

THE SUPPLEMENT TO DIDEROT'S VOYAGE

One of the most enjoyable parts of writing about the life of Denis Diderot has been reconnoitering, exploring, and sometimes imagining the physical spaces that the writer frequented during his lifetime. Several friends sensed my fascination with this aspect of the writer's existence and suggested that I provide something of a more focused *visite guidée* that one could follow if desired.

The logical place to start a tour of Diderot's life is where his own began, in Langres.¹ Unless one lives in neighboring Burgundy or Champagne, the best way to reach Langres is by train from Paris's Gare Saint-Lazare. Some three hours after leaving the capital, one arrives in the sleepy suburb-like valley below the city. Low-lying clouds often hover here, which gives the impression that Langres's ramparts are floating in the air.

If you are lucky enough to have a strong pair of lungs and legs, forgo a taxi and set off on the calf-stretching hike up to the old city. (A GPS is not needed, just follow the hill.) After about a twenty-minute walk, one arrives at the imposing embankments, towers, and stone gateways that serve as a testament to the city's former nickname and motto: The Maid, *always attacked but never taken*.

One can get a real feel for this mile-square city in a day or two. The best place to start a tour of Langres is on the city's 3.5 kilometer rampart walkway. During this forty-five minute stroll around the city's periphery, one can both peer down into a number city's neighborhoods, and look out over the ramparts for what seems like hundreds of miles (weather permitting) in all directions. To the east, one looks over the Lac de la Liez, the Marne valley, the Vosges mountains and, one a perfect day, the Swiss Alps. On the other side city is the Bonnelle valley and **the so-called Langres plateau** with its undulating hills and woods. These astonishing vistas led many people during the eighteenth century to believe – mistakenly of course – that Langres was the highest city in France.

Within a few minutes of leaving the ramparts for the city itself, one arrives at a triangular intersection that has long reflected the city's symbolic identity. In the early ninth century, this parcel of land – designated as *campus bellus* – actually belonged to Charlemagne's grandson, Charles the Fat (839-888). Months before his death, the Carolingian emperor signed over this property to Langres's bishop. Over the next eight centuries, this formerly royal property – ultimately known as the *Place Chambeau* in French – evolved into the city's central axis and principal gathering space for religious festivals, processions, and plays.

As I described in the first chapter, the Place Chambeau became the Place Diderot on the hundredth anniversary of the writer's death, in 1884. Number six

Place Diderot, which belonged to Diderot's grandparents, is where Denis was born. Number nine, which currently houses a tobacco, stationary, and souvenir store, used to have a rounded door through which one would have seen Didier Diderot's cutlery workshop. Down the street from the two Diderot residences, one can also stroll by the "Collège Diderot," which Diderot attended before moving to Paris. (Although much of this *collège* burned in 1746, it was rebuilt very much in the style of the age.)

The next stop on the tour is the neighborhood of the Saint-Mammès Cathedral. Begin with your back to the façade of the cathedral and imagine that much of the small park (now named Place Olivier Lahalle) in front of you was taken up by a thirteenth-century church, that was raised in 1799. This was the parish of Saint-Pierre and Saint-Paul, where Diderot was baptized. Directly behind this now open space is a charming little house where Diderot's censorious brother, Didier-Pierre, lived after 1773 (today 5, Place Jeanne Mance).

Now turn back toward the Saint-Mammès cathedral, which was the political and religious center of Langres during Diderot's lifetime. The façade that you are looking at is not the original. By 1750, this western portion of the church had begun to collapse and was torn down and replaced with a far more classical façade (more reminiscent of Saint Sulpice than Chartres). The cathedral received another facelift in the early 1790s, when revolutionaries replaced a number of religious themed friezes (such as a bishop's miter) with revolutionary symbols, such as the *bonnet phrygien*, the red cap of liberty worn by the revolutionaries.

To get a sense of the importance of religion in Langres during Diderot's lifetime, it is best to walk around the city with an eighteenth-century map (see attached). Notice, first, that the entire city was peppered with monasteries and convents that were erected during the Counter-Reformation. Most of these buildings are still standing, though they have been converted to new purposes. The former Oratorian seminary, for example, is now the city's municipal theater. One of the convents that has disappeared is that belonging to the Ursalines (rue Tournelle), where Diderot's sister Angélique died in 1748 or 1749. Make sure that you walk by the ruins of the chapel.

Perhaps more catholic (and less agnostic) than many cities in France, Langres has nonetheless adopted Diderot as part of its identity. In 2013, the city opened an excellent museum – *La Maison ds Lumières*) in his honor that is housed in a sixteenth century *hôtel particulier* located on 1, place Pierre Burelle.

During several visits to the city, I have made it a point to ask a number of *Langrois* what Diderot means to them. The few high school students I have come across – they attend the Lycée Diderot, of course – tend to consider the writer as the city's bad boy mascot. For sixty years running, a committee of students has decorated the statue of Diderot that stands in the city's central square on his birthday. Each October 5th, Langres wakes up to find the bronze effigy of Diderot disguised as a bishop, a hippie, a transvestite, or a Wall Street Banker. In a nod to his novel of the same name, the nun has been a recurring favorite.

Back in Paris, where Diderot spent the vast majority of his life, his presence is not nearly as tangible. This became very clear to me a couple of years ago when I was strolling past the house where the writer died at **39, rue de Richelieu**. Though in a hurry, I noticed that workers had left open the building's *portes cochères* to move ladders in and out. Sensing a rare opportunity, I snuck in through these twelve-foot doors into a vestibule that, 250 years before, would have led to an inner courtyard for the owner's coach and horses. To my left was the timeworn stone staircase leading to Diderot's apartment on the second floor.

As I was imagining Diderot's lead coffin being carried down these stairs, one of the building's residents came up behind me through the same open entryway and said hello. I turned, smiled, introduced myself as an American writer, and proceeded to ask her if she lived in the apartment where Diderot had spent his last hours. She looked at me, initially puzzled, as if I was asking about a current resident, then asked, "Do you mean Molière? Molière lived across the street. There's a plaque and a statue." I stammered quickly that the city of Paris had also put up a plaque in the façade of her own building in 1885, though it was now practically unreadable. She slowly nodded her head up and down, humoring me, then disappeared quickly behind a thick glass door.

Who can blame this nice Parisian woman? Her neighborhood simply has too many famous ghosts battling for recognition. In addition to Molière, who had the audacity to die across the street in 1673, the rue de Richelieu was home to the great novelist Stendhal and the revolutionary leader Simon Bolivar, who schooled himself in French Enlightenment thought – including that of Diderot – before returning to Venezuela to emancipate half of Latin America.²

Diderot may not have left a mark on the neighborhood where he died, but it is nonetheless a decent enough place to start a tour, albeit anything but a chronological tour of his life.

Walk around the corner from his apartment on the rue de Richelieu onto the rue Montpensier, and you will enter into (an admittedly newer version of) the Palais Royal pleasure gardens where Diderot often came to meet Sophie Volland, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or, far less often, Jean-François Rameau. The beautiful flower-filled park was also home to the Café de la Régence, where Diderot played chess, and the Petit Caveau, where he often had ice cream. Diderot's dearest friends – among them Sophie, Madame de Maux, d'Holbach, Madame d'Épinay, and Falconet – all lived or maintained apartments within a short walk of this neighborhood. This was also the case for Grimm, who had a flat for years on the rue Neuve-Luxembourg (now **rue Cambon, 75001**), not far from the rue Saint Honoré.

From the Palais Royal, it is only a short walk to where Diderot was laid to rest in the late Baroque Eglise Saint-Roch, on **284 rue Saint-Honoré**. Make sure to walk into the deepest part of the church and into the Chapelle de la Vierge, where

you will be standing in front of a beautiful sculpture by Falconet. Diderot's crypt is located in front of the altar, often with a second, smaller table placed on top of it.

If one is more inclined to temples of atheism than churches, take a stroll from the Eglise Saint-Roch to Baron d'Holbach's townhouse on what used to be called rue Royale (now rue des Moulins, 1st arrdt). This is a small street whose well-constructed eighteenth-century townhouses look very much like they did in the 1740s. Replace the electrical lamps with gas, and get rid of the cars, and it is quite easy to imagine Diderot pulling up in a carriage on Thursday and Sunday afternoons for "dinner" among an ever-changing group of atheists, dignitaries, and freethinkers, some of whom were involved in d'Holbach's clandestine war against the Church and God Himself.

D'Alembert's *hôtel particulier* is now identified as # **8, rue des Moulins**) and has no plaque, other than the brass inscribed brass nameplate indicating a neighborhood dentist's office. How sad, at least from my point of view, that some people are getting root canals in the same room where d'Holbach served the most sumptuous food and wine, not to mention some of the era's most scandalous ideas.

Other landmarks associated with Diderot's life on the Right Bank are less joyful. To the east, just beyond the Bastille, is the **rue Traversière** where Diderot lived for an unhappy year with Toinette shortly after they were just married. The sole significant architectural landmark that one might conceivably visit from this era is the Eglise Sainte-Marguerite [**36, rue Saint-Bernard, 75011**], where Diderot and Toinette buried one of their children.)

Even farther to the east outside of Paris is the Château de Vincennes where Diderot was locked up for three months. A medieval fortification converted a royal palace and then hunting lodge, this is a museum well worth visiting. To the full effect of Diderot's imprisonment here, eat some stale bread for breakfast, a bowl of "past its sell-by date" mutton stew for lunch, and then visit the prison cells on a cold October afternoon around four in the afternoon.

It is now time to return to where Diderot spent much of his life, on the Left Bank. Make sure to cross the river via the Île Saint-Louis, and look down the rue des Deux-Ponts, where Diderot stayed (address unknown) after escaping from Carmelite monastery in Langres. It was also on this same island that Diderot and Toinette got married at the Saint-Pierre-aux-Boeufs church, which was razed in 1837 to make way for the present **rue d'Arcole**. Diderot devotees can still track down the church's main portal, however; it was added to the west façade of the Église Saint-Séverin on the **rue Saint-Séverin**.

As one leaves the Île de la Cité for the Left Bank, one must remember that this portion of Paris was not yet the huge agglomeration of arrondissements that we now associate with the southern portion of the capital. During the eighteenth century, "Diderot's Paris" included only the northern portion of the fifth and six

arrondissements, along with several populated Faubourgs, including the foul and impoverished Faubourg Saint Marcel and the more refined Faubourg Saint-Germain. All in all, the Left Bank of Paris probably had 250,000 or 300,000 inhabitants living there in 1750.

Locating vestiges of Diderot's existence in the southern portion of the city is harder than it seems. Paris may seem timeless and unchanging to the tourist, but it has always been a shifting, growing, evolving creature that often consumes its own young. Much has disappeared here. In addition to the loss of various architectural landmarks, Paris no longer has the smell of an eighteenth-century metropolis, particularly the omnipresent stench of raw sewage, animal dung, and, if one walked east of Notre Dame, Paris's tannery industry.

The most logical place to begin a tour of Diderot's Left Bank life is just south of Notre Dame, in the Latin Quarter, which was known as the *quartier de l'université* as well. Urban renewal and renovation have erased many of the landmarks associated with Diderot's life here. On the northernmost portions of the north-south **Boulevard Saint-Michel**, cars now drive through the space where Diderot attended the sprawling medieval-era Collège d'Harcourt. The eighteenth-century Sorbonne classrooms on the **rue de la Sorbonne** were also razed and replaced in the nineteenth century, though the chapel remains.

During the eighteenth century, the Latin Quarter was home to a curious mix of ecclesiastics, scholars, and a large number of tradespeople involved in the book trade. Located along and around the **rue Saint Jacques** and the University of Paris were perhaps twenty-five or thirty booksellers and printers. Among these was the bookshop and print house belonging to the driving force behind the *Encyclopédie*, André-François Le Breton. His shop, located at the corner of the **rue Saint-Séverin** and the **rue de la Harpe** is occupied by a nondescript mortar building housing a South Tunisian bakery.

Diderot rented a number of apartments in the Latin Quarter, including his first apartment with Toinette on the rue Saint-Victor in 1743. He also lived on the rue Moufflard in the **Faubourg Saint Marcel** in 1746, only steps away from the Jansenist Saint-Médard Church. The Church itself is worth visiting, though the adjacent cemetery (with François de Pâris' grave) has disappeared, which explains why there are no longer any *convulsionnaires* here either.

From 1747 to 1754, Diderot and Toinette also lived on the rue de l'Estrapade. While there is some uncertainty if he lived in the same building for seven years, the couple certainly lived for a time at **3, rue de l'Estrapade**. The building has added another story since Toinette reportedly looked out of the first floor window and saw her husband being rudely pushed into the carriage that would take him to Vincennes.³

The address that was the most synonymous with Diderot during his lifetime is the rue Taranne, which was located in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Today this

same geographical space is home to Paris's great cafés, Deux Magots and the Brasserie Lipp. It certainly looks timeless. And yet, like most of the city, this Faubourg Saint-Germain quarter was razed and reborn, several times over. A century or so before Diderot was born, this area was farmland, filled with little more than grazing animals, verdant meadows, and the occasional small stone farmhouse. Sixty years later, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, dozens of *hôtels particuliers* and limestone apartment buildings began to rise on both sides of the Faubourg's cow paths and country roads. By the time that Diderot and his family moved to their apartment on the rue Taranne in 1754, the once pastoral district had become a natural extension of the burgeoning capital. It was here, at **2, rue Taranne**, which was about a hundred yards from the Saint-Germain-des-Prés Abbey, that Diderot held court in his fifth-floor garret office, oversaw the production of the great *Encyclopédie*, and wrote his most celebrated books.

Architecturally speaking, not much changed in their former neighborhood until the mid-1860s, when the entire quarter fell prey to an army of dust-caked laborers working under the Baron Haussmann. As was the fate for four thousand other buildings in Paris at the time, pickaxes and sledgehammers tore at Diderot's 125-year old apartment house, while oxen, mules, and great new machines carted away their walls and foundations. By 1880, all traces of Diderot's existence in the quarter – including the rue Taranne itself – had been replaced by the congruent and orderly stone facades lining the massive transversal of Boulevard Saint-Germain. Today, on 149 Boulevard Saint-Germain, an Armani shop occupies the same basic space where, in the 1750s, a wigmaker rented the ground floor of Diderot's rue Taranne building.

Diderot often walked far and wide from his rue Taranne neighborhood. To do so he began by circumventing the fortress-like walls of the neighboring Abbey of Saint-Germain. To go north, toward the river, he then entered a series of medieval streets choked with small manufacturing concerns, book shops, and the occasional cook caterer. Diderot often went to the Louvre and the Right Bank. To do so, he took one of two bridges. The Pont Neuf was the more pleasant. As one of the few overpasses without houses blocking the view of the river and the city, this most modern of bridges gave its pedestrians the opportunity to see the façade of the Louvre palace stretching out on the other bank of the Seine.⁴ This was his Paris.

¹ The best way to make the 250-kilometer trip to Langres is by train and then on foot. From the Langres train station, which is actually in the valley, look out

walk up the steep hill to the citadel-like city. This sweat-inducing twenty-minute walk up to the steep granite ramparts and a stone portal explain the

² Manuel Anselmi, *Chevez's Children: Ideology, Education, and Society in Latin America*, Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013, p. 26.

³ Like many neighborhoods in Paris, the history of the *quartier de l'estrapade* has long since disappeared from the city's collective memory. During Diderot's lifetime, however, the name of the street conjured up a forty-foot, tripod-like machine – an *estrapade* – that was used to inflict unspeakable torture upon criminals, the unorthodox, or Protestants unwilling to convert. Its victims were hoisted by their elbows to a height of thirty-five feet, then released into a free fall until the rope snapped taut – a mere seven feet off the ground. One wonders if Diderot thought about the history of his street name when he, too, was arrested for his heresy in July of 1749.

⁴ Diderot seems to have taken the Pont Royal when going to the Tuileries. See Diderot, *Diderot on Art – II: The Salon of 1767*, trans. John Goodman (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 312. The Pont Neuf was probably closer to the entrance of the Salon, however.