

LISLE

Philip Thicknesse (1719–1792)

Lisle, 8 June 1766

Notwithstanding the many mortifications I met with at my first entering this city, I have continued in it a week. It is certainly a well-built town, and the grand place is a fine square. There are at this time ten thousand troops doing duty in Lisle, and the guards, both horse and foot, are relieved every morning in this square, who make a fine appearance; nor can the excellence of their discipline and the clean and soldier-like appearance of the French troops in general be too much admired; their clothing, which is chiefly white, is perfectly clean; and yet there men have but five sols per day subsistence.

Here is also an indifferent theatre, but some good comic actors. Hackney coaches ply here as in London, at half the price, and much better voitures. It is astonishing how universal the fashion is in France to dress the head; scarce a man, woman, or child above the degree of the meanest peasants but have their hair dressed and powdered in the highest taste of the country. I am apt to think the taking of snuff, the powdering of the hair, and the great attention shown by all degrees of people in France to adorn their persons is a piece of state policy to prevent their employing their intellectual faculties; and yet, with all this, the Flanderkins are very dirty people, and seem almost strangers to sentiment or delicacy. A girl of twelve years of age will do that business in the public street here that one of the same age in England would be ashamed to own she did in private! And some still older. An innocent, modest, blushing country girl is not to be seen in this part of France. Here are a great number of very opulent tradesmen, but their goods are not exposed as with us. I bought a waistcoat of a shopkeeper who, I was well-assured, could speak English perfectly, but who pretended not to understand a single word; by this artifice they learn your sentiments, if you have a friend with you, relative to what you are in treaty for, and regulate their price accordingly. These Flanderkins are very artful and sharp in their dealings, and you may, without offence, offer them a third less than they demand; and, perhaps, pay dear even then.

Having mentioned the general snuff-taking here, I cannot help observing how very abominable this custom is; it is at best an indelicate one; but the middling people, who do not change their handkerchiefs so often as they should, are continually exhibiting a filthy one in your face in order to find out a vacant place in it to apply to their nose, without considering how much they offend the eye of every person they come near who are unused to such sights; and considering how very little they regard cleanliness even in cooking, and how often the snuff-box and handkerchief are handled by cook and scullion, I doubt nothing is eaten in this country that has not a little of the tincture of tobacco in it. But remember this is French Flanders, not France; and I hope I shall meet with better things as I approach nearer to the capital, for which town I set out to-morrow, and from whence you shall hear farther from

Philip Thicknesse *Observations on the Customs and Manners of the French Nation* (1766):24–27.