

PARIS

Philip Thicknesse (1719–1792)

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After having seen, among the great variety of what is said to be worthy of attention, those things which most excited my curiosity, I am become tired of Paris and have sallied out of town several times in search of a house or lodging in the neighbouring towns, and yesterday fixed upon one at Saint Germain's; but before I say any thing of that town, I will give you some account of Paris.

It is certainly, as I told you before, much inferior to London in size and beauty, yet almost every street furnishes either a church, a convent, or something worthy of attention. The place Victoire is a small circus, and in the center thereof is a fine statue of Louis XIV; indeed neither this circus nor any of the squares in Paris are equal in size or beauty to the smallest that adorn the environs of the city of London. The Luxembourg and Tulleries gardens are, indeed, very fine, as gardens, but not so pleasing as Saint James' and Hyde Park. Opposite the Tulleries garden, in the center of a square that is not yet built, is a very fine equestrian statue of the present King, who has ornamented one side of this square with a building, or rather façade, that cannot be too much admired and, perhaps, is not inferior, either in design or execution, to any edifice, either ancient or modern. Everything in Paris has been so often and so much better described than it is in my power to do that it would be absurd in me to attempt giving you an exact description of anything; nor have I seen a quarter part of what a stranger is told they must see. The manufacture at the Gobelins is one thing, however, that gave me great delight, and what added to it was that I found the principal conductor of it an Englishman, whose apartments, ornamented with this work and his own ingenious pencil, contributed greatly to the pleasure I received. Indeed the sister arts seem to dwell with him, and his musical family, in that royal palace; and the execution of this inimitable art of painting in worsteds to such a degree of perfection is well worthy of the sanction of a King of France. There is a whole length of Louis XIV, finely executed, in this manufacture. A small fire-screen, with a little boy feeding a hen and chickens, was sixteen guineas price; indeed I wondered at the cheapness of it, and how a work (the progress of which is so slow) could be sold at so cheap a rate.

I must now mention a beauty which Paris has that London has not; Paris being walled in, the ramparts more than half round the whole city are nobly adorned with four rows of stately trees, in the center of which is a broad road for coaches, and on each side very fine shady walks. Upon these ramparts are to be seen, every fine evening, many of the people of fashion in their coaches, which are often gaudy, but oftener truly elegant and painted in a most exquisite manner; not with arms, crests, or initial letters, but with a variety of pastoral scenes. On the margin of these walls are a great number of coffee-houses and places of public entertainment, where are exhibited a variety of amusements, something in the way of Bartholomew Fair, but, you may imagine, better executed by a people whose characteristic it is to laugh and be merry. The coffee-houses etc. are decorated with a great deal of eye-trap, and in most of them are harlots and musicians; and there the bourgeois, with their wives and children, enjoy a little fresh air and the view of the adjacent country, which is to be seen in great variety from the different parts of these ramparts. The English are apt to think the French are very poor, but if fine houses, expensive furniture, superb equipages, and a great number of servants are proofs to the contrary, it is not so. There are certainly more coaches in Paris than in London and, I believe, more inhabitants; but certainly London is more than one third larger.

The river Seine makes but a poor figure at Paris when put in competition with the Thames; but when the great distance it is from the main ocean is considered, and the many leagues its fantastic course takes to disembody itself, it must be considered a wonderful and noble river. It is, for instance, but twelve miles from Paris to Saint Germain; yet to go by water to this town, it is near thirty; and in this little distance are between twenty and thirty fertile islands. The river is continually extending her arms to embrace these jewels that add so much to her beauty. The banks are hard and firm on each side, and are adorned with a great number of houses, and some villages. Two leagues from Paris upon the banks of this river is Saint Cloud, where the Duke of Orleans has a noble seat, and where, under his protection, the porcelain manufacture is carried on and brought to an exquisite degree of perfection. After being shown the various progress of this work, I thought myself under a necessity of taking a small specimen of it, and the cheapest thing I could find was a small salad bowl, which, however, cost me a guinea; here I was shown three small pieces of ornamental china for a chimney piece that came to four thousand livres. From this seat you have a fine view of Paris, the Bois de Bolloigne, and the beautiful line of beauty (according to Mr. Hogarth) that the river Seine exhibits. The Duke of Orleans' park and gardens are open to everybody, and upon Sundays in fine weather it is incredible what numbers of people come down to recreate themselves there by water from Paris. Greenwich Park is not so crowded on holidays, as the Duke of Orleans park is every Sunday during the summer; but

none of the French nobility shut up themselves and their houses as the English do. In the many years I have lived in and near London, I could never see Lord Burlington's gardens, though I had frequently a ticket. In France the appearance of a gentleman, and particularly a stranger, is a ticket to go anywhere, and ought to be a sufficient tie to everyone not to abuse the confidence reposed in him. Scribbling upon the windows and the like is not common in France; I do not recollect that I have once seen any writing upon the windows of the public inns but what was done by the pencil of an English hand. Indeed I saw at every inn I stopped upon the road to Paris a certain Irish Peer's portrait, as perfectly drawn in France as it has been in England, with the name of the painter at full length.

Philip Thicknesse *Observations on the Customs and Manners of the French Nation* (1766):32–37.