

# The Rime of the Frequent Flyer

or

## What the Elephant Has Got in His Trunk

Steven Flusty 2015 (2010)

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**Summary:** *Touring is commonly taken for the frivolous offspring of shrinking distance and expanding leisure time. The miscegenation of these very modern phenomena gives rise in turn to vast and diffuse landscapes bound together by particular tour itineraries and conveyances, anchored by tourist attractions and traps, and saturated by the effluvia from bottomless reservoirs of souvenirs. The spatially and temporally specific significances of these landscapes, however, harbor far deeper and more sordid truths awaiting excavation, and thus we here set forth to plumb those depths. In so doing, touring shall be exposed as not just an excrescence of modernity, but as culpable for the all-consuming germination of the modern and, not at all incidentally, for the production, elaboration and maintenance of the imperial along the way, leaving us perpetually lost in transit and ineluctably the tourists we strive to avoid.*

**Key words:** *conquest, Gatling gun, Looty, pachyderm, tourism, Vanderdecken*

What am I missing? This is perhaps the most uncomfortably nagging question to colonize my head whenever I find myself sealed into an aluminum can and hurled across the troposphere. Wedged into four square feet of space, at most, for untold hours as I excrete my own personal quarter ton of carbon onto the world below, I find myself obsessively wondering if I remembered to lock the stove, pack the front door, and turn off my passport on the way out. I know there is something I must have forgotten, as does every other traveler shoehorned into steerage class here with me. No procession of slightly outdated movies, truncated and miniaturized to accommodate our friable sensibilities and seatback screens, can assuage the anxiety.

The question, however, is neither so simply pragmatic nor so existentially limited to the prolonged moment of transit - that homogeneous bardo of seat pitches and overhead bins suspended outside the space and time of home and destination, interrupted only by occasional bouts of turbulence that viscerally recollect the precariousness of our present disposition. Rather, I believe the question permeates touring itself. I do not mean by this to imply I have derived a single, universal explanatory algorithm of optional travel. While it is unlikely there are as many rationales for travel as there are travelers, given that persons setting out upon similar ventures must have motivations that are at least congruent to some degree, my conversations with my fellow in-seat-mates have certainly elicited a broad range of explanations for our shared confinement. Some are en route to relaxation, others to excitement, yet others to the different, to the unexpected (but not too unexpected, most – although not quite all - of us hope), to the new, or to the long lost. Such variation leads in turn to a variety of tourisms. To sun-and-cocktail-drenched tropical paradises nestled within perimeter fortifications of razor ribboned chainlink and aerosolized insecticide. To olde townes saturated with Taylorized handicrafts and tourist police. To charnel scenes of memorialized atrocities retrofitted with restrooms, snackbars, understated purveyors of mementos of mass mori, and interpretive placards thoughtfully arrayed along pedestrian paths.

But despite their diversity, a collective discomfort crosscuts the lot – we are all missing something, something we believe we must be able to find somewhere elsewhere. We pour through libraries of unceasingly updated guidebooks that instruct us where to find it. We purchase package tours that promise to lead us straight to it. It would, after all, be a shame to go all that way and somehow miss it. And whatever it is we believe we are missing, it must be something vastly important and irresistibly attractive. Otherwise why would we subject ourselves to imprisonment in four square feet of imperceptibly yet inflammably propelled space to begin with, let alone pay for the experience?

SIGHTSEEING, or BUT WHAT, THEN, IS IT?

“Whatever it may be, ironically purpled verbiage will get you no closer to it” my traveling companion mutters condescendingly, reminding me that I have thus far missed mentioning him at all. We have traveled together off and on since I was very young, and he is prone to addressing me in this tone. It is the tone of one accustomed to authority, but also a tone I have heard gradually soured by his long years in exile following his deposition from his rightful throne. Or so he accounts for his present disposition, although he has never struck me as particularly royal in his battered derby hat and his threadbare suit faded from what must once have been a becoming shade of green. Not to mention the sizeable trunk he carries with him at all times, although this is to be expected given that he is an elephant. One might think this would strike onlookers as odd, but nobody seems to notice. In fact, nobody but I ever much acknowledges his presence at all, although this too is unsurprising – it is common practice to ignore an elephant in the room. Or, in this instance, an elephant in the Kodak Photo Spot. “If you are at a loss for just what is missing, why not try to infer it from what you are doing – and rather incessantly, I might add - to find it? Think about what you are doing.”

So what am I doing? Browsing shopfronts and surveying store contents. Amassing postcards. Composing photographs of the Flavian Amphitheater (open daily from 9am, entry fee fifteen and one-half euro), of weathered triumphal arches, of more than a dozen pilfered Egyptian obelisks, of a centurion in full armor chatting on his cellphone. Enlisting others to photograph the same, but with myself included in the foreground. I protest that what I am doing is hardly representative, as my motivations for these seemingly touristic behaviors are different. I, after all, am not engaged in common tourism but in assaying commodity landscapes and gathering evidences towards learned ends. My companion is clearly unimpressed and, in a souvenir shop a mere pilum's throw further on, it becomes apparent why.



A state of considerably worse repair

The shop consists predominantly of row upon row of waist-high bins, each displaying upright reams of antique images in heavy cardboard mattes. Many are engravings that faithfully reproduce my photographs, but in black linework on white. The amphitheater, the arches, the obelisks, pedimented temples, domed cathedrals and ruined tumuli are all there, although most admittedly in a state of considerably worse repair. And while there is not a single cellular-toting legionnaire in sight, many of the engravings include other human figures in frame, dressed in culottes and tricorne hats. They marvel and point at the landmarks and, in at least one instance, a figure even seems to be posing for a portrait sketch in front of a triumphal arch. The shop's proprietor laughingly proclaims these "snapshots before cameras", and adds that Giovanni Piranesi made his living peddling them to the Grand Tourists of England.

He then lifts additional prints, color reproductions of oil paintings, out of another bin and introduces me to those English. Depicted here by their favorite portraitist, Pompeo Batoni, they are a sumptuous lot in their satin knee-breeches and waistcoats, their velvet cloaks and fur trimmings. Young, mid-Eighteenth Century jetsetters like Charles Crowle, Richard Milles, and Gregory Page-Turner, fortunate scions of their time's most up-and-coming superpower, posed amongst what look to be personal collections of classical busts and frieze fragments, invariably with scholarly documents and books immediately at hand (Page-Turner being a particularly apt moniker under the circumstances). They seem as keen to be witnessed as world-wise as they are to witness the world, immersing themselves in ancient glory gone to ruin while immortalizing their immersion, all to show they are now equipped for the attainment of greater glory still. And they seem nearly identical in their pursuit. They are all men, all pale-complexioned, similarly and splendidly dressed, all in possession of classical artifacts. Chuck, Dick and Greg even pose identically, right hand on hip and left resting upon field notes or route maps.

My companion fixes me with a maddeningly wry stare as if to say, "looking uncomfortably familiar, are they?" I pointedly elide the barb by grabbing another print from the bin. This one is a

reproduction of Johan Zoffany's *Tribuna of the Uffizi*, in which a veritable package tour of Georgian Era aristocrats cluster in discussion about various, predominantly nude, objets d'art in an ornate salon lined wall-to-wall with paintings. These gentlemen are older and even more sumptuous than Batoni's, my eye drawn particularly to a nobleman in a dark velvet waistcoat encrusted with ornate gold embroidery across the chest, surmounted by a bejeweled breast star and sash. A painting is being held up for display before him, with a solicitousness suggesting the art is not merely being presented for study but offered for acquisition. As with Batoni's, Zoffany's composition enlists assemblages of a Classical past to serve as a backdrop against which knowing travelers stand illuminated in the foreground, rendering them simultaneously masters of a static antiquity and its living opposite. "And the opposite of antiquity...", my companion prompts, and there is no eliding his insight no matter how maddeningly pedantic its delivery. These are paintings of tourists inventing modernity, making themselves modern by touring.

#### GETTING THERE, or THE HITCHIKER'S GUIDE TO MODERNITY.

"Successful travel, after all, relies upon timeliness. If you run late you will never be where you should be when you should. You wouldn't want to be left behind, would you?" The elephant reaches into his trunk and withdraws a timetable, waving it at me to emphasize his point. The timetable is yellowed with age, depicting the route of a weekly flight from Amsterdam to Batavia - present day North Jakarta - with only a mere two dozen stops along the way. Its cover proudly announces "14,350 kilometers in 10 to 12 days", this conquest of space and time illustrated by a graphic of the Westerkerk towering high above a thatched hut nestled in the shade of coconut palms.

As we meander between the Prinzengracht and the Singelgracht, I try to focus my attention on what is immediately in front of me, and, of course, to photograph it before it recedes behind me again. I

am leery of the proposition that what we now seek through travel is our own modernity. If anything, isn't touring supposed to be a respite from the mundane routinization of modern life? My eye moves from one narrowly elongated centuries-old canal house to the next, the hoist beams of their gabled rooftops reaching out above us to the waterway beyond, their windows populated by ceramic curios in blue and white, curtain lace, and in one instance a cadre of exotically ornate wooden puppets. The effect is quaint, like stepping back in time, which I reluctantly begin to acknowledge would necessarily suggest that, in relation to the concrete everyday reality I am touring, I myself must therefore be visiting from somewhere forward in time.

More improbably still, the imagery emblazoned upon my companion's timetable seems to be somehow proliferating in ever more peculiar forms along our path. It begins innocently enough, a postcard on an outdoor rack depicting the Westerkerk rising adjacent the Prinsengracht's banks. But upon closer examination this Prinsengracht proves to be thickly lined with coconut palms, flocks of parrots and pink flamingos, while tanned swimmers cavort with wildly leaping cetaceans in the canal's water. And as we proceed, similarly dissonant imagery appears wherever we look. Stamped tin novelty placards, greeting cards and posters combining mechanical conveyances with wild animals, savage people and even mythological beasts. I purchase them as we go, harvesting souvenirs on the fly, and finally pause at a brown-bar's canalside terrace for a break, a beer, and a less frenzied assessment of my acquisitions.

The very first one confirms and compounds my suspicions. A vintage advertisement for Royal Dutch Airlines, it depicts a twin propeller driven airplane, no doubt the high technology of its day, aloft above a massive Seventeenth Century sailing ship at sea, accompanied by the slogan "The flying Dutchman, FICTION becomes FACT." The juxtaposition of the antiquated and then-modern vessels in use suggests a process of progressive evolution somehow inherent to travel technology itself, a hereditary lineage of machines whereby travel makes even itself modern. And this evolution, we are instructed, is a marvelous and perhaps even miraculous thing, whereby the mythical becomes the material. At the same time, though,

something feels ominously amiss. The legendary flying Dutchman, after all, is a skipper – christened Hendrik Vanderdecken in most versions of the tale - who sets out from home for the colonies (or perhaps vice-versa) but, in mid-journey, wrathfully refuses to submit to insurmountable headwinds. For this stubborn pride, he is condemned to sail forever at top speed only to remain trapped perpetually in place between home and destination, to never make landfall or even headway, plying the seas until Judgment Day. An odd mascot for an airline, and indeed I recall my long-ago hesitancy to enroll in KLM's old "Flying Dutchman" frequent flyer program for fear that it might curse me with insurmountable departure delays or, perhaps, being imprisoned forever in some transit lounge. So the celebratory advertisement seems to have inadvertently subverted itself. Or perhaps, conversely, it is onto something, although I am not yet certain what.

This thematic contrasting of modern technology above with antitheses below proves a constant in my new cache, albeit with distinct typological variations. Two old Air France advertisements, for instance, depict a god's-eye view of propeller-studded passenger liners high above an "Extreme Orient" – stylized blank landmasses from which sprout the upturned eaves of toy pagodas. Here too the modern realizes the mythological, as in one image situating the airplane in the tail of a soaring phoenix. And perhaps there is some unintended ambivalence here as well, given that the life cycle of the phoenix necessitates bursting into all-consuming flame. But the principle depiction is one of sleek, silvered mobility gliding swiftly over the tans and jewel-tones of immobile edifices rooted timelessly in exotic place below.

Four additional advertisements, one each for Air France, Air Afrique, Sabena and Pan Am, invert the perspective with ground-level views, looking skyward at modernity in flight. In one of these, it is a trio of elephants grazing obliviously below. My companion harrumphs irritably at this. In another, it is West Africans staring up in astonishment, with what is evidently intended to be a shaman (although I suspect the illustrator would have been thinking something more akin to "witch doctor") raising his arms towards the





Dissonant imagery

plane as though welcoming a deity. In the third, there again are those same raised arms of welcoming supplication, although here they belong to a lone Bedouin beside his camel in the desert sands. And finally, Pan Am shows us a hulking passenger liner cruising above a palm-lined tropical lagoon while, in the foreground, a reclining lei-bedecked woman in a floral kikepa welcomes the arrival with a more odalisque greeting. So it is not just edifices immobilized in exotic places but their inhabitants as well. The antithesis of the aircraft aloft is no longer yesteryear's technology, but peoples depicted as living still in yesteryear and the year before that, perhaps reaching backwards unchanging through time immemorial.

Of course, those aircraft are no less inhabited than the landscapes above which they soar, as another advertisement for Air Afrique illustrates. In this one, a passenger reclines luxuriantly in a wicker

chair, gazing out the window at the palms and plantation houses arrayed beneath him. His overview of this landscape is twofold, the view out the window augmented by the map of his aerial route across Africa in his hand. While he can see all below him, we can see no more of him than the pinkness of his chin and hands. His wide-brimmed pith helmet, coordinated to match his white bush jacket, conceal his face completely.

The story told collectively by my new stash of souvenirs is revelatory. It delineates a genealogy of the modern constructed by Europeans in continually accelerating conveyances situated at ever greater heights above the past. And above others perpetually mired in that past who are, at most, able to traverse it only at the speed of a camel's trot. Another route to modernity seems to be revealing itself here, but I am thrown off course by a trumpet of alarm sounding from across the table. My companion stares aghast at the tinplate printed with the pith-helmeted passenger, snatches it up with his trunk, and hurls it into the canal. "Wicked hunter," he cryptically utters a few moments later, seemingly by way of embarrassed apology.

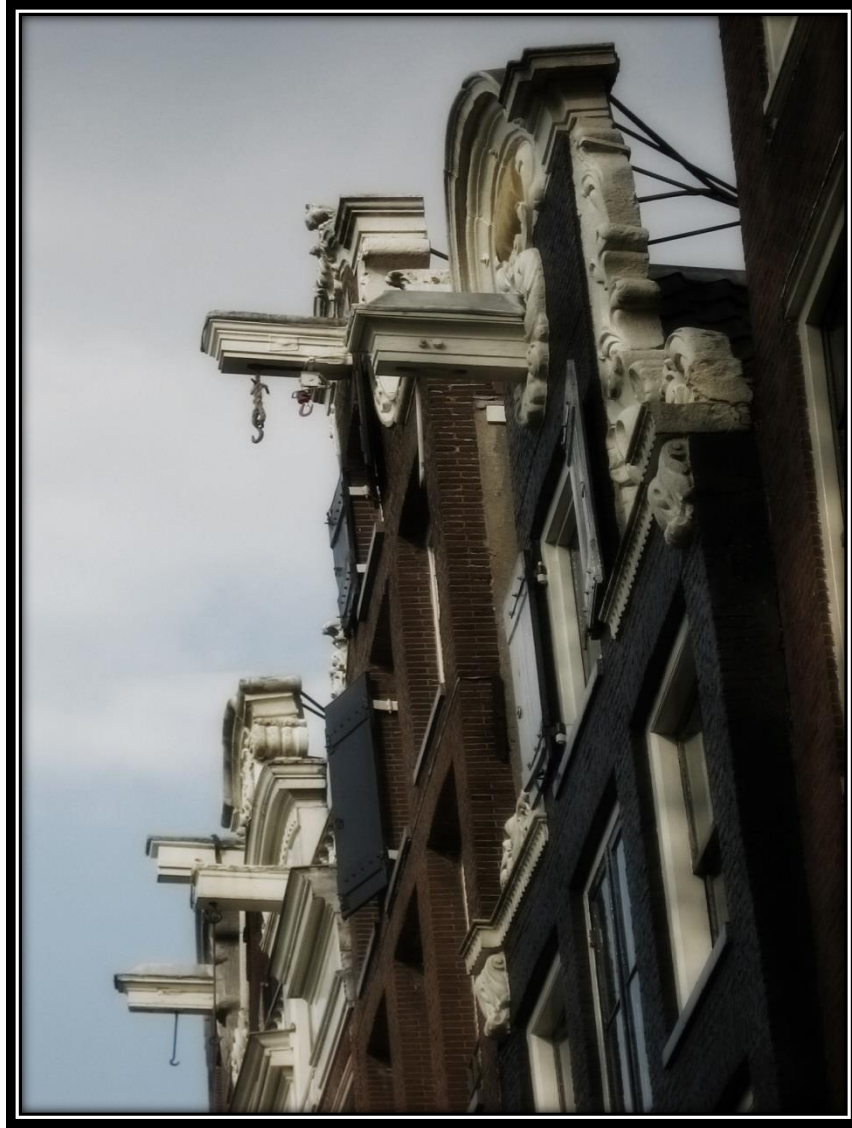
A final pair of stamped tin placards stand out in that, unlike the other images, they place the traveler and the local in intimate contact. One bears a sepia-toned illustration for the steamship company Rotterdam Lloyd's bimonthly service between Amsterdam and Batavia. It depicts a single-funneled steamship looming over a twig-roofed sampan in the background, while in the foreground a Javanese woman kneels over a basket of fruit at the feet of a binocular-wielding European woman in tailored white traveling clothes. This self-lionizing encounter with supplicant exoticness is reinforced on the second plaque, depicting a phalanx of mustachioed men in forage caps bicycling out of a palm forest while a gaggle of barefooted Javanese villagers look on from the sidelines. When I had grabbed this particular item, I had thought it was some sort of antique advertisement for bicycles or perhaps even for an early organizer of bicycle tours, and in a way it was the latter. A closer inspection reveals the cyclists to be dressed in blue

uniforms with rifles slung over their shoulders, and the accompanying text an offer of five to thirteen guilders per week for service in the Dutch Indies Legion. These cycling tourists are occupiers.

My shopping binge, it seems, has amassed a compendium of tourists making themselves modern, and tourism making the modern, by means of manufacturing contrasts. In this instance, though, modernity is attained not by contrast with “classical antiquity” but with “living tradition”. This contrast is enabled by developments in logistical technology that afford tourists opportunities to sightsee others they can position within hierarchical degrees of putative barbarity or even savagery, and to proclaim themselves civilized by comparison.

This ordinal social positioning, then, depends upon mobile geographic positioning – the itineraries that relate airlines to destinations, for instance. As depicted by my souvenir reproductions, these would include Pan Am to the South Pacific, Air France to Indochina, Sabena to Sub-Saharan Africa, and of course KLM to Java. Each flag carrier to its own territorial possession, expediting administration of, and extraction from, the colonies. And tourism alike, for these are routes that clear the way for leisure travel, routes to modernity that over time intersected and entangled to weave the network of airways we travel across today. This is certainly a thing we miss, and even prefer to miss, in our travels: the awareness of their imbrications with colonial dispossession. And if this realization is what I was missing, I am already beginning to miss missing it.

But once I have recognized this has been missing, the more pervasively it presents itself, the harder it is to miss, and the less our own touristic culpability is plausibly deniable. I lift my beer for another draught, and now notice the label: a Seventeenth Century Dutch sailing ship, over the brand name



No longer so quaint

“BATAVIA”, and the additional note “produced by PT Delta Djakarta TBK Bekasi, Indonesia.” We set off again along the waterways, past canalhouses that are no longer so quaint. Now they have become donjons for the plundered wealth of distant shores. Even the charming puppet collection in the lace-curtained window resolves into a chain-gang of acacia-wood deities and heroes abducted from *wayang golek* puppet theaters some 14,350 kilometers away.

Eventually we find ourselves drawn to the sheer mass of the Bushuis Library (open Monday through Friday 9:00am until 6:00pm, entry is free of charge), a brick building in the Dutch Renaissance style large enough to fill a city block entire. We are pulled through its courtyard, beneath a baroque lintel inscribed with an interlocked VOC, into what at first glance is an unassuming meeting room. A long table and a score of modest velvet-upholstered chairs cluster at one end, the white walls and exposed beam ceiling ornamented only with a gilt-garlanded and marbled fireplace set amidst a handful of framed pictures: a map or two of Asia, and paintings depicting Couchyn (now Cochin) on the Malabar Coast, Canton, and between the two the fortress of Batavia – all sites of Dutch merchant settlement. And despite the unpretentiousness of the setting, what I had been missing overwhelms me in this room that once sat at the very center of it all, the boardroom of the United East India Company. The intimate and immediate place from whence routes were determined, sailors hired and dispatched (from the very courtyard through which we ourselves have just passed), native populations decimated and ruling dynasties unseated half a world away, and everything from porcelain to pepper – and puppets – drawn the many thousands of miles back again.

Somewhere along our travels, seeing the world and experiencing its civilizations became stealing the world while expropriating its civilizations. Is it that travel is power, the power to *be* the modern, extracted from those one encounters along the way for distillation into the new, the next and the latest? Is this where tourism begins, and its infrastructure originates? If so, might this give some clue as to why the term tourist is frequently used as an obloquy?

DINING, or EAT, PREY, LOATHE.

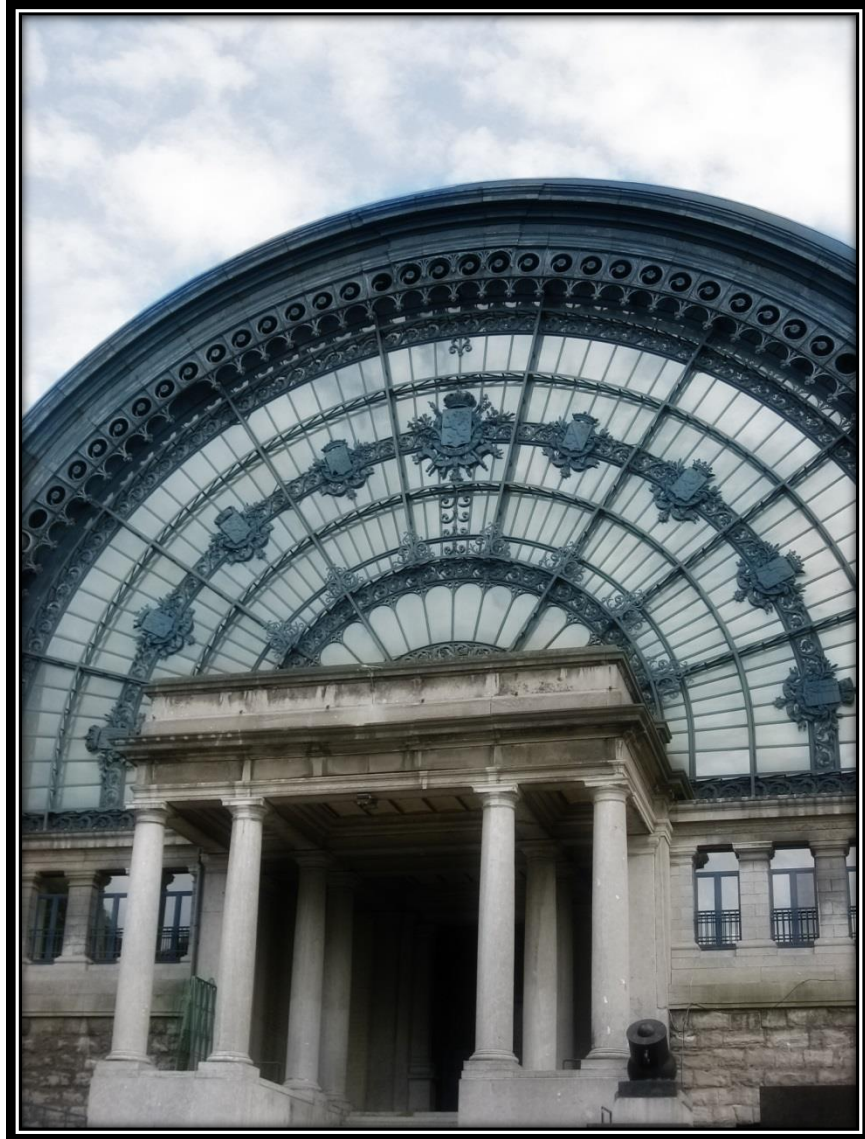
“Self-loathing is not particularly becoming in a tourist,” my elephantine friend cautions me, “nor do I share in it. While I cannot for the life of me clearly recollect what turn of events first initiated my own travel,” an assertion I find astonishing given my companion’s uncanny capacity to remember absolutely everything else, “I certainly recall both its pleasures and its efficacy in readying me for my...ahem...crowning achievement. But if you are so committed to your convictions, far be it from me to blacken your soul further with any more of this!” he adds wryly, placing another square of estate-grown single-origin chocolate into his mouth and savoring it dramatically.

We are exploring a cluster of chocolate shops (open daily 9am until 10pm, entry is free of charge but the chocolate most definitely is not) just south of the Grand Place, methodically journeying from Valrhona to Leonidas to Godiva and back again, simultaneously taking our tastebuds on tour from Madagascar to Ecuador with layovers in the Ivory Coast and Dominican Republic. Yet throughout it I keep thinking not “chocolate” but “chocolat!”, and its violent expropriation by a typically high-spirited tour group of Spanish souvenir-hunters during their Mexican Riviera cruise’s shore excursion nearly five centuries ago. My companion thinks my misgivings an unwarranted stretch, showily savoring another bite while exaggeratedly declaiming, “No, not a hint of blood, just the unadulterated flavor of fine Belgian chocolate. But if you can show otherwise then lead on, Ferguson.” Noting the jesting reference, I take up the challenge. It is not far to the Cinquantenaire, (open Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00am until 5:00pm, entry fee five euro), a pleasant monument-studded formal park that at the close of the Nineteenth Century was the site of a major national exhibition. The exhibition’s central venue remains to this day. Its two wings of exhibit halls embrace us expansively, terminating on either end with facades that strike me as perfect summations of modernity’s geneology – classical stone temples of Doric stone columns rising from

rusticated stone bases, topped with barrel vaults of industrial iron and glass, ornamented with ironwork crowns, shields, and bemedaled sashes. The two wings are centrally conjoined by the triplicate gaping portals of a towering triumphal arch surmounted by verdigris muses, angels blowing gilt trumpets, and a militant quadriga. The arch's coffered underside is embossed repeatedly with King Leopold the Second's monogrammatic crowned double-L, the adjacent facades emblazoned with murals featuring militantly stylized soldiers on the march in steel helmets and greatcoats while goddesses and mere mortal women look on in varied states of undress.

“Kings will be kings” my companion muses sympathetically, to which I respond, “That they will, Ferguson,” and request his travel copy of Mark Twain. With some surprise, he reaches into his trunk and produces a volume of the collected works. As I expected, *Innocents Abroad* is particularly well worn. But I page through until I find *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, Twain's scathing critique of Leopold's rule over his personal private colony in the Congo, where (to paraphrase page eight of the second, 1905 edition) all the riches of the land were his – his solely – and gathered for him by the men, the women and the little children under compulsion of lash and bullet, fire, starvation, mutilation and the halter. How that gathering was encouraged is made plain in accompanying photographs and etchings of men, women and children each relieved of a hand or foot by Leopold's colonial agents. The volume even includes what could be an alternate design for the Cinquantenaire more accurately reflective of its funding: two score of thirty-five mile long radial boulevards, each lined with four hundred thousand headless skeletons chained together, converging upon a four hundred fifty foot tall pyramid of human skulls crowned at its apex with the taxidermied corpse of Leopold II himself, machete and manacles in hand. My case, however, is only half made.

A little further on, we arrive at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, previously known as the Museum of the Congo and, before that, the Palace of the Colonies (although Palace of the Colony would have been more technically correct). An Eighteenth Century French palais built outside France towards the



Perfect summations of modernity

end of the Nineteenth, contemporaneously with the Cinquantenaire. We enter past a larger-than-life size statue of a bull elephant ridden by three naked, spear-toting African hunters, eliciting from my companion a disdainful utterance of, “Not damned likely.” The entrance rotunda displays gilded allegorical statues of



evidently European missionaries, saints and women-at-arms providing succor and protection to African women and children. Beyond this are the exhibition rooms, featuring ritual and everyday artifacts along with taxidermied animals all taken from the Congo Free State, and innumerable stone-engraved rolls of honor and busts celebrating the explorers and officers who took from the Congo Free State. And one room concentrates entirely upon colonial industry, describing in detail the Free State's production of rubber, cotton, tobacco, coffee and, most significantly for my purposes, cocoa.



Larger than life, not damned likely

Unsurprisingly, the usual is missing from the exhibits, just as we all prefer to miss it. There is no mention of Congolese being compelled to plant, harvest and surrender cocoa, of the failure to do so in prescribed quantities costing them quite literally arms and legs, of how this provided a model of conduct

for combatants throughout the region to this day, nor of how it is precisely the heritage and continued practice of such violent expropriation that affords us our own leisure, leisure travel included. But I expect my case is made nonetheless. My companion's attention, however, is too riveted elsewhere to notice. He anxiously grasps at his tusks, and I follow his aghast stare to discover that ivory, too, was one of the colony's major exports. I turn him away, only to find us confronted by a television displaying degraded black and white footage of Africans delivering their bundles of cotton, or perhaps coffee, or even cacao – the quality of the video is too poor to be certain – to a colonial agent for weighing and payment, again with no indication of the penalty for underproduction. What is clear is that the colonial agent is clad in a white bush jacket, and matching pith helmet.

Somehow, my companion avoids shattering any of the museum's contents or fixtures in his panicked stampede out the nearest rear exit. I find him in the museum's back garden, his horrified gaze transfixed by a fountain decorated with Leopold the Second's bust, three legless Congolese warriors, and the decapitated head of a bull elephant.

#### SHOPPING, or BABARIC SPLENDORS.

My companion remains irritable and agitated, constantly craning his massive head as though expecting to find a pith-helmeted nemesis emerging from every shadow. I wonder at what trauma might provoke this paranoia, and whether he perceives a pith helmet atop my head as well. I myself do not see any pith helmets donned in our vicinity but, then again, perhaps my perceptions are as flawed as those incapable of seeing elephants immediately before them. "You Americans never see the world's wickedness, too busy seeing yourselves and expecting the best," my companion vents. "Narcissistic optimists, thinking every voyage is one of self-discovery, everywhere you go a mirror to uncover your shining inner light. Pfah! Does it ever occur to you that mirrors can reveal things you would not care to see?" Far from disagreeing, I want

to admit that seen in relation to its past, all tourism is beginning to look to me like dark tourism. But my elephant friend needs cheering, and I know how to do it. Palaces always make him feel more at home.



The wrong mode.

Fortunately, we have at least two to choose from. Entering the eldest, we pass through a high pointed-arch gateway thickly emblazoned with arabesques of flowing golden script across black stone

panels, and enter the grounds of Topkapı Palace (open 9am until 7pm Wednesdays through Mondays, entry fee twenty lira plus an additional fifteen for the harem). Wide greenswards punctuated by Cypress trees and gurgling fountains alternate with labyrinths of deep colonnades, broadly projecting eaves, and pavilions tiled in ornate patterns of blue, white and gold. The interiors are similarly ornamented, frequently lined with low divans and stocked with artifacts sufficiently elaborate to be like miniaturized concentrates of the pavilions themselves. Bejeweled thrones and daggers, delicately damascened blades, even an Imperial Wardrobe displaying richly embroidered silken caftans.

I move from one garment to the next, admiring a pattern of blood red tiger stripes and leopard spots on one, silvered peacock feathers and warding eyes on another, but am brought up short upon encountering another unlike the rest. It is in midnight blue velvet, almost black, embroidered down the front and at hem and sleeves with wide bands of intertwined leafy vines in gold thread. And I am certain I have seen something very much like it already, worn by an English nobleman in Zoffany's painting of the Uffizi. Admittedly, here it is not a fitted waistcoat but a flowing caftan. Still, the resemblance is uncanny. It is labeled merely as a robe in an antique style and dated to the second quarter of the Nineteenth Century, succeeding Zoffany by roughly half a century.

In a nearby room, I encounter a deluge of this gold embroidery upon midnight blue velvet. It is a portrait gallery, lined with depictions of Ottoman Sultans more or less in chronological order of rule. Viewed one to the next it is impossible to ignore the transformation that occurs in the early Nineteenth Century, somewhere between Mustafa the Fourth and Abdülmeçid the First. Voluminous robes and massive turbans give way abruptly and entirely to dark blue jackets, gold embroidered plackets and collars, shoulder boards, the glittering breast stars of imperial orders, and the simple fez.

I express my surprise at the sudden appearance of this seeming uniform to my companion, but evidently it strikes him as so commonplace that he scarcely noted it at all. "Court uniforms, embroidered

coattees - the newest, the next, the latest thing. All the rage once King George the Fourth put them on all his courtiers. No point to being à la mode," he muses, "if it is the wrong mode. The wrong fine clothes, the wrong handsome hat, and you are merely barbarous, decadent, or both. Fezzes, though," he winces, "*de gustibus non disputandum est*. And at least it is an improvement on those outré turbans."

Rummaging about his trunk, he removes an album of what he chucklingly terms "family photographs", and flips through it. On its very first page is a wizened and bespectacled bull elephant, resplendent in a dark blue jacket embroidered at placket and sleeves in gold and a matching, plumed cocked hat. "My closest advisor," he tells me. The next page is a photograph of a bronze complexioned man with curly black hair and muttonchops, his dark jacket spangled with a shoulder sash, lanyards, epaulets and an octet of breast stars, its collar and cuffs embroidered with gold fern and taro leaves. A cocked hat with plumes rests on a pedestal by his side. "King David Kalākaua of Hawai'i, diplomat, legal scholar, and ardent ukuleleist." A few pages further along, a double-page spread. To the left, an elderly Asian man in yet another dark, gilt-embroidered jacket, albeit worn over a panung. "King Mongkut, Rama the Fourth of Siam, and for more formal portraits he did prefer knee breaches. His son Chulalongkorn - Rama the Fifth - was more consistent," the elephant says. He points to the picture on the right of a moustached Asian man in an embroidered, bemedaled jacket and plumed pith helmet. I notice my companion retains his composure at this last, and he in turn notices my noticing. "Sometimes you must look like a hunter to evade a hunter," he mutters, although whether he is referring to Rama the Fifth or to the contents of the entire album, I am uncertain.

Exiting back the way we came, I now find myself hunting for what could be termed Imported Baroque, and notice details I had originally overlooked. Harem chambers sporting Delft tiles and crystal chandeliers; ceiling coffers painted with trompe-l'oeil bucolic scenery; stone medallions carved with a coat of arms featuring the sultan's calligraphic tughra monogram in a sunburst and crescent over an encyclopedic

array of swords, spears, revolvers, cannons, military medals and battleflags, with a cornucopia, a scale and a pair of books thrown in for good measure. A sunglass-clad Janissary sets aside his walkie-talkie and briefly explains that the tughra itself was the true imperial coat of arms, but needed some radical augmentation in the late Nineteenth Century for the *other* European powers to make heads or tails of it. Evidently, donning the right coat and hat are necessary but not sufficient. Even then, something is missing still, there is more to the modern than just what is on one's head and chest.

“Of course there is more,” the elephant tuts, “don't forget what is beneath your backside!” He turns to a sepia-toned picture of himself in the album, a much younger elephant in a flawless derby and crisp new suit, posed in an ornate straight-backed chair atop an expensive carpet. I page through the album again and see what is pointedly, even strategically missing: there is not a divan in sight. In every picture, the assertively modern monarchs are seated on finely carved and upholstered formal chairs atop fine carpets, or standing beside more-or-less Empire style sidetables that seem to have been the universally preferred receptacle for cocked hats. Even the monarchs' poses are similar, the slightly casual lean to one side, left hand resting lightly on swordhilt, and familiar as well. They are roughly the same postures as Messrs. Crowle, Milles, and Page-Turner.

I flippantly ask my companion if his “family” was much for traveling, and elicit an enthusiastic, “Of course, commonly preceded by these very photographs as a kind of calling card.” My companion proceeds to a list of tour itineraries: Sultan Abdülaziz, the first sultan to leave the empire in peacetime, from Istanbul to Paris and London, where he received the Order of the Garter from Queen Victoria herself. King David Kalākaua, first monarch to circumnavigate the globe, from Honolulu to San Francisco and from there back due west around the world by sail and rail, meeting with his fellow kings, queens, popes, Kaisers, emperors and presidents en route. Rama the Fifth, the Royal Buddha and Great Beloved King, throughout Southeast Asia in his youth and, upon ascension to the throne, from Bangkok to London. Every

stop along his way was simultaneously a major media event and a coming-out party. And while his father never made the trip, Rama the Fourth did beat a path by sending a Grand Embassy – although grand package tour seems an equally apt descriptor - of two dozen nobles and attendants to Queen Victoria’s court, to spend an entire winter shivering in their tropical silks.

“And speaking of Grand Embassies, let us not forget the one Peter the Great accompanied incognito from Muscovy a century and a half earlier”, the elephant concludes. “Although I suspect the true identity of a six-foot four-inch Russian autocrat calling himself Piotr Mikhaelovich was never much in doubt.” Recollecting my history, it occurs to me that Peter the Great also returned to update his court by compelling them to shave off their beards, over a century and a quarter before George the Fourth would update his own by compelling them to don embroidered coatees.

So is it a universal predilection of elites everywhere, touring to make themselves modern and to make the modern along the way? And to display their modernity, and the authority it confers, for approbation both abroad and back home? Perhaps, but there are evident differences as well. For the Grand Tourist, modernity seems to be acquired through contrast with the putatively antiquated and the exotic. But for what might be termed the Grand Ambassadors, it seems to derive more from breaking with ascriptions of antiquatedness and exoticness so as to erase the contrast, from basking (and being seen to bask) not in the rusticated ruins of ancient glories but in the precision-engineered and well-oiled machinery of their contemporary analogs.

But does not that latter entail conforming to the self-serving normative standards of another, and to spoiling one’s own uniqueness in the bargain? Do entire traditions go missing in the process? These misgivings arise as we make our way through the chambers of Topkapı’s mid-Nineteenth Century replacement, Dolmabahçe Palace (open 9:00 am to 4:00pm Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday through Sunday, entry fee fifteen lira plus an additional ten for the harem and a further seven for photography), a

relentless pastiche of broken pediments and Corinthian columns, spiraled corbels and stone garlands, polychrome marble inlays and gold leaf accents. The cavernous interiors are precisely the sorts of parlors in



The latest thing.

which my companion's family photos must have been posed. They rooms are liberally studded with Louis XIV furniture and fittings, the world's largest Bohemian crystal chandelier, and a central staircase with



banister spindles made entirely of Baccarat crystal. Were it not for the occasional inlaid tughra or gold leafed globe surmounted by a crescent moon and star, it would be difficult to determine just where in the world this palace is located. Even the mosques adjacent are concatenations of the Neoclassical, the Baroque and the Romanesque, marbled walls and trompe-l'oeil ceilings all outlined in gilt.

I find my companion in a nearby giftshop, sampling the tracks on a compact disc of Ottoman classical music from the period. Like the palace itself, they are European compositions with nods to local idioms – sonatas, fugues, marches and even a ‘national’ hymn composed with a surfeit of minor chords by palace conductors Giuseppe Donizetti and Callisto Guatelli, both Italian imports, both created pashas by their respective sultans. I sample a disc or two myself, Janissary mehter marches remixed as electronica, before expressing my misgivings. My companion bristles. “Remind me not to take you to Peterhof, let alone the Bang Pa In Summer Palace - you’d hate what Chulalongkorn did with the place. Or to ‘Iolani Palace, you would no doubt find Kalākaua’s all-night electrically-lit après surf poker parties dreadfully inauthentic. Why should you be the only ones ‘spoiled’ by broad streets, automobiles and busses, and fine clothes? You are somehow entitled to cocoa and ivory, but Peter the Great has no business with tooth-keys and wrung staffs? King Mongkut’s emissaries must not be allowed to contaminate themselves with whatever...” and here, he fumbles in his trunk for an antique intelligence report to Her Britannic Majesty from the Siamese Grand Embassy’s British handler, “‘they can...thoroughly understand without the assistance of Europeans to work them...portable machines of all kinds... scientific instruments...chronometers...and arms from the best makers and of the latest improvements?’”

The act of sifting quotations calms him somewhat, but still he adds, “You may carry home anything we produce that strikes your fancy, but we are forbidden to return the favor? Would you prefer me a naked little calf riding his mother’s back forever? And while we are on it,” he concludes, taking on a tone

of understated mischievousness, “just how are those Twenty-first Century electro-meheter remixes you have there any less tainted than their Nineteenth Century Italo-Ottoman precursors?”

ACCOMMODATIONS, or MY PLENIPOTENTIARIES WENT TO THE CONTINENT AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY EMBROIDERED COATTEE.

By what criteria is authenticity to be measured, I wonder, as we arrive at the doorstep of Sirkeci railway station. Which is more authentic, the imported Baroquerie of Dolmahbaçe, envisioned and realized by a loyal Ottoman-Armenian subject of Sultan Abdülmecid the First, or this very station, its Orientalist archways and Byzantine crenellations designed and financed by imported German agents of Kaiser Wilhelm the Second? And by what standard, and by whom, can such innovation be declared innocuous and even inherent to the authenticity of one civilization, but poisonous to that of another?

My companion and I board the Orient Express, yet another Belgian venture from the time of King Leopold the Second, and take our seats. All the while the elephant regales me with how a modern, civilized demeanor is not merely a matter of putting the right thing on your head, your chest, or beneath your backside, not just the parlor in which they are arrayed nor the palace that contains them all. “The sovereign traverses the broad streets no less than his subjects, his modernization is his people’s.” He invokes another long list of examples, proceeding from the same railway we are riding to those King Rama the Fifth stretched out from his numerous new German- and Italian-built palaces in Bangkok; expanding to include streetlight electrification and hydroelectric dams; reaching a crescendo with the construction from scratch of Saint Petersburg and, “my own lakeside capital - admirable, practical and convenient – to each elephant his own house, employment from the Bureau of Industry, and entertainment at the Amusement Hall! If one is going to undertake a Grand Embassy, after all, one may as well make the most of it.”

The elephant reopens his family album towards the back, to a pair of group photos. One, labeled “First European Mission, 1862” (followed by a handwritten notation “first in centuries, anyway”), shows a party of nine well dressed gentleman immediately prior to their departure for an official state tour through Europe. They are resplendent in kimono and hakama, top knots carefully coifed and katana at hand. The other, labeled “Iwakura Mission, 1871”, depicts a second party of gentlemen to tour Europe, along with much of the rest of the world, in an official state capacity. Of the party’s five members, all but one are clad in fine black suit jackets and trousers, their hair parted to one side and slicked back, and all five carry top hats.

I am taken aback at such vivid evidence of a learning curve so steeply surmounted, to which my companion responds I am in good company – that of the Iwakura Mission itself. “They were just as startled to discover that their hosts were themselves parvenus although, being gentlemen, the ambassadors kept the observation to themselves.” Or, more correctly, kept the observation to the pages of their diarist Kunitake Kumio’s illustrated travel journal, a copy of which the elephant withdraws from his trunk to recite:

Most of the countries in Europe shine with the light of civilization and abound in wealth and power. Their trade is prosperous, their technology is superior, and they greatly enjoy the pleasures and comforts of life. When one observes such conditions, one is apt to think these countries have always been like this, but this is not the case - the wealth and prosperity one sees now in Europe dates to an appreciable degree from the period after 1800. It has taken scarcely forty years to produce such conditions...How different the Europe of today is from the Europe of forty years ago can be imagined easily. There were no trains running on the land; there were no steamships operating on the water. There was no transmission of news by telegraph.

“And there is some cause to suspect this mission knew it was not alone in the realization, either,” the elephant adds, paging through the journal to Kunitake’s carefully drafted illustration of the ‘Bronze Horseman’, the equestrian statue of Peter the Great at the center of Saint Petersburg.

My companion then returns to his family album, and points at what I take to be an example of the learning curve's summit attained - another pair of photographs. To the left, an intensely civilized young adolescent in a capacious raifuku robe and tied-on skullcap with a crest nearly half as tall as the wearer, seated on a low dais atop a tatami-covered floor. And to the right the same refined adolescent, but now sporting the beginnings of a beard and moustache, dressed in a jacket encrusted with golden embroidery at the sleeves, hem, chest and collar (although, in all fairness, the embroidered patterns are in relatively Asiatic motifs). At his elbow is a sidetable bearing a cocked hat with plumes, and he sits in an overstuffed armchair with a thickly patterned carpet beneath. "The Emperor Mutsuhito, Meiji the Great", the elephant announces, "before, after. No point to being civilized if it is the wrong civilization."

We disembark at the old Shimbashi railway station, designed in the Neoclassical style by an American and built at the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century by otherwise underemployed samurai on the brink of seeing their caste abolished entirely. Our arrival is no mean feat given that the train tracks would run directly into the sheer glass face of an adjacent highrise, were it not for the fact that while there is an arrival platform there are no tracks whatsoever. But then again, the Orient Express only ever traveled due westward from Sirkeci to Paris Gare de l'Est in the first place, rendering the Orient itself no less a mobile absurdity.

As is to be expected at any railway station, this one has a rack of postcards to facilitate tourists' reportage of their travels to audiences back home. And as might be expected of any reconstructed late Nineteenth Century railway station, were such a station to be expected at all, these postcards replicate imagery of the period. Being less expensive in bulk, I purchase a packet assortment of them, and flip through them as we walk.

Together, the postcards constitute something of a pictorial inventory of the souvenirs returned home by the missions. The topmost card in the stack depicts the station itself, with a topknotted engineer

piloting his train towards awaiting passengers in kimonos. The next shows a quartet of affluent women by a lakeside, dressed in a mixture of kimonos and Victorian ruffled gowns, a woman in the foreground working a hand-powered sewing machine. A third displays a unique hybrid image – a graphic of a hand-cranked telephone atop a sidetable cloaked in a richly embroidered cloth, adjacent an inset roundel ornamented with



*A learning curve so steeply surmounted*

cherry blossoms containing an early black and white photograph of switchboard operators lined up at their stations. Another portrays a cadre of imperial dignitaries in a profusion of dark jackets, gold filigreed chests and cuffs, epaulettes, cocked hats, and tall straight-backed chairs. There is also a profusion of moustaches, luxuriant beards, and one truly prodigious pair of muttonchops - no mean accomplishment for

a gentleman of Japan – and I cannot help but wonder which are more modern, Peter the Great’s forcibly cleanshaven courtiers or the Meiji Emperor’s conscientiously bewhiskered counterparts.

The packet includes a card bearing a portrait of the imperial family itself, the bearded Emperor Meiji in dark coat with gold embroidery and braid, his Empress in damasked Victorian gown, with the heir apparent between them in miniaturized black naval livery with brass buttons. They sit in upholstered gold-framed armchairs with a potted bouquet of chrysanthemums between them, a golden screen depicting pine forests and Mount Fuji as the background. In its poses and furnishings, this imperial portrait strikes me as familiar. It seems a variant on one in my companion’s album, of Rama the Fifth in his parlor with his Regent Queen and their five royal offspring, some of whom are also dressed in scaled-down sailor suits. That latter portrait, however, is most telling for what it does not depict of the family – Rama V’s three other queens, twenty consorts, and seventy-two additional children. This portrait, conversely, is more telling in the technique it uses to depict the Meiji Emperor’s family – by means of the centuries-old technology of polychrome woodblock printing. In fact, all these picture postcards of newly imported mechanical, sartorial and administrative technologies are produced with the same, centuries-old technique, perhaps as a means of rendering their depicted topics more apprehensible for the audiences of their time.

At the same time, the audience’s apprehension is depicted as well. A postcard accredited on its back to Utagawa Yoshifuji and entitled *Imported and Japanese Goods: Comic Picture of a Playful Contest of Utensils*, envisions two armies locked in combat. One consists of kimono-clad paper lanterns, palanquins, bamboo-ribbed wagasa parasols and stacks of woodblock prints. The other is comprised of kerosene lamps, rickshaws and steam locomotive engines, umbrellas and framed photographs, all dressed in trousers and red military jackets. The latter army appears to be winning. My companion and I pause at what may as well be the site of this battle, a bridge over the Nihonbashi River that constitutes the center of the country entire – the zero-mile from which all distances are measured. This bridge’s wide, graceful wooden arch can be found



The form of modernity accomplished

in numerous Hiroshige woodblock prints. It can not, however, be found spanning the river. In its place, we come upon a low Neoclassical double archway of stone, rusticated at its base, supporting a flat asphalt causeway with wide balustered side rails. Along these rails are patinated cast metal lamp stanchions conjoined to sculptures of guardian lions and dragons realized in muscularly realist Victorian idiom. Or perhaps more correctly, muscularly realist Wilhelmité as the architect, Tsumaki Yorinaka, had brought this

latest style back with him from his extended stay in Berlin. And more completely, Wilhelmité except insofar as the lamps are translations of paper lanterns into metal, the dragons seemingly crossbred between European and East Asian stock, and the lions more akin to what one might find in front of a Chinese temple than at the foot of the Nelson Column

The triumph of this early Nineteenth Century viaduct over its early Seventeenth Century predecessor, however, is itself contested. The bridge and its protective beasts now lurk in shadows cast perpetually by the stripped-down concrete columns and steel beams of a multi-lane overhead expressway. This more recent battle between the new and the newer for the country's zero-mile, however, has not extirpated the original wooden bridge entirely. Its replica can be visited inside a museum some distance removed.

I ponder, with sharpening sardonicism, whether this is the form of modernity accomplished. The elephant hands me a stack of brittle newspaper clippings in silent answer, along with his collected Mark Twain opened towards the middle of *Innocents Abroad*. The top clipping is a yellowed copy of October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1872's *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, reporting disappointment with the Iwakura Mission: "[t]he gentlemen were attired in ordinary morning costume and except for their complexion and the oriental cast of their features, they could scarcely be distinguished from their English companions." But attached to this clipping is an editorial cartoon from a German newspaper of the period, captioned, "the Japanese, true to their mission of becoming familiar with European culture, get themselves an inside view in Essen", and depicting caricatures of grinning, top-knotted samurai sticking their heads into the breach of a giant Krupp field cannon.

Nor, apparently, were the Japanese the only ones trapped between the rock of disappointment and the hard place of disparagement. Another clipping, from June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1867's *Le Figaro*, acknowledges popular regrets over Sultan Abdulaziz' European enough appearance despite his red fez: "without doubt, not as



marvelous as we believed...". Conversely, upon seeing the Sultan in Paris during his own Grand Tour, Twain describes him as "stout, dark, black bearded, black eyed, stupid, unprepossessing", and reported:

Napoleon III, the representative of the highest modern civilization, progress and refinement; Abdul Aziz, the representative of a people by nature and training filthy, brutish, ignorant, unprogressive, superstitious – and a government whose Three Graces are Tyranny, Rapacity, Blood. Here in brilliant Paris, under this majestic Arch of Triumph, the first century greets the nineteenth!

Critics of colonialism, it seems, are not immune to thinking like colonizers themselves. "Typically American, that. Like Niebuhr said, frantically avoiding recognition of one's own imperial impulses, all the while turning Kalākaua into a figurehead and using the price tag for his modern palace as an excuse to do it!" the elephant snorts. "Gone too far while somehow never having gone far enough, in the end you are still just a pachyderm in a suit, no matter how artfully embroidered your court uniforms, how opulent your palace, how many Bureaus of Industry and Amusement Halls you build, or how grandly you tour the crowned heads of Europe. And when they have emptied your treasury to pay for palaces and railroads, or they have discovered you have more bauxite than you are willing to surrender..." he trails off bitterly.

#### IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, or AM I MODERN ENOUGH FOR YOU?

Noting me distracted by the prospect that no amount of mileage accrued or souvenirs amassed can ever acquire respect, my companion repeats the question: "I said, 'Am I modern enough for you *now*?' " I turn to find him posed like a hunter atop a trophy kill, a massive and wicked-looking assemblage of tubes and gears held crosswise in mock heroism across his torso. How he fit an entire Gatling gun into his trunk is beyond me, let alone how he has managed to carry it about unhindered. But of course, why would an elephant in the room suddenly attract notice merely because that room happens to contain a security checkpoint? "Upwards of four hundred rounds per minute at the mere turn of a handle can persuade even

the most reluctant host to welcome you with open – or at least raised - arms. But relax,” he chuckles, “nobody besides you egalitarian Americans would be so ungentlemanly as to use one of these on anything but lesser peoples. At least not before the Great War, at any rate. A good reason to never be lesser, no? Sometimes it is not enough to look the wicked hunter. Sometimes, you must become the hunter.”

“Remember,” he adds, “those Siamese ambassadors went shopping for more than just chronometers and scientific instruments.” Returning to his family album, the elephant turns towards the back and indicates paired photographs of rakish soldiers. One wears a fez and prodigious beard, but also a thickly bemedaled Imperial German dress uniform. The other is clean-shaven and young, a Blue Max and Iron Cross prominent upon his feldgrau dress tunic, all topped off by a tall lamb’s wool kalpak hat emblazoned with a dramatically winged crescent moon. My companion makes the usual introductions, “Gifts from the Kaiser: The Baron Bodo-Borries von Ditfurth, sent to reorganize the Ottoman army; Hauptmann Hans-Joachim Buddecke, an aerial ace to the Sultan.” Apparently, the sultans ultimately took to complementing their Italian composers with Prussian tacticians.

Flipping through the last of my postcard pack, it becomes apparent the sultans weren’t alone in this. The final card of the set, accredited as Toyohara Chikanobu’s *Observance by His Imperial Majesty of the Military Maneuvers of Combined Army and Navy Forces*, displays a woodblock print of exactly that. The Meiji Emperor stands high atop a hill, field glasses in hand, while below him soldiers and sailors clad in uniforms crossbred from French and American acquisitions practice Prussian battlefield tactics with ordnance brought from Britain. “There is, in theory, no evident reason that colonies should be reserved for the itineraries of Grand Tourists, or that extracts of colonies should power the West alone with the new, the next and the latest,” my companion observes. In response, I note that theory is not practice, nor necessarily lived experience. “You have heard of the Treaty of Sèvres, have you not? Or of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?” my companion mutters in agreement, disconsolately.

Unsurprisingly enough, my companion now suggests that another palace tour will do us good. The degree to which this predilection has begun manifesting as an obsession at times of unsettlement concerns me. I suppose, however, that it is to be expected in my present company, given what it is that a deposed monarch must be most inclined to miss. So I accompany him to the Yuanmingyuan, the Old Summer Palace (open daily 7:00am to 5:30pm winter, 7:00am to 7:00pm summer, entry fee ten yuan, plus an additional fifteen for the concessions). The Yuanmingyuan is less a palace, though, than a deluxe resort for rulers. It is an eight hundred and sixty acre conurbation of palaces, pavilions, undulating colonnades and shaded courtyards clustered around innumerable artificial lakes and canals. My elephantine fellow traveler waxes poetic about the site:

Build a dream with marble, jade, bronze and porcelain, frame it with cedar wood, cover it with precious stones, drape it with silk, make it here a sanctuary, there a harem, elsewhere a citadel, put gods there, and monsters, varnish it, enamel it, gild it, paint it, have architects who are poets build the thousand and one dreams of the thousand and one nights, add gardens, basins, gushing water and foam, swans, ibis, peacocks, suppose in a word a sort of dazzling cavern of human fantasy with the face of a temple and palace.

Although he does then admit, with some slight embarrassment, that the description is not his own.

Withdrawing a tied sheaf of correspondence from his trunk, he rifles through it until he finds the excerpt, in a letter signed by no less a personage than Victor Hugo himself.

Regrettably, though, we seem to have missed the place, and done so by a century and a half. Instead, we find ourselves standing amidst a vast plain of ruins strewn out in every direction as far as the eye can see. Empty foundations and vast piles of broken stone, punctuated intermittently by a crumbling moon bridge or partially effaced and toppled frieze, rim the banks of reedy lakes and eroded canals. Further along, we encounter a dense cluster of shattered monoliths like the wreckage of catastrophic collision between Chinese and Enlightenment-era European manor houses traveling at high speeds, a gigantic graveyard of Chinoiserie. Baroque pilasters and rococo columns with complexly faceted moldings jut up into the bare air in support of nothing, ornately medallioned porticoes topped by curlicued



A good reason to never be lesser

pediments grant entry to emptiness, long dry fountain basins in the form of massive stone seashells project from desiccated rubble.

As the occasional carved stone interpretive placard makes clear, in Chinese and intermittently idiosyncratic English, this is what one gets when one hesitates to receive repayment in opium from a well-armed debtor. My companion expands upon the story, paging through his sheaf of correspondence to locate a letter home from Charles Gordon (late of Khartoum), one of the 3,500 soldiers who spent a full two days looting the place and another two setting much of it ablaze:

We...went out, and, after pillaging it, burned the whole place, destroying in a Vandal-like manner most valuable property which would not be replaced for four millions. We got

upwards of £48 a-piece prize money before we went out here; and although I have not as much as many, I have done well...[y]ou can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the places we burnt. It made one's heart sore to burn them; in fact, these palaces were so large, and we were so pressed for time, that we could not plunder them carefully. Quantities of gold ornaments were burnt, considered as brass. It was wretchedly demoralising work for an army. Everybody was wild for plunder.

I am reminded of a t-shirt I encountered at a pirate supply store on a previous excursion, emblazoned with the slogan “pillage before plunder, what a blunder; plunder before pillage, mission fulfillment.” In the same spirit, I find myself ruefully redacting the platitudes of ethical tourism into more historically accurate formulations along the lines of “take only valuables, leave only ruins.”

Delving deeper into my companion's letters, we discover these sentiments stirred in us by the surrounding devastation are not ours alone. Victor Hugo's own narration of the palace continues:

One day two bandits entered the Summer Palace. One plundered, the other burned...[t]he devastation of the Summer Palace was accomplished by the two victors acting jointly. Mixed up in all this is the name of Elgin, which inevitably calls to mind the Parthenon. What was done to the Parthenon was done to the Summer Palace, more thoroughly and better, so that nothing of it should be left. All the treasures of all our cathedrals put together could not equal this formidable and splendid museum of the Orient. It contained not only masterpieces of art, but masses of jewelry. What a great exploit, what a windfall! One of the two victors filled his pockets; when the other saw this he filled his coffers. And back they came to Europe, arm in arm, laughing away. Such is the story of the two bandits...[b]efore history, one of the two bandits will be called France; the other will be called England.

Little wonder, then, that my companion and I find little by way of souvenirs. And as per Hugo's commentary, ultimate responsibility for this must rest with Lord James Bruce, the Eighth Earl Elgin, successor to his father Lord Thomas Bruce. Lord Thomas, one-time ambassador to Ottoman Sultan Selim the Third, is best known for his thorough tour of the Athenian Acropolis, pieces of which returned with him as souvenirs he had gotten for a steal. His son's latter scorched-earth shopping spree was similarly prodigious, yielding bejeweled and silken giftware for friends in high places back home: gigantic cloisonné

vases, gilded jade scepters, richly embroidered imperial robes, elaborately carved thrones, even the first Pekingese ever to be seen in Europe - christened by Queen Victoria with the jocularly shameless name of Looty. Additional to this transfer of imperial regalia, bronze fountainheads wrought in the form of zodiacal animals seem to have been particularly hot commodities, periodically turning up to this day for auction at Sotheby's and Christie's. Postcards excepted, reproductions of these decapitated fountainheads in materials ranging from cold cast resin to verdigris bronze are the only keepsakes we find on offer in the interpretive center's giftshop, available in various sizes and assorted price levels. Perusing the shelves with my companion, I give silent thanks that the animals of the Chinese zodiac do not include the elephant.

Simultaneously perusing the elephant's collection of correspondence, however, we are startled to discover that the disgust we share with Victor Hugo over this triumphalist thievery is reiterated by none other than Lord James himself. We pour over dispatch after dispatch, and in each the Eighth Earl Elgin excoriates his empire's machinations, his fellow subjects for demanding them, his soldiers for executing them, and himself for commanding them. As to the Yuanmingyuan specifically, he writes:

I have just returned from the Summer Palace. It is really a fine thing, like an English park - numberless buildings with handsome rooms, and filled with Chinese curios, and handsome clocks, bronzes, &c. But, alas! Such a scene of desolation. . . There was not a room I saw in which half the things had not been taken away or broken in pieces. . . Plundering and devastating a place like this is bad enough, but what is much worse is the waste and breakage. . . War is a hateful business. The more one sees of it, the more one detests it.

Yet, to use an Orwellian turn of phrase, he went ahead and did it just the same.

If the Yuanmingyuan embodies the tourist's ultimate nightmare, destinations entirely despoiled through ravenous acquisition, then Lord James in turn is both the prototype and the paradigm of the tourist's self-loathing: the cultural tourists revulsed by the impact of their own presence upon the peoples they tour, the ecotourists lamenting their own swelling carbon footprints midflight. Indeed, all of us who in our travels strain to think of others as tourists but not ourselves, to revile their presence alongside our own and to avoid their "tourist spaces."

All the while, we continue in our travels to avail ourselves of the acquisitions some very indelicate souvenir hunters brought back in their baggage, and the routes they established to make good their escapes. Our travels, then, are inextricably rooted in conquest, concealed beneath the traveling cloak of the new, the next, the latest, in short - the modern. Vaguely suspecting this and repressing those suspicions, we nurture our contempt for the tourist who somehow is not, must not be, could not be us. It is the assiduously ignored elephant we prefer to miss that nonetheless accompanies us in our travels.

But it is just one in a herd of like absences, a grand ambassador for the willfully unseen pachyderm at the heart of the modern that manifests simultaneously within our own hearts as well. It is our inner king of all elephants, forever afraid of being a pretender to the throne of the now and constantly in danger of being dethroned by change. We are naggingly colonized by the constant absence of we don't and can't know what, an insatiable hunger for whatever is newer and next and so does not even exist yet to be had, conjoined to the absence of what we continually surrender to attain what is always just beyond reach. So of course something is missing, and of course we can never apprehend what it is.

We have become the fiction of the flying Dutchman made fact, all members of Vanderdecken's crew. Whether we signed on voluntarily or found ourselves impressed by force, we are all sailors for a global imperium of discontent. The pasts we could never have experienced irrevocably rendered and mummified as picturesque ruins and tourist attractions, the future fated to become the claustrophobic and inadequate present at every moment of arrival, our souvenirs melting into air within our grasp. Our perpetual travel in pursuit of what will always necessarily be missing dooms us to sail with all our might merely to remain in place, to stave off being blown backwards and left behind, as the tantalizingly new becomes the intolerable now.

If we can make no headway, why undertake the voyage to begin with? True, there are some exquisite souvenirs to be netted along the way. But over the course of my own travels, I believe my companion has

provided me the answer we have been missing. Just as travel gives rise to the modern, the modern's travels time and again give rise to an indisputable object lesson: those who do not subject themselves to modernity's relentless and shifting winds are forever in danger of finding themselves subject to those who have.

Thus are we all, all who can afford the luxury anyway, pulling geographics as the recovering addicts call it, and playing Elgin all the while. Traveling from place to place in acquisitive search of idyllic paradises, unspoiled cultures, shining paragons of luxuriant technological utopias or vicarious encounters with brutal mass mortalities past or ongoing. We transit through endless chains of departure lounges and arrival gates, passenger cabins and hotel lobbies, never to find rest until we have attained the irremediably unattainable.

## SOURCES

Being over a year and a half in constant transit, with no fixed address or regular workplace, often alone in settings where one can barely speak the language (if at all), can do strange things to a person. The traveler starts to recollect widely separated locales as immediately adjacent, for instance, and have dialogues with traveling companions others can not see. This latter can persist even on those occasions when accompanied by the best of plainly visible and entirely human companions, amongst whose numbers I thankfully acknowledge Heather Childs, Timmo Kaupi, Claudio Minca, Shusaku Morinaga, Yangyang Sun, and most especially Pauline Chia-Wen Yu. Gratitude is also due to the Rikkyo Amusement Research Centre for encouraging, in multiple senses, many of these travels, and to Carol Borden for continually reviewing their reportage.



The effects of incessant dislocation can be even more pronounced when the dislocatee is an academic, deprived of the usual library sources in a familiar language even were there time to remain sedentary and read. The productive output of such circumstances can be exceedingly peculiar, and highly idiosyncratic in its source material. In this instance, I have relied upon a range of sources not conventional to academic research in writing this traveler's tale, a good deal of it drawn from the collected contents and interpretive augmentation of multiple museums and venues in situ. The most significant of these include the University of California at Santa Barbara's University Art Museum (and especially their 2009 exhibition *Holiday: Nineteenth-Century Travel Photography and Popular Tourism*), the University of Amsterdam's Bushuis Library, the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, the Topkapı Palace Museum, Dolmabahçe Palace, the Harbiye Military Museum, the Old Shimbashi Station Museum, the Edo-Tokyo Museum, the Tokyo National Museum, the interpretive centers of the Yuanmingyuan, the British Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

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