

Dear Friends,

I have been back home (from New York and Los Angeles) only for a couple of weeks, and yet it has been nearly three months since October 2, when I left for Paris by way of Reykjavik, Iceland. It seems like so long ago as I struggle to remember – was I really in Iceland? But there is the stamp in my passport, so I must have been.

### Iceland

I hadn't originally planned to go to Iceland at all, but when I went on line to buy my tickets for Paris I found that going through Reykjavik gave the cheapest fare. Plus, of course, a chance to add another country (#69!) to the list. So I went for the ticket, via Icelandair, and since I was now going there anyway (routed for some reason by way of Seattle) arranged for a three-day layover. I can't help quoting from this Icelandair paper napkin:

Ingólfur Arnason was the first settler in Iceland, more than 1100 years ago.  
His trip from Norway lasted four days and there were no napkins.



Iceland (arms at left) in early October is not icy, at least not in the southwestern corner where the capital is, but it was chilly and overcast, sometimes drizzling, as I rode in from the Keflavik airport through a flat, desolate, nearly featureless lava plain covered in low yellow-brown vegetation that looked like moss. There was not a tree anywhere in sight. I arrived at my hotel, which was upstairs at an Italian restaurant, just before eight in the morning, to find no one home. Not an auspicious beginning! But eventually I found someone to let me in.



Reykjavik (arms at right) has the look and feel of a small American state capital. It is much larger than it used to be, at 120,000 population (out of 320,000 in the whole country) about the size of Charleston, South Carolina. It is not an old city, and except for a few 19th century buildings in the downtown area everything looks quite modern and European. Most of the houses are tidy two-



or three story structures with colorful roofs (above left).



On that first day I trudged all over central Reykjavik, headed first for the National Museum, which was closed, and then for the striking art deco church called the Hallgrímskirkja (left). The church is on top of a hill, and the more I climbed the further away it seemed to get. After looking over the city roofs from the windows at the top, I walked back down the hill to my hotel. Easier down than up!

Everyone in Iceland speaks English without hesitation and sometimes without an accent – no one expects visitors will speak Icelandic. In France speaking English is a failure, but not in Iceland. Icelandic has two letters found in Anglo-Saxon that modern English does not have. Both the *eth* [Ð ð] and the *thorn* [Þ þ] are pronounced *th* – as their names suggest, thorn has a harder sound. It is hard not to

read Þ or þ as P or p, but a person has to try. Here's what Icelandic looks like:

Ýmsar ástæður eru fyrir því hversu vel málið hefur varðveist. Hefðbundna skýringin er auðvitað einangrun landsins en líklega hefur fullmikið verið gert úr því og er sú skýring ein tæpast fullnægjandi.

(That's easy for *you* to say.)

The next day I took a bus tour of the nearby sights, of which by far the most affecting was *Þingvellir*, or Parliament Field, the site of the original Icelandic *Alþingi*, or Assembly, in 930 AD (see how hard it is not to read þ as *p* instead of *th*?). The land was chosen because its owner was outlawed for murder, and the Icelanders gathered there every year for a meeting and to hear the Lawspeaker recite the laws from the *Lögberg* (Law Rock). Eventually constitutional changes in Iceland caused Þingvellir to be superseded as Iceland's brain, but it remained Iceland's heart.





The Icelanders voluntarily surrendered their independence to Denmark in 1262, because left to themselves they couldn't stop fighting, but the American occupation during World War II (to keep it out of the hands of the Germans) finished off Danish rule. When the country declared its independence from Denmark in 1944, they held the ceremony at Þingvellir.

The picture above shows what the place looks like now. The church and the small clump of houses are the only buildings in the whole area. One of the houses is the headquarters of the national park where Þingvellir is situated; another is the summer residence of the prime minister. Beyond that, just water and sky and marsh and empty land. I have been looking for a word to describe this view instead of the tired *haunting*, but can't find one that does as well – I have not been able to get it out of my mind. It was certainly the most memorable scene of the whole trip, including three weeks in Paris.

Also memorable at the site: a deep crevice in the ground, wide enough to fall into, deep enough that you can't see the bottom, fresh enough that it still had yellow police tape



around it. Just another earthquake at the very site of the rift between the North American and Eurasian plates. People are almost as blasé about earthquakes



in Iceland as they are in San Francisco, due probably to the same underlying denial. Also on the tour: geothermal plumes (see left); volcanoes (including Eyjafjallajökull, which stopped air traffic last year, and Hekla, the national sacred mountain, see right), a roaring waterfall, a flooded volcanic crater where the pop singer Björk once gave a concert from a boat, and Geysir, the original geyser. Geothermal energy supplies heat and hot water to most of the country; in some places (like my hotel) this water is used directly, giving it a distinct smell of sulfur dioxide.



Everywhere we went on this tour (bizarrely enough in a Gray Line bus) the land was deforested, worse than in Ethiopia – the Icelanders long ago cut down their forests for lumber and firewood, only to find it was not so easy to get them to grow back again so close to the Arctic Circle. They have been trying to reforest on national park land for 80 years and have not yet got much further (at least where I was) than some scrubby-looking willows. Lots of mountains, lots of sheep, but almost no trees except some artificially planted on city streets. Outside the city habitation is very sparse – a few small towns, and otherwise just the occasional isolated farmhouse (Little House on the Lava Plain). One

old church out by itself in the heather and gorse is where the last Catholic bishop of Iceland lived, before the reformers cut his head off in 1550.

Here is a map of southwestern Iceland, taken from the bus tour brochure, marked by the guide and then pasted into my notebook, showing where we went. *Jökull* means *glacier*.



Back in Reykjavík for a day of tourism, I visited the tiny Parliament building (see left) with its toy garden in the back. I watched the locals feed the ducks and geese and gulls and aggressive swans on a small lake near the downtown. I went to the National Museum, which had a good collection of historical objects including the original silver seal (dated 1593) with the colonial arms of Iceland (a stockfish: a split, headless dried cod, see the image on the preceding page). This might not have been



a thrill for everyone, but I enjoyed it. Right: Leif Ericsson, from the Saga Museum, a peaceful variation from the museum's principal scenes of savagery and brutality. Hunting for heraldic books, I only found one, but a kindly bookseller arranged for



me to go to the Icelandic Association of Communities and pick up a free copy of their privately printed roll of civic arms. Some of them are pretty good.

Then, on October 6, I waited outside my hotel in the chilly darkness at 4 AM for the bus to take me to the airport and then on Paris. I was glad to have seen even a little bit of Iceland; some day (when I'm next in the neighborhood?) I may go back and see the rest.



## Paris



It felt great to be back in Paris (arms at left), where I had not been for several years. I took a bus from the airport to a side street near the Opéra and rolled my suitcase toward the square to look for a taxi. After Reykjavik, the Place de l'Opéra with its noise and traffic felt like the big time. It would probably have felt like the big time even if I *hadn't* just come from Reykjavik, for that's what it really is.



The taxi brought me to the Hotel Studia, 51 Boulevard St. Germain, Paris V, where I had stayed as a teenager in 1959 and again in 1963. It was cheap but centrally located back then, and still is (right next to the Place Maubert, a block from the Seine right opposite Notre Dame, bus and Métro stops right in front). I meant to take a picture of it but forgot – the one above from Google Earth will have to do. The hotel is about 8 floors high and has the standard Parisian mansard roof. The word *Sorbonne* is a Google artifact and slightly misleading – the Sorbonne is several blocks away.

The Studia was 54 *euros* a night, not 54 *dollars* as I had expected, but that is still pretty good for ground zero central Paris. For 54 euros I got a room on the top floor, one floor from the elevator, with a typical Parisian double dormer window. It was small but very cozy, with a comfortable bed and a desk beneath the window (which opened), reasonably quiet even directly above the boulevard, good natural light, and a free breakfast thrown in. I could have stayed there indefinitely. There was no private bathroom in the cheap



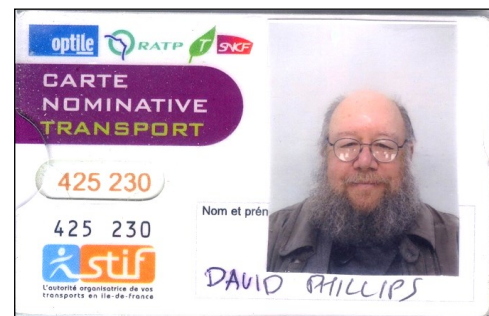
rooms, but there was a sink, and fortunately also a bidet, which solved most of the bathroom problem (*vive la France!*). On the top cheapo floor the communal shower was locked and it cost €3 each time for a



key. But what's three euros every Saturday night? Above are two pictures: one taken from my bedroom window, showing the towers and steeple of Notre Dame, and one from the bathroom, showing the dome of the Panthéon. It doesn't get any more Parisian than that.

This trip to Paris was not about seeing the sights – I had seen the sights of Paris on many previous trips. It was not even about museums, although I did revisit several favorites, or about finding French heraldry books, although I found a lot of them. Rather it was about just *being there* and enjoying the place, reconnecting after several years' absence, idling along the streets, drinking *chocolat* in the cafés, speaking French, and soaking it up. They say that good Americans go to Paris when they die, but I didn't want to wait that long.<sup>1</sup>

I allowed myself just over three weeks for upsoaking. As soon as I was settled in my hotel I made my way a block north to the river, just across from Notre Dame. The cathedral looked just as it did on my first visit to Paris in 1452.<sup>2</sup> I found a bus map, got a French SIM card for my European cell phone, found an ATM and stocked up on euros, and got a transit pass (see right).



It was chilly in Paris, and rained a lot my first week. It was too cold to sit in the parks, so I walked around. Paris is probably the most magnificent city in the world – Venice is more romantic, Rome has more ancient buildings and monuments (very little in Paris is earlier than the 19th century), but for stateliness and visual coherence no place beats Paris. A lot of this is the ornament on the façades – and on street furniture too, lamp posts and railings and Métro entrances. Almost every building has some ornament, whether in beaux arts or art nouveau or art deco idiom, even if only a flourish over a doorway (right). It made me feel once again the poverty of American design, where ornament has more or less



<sup>1</sup> “They say that when good Americans die they go to Paris,” chuckled Sir Thomas, who had a large wardrobe of Humor’s cast-off clothes.

“Really! And where do bad Americans go when they die?” inquired the Duchess.

“They go to America,” murmured Lord Henry.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)

<sup>2</sup> Actually 1952. But who’s counting?

been abolished. Parisian public buildings are even more lavishly ornamented than



the private ones, the reverse of what we have here. Architects used to sign and date their Paris buildings (see right) – if we made American architects do that the centers of our cities might not be such barren wastelands.<sup>3</sup>



Paris is not perfect. It is noisy and crammed with cars.

The consistent rooflines and scarcely varied limestone façades look splendid, but too much can still be too much. The Rue de Rivoli, for example, feels a bit overbearing – Renoir called the buildings on this street (see left) “cold, and lined up like soldiers on re-



view.” One wishes “Baron” Haussmann had not knocked down much of medieval Paris to make way for *grands boulevards*, designed at least in part for easier military control by an élite that had been frightened by the revolutionary events of 1848 (avenues too broad for barricades, straight enough to fire artillery down, radiating intersections designed to be commanded by small forces). See, below, Horace Vernet’s painting of the barricade on the Rue Soufflot in 1848 – it’s easy to see

why Napoleon III didn’t want *that* to happen again. And indeed, when it came time to break up the Paris Commune in 1871, Haussmann’s renovations worked as planned. They also had the effect of forcing the people of the artisan class, who used to live in the center city, out to the suburbs.

But I digress. Other than buying heraldry books I had no agenda in Paris. Originally I had planned a motor tour of Normandy, but scrubbed it in favor of just enjoying the city in an unhurried way. I strolled the streets, and stopped every so often at a café to rest and read the *Herald Tribune* (€3 [= \$4] a copy!). Often I ordered a hot chocolate (€4 = \$5.33 a cup!), but sometimes I had a



glass of red wine instead. I ordered wine because I don’t much like it, so I wouldn’t slurp it down right away, but would appear to be still working on it (not that they hurry you at

<sup>3</sup> Paris has also had a law since the mid-19th century that limits the height of a building according to the width of the street.



French cafés). I did come to enjoy drinking wine, but like speaking French it is a habit that will probably not survive my return home.

Speaking of speaking French, I was amazed at how well I was doing once immersed. I had not been to France since 2003, and I wasn't nearly as good at speaking French then as I suddenly found myself in 2011. Why was this? I had not practiced in the meantime – my French should have been *worse* than before, not better. But it *was* better, and I did not fight it. Instead I jabbered away, and could read with some fluency not only museum labels but heraldry books and even a newspaper. The genders began to feel natural enough that I could get them right; as an exercise I tried to translate back to English but sometimes couldn't because I was reading in French and not translating word by word.

I went out to lunch with my cousin Billy Phillips, who lives in Paris, and some of his friends, and I was even able to participate in conversation – not well, but well enough to get by, which I had never been able to do before. I gave directions in French to people who asked for them on the street. It got so that when people spoke to me in English, I would say *vous pouvez parler français* (you can speak in French). Sometimes I added *si vous parliez lentement* (if you speak slowly), because people who thought I really *could* speak French often spoke so fast I couldn't follow them. But even there I triumphed: *parliez* is subjunctive! My competence in French was fragile, though – watching a movie in Italian almost wrecked the whole thing and I mixed up the languages for the rest of the day. And now that I'm home I don't think I could manage changing a SIM card in my cell phone in French, as I did in Paris. Fortunately I don't need to try, because nearly everyone here speaks English almost as well as they do in Iceland.



Although I didn't plan to do much sightseeing, I did some anyway. Notre Dame, begun in 1163 and completed (more or less) in 1342, is still a fabulous interior space, even though it is now filled with tourists snapping photos with their cell phones and panning with video cameras, and piped-in churchy mu-



sic. Left: a roundel from the stained-glass windows; right: a portrait of me from Ste. Anne's portal.<sup>4</sup>

I watched the *promenade* in the Luxembourg Gardens, which looked like a scene from Seurat or Caillebotte except that everyone was wearing jeans and T-shirts. (Below left: a quiet spot in the Gardens.) I crossed the Seine and checked out the padlocks that hundreds of couples had fixed onto the railings of the Pont de l'Archevêché to show that their

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<sup>4</sup> All right, it's not really me, it's one of Herod's counselors.

love would last. I went to the Eiffel Tower, but twice the lines were so long I couldn't get in – never mind, it was enough to be there and marvel at its immense size, never quite understood until you're on the spot (see right). The grounds were filled with Moroccan-



looking young men, each carrying large supplies of gimcrack models of the Tower in different sizes; I saw 16 of these youths hawking them to tourists at the same time, and not selling a single one.



I couldn't get into Sacre Coeur either (one of my favorite place in Paris) – the lines were overwhelming, and Montmartre was so crowded with tourists it reminded me of Provincetown on Labor Day. Like Provincetown, Montmartre became so famous for its atmosphere that it attracted enough people to obliterate completely the quality that first made it attractive. The Place du Tertre is now a place of horror – no reason to go there anymore. If Edith Piaf were alive, that's something she *would* regret.

For me an important element of any trip to Europe is trawling for heraldic books. Using Internet resources I compiled a list of about 135 likely-seeming bookstores, mostly either antiquarian or specializing in art, and plotted them on a map. I sent e-mails to most of them, and those who didn't respond I called once I got to Paris. I whittled the list down to a few dozen and began trudging from one to another, seeing what they had. This trudgery was also a reason to go to different neighborhoods – it gave me specific destinations for my wanderings. Usually I went by bus – riding buses in foreign cities is a great way to see parts of town you wouldn't ordinarily go to, and I had a good map of the bus routes (detail, right; the circle on the right-hand side was my home stop). The Métro is faster, but you can't see anything out the window, and I was in no hurry. With my pedometer I documented that I was 400% more active in Paris than at home.



My favorite place for heraldic books in Paris is Saffroy, an old-line specialist bookshop on the Left Bank. Other specialist shops concentrate on expensive items valuable mostly

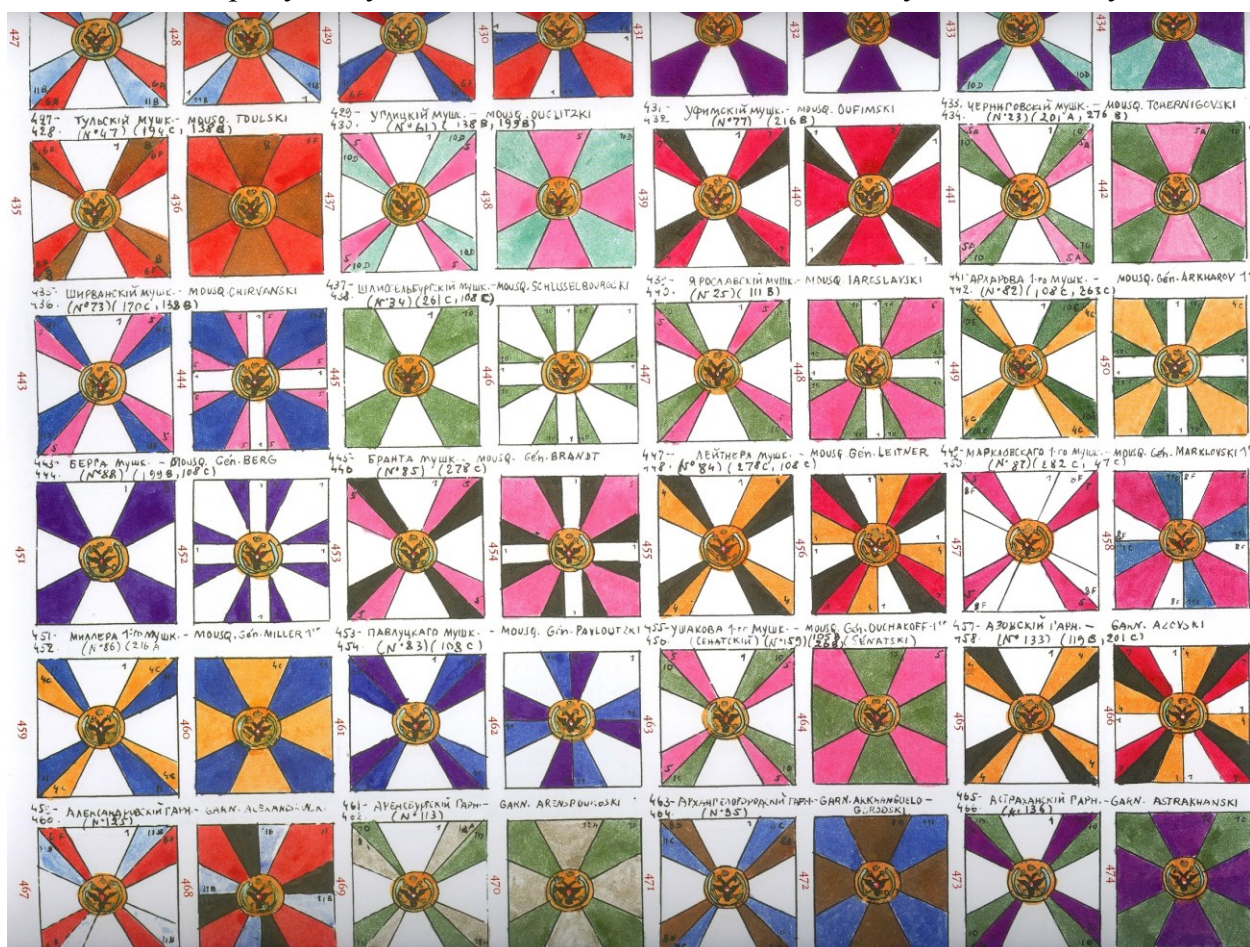




for their antiquity, which I don't care about, or are now set up principally for Internet traffic and don't work for browsers. But Saffroy (left) is the real thing, and I bought a lot from them.

Bit by bit I scored in other places, too. One bookstore had an armorial of the communities of French Algeria, the only work of its kind, using

information ingeniously gleaned from many sources. The Carnavalet Museum bookstore had some nice things too, and the Librairie Polonais [Polish bookstore] had a terrific item, and two military bookstores in outlying quarters of the city also had some fine material. I scarfed up whatever I could find. My favorite of all was a magnificent treasury of Russian military and naval flags from the 16th century to 1914, hand-drawn from archival sources and colored with watercolors. Here's part of one plate of regimental flags – the plates are too big for my home machine to copy completely. As usual, Lord Ganesha let me fill up my carry-on suitcase until it wouldn't hold any more, and my shoulder





bag too, and stuff my pockets with paperbacks, and when I absolutely had no more room anywhere even for a pamphlet He cut off my supply. This is the fourth time in a row (Vienna, Florence, Rome, Paris) He has let me fill to the brim but no further. I ended up having to wheel 70 pounds of books through three airports (clearing customs in Seattle – no duty on books!). I weighed them when I got home.

I also found some lovely atlases. I am not really collecting atlases any more, but found a few on Parisian history that I couldn't pass up. Here's an image of Paris in the 4th century, as the buildings of Roman Lutetia fell into ruin or were cannibalized for stone.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately it is hard to make out detail in this reduction, but the big squarish structure was the ancient forum, about where the Sorbonne is now. The amphitheatre at right, now called the *Arènes de Lutèce*, is still there.



Just as I started out without a fixed intention to visit any of the Major Sights, but did visit



some, I had no plan to go to any of the fabulous Paris museums (except the Orsay, which I wanted to see because they had re-decorated the galleries), but did end up going to quite a few. I went to the Carnavalet, the museum of Paris history, one of my favorite places (left: an art nouveau café sign from



their collection). I went to the Invalides army museum and saw a presentation, mostly in old films, about General de Gaulle (right). I went to the Musée du Quai Branly (anthropology) and saw an exhibition on Maori art. I went to the Louvre, because it was there.

<sup>5</sup> The image is by Jean-Claude Golvin, from *Et Lutèce devint Paris...* (2011).

I tried to see the home of crazy old Gustave Moreau, the symbolist painter, but they wouldn't let me in because they were closing for lunch, despite the hours listed in the official museum guide from the tourist office. OK, Moreau, I said, be that way, and went to the Marmottan instead, where I saw rooms full of breathtaking Monets (below, a view of



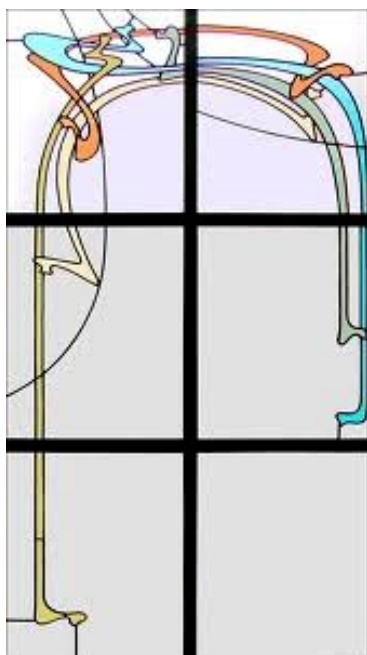
his house from the rose garden, finished in 1924, just a couple of years before he died). They also had an exhibit on Henri-Edmond Cross, a pointillist (or Neo-Impressionist, as he liked to call himself). I find the pointillists very unsatisfying, but it is not entirely clear to me just *why* a fully representational scene made of tiny dots (or, later, uniform oblong daubs) makes me yawn, but something like the scene above leaves me stunned and whimpering for more. What am I, a philosopher of art? I know what I like...



And I went to the Musée des Arts Decoratifs (left), in but not of the Palais du Louvre, and wallowed in art nouveau furniture and ceramics and jewellery and similar rich stuff (below left: a window by Georges Nérét, 1890s). Also to the Orsay, as soon as the redecorated galleries opened to the public, only to find that the moment they opened the staff went on strike (how very *Franch!*). I kept checking and the

museum was still closed, and my time in Paris was expiring, so I went to the Garden of





the Tuileries instead (where I used to go in my Eton suit as a boy of seven and roll a hoop)<sup>6</sup>, intending to visit the Orangerie. When I tried to get into the Orangerie with my pre-paid Orsay ticket they told me the strike was over, so I walked across the bridge to visit the Orsay after all. More magnificent Art Nouveau, in galleries whose walls were now done in rich dark greens and browns. They also had an exhibition on the English Esthetic Movement, including the tapestry of Burne-Jones' 1904 *Adoration of the Magi* (below). I had often seen reproductions of this remarkable piece, but as always there is no substitute for the real thing. I would like to show dozens of the beautiful works I saw there, but let the Néret window from the other museum stand for them all. Both museums are inexhaustible.<sup>7</sup>

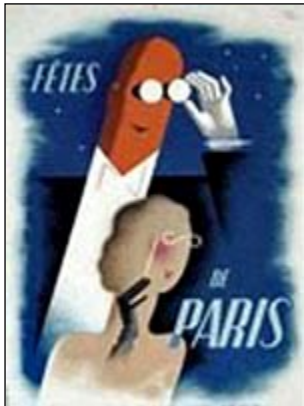
Finally I went to the Guimet (Asian Art) museum, where the original of Carl Jung's famous *Red Book* was on exhibit. I spent a few hours looking at his paintings, and the actual book, and paging through a life-size facsimile. Here again, there is nothing like the original, but I show a couple of these paintings below anyway. Also at the Guimet were some magnificent Indian and Himalayan works of the kind that inspired Jung to explore Asian spirituality.



<sup>6</sup> My brother Christopher has the old color films to prove this.

<sup>7</sup> While I was approaching the Orsay a Moroccan youth stooped and “found” a “gold” ring right in front of me, and tried the old found ring scam (for some reason he cannot sell this valuable ring himself, so he lets you take advantage of him and buy it for an absurdly cheap price, and then you go to the jeweler and discover it is worthless). Unfortunately for him I already knew this game, and so I told him *va t'en, espèce de voleur* [get out of here, you type of thief]. Nevertheless three more Moroccans found and offered me identical rings within the space of a block and a half.





There was lots more to do in Paris. I visited friends and relations. As noted I rode the buses a lot – even when I had nowhere special to go I would often just ride a bus to the end of the line and then take another bus to the end of *that* line. It is remarkable how quickly Paris, one of the most beautiful cities in the world at the center, gets grotty as you approach the margins. European cities grew in a different way than American cities. In America the overclass fled the center, leaving it to the underclass; in Europe the underclass was pushed to the suburbs. This was especially true in Paris where the vandalism of Haussmann deliberately destroyed the older residential areas.

I also went to the movies a lot (top choice: *The Artist*, a new black-and-white silent film which just opened in America – best picture of the year in my view), and went to concerts, and rode the Batobus (an excursion boat making regular stops along the river between the Eiffel Tower and the Jardin des Plantes), and goggled at the passing scene.

And of course I ate, although not usually in restaurants except for lunch. On the Place Maubert, next to my hotel, all lined



up in a row, were an *épicerie* with delicious fresh fruit, a *charcuterie* with great sausages and *terrines* and *prosciutto* and cooked meats and salads and great mounds of other delicacies, a wine store, a *fromagerie* for stinky French cheeses, a *boulangerie* with superb fresh bread, and other shops (a butcher, a fishmonger) I couldn't use because I had no cooking facilities. Plus there was a farmer's market right in front every other day. Usually I tried to get back from my daily activities before the seven-o'clock closing time for these shops so I could buy provisions for dinner and have a picnic in my room.

All this was huge fun, but somewhat exhausting, and while I could have stayed in Paris indefinitely I was pretty tired by the end of October, and ready for home. At right is a picture of me toward the end of my trip, sketched by a street artist.<sup>8</sup>



And then on October 28 I headed out, a 26-hour *schlep* across ten time zones, back through Reykjavik and Seattle. As we came in to Iceland I saw from the air a crack in the ground that ran as far as I could see, from one end of an empty brown lava plain to the other. Then Greenland's icy mountains, and the peaks of Oiqiktaluk (Baffin Island) poking out of the snow, and floe ice in Canadian Arctic waters, all looking very cold, and finally, eventually, back in San Francisco, as always glad I had gone but just as glad to be snug at home again.

David

December 2011



Monet's palette [at the Marmottan]

<sup>8</sup> All right again, this is not really me either. It is a detail from an 18th century Japanese scroll by Hakuin Ekaku, showing Bodhidharma, the first Zen patriarch, who sat in meditation for eight years facing a rock. I saw it at the Musée Guimet. See <http://www.guimet.fr/Daruma-Meditating>.