

Is There Ever Too Much?

“Enough! Enough! I can’t look at any more of this stuff! It’s all the same. I have to get out of here!”

Such anguish. I can’t recall hearing such anguish in my wife’s voice - before or since.

“You sound like Mark Twain!”

It was the end of a long day of sightseeing. Started early and running late.

But we were entering the Great Council Chamber of the Doge’s Palace, just beginning our tour of Venice’s most impressive site. The architecture – exquisite; the art – spectacular; the history – ancient!



Saved for the last to avoid the day tour and cruise ship crowds, the place was empty; we’d have it to ourselves.

So, which of us was in a greater panic, my wife desperate to leave or me desperate to stay?

Twain hated, just hated the “old masters”. In his 1869 travelogue *The Innocents Abroad*, written after a grand tour of Europe and the Holy Land, his contempt became pathological.



Beginning in Paris, he “found small pleasure in examining” the Louvre’s “miles of paintings by the old masters”, condemning their “nauseous adulation of princely patrons”.

In Milan, he mocked others’ adoration of Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* - “the mournful wreck of the most celebrated painting in the world”. (It’s been restored and preserved in the past fifty years.)



In poor Venice - “fallen a prey to poverty, neglect and melancholy decay” (even today) – “We have seen famous pictures until our eyes are weary with looking at them and refuse to find interest in them any longer.”

At this point in the book, I was embarrassed for him. And Twain, not without concern for what he termed his “uncouth sentiments”, concluded that he found his beauty “in the grand pictures that are spread before me every day of my life by that monarch of all the old masters, Nature.”

By the time Twain arrived in Rome, poor “Michael Angelo” took the brunt of his attack:

“I wish to say one word about Michael Angelo Buonarrotti. I used to worship the mighty genius of Michael Angelo – that man who was great in poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture – great in everything he undertook. But I do not want Michael Angelo for breakfast – for luncheon – for dinner – for tea – for supper – for between meals.”

Yet his introspection continued after touring the Vatican Museums (for me, the most amazing collection).

In its “wilderness of statues, paintings, and curiosities of every description”, Twain found Raphael’s *Transfiguration* “in a room almost by itself”.

After all the works of art he’d seen and dismissed, this one stood out and earned his lengthy and lavish praise: “It is a picture that really holds one’s attention; its beauty is fascinating.”

Though on reflection, he wondered:

“Is it not possible that the reason I find such charms in this picture is because it is out of the crazy chaos of the galleries? If some of the others were set apart, might not they be beautiful? If this were set in the midst of the tempest of pictures one finds in the vast galleries of the Roman palaces, would I think it so handsome? If, up to this time, I had seen only one ‘old master’ in each palace, instead of acres and acres of walls and ceilings fairly papered with them, might I not have a more civilised opinion of the old masters than I have now? I think so.”



My wife and I’d visited the Vatican Museums barely a day before, and we’d begun our time in Venice touring the Accademia Galleries’ collection of masterpieces from Byzantine to Renaissance.

Now we were entering rooms of the Doge’s Palace lined with canvases depicting Venetian victories and nobility.

Even I felt a bit claustrophobic, penned in by vast muraled ceilings and heavy, gold-leafed moldings.

As the travel planner, it was my fault. My desire - or at least stamina - to sightsee is greater. On a short stay, it's hard not to overbook in a place like Venice. I try not to; perhaps not hard enough.



But you can't skip the Doge's Palace in Venice.

She groaned, I moaned - and we "hurried" through it. Unforgettable!

And Twain didn't skip anything either; he saw it all and then some.

Just you really can't see it all. Perhaps the best places you've always wanted to visit are those you'll want to go back to. Leave something for the next time, even fearing it may never come.

Ah, for another day in Venice!

Steve Glovsky can be reached at TravelsWithTwain.com.

[Hear about the history of Mark Twain's grand tour of Europe and the Holy Land and its tie to Wayland, Massachusetts at the upcoming Annual Meeting of the Wayland Historical Society on Wednesday, May 10th at 7:00 P.M. in the Raytheon Room of the Wayland Free Public Library - (waylandmuseum.org) and also by Zoom:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/83498554073?pwd=U1AxQ3lZVlR2MHpFYWVuM3VlOL051dz09>

Meeting ID: 834 9855 4073
Passcode: 434783]

