

Museums without walls A letter from wintry Paris

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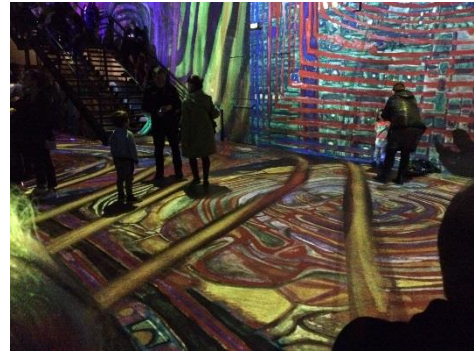
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Buddha, Bayon Style
12th-13th Century
Musée Guimet, Paris



Projected images of Gustav Klimt
Culturespace,
Atelier des Lumières, Paris



Projected images of Hundertwasser
Culturespace,
Atelier des Lumières, Paris

The City of Light offers many pleasures. For someone like me, who has been compared to the Duracell bunny by travelling companions (admiringly and not so admiringly), Paris is a museum without walls. And *of walls* too. White and pristine walls of Haussmanian elegance and also walls and bridges and underpasses tagged with an unbelievably rich and arcane iconography that I don't think I will ever understand. André Malraux's famous concept of the museum without walls invoked an ideal world where art was available to all, heterogenous and not confined to the rarified, austere, and muffled walls of the museum. I have been walking the grand boulevards and exploring the not so grand backwaters. I am trying to keep my museum addiction to one every other day so I can get down to my own painting in my little attic in the 14th. *Si, mi chiamano Mimi...*

This is a city that I know well, and I have lived here many times before, but it still surprises me. It gets a bad rap for its attitude, but either I have become impervious with old age or I am too lost in a haze of awe and privilege, trying not to end up under a car as I absorb the sights and sounds and smells. Smells are so important in this city. Where I am living and working right now, I smell fish; cheese; bleach; coffee; roasted chestnuts; garlic; and the burned apple smell of the metro...

In the last week I have been all around the houses, galleries and museums. My first port of call is always to my favourite, the pearl of Asiatic art that is the Musée Guimet. A fantastic modernised building that honours its exhibits, unlike so many museums (Fondation Louis Vuitton? Lovely building. Horrible space to show art.) The celestial smiling Cambodian Buddhas are transcendent. To quote *When Harry met Sally* - I'll have what they're having. They are the core of this collection. *Meiji, The Splendours of Imperial Japan, 1868 -1912* is an exquisite show running until next year. It's very conventional and well behaved. Beautifully lit and curated. Everything one expects from a scholarly approach to its subject.

Then to Quai Branly which I now see has Jacques Chirac's name added to its title. This Jean Nouvel building has lost its charm for me over the years. It tries much too hard to evoke the deep dark mysteries of "tribal" art and so much of its space is inert and dead, like its long ramp

entrance that offers one nothing to look at except a very lovely river of words projected onto the floor...I am sure that this is a place where adults think children will be introduced to world art. Last Sunday children were trying very hard to have a good time in the dark chasing each other round the display cases of what was once, controversially, snobbishly and fatally called “Primitive art” by its patron, one Jacques Chirac. Politiquement incorrecte indeed.

Yesterday I was confronted by my own very potent snobbery. A defunct piece of industrial heritage, the Fonderie du Chemin Vert, a 19th century foundry which until 1935 was used to cast huge locomotive parts, has just been turned into a digital gallery – into what its creators have determined to be an “immersive” experience. The Atelier des Lumières uses light, on the walls, on the floor, on the ceiling and on the old machine constructions to break down the walls of the museum, and the experience of the museum is broken down completely. It feels more like being in a multi-media rock concert, albeit with music by Mahler, Beethoven, Franz Lehar and Philip Glass among others. It also conjures up memories of psychedelic happenings in the 1960’s. Projecting art onto the enormous old foundry walls using cutting edge technology, its first show dedicates itself to Vienna; to the Secession and its followers. My first reaction seeing the paintings of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and Friedensreich Hundertwasser projected in this enormous space, was to groan. It felt kitsch. The stuffy art historian in me was appalled. But despite myself I was won over to the experience. One could see all the brush marks, as the gigantic images slid over each other. Very seductive. And the many children who were there were utterly seduced too. The intention of the creators is to bring art out of the hallowed halls of the museum and into the digital, virtual world that these children inhabit in the 21st century. They persuaded me. Malraux would have adored it.

Next week: Joan Miro at the Grand Palais!