

Dear Friends,

Greetings from New York, the Apple of the World.



My last postcard left off as I was gliding into Washington after a week of Virginia tourism. I had planned to do some tourism in Washington also, at least to visit the National Portrait Gallery and some of my favorite haunts. But I only had a week there, and beautiful as the city was I spent most of my time seeing old friends and resting up from Virginia. I did have time to go to the magnificent National Building Museum, in the old Pension Building (left) – one of the best interior spaces in a city devoted to monumental architecture – and to see some paintings from the famous Meyerhoff collection, and spend a bizarre evening with Sam Donaldson (details supplied on request, in a plain brown wrapper). And then it was off to New York.



Usually in New York I spend a couple of weeks in my brother Christopher's house, trying not to outstay my welcome, but this time I planned my visit to overlap his trip to Europe, where he still is as I write this in his living room. That gave me a month in Manhattan, longer than I have been able to stay here at one time since I was a student at the Columbia Library School in 1974. The roominess of my stay has allowed me to experience the City not as a tourist, with daily museum and theatre objectives, but in a more relaxed way, as if I lived here. And the more relaxed approach of pretending to live here let me feel the City itself as more relaxed, and took the edge off the pace and noise and crowding that New York always presents to the visitor. It let me turn off Broadway, in a sense, and onto the placid tree-lined side streets where the City breathes.

I have spent a lot of time lounging around these side streets, strolling beneath the trees, eating the plentiful native hot dogs that grow here like breadfruit in the tropics. I prowls the Upper East Side like an anthropologist. See the Stroller Folk, pushing the pale bored children of privilege before them like Roman patricians in their litters. Those children

should probably be walking instead of being passively wheeled around, but who am I of all people to say that? And here are the iPod People – nearly everyone not pushing a stroller has some kind of hand-held device, walking along talking to it or listening to it, texting or looking something up, arguing as with the air, giving the strange impression of a city of zombies all plugged into Zombie Central, captive souls without volition or awareness of



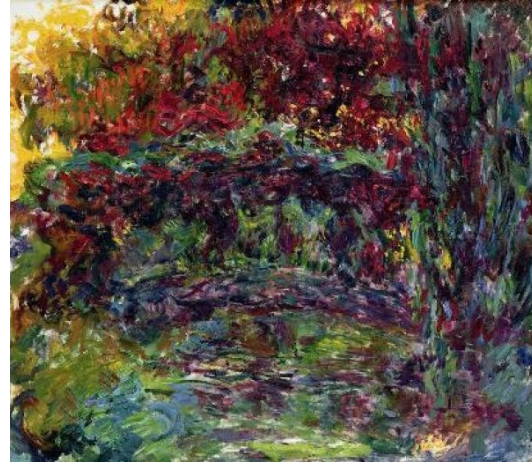
where they are.

But the Upper East Side isn't everywhere. And mixed in with these tribes are other people of every shape and kind, including me, people from everywhere, speaking Indian and African languages and Italian and Japanese and Russian and Arabic and Hebrew and Haitian Creole, and of course richly accented Nyawkish. The kabobs are *halal*. The designer handbags for sale on the corners are said to be authentic. Sunglasses? Children's books? Cellphone pouches? Silk scarves from Asia? Watchoo want? The Korean delis are open 36 hours a day – fresh flowers for sale at three in the morning. It is very exhilarating, this time without being exhausting.



I am a little exhausted anyway, though, from a bout of hay fever, which I almost never get, and which has kept me coughing and sneezing and wheezing and gasping for breath for four or five days now. But apart from that I have been enjoying the city, with its seductive attractions and leafy shady enclaves and its endless variety of architecture, lots to enjoy on every block, and lots to deplore, too, but less of it. I went down to Orchard Street to see an off-off-Broadway production of *Measure for Measure*, and was astounded to see the same gritty Lower East Side tenement neighborhood where my ancestors came up from sweatshop to pushcart transformed into a happening place. The buildings are the very same ones they were crammed into in the 1880s, but now the ground floors are full of bars and sushi parlors and restaurants with clever names, packed with slender tattooed young people smoking pot and texting each other. Cool!

I did do some museums. At the Morgan Library I saw a Magna Carta from 1217 (below left), held over because the eruption of the Icelandic volcano temporarily prevented its return. Also on view there: some original letters from J. D. Salinger, who being dead can no longer prevent anyone from reading them. I saw a beautiful show of French Art Deco at the Metropolitan Museum, and the visiting Burgundian tomb sculptures, and some superb late Monets at the Gagosian Gallery at 11th Avenue and 21st Street. The blinder and more infirm Monet got, the better he could see and paint – by the end it was all vision, with just the frailest line to suggest the actual Japanese bridge we know is there.



I took a few side trips – to Princeton for a reunion with a teacher from my youth who remembered me from the seventh grade, and to an artist’s studio by the side of a peaceful creek in New Jersey that reminded me of the river in *The Wind in the Willows*. I went to Pennsylvania to see other friends – in Altoona I stopped at the modestly famous Horseshoe Curve, where freight trains hundreds of cars long run on both tracks at once, disappearing around both ends, and the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, where life-sized bronze statues of the Signers are casually arranged as if for the wine-and-cheese reception after the actual signing. And after each adventure, back to New York, lox and bagels and whitefish salad, and met with more and more friends of my youth, some not seen for 50 years, which made me feel eerily as if I had never left, and needed only to board the crosstown bus to be back in high school. Fortunately this was not really the case – but perhaps only my now paying the senior fare kept that from actually happening.



I am near the end of my trip now. In a couple of days I will go on to Boston, to see even more old friends, do some research in the peerless library of the Flag Research Center, bring the first monograph in the new Flag Heritage Foundation publication and translation series to the printer (“The Estonian Flag: 100 Years of the Blue-Black-White,” available for the first time in English), and visit the Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site in Plymouth Notch, Vermont. And then home to the fog and the gulls – that’s enough for one trip.

David

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