in March 2000.

Henry Tate, a grocer's apprentice at the age of thirteen and a shop owner at twenty, had acquired a chain of six stores by the time he was thirty-five. He became a partner in John Wright & Co sugar refinery, selling the grocery business in 1861. By 1869 he had gained complete control of the company, and renamed it Henry Tate & Sons. In 1872 he purchased the patent from German Engen Langen for making sugarcubes and in the same year built a new refinery in Liverpool.

Tate rapidly became a millionaire. He donated generously to charities and was a philanthropist of many causes including education and health institutions. He built the Tate Institute, a community facility and a beer and dance hall opposite the refinery for recreation.

In 1889 he donated his collection of sixty-five contemporary British paintings to the government on condition that they be displayed in a suitable gallery, the construction to which he donated £80,000. He was seventy-eight years of age when the Museum known now as Tate Britain was opened in 1897. Henry Tate was made a baronet in 1898, eighteen months before his death, though he'd refused the title several times. He was told the Royal Family would be offended if he refused again.

Whenever I travel to Europe - such far distances from Australia - this being the third time, I take sketchbook and pencils, however it is seldom the two ever meet. When in large cities I'm too busy planning and organising itinerary to feel relaxed enough to sketch. The tyranny of the camera is such a convenient tool to record sights. One is constantly on the move, over stimulated, seeing new things, or irritated by crowds.

I was fortunate to see a watercolour exhibition at the Tate Britain which explored this medium's versatility for realistic representation and for hallucinatory or abstract invention. The temporary exhibition was a survey of several centuries of watercolour. Eight adjoining galleries had been curated to represent collections such as 'Intimate Knowledge', 'The Natural World', 'Travel and Topography', 'Exploring the Medium', 'Watercolour and War', 'Inner Vision' and 'Abstraction and Improvisation'.

Famously J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and Edward Burra (1905-1976) were both represented. Other interesting artists I noticed were Arthur Melville (1855-1904), Frederick Robinson (1862-1927) and Anish Kapoor (1952 -).

The Romantics Exhibition was also highly interesting, and included some William Blake (1757-1827) paintings who was also a poet. The origins of the Romantic Movement in Art is embedded with Western European Enlightenment ideas and the Industrial Revolutions of the 18th and 19th Centuries.

The experience of the Tate Britain was like being in a country town compared to the intensity of the Tate Modern. A welcomed change. It just didn't feel like I was in London. The building itself with its portico entrance and central dome resembled a temple. And provided a sense of authority appropriate for a national museum of its time. The statue of Britannica with the lion and unicorn on top of the pediment emphasised its function as a gallery of British Art.

The National Gallery Museum

The late 18th Century saw the nationalisation of Royal or Princely art collections across mainland Europe. Great Britain however did not follow the Continental model, and the British Royal Collection remains in the sovereign's possession to this day.

The first National Gallery was opened to the public in 1824, at Pall Mall, at the townhouse of recently deceased John Julius Angerstein, a Russian-born émigré Jewish banker and art collector based in London. His collection of 38 paintings purchased by the government, together with 16 paintings gifted by British aristocrat Sir George Beaumont, were the beginning of a national collection. However, this small, hot and frequently overcrowded house became a cause of national embarrassment when compared to the Louvre in Paris.

So was born the National Gallery as we know it today, in an area that had been transformed in the 1820's into Trafalgar Square. The location was significant being between the wealthy West End and the poorer areas to the east.

From 1824 the collection was shaped by its early director Sir Charles Lock Eastlake, and private donations, which today account for two-thirds of the collection.

Construction on the new building began in 1832 and opened in 1838. During the 1850's the pollution of central London and the 'failings' of William Wilkins building resulted in discussions to move the collection to South Kensington. Finally it was argued that the collection could be better accessed by people of all social classes at its Trafalgar Square location. From 1837 until 1868 the Royal Academy was housed in the east wing of this building.

I spent a morning and afternoon at the National Gallery. Returning to revisit after lunch I noticed a concert advertisement for Antonio Vivaldi's (1678-1741) most popular 'Four Seasons' (four violin concertos, 1725), at a nearby Georgian church, St Martin-in-the-Fields. These concertos are often played in European cities in beautiful churches. I've enjoyed this on each of my European trips. The entry fee is always affordable. I have somewhere to go tonight!

St Martin-in-the-Fields

St Martin-in-the-Fields is a Church of England parish church of Trafalgar Square dedicated to Saint Martin of Tours, Tours now being one of the largest cities in the region of Centre-Val de Loire, France.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese (22) of Tours has roots that go back to the 3rd century. There has been a church on the site since at least the Medieval period. The earliest written reference to the church is from 1222. The Church has had many rebuilds and renovations. The form of the current building as it stands now was designed by James Gibbs Architect and completed in 1724.

Until the creation of Trafalgar Square in the 1820's, the church was crowded by other buildings. Various notables have been buried in the church.

Dick Shepherd, Vicar from 1914-1927 who began programmes for the area's homeless, coined its ethos as the "Church of the Ever Open Door". (Wikipedia 2022)

The National Gallery Museum revisited

"God created the world but the Dutch created Holland"

For over five centuries the Dutch have reclaimed land from the sea, and much of it is fertile, which makes Netherlands one of the largest exporters of food in the world. Once 10,000 windmills pumped water out of walled catchment areas. In 1932 a giant wall was built to create a barrier to the saltwater sea that turned this huge body of water into a freshwater lake.

It might be usual for people who visit large art galleries or museums, especially travelling tourists, to leave without remembering much of what they saw. Unless you buy a book or a postcard of a work of art that had particularly impressed, you won't remember. Once or twice I have purchased a "guided-tour" with headphones, but mostly I prefer not to.

It's the sheer volume of artworks presented in these collections that overwhelm and can leave one bewildered. I took a floor plan map to target particular rooms I felt might be of interest. It was Dutch painting I decided to focus on. The majority of the paintings in the National Gallery are European.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569)

The peopled landscapes Bruegel painted in the last decade of his life around 1565, works such as 'Hunters in the Snow', 'The Harvesters', 'Winter Landscape with Ice Skaters', and 'Gloomy Day' are masterpieces on an epic scale. These were painted at the beginning of The Eighty Years' War (1566-1641) in the Habsburg Netherlands between Dutch and disparate groups of rebels and the Spanish Sovereign King Phillip II. These paintings were commissioned by Nicolaes Jonghelinck, a merchant from Antwerp who wanted to decorate the grand dining room of his Villa. These 'mediaeval type' pictures of 'village workers as monks' are absent of any traces of war. Bruegel takes solace and hope in the seasonal life and vision of nature and place in which he lives – a philosophical and perennial view.

Land and Water

It was later in the Sixteenth Century Flanders that landscape art developed into an independent genre. Flemish immigrant artists introduced these to the fledgling Dutch Republic. This country characterised mostly by a flat landscape produced some of the greatest landscape painters in Western Art. Even Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) painted landscapes, many of which found their way to Britain, where they later influenced Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) and John Constable (1776-1837).

Most of these Flemish landscapes however convincing in reality, were invented in the studio. Flemish artists had travelled to Italy and Rome - including Pieter Bruegel, and were influenced by Italianate 'panoramic' sunlit versions.

Many of the artists from the 'Golden Age' of Dutch painting, such as, Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), Pieter de Hooch (1629-1686), and Gessit Dou (1613-1675), who depicted contemporary domestic life, also invented and imagined their scenes. The pride of nationalism is very evident in Dutch Art.

* * *

Pieter Bruegel the Elder remained my favourite. I didn't expect his paintings to have such a profound impression on me. His son Jan Bruegels' (1568-1625) paintings were also in the National Gallery. It was at the Louvre Museum however that most of his paintings were

housed. I will always remember Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the great Renaissance Period Flemish Artist.

(22) Historically an ecclesiastic district under the jurisdiction of a bishop

A New Art for a New Nation: "The Dutch Golden Age"

Excerpt from 'Age of exploration' (TimeLife publication 1966)

The Dutch Republic of the 17th Century witnessed a powerful and creative periods in Western Art. In the late 16th Century, the predominantly Protestant northern Netherlands declared itself independent from Catholic Spanish rule. A new art was born as artists increasingly produced works not on commission but for a speculative market determined by the demands of a new class of prosperous citizens. By 1630, Dutch burghers, whose business led them to select tough captains for their well armed ships, could claim to have "sailed all other nations off the seas". The Dutch became Europe's largest importers and distributors of spices, sugar, and decorative beads. They spent the profit from this trade on middle-class pleasures, filling their homes with valuable furnishings, wearing beautiful fabrics, loading tables with lavish meals. When such spending could not absorb all the money that poured in they turned to art, which they often commissioned to commemorate themselves or their possessions. At first only the by-products of prosperity, many of these paintings became the enduring monuments of 17th Century Dutch achievement. A painting entitled 'Affluent Artists' by Jan de Bray (1626-1697) depicts the character of seven middle class wealthy burghers in a very satisfied air.

The Dutch discovered art as a pleasure and a business. The art dealer who sold from a gallery also acted as an important intermediary between patron and their painters. The demand for Dutch paintings extended to The Court of Louis XIV of France and aristocratic collections in Italy and England, but the major market was the Dutch middle class. The burghers often liked art not so much for aesthetic reasons but that paintings could attest to their riches. Above all, they wanted 'faithful' rendering of familiar aspects of their lives, and painters were happy to comply. Most Dutch artists were simply good craftsmen and they produced great quantities of meticulous interiors and landscapes, family group portraits, civic magistrates and merchants with their fleets. But others such as Johannes Vermeer, Frans Hals, Jan Steen, and Rembrandt van Rijn, rode the tide of Dutch prosperity to produce 'immortal art'.

Artist Jan Steen (1626-1679) in his painting titled 'A Merry Family', depicts three high spirited generations, enjoying their company, food, wine, and bagpipe music at their home in a lavish way. He's my third favourite painter after Pieter Bruegel and Rembrandt. (25)

On the Train London to Brussels Sunday June 12

A double scotch at the train station did the trick – forget about the double shot coffee. My ears popped and blocked a few times going through a tunnel. I'll be curious to see what happens when we travel through the channel tunnel. I had read that the engineers made provision for air pressure effects to passengers. The cost for one-way is £112 and it takes twenty minutes.

The Tate Britain Museum, The National Gallery, and a performance of Vivaldi's The Four Seasons at a small church on Trafalgar Square one night were the highlights of my London visit. I enjoyed the food much more than in Paris. A beef steak at an English pub managed by Australians in Earls Court Road, fish at a Spanish restaurant near Leicester Square (the Square was unfortunately closed off in preparation for the Olympic Games in 2012), Spaghetti Bolognese at an Italian Restaurant in Victoria Station, and prawn, beef and vegetable curry at a Thai Cafe in Earls Court. The highest price I paid was £30 at the pub for three courses. I didn't have time to visit The Hayward Gallery, The Tower Bridge, or even one of several parks – due to the damp and drizzly weather. I did travel on a double decker English bus however, when I booked a tour. The tour operator's discourse however too often mentioned the Royal Family - in regard to history, shops, and wherever else one of them frequented. It irritated me so much that in the end I terminated the tour and got off the bus. There was also a group of women who incessantly giggled, which was unpleasant despite the fact we were sitting 'plein-air' upstairs.

In Brussels I hope to see some paintings of René Magritte (1848-1967), Paul Delvaux (1897-1994), and Balthus (1908-2001). The stay will be for three nights before the return air flight to Melbourne from Paris. Many passengers are dozing in the train, which doesn't feel to be moving that fast, though it's difficult to know without any visual reference in the tunnel. If I knew the distance between the tunnel lights I could estimate the speed. The ventilation in the train could be improved.

Two languages, Flemish Dutch, and French, are spoken in Belgium – and a little German. A man from Belgium told me this in an English pub. One evening as I waited for my meal, an older man and woman arrived to sit at a nearby table. The woman announced what she would eat – they spoke in English. A short time later they began to talk in another language – it was French! Then a short time later in another. What was this? Had I drunk too much on an empty stomach? It sounded like they talked in a different language. When I asked the man, he replied that they were from Belgium and the language was Flemish. It was an opportune meeting. I had intended to take a train from London to Paris and then to Brussels – I had thought Brussels was south of Paris, not north. The Belgian advised me strongly otherwise: "Go straight to Brussels from here." Musing about travel, people being alone and meeting people, I was reminded of the pendulum in perpetual motion at the Pantheon in Paris. After my 'historical tour' of Dutch Art yesterday at The National Gallery, it seemed a quirk of fate and good fortune to meet a Flemish man at the pub.

Opéra Hôtel Brussels June 13

I'm in a noisy part of town in 'Central' Brussels, the old Mediaeval part around La Grande Place. I've never seen so many restaurants in a confined area. Alfresco Dining reigns! I found a quiet Italian restaurant to get away from the tourists, with a Sicilian owner - a 'charming' man. The prawn entree however was expensive – six prawns for twelve euros. They were still in the shell and I naively asked the waiter how I was supposed to eat them. "you don't know?" He asked incredulously, "with your hands!" I was laughing so we all laughed, including the cook, who eventually peeled them. There were plaintive jazz melodies coming from a nearby restaurant. I felt compelled to write down the lyrics, "As time goes by, the songs grow sadder."

The day started unexpectedly – the art museums were closed Mondays due to a bank holiday. Another unexpected turn was that The Modern Art Museum that housed Balthus, Delvaux and Klimt, among others, was undergoing restorations. The Magritte Museum I

shall visit tomorrow. No one at the Tourist Information was able to tell me what they had done with the paintings at The Modern Art Museum while it was being renovated. At times, some museums help pay for the alterations by sending paintings elsewhere for exhibition tours.

Belgium gained its independence in 1830 when it seceded from the Netherlands. The Column of Congress, which I photographed today, rivals in height the Trafalgar Square's Column of Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758-1805). It has its first Monarch Leopold (1831-1865) at the top and an unknown soldier for the victims of World War I entombed beneath. The base of the column has four sitting feminine sculptures that represent the "enshrined liberties" - association, worship, the press, and education. Two monumental bronze lions that 'guard' the pedestal are the most impressive. I passed this on the way to The Toy Museum. Other 'landmarks' or places of interest were some Art Nouveau facades, the 'old England building', Parc de Bruxelles, Grand Place (Old Town Square), St. Michael and St. Gudula Cathedral, and Royal Saint-Hubert Galleries (the former retail shops which are mostly only cafes these days) - a precursor of shopping malls.

Grand Place (Old Town Square)

Whoever has travelled here will know Europe is like walking through history. On return from previous travel I'd find myself reading its history. One can't help but wonder about changes that shaped the world, what one sees and feels. Of course much more so than Australia. The architectural history of cities, in particular buildings that were built and shaped by linked generational authorities and communities of people to become towns and cities. Grand Place, Brussels is one such example where time suddenly stands still, where history and memory remain. Usefulness, practicality, and fashion – the 'dictates' of our own Twentieth Century have left many 'victims' of architecture and building in its short "wake" – abandoned, derelict, ugly, as results of over investment. The overly ephemeral and 'throw away' character of the modern secular Western world creates this chaos and disorder in the public domain – what is at times referred to as our 'collective consciousness'. The psychological effects of this restless change has been and is dramatic and alienating. Modern city architecture has for several centuries not been able to sustain a connectedness or linked stability – much like the loss of generational links in families. One does not need to know the social and political history to admire the beauty and harmony of Grand Place Brussels, it just makes it more significant and meaningful.

Grand Place has a type of wholeness with links in its visual representation and history: mediaeval origins in the 11th Century, a market not far from a port on a river, and near the Church of St Nicholas, situated on an important trading route between the regions of Rhineland (Germany) and the County of Flanders. A covered meat market, bread market, and cloth market in the 13th Century, eventually gave rise to significant edifices being built in the 14th Century. The two most significant being the Gothic Town Hall (1401-1455) and the Neo-Gothic Administrative building opposite, known as 'The King's House' in French or 'The Bread House' in Dutch, after the market whose place it took (1515-1536). The Bread House had rebuilds in 1695 due to war and again in 1874-1896 due to deterioration. The Grand Place is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1998), of which there are at least count 1,150.

This morning I had a coffee and a cake at a beautiful art nouveau style restaurant opposite the former Brussels Stock Exchange building (1863-1873). Built over an old Franciscan

convent. Trading stopped in 1996 and it is now used for temporary exhibitions. The restaurant was for all its beauty, significant for another incident, there was a cute resident dog walking around the restaurant. It walked to the bar two or three times and waited at the side without venturing any further. I tried to gain its attention without success. On my way out, I motioned to pat it near the door – it bit my hand, a nasty bite on the middle finger. The waiter gave me some disinfectant, tissues, and bandaids and off I went to the toilets. Back at the hotel I bled the wound and applied antiseptic cream. It bled for almost sixty minutes, I was worried the infection might spread. Never fondle animals in public places. The old dog had not forgotten what it was. Of course it shouldn't be in the restaurant in the first place as people can be attracted towards it. At the time I laughed it off - it could've been worse. It doesn't like tourists! - or perhaps the owner doesn't and has trained it well.

Tourists generally wonder about their purpose for travel, whether they have one, or whether they travel simply because people they know travel. From what I've overheard here, they talk to each other about their homelands rather than the place they are in. They sit, eat, drink, and chat about very little. They photograph everything, from the menu to the cafe with the waiter, they just do what they think they should do or otherwise don't know what they should do without their phone or travelling companions. A young Japanese man was so taken by his glass of beer that before no time out came the camera! It's as if when in a strange environment, they don't know what to do other than shop or eat, nor how to behave, unless they drink alcohol when their behaviour can be 'excused' due to their intoxication, and away from home they can do what they like.

Tuesday June 14

Brussels is an interesting city, medium-sized and less populated than my recent visits to London, Paris, and St Petersburg. It is indeed promoted as 'sized for walking' and 'sized for discovery'. I just happen to be in a hotel in the busiest restaurant part of town – all shoulder to shoulder, trying to out muscle and outwit one another for the tourist trade.

There are quite a number of beggars on the streets about Grand Place who sit on the pavement, sometimes with a dog or two. Why wouldn't they be at the most visited attraction. One I saw moving around was a younger man who was 'walking' among outdoor diners on all fours, stopping, then cupping his hands to request charity. He genuinely appeared handicapped. It was a disturbing sight as I watched him 'walk' into a shop.

I visited the Musée voor Schone Kunsten, mainly on account of the René Magritte Museum. I was left feeling somewhat indifferent about his paintings. They may be clever in ways, also there seemed to be very few. The Pieter Bruegel (both the Elder and the Younger) paintings interested me far more - of the 16th and 17th century. Strangely the museum documents the 15th to 19th Century art as "Ancient Art"! Or is this a case of lost in translation? - as if there is no connectedness or continuity between the 19th and 20th centuries?

The amount of work in the paintings of the Bruegel's made me wonder. Firstly, what did they do for a living, and secondly, how many paintings did both complete? And did they have apprentices working under them as was the case during the 15th to 17th Century in Italy for example? Pieter Bruegel the Younger's paintings' exhibit a cast of thousands very much like the crowd of tourists where I've been. Bruegel's is a 'bird's eye view' sitting somewhere in a tree or on top of a house.

The History of Musical Instruments Museum, directly opposite the 'Musée voor Schone Kunsten', housed in a wonderfully restored circa 1900, building of Art Nouveau influence, was also of interest – despite the six flights of stairs – the lift wasn't working. Originally the

building was used for retail purposes. It has the words "Old England" forged in metal at its zenith. One could stand before each instrument on display and listen to a reproduction of its sound through the headphones. The attendant explained that the handset received microwaves from the above emission, converted into sound. It was all too much for me.

The rooftop restaurant had a very ordinary view, and apart from a pretty African waitress, is barely worth mentioning. Something I've noticed in Brussels and Paris is the absence of waitresses and more waiters. This was not so in St Petersburg or London. A traditional remnant?

Back in Paris June 15

It's a full house in Montparnasse! "You must have fate," said the male receptionist at the seventh or eighth hotel I'd walked into. He must have said faith - "believe in Jesus" he continued as he placed a book on the subject onto the counter. I'd been wheeling my luggage case under the sun for about one and a half hours around the streets of Montparnasse, stopping at a bar once for some beers and to ask - it had to be in French this time - if anyone knew of a nearby hotel. It was late afternoon and I was starting to feel desperate. I replied "you can have fate without belief in Jesus." It must have been "faith". He called another hotel to enquire on my behalf, then I thanked him and left.

The next hotel, the large Hotel Montparnasse had one vacancy, a room to accommodate four. If the receptionists' line to God at the previous hotel brought good fortune in the way of a vacancy, it came at the high price of €190 for the night! "What? Is it a 5-star hotel?" I exclaimed. The female receptionist gave me a €10 reduction and I was tired of walking. Although there were numerous hotels in the area, I had lost my will to persevere. Only one night.

Breakfast wasn't included, so I walked into a restaurant the following morning on Blvd Montparnasse. I asked for an omelette and coffee. I received what is called an "American Breakfast" for €15, consisting of fruit juice, coffee, omelette with salad, and two slices of toast with marmalade. Not bad.

After I'd finished, I thought to myself maybe I hadn't explored enough in my restaurant hunting in Paris – then again, who wants to walk far for breakfast—or even lunch or dinner? You eat when you're hungry and the choice in a myriad of choices is often haphazard or hurried.

The Missed Flight Thursday afternoon June 16

It's Paris for another three days. A traffic accident on the freeway, increased by 30 minutes or so the bus trip to the airport – and the extra time stolen from me to write the previous page of this diary made all the difference. At the luggage check-in counter with fifty minutes to flight time, the official confirmed in the negative – they weren't allowing passengers to board. I was second in the queue. Shocked in disbelief, I spent the next two hours seeking assistance – from tourist information, various officials, shopkeepers, and passers-by, eventually even God. The Korean Air officials weren't at their desk, no one knew for how long and to call Korean Air from the public phones was unsuccessful. Finally a call to my sister, Helen in Melbourne from the fourth telephone was a success. I spoke to my Nephew who had some reassuring words of advice. Then I was able to get through to Korean Air and my flight was rescheduled free of charge for "reasons beyond my control". Now I'll need to rest my head and arse for another three nights somewhere,

hopefully for not too many Euros. If I had a tent I'd pitch it in a forest. Events happen unexpectedly, expect the unexpected!

Public phones, even at airports, are in demise. Their upkeep is not maintained. The digital age has usurped their usefulness – or in panic, I couldn't get them to work? The information age of the last ten to fifteen years with the connection of the internet to the cell phone is now one of the main providers of employment and one of the main tools and instruments of commerce - not to mention mass information and mass control. There is a monumental 'sculpture' on the way to Charles De Gaulle airport of a hand holding a cell phone with the affirmative thumb raised in the air. The cell phone, especially for travellers, has become an extra, to be used as a tool for information and communication. The quality of this information and communication is another thing altogether – then there are the various stratified levels of education, intelligence, and purpose of the user, which to me is of greater importance.

Gare de Lyon

The last two days have been a challenging time, which I've had to deal with and am still dealing with. The use of one's time and its quality. The mobile phone I bought in St Petersburg, which is with the luggage at the Gare de Lyon rail station, could've been made active on my arrival in Paris and should have been.

The Hotel St Hubert has become my Guardian Saint. I just wish the Guardian Saint could have influence in turning the loud tv off in the breakfast room. It seems to be the why of things. I found this hotel by chance - it wasn't listed in the guidebook. After the airport drama I took a train to Gare de Lyon, a station as large as Gare Montparnasse but not as bewildering—in the Bastille quarter - this time on the Right Bank not far from the Seine, dropped my luggage in a locker then walked around. It was late afternoon and the hotel's sign was already lit as I walked down a narrow street beside the station - only a few minutes walk! - I was elated - there was a vacancy!

The area I have found more 'friendly' than Montparnasse—the African, Moroccan or Arabic looking people are more casual, engaging, helpful, and seem pleased to help.

Eve of my departure Paris June 18

In my view, there are two major strands that influence one's attitude in decision making, opinion and value judgements generally. One is a social-political 'world view' and the other is the development of inner 'self-knowledge' wisdom or whatever one choses to call it - or the outer and inner, or art. These days it seems more practical to exercise the latter over which we at least can have influence. The former is the world we need to live in - an information statistical digital age, which tends to impose more and more on our lives. We have mass digital consumerism at the lower end of the spectrum and an inexhaustible quantity of choice that discriminating people can attempt to make at the other end.

The factual statement from my visit to The Museum of Evolution still reverberates in my mind—that 60% of all the people in the world now live in cities. These places are increasing pressure on the available resources of the world to supply the energy necessary to maintain our standard quality of life. Incidentally, the 'interesting' written material in the Museum was undermined somewhat by the lack of adequate lighting in some places for the material to be read.

In Flight to Melbourne with Seoul stopover June 19

Finally on the plane. A night flight. Yesterday, I walked around the streets near St Martin Canal – an interesting part of Paris – Arabic, Africans, were in greater numbers. Some Arabic women have a startling beauty.

After seeing a club venue that advertised live music in the canal, I decided to visit that night. Didn't like the music nor the performers – only stayed for a few songs, paid €10, African performers. Liked African "rhythm and blues" as it was called when in my twenties and thirties but not so much now. All the same, an interesting night's walk there and back along the canal.

Then I took the metro to Pigalle - Moulin Rouge fame - just to see what the night life was like. According to the tour guide book "it is very seedy". It was 11pm when I arrived and nearly 1am when I departed. There was not much there really. Tourists, even families, I thought they must have 'cleaned it up'. I was approached a couple of times by spruikers inviting me to a 'live show'. Maybe I should've but I declined – again, the words of the tourist guidebook, possibly false, echoed in my ears—"..customers are exploited inside to spend money on drinks." But of course they are! On the way back to the metro along a dark backstreet I thought I saw or felt a shadow following me so I stepped up the pace.

Near the hotel, in the dark deserted streets, just near the sex shop, I was suddenly approached by two Arabic-looking women. "Mon Cheri," she said, caressing my arm, "the sex is good", "€50 each for the two of us – we have condoms" she said, and she opened her bag. I thought it ironic – in search of the so-called 'low-life' in Montmartre to offer itself almost at the hotel's door. They were very insistent and followed me. They couldn't enter due to the night porter at reception. My guardian Saint Hubert! I deposited my jacket and washed, then walked downstairs. The night porter who must have seen the women said "Girls—watch out." He was an older man with an expressive face who couldn't speak much English, but made it quite clear that these girls were dangerous. He motioned a finger across his throat. I believed him. I still ventured out. They had gone from their position at the sex shop corner. I just wandered around for a while in the warm night air. Not much open – I had a nightcap at a small bar and returned.

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I remembered visiting Chateau Fontainebleau, just out of Paris - a peaceful landscape on a warm day when the breeze was gentle. The Chateau was in a way of some interest but I felt the rooms had been so staged theatrically that the authenticity was absent. Maybe that's how they were? The gardens were the gem - I went outside and dozed for an hour or two in a small wooded area of tall trees and a gully.

The leaves had fallen thickly on the ground where I lay and the sunshine was shaded in dappled light under the tree. I had read back in Melbourne one time short meditations by Robert Louis Stevenson about places of nature – mainly Scotland, and a piece of prose called 'In Praise of Idleness'. I must have dozed off for an hour or so.

Melbourne June 25

Too cold to contemplate a trip south to Wilsons Promontory. I remember being in Paris and having the desire to find some books on Expressionistic art, in particular German painting. I recently found one here in Thornbury, Melbourne at a secondhand bookshop called 'Expressionism' by Waldemar, George. I was actually searching for a book of mediaeval art on Russian icon painting, which had interested me in Paris. When I read that "German Expressionism is little known in France...and it is a school whose influence has been retrospectively felt all over the world...and no other school, I believe, has paid such a heavy toll for the cause of human freedom...". I recalled the near absence of expressionist painting at the Museums I visited in Paris.

The author traces the origin and developments of 20th Century Contemporary Art, in particular the contributions of Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism in an interesting way. He describes "...the symptoms of expressionism are violent brushwork in realistic colour, rapid working, freedom in rendering motifs, drawing with the brush, and a preference for curvilinear forms. An expressionistic canvas must make a physical impact on the spectator...it is not a stylistic term."

He defines expressionism as "an eternal artistic tendency...prehistoric, archaic, mediaeval and of Baroque 17th Century art. Expressionism like Baroque is a mental attitude. Classicism implies balance of all human faculties, Baroque emphasises the emotional at the expense of pure form."

"When a bird of prey is flying freely in the sky, its behaviour's classical. When it is hunting or falling or wounded and flapping its wings, it is Baroque!" (Karl Scheffez (1869-1951) German Art Critic). "If Baroque is a continuation of Gothic, Expressionism follows in its footsteps...like Surrealism, whose path it sometimes meets, it claims or is entitled to claim, direct or indirect descent from Primitive art inspired mainly by fear."

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