

## Italy Through French Eyes

### Content:

*Siena, the fiery city, is a kiss in a mystical smile.*  
Andrè Suarès, in *Siena, The Beloved One*

Italy has for several centuries been the objet of admiration and source of inspiration for novels, essays, poems and paintings by French artists. French Renaissance offers the poems of Joachim du Bellay singing the ruins of Rome in his *Antiquities*. Still in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Michel de Montaigne writes essayistic reflections on Italian customs, languages and political organization, adding attentive remarks about the women he sees in the cities he visits. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is especially prolific. In an exoticizing move, in an era in which the French cast their gaze in the Orient, French artists look at Italy as a mysterious and attractive land to be conquered by their pen and their brush. Like Jerusalem, Cyprus and other somewhat mystical and Eastern destinations, cities such as Rome, Florence, Naples and Venice enter the circuit of great journeys which are recorded in copious journals and letters.

Alexandre Dumas, creator of the Four Musketeers, establishes parallels between literature and painting by exclaiming: “Michelangelo is the Dante of Italian painting, Titian, its Ariosto.” François René de Chateaubriand, a leading figure of French Romanticism, evokes the magic he finds in buildings, sculptures and manuscripts in Italy in his poetic work *Mémoires d’Outre-Tombe* and in his extensive travel narrative. Stendhal’s Italian writings and their vertigos of excess inspired what in medical circles is known as “Stendhal syndrome.” For him, more than museums, galleries and relics he sees in Italy, it is the contact he establishes with the people he meets that make Italy “his.” Venice is the stage for a love affair between Alfred de Musset and George Sand; at least four books are the literary result of this eventually unhappy story. Théophile Gautier, an exponent of “art for art’s sake,” confronts the Italy he had imagined by reading Byron and Stendhal with the Italy he encounters. Admirer of Michelangelo, Titian and Raphael, Gautier organizes his trip around his artistic impressions, and recognizes that works such as Leonardo’s fresco *Cena* give him “new aesthetic perspectives.” André Suarès creates the character of the Condottière and registers his travel impressions with passion and detail. To Siena, nicknamed “The Beloved One,” he dedicates a whole volume, where his admiration is clear: “Siena love, Siena harmony!” Of the “sweet” city, he asks, “Which city is more of a woman than Siena?” Sade, Proust, Aragon (who tries to commit suicide in Venice in 1928) and many others visit Italy, and this trip marks their work, in one way or another. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, French writers such as Philippe Sollers still find in their experience of Italian landscapes and people a source for their writing.

In painting, Italian travels are not less important. Fragonard and Chassériau, chief exponents of French Orientalist painting, also depict the colors, hues and textures they see in Italy. Géricault comes to Italy to experience ancient and Renaissance art, and this 1816 visit is pivotal in his life and the development of his Romantic style. And there is always the journey to Italy that never happened and which could have profoundly altered

the history of Western art, that of Delacroix. But the relationship between Italy and France went both ways: one of the reasons why the Gothic art in Siena is different from that of rival Florence is that Duccio di Buoninsegna spent time in France and brought back the French Gothic, while the Florentine style was Latin and Roman.

Italian landscapes fuel the poetic imagination of innumerable French artists, whose observations many times betray an anthropological and colonialist impulse. But for many, their journey in Italy is not only an artistic but also a personal and spiritual one, echoing what Goethe recognizes about his time in Rome: “I first found myself, for the first time I achieved inner harmony...” However, in the rich history of French responses to Italy, the presence of Napoleon cannot be overlooked, as it left much more than a passing impression. Unlike the artists, Napoleon thought there were other, more effective ways of conquering Italy, and indeed became its emperor. He opened the Jewish ghettos in Italy, but in Venice he will forever be remembered as the one who humiliated the Doge, destroyed half of the churches of the city, created “rio terras” by landfilling several canals, and generally destroyed, pillaged and brutally killed.

This course will focus on these different literary and pictographic responses to Italy. The poetry, narrative and painting of French artists will guide our own exploration of the Italy we encounter. Our fresh view of mountains, buildings, piazzas, churches, sculptures and paintings will be confronted with the gaze of the past. This process will be registered in a daily written journal, but the artistically inclined among us will have an opportunity to express themselves through other media as well.

**Objectives:**

- Learn about Italian history, literature and art.
- Experience the places, the settings and the people of Italy.
- Be familiar with the travel narratives about Italy by different French writers.
- Also be introduced to poetic and creative texts in which Italy is the setting, the source or pre-text.
- Become familiar with a number of French painters whose work was marked by a stay in Italy.
- Learn about France’s occupation of Italy and the effects of Napoleon’s campaign.
- Study the different exchanges between France and Italy: in art, literature, politics.
- Develop a renewed interest for other cultures.
- Appreciate poetry and art.
- Practice and improve writing skills.
- Strengthen critical and reading skills.
- Have fun while doing all of the above.

**Suggested Excursions and Activities:**

- 1) Accademia dell'Arte in Venice: besides an array of Italian art, it exhibits one or two Fragonards and other French painters.
- 2) Fortuny Museum in Venice—offers a number of French paintings.
- 3) Contrada museums in Siena, maybe the Oca (Goose) one in the Terzo di Camollia.
- 4) A contrada show and/or dinner.
- 5) Visit to the ghetto in Venice.
- 6) Art class at the Atelier Tintoretto in Venice.
- 7) Museum of the Opera del Duomo in Florence.
- 8) Institute Français in Florence.
- 9) Bardi Chapel in Florence—for Giotto's Florentine Gothic.
- 10) Uffizzi in Florence—see Simone Martini's *Annunciation* in Room 3 for example of Sienese Gothic style.
- 11) In Florence, at the Uffizzi, give special attention to Room 2, the room with the enthroned Madonnas by Giotto, Duccio and Cimabue. Facing one another, these altar-pieces illustrate the stylistic differences developed in the art of master (Cimabue) and pupil (Giotto), and between Florentines and Sienese.
- 12) Room 28 at the Uffizzi for Titian's nudes.
- 13) Synagogue of Florence—built in 1874, after the ghetto was opened by Napoleon in 1848 and destroyed soon after.
- 14) Santa Croce—largest Franciscan basilica in Italy, about which Stendhal wrote: "I had attained to that supreme degree of sensibility where the divine intimations of art merge with the impassioned sensuality of emotion. As I emerged from the port of Santa Croce, I was seized with a fierce palpitation of the heart; I walked in constant fear of falling to the ground."
- 15) Visit to a triumphal arch in the former Roman forum in Florence. The site allows for a synchronic view of Italian history in one architectural piece. The arch bears the inscription: "Da secolare squalore/A vita nuova restituita" ("From centuries of squalor/A new life restituted"). Three different epochs are condensed in this inscription and place: the arch as motif of Roman power (ancient Rome), the Jewish ghetto which once stood there and which is referenced by the "squalor" in the inscription, and the date of 1865, in Roman numerals, which marks the new historical moment in which the square—metonymically standing for Florence—is the capital of the new united Italy. Furthermore, the inscription "vita nuova," instead of "nuova vita," also purposefully cites Dante.
- 16) Excursion to Padua and Verona?
- 17) Coliseum and ruins of Rome.

**Methodology:**

This course is in a format that combines some lectures with a seminar-style class, where in-class and out-of-class discussion, as well as collaborative work, are encouraged. My lectures will at various moments include the use of video, music, and illustrations. For images—paintings and illustrations—I will use Power Point, but will make much use of the museums and galleries we visit. Class discussions will be very important, and so will the observation of our surroundings in Italy: landscapes and people. Students will write very often and engage in guided writing exercises in different genres. Students will also have the chance to develop projects in other languages, such as photography, drawing and painting. Course culminates in an exhibit and/or anthology of student work.

**Evaluation:**

- 1) Reading and preparation of assigned material for each class
- 2) Participation in class discussions and other activities
- 3) 10-minute oral presentation
- 4) Journal on the readings and trips
- 5) 3-4-page essay on the readings and/or art works examined
- 6) Final 3-4-page personal travel narrative piece (instructor is flexible: might accept a poem, painting or drawing if contacted and convinced)

**Reading material:**

Required Texts:

Writing book?

A course-packet, probably in the form of a CD, with primary and secondary texts selected by the instructor and sent in advance by e-mail. Readings will be no longer than 10 pages. Texts will be selected mainly from the bibliography below.

Selected bibliography:

Aciman, André (org.) *Atlas Pocket Classics: Italy: Italian Journey; Rome, Naples, & Florence; Italian Hours*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Stendhal, Henry James. New York: Atlas & Co., 2008.

Broers, Michael. *The Napoleonic Empire in Italy, 1796-1814: Cultural Imperialism in a European Context?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Cecconi, Giovanni. *Il principe Napoleone in Toscana*. Roma: Tip. Delle Terme diocleziane, 1891.

Chateaubriand, François. *Travels in America and Italy*. New York: Applewood Books, 2007.

*From Trieste to the Venetian Lagoon with Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Howells, Beckford*. S.p.: G. Barbera, 1968.

Cuzin, Jean-Pierre. *Fragonard*. 5 Continents Editions, 2006.

Duggan, Christopher. *A Concise History of Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Dumas, Alexandre. *Impressions de voyage: le véloce*. Paris : Calmann Lévy, 1882.

Dumas, Alexandre. *Journeys with Dumas*. New York: Little, Brown, and Co, 1902.

Du Bellay, Joachim. *Antiquities of Rome*.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Voyages: Tome Second: Voyage en Orient: Egypte, Palestine, Asie Mineure, Constantinople, Grèce, Italie (1849-1851); Constantine, Tunis et Carthage (1858)* Paris: Société Les Belles Lettres, 1948.

Grancourt, Bergeret de. *Voyage d'Italie 1773-1774. Avec Les Dessins de Fragonard* S.p.: 1948.

Gautier, Théophile. *Journeys in Italy*. New York: Hutchinson, 1903.

Gide, André. *Journals, Vol. 2: 1914-1927*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Lamartine.

Montaigne, Michel de. *Montaigne's Travel journal*. Donald Murdoch Frame (org.). San Francisco : North Point Press, 1983.

Montaigne, Michel de. *Works, Comprising His Essays, Journey Into Italy, And Letters, With Notes From All The Commentators, Biographical And Bibliographical Notices, Etc: Vol. I*. Read Books, 2008.

Parks, Tim.

Rosenfeld, Daniel. (Editor), *European Painting and Sculpture Circa 1770 to 1937*. Museum: June 1992.

Sade, marquis de. *Voyage d'Italie, ou, Dissertations critiques, historiques et philosophiques sur les villes de Florence, Rome, Naples, Lorette et les routes adjacentes*

*à ces quatre villes ...* Paris : Fayard, 1995.

Spinosa, Atonio. *Napoleone, il flagello d'Italia: le invasioni, i saccheggi, gli inganni.* Milano: Mondadori, 2003.

Whitney, Wheelock. *Géricault in Italy.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Focillon, Henri. *The life of forms in art.* New York : Zone Books, 1989.

Focillon, Henri. *Piero della Francesca, avec 52 figures dans le texte et 28 planches hors texte.* Paris, A. Colin, 1952.

Focillon, Henri. *The art of the West in the Middle Ages. Edited and introduced by Jean Bony.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Gide, André, *André Gide-André Suarès Correspondance, 1908-1920.* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1963.

Greaves, A.E. *Stendhal's Italy: Themes of Political and Religious Satire.* Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995.

Musset, Alfred de. *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle.*

Ohnheiser, Danièle. *A Journey to Florence: with Dickens, James, Dante, Lord Byron, Stendhal.* Rome: Fratelli Palombi, 1999.

Proust, Marcel. *A la recherche du temps perdu.*

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Confessions.*

Sade, marquis de. *The Misfortunes of Virtue and Other Early Tales.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Schneid, Frederick. *Soldiers of Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy: Army, State and Society, 1800-1815.* X: Westview Press, 1995.

Stendhal. *Three Italian Chronicles.* New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991.

Sollers, Philippe. *Fête à Venise.*

Suarès, André. *Sienna la bien aimée.* Paris,:Émile-Paul frères, [1932].

Suarès, André. *Italie, Italie!* Paris: Émile-Paul frères, 1915.

Zangwill, Israel. *Napoleon in Italy*. S.I.: s.n., 1910?

Dante-Inferno—part on Florentine exiles in the ary refusing to let the Sienneses level the city and sow the ground with salt. Lots of anti-Siena propaganda in Dante.

Landscape of Tuscany: charm: in the paintings of the Renaissance, the background of rolling hills, cypresses, poplars and umbrella pines, the vieyards and winding lanes are often more beautiful than the nominally religious subject in the foreground. ..in Leonardo, each tree and rock takes an almost mystic significance.

**Schedule:**

**Week 1:**

*Introduction and Presentations.*

Reading: Aciman. “Introduction”

Excursion to Piazza and a few churches in Siena.

**Week 2:**

Reading: Du Bellay (poems from *Antiquities of Rome*)

Montaigne

Rousseau

Excursion to Rome

**Week 3:**

Reading: Chateaubriand

Lamartine (poems)

Excursion to the mountains and the Palazzo Publico in Siena.

**Week 4:**

Reading: Stendhal

Paintings by Fragonard

Excursion to Florence

**Week 5:**

Reading: Dumas

Paintings by Fragonard

**First installment of journal entries**

**Week 6:**

Reading: Gautier

Duggan: On Napoleon and Venice

Excursion to Venice

**Week 7:**

Reading: Focillon

Duggan and Schneid: On Napoleon  
Paintings by Chassériau  
**Oral Presentation**

**Week 8:**

Reading: Flaubert  
George Sand  
Musset (poem)  
Paintings by Géricault

**Week 9:**

Reading: Suarès  
Proust  
Excursions around Siena

**Week 10:**

Reading: Suarès  
Sollers  
Excursions around Siena  
**Final journal entries**

**Week 11:**

*Conclusion and Goodbyes*  
**Final essay**  
**Anthology of travel narratives**