

Victorians Abroad

Thinking about 19th Century Tourism from a 'Modern' Perspective:

An Illustration Project

Project Concept

Travelling and tourism play a significant part in modern life. We want to travel to learn about other cultures, and more solipsistically, about ourselves. Beyond that, we want our travels to be unique. We want to take the path less travelled, to go where no one else has, despite the many who live there already and have been travelling those paths for generations.

The notion of touring abroad and paving one's individual path through a foreign space is not a novel one. It became increasingly popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The end of the Napoleonic Wars meant that travel out of the UK was finally possible and the 'Grand Tour,' a set route through Europe, became popular and was undertaken by famous figures like Lord George Byron. Literature and art around this topic was prolific, circulated and consumed on a

vast scale - guide books like *Murray's* advised on where to tour, what to see and how to do it better than anyone else - a culture which may sound very familiar to us now. However, it must be noted that the Grand Tour was often limited to the wealthy, especially wealthy men, and often concerned a fascination in the exotic or the desolate, the idea of a past waiting to be awakened by a travelling English influence.

Through my own art, I want to explore these tendencies and how we might relate to them today, to evoke questions of why we travel, what we attempt to prove by travelling, and what ideas of history, myth or a lost past we may be projecting onto spaces which exist with us in the present day.

Framing a lost past in the present



Lord George Byron contemplating the Colosseum in Rome
by Arthur Willmore or James Tibbets Willmore, British Library

*'O Rome! my country! city of the
soul!
The orphans of the heart must
turn to thee,
Lone mother of dead empires!
... dost thou flow,
Old Tiber! through a marble
wilderness?
Rise, with thy yellow waves, and
mantle her distress!'*

Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

L O R D B Y R O N ' S G R A N D T O U R

In Willmore's painting, the solitary traveller Byron is pictured ruminating on the dilapidated ruins of the Colosseum before him, and on the loss of the Roman Empire. Byron's poem 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' suggests where his fascination in travelling lies: he dubs Rome, 'the Niobe of Nations' likening the city to a childless mother of mythology who turned to stone after losing her children. Admiring the woman's desolate state, he invites the river Tiber to highlight and 'mantle her distress'.

R O M A N T I S I N G D E C A Y

*'Bewailers for their Italy enchained,
And how they called her childless among
mothers,
Widow of empires, ay, and scarce refrained
Cursing her beauty to her face, as brothers
Might a shamed sister's...'*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Casa Guidi Windows*

In these lines, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a poet living in Italy at a time of political and economic crisis, instead focuses on the present and future while denouncing Byron's romanticisation of lost empires. Browning's 'Casa Guidi Windows' questions this romanticised narrative of maternal fragility and loss, of a 'widow of empires.' These words inspired me to similarly question this habit and fascination with framing a lost past. What can pondering in front of ruins do, and why does Byron (or why do any of us) insist on doing so?

ILLUSTRATING AN IDEA ARTISTIC INSPIRATIONS

Ideas for my own illustration were largely inspired by contemporary works which capture the culture of Victorian tourism. Many feature desolate ruins in the distance which an individual or a group of English tourists stand before. Again, travel print culture is central; in Carl Spitzweg's painting, the tourists are glued to their guidebooks.

Below is a commissioned portrait of a Grand Tourist by Pompeo Batoni. It is one of many capturing how travellers wished to appear to the society around them.

I was most inspired by a satirical Punch illustration which also depicts a family of tourists. They are just as devoted to their copies of *Murray's* and seem rather out of place. Most striking are the signatures

Carl Spitzweg, *English Tourists in the Roman 'Campagna'* c. 1835 – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

Pompeo Batoni, *Francis Basset, 1st Baron of Dunstanville* 1778 - Museo del Prado



On the Grand Tour, Punch Magazine, (19 October 1872)

which past tourists have etched into the ancient statues, along with the illustration's caption: *'O Ma dear, O Papa! Do look! Isn't this charming? Isn't it delightful? Only fancy - the Bragginton Smiths were here last month!'*

The interest in visiting a foreign place seems to lie in the idea of asserting oneself into it, and (like the Bragginton Smiths) asserting one's wealth and superiority back home. Tourism is a performative practice, and this comic fundamentally begs us to question why we tour in the first place.

I wanted to replicate such questions in my own work:

MY ILLUSTRATION: NIOBE



MY ILLUSTRATION

Niobe

‘mantle her distress!’

‘The Niobe of nations! there she stands,

Childless and crownless, in her voiceless woe;

An empty urn within her withered hands,

Whose holy dust was scattered long ago’

Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*

Channeling the eerie, misty, ruined backgrounds of the paintings surrounding the Grand Tour, I attempted to reflect the emphasis on idealised, dilapidated ruins and on the ‘mantled’ ‘widow of empires’. Surrounded by vague remnants of the past, the tourists are captivated by the statue of Niobe, raised on a plinth for all to see.

It may seem absurd that the tourists find Niobe’s distress so fascinating, and they appear a little out of place. The tone is difficult to pick out - this should be a pleasurable activity yet it feels like the Victorian visitors may be intruding. Their fascination is as much about the act of ‘touring’ as it is about their surroundings. Both individuals carry a guide book, having consulted literature on tourism before actually touring themselves. Any others who live here in the present are absent, and so the experience seems slightly fabricated.



Past grief is held on a plinth and claimed uncomfortably by English tourists. Niobe’s suffering is the subject of much enjoyment. She is a statue which cannot speak and as in mythology she is turned to marble and is silenced, yet she maintains striking human qualities and emotions. What makes Victorian visitors any more ‘modern’ than Niobe? And are we more ‘modern’ than those visitors?

The mild excitement of going to see what one is *supposed* to see, the claiming of knowledge or emotions which belong to other cultures; it all seems familiar. This illustration attempts to pose one question above all:

Do we see ourselves in these tourists?

R E F E R E N C E S

Anon, On the Grand Tour, Punch Magazine, (19 October 1872)

Byron, George Gordon, ‘Childe Harolde Pilgrimage’

Browning, Elizabeth Barret, ‘Casa Guidi Windows’

Batoni, Pompeo, *Francis Basset, 1st Baron of Dunstanville* 1778, Museo del Prado

Spitzweg, Carl, *English Tourists in the Roman ‘Campagna’* c. 1835, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie