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Letters from Paris

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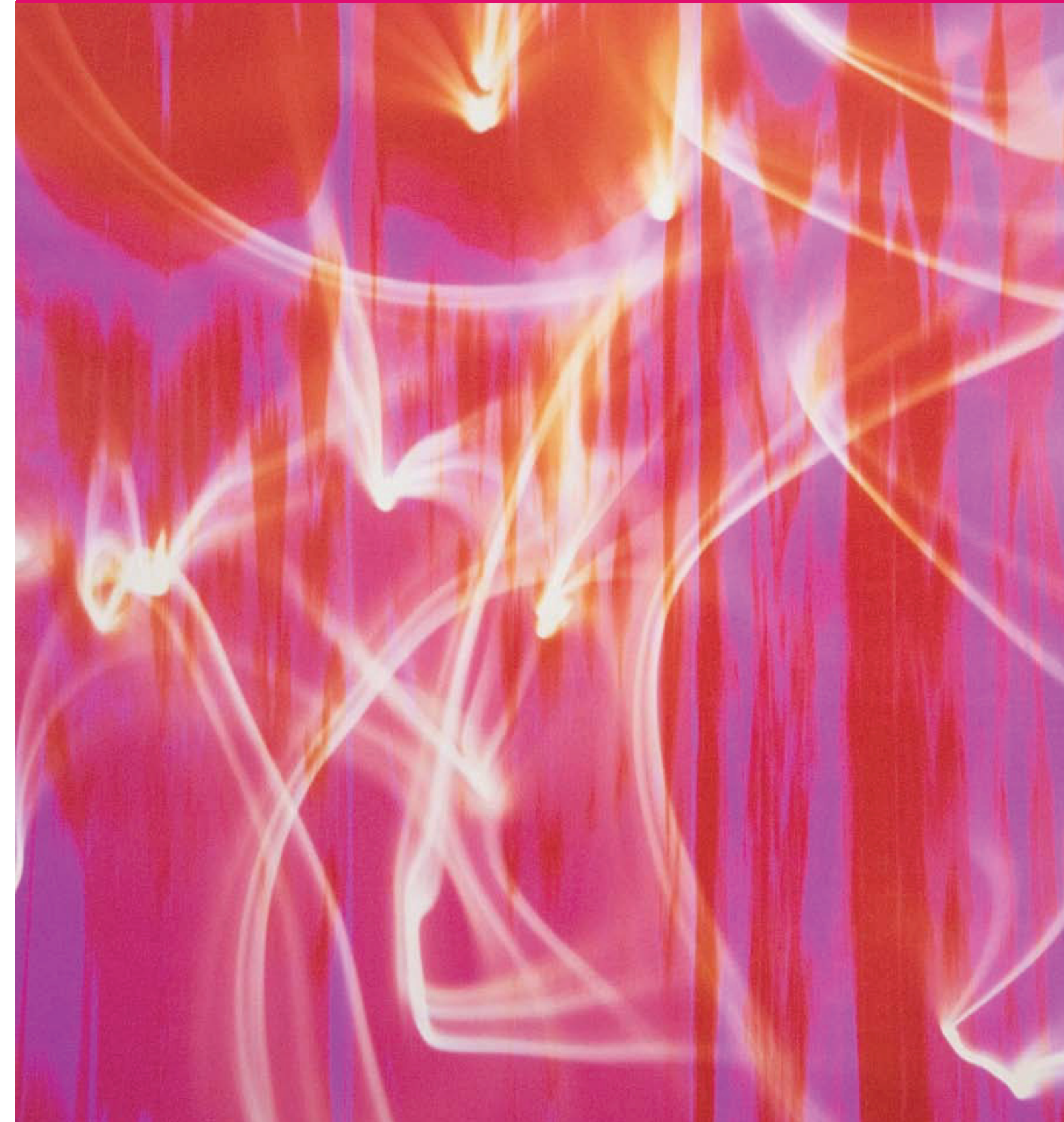
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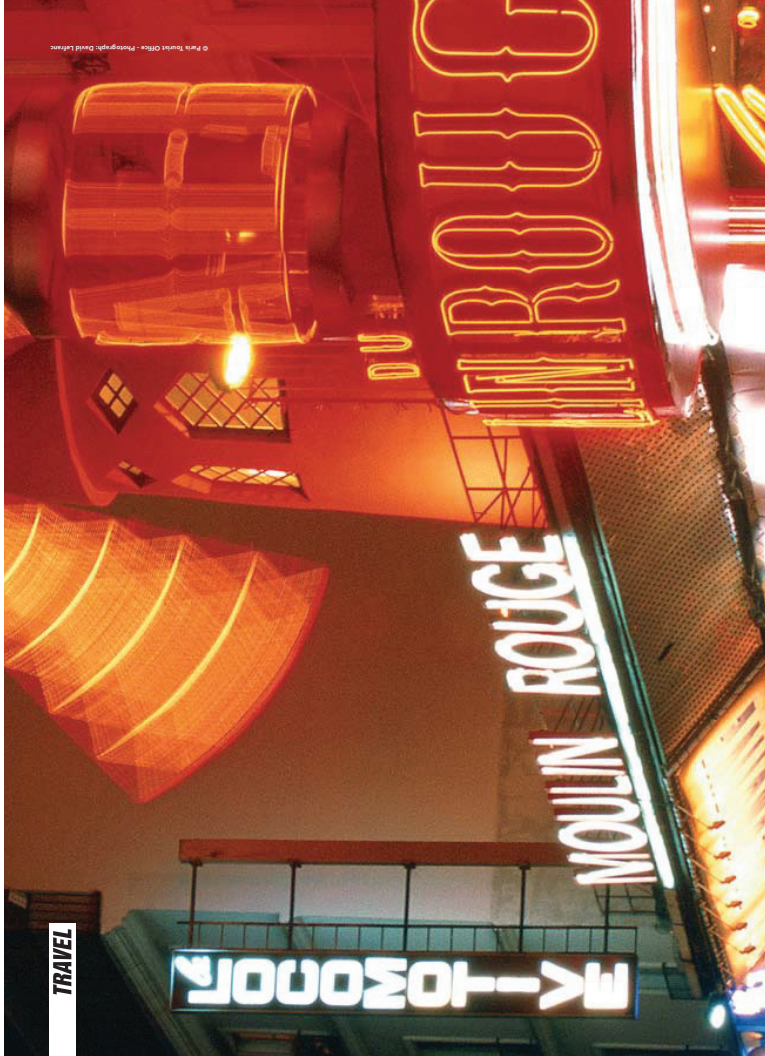
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BY PHILIP ELIASOPH

LETTER FROM PARIS

“THE MOVEABLE FEAST” - AN ARTISTIC PLAT DU JOUR

Like an early Picasso cubist collage of clashing designs, a colorfully mixed palette of fragmented memories by Chagall with surreal images of the Eiffel Tower, bookstalls along the Seine, or bistros dotting a wide boulevard, Paris might be more hallucinatory than real. Reminiscing, Ernest Hemingway wrote in 1950 about his youthful adventures in Paris between 1921-1923:

“If you were lucky enough to live in Paris as a young man then, where you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you—for Paris is a moveable feast.”



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Stunning in the Jardin des Tuileries on a green metal chair (which magically appears just as one reaches a collapsing moment of fatigue after a day of museum and gallery hopping), finding the right brasserie for a refreshing espresso, or just strolling aimlessly, my time in Paris was dangerously seductive. In the midst of such overwhealing art, beauty, and a state of visual pleasure, strange temptations filtered into my thoughts.

Searching to rediscover its mysteries, torn between its mythic fragrance and current daily routine, we spent a few days recently in la Ville Lumière. Celebrating a cluster of life cycle milestones, we intentionally splurged on a few frills. One needs to stop converting currency in your head from mighty Euros into anemic US dollars early in the trip. Unwilling to say, "oh I wish we had spent more time in Paris" once the Grim Reaper appears at our doorstep, we decided to live it up.

Facing such enchantment, one is tempted to sell the farm, retire early, and—like Gauguin leaving his bank-teller job to go off to Tahiti—opt out and find a little pied-à-terre in the 3rd Arrondisse-

ment. The absolutely "now" place to live is the warren of crooked streets around the stately Place des Vosges, home of Victor Hugo. Here we find a cluster of hip new boutiques, art galleries, and neo-bistro eateries. The Marais district offers the Musée Picasso in a 17th-century mansion. Here is where you should spend your first morning to survey the leading edge of the city's fashion, design, and galleries. Take the pulse of the thriving local arts scene. Defer your marathon museum visits to the Louvre, Musée d'Orsay, or Centre Pompidou. The old masters and modern geniuses will be there, but catch the vibe of Paris at street level for your initial plunge.

Even more unexpected in the Marais is the brilliant Art Nouveau synagogue designed by Hector Guimard, whose biomorphic designs are the iconic Métropolitain entrance signs. Nearby at 71 Rue du Temple is the newly created Museum of Jewish Art and History, which includes a fascinating set of documents related to the infamous Dreyfus Affair, with original newspapers of Emile Zola's 1898 heroic headline: "J'Accuse!"

Floating throughout this daydream a steady stream of images came into focus. It's as if history's headlines have remained etched

into each magical garden, monumental arch, or palais. In October, 1793 the guillotine's razor edge on Marie Antoinette's sweet neck sliced through the vast urban space of the Place de la Concorde.

Napoleon's tomb under the soaring dome of Hôtel des Invalides, (ironically, Hitler's favorite stop on his triumphant victory visit of June, 1940), reverberates with the delusions of emperors and tyrants. Dumbfounded, gazing up at the neo-baroque façade of Charles Garnier's Opera house, one can strangely appreciate how it was admired and almost imitated for the new masterplan for Berlin's Third Reich.

Completed in an imperial style in 1874 like a souped up wedding cake with more sugary pastry and kitsch hanging from every niche and cornice, it stretches the mind as the cavernous rebout of its ghoulish Phantom. Meglo-maniacal and yet awe-inspiring, even the Führer came to understand that no other city—not Madrid, Milan, or Munich—could challenge Paris as the capital of Europe.

The neighborhood linking the deceased and their living legacies haunted me at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in the 20th Arrondissement. Where else can we find so many cultural legends, including Maria Callas, Honoré de Balzac, Eugene Delacroix, Marcel Proust, Amedeo Modigliani, and Jim Morrison? The Crystal Ship's lyrics "Before your slip into unconsciousness..." is almost audible within earshot of Callas' tomb, reaching her velvety vibrato towards the finale of Tosca.

Through a lens, darkly we can only imagine young Ernest Hemingway's years of 1921-23 hobnobbing with literary giants at Sylvia Beach's fabled bookstore, Shakespeare & Company, in this enviable Latin Quarter haunt, with fountain pens and primitive typewriters, a coterie of authors and bohemians—such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Alice B. Toklas, Lincoln Steffens, and Gertrude Stein—banged out a modernist vision transforming the written word.

The original shop near the Odéon metro stop was re-invented for the Beat generation of the 1950s by George Whitman who considered its purpose as a literary mecca: "socialist utopia masquerading as a bookstore." His daughter, pleasant and perky Sylvia Whitman, still runs the cash register today keeping the torch alive. If you are a starving poet, ask her for a bed upstairs and she will expect you to monitor the stacks and greet the international cast of hobos, culturati, and Allen Ginsburg impersonators streaming through the front door.

On the more generic tourist route, let me offer a few recommendations. The Paris Open Bus Tour is a "must do" for your first or 10th visit—for about \$40 you can tour all the major districts and



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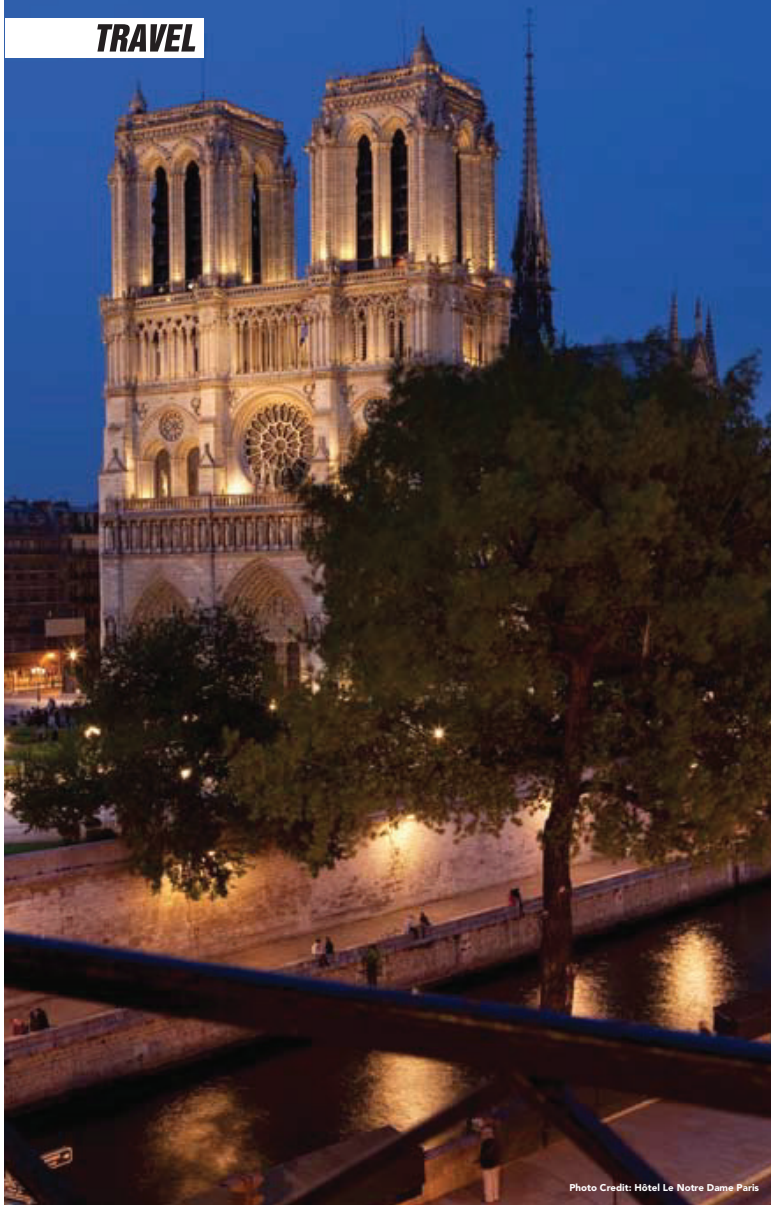


Photo Credit: Hôtel Le Notre Dame Paris



monuments from the top of a double-decker bus with an English language earphone. You can jump the bus and get off at numerous locations – and truly “see” the entire city in a day. The tour bus-hoi-polloi crowds love the corny “Can-Can” dancing at the historic Moulin Rouge or Folies-Bergere.

More on the edgy side, is the tastefully produced Crazy Horse Saloon show with stunningly athletic dancers—au naturel—whose erotic dancing reminded me of the silhouetted femme fatales from James Bond classics with Sean Connery peeking through his gun-sights. Don’t go if you expect Betty Friedan or Kate Millet to approve of this risqué night-club scene with Russian petro-czars, Brazilian CEO’s and Saudi sheiks wearing Savile Row suits. Ingres, Renoir, and Modigliani all painted the female figure as the highest creation of nature, but witnessing nine dancers in the flesh in a series of synchronized routines is like watching Cirque du Soleil at an acrobatic nudist camp.

It’s easy to blow beaucoup euros on world-class five-star hotels like the Hotel Ritz (where Princess Diana spent her last fateful night) or the Four Seasons George V (if you are a high-roller financier attending your Carlyle Group investment seminar). Or even a grand old dame place like the Hotel Scribe (where I stayed decades ago thinking it was a stage set for a fin-de-siècle operetta), but we searched for a “room with a view.” If Paris is the center of France, this room is a few yards away from the geographic center of the city. Our love nest,

Hotel Le Nôtre Dame (www.hotelnotredameparis.com), was breathtaking but modest; it ran about \$300 a night, with a perfect baguette, croissant, and coffee for breakfast included. Exceptionally located on the corner of the Quai Saint-Michel at the end of the Petit Pont, we collapsed in total bliss with this discovery. The psychedelic-chic rooms are like Hieronymous Bosch scenes from the Garden of Delights, tastefully appointed by Christian Lacroix. Ask Mademoiselle Julie at the desk for chambre #52 and you can open a set of four windows, putting the 12th-century façade of the Cathedral of Notre Dame at your fingertips.

And remember what Audrey Hepburn realized in her ingénue role in the classic film *Sabrina*: Paris is always a good idea! □



Photo by Erin Gleeson Studio, NYC

Philip Eliasoph is Professor of Art History at Fairfield University and the Director/Moderator of the Open Visions Forum, a public town hall current affairs series. As a lifelong wanderer he has slept near sheep in Bedouin tents in the Sinai desert, trekked with sherpas and mountain goats in the Himalayas, and enjoyed the same suite at the deluxe Daniele Hotel with a terrace over the Grand Canal in Venice where Sophia Loren left her fragrance. For over 35 years he has been leading cultural tours through Italy and France with this conclusion: “discovering all of Italy is the purpose of living -- but if you only have a few days - go to Paris.”