Opening Extract from...

Kevin McCloud's Grand Tour of Europe

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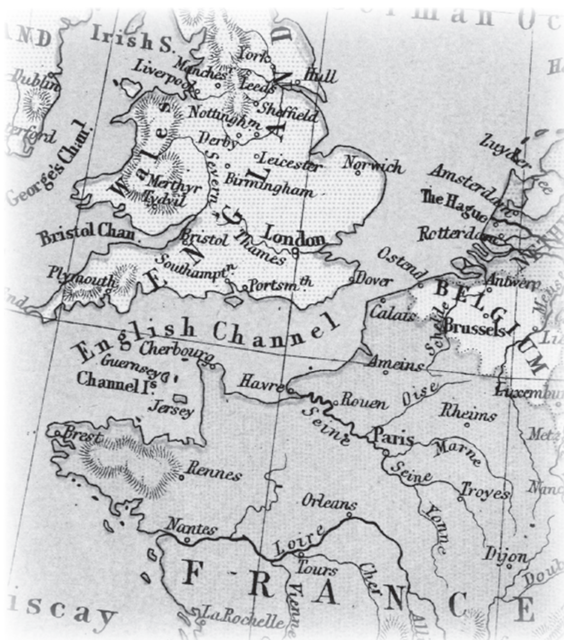
PHOENIX

From London to PARIS – a crash course in Continental Culture



Paris, the first stop on any tour,
attracted Grand Tourists in droves; in 1787
3,760 Englishmen visited the city in just six weeks.
They didn't come for the architecture.

A congested jumble of narrow, crooked streets and pointed gables and spires, its Gothic townscape had been dismissed by the great Italian architect Bernini in the 1660s as a collection of chimneys resembling nothing so much as the spiked instrument used for carding wool. Bernini was famously rude about almost everything, but British visitors were minded to agree. Armed with an education in Latin and the classics, they came to the Continent in search of classical enlightenment and to an extent they regarded Paris as an architectural backwater, a city which by the end of the seventeenth century had become populated with formal buildings that seemed like large defensive blocks with a smidgen of classical surface decoration. Italy, with its classical architecture and antique ruins, was the undisputed focus of the Tour. The French interpretation of the classical world seemed strangely wooden. What the Grand Tourist wanted was the romance of classical literature, the heroism and passion of the *Aeneid* and of Horace brought to life in the streets and ruins of the Italian peninsula.

And these interrelationships remain the same today in my view. Paris is now an immensely cultured city, formal, well laid-out and impressive. Its architecture, ancient and modern, still reeks of the concentration of power and composure: the very effect that centuries of French bureaucrats have wanted to create. But passion? Romance? Where are they? There may be beauty in Paris, but for unbridled, loose sensuality you have to look further south.

Historically, visitors didn't even come to France for the food: it was oily, garlicky, over-spiced and over-sauced and frogs' legs were viewed as a poor substitute for good, honest Protestant roast beef. They came instead for a crash course in Continental culture at the first stop on foreign soil and an opportunity to acquire the requisite manners and appearance for entry into foreign courts. Britain had always mistrusted Continental sophisticates, but on the Tour one joined them. In Paris, Tobias Smollett in *Travels Through France and Italy* wrote, 'the Tourist cannot appear until he has undergone a total metamorphosis.' You 'Frenchified' yourself with silks from Lyon, brocade from Les Gobelins, perfume, powdered wigs, a new coat – and became the *Milord* on the Continent. And you stocked up with perfume – a travelling essential when there's no knowing when you're going to get your next bath. Paris was the centre of the perfume industry; *fleurs d'oranger* and *eau de lavande,* which offered protection against bedbugs, were the smells of the age. Such 'Frenchification' of course provoked a lot of suspicion on British soil about the emasculating influence of Continental ways. Smollett observed that visitors aped not only the fashionable dress and manners of the Parisians, but also their ostentation, indecency and, worse still, their unmanly subjection to the whims of Frenchwomen. Many a young gent returned to Britain more foppish than expected.

PLACE DES VOSGES

But in Paris they could preen to their heart's content. Grand Tourists joined fashionable Parisians at the Place des Vosges, originally called Place Royale, *the* place to be seen and historically the site of an endless whirl of tournaments and duels. The rules of modern fencing were being established in the eighteenth century, not least in order to establish an etiquette of duelling to avoid both combatants getting killed, and lessons with a fencing master were deemed part of the process of becoming a gentleman. As well as being an important social accomplishment, it was crucial that travellers were prepared for attacks by brigands on the epic journey ahead.

Built by Henri IV from 1605 to 1612 to designs probably by Baptiste du Cerceau, the Place des Vosges represented a concerted effort to create coherent cosmopolitan splendour in a city that was generally claustrophobic, chaotic and cramped. This was the first formal square as we know it with terraces of identical houses on four sides. It was built for the Parisian nobility, who had always resided in country châteaux or 'hotels' (private houses) scattered throughout the city, but here their dwellings were expressed as constituent parts of an over-arching composition. In a radical departure from the norm the thirty-eight houses were all built to the same design – red brick and cream stone façades, steep slate roofs and dormer windows and a ground floor vaulted arcade – creating a unified backdrop for the pageantry of the great court. And a shopping arcade. The superiority of the monarchy is clearly expressed by King's and Queen's pavilions, which punctuate the roofline, and sit above the triple-arched gateways at the north and south ends of the square. Politically the Place put the nobility in their place; architecturally it put Paris on the map.

Regal posturing apart, the square – and at 140m × 140m it *is* a true square – represents the city's first real attempt at town planning and was the prototype for countless city squares across Europe. Since opening with great aplomb, with a celebration of the wedding of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria, it was an essential part of the Grand Tour itinerary. I have always been fascinated by the square's uncanny resemblance to Covent Garden Piazza when it was first built in the 1630s. And there's clearly an influence here because one of my building heroes, the English theatre designer and first proper architect in this country, Inigo Jones, was, it seems, the hidden master-planning hand behind Covent Garden. Jones had toured France and Italy in 1596 but undertook a second Grand Tour of Italy between April 1613 and Autumn 1614, visiting Paris on the way home.

The son of a cloth worker, Jones worked for King Christian IV of Denmark and for Queen Anne (King Christian's sister and the wife of England's James I) as a designer of costumes and scenery for court masques before becoming Surveyor of Works to Henry, Prince of Wales in 1610. The appointment came to an abrupt end with the prince's death in 1612 but the death of the king's Surveyor of Works, Simon Basil, in 1613 brought the promise of an even more distinguished role. For Jones, his second

Grand Tour, taken in the company of Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, and his wife Aletheia, offered a chance to complete his self-education as a classical architect before returning to England to become Surveyor of Works first to James I and subsequently to Charles I.

The role, which was essentially that of chief architect to the Crown, lasted from 1615 until the outbreak of civil war in 1642. Jones exercised significant influence over London's development, but he built little of his own design and generally found his progressive, classical ideas disliked at court, where the concocted mannerist styles of the sixteenth century kept hanging around. Covent Garden was perhaps an exception. Once the site of a convent, the land had been gifted to the Bedford family by Henry VIII after the Reformation as a token of gratitude for service to the royal house. Around 1630 the fourth Earl of Bedford decided that the time had come to exploit the convent garden, or Covent Garden, for speculative development – on a stately scale. In a plan that was to be mimicked by other London landowners, Bedford laid out the square to the north of his own back garden, leaving the southern edge of the development open so as to allow in light and a view from his own house.

The first of the newly built London squares of the seventeenth century, Covent Garden is credited as London's first stab at formal town planning and was the first housing project in the city to be organized through the use of the classical orders: Jones' own Doric church there is the first public Protestant church in England and the first classically designed church too. The terraced houses were in the Ionic order and the very idea of a public square can be clearly traced back to its Continental roots. Designed as a classical forum, with arcades and a public meeting place in the portico of the church, the piazza was more classical – even more *Italian* – than the Place des Vosges – suggesting influence from wider travels: Vicenza's palace façades; Livorno's piazza and church. Both of which Jones would have seen.

The Covent Garden development included seventeen arcaded houses, thought to have been designed by the supervising architect Isaac de Caus, on the north and east sides. Jones' Church of St Paul lay to the west. Though lower than the other buildings, the church was the most prominent element in the square thanks to its monumental portico and temple front. A low wall bordered the gardens of the Bedford estate to the south. The housing was an exercise in unabashed façadism; a successful attempt to apply regal bombast to commercial ends. As at the Place des Vosges, identical units combined to form a composition of palace-like proportions; the same colour of brick and stone were used; the window proportions were copied and similar dormer windows inserted; there was even a matching ground floor arcade. Behind the façades, tenants were free to arrange their quarters exactly as they pleased.

While the Place des Vosges drew on classical precedent to convey the gravitas of the court, Covent Garden used it to create a shrine to commerce. The Place des Vosges became the scene of knightly sports and tournaments; Covent Garden became a vegetable market, a valuable addition to the Bedford family fortune. For all its monumentality it remained, at heart, a place to trade.

But its influence was profound. Jones didn't just introduce proper classicism to Britain. He introduced town planning. He didn't just copy the works of the puritanical classicist Andrea Palladio, he developed and adapted the style to our culture, albeit 100 years before we were ready for it. And he left another, quieter legacy: the terraced house. The streets we all live in have grown from that idea expressed in Covent Garden. A century later Robert Adam was drawing on the same language to the north in Bloomsbury and to the south in the Adelphi, though his houses were even grander – without the shops and with a pediment in the middle of the façade so that they truly looked like large palaces. Our homes and our streets wouldn't be what they are if it weren't for Jones – and the Grand Tour he undertook.