David McCullough celebrates American tie with Paris


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By Glenn C. Altschuler

In 1845 during a triumphant European tour, P.T. Barnum, the "Prince of Humbugs," arranged a meeting between his protege, General Tom Thumb, and King Louis-Philippe at the Tuileries in Paris.

Attired in a black coat, white vest and diamond shirt pin, the 7-year-old midget, who stood 2 feet tall and weighed 16 pounds, arrived in a miniature carriage drawn by four ponies. "What can you say in French?" Louis-Philippe asked. "Vive le Roi!" the General replied. He then looked at his tiny pocket watch and removed a pinch of snuff from a bejeweled box.

Tom Thumb was one of thousands of Americans who set out for Paris during the 19th century. Few of them shared the General's enthusiasm for the monarchy, but many found inspiration -- and more than a bit of pleasure -- in the City of Light.

Reminding us that "not all pioneers went West," David McCullough, one of America's most beloved historians, chronicles their experiences in "The Greater Journey."

Although the ranks of American travelers included students, salesmen, ministers, merchants, and nouveau riche tourists, Mr. McCullough focuses on the people Margaret Fuller called "thinking Americans," who celebrated their birth in a New World but did not "wish the seed from the past to be lost."

These artists -- James Fenimore Cooper, Samuel F.B. Morse, John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt, Augustus Saint-Gaudens -- settled in Paris, learned their craft, made their mark and then returned home.

"The Greater Journey" is, in essence, a series of sketches by a masterful storyteller. With Saint-Gaudens' career and his marriage hanging in the balance (the parents of Augusta Homer, an art student from Roxbury, Mass., would not consent until he had secured a major commission), the young sculptor known (if known at all) as a "cameo cutter," somehow got the $9,000 contract from the City of New York to create a large bronze memorial to David Farragut, the Civil War naval hero whose defeat of the Confederates in the Battle of Mobile Bay resulted in the surrender of New Orleans.

Unveiled in Madison Square in 1881, with a Marine band playing and sailors marching, the finished work,
more than 8 feet in length and weighing 900 pounds, was acclaimed as a masterpiece, the work of "a new Donatello."

In time, Mr. McCullough writes, Saint-Gaudens would create five more public monuments to the Civil War, one of them, the statue of Gen. William Sherman, like the Farragut, made in Paris.

Artists flocked to Paris, the author explains, because the city afforded them unique opportunities to learn what was au courant; measure themselves against their most successful contemporaries; and exhibit their work to the world's most discerning audiences.

Once enamored with Velazquez and Correggio, Mary Cassatt, like Mr. McCullough, a Pittsburgher, discovered the works of Monet, Renoir, Manet, Pissarro and Degas, later known as the Impressionists, in 1875 and began to see and paint in an entirely new way.

When Degas visited her studio and asked her to become the first American in their group (La Societe Anonyme des Artistes), Cassatt accepted with joy, feeling fully free now to "work with absolute independence."

"The Greater Journey," however, is far more descriptive than analytical. Mr. McCullough doesn't add all that much to our understanding of the impact on his subjects of the Paris sojourn. He is far more interested in taking us into the streets to witness what American Ambassador Elihu Washburne called "the incredible enormities" of the Paris Commune and listen to denunciations of Gustave Eiffel's 1,000-foot wrought iron tower ("more in character with America where taste is not very developed")

And in inviting us to celebrate a (perhaps more innocent) time when talented and ambitious Americans loved Paris, every moment of the year.

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