

What the ancients knew about the pleasures of armchair travel

BY TOM CHAFFIN

In his opera “Carmen,” the 19th-century composer Georges Bizet created what is arguably the world’s most celebrated musical work associated with Spain. That achievement came despite the fact that the Paris-born composer never set foot in the land of Don Quixote.

Similarly, William Shakespeare set 24 of his 37 plays in foreign realms, yet the playwright never traveled outside his native England.

In our age of cheap flights and bucket list destinations, many people are making an environmental case for vicarious adventures, for the thrills and satisfactions of armchair travel — not to mention the rewards of reading deeply about a place rather than just passing through it.

The ancients were way ahead of us. Pondering what we now call the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Greek writer Philo of Byzantium (circa 5th or 6th century CE, and the second writer to call himself that) was an early proponent of not going there. Alexander the Great’s Near East conquests, between 330 and 323 BCE, whetted Greek appetites for travel — or at least a yearning for it. Writers and thinkers of ancient Greece tended to limit their groupings of admired monuments to seven — a preoccupation derived from Mesopotamian civilization, which viewed that number as possessed of mystical properties.

“Everyone knows of the renowned Seven Wonders of the World, but few have set eyes on them,” Philo wrote.

“The traveler who reaches these places sees them once, and as soon as he leaves, he forgets, because he has not firmly grasped the delicate beauty of the works he has gazed upon.”

The seven were the Hanging Gardens of Babylon; the Great Pyramid of Giza; the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (near today’s Selçuk, Turkey); the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Greece; the Mausoleum (the tomb of Persian satrap Mausolus) at Halicarnassus (today’s Bodrum, Turkey); the Colossus (statue of the sun god Helios) at Rhodes, Greece; and the Pharos — the lighthouse — at Alexandria, Egypt.

It’s doubtful that Philo visited any of them.

By his lights, then, rather than traveling to, say, the Colosseum, in Rome; the Eiffel Tower, in Paris; or the Grand Canyon, in Arizona, to snap our selfie, post it on Instagram, and move on, we gain a more vivid appreciation of these places’ significance and splendor by reading about them.

Long before the advent of technologies capable of hurtling people, goods, and information across distances, the ancients wrestled with their own ambivalence over whether to travel or stay put.

For starters, few in the ancient world of the Mediterranean and Near East could spend the time or money required for recreational travel over long distances. The mostly male aspirants who could do so had to contend with the impediments of frequent wars and a dearth of lodgings and reliable maps.

And anyway, a traveler trying to find the Wonders might well have been dis-



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Maerten van Heemskerck’s rendering of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the world’s Seven Wonders.

appointed. Among the seven, one, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, likely never existed — at least not in Babylon. Among the other six, only one, Egypt’s Great Pyramid, remains standing; the others were destroyed over the years, variously by earthquakes, fires, demolition, theft, and vandalism.

On what sources did Philo and other ancient chroniclers of the monuments rely? They drew on the best works available to them: accounts from other Greek and Roman writers and travelers. In many cases, however, those individuals had likewise never actually gazed upon the Wonders. And their de-

scriptions, in turn, rested on now-lost manuscripts or even fragments of still earlier works — accounts, in many instances, replete with embellishments and embroideries.

In the late 16th century, Dutch artist Maerten van Heemskerck painted fanciful renderings of all seven Wonders. Over time, his images, widely reproduced as engravings and on tapestries, became templates for most visual representations of the Wonders. His influence, fixing our mind’s-eye conception of the fabled monuments, persists today.

Consider French sculptor Frédéric

Auguste Bartholdi’s Statue of Liberty, which drew on Heemskerck’s version of the Colossus at Rhodes. (Bartholdi’s statue had been originally conceived as “Egypt Carrying the Light to Asia” and was to stand at Port Said, Egypt, at the entrance to the Suez Canal.)

Or Sergio Leone’s 1961 film “The Colossus at Rhodes,” in which the statue, true to Heemskerck’s depiction, boldly straddles the harbor’s entrance, the figure holding a fiery bowl.

Thanks to modern archaeological discoveries, we now know that the giant Helios statue at Rhodes never bestrode the entrance to the island’s harbor. We also know that the statue was smaller than it was thought to have been. The sun god Helios himself underwent creative embellishment. He did not, as often depicted, hold his right arm up but stood serenely with both arms at his side.

Philo, eschewing “the exertion of foreign travel,” chose the pleasures of armchair discovery. “He, who by selective reading has become acquainted with a worthy sight knows the details of its form and has thus set eyes upon a complete work of art, and, because these sights have been seen in his mind’s eye they remain, imprinted on his mind, each single image, never to be destroyed.”

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