

... more not-so-random motions ...

2014, September-October - Europe

9/11

Having departed LAX the afternoon of 9/10, we arrived in Amsterdam at local noon, after a thankfully uneventful flight; checked into Hotel V Nesplein in the oldest part of town, in an old building, and was surprised to find inside an "industrial chic" trendy establishment. Feather beds, heaven.

Jet-lagged, we walked and explored that first day, for five hours. Bicycles everywhere, young and old and in between use them for everyday travel in the city. No special clothes, no helmets, toddlers balancing in their little seats and baskets for babies. Normal size people everywhere, heavy ones in tour groups ... very noticeable.



Visited the floating flower market, could not resist buying tulip bulbs which are supposed to clear customs ... we shall see. (They did!)



Yes, we walked thru the red light district and saw the girls in the windows; and yes, we resisted the cannabis shops with their seeds and "stuff".



Sunday morning was a concert in the famous "Concertgebouw"; with Canteloube's "Songs of the Auvergne" sung by Sarah Fox, and Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition", all energetically and enjoyably delivered; a champagne buffet brunch after; then we spent rest of day in the Van Gogh museum. His range of work (in a short 10-year working life) is far broader than we had realized.

Visited the large Rijksmuseum all day Monday, lots of wonderful Dutch masters to be seen; and lunch in their charming cafe with unusual menu and wait staff that speak 4-5 languages as condition of employment. Amazing.



Next day, visited Rembrandt's House which dovetailed nicely with the book I was reading about his later life there with his mistress Hendrickje Stoffels and their experiences with the Plague which was still rampant in the 1650's. Samples of the etchings which provided the bulk of his income are on display, and the techniques were demonstrated for us. The temporary exhibition space was devoted to Johannes Thopas, a gifted artist despite being deaf and mute.

We loved restaurants Humphrey's and Haesje Claes, where we have been trying the local dishes like "hutsepot" which translates into "hot pot" or "hodge-podge" which is a winter meal of meat and vegetables stew. Their local, flavored gins are different and mild ... they boast they taught the British about gin. (It was Rembrandt's favorite drink.)

Wed, 9/17, warm and sunny. Spent the day in Amsterdam city museum, with interesting displays of how the Dutch conquered the watery land. Some of the oldest buildings show definite un-level lines!



Then, to the concert that evening again in the magnificent Concertgebouw, with Rossini, Shostakovich (Piano Concerto in C minor), and Prokofiev. The piano artist was Yuja Wang, the young, pretty one who has caused sensations with her almost-there concert dresses. This was no exception; a 2 piece halter and skirt slit to the hip on both sides, which of course fell away as she played. Our seats were second row, front and slightly below piano. Al swore he did not plan the view! Her mother ought to have a word with her if she is to have a long career.

Next day, a visit to the diamond museum, since Amsterdam was/is the center for cutting and polishing, then the sleeper train to Prague. There is something scary/ thrilling about hurtling thru the darkness on a rainy night at 100 plus m/h. Did manage to sleep with the rocking of the train on the 14 hr trip.

9/18

Arrived in Prague, walked few blocks to Hotel Paris, an outstanding example of Art Nouveau architecture and styling. Had a luxury suite on the 5th floor, and there was even a "pietra dura" table in the hallway for Al to covet. Breakfasts in the deco Sarah Bernhardt cafe were superb, with lots of choices - eggs, veggies, fish, meats, cheeses ... and great breads.



Had dinner that Friday night across the street in Francouzská, billed as the "most beautiful Art Nouveau restaurant in the world". Huge Mucha murals, and huge chandeliers. Food was wonderful; all over-the-top experience.

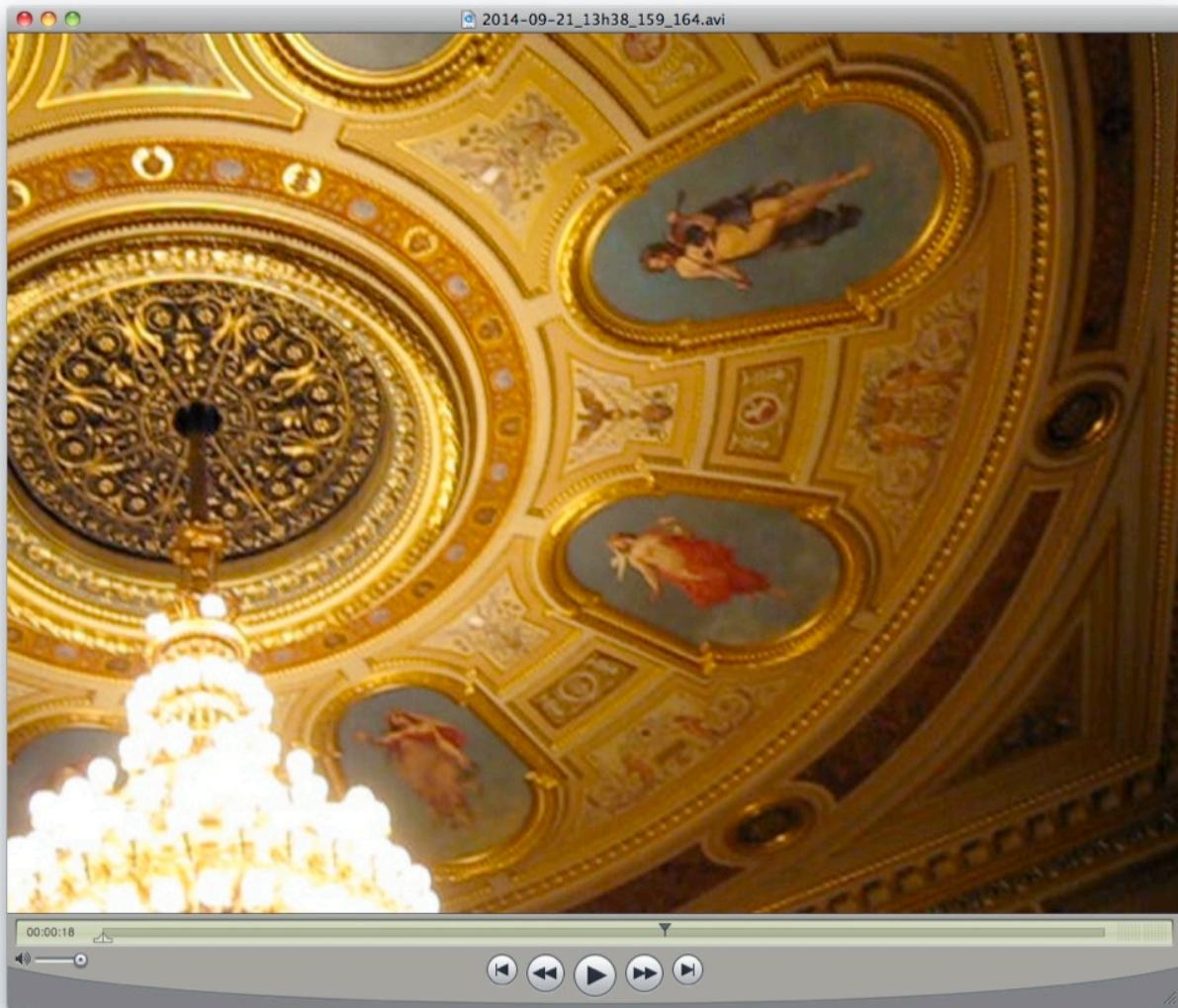


Explored the Mucha museum, he's a favorite from our Paris trips, then dinner that night in the belfry of the oldest bell tower (once part of city wall) which had just one large bell left, right next to our table.



As we have traveled thru these regions, we have absorbed the history of WWII effects on the cities and on the people, sobering thoughts of the suffering and deprivations that beliefs, politics and actions impose. It has been more vivid for me since I have been reading a mystery historical novel set in Amsterdam/ Prague /London about a stolen Rembrandt, international intrigue, and tracing art thefts which occurred during WWII. Always amazed at the human capacity for innovation and goodness, and for meanness and destruction.

Attended the opera, Sunday matinee at the National Theater - the Bartered Bride, by Smetana. Sumptuous old velvet-gilt opera house. Simple but effective set, and wonderful performers. Many children with their parents at this Sunday 2:00 performance.



Dinner later at U Zlatého lva, a local Czech restaurant in a 500+ year old cave, serving typical local meals. Had sirloin in a cream sauce, which was wonderful and which I would probably never do at home. Returned there a second time.



At the Castle, we enjoyed visiting the unusual cathedral, where there is a stained glass window by Mucha,



and several over-the-top-ornate ancient crypts.



At the Veletrzní Palace, we saw (among other things) Mucha's 'Slav Epic' part of the National Gallery.



Attended Wednesday evening opera "Rusalka" by Dvorak, in the Prague State Opera House. All white and gold filigree wood work, looks like a wedding cake. Absolutely stunning staging, and beautifully performed.



We appreciated the English supertitles, as Czech is a rather complex language.



My black uniform of dress, tights, shoes and the other long black silk skirt and white sparkly sweater have worked well. Al was right about the weather, no need so far for any other than our everyday jackets and an evening poncho.

The Czech Republic, this area of Prague has been noted for its Bavarian glass and crystal works, so this crowd is just delighted with all the shiny, bright, bowls and chandeliers, not to mention the antique garnet jewelry. Fortunately, or unfortunately, this old crowd has all the shiny stuff she sees, so we can leave it all behind, (not like the old days of carrying everything home from our travels.)

Prague received little WW2 bombing, so its beautiful 16th Century buildings are intact. Al has been fascinated by the architecture here and in Amsterdam. The engineer in him wanted to straighten all the tilted narrow buildings along the Amsterdam canals, that have settled at odd angles due to fluctuating water tables just as if they were pictures on a wall.

9/25

Vienna. Al has been an amazing navigator on this trip to where we have never been before. Has his maps and map apps on his iPad and iPod, so he always knows where we are going and how to get there. We came from train station to the hotel in Vienna by Metro, just like he has done it every day! I just follow along ...

Our hotel in Vienna is the Konig von Ungarn, which we learned in the Museum of Art History means the king of Hungary. It is the oldest hotel in the oldest part of the old town, just beside the famous St. Stephan's Cathedral, sharing walls with the Mozarthaus. Like Spain, they like their horse and buggies, and during breakfast we counted twelve pairs going past to their posts outside the church. Also, we will again play "dodge the horses" since again, I forgot my Epi pen. Best to avoid than to treat, anyway.

In all the hotels, we have enjoyed the lavish breakfast buffets which feature the typical local foods. It makes it easy to sample things we would usually not have, like bratwurst and warm beer for breakfast. We are adventurous breakfast eaters, so this is culturally fun.



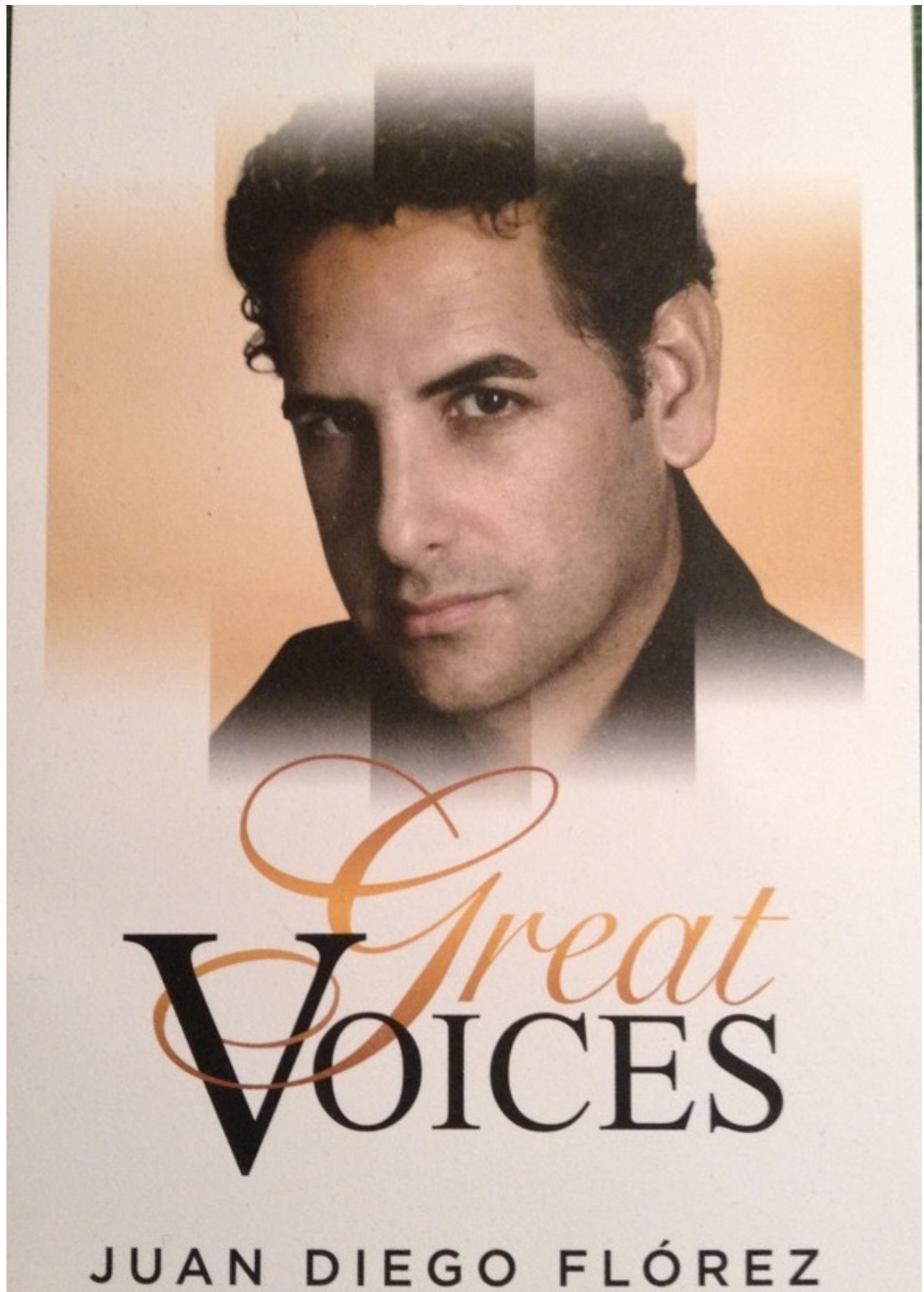
A large pink bunny rabbit guards the Vienna State Opera house.



Friday night 9/26 was Donizetti's 'L'Elisir d'Amore', very enjoyable (nobody dies), with handsome young tenor Juan Diego Flórez (seems that all women's pulse rates rise), and Adriana Kucerová. Great set, a

miniature Tuscan village. Loved the beautiful house, with little personal subtitle displays.





Saturday, walked to the Kunsthistorische, passing the scaffolded Mozart statue (and musical staff done in red flowers) on the way.



Was so impressed with the Kunsthistorische (Art History) Museum's Old Masters galleries and the Hapsburg's treasures made of gold, silver, jewels, coral ... rivaling the treasures we saw in the Pitti Palace in Florence. It is amazing how little I know about so much.



Tram to the Upper Belvedere on Sunday. Lots of Klimts here, and beautiful gardens and fountains.

Monday we visited the Franz Joseph and Elizabeth of Austria ("Sisi") museum & apartments, showing their tableware, clothes and furnishings. Napkin folding was an exotic art of the court.



I was very impressed with the Imari porcelain all in one place. Sisi was later assassinated and thereafter became a legend. We will have to again watch the old movies about her life from the 50's, with Romy Schneider playing the lead (good old Netflix).

The MAK was our treat on Tuesday. Amazing, unique displays of arts old and newer. Just look at the flying carpets, as only one example; also bentwood chairs projected as shadows; well worth a visit!



Tuesday night at the opera house we saw Nureyev's version of Swan Lake, where the Prince died instead of Odette, and Rothbart carried her away! I've seen three separate productions with three separate endings. Makes me realize how much I have missed my Pilates classes.

October 1, last full day in Vienna. Got a late start today, it was lightly drizzling on our way to the Secession Museum where the 36 meter wide Klimt is installed (and several current "installations". After the wonderful Klimt display in the Belvedere and in Prague, I think I am Klimt'd out.

Today I enjoyed our mile long walk thru the "nachtsmarkt" which means "snack market" because of all the stalls and all the offerings of samples made by the multi-cultural, multi- ethnic purveyors of everything edible. A real magic carpet ride to food fantasy-land.



We have been eating "locally" which means bread, beer, veal sausages, potato pancakes, onion gravy, etc. Gave up counting carbs after 4-5 at one meal, which some of you know is not like me. O, well, when in Vienna ... Our weight has maintained due to our daily 5-6 hr city and museum walks.

Did we mention, beautiful flowers abound?



Enjoyment of the city has been enhanced by the historical fiction books I have been reading, the latest one called "Death in Vienna" and set here in recognizable surroundings. Altho it is a spy, thriller, intrigue type it is very well researched and gives very detailed facts surrounding the events occurring in Vienna during Word War II. Adds dimension and balance to the experience.

What civilized public transportation! Look at the roomy City Airport Train; and unlike the Green Line, this one does go to the airport ...



We managed a "just one carry-on bag each" policy, which worked very well in minimizing the stress of schlepping our bags on travel days. This meant carrying only simple pocketable cameras, so we apologize if some of our photos are not sharp.

10/02

Thursday, a travel day by plane to Paris. Arrived in Paris in late afternoon. Amazing how a 2 hr plane ride can become a 6 hr travel day. Staying in a small hotel in the 7th very near to our (1998) apartment, so it feels like we're back in our "hood". We see the Eiffel from the hotel breakfast hall; here is an evening view from just up the street.



Of course, Paris also has many lovely flower shops as did the other cities on this trip. Here is just one.



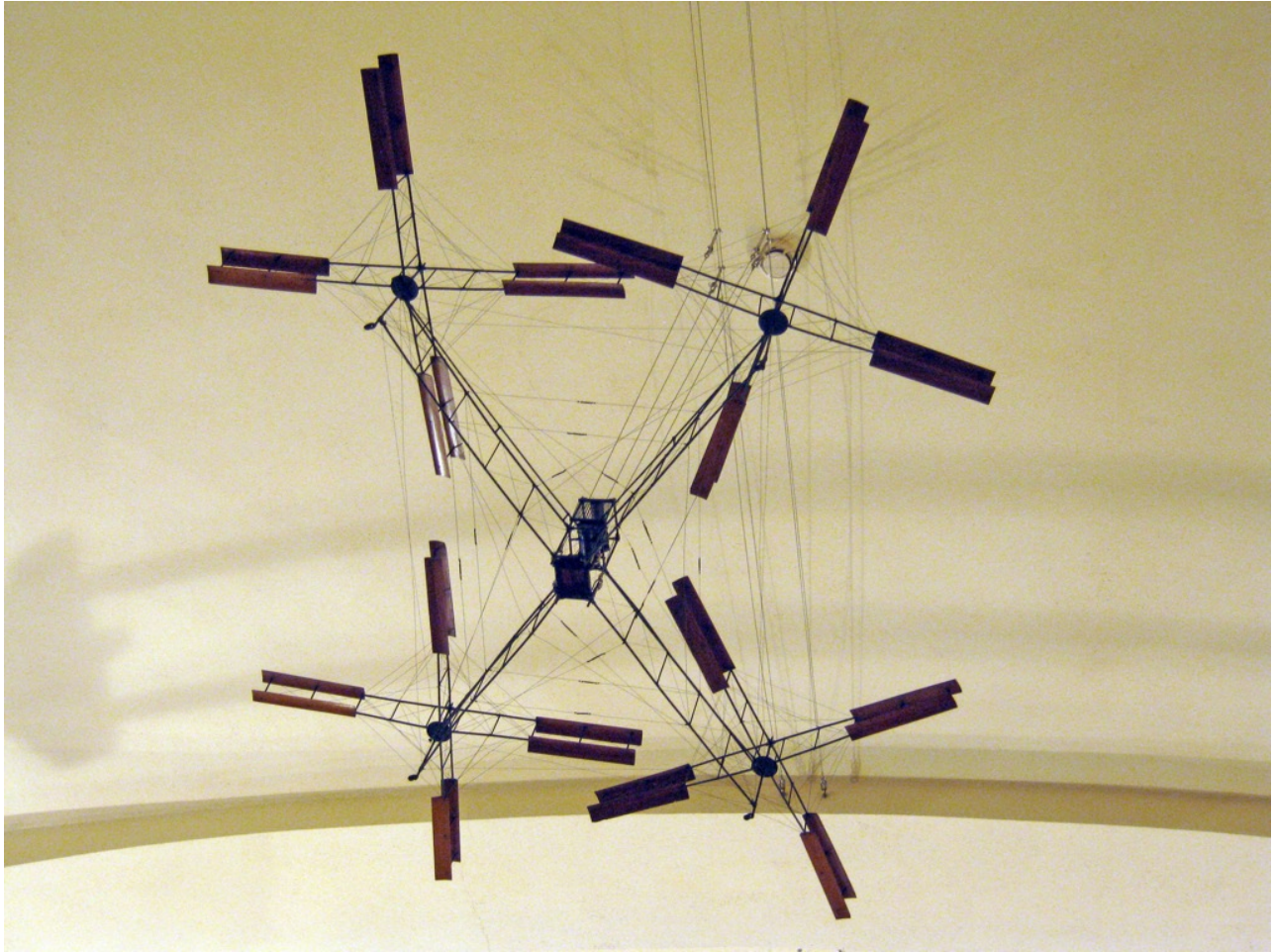
Everything feels so familiar and easy ... slipped right into our common French phrases. Friday was a beautiful 75ish, sunny, "Indian Summer" day, so we visited the Luxembourg Gardens and marvelled at the diverse plantings of multicolored flowers. The petunias were huge, and how do they get geraniums to grow alongside coleus in full sun I'll never know. That would not work at home.



Before the gardens, we fell into the Bon Marche where Al was dazzled by the hand-made paper birds sitting on the jewelry displays, and I was dazzled by both (see examples at: [Production-for-Mathilde-Nivet-for-LE-BON-MARCHE](#))

Continued our day strolling thru the upscale St. Germain area, looking and giggling at the outlandish designer shops with their prices to match. We were on our way to L' Entrecote for Al's birthday dinner; a favorite steak house we visit once or twice each visit. Their specialty is rib steak with green pepper sauce and unlimited frites. We also have the profiteroles for dessert and of course, a bottle of red wine.

In 25 years of visits, Al had never visited the museum of Technical Arts (Musee de Arts et Metier) even tho we'd had an apartment in the 3rd, very near to it. So he was in engineer heaven, looking at models of how everything worked in ancient times, as were all the other gear heads; the place was full of men. Even I learned about how things worked that I never knew existed ... know so little about so much! If you thought that the quadricopter was new, look at this one by Dufaux from 1905.



Sunday took the Metro to the Bastille Opera house for a 2:30 performance of *La Traviata*, one we had never seen performed, although some of the music was recognizable. The young soprano, Ermonela Jaho, was no one we had heard about, but reading later reviews, found that she is very well known and appreciated. We loved the performance, and the stage settings were elaborate; if only those old Italian composers could have come up with story lines where the heroine didn't always cough and die at the end.

We later walked the very busy, very "in with the young people" Marais section, where we had dinner in a very posh restaurant called "Le Dome"; we had tried to get into it on previous visits, but the timing was always off.

Our last apt in Paris was very near here, so it also felt very familiar seeing the same shops and restaurants. Back to the hotel in the 7th by Metro which was a nostalgia trip all its own. The musicians still jump on and sing or play until the next stop, collect donations, then jump onto another car to repeat the performance. I marvel at the efficiency of this people mover system. In these days the old "subway stare" has been replaced by everyone looking at their mobile devices in their hands, so no fear of offending by people-watching. I love the Metro.

Our last day we had reserved to tour the "Grand Magasins" on Blvd Housseman in the first arrondissement, and a good thing, because it turned out to be the first real rainy day we had the whole trip. Galeries Lafayette was crowded with people, tourist and locals alike. Lines of Asian tourists waiting at the velvet ropes to get into the Chanel boutique, a whole basement floor devoted to designer shoes, and the beautiful, huge floral arrangements ... such fun.



Did I mention, I surveyed the shoe offerings in each city, and yet managed not to buy any; but did succumb to a sparkly crystal and pearl necklace.



I especially like the housewares areas where different and innovative everyday things grab attention and stimulate creativity.



Conveniently, the restaurant we chose that last evening was next door to the hotel. There I finally had my favorite Paris meal, moules et frites; in the shadow of the Eiffel tower, red wine, rainy night, Al, all is wonderful.