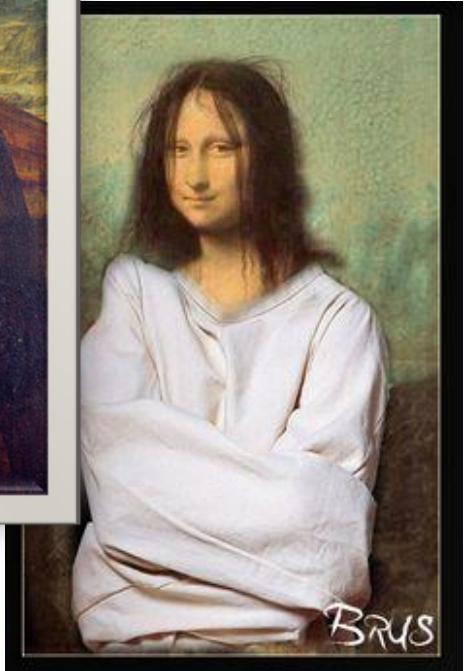
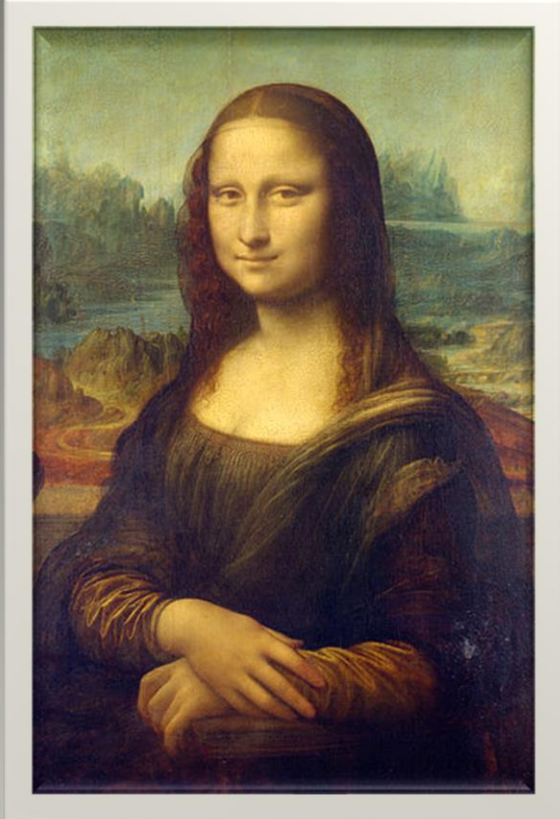
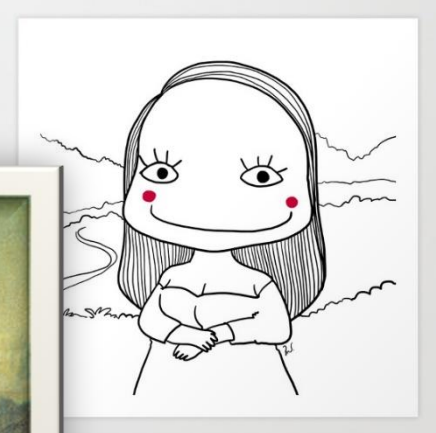


THE ICORIC ROUTE: France



"Trust me, enigmatic is better!"

Franx Reichelt and the parachute suit in which he leapt to his death from the Eiffel Tower, February 4, 1912.



THE ICONIC ROUTE: France

being an account faithful and true of the journey in APRIL, 2022 of
GUY & ROSY LILLIAN to
PARIS, FRANCE and OMAHA BEACH
bedeviled by mis-mailed packages, misunderstood dates, a late
flight, cold weather, a bad belly and my aching feet,
assisted by tranquilizers, Imodium, suspenders, and the kindness of
strangers

Written by Guy H. Lillian III at
1390 Holly Avenue, Merritt Island FL 32952. GHLIII@yahoo.com.
GHLIII Press Pub #1320. May, 2022.



“We saw London, we saw France / We saw Guy almost mess his p- ...”

You need to know this before we get started. Throughout our three weeks in France, England and Scotland in April, 2022, I was sick.

I often needed Rosy’s help putting on my shirt because I couldn’t raise my left arm high enough. Getting into and out of cabs often required a helping arm from the driver. Forever I needed to be hyper-aware of the nearest jakes. I hit Europe – and a very demanding schedule -- despite terrors in my feet, back, guts, and the shock of a very recent Parkinson’s diagnosis. I was afraid my condition would ruin Rosy’s trip. It’s a gold star on my report card that I didn’t let it. Paris, London & Environs, and to a lesser extent, Edinburgh, conquered all. I was 100% gassed by the experience – cramming in life-sight after life-sight, day upon day – three weeks never to be forgotten. Here’s the first.

Vive la France!

PRELUDE

Coca-Cola is better in France. They use real sugar instead of corn syrup. And why does a guy living in Florida have to go to England to get a KitKat flavored like *Key Lime Pie*?

I'm ahead of my story. *The Iconic Route* actually began when little Rose-Marie Green, age 11 or so, read book after book set in the British isles and developed a ravenous desire to go see it for herself. Twice were fomented actual plans to go, but both times she was thwarted – once by a family problem, then by her husband's insistence to instead attend a Worldcon in Australia. Rosy despaired of ever fulfilling her lifelong desire.

But then she and that selfsame husband – myself – rendered essential assistance when her stepmother, the beloved Patty Green, became ill. In gratitude, Rosy's father Joe promised Rosy that trip to England. Plans were revived, an itinerary was drawn up by a family friend, propitiously a professional travel agent, and we tensed to go.

Whomp! COVID! England went into lockdown. So did France, where, as long as we would be in the area, we had also decided to visit. Twice our ticket dates were moved forward, and when COVID restrictions began to be lifted, and appropriate injections taken, a date for early spring, 2022 was chosen.

And *then*, days before departure, I was diagnosed with early Parkinson's Disease. Rosy didn't say so, but you could feel catastrophe fall once again upon *la belle* like a meteor onto Yucatan.

I refused to allow it. Yes, I was slow of foot and my left hand fluttered like a butterfly. Yes, I was nervous about the flight, despite air travel being sweet the last trips we'd taken. It mattered not. Rosy was going to Europe. *I* was going to polish off my bucket list, which consisted of two items: dancing with my darlin' before the *Mona Lisa* and twirling with the same lady *within* Stonehenge. We would not be kept from the icons of a lifetime.



Nor would we be facing these challenges alone. Our *personal* icons, Mib the red-bow-tied panda and Neville the clasping koala, would be along, as they always are. Their protective purpose would be supplemented by supplements – a.k.a. *drugs*. I've been a closet junkie for many years. So I'd be well-stocked with Imodium to combat the spasms of a vibrant gut and lorazepam to deal with my delicate nerves. Not to mention my various vitamins, analgesics, blood pressure meds and (N.B.)

levothyroxine, a supremely necessary drug I quaff for my thyroid. I repeat, N.B.

We bought new luggage, packed it with new clothes. I bought *suspenders* to supplement my belts, since my voluminous belly has developed a tendency to shed my pants if I inhale. We brought chargers for our phones and my Kindle. Rosy read about pickpockets at the Eiffel Tower and had me transfer my credit cards, I.D., insurance cards and some cash to a tiny travel wallet I could keep in my front pocket. She had me wear a money belt beneath my shirt in which to keep most of the Euros and pounds we secured at the bank. (I never used it.)

Came the day – April 3. Rosy’s BFF since grade school, the divine Darcy, and her roommate Jeanie drove us to the Orlando airport. We were trusting her sister and in-law to care for Joe, and our beloved yorkie Ginger, while we were gone, and in those tasks they’d excel. (Both Joe and Ginger had a nice vacation from me and were fine when we got home.) Anyway, Rosy and I got to the frantic Orlando airport and through its messy TSA procedures in plenty of time for our flight. To *Chicago*.

What? Fly north to go east? Doesn’t Orlando have direct flights to Paris? Of course it does! But for some godforsaken reason, we weren’t booked on one. Instead we had to fly across the midwestern United States – turbulence, turbulence, turbulence – and *then* make for the City of Lights. Furthermore, we had to change terminals in Chi-town and find the international gate, all in about 75 minutes.

Naturally, our Chicago flight was late. The flight engineer got his zipper stuck or something and was delayed getting to the airport. I asked the gate attendant if we’d still make it to Chicago on time for our Paris connection. Good thing I did.

The next thing we knew, we were being ordered across the Orlando terminal to another gate and another plane connecting with a Paris flight. At *Dallas/Fort Worth*. It was either fly west to fly east or sit in Chicago for a night and muck up our whole schedule.

We hurried across the terminal – a long and, for me, torturous trip. The Dallas plane was already boarding. Somehow we made it. A kindly gentleman traded seats with me so I could sit beside Rosy. Not the last kindness we’d see. I gobbled my first trunk and off we went.

That Orlando-Dallas flight is the only one I’ve ever taken where I never looked out the window. I simply judged the trip’s progress by the sounds of the engines. Made it in plenty of time. We had a row to ourselves on the Paris leg of the journey, but the animated map on which we should have been able to follow our progress didn’t work. The tranquilizers did, though. My next memory is of watching clouds part for us ... above Paris.

PARIS. The Seine. April 4, 2022.

France didn’t seem all that welcoming when we got off our plane. For one thing, we were last to disembark, and we wandered down an empty corridor. Where was everyone? This, after all, was Charles de Gaulle Airport, a world-famous international hub ... why was it deserted? We made our way to the front, baffled. The major international hub seemed empty ... and seedy.

Well, as all of our luggage was carry-on, we had no need of baggage claim, so we headed straight for the taxi stand, and soon we were on our way in. The landscape was just that, landscape ... until we reached urban turf, and Paris began to assert itself.

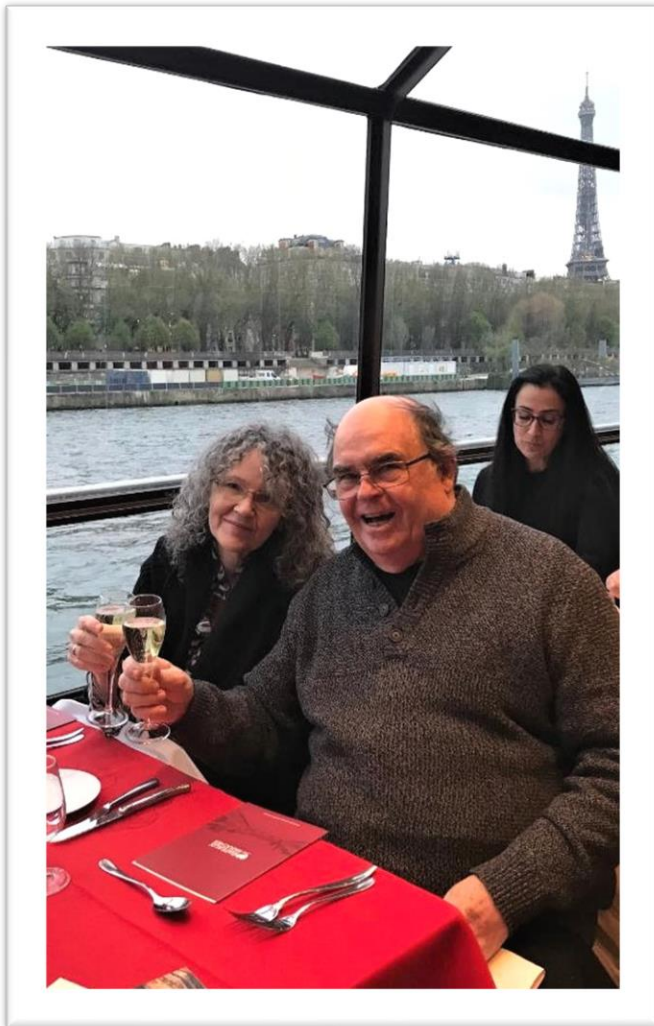
There's much to it. Paris is an old city, and the architecture ranges from the Gothic genius of Notre Dame Cathedral, begun in the 12th Century – that's 900 years ago – through the Louvre, rebuilt in the 17th Century – all the way up to now. As our taxi conveyed us through the wide avenues towards our hotel, we felt as much as saw the apartment buildings with their elegant antique cornices, the sense of age, beauty, old money, deep class – the streets, thriving with people, *young* people – and the girls, classic beauty on every face, *chic* couture (much black and white) on every body – we weren't even to our hotel, yet, nor seen any sights, and already I felt the city's allure.

Our hotel, *The Left Bank*, was small, on a side street off a main avenue. The concierge spoke fine English, and our room was charming if oddly designed. But the bed was comfy enough for a damn-the-jet-lag nap. (Weirdly, though the TV worked well, the

French language programs made me a tad *nauseated*. My warped brain chemistries may have been confused by the beautiful if incomprehensible language.)

Evening came on. When we'd begun planning our trip, I told Fran, our travel agent, to include a dinner cruise on the Seine River. We went that night. What better way to begin our discovery of Paris?

The company was Bateaux Mouchs, the boat was long and comfortable, the food memorable – I had sea bream with dill sauce – the cruise epic. We eyed the magnificences outside. Some we would come to know better as the week went on. Some could not be seen from anywhere but here – such as the bridge with the Napoleonic initial, Frédéric Bartholdi's original Statue of Liberty, and the sky-tickling spire behind us here ← and, aglow, on the page to follow. When we came abeam of the great glowing Christmas tree, many – ourselves included – rushed to the upper deck to be photographed in the chill.



We *didn't* spot Notre Dame Cathedral!

Not something you can miss easily – but where did it go? Did they *move* it?

A magnificent experience! Our only problem came after dinner was done and the boat had docked. We had to walk a long way along the wharf to find a taxi stand. And I had forgotten my suspenders and ... oh, who cares? Paris, man ... we were there!

ON THE SEINE ...

April 4, 2022.



PARIS! Our hotel lobby ... the original Statue of Liberty ,, and "Look where we are!"



La Tour Eiffel. April 5, 2022.

The next morning I noticed it. I'd forgotten my levothyroxine.

You know how it is. You have a thousand things to pack, among them three dozen pill packs, and one of them gets set aside, and *doesn't* get packed, and when you discover your flub you're 6,000 miles from where you left your dope.

But ... *why* was the levo so vital? My mind flashed on the late President Bush when *he* went off *his* thyroid medication on an overseas trip. He barfed on the Japanese prime minister in a photo that might well have cost him the 1992 election. I would face no prime ministers on this journey – unless we ran into Boris Johnson in London – but going without levo not only makes one ralf, it makes one *cranky*. Is bad. What to do?

Rosy had an idea. Dog- and dad-sitting for us was Rosy's sister Melody and her S.O.

Heather, at the Greenhouse while we were in Europe. Perhaps they could find my meds and boogie them on to us. Both Melody and Heather are deaf, so we sent a text across the Atlantic, and were off to see ... well, think "Paris!" and what image pops instantly to mind? **The Eiffel Tower.**

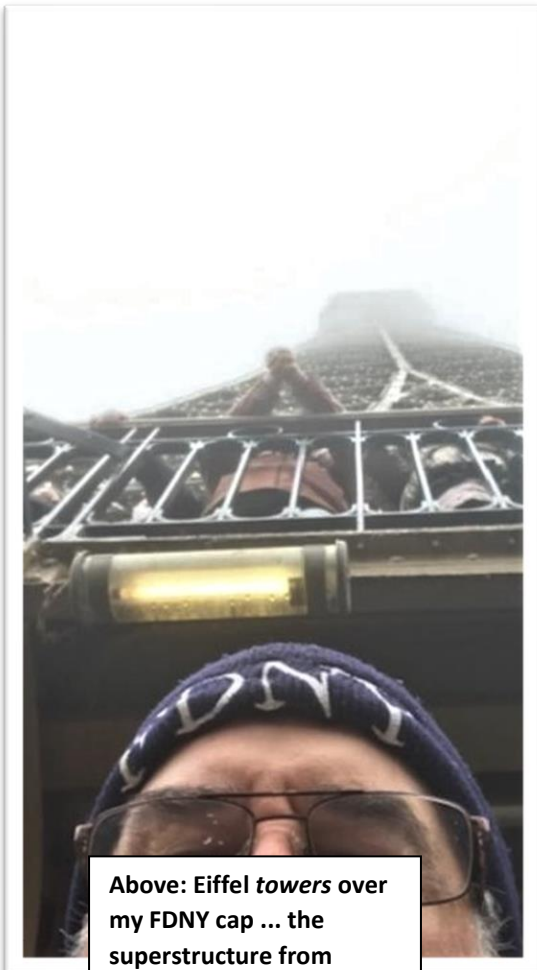
Built by Gustave Eiffel as the symbol of the 1889 Paris Exposition, the great spire rises 300 meters (about 984 feet) above the Seine. It took 22 months to build. Eiffel put scientific equipment on the very top to keep his masterwork from being demolished, as scheduled, in 1891. You can, of course, trod up a metal stairway to the upper reaches of the Tower, but being sane, we chose elevators. Rising steadily, eying the riveted girders and the occasional metal bands clasping one shaft to another, *la belle* wondered for a moment if the Tower might fold and collapse around us; imagining her *not* to be kidding, I said that after holding together for 133 years, Eiffel's construct could be trusted.

The Eiffel crawled with kids, and the Tower had been attacked by a cloud that obscured much of the view. Nevertheless, it was a *tres* neat time. Although I remembered with sadness the poor fool who leapt to his death there, trying out a parachute suit, I admired his dream, and the Tower could have been on fire and I would have been thrilled to be there. Coolest touch: the apartment at the top, furnished, with wax mannequins of Gustave, his daughter and a visitor, Thomas Edison. Pretty small, and a girder runs through it, but wouldn't it be cool to stay there overnight? (There's a new, modern pad, too – I don't dare guess at the rent.)

Some years ago, on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, entrepreneurs opened a restaurant that used to occupy a floor in the Eiffel Tower. We've never eaten there, and Rosy nixed the small coffee shop inside the Tower itself. Around the corner, though, we found one of the terrific sidewalk cafes for which Paris is famous. The waiter practically dragged us inside. I enjoyed my burger, but was shocked – *shocked*, I tell you – by the gorgeous American college girl at the next table who took the opportunity to reach into her tee and *adjust her boobs*.

Undoubtedly it was the influence of the country.

Vive la France!



Above: Eiffel towers over my FDNY cap ... the superstructure from within ... Right: mannequins of *Gustave Eiffel* and *Thomas Edison* converse in the Tower's tiptop apartment, See the beam?



PARIS. Versailles. April 6, 2022,

Seeing Paris was secondary, on this trip, for Rosy; her ambition was London, a goal we'd achieve shortly. But I remembered her enjoyment of Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*, and *really* wanted her to visit the place where it occurred: the legendary **Palace at Versailles**.



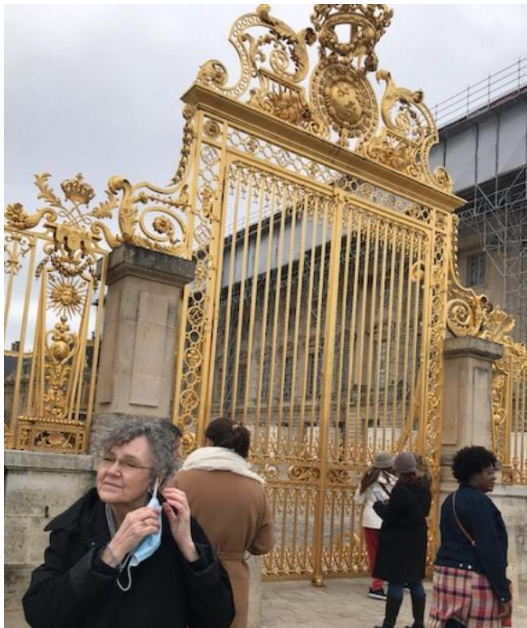
Home to kings and to queens – playground for Antoinette herself – site of the signing of the Armistice for World War I, which led in time to World War II – the Hall of Mirrors – Rosy deserved to gaze upon such magnificence, and as I also liked the movie, I did too. And so did every tourist in Paris, *and* her kid sister.

Our travel agent had assured Rosy that the classic romantic song “April in Paris” bespoke the best possible time to visit. The winds of winter – hmm, nice title; like to see

such a book someday – would have ceased to flail continental Europe with arctic temperatures and there wouldn't be many tourists. Ideal.

Wrong!

Despite the classic romantic song, we had already decided that we had made a mistake choosing April to visit Paris. It was *cold*. I was usually layered under a tee, a shirt, my suspenders, a heavy sweater and Harold Rothbard's London Fog overcoat, and still I froze. Also, the city was glutted with visitors, all of whom seemed aimed at Versailles.



I admit to being miserable before, during and after the tour. To begin with. We had to hoof it a quarter of a mile or more from the tour bus to the golden gates of the Palace. The plaza we had to cross was paved with uneven cobblestones, *painful* for me to walk on. I entered Versailles with aching feet. Inside, mobs of schoolkids and tourists, and practically empty rooms. Very little furniture. As Rosy said, you could glean no idea of what it was like to live there or attend the soon-to-be-headless royalty.

In addition, though we had a charming guide, we could hear little over the constant throb of the crowd, and garnered no sense of the historical context of the place, its ironic significance to the Revolution that roared through those gorgeous cathedral rooms, leading Louis XVI and

Antoinette to the guillotine and fomenting a social convulsion our race is still pondering. Here, *in this place*, and pun definitely intended, civilization came to a head – but we could make out little echo of that importance. Just the roar of French brats and

American *touristes*. (Although it was fun to encounter a couple of cool black ladies from Atlanta, and tickle them by boasting that I *knew* Peachtree Street.)

Also, there was the unfortunate fact that I was feeling the effects of the agonizing Death March from the tour bus, and there was no place to sit down like a decent human being ... so at one point, I just parked my butt in a corner. And I could not *get up*. There was nothing to grab, and too slick a floor to gain traction. Two of my fellow visitors had to lend helping arms, which they did unselfishly and kindly.

These gripes should not overwhelm the beauty of the murals and portraits bedecking the walls and ceilings. Even without ambience, they were varied in subject but universal in beauty. Just glorious. Louis XIV did his family proud – too bad the Sun King and his successors didn't share the goodies of their station with the *sans culottes*.

I fear I put a damper on Versailles for Rosy, although she felt as I did about the Palace: even the Hall of Mirrors → gave more of an impression of a warehouse than a historical treasure. *La belle* wanted to visit Marie

Antoinette's private palace, Le Petit Trianon, elsewhere on the grounds, where the Queen would hold lavish spendthrift parties and earn the enmity of the people. But by the time our tour of the Palace proper had ended, so had my strength. We also eyed with regret the fabled gardens out of the windows, but as I may have imparted, it was effing cold out there. We elected to concentrate on the next day. I nearly slipped on the spiral stairs heading down to the Metro and garnered more than one concerned look on the train; I must have looked like I felt.

Rosy made good use of the Metro station, though, buying passes to get us through the Paris turnstiles for the rest of our week. Too beat to explore the area for one of the many splendid cafes, we settled for lobster rolls from Homer, a takeaway down the street. I won the admiration of the salesgirl when she said they also offered *crayfish* rolls. "We call them *crayfish* in Louisiana," I laughed. Her grateful scowl warmed the heart of my cockles.

**



One of Versailles' amazing works of ceiling art. Clearly French royalty spent a lot of time on their backs.



Right: a royal bust and a royal pain.

If Versailles stood for anything, it is raw opulence. Check out the room to left. Versailles lacked and needed context – a sense of the history it embodies, for there is no more important place in France.



PARIS. Notre Dame. The Louvre. April 7, 2022

Recall that on our magnificent voyage up and down the Seine on our first night in Paris, Rosy and I had been frustrated in but one way: though we'd seen the Eiffel Tower lit up fit for Vegas, the model for America's Statue of Liberty, and many another glory, we *hadn't* seen Notre Dame Cathedral, and yet there it was, right on the map. We had the morning of April 7 free, so in search of Our Lady of Paris we did go.

Now, why did we have the morning free? Fran, our travel agent, had filled every minute of our trip with stuff to do. What was special about the ante-meridian hours on this day? Bear with me. This is a bit complicated.

Rosy's dad, Joe Green, has left his footprints all over the world, but still watches travel videos – in part to remind him of the best times. One such I watched with him involved the Louvre Museum. That video provoked one of my three good ideas for our journey.

Joe's video toured the museum, lingering over the famous statues and paintings. It climaxed, predictably, with the *Mona Lisa*, ensconced at the far end of a long gallery. During the day tourists are packed into that gallery like ... like ... well, metaphor fails me. Here's a typical scene.

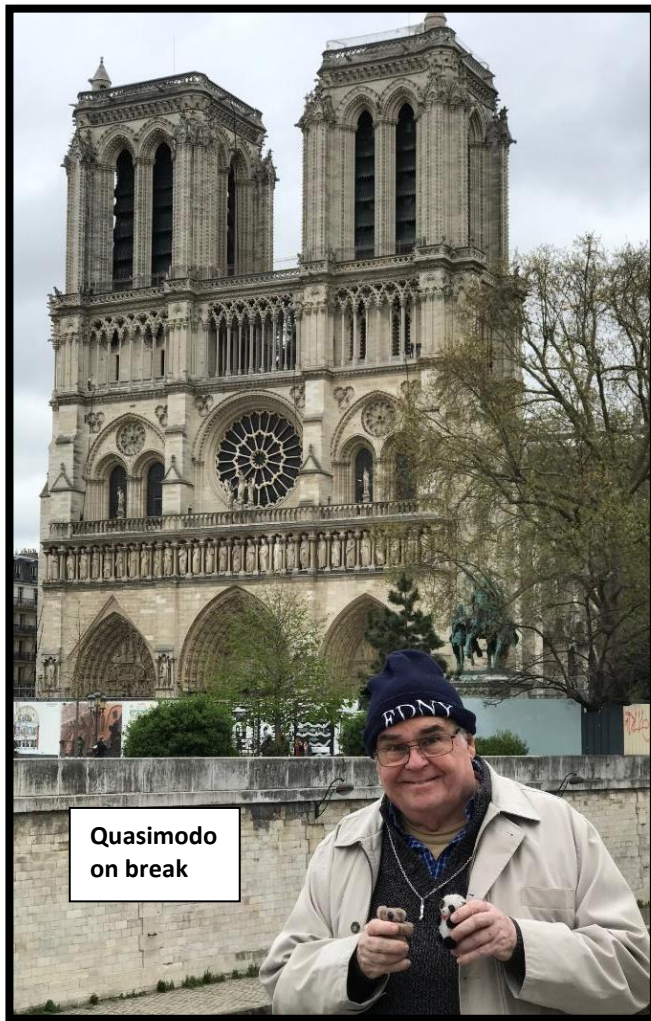


I understand Louvre employees force the *Mona* mob to circulate so that everyone gets a few seconds close to the painting, but mostly they see it from a jolting distance – the source of the libels you read that she is smaller than expected. (In fact, *Mona Lisa* is 31 by 20, a perfectly proper size.) I watched the video of this nightmarish melee and vowed “I’m not flying over an ocean to be elbowed and stomped on by some selfie-taking fool from Podunk, Nebraska!” I hit the Net.

There I found, to my delight, a Louvre tour that boasted an uncrowded, mostly unhurried encounter with *La Gioconda*. It began late, and brought its clients into proximity with the masterpiece shortly before the Louvre would close. Other tours would be over. It wouldn't be crowded. *We could get up close*. I informed Fran, our travel agent. Booked!

And so we had the morning of April 7 open – to seek Notre Dame.

We rode the beautiful, clean trains of the Paris Underground to the indicated destination. Out on the street Rosy paused, wondering where to go next, while I looked over her shoulder at one of the most magnificent buildings our civilization has ever raised – and now is raising again. Wikipedia says it was, before the 2019 fire that trashed its roof, the most visited attraction in Paris. It's certainly the oldest. They began building it in 1163; my arithmetic is questionable, but that should be 859 years. Angel Oak in South Carolina may be older, but no other object I've ever seen, natural or man-made, tops it. (The Grand Canyon and Crater Lake are not *objects*, get it? Anyway ...)



Rosy wanted to walk about the Cathedral, which would have been boss – I'd love to have seen its famous flying buttresses. But the reconstruction had the back closed off, and from our vantage I could see what I most wanted to, anyway: the *bells*. You could almost hear Quasimodo shouting "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" and see him swinging from the lips of the carillon.

One reason to return to Paris, and a potent one, is to tour the cathedral when it reopens. I want to see the Rose Window from the inside instead of distantly, and from without, as here. And although I can't believe for an instant that Our Lady has the actual Crown of Thorns plus a nail and a sliver from the True Cross in its collection of holy relics, I love the strength and power and beauty of that church among churches enough to respect them.

We lingered until the hour approached for us to find the Louvre.

Another ride on the Underground – no kidding, the cleanest public

transportation I've ever encountered. We emerged to find ourselves facing a block-long wall: the Louvre exterior. Through a passageway to a huge plaza and the main entrance – the (in)famous pyramid.

A big fan of Dan Brown, Rosy was delighted to see the controversial shape. But we wouldn't be entering the museum that way. We had to schlep the length of the plaza to the miniature Arc du Triomphe at its end – the model arch Napoleon actually got to see – and meet our tour group beside a statue there.

We huddled around the statue's base, hiding from the chill. Did I mention it was still cold? Finally a skinny little guy with the brightest yellow hair I've ever seen began to pass out walkie-talkie receivers, with headphones, and introduced himself: our tour guide, Adam. He also introduced us to ourselves: *Team Adam*.

Great praise to our shepherd: Adam, a physics Ph.D. (!) who had fallen in love with art, he was extremely knowledgeable, efficient and entertaining. Walking (irk) us past, and explaining, the Arc di Triomphe Jr., he led us into the back door of the Louvre.

The back door ... and the *basement*.

Dating back to the 1500s, the present Louvre is not much older than a parked Winnebago relative to Notre Dame, but it does have its history. The building began as a fortress, but was transformed into a museum when Paris grew up around it and it was no longer needed for defense. (That was in the mid-1700s – seems like yesterday when talking about Paris, doesn't it?) Parts of the original fort survive, in the form of the block walls extant in the basement. Once they held the building's moat. (Adam is shown here pointing out a workman's symbol, left on the stone as a signature.)

We trundled upstairs to find ourselves at the end of a long, high gallery peopled by white marble statues – and a sphinx, apparently the oldest artwork in the museum's collection. Adam stopped before one particular statue, challenging us to tell if it were Greek or Roman – and explaining how we could tell (subject matter, materials, support – look it up; it's fascinating). One distinction: the alleged beauty of the male

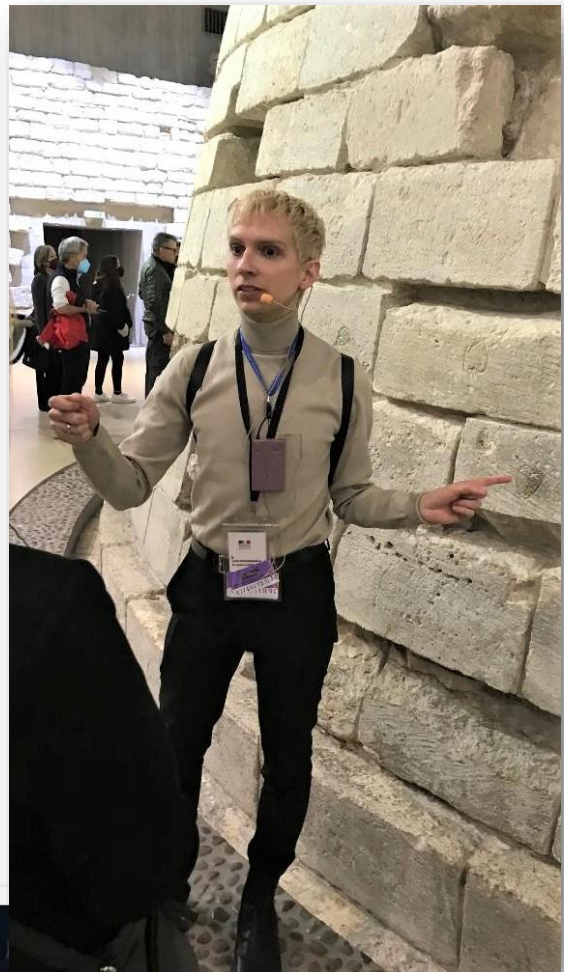


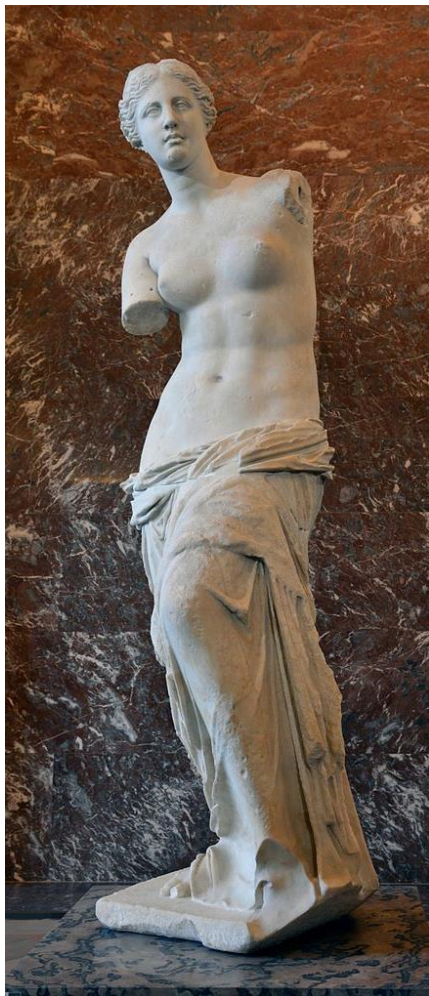
figure was idealized by the Greeks, as shown by this rather hilarious figure ←.

Seen from one angle, the recumbent figure seems a voluptuous female. Seen from the other, a detail in the center of this shot reveals the error in that interpretation.

**

It was in this gallery that I felt the first emotional *tsunami* of the day. At

the far end of the enormous room, past all of the other gods and people immortalized in white marble, I spotted a familiar female figure. I remembered Salvador Dali's recreation of the personage, with drawers – the put-socks-and-underwear-into kind – attached. Gazing further back into ludicrous memory, I remembered Mexican hucksters at border crossings selling significantly shorter – and bigger-boobed – replicas, and crewcut college guys – it was that early – lusting to buy them. A spunky lady born without arms revealed to Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* that her CD handle was named for this sculpture. I've read up on the statue, how her discovery is locked in mystery: how did a work of art so venerable – not to mention *large* (she's 6' 8")—end up on a little island like Milos? What happened to her arms? What was she doing with them? Weaving? Holding apples? Juggling? Lots of questions, and much awe, surround the **Venus de Milo**.



Right now she was surrounded by Team Adam. Our guide gave us extra time to groove on the armless Aphrodite. In the midst of my mad photography, I noted with dismay that she was damaged, and I didn't mean her arms. There's a cell phone-sized patch of roughness on her right shoulder blade. Adam explained that she was found lying on her back.

Mysterious and incomplete sculptures were big in the Louvre. Limping after Team Adam up a flight of stairs, *la belle* lending assistance, I turned a corner where they were gathered to find myself staring into the armpit of another such: *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*.

On first sight, you wonder how *Winged Victory* became so beloved. She's little more than a fragment, lacking her head, her arms, and, until reconstructed,



one of her wings. Then you look at what remains – and if you're like me, you're enraptured. She is the embodiment of motion with power and grace.

Art historians and theorists have posited elaborate symbolism around the statue. Knowing nothing of this, I remembered a great work of folk art I loved, in Los Angeles – the fabulous Watts Towers. Atop the little chapel Simon Rodia built into his masterwork, the little genius placed a tiny model of the *Winged Victory*. It is there yet. (When I told Adam this fact, he seemed puzzled, but I know he must have heard of the Watts Towers.)

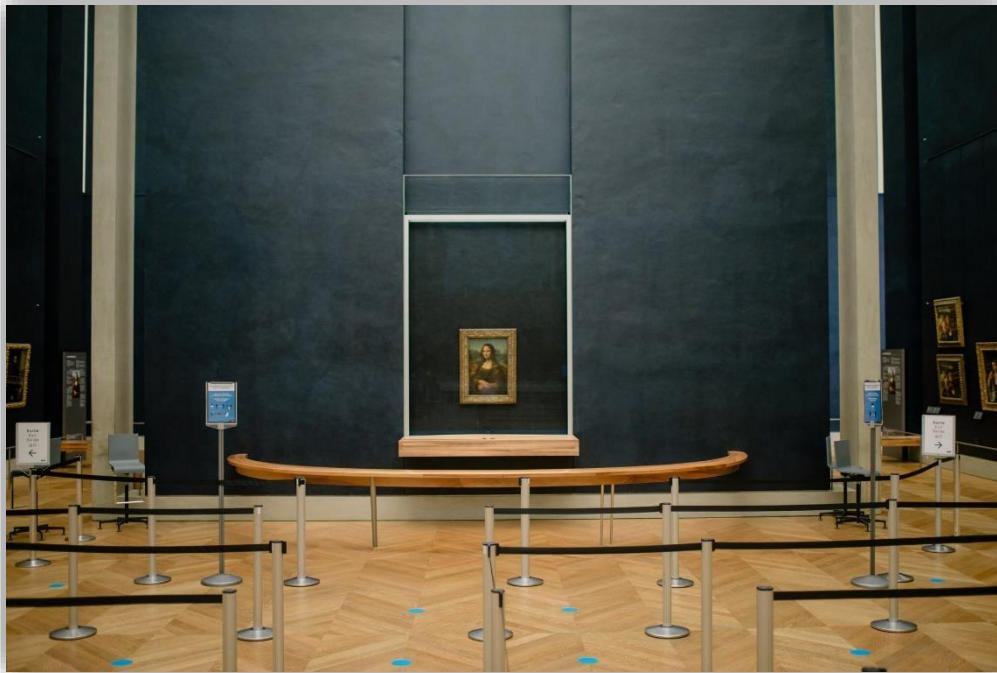
Of the three supreme attractions of the Louvre, we'd now seen two. Adam led us towards the third. But he made us wait, with more lessons in the history of Art.

Apparently there are 15 paintings out there attributable to **Leonardo da Vinci**, and the Louvre has five of them. Justin Winston told me that you can walk up to four of them and lick the damned things if you want. That pleasure I could gladly skip, but see them we did. The smiling portrait of St. John the Baptist drew special attention; Adam called it Leonardo's best painting, and baffled all but one of his Team when he asked who had modeled. That standout was *la belle Rosy*, who correctly responded with the answer: Giacomo Caprotti, nicknamed "Salai" ("little devil") – the great master's boyfriend. How does she know these things?



Look at the vibrant colors in *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, and contrast them not only with the dark *St. John the Baptist* but with the painting shown on the next few pages. Originally its sky was as blue, the subject's skin as vivid. That's what 40 layers of protective varnish does to a work of art over the centuries ...

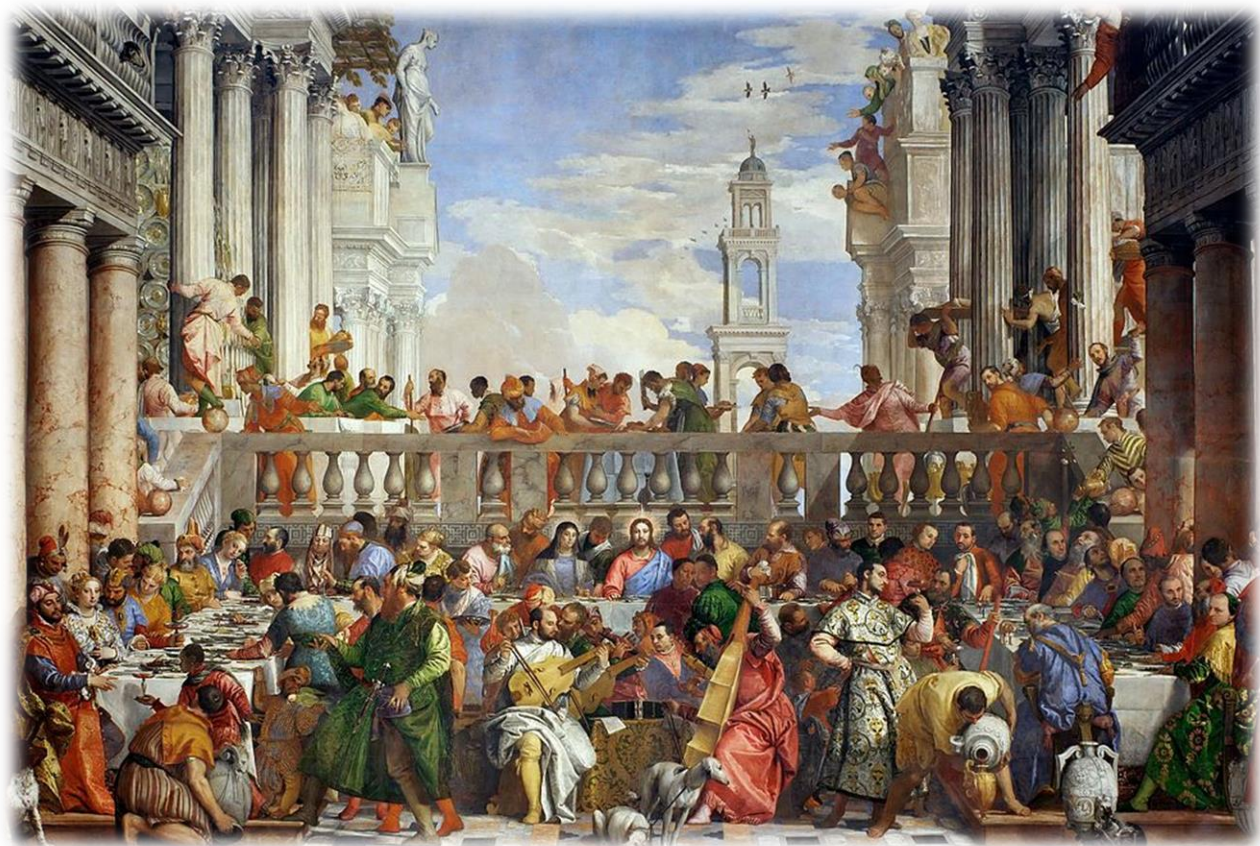
When you first see her, she's at the end of a long gallery, usually packed with people.



No wonder most say she's smaller than expected.

Adam, our guide, first talked about the painting she faces. *It is gigantic.*

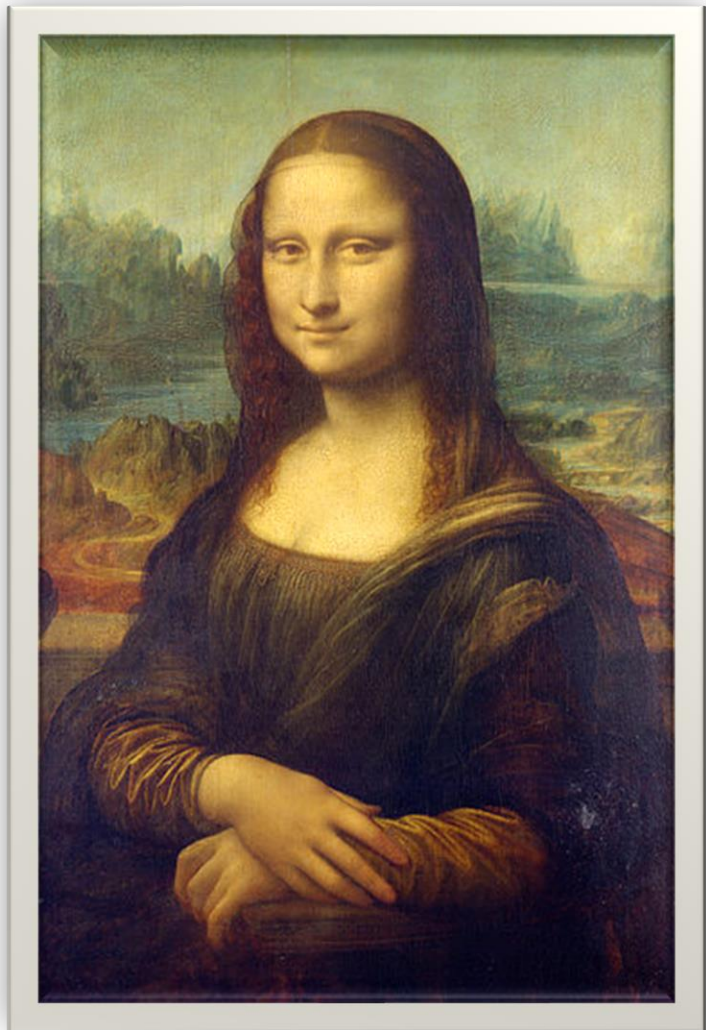
The Wedding Feast at Cana by Paolo Veronese. 130 figures!



Finally, we were unleashed. The gallery was empty save for our group, a few late-comers, two or three staffers, and *her*. We could get up close. We could stay a while with the most valuable, venerated, evaluated, perfect painting in the world. Within her ornate frame, she looks like this →. Not small at all.

I find it stunning that da Vinci was painting *Mona Lisa* at the same time that his great rival Michelangelo was chiseling away at *David*. There was something special in the Italian air in the early 1500s ...

It's said that Leonardo kept her with him, adding a daub of paint here and there over the years, fascinated and amazed with what he had done. Napoleon hung the painting in his quarters. When a bold thief stuck the 30 x 21 inch slab of poplar wood beneath his



coat – she simply hung on a hallway wall back then – and walked out with it a hundred years ago, there was worldwide panic, and the French hid her from the Nazis – along with other treasures – when the Germans took Paris during World War II. Maniacs have attacked her with acid and coffee cups, so she's now behind bullet-proof glass in a strictly controlled environment.

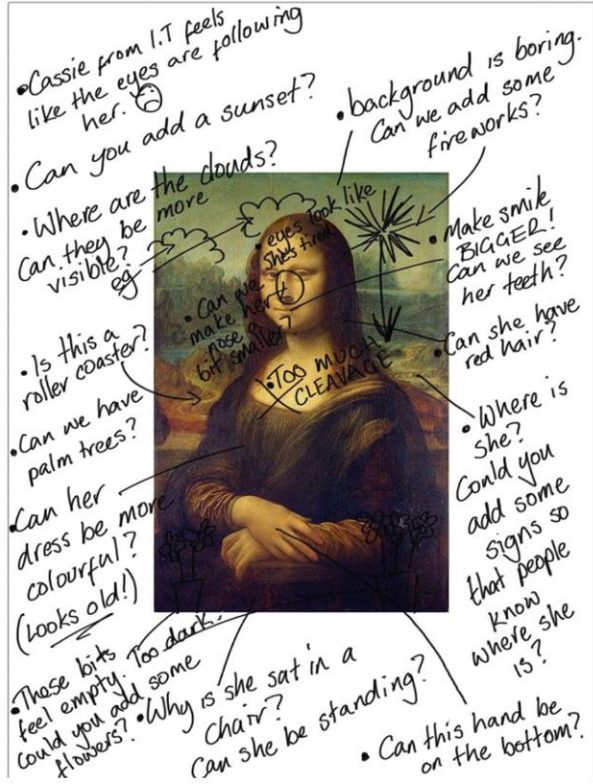
So why? What has made *La Gioconda* special – to her creator, to Napoleon, to the world of Art and the world at large – for over half a millennium? Is it her fame? All the parodies?

Mona Lisa is covered by so much protective varnish that Leonardo's true palette is forever dulled. *This* ← is how she may have looked when first painted.

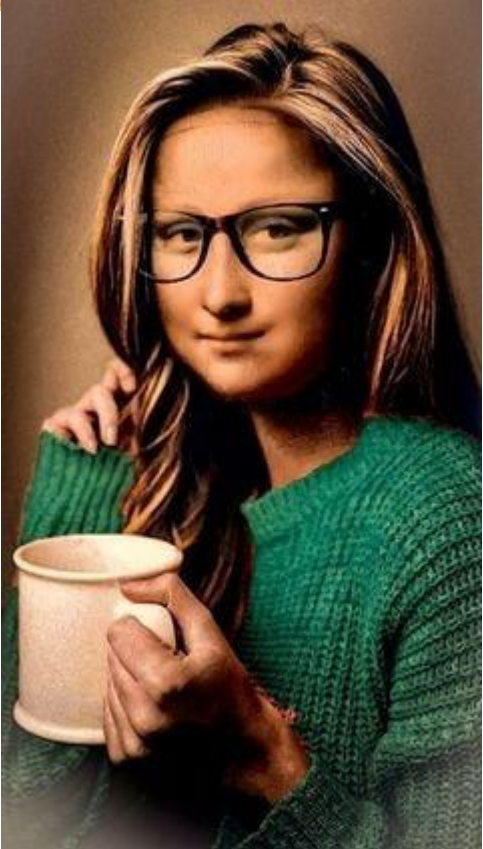
Hi Leonardo.

Please see attached document for feedback...

Many thanks.



Rosy and Neville imitate *Mona*; others see her as she would be seen today.



Of course I can't be sure. But I'm not going to argue with the artist and civilization.

Leonardo obviously thought he'd caught something special in his commissioned portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo ... that in her smile – that baffling, all-knowing, wise and wonderful smile – he'd found a truth universal not only about women but about humanity.

No wonder he couldn't let her go. No wonder Napoleon, the most incredible military and political man of his time, wanted to see her every day on his bedroom wall. No wonder we mere mortals – for she is *immortal* – practically worship her. No wonder I felt – and this is insane, but true – a little *scared* of her. After all, when you look at *Mona Lisa*, you're looking at the *essence of our human race*.

Scared or not, I grabbed *la belle* and we danced before the lady of the Louvre.



NORMANDY. April 8, 2022.

When our Louvre tour finished, and everyone was gathering around Adam, thanking and tipping him, we also returned our walkie-talkies, and I *almost* gave the brilliant lad my *figa* as well. I liked the guy, but not that much. Rosy went out to the plaza to run around the pyramid; she do luv dat *Da Vinci Code*.

The next day, early, we caught a train for Normandy. My FDNY cap drew notice from two young men in our car: they asked if I was a firefighter. When I admitted that no, I merely bought the cap (at Ground Zero, within weeks of 9/11) they said they *were*. The company of heroes ... appropriately.

It was cold. It was *blue* cold. We were met by Francois, a friendly and well-versed guide, who loaded us, another married couple from the States and an English girl into his car for our tour. He showed us the hedgerows, he showed us the rebuilt farmhouses, he took us to La Pointe du Hoc, or rather to the museum a long walk from the Nazi gun emplacement atop that very tall and very steep cliff climbed by Army Rangers on June 6, 1944. Are you at all surprised by that date?

I pleaded my Parkinson's and stayed behind at the museum while the others trooped down to the old battery. The museum displayed one of the grappling hooks fired by the Rangers at the Germans up top. They came back, icicles dripping from their faces (well, close enough). On to the next stop, **Omaha Beach**.

This excursion was my idea, and Rosy had gamely gone along. Why did I ask to see Normandy and that particular stretch of sand? I have no personal connection with it; during World War II, my daddy swabbed decks on a troop transport in the Pacific. He didn't even join up till the day *after* D-Day. Still, I felt an obligation ... a debt. For on June 6, 1944 there was no more important piece of real estate on this planet than that before us.



(It was, indeed, cold – chilly morning that day, too. Now, it was high tide. The invaders came ashore when the tide was out, the better to see the jacks-like steel obstacles Rommel had spread over this beach. Standing on the bluff where, that day, German guns had wreaked havoc on the G.I.s below, I remembered that super-familiar bit of film about Omaha Beach: the silhouettes of three

soldiers running past a tank trap; the third one falls, *whap*. I thought of the savage fight caught in *Saving Private Ryan*; murder upon murder upon murder. Down below, frothy

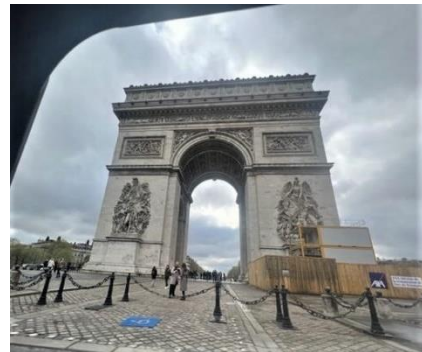
waves expended themselves repeatedly upon the sand. I couldn't imagine how I would have behaved if sent ashore onto that beach.)

Francois then took us to the nearby American cemetery. I wouldn't let the cold stop me now. All those brilliant white crosses ... the same hue as the Venus de Milo. Rows and rows of them, crosses and a few Stars of David (most of the Jewish dead were taken home for burial). Three of the stones bore gold letters; the men beneath won the Congressional Medal of Honor. While we were there, cemetery staff lowered two flags, while a recording of "Taps" played. All those fathers ... their generation is passing now, ordinary kids who did so much for the USA and for the very concept of civilization. I felt and feel more than just pride in them. I felt inspired. Francois told us that each gravestone's inscription faces west, towards America.

That night we packed. Tomorrow, we'd be leaving Paris. Or so we thought.

PARIS. April 9, 2022.

The concierge at our hotel may well have given us a funny look as we checked out the next morning. I didn't notice. I do know that it was an emotional taxi ride to the train station. I felt I was saying goodbye forever to the City of Lights, and being taken through parts of Paris no tourist would be likely to see. We passed a "Laboratoire" with a line of street people queued outside, huddling against the chill, waiting to get tested or – alas – to sell blood. The same rundown avenue was lined with tiny bridal shops, white-clad mannequins in every window, eying the sidewalk. It was painfully seedy.



We made it to the station, pausing to photograph the giraffe (!) sculptures at the entrance. Inside the cold terminal we found the Eurostar ticket line ... and found out the embarrassing truth. Our train wouldn't leave for 24 hours. We'd misread the tickets. We were a day early.

The ticketmaster said we *could* take the train today, but, our reservations being for tomorrow, we'd have to find a hotel room, and lose the room here in Paris we'd already paid for ... Oh good grief! We pulled our luggage out to the street, past the giraffes, and across to a posh crepe shop, where we contemplated our fate. Stuck in Paris for an extra day! The horror!

Always affirmative, forever positive, Rosy saved the day. She checked with our hotel; yes, we could get our room back. The staff wondered why we'd left so early. While chowing down on her crepe, she unfolded a Paris map. What *hadn't* we seen that we wanted to? She found the items on the map – the Arc du Triomphe ... the Moulin Rouge ... the rebuilt Notre Dame "Spire" ... The ride might



cost a bit, she said, but we can ask the cab driver to take us by those sites on our way back to the hotel!

And so we did. We paused outside of the windmill-bedecked Moulin Rouge so *la belle* could get a picture. We risked the world-renowned roundabout rounding about the Arc du Triomphe – I still didn't get a good look at it, though Rosy scored some excellent pictures. Our driver took us down the Champs d'Alysee, naming the enormous government buildings we passed – the American embassy is bigger than the White House! As for the Spire, currently under construction, it was surrounded by scaffolding.

It was a grand tour. When we got back to our once-and-future hotel and checked in – delayed by a pushy American who took twenty minutes of the desk clerk's time asking for directions (quote: "I was here first!") – I said we'd be leaving the next day. "Are you sure?" asked the clerk.

We didn't wander far that afternoon – just checked out a couple of the many chocolatiers in the neighborhood. At dinner that night I ate my first *escargot*. Chewy!



FRANCE. April 10, 2022.

Homer. Le Vagenende. Le Buci. Le Garde Manger. Café de la comédie. Le Castel. La Crème de Paris: some of the Paris cafes where we dined. Excellent steak at Le Buci.

One of the few disappointments on this trip was the scotching of my hope to see the White Cliffs of Dover. Our travel agent had secured a private compartment for us on the ferry across the English Channel, but shortly before our leave-taking, she found that the boat wasn't running. Instead we would rely on **the Chunnel**. Opened in 1994, dreamt of since 1802, the tunnel beneath the English Channel runs >31 miles, connecting France with England. Father-in-law Joe Green was excited for us.

As our Eurostar zoomed across western France, I gazed out at the French countryside and thought back on the last week. A lot to it! Every day a life-changer, and yet, so much we hadn't

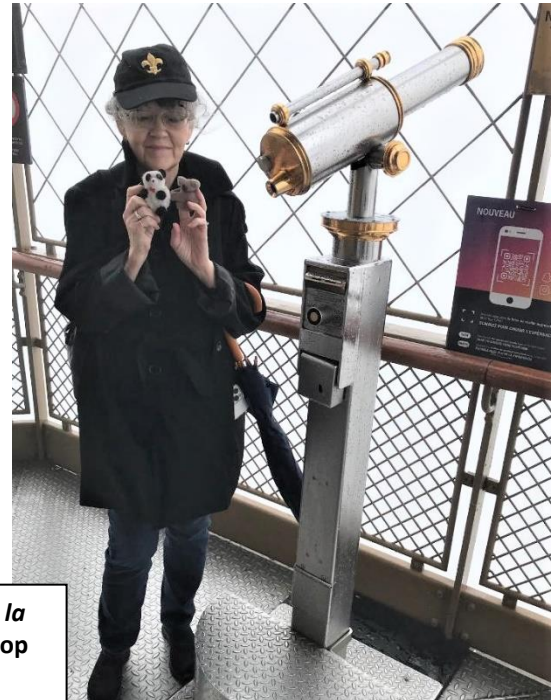
seen, hadn't done. Would this be our only chance at France? Time will tell. Ahead, the U.K., England, London ... and a lot more.

Suddenly the windows went black.

TO BE CONTINUED.

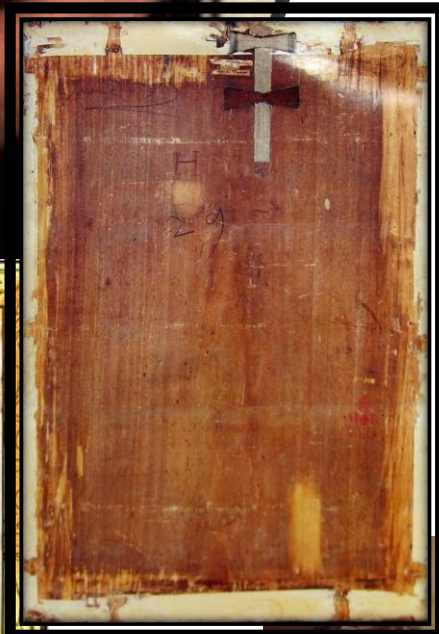
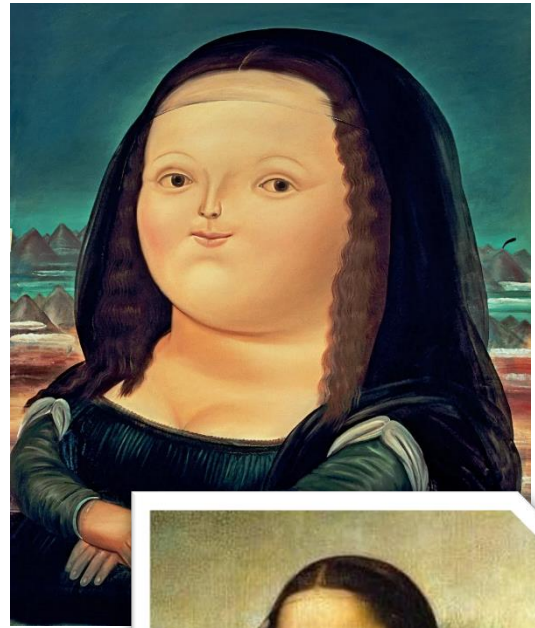
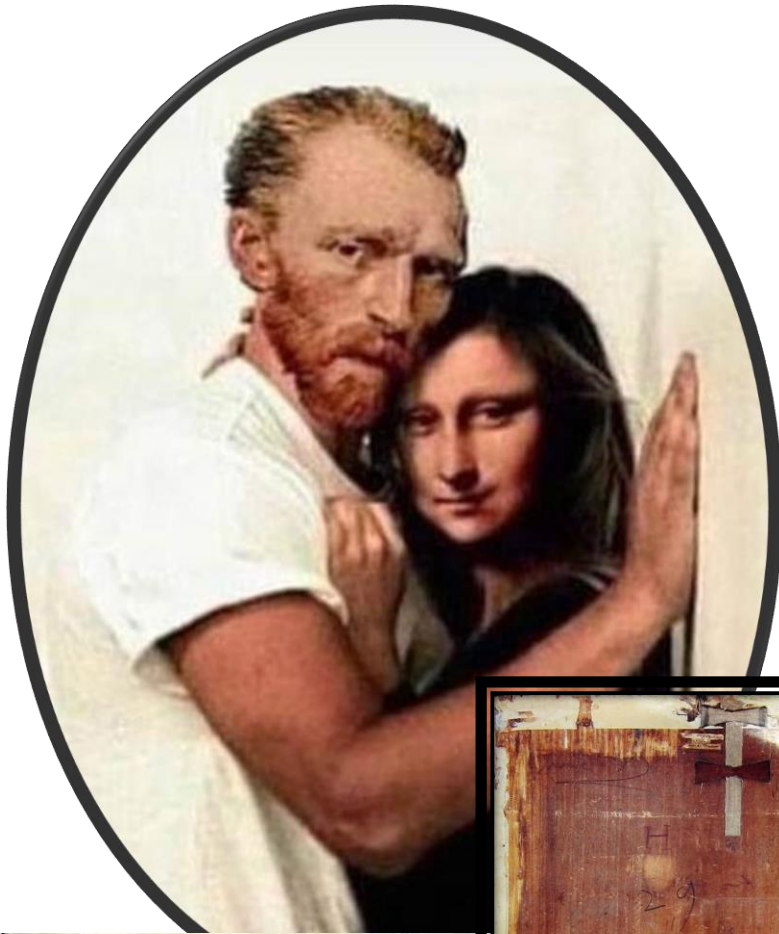


At a chocolate shop – *la belle* with the boys atop the Eiffel.



A Louvre gallery – an American paparazzi





Above center: the *back of the Mona Lisa*.