

A ramble round the shopwindows of Paris

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A RAMBLE ROUND THE SHOPWINDOWS OF PARIS

Draw a line from the Place Vendôme up towards the Etoile, with a bend in it to include St. Augustin, and then another line from the Etoile to the Place Vendôme jutting out at the Place de l'Alma. In this rather irregular lozenge, you have the Paris of the shopwindows — the number one attraction for the foreigner or the provincial visiting Paris for a few days.

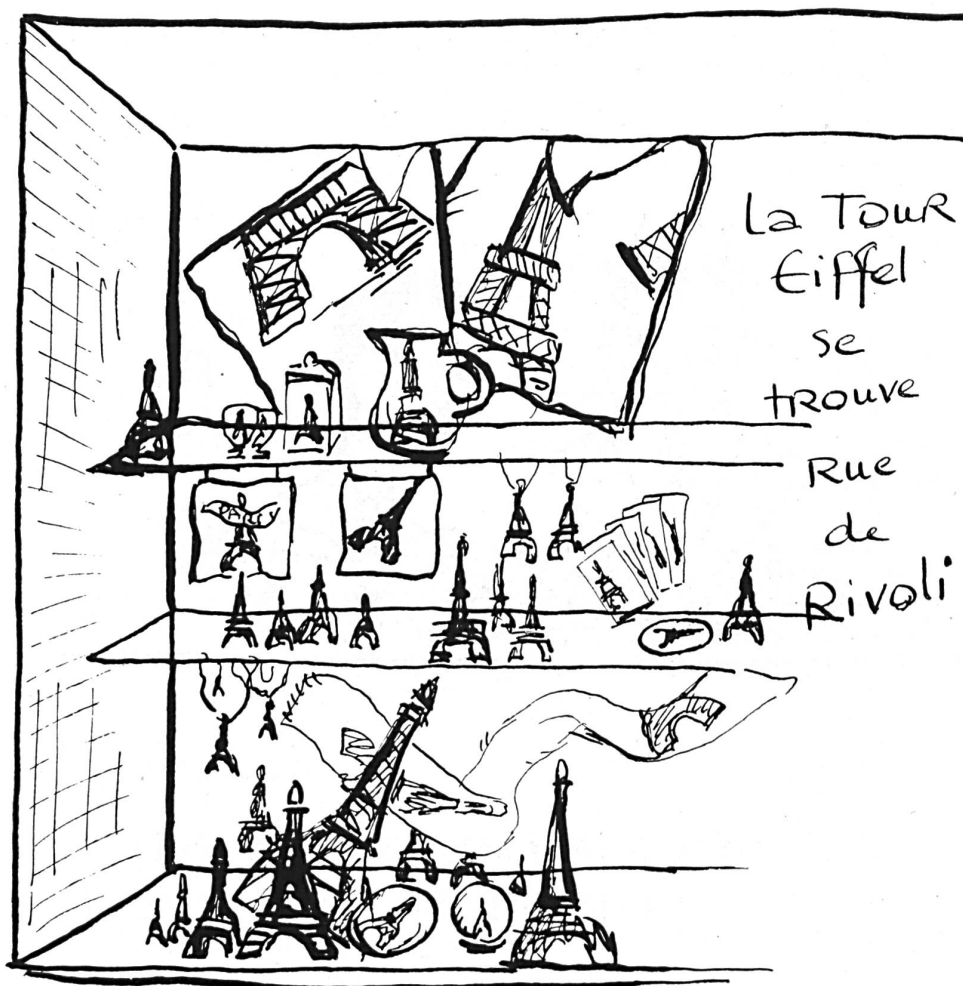
Do not try and tell me that the shopwindows take second place to the monuments, the museums and the catalogued viewpoints — you would be very wide of the mark. Just think back a moment. Go back in your mind to your first arrival in some foreign capital. Once the hotel has been chosen, the room accepted, the luggage unpacked and the dresses put tidily away on their hangers — I do not mention the men's suits purposely, since there are never any hangers left for them anyway and they have to be content with the backs of chairs — all this done and your conscience clear, where do you go first of all? I repeat — to look at the shopwindows. It is by far the best way to get to know a town.

What can be more amusing, when in London, than to stroll past the shopwindows crammed to overflowing in Regent Street, Piccadilly, Bond Street or the Burlington Arcade? Everything has a typically English look about it which, right away, puts you in touch with the crowd.

And New York? Naturally, the first time in this city one makes straight for the Empire State Building. But to get there one has to go down Fifth Avenue, and one takes advantage of the opportunity to saturate oneself with the style of the New York window-dressers.

And so it goes on. To back up my theory I could quote one capital after another by way of example, make great show of peripatetic knowledge (in the strict Aristotelian sense of the word, « that which teaches while walking »), speak of the Avenue of Alcalá in Madrid, the Street of Gold in Lisbon, the Gonsalvez-Diaz in Rio de Janeiro, the... but it would be too easy and rather pretentious. It is Paris that I want to talk about. The Paris of the shopwindows, which changes every day and which forms the veritable economic and demographic geography of the capital.

Our shopwindows all have a certain style that makes them akin, but then, on the other hand, there are groups and affinities that transform the appearance of our streets and avenues, upset the traffic and change the appearance of the pedestrians.



Let us take, first of all, the main thoroughfare which crosses the area we have outlined on the plan — the avenue of the Champs-Élysées. Look closely at this triumphal way, in the small hours of the morning when all is quiet and serene, when the traffic is stilled and there is not a soul on the street. It has no character; it is made up of dissimilar elements, a mixture of Napoleon III mansions, modern buildings and houses built at the beginning of the century, of all shapes and heights. In spite of that, this avenue is all of a piece. It even has a kind of beauty in its lack of uniformity, due doubtless to its width, its inclination, the imposing monument that dominates it, and the bluish haze of the Tuileries in the distance, but also to the shopwindows, the huge plate-glass fronts, the splashes of colour of the advertisements.

And yet, it is not in the Champs-Élysées that you will find the quintessence of Parisian shops. Of course there are the sleek and shiny motor cars, the long graceful bonnets of the Talbots or Delahayes, the solid chromium painted jaws of the De Sotos and Packards, the wrinkled noses of the 2 H.P. Citroëns. But you can see these in any big town. There are, too, the travel agencies with the scale models of aeroplanes and ships, the outfitters' blazoned with gold on a staff ground, the cinemas, whose queues at night remind one of strips of flypaper and, finally, the cafes. These are already more Parisian. But apart from the Lido Arcade where the clothing shops are definitely Parisian, although not particularly high class, the Champs-Élysées does not represent Paris. It is a cosmopolitan street, showy without any real distinction; it goes with the street photographers, the over-dressed shop-assistants and the flashy shops.

The Avenue Georges V, where the tone is set by Fouquet's, is quite different although it is gradually being commercialised — luxury shirtmakers, florists and couturiers are beginning to make it their home; two big international hotels clutter up the pavements with outsize Bentleys, Cadillacs and Rolls Royces. Just around the corner, Jacques Fath and Balmain attract the women of fashion.

Few shopwindows, but all original and in good taste. Here we are in the ultra-chic Paris. Is it the true one? Is it the most diverting? — Actually...

But to continue. At one time the avenue which goes from the Place de l'Alma to the Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées was an extremely « swanky » one, containing big mansions, fashionable dwellings, the head offices of holding companies and companies with big registered capitals. The former Allée des Veuves of the Directoire, which at the time of the Second Empire resounded to the trumpets and drums of Mabilie, the famous public ball, known for its wild cancons — or the Avenue Montaigne, to give it its present name — began to change, the day August Perret built the finest theatre in France there. It acquired its letters patent of nobility in 1946 when Christian Dior moved there. Since then, a few shopwindows have put in a timid appearance, but just wait... in ten years the Avenue Montaigne will have attracted the people who now patronise its continuation, the Avenue Matignon, which is growing out of date. The Avenue Matignon reigned supreme in the days of Lelong, Callot and others more. In spite of being enriched by the presence of Maggy Rouff, who moved into the splendid mansion of La Vaupalière, two steps away from the house of the handsome Fersen, lover of Marie-Antoinette, it no longer enjoys the same favour as it did ten years ago at the end of the occupation. To be sure, there are the new windows of Jean Dessès, carved out of the foundations of the Eiffel Hotel, but it seems to be losing some of its prestige every day.

The thoroughfare however where the purest blood of Parisianism still flows, remains true to itself — the Faubourg St. Honoré, younger brother of the Rue St. Honoré. The most beautiful shopwindows in the world sparkle there, those created for Hermès by the amazing Annie Baume. A strange street, with well-defined sections, crammed with little shops representing a hundred and one different trades.

From the Place Vendôme to the Rue Royale, on both sides of the street, is the domain of blouses, coats, bags, little goldsmiths and jewellers, ceramists and lingerie makers. Between the Rue Royale and the Avenue de Friedland, couturiers, milliners, tea-shops, antique dealers, perfumers, shoemakers, stocking shops, shops selling knitwear, crystal, brushes, woollens and gloves, decorators, chocolate makers, carpet dealers and shirtmakers display in a few square yards the best and most original Paris has to offer. It is a far cry from the outsize plate-glass windows of the Champs-Élysées. Here, everything is on a small scale, but distinctive and well done. From Royale to Boissy d'Anglas, both pavements are interesting, but from Hermès on it is mostly the right side. On the left, with few exceptions, we are in the world of officialdom: the Cercle Interallié, the British Embassy, the American Services, the home of the President of the Republic. Then the Faubourg becomes eclectic once more and, beyond St. Philippe, changes completely. Already there is less style and it is hardly worth a visit if you are spending only a few days in Paris. But, around the true « Rue de Paris », how many amusing little streets there are: the Boétie, with its household utensils and its art galleries, Franklin Roosevelt, Colisée, Ponthieu with their small craftsmen, their « bistros », their American bars, their shoemakers and Miromesnil with its antique dealers.

It is in the district of St. Honoré that we come nearest to feeling the real heart of Paris beat, the Paris of art and creation. Naturally, there are the big shopwindows of Le Printemps, the Galeries, the Louvre, the Trois-Quartiers, the Samaritaine, with their exaggerated, aggressive effects. To



Caroline



be sure, there are the boulevards, glittering with lights, with cinemas, a sort of minor Champs-Élysées where the true Parisians no longer stroll as they were wont to do; there is, of course, the Avenue de l'Opéra with its bookshops, its ceramists, its steel merchants, its dealers in sporting rifles and travelling articles; there is also the Rue de Rivoli with its hundreds of little shops selling bronze, glass and china Eiffel Towers by the thousand, handkerchiefs with loving mottos, postcards and cheap souvenirs. You will often find here the little inexpensive gift you are looking for, which may be quite characteristic — but the heart of Paris does not beat here.

When all is said and done, it will be sufficient, in order to discover the magic of Paris, to visit the lozenge-shaped area, to stroll through its streets. You will see there no phosphorescent ties, multicoloured shirts or striking eccentricities, but good quality, tasteful objects, which cannot be found elsewhere and which are the fruit of several centuries of craftsmanship and tradition. Leave your car behind, you will not be able to find a parking place. Go on foot, take your time just window-shopping, you will not regret it. And this gentle stroll will teach you more about Paris, its inhabitants, its customs and its history than a whole morning spent at Carnavalet. You will see the *raison-d'être* of Paris, the explanation of its perpetual charm: love of beauty, fondness of moderation, instinct for taste.

But I do not know why I am telling you all this. I have a feeling that I am breaking in a door that has already been opened, and that you have not waited for me before getting to know the shopwindows of Paris. You must bear with me however: it is so easy to rave on when talking of what one loves...

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