

A MERRY MIX: PROVENCE, THE FRENCH RIVIERA & EDINBURGH

Fine Art Connoisseur’s 10th annual adventure abroad was never going to be ordinary, given its surprising mix of destinations – Provence, the French Riviera, and Edinburgh. But thanks to our great travelers, great planning, and great weather, it all worked out brilliantly, and then some. Conceived by FAC publisher Eric Rhoads, the tour program has been going strong for an entire decade, blending superb art and architecture with five-star comforts and a delightfully cohesive group of travelers who share with each other their passion for beauty, quality, and learning.

Upon our arrival in each place, I presented an illustrated lecture that set our upcoming sites (and their artworks) into historical context so they would make sense when we finally got there. The program included all breakfasts and most lunches and suppers: we are pretty sure everyone gained at least five pounds, as the meals were always delicious and plentiful. And our logistics proved remarkably easy, thanks in part to speedy motor coaches and a direct flight from Nice to Edinburgh.

THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

To be precise, the French adventure actually began on October 8, when Eric Rhoads gathered a small group of fellow artists to spend three nights at the legendary hotel Les Colombes d’Or in the pretty Provencal hilltop

town of Saint Paul-de-Vence. Their time there centered on painting the scenic landscape and picturesque architecture, facilitated by the local artist Elisa Musson and her husband, Peter, and also the sculptor Remi Pesce.

The rest of us got into tour mode on October 11, when we gathered at Domaine de Manville, an elegant hotel on an estate featuring olive groves, a golf course, and stirring views of the ruined hilltop castle of Les Baux-de-Provence. Our many repeat travelers warmly welcomed the “newbies” during a reception on the patio and then a supper in the conservatory. The next day began with a tour of the Cloître et Cliniques de Saint-Paul de Mausole, just outside the town of Saint-Rémy. This is the asylum (still used) where Vincent Van Gogh was confined after his ear-cutting episode. In fact, the artist was permitted to go out and paint the countryside during the day, so we spent considerable time comparing reproductions of his pictures to the actual olive groves and rugged hillsides around us. In downtown Saint-Rémy we explored the small but choice Musée Estrine, then headed to the larger town of Arles, where evidence of Van Gogh’s time there was brought to life by our professional guides. A particular highlight was the Fondation Vincent Van Gogh, which had borrowed back several paintings by the Dutch master.

The next day found us in L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, a charming town that hums on Sunday mornings with a giant market selling everything from

Painting on the terrace of Elisa and Peter Musson overlooking Saint Paul-de-Vence (left to right: Elisa Musson, Rick Dickinson, Eric Rhoads) ■ Gabriel Haigazian (at the wheel), Peter Trippi, and Howard Wise rely on a golf cart to get them around the Domaine de Manville property. ■ The ruined castle of Les Baux-de-Provence was visible from the Domaine de Manville; photo: Elaine Gaskell deSpaelberch





(L-R) Bob Wrathall explores a grove of olive trees near Vincent Van Gogh's asylum. ■ Avignon's Papal Palace seen through a glass of rosé wine — Provence's favorite beverage ■ Prof. Mary Flanagan leads us through the Dora Maar House. ■ The costume designer Jeffrey Wirsing welcomes the group to his home in Beaucaire.

antiques and fresh food to clothing and jewelry. Having shopped ourselves out, we traveled to the city of Avignon, where the enormous, semi-ruinous Papal Palace hints at the luxuries enjoyed by the popes when they reigned here during the Middle Ages. Finishing out the day was the Musée Angladon, which has superb paintings and drawings collected by the once-famous couturier Jacques Doucet — especially a stunning Modigliani portrait.

Monday, October 14 saw us covering a lot of ground, all of it memorable. We started at the Museum of Corkscrews, assembled by the owner of a vineyard near the hilltop village of Ménerbes. Leave it to a French wine lover to remind us that even a lowly bottle opener can be adorned enough to become a work of art. Soon we headed uphill to the former home of Dora Maar, best known as one of Picasso's muses but also a gifted (surrealist) artist in her own right. The house has been refurbished by the Texas patron Nancy Brown Negley and is now operated by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which welcomes artists and other creatives to work there. We were shown its impressive public rooms and gardens by a former resident, Prof. Mary Flanagan of Dartmouth College, whose enthusiasm was infectious. Also in this charming town is the studio house once occupied by the American painter Jane Eakin, now a museum exhibiting her art. After a stop "at home," we headed to Beaucaire on the Rhône River, where the New York-based costume designer Jeffrey Wirsing hosted us for a sunset reception on his huge terrace overlooking the town's castle and red-tiled roofs. Then we headed back to Les Baux-de-Provence; there a disused limestone quarry has been ingeniously converted into a giant projection room called the Carrières des Lumières. Armed with champagne and canapés, we wandered its cavernous halls watching a thrillingly produced and scored reverie on Van Gogh's art.

Alas, the next day saw us depart the Domaine de Manville, but we were rewarded with a full day in the pretty city of Aix-en-Provence. After visiting the unusually historic Cathedral Saint-Sauveur, we

explored the rich collections of the Musée Granet, then the studio of the post-impressionist master Paul Cézanne, who spent most of his life in Aix. Before leaving town, our travelers gazed out from a hillside park toward Mont Sainte-Victoire, the massive mountain painted by Cézanne so often. Then it was on to our next base of operations, Nice, which is essentially the capital of the Riviera. Our new home away from home was the historic Hotel Le Negresco, renowned for its enormous collection of 20th-century art displayed frame-to-frame in every possible hallway and public space.

Upon awakening in sunny Nice, we strolled along the sparkling Mediterranean and into the city's picturesque historic center, then traveled uphill to see two large museums commemorating modernist masters who once lived on the Côte d'Azur: Henri Matisse and Marc Chagall. We closed the day with a festive supper at Le Galet, a restaurant that is literally on the beach.

There's no point in visiting the Riviera without seeing how the other half lives, so the next day saw us making the short scenic drive to St. Jean Cap Ferrat, one of the most expensive neighborhoods on earth. We glimpsed its fabulousness by touring the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild, with its superb gardens overlooking the sea, then the Villa Grecque Kerylos in the next town over, Beaulieu sur Mer. Both mansions were constructed during the Belle Epoque by extremely rich collectors who spared no expense, though in distinctive ways. That night, we lived like billionaires by hitting the Casino de Monte Carlo; there we enjoyed an outstanding meal in its Salon Rose, then explored its famous salons and gaming rooms on our own.

Our final day in France was spent on the other (western) side of Nice. First up was Les Collettes, the house in Cagnes-sur-Mer where the impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir spent his final years.



The Carrières des Lumières features an immersive sound-and-light show about Vincent Van Gogh. ■ Professional guide Thibault Martin-Battisti notes a detail in Ingres's *Jupiter and Thetis* at the Musée Granet in Aix. ■ Exploring Paul Cézanne's studio ■ In Nice, the Hotel Le Negresco became our home away from home.



(TOP ROW L-R) Eric and Laurie Rhoads at the Casino de Monte Carlo ■ Discussing Pierre-Auguste Renoir's studio ■ Saint Paul-de-Vence ■ At Matisse's Rosary Chapel ■ (SECOND ROW L-R) Sheonagh Martin (in red) introduces the history of Edinburgh's Georgian House. ■ At Holyrood Palace ■ Bob and Charla Nelson prepare to board the Royal Yacht Britannia. ■ Director Celia Joicey welcomes Peter Trippi and Eric Rhoads to the Dovecot Tapestry Studio. ■ (THIRD ROW L-R) John Mackie points out highlights in his decorative arts sale at Lyon & Turnbull. ■ A pipe and drum corps appeared out of the darkness at Gosford House. ■ On the grand staircase at Gosford House ■ The banqueting hall at Gosford House ■ (FOURTH ROW L-R) Emperor/Prime Minister/Ambassador Roger Rossi with a bagpiper at Gosford House ■ Peter Trippi and Barbara Lynn Pedersen on Jeffrey Wirsing's terrace ■ Mary Burrichter on a terrace overlooking Villefranche-sur-Mer ■ At the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild

We moved on to Saint Paul-de-Vence, whose pretty cobblestoned streets beg to be walked, then to the town's chief artistic attraction, the Fondation Maeght. Created by a married art-dealing couple from Paris, this is an ideal place to see world-class modern art, displayed indoors and out. Our final stop was at the small but luminous Rosary Chapel, designed by Matisse in his old age as an expression of his Catholic faith.

SCOTLAND'S CAPITAL

Saturday, October 19 was action-packed. Many in the group had decided to journey with us to Edinburgh — not exactly a logical follow-on to sunny,

balmy southern France. Fortunately, the *Fine Art Connoisseur* team had anticipated the imminent change in climate by providing all travelers (in both countries) with snazzy fleece vests emblazoned with our official logo. These came in handy in Scotland, where the weather was dry but brisk. We checked into Edinburgh's leading hotel, the Balmoral, which looks regally over Princes Street Gardens and across to the castle. We eased into Scottish culture by attending a festive reception and tour at the magnificent 18th-century Georgian House, which stands on the city's most prestigious square and is operated by the National Trust for Scotland.

The next morning started early with private access to Holyrood Palace, where Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II spends time every summer.



(TOP ROW L-R) At the Casino de Monte Carlo ■ Libby and Dan Whipple with a bagpiper at Gosford House ■ Jill Stoliker ■ Barbara and Charlie Robinson ■ (BOTTOM ROW L-R) Kathy Jackson and Peter Vig ■ Linda and Tom Garden ■ Claudia Clayton and Bob Wrathall ■ David Orcutt enjoys fish and chips in Edinburgh.

After discovering its remarkable history — with frequent mentions of Mary, Queen of Scots — we enjoyed a fascinating exhibition at the adjacent Queen’s Gallery highlighting the Royal Family’s links with the Romanovs of Russia. After visiting Canongate Kirk (where the Queen worships) and Edinburgh Castle, we were piped aboard the Royal Yacht Britannia. This is the sleek vessel on which Her Majesty once traveled the world; now commoners like us can explore every deck with a glass of champagne in hand.

On Monday morning, October 21, we delved into tapestry weaving, something many of our travelers had never witnessed. Once a public swimming pool, the Dovecot Tapestry Studio is now a leading venue for creating these complicated textiles. Here we were welcomed by director Celia Joicey and oriented by the American weaver Rudy Richardson and staff educator David Haslam. It was a quick walk over to the National Museum of Scotland, where research fellow Rosie Waine introduced the exhibition *Wild and Majestic: Romantic Visions of Scotland*, which explained — among many other things — why Scots are so closely identified with tartan. Then it was off to the auction house Lyon & Turnbull, where expert John Mackie told us about his imminent sale of Scottish decorative arts before we perused its lots. The day ended with an unforgettable gala at Gosford House, a historic palace east of Edinburgh owned by the Earls of Wemyss and March. Here we were (bag)piped in for a champagne reception and tour of the art collection before we feasted in the enormous banquet hall. After dessert we shivered on the terrace as an eight-person pipe and drum corps magically emerged from the darkness, skirling “Scotland the Brave” and other classic anthems before vanishing again.

Our final day together presented a different side of Edinburgh. Much time was devoted to the Arts & Crafts muralist Phoebe Anne Traquair; we were thrilled to see her two masterpieces, the Song School of St. Mary’s

(Anglican) Cathedral, and the Mansfield Place Church. We moved on to the National Portrait Gallery, which has not only great artworks but also another spectacularly muraled hall, and finally to the Fine Art Society, a prestigious commercial art gallery that was exhibiting paintings by the Scottish icon John Byrne.

MORE TO COME

As always, it was bittersweet to part with friends old and new. This was an exceptionally merry group, their mood surely lightened by our peerless travel coordinator, Gabriel Haigazian (CTP Group, California), and his colleague Howard Wise.

Our next trip, in September 2020 — the 11th annual — will explore Vienna and Berlin, with a post-trip to Dresden. These cities are synonymous with great art, architecture, and music, so we expect to have a marvelous time. For details, please contact Gabriel Haigazian via 818.444.2700 or gabriel@thectpgroup.com. Our official website, finearttrip.com, will be active in mid-January. ●

PETER TRIPPI is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.