

Francesco Algarotti and his Grand Tour

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Introduction

In eighteenth-century England, the Grand Tour—sending sons to the Continent to let them see the world—was extremely popular among the aristocracy.

In his twenties, a young Italian named Francesco Algarotti (1712-64) visited England twice (1734-36, 1738-40) in order to carry out further research into Newton's (Issac, 1642-1727) optics and also to attempt to obtain favourable status at the English court. Though ultimately unable to find such a satisfactory position, he did manage to deepen his insights into aesthetics, which were eventually to form the basis of his concept of art.

Later, Algarotti was invited to the court of Frederick II (the Great, 1712-86) of Prussia where he would finally gain the position he desired. We can say that what Algarotti learned in England—through his encounter with English aesthetics—played an important role in his later career. In addition, for Algarotti, his tour to England was a kind of Grand Tour in the opposite direction. When conceiving of the Grand Tour, I think that this notion of the reverse is of unusual interest, since the customary idea of the Grand Tour emphasizes the influence of the Continent on England. And this is to be discussed in my paper today.¹⁾

1. Grand Tour to England

Now in Pisa, in the piazza famous for the Leaning Tower, Francesco Algarotti sleeps forever in the tomb which Frederick the Great erected for him. It was Frederick that had invited Algarotti to his court in Prussia and ennobled him as a count. But what links this young Italian man to Frederick?

Algarotti was born in Venice in a wealthy merchant family and studied in Rome, Bologna, and Florence. He visited England for the first time in 1734 with the aim of further researching into

¹⁾ This paper was read at the annual conference of British Society of Eighteenth Century Studies held at St.Hugh's in Oxford (7 Jan. 2005), and it is also a part of my research supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research.

Newton's optics and also of gaining a favourable position where he might perform his life's work.

This journey to England can be considered to be his Grand Tour. In his satirical work, *The Dunciad* (1743), Alexander Pope(1688-1744) criticized the young man who came back to the court of Dulness from his Grand Tour without studying anything. Indeed, when speaking of the Grand Tour, we can easily recall Lord Chesterfield's (Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, 1694-1773) following advice:

You are not sent abroad to converse with your own countrymen; among them, in general, you will get little knowledge, no languages, and, I am sure, no manners. I desire that you will form no connections, nor (what they impudently call) friendships, with these people; which are, in truth, only combinations and conspiracies against good morals and good manners.

(15 May, 1749)²⁾

But in the case of Algarotti, he was lucky enough to become acquainted with such people as Lord Hervey (John Hervey, 1696-1743), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), Voltaire (François Marie Arouet, 1694-1778) and the Marquise du Châtelet (Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelier de Brteuil, 1706-49) ; the latter two, Algarotti met on his way to England, and all these people were charmed by Algarotti's personality.

In 1736 Algarotti was elected as a member of the Royal Society and during his first stay in England he continued his study on optics, and this study was to be published in 1737 under the title of *Newtonianismo per le Dame*(1737). As to his book on optics, Algarotti owed much to the Marquise du Châtelet, a highly talented lady who translated Newton's optics into French herself. She and her friend, Voltaire, knew Frederick II and this fact can be regarded as one factor underlying the link between Algarotti and the Prussian court.

After the publication of his book in Italy, Algarotti returned to England in 1738 and joined the circle of Lord Hervey and the 3rd Earl of Burlington (Richard Boyle, 1694-1753). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who fell in love with Algarotti during his first stay already left England for Italy where she wanted to live with Algarotti.

I have already said that what Algarotti learned in England—through his encounter with English aesthetics—was to play an important role in his later career. This encounter is to be

²⁾ *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope 4th Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée, 6 vols. (New York: Ams Press, 1932), IV, pp.1342-43 (No. 1639)

examined from the following three angles: Palladian style of architecture, English landscape gardening and the camera obscura.

2. Palladian Style, English Landscape Gardening and Camera Obscura

In eighteenth-century England, Palladian architecture became a fashionable style owing to Lord Burlington and his circle. As is well known, Lord Burlington himself went to Italy on his Grand Tour and brought back William Kent (1685-1748) with him. Palladio's (Andrea Palladio, 1508-80) new version of *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (1570) was published thanks to Lord Burlington. Later Frederick the Great, who also had an interest in this architectural style, asked Algarotti about Burlington's new house in Chiswick.

What did Algarotti think about the Palladian style of architecture which he viewed far away from his homeland? When I encounter Japanese things outside Japan, I am glad to know that Japanese style and the Japanese idea of art are appreciated and accepted by foreign countries, but sometimes, I cannot help but feel that they are somewhat out of place. Of course, the difference between England and Italy was not so big compared to that between Japan and the West. Nevertheless just as with the different weather and the different colour of the sky between England and Italy, it seems to me that Algarotti could discern the slightest differences between the Palladian style of England and its original in Italy.

This idea of the same architectural style in different places, the transfer of the building, so to speak, has a very important meaning for Algarotti when he later became an advisor to the art collection in the court of Augustus III of Saxony (1696-1763). For this art collection, Algarotti bought pictures from Italy with the help of Joseph Smith (1682-1770), English consul in Venice at that time. It is said that Algarotti influenced the idea of capriccio, an art technique which Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal, 1697-1768) and Piranesi (Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1720-78) used in their paintings.

These days when we travel, we take many photos, nowadays digital ones back home. In the days of Grand Tour many noblemen who went to Italy brought back pictures, and landscape paintings. Canaletto painted many pictures of Venice but sometimes he painted imaginary landscapes. When painting the famous bridge over the Grand Canal in Venice, Rialto Bridge, he painted the bridge in a Palladian style which was in fact never built at that place. When Piranesi painted ancient ruins later, this technique of capriccio was to be further developed. I think the English Palladian style gave Algarotti a freer viewpoint, indeed a kind of tolerance towards new

ideas in architecture and art. Thus Algarotti could easily become an advocator of the idea of capriccio, I think.

Let us move on to the second issue, English landscape gardening. Alexander Pope played an important role in the new trend of English gardening. In his *Epistle to Burlington* [Moral Essay IV] (1731), Pope highly appreciates the original spirit of Nature, genius loci. The following are his well-known lines:

To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,
To swell the Terras, or to sink the Grot;
In all, let Nature never be forgot.

.....

Consult the Genius of the Place in all; (ll. 47-50, 57)³⁾

William Kent followed this idea of Pope's when he designed gardens but Algarotti was equally inspired by it. In his work, *Saggio sopra l'opera in musica* (1755 / 1762), where he mentions about stage scenery, Pope's idea of genius loci, the idea of English landscape gardening is clearly echoed by Algarotti:

The objects I propose to the imitation of our artists, from which pleasing ideas will arise and delightful scenes may be drawn, are the gardens of that most ingenious nation; for the gardeners there are so many painters, who do not lay out their ground with the same regularity which architects observe in building houses. No. They take nature for their guide, and employ all their efforts to imitate her noble disregard of symmetric order and her fondness of variety. . . .

The English have derived their present taste in gardening from the Chinese, by which means it is their Kent and Chambers, Brown, have so far surpassed Le Notre, who, before their time, was esteemed to be the unrivalled master of the art of laying out gardens.⁴⁾

Algarotti thought that the original idea of English landscape gardening came from China, and

³⁾ *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt et al., 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1939-69), III-ii, pp.141-42.

⁴⁾ *An Essay on the Opera written in Italian by Count Algarotti* (Glasgow: R.Urie, 1768) chapter V.

this was to be criticized later by Thomas Gray (1716-71) as Algarotti's biased idea.⁵⁾ Because Algarotti was born in Venice, he must have grown up in an atmosphere where he could feel the winds from the East. English gardening is different from the Italian style of gardening with hillside terraces. The aesthetic of English landscape gardening, which Algarotti learned in England, must have given him a greater influence. Lord Burlington was said to have received a Chinese landscape painting, so the people in his circle could have a chance to have a glimpse at Chinese landscape.

William Chambers (1723-96), who served under King George III and made the Chinese pagoda in Kew Garden, once thought of serving in the court of Frederick the Great who also had an interest in Chinese pagodas. Even though Algarotti would have already experienced something of Chinese, and Eastern ideas in his earlier career in Venice, I believe his interest in the Chinese idea of gardening and its culture developed during his stay in England, and in his voyage to Russia which will be mentioned later.

Next, as the third factor, I would like to turn briefly to the camera obscura. Canaletto was said to use this tool when painting pictures but Algarotti in his *Saggio sopra la pittura* (1762), also referred to its effectiveness for the painter, in the same way that a telescope aids the astronomer and a microscope the scientist.⁶⁾ Algarotti himself used the word camera ottica, instead.

The word camera obscura reminds me of Pope's grotto built under the road to link the two parts of his garden. When the doors of either side were shut, this grotto must have been regarded as a room type of camera obscura and the outside scenery was said to be projected on the inside wall.

These three factors, Palladian style of architecture, English landscape gardening and the camera obscura helped Algarotti to form the foundations for his concept of art. As Michael Levey says in his book, *Painting in Eighteenth-Century Venice*, Algarotti "affected in some instances the art of the day."⁷⁾ Algarotti went to England, as it were, for his Grand Tour and it seems clear that what he learned during his stay there influenced his way of thinking and made him a kind of art producer as to the ideas of capriccio and camera obscura.

⁵⁾ Cf. *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. P. Toynbee and L. Whibley, 3vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), II, p.814 (No. 375).

⁶⁾ *Illuministi Italiani tomo II—Opere di F.Algarotti e di S.Bettinelli*, ed. Ettore Bonara (Milano:Riccardo Ricciardi, 1969), p.369.

⁷⁾ Michael Levey, *Painting in Eighteenth Century Venice* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1994), p.16.

3. Voyage to Russia

Before Algarotti decided to go to Prussia, he had the opportunity to go to Russia with Lord Baltimore (the fifth, 1699-1751) in 1739. We can tell what this trip was like by his epistolary work, *Viaggi di Russia* (1764). The work consists of twelve letters, and the eight letters are written to Lord Hervey. In this work, Algarotti mentioned about such interesting topics as military power, trade and Chinese culture. Algarotti analyzes the military force of Russia as follows:

Though Europe seems now to decree the military palm of Prussia, I doubt whether more exactness in the evolutions and other different exercises would be found at Berlin.

Certain it is, that there does not seem to be any nation fitter for war than the Russians. . . .

Thus, if I may be allowed the expression, there is nothing farther wanting in Russia, to complete the temple of Mars, but an establishment in favour of invalid soldiers.⁸⁾

In those days the forces of Prussia were something that no other nation could neglect. Nonetheless Algarotti's observation tells us that Russia was a potential military power.

As Vice Chamberlain and Lord Privy Seal serving under King George II (1683-1760), Lord Hervey would have known the importance of diplomacy. Later, as Hervey himself could not find a favourable status for his friend, Algarotti at the court in England, he let Algarotti go to Prussia to serve under Frederick II. As I have already mentioned, Algarotti wrote about the naval forces in the northern European countries in his letters addressed to Hervey; this kind of information is of great importance when one considers international relations in war time.

Especially on account of the rivalry between the Bourbons and the Hapsburgs, a number of wars broke out in Europe (the War of Austrian Succession and Seven Years' War, for instance). Hervey must have thought that Algarotti could play a diplomatic role between England and Prussia.

During his stay in Dresden, Algarotti mentioned about the fine porcelain coming from the East:

. . . to copy the old porcelain of Japan and China; the shapes of which, like the plants and animals that are brought to us from those countries, have in them a somewhat noble and exotic at the same time. Above all, I believe that this trade, already very considerable, would become

⁸⁾ *Letters from Count Algarotti to Lord Hervey and The Marquis Scipio Maffei* (London: Johnson & Payne, 1769) Letter V.

much greater still, if the Saxons applied themselves to the imitation of antiques.

(*Ibid.* Letter VIII)

This is a poignant observation in light of the history of Meissen china which developed during the eighteenth century under the great influence of China and Japan (especially Kakiemon).

Moreover, later, during his days in the court of Prussia, Algarotti became an advisor (1742?-46) to the Elector of Saxony, Augustus III and helped him to enlarge the collections at his gallery, buying paintings from Italy (Canaletto, Titian, Veronese, Tiepolo, and so on). Through his voyage to Russia, Algarotti could learn more about the East, and this seems to have given him a greater international outlook.

4. The Road to Prussia

On his way back from Russia, Algarotti met Prince Frederick of Prussia for the first time. In the last part of the last letter addressed to Lord Hervey, Algarotti mentioned about young Frederick:

What shall I say to you, my Lord, of the Prince Royal, the lover and the favourite of the Muses? Several days which we passed with him, in his castle of Reinsburg, seemed to me but a few hours. He is the most intelligent and most amiable of men. Though I could notice only his private virtues, I can boldly assure you, my Lord, that the world will one day admire his royal qualifications; and that when he shall be upon the throne, he will show himself to be the greatest of Sovereigns. There is all the reason in the world to believe that he will seek out for great men, with as much eagerness as his father does for giants. (*Ibid.* Letter VIII)

The above Letter VIII was dated from Hamburg, 30th September, while Frederick himself wrote a letter to Algarotti on 1st September:

Je n'oublierai jamais les huit jours que vous avez passés chez moi. Beaucoup d'étrangers vous ont suivi; mais aucun ne vous a valu, et aucun ne vous vaudra si tôt.⁹⁾

⁹⁾ *Correspondence de Frédéric Second Roi de Prusse avec le Comte Algarotti* (Berlin: George Gropius, 1837), pp.5-6.

Frederick really became charmed with Algarotti's personality and we can say that the latter's road to Prussia had already started from their very first meeting. After coming back to London from Russia, Algarotti stayed on Bond Street, but the next year, in 1740, he was ardently invited by Frederick who had succeeded his father. After leaving his home country and searching for a place in England, Algarotti finally succeeded in getting a social status in Prussia. When Algarotti came back from Saxony in 1747, Frederick the Great made him a count.

Concluding Remarks

Through my study of the Grand Tour focusing especially on the case of Algarotti, I came to realize the influence that England had on the Continent.

In England, Algarotti found that Lord Burlington and his circle had reevaluated the Italian architect, Palladio, and Algarotti was also able to learn the new trend of English landscape gardening, different from the French style and the Italian.

Later, Algarotti was invited to the court of Frederick the Great of Prussia where he could finally obtain his coveted social status. During his stay in Germany, Algarotti introduced many Italian paintings to the Elector of Saxony. In his *Saggio sopra la pittura*, Algarotti advised painters to use a tool, camera obscura. He is also said to have had a great influence on the idea of capriccio in art history. The idea of English landscape gardening came to be widely known on the Continent in the eighteenth century. We can say that what Algarotti learned in England combined to form the foundation that played an important role in his career, and finally secured him a position in the court of Prussia.

Frederick the Great, who was the same age as his Italian protégé, could appreciate English cultural affairs together with Algarotti. Most probably when we speak of the eighteenth century, Casanova (Giovanni Giacomo Casanova, 1725-98) can be regarded as a more famous person. But if I am allowed to say that Casanova walked under the moonlight, Algarotti was a person who could walk under the sunshine.

It is certain that Algarotti can be regarded as an important herald of English culture on the Continent at that time.