

I wrote this foreword in December 2010 for an art history resource at the request of the author. I was given a 24-hour deadline to start and complete. The resource was published by the university (through Transcontinental) under the title "Traipsing Through Europe: Patricia's Guide to a Modern Grand Tour". It continues to serve as a comprehensive guide for the university's European travel-study semesters abroad.

Traipsing Through Europe: Patricia's Guide to a Modern Grand Tour

Foreword

The SSU European study term began sometime in the early 1990s when the board, faculty and staff were collectively convinced that God was inviting them to do something wild.

My first SSU European trip was in 1998, with past president Don Kantel and Elizabeth, along with 14 other students. We were stuffed, gear and all, into two not especially large Peugeot vans and caravanned for two and a half months of adventure, moving seamlessly between erudite immersion in the foundations of Western civilization and a crazy family road trip. We landed in Paris at Charles De Gaulle, grabbing bags amid the airport's blue haze of cigarette smoke, and loading them into the two sparkling vans that would become considerably less pristine over the next 10 weeks. The itinerary was ambitious and the pace brisk: fresh from the plane and the wonders of Paris, we travelled west and south across the continent into Spain, ferried across the Mediterranean to Morocco, and then returned to follow the Mediterranean eastward along the Riviera, ending in Monaco and turning south into Italy through Florence and Rome as far as Naples. Returning northward, we passed through Austria to Germany, visiting Munich and Dachau, and then back to France, crossing the English Channel and continuing on through the Lakes District just shy of Scotland in Carlisle, only then heading for London and homeward.

I wonder if it was mostly the little victories that kept Don and Elizabeth going. Trip after trip, they took students such as me, barely finished with adolescence and seemingly raised by wolves or some other feral creature for at least a portion of time, and attempted to instill something even passably resembling a groomed and literate Christian, ready to lead others into the 21st century with a broad grounding in the Western story and an adroit appreciation for modern European civility. I imagine Elizabeth suppressing a tiny thrill of hope that perhaps all was not lost when we correctly dispatched with our cutlery at the end of a meal, or didn't guzzle the last drops of whatever beverage was being served from the bottle at table. Similarly, I envision Don breathing in with restrained satisfaction when we were able to piece together a cogent historical observation, or when we resisted the urge to capitalize on a stumbled upon toilet paper prank. I distinctly remember trying to determine what to do next after making a drinking gesture with a *tastevin* (a small silver cup for determining wine quality) in an elegant little French shop, and watching, along with Don, Elizabeth and the genteel shopkeeper, as the loose price

tag slipped out of the little bowl and flew directly into my mouth. It was hard to clearly recognize the Christian leaders of tomorrow in each of us through the fog of unpolished demeanours, but we were making progress.

In the fullest sense, there was an aspect of family on the SSU European study term that went well beyond our experience of university life at home in Park Hall. The intensity of proximity, and the rigour of waking up every day to pack up your home and move it to the next location (meanwhile touring world-class cities, galleries, cathedrals and museums amid these daily rhythms,) was both exhilarating and stretching, at times to the point of snapping. Ten weeks of body odours and emotional roller coasters brought all of the worst things out in us, as you might imagine. But Don and Elizabeth also brought out the best of family in us. Elizabeth would take the young women on a trip to buy fresh-picked lemons in Sorrento, then took them to smooth rocks overlooking some of the bluest waters the Mediterranean has to offer, where they would lie in the sun and lighten their hair with the juice. Don would indulge us here and there with stops for gelato or ice cream, and would enrich the driving times with a wealth of historical information and personal anecdotes, seasoned by many years of travel.

Although it may not have been expressly stated in the syllabus, the idea of pilgrimage— “a physical journey with a spiritual destination,” to steal Daniel Taylor’s raisin—was an underpinning of all our travels. Upon our approach to Chartres, Don would make sure we were attentive to our surroundings, observing how the town’s famous Cathedral seems to rise out of the landscape, beckoning us onward as it had for centuries of pilgrims before. These little reminders kept the group present to the mysterious harmony as centuries-old pilgrim spirituality, academic pursuits, and daily life on the road were again and again interwoven.

In a sense, we had been preparing for the study term in Europe over our entire university education. At the time, there were no majors or significant course variations in the Liberal Arts program; every freshman took the exact same courses, as did every sophomore. By the time we were ready for Europe, all of us had completed two or three years of courses in mostly every discipline offered (Literature, History, Philosophy, Biblical Studies, and Cultural Studies). The disciplines were chronologically integrated, surveying the Greco-Roman classics in first year, the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the second, and Romanticism and Neo-Classicism in the third. All of us had also survived, more or less, an introduction to Latin with the vigorous coaching of Helga Stewart. These years of preparation had established a common foundation of knowledge, yet we were not entirely ready for the impact when places, buildings and objects we had read about were transformed into personal experiences, vividly illustrated by touch and sound and taste.

In conversation with material historian and SSU Dean of Arts Dr. Gregg Finley, he points out the importance of this physicality, and the instinctive human need to grasp in the process of learning.

In the formative months, a child learns by grasping and touching something physical. From the very beginning of our consciousness, we grasp things until we grow a bit, and then language takes over...This is one of the strengths of the Europe trip: most thinking people have noticed that when one picks up and examines an object, it is a much fuller experience than merely reading about it. I have respect for the text on the page, but I have even more respect for the combination of the text plus the visceral physicality of a work of art or the façade of a cathedral.

In the context of the European study term, learning through physical grasp is to “understand the past beyond words”; to engage with the work or figure or event where words end or fail. Important information is embedded in non-textual objects, such as art and architecture, as Gregg observes further:

A rocking chair, the Mona Lisa, a gargoyle—they can live for the observer who knows how to read. How do you read a rocking chair? It’s not in words and sentences, but it still can be read, whether it’s a cathedral or a rocking chair.

There is a tendency among some conservative Christians to eschew such reading of the icons and idols of Western culture, preferring to escape or hide rather than risk direct engagement with its fundamental themes and powers. And it is risky. To engage in a sleeves-rolled up, gaze-levelled wrestling with culture is also to risk being challenged to the core of our most cherished values, beliefs and ideals.

Throughout my first trip in 1998, we were regularly told, “This is just a taste. These are all places you’ll want to come back to later.” Since that trip, I *have* returned to many of those places, some multiple times, and have re-encountered many of Western Europe’s artistic and architectural treasures, both the iconic and the more obscure, with more experienced eyes as well as through the eyes of others. So far, I can say with reasonable confidence that if you toss a coin in Trevi fountain, you *will* return to Rome.

The trip has evolved and expanded considerably since the days of Don and Elizabeth Kantel, with each new member of faculty leaving an imprint. Dr. Peter Fitch brought his love for the spiritual mothers and fathers of the Church, introducing students to Francis and his Assisi, St. Benedict’s Monte Cassino and a deeper look at the spiritual themes of Western art. Dr. Gregg Finley brought his love for Celtic Christianity, and Dr. Walter Thiessen his passion for the historical champions of Church Reformation and for contemporary social justice. Dr. Margaret Anne Smith introduced literature and the value of myth to the curriculum, bringing a more rounded and interdisciplinary approach. And Dr. David Stewart elevated every area in which he involved himself, drawing particular attention to Western culture’s interplay between the sacred and the profane. The student body has also expanded,

outgrowing our pair of family vans and moving into a professional tour bus. Students are now pursuing varied fields of study, and in some instances different programs, some of which by nature of the discipline offer little or fragmented preparation for the diverse works of art and architecture that they encounter over the European study term. Yet, despite these expansions and evolutions, the themes of character development, family, pilgrimage, and value in the “visceral physicality” of encountering culture head-on remain at the heart of the SSU European study term experience, just as they did in 1998.

Near the beginning of my first trip, Don and Elizabeth Kantel took our group to the Museo del Prado in Madrid to experience first-hand the powerful paintings of Velazquez, El Greco, Goya and others. At that time, tours were forbidden in the Prado, so Don surreptitiously whispered directions to paintings we should stand near. While we were standing there, he would come alongside us (apparently just another patron) and with a captivating cloak and dagger delivery would feed us essential information under his breath so that we could understand what we were seeing and fit it into the proper historical context. While your European experiences may be considerably less clandestine, consider *Traipsing through Europe* as a similar resource, living in your pocket and ready when you need it to provide historical insight and context to what you are seeing, and *how* to see it, in a manner uniquely tailored to the SSU study term. May you read well both the words Patricia has written here, and the vast field of Western story that lies waiting for you in the art and architecture of Florence, London, Munich, Paris and Rome, out beyond word's reach.