

Notes on:

Spence, Jon, ed. *Jane Austen's Brother Abroad: The Grand Tour Journals of Edward Austen*. (Paddington, NSW: 2005).

Spence begins by saying that, though Austen mentioned Edward quite frequently in her letters, she never described him in detail. His mother is quoted as saying that he "had an active mind, a clear head, and a sound judgment, he is quite a man of business." She then remarks that her son James did not have this business sense but he did have more "Classical Knowledge, Literary Taste, and the Power of Elegant Composition" than Edward but concludes that, though Edward did not aspire to the scholarly strengths of James, he was a "good, amiable, and sweet-tempered" man.

His "Grand Tour" portrait, painted either in Rome by an unknown artist, or more likely in England by Ozias Humphrey after his return, depicts him as a young but now self-assured, landed gentleman.

His first two years abroad (1786-1787, he was 18-20), after some short trips, was spent primarily in the home of Monsieur Meuron and his wife, who introduced him to Swiss society as well as arranging for tutors. In 1788 he proceeded to Dresden, and in 1790 went to Italy.

His 1786 journal (117 pp., small pages) described his trek through the Swiss Alps and countryside. This was in the early days before the explosion of "romantic and rustic tourism" that became so popular in the later 19th century. Spence describes Edward's journal as not a daily recording but as what amounts to a long letter based on notes taken during the journey and meant to be read by his family when he got home. He began in August 1786 from Neuchatel, southeast to Oberwald, north to Schaffhausen, the southwest through Basle, thence back to Neuchatel. In all he traveled through 20 towns over the course of just under a month.

His descriptions include scenery—both romantic rocky areas, cascades (including Reichenbach), and glaciers--where he was surprised to find vegetation, even strawberries, right at the foot of a glacier--as well as well-tended fields. He is quite taken with bridges, especially those that look dangerous. He gives his impressions of the cleanliness or appeal of the towns, the architecture of some of the more notable buildings, and notes what he has learned about the industries, exports, and imports of each region, as well as some of the local political structure. His writing is direct, sometimes mildly amusing, and he does not hesitate to praise or decry what he sees.

The 1790 journal extends from June 1 to July 30. In that time, he travels from Genoa (northern Italy), to Switzerland, then to Germany and finally to Amsterdam for a couple of days. He does not go to Florence or Rome.

The journal entries are more focused on the governments and histories of the place he visits, describing the politics, the size of the population, and reporting the chief products for export

and import. For example, Genoa exports velvet, silk, “oil, paper, paste, and ivory. They import wines, silks, and jewelry from France, and large quantities of clothes/fabrics from England.”

Art

It is perhaps understandable that, given his route and his expressed interests in scenery, that the 1786 Switzerland trip was not designed to seek out artworks. In one area of Switzerland he sees the interior of a covered bridge painted with the Dance of Death and learns that that is a common theme for these types of bridges. He also mentions, with distain, some clumsy murals related to William Tell (“disfigured by ridiculous images of different saints”) as well as some “bad paintings of William Tell and some battles.”

He is much more interested in a large topographical model of the whole valley made by General Pfiffer. He was ‘underwhelmed’ by the supposed large library at Zug, but interested that there is a death mask of Henry IV and even more impressed to find some letters on display written by Lady Jane Grey. (Those letters are in Latin but Spence points out that Jane, in her “History of England” writes that Lady Jane Grey had written letters in Greek as well.) He visits the physiognomist Lavater and the pastoral poet Gessner. Near the end of his journey, in Basl, he buys some small Swiss and English prints and visits the Library that has a painting by Holbein over the door and a “good collection of botany and natural history books.”

In the 1790 trip he begins in Italy and, as might be expected, has opportunity to see more artworks. But it should be noted that he also seems to be very impressed by the amount of glass, chandeliers, and mirrors. As in Switzerland, he is much drawn to architecture. The journal entries follow a pattern: the size, location, and population of the town is detailed. A relatively long description of the history, government, principle manufacturing, farming, and exports are given. The architecture of some buildings is detailed and bridges are again of note. However, in a similar way to the early journal, his descriptions of the landscape are predominant.

On June 1, in Genoa, he lists “an excellent portrait of Rubens by himself” and calls Guerino’s “Joseph’s bloody garment presented to Jacob” a “capital picture.” That same day he visits the Durazzo palace and lists a Virgin and Child by Carlo Cignani, three large pieces by Luca Jordano [Giordano] and a beautiful painting by Rembrandt.” And concludes with “There are many other pictures in both but these appeared to me the most worth remarking.” That day also includes a trip to the Albergo orphan asylum which has a “good basso releivo of a Virgin regarding a dead Christ by Michelangelo.”

By Saturday June 5th he has reached Milan and see “a good picture of The Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci. Many think it has been repainted. The colors are much gone.” And on Monday he visits the theatre (“no remarkable good voices, the dancing tolerable”). That same day is a visit to the Ambrosian Library which is “very rich in old manuscripts” but only has a few valuable pictures, chiefly of the school of da Vinci” and one Raphael sketch.” Of more interest that afternoon is a small house nearby in Simoneta “celebrated for a singular echo which is

heard from one of the windows. The report of a pistol is repeated above 40 times. We tried the experiment but found it difficult to count.” He did, however, see “some excellent pictures of Perugino in a small collection.”

From June 7th, through the end of the month, traveling through Italy and then continuing through Switzerland, he remarks on the countryside, the landscape, the architecture, the history, but does not mention looking at any art. It is not until he reaches Mannheim on July 17th and visits the palace that he sees another gallery where there are “some good pictures with a quantity of trash. Different landscapes and Dutch pieces by [David] Teniers, game pieces by [Jan] Wennix, a good dying Seneca and other portraits of L. Giardano, some tolerable Bassanos. Others by Rubens, Rembrandt, etc., 2 pretty [Adriaen] van der Werfs, a holy family and 2 angels said to be by Rafael...A charming head of a young Christ by Carlo Dulci. A sleeping Christ child by Guido [Fra Angelico], a true picture. The population of Mannheim scarcely exceeds 20,000...”

The last mention of artworks is at the Elector’s palace at Düsseldorf on July 23rd. It’s “considerable collection of pictures” includes Flemish masters, three different large pictures of Rubens (a portrait of himself and his wife please me best”). A number of [Adriaen] van der Werfs which one soon tires of seeing. A good Magdalen by Guido Reni. 2 portraits by Rembrandt. 2 women and children by [Andrea] del Sarto, an excellent picture. A good St. John by Raphael. Virgin, Child Etc. by Michelangelo, excellent. Some good Teniers and hunting pieces of [Frans] Sneyder. There are scarce any of the Venetian school worth seeing. We pass’d the Rhine over a flying bridge on leaving Düsseldorf and continued through a bad sandy road to Hochstrass...”

By July 31st he in The Hague dining “with all the English Colony” and here the journal ends. By early March the next year (1791) he was back in England engaged to Elizabeth Bridges.

Though his 1786 Switzerland trip is particularly devoid of art he does have the opportunity to visit several collections and galleries in the 1790 tour. He visits galleries or collection on only four of the sixty-one days of his second tour and each visit is not of long duration. He seems to focus on the popular masters and, though he expresses some opinions, the descriptions seem to read more like a checklist. This is not to say that he doesn’t enjoy the gallery visits, but compared to the other aspects of travel—the landscape, the architecture, the agriculture, the cleanliness or beauty of certain towns and the filth and ugliness of others, his interest in history and government, and even his focus on manuscripts, all firmly outweigh the interest in art.

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