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The Grand Tour

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The Grand Tour was 'a phenomenon which shaped the creative and intellectual sensibilities of some of the eighteenth century's greatest artists, writers and thinkers'. So reads the opening paragraph of Adam Matthew Digital's new website, *The Grand Tour* [2]. It is a substantial claim to make, but a fair one. The Grand Tour, which attracted British travellers to the continent between c.1550 and 1850, was hugely influential in terms of Britain's cultural, social, political, architectural, gastronomic, sartorial and artistic evolution. Among its many and far-reaching influences, it fuelled the transformation of Britain's finest historic houses and provided much of their contents, defined the syllabi of many English preparatory schools, and introduced the authoritative architectural language of neoclassicism to British governmental and institutional buildings. It is perhaps not surprising then that the Grand Tour currently enjoys great popularity among scholars. In a research community where interdisciplinarity is celebrated and visual sources have finally won their place in peer-reviewed historical research, the Grand Tour holds appeal for researchers and reading audiences alike.

The recent avidity for 'all things Grand Tour' might justifiably be attributed to a succession of exhibitions on the subject over the past 15 years. One of the earliest, the Tate's *Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century* (1997), provided the model for much that was to follow. In this substantial exhibition the curators presented an array of visual material ranging from busts and oil paintings to sketches and panels. The result suggested comprehensiveness, but it was in fact, focused squarely on the image and experience of Italy. Four years later, between 2001 and 2002, a trilogy of exhibitions at the Getty in Los Angeles ensured ongoing international interest in the essentially British phenomenon. Again, the focus was Italy. *Naples and Vesuvius on the Grand Tour*, *Rome of the Grand Tour*, and *Drawing Italy in the Age of the Grand Tour* were accompanied by musical performances and talks which fuelled popular as well as academic enthusiasm for the subject. More recently, these broad, inclusive shows have given way to exhibitions that address a specific

element of the Tour, or which contextualise it more explicitly within 18th-century society and culture. Although small, *From Reason to Revolution: Art and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (2007⁸) positioned the Grand Tour alongside the Industrial Revolution, exploration, scientific discovery, and slavery. In so doing, the Fitzwilliam revealed to visitors some of the Tour's wider social, cultural and artistic implications. The importance of the Grand Tour's legacy and influence is also reflected in the Victoria and Albert Museum's British Galleries, which opened in 2001 and continue to attract large numbers. In 2008, the National Gallery's Pompeo Batoni exhibition gave visitors a different perspective of the Tour through the portraits painted by that artist. Although it attracted large crowds, this particular show may have prompted more 'Tour fatigue' than enthusiasm. Other specialist shows such as the Victoria and Albert Museum's *James 'Athenian' Stuart, 1713-1788* (2007) and *Thomas Hope: Regency Designer* (2008), and the Royal Academy's *Andrea Palladio: His Life and Legacy* (2009) testify to the seemingly endless potential for interesting and challenging exhibitions on the Grand Tour and its associated art and architecture.

Despite the evident appetite for exhibitions, digital resources on the Grand Tour have been slow to materialise. Jeremy Black's complaint, made in *The British Abroad* in 1992, that 'much tourist correspondence is poorly catalogued and scattered in general political or family correspondence and, in consequence, difficult to find' remained unanswered for 15 years. *The Grand Tour* website is the first coherent attempt to respond to this challenge by collating letters, diaries, printed guidebooks, travel writing, maps, paintings and architectural plans within one searchable, online resource. It is, therefore, a notable achievement and much-welcomed by the research community.

Technologically, *The Grand Tour* provides a number of benefits to scholars and general readers alike. The transcript feature enables a full-text search, leading viewers quickly and directly to relevant passages throughout the collection. The inclusion of original colour scans on a separate tab means that readers can alternate between the two formats, checking references and viewing illustrations as they read. This combination of searchable, easy-to-read transcripts and original scanned material is one of the greatest strengths of *The Grand Tour*. However, the effective integration of digital technologies does not end there. A download feature enables readers to download either a single image or an entire chapter in PDF format, while the inclusion of an export feature for *Endnote* and *Refworks* ensures that references can be easily and accurately recorded in the reader's own files. Of course, other websites and digital archives have incorporated similar electronic features. However, by making these elements more intuitive to use, the architects of *The Grand Tour* have broadened their potential user group. In doing so, they may prove to have played a significant role in reshaping the way in which scholars approach archival research.

The inclusion of a substantial number of manuscript sources, scanned and indexed represents a significant new resource for scholars and students of the period. There is no denying the sheer pleasure in being able to skip easily between such delights as *The frauds of Romish monks and priests set forth in eight letters* (1725), Maximilien Misson's cool and blasé observations on prostitution in Rome and Venice (1739 edn.), and Joseph Addison's surprisingly vehement criticism of the beef tax in Naples (1705). It is this diversity of material that attracts scholars to the Grand Tour as a subject, and the digitisation of these sources certainly makes the appeal all the greater. The search engine is powerful enough to be both specific and fast and there is no doubt that it can handle the volume of information currently uploaded to the site.

The digitized manuscripts and printed books constitute the richest resource on *The Grand Tour* website. However, the editorial board and designers have clearly made efforts to make the website as interdisciplinary as possible and visual material holds a prominent position within the site. It is perhaps the same fundamentally visual character of the Grand Tour, which lent the subject so easily to colourful and attractive exhibitions, which also makes it so well-suited to an interactive online resource. In fact, at its most basic level *The Grand Tour* website can be viewed as an online exhibition. However, the range and organisation of the visual material is a little disappointing. Within the 'Visual Sources' section of the site, items are categorised uneasily under the headings of 'maps?', 'art gallery?' and 'photo gallery?'. Unfortunately, the 'maps?' section is an interactive map, rather than a gallery of historical cartography. Similarly, the 'photo gallery?' is, rather inexplicably, a collection of specially-commissioned modern

photographs of extant historic Italian landmarks. Some of these are far more 'poster art' than historical resource, making the 'photo gallery' appear more like a page from *Flickr* or *Facebook* than a valuable scholarly resource. The 'art gallery' is the most rewarding of the three 'galleries' and the most valuable for academic research. Although hardly comprehensive, the gallery brings together paintings and sketches from a number of prominent collections, including the Paul Mellon Collection and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Works by Richard Wilson, William Pars and Claude Lorrain appear here alongside one another, providing novices with a useful introduction to the role of the visual arts in the Grand Tour experience. However, here, as with many museum exhibits, the material has taken centre stage at the expense of effective contextualising commentary.

Perhaps the most traditional element of the website, in terms of publishing at least, comes in the form of the three essays written by distinguished scholars, expert in this field. The essays by Jeremy Black, Rosemary Sweet and Edward Chaney, comprise an introduction to the Grand Tour as a subject, a 'tour' through the changing perceptions of Italian cities during the 18th century, and a historiographical account of Grand Tour scholarship since 1900 respectively. Jeremy Black's introductory essay is a little disappointing, if only for its brevity. At just over a thousand words in length it can merely hint at the diverse themes and subject matter he explores in his more substantial publications. Over the past two decades, Black has become synonymous with the Grand Tour, with two of his most well-known publications being *Italy and the Grand Tour* and *The British Abroad*.⁽¹⁾ Ironically, it may well be due to his extensive research and publications on the subject that his essay is disappointingly slight. The essay is too broad and at the same time too brief to satisfy a potentially wide readership. With such a huge base of material and knowledge, Black's essay reads too much like a ruthlessly edited digestion of a lengthy and varied article, skipping between subjects with few extended examples or quotations to illustrate his brief account. It provides little of the detail and primary material that a knowledgeable scholar might appreciate, and yet presumes too much prior knowledge among new initiates to the subject. Black moves so quickly through the themes of tourism, sex, travel literature and Italy, that the non-specialist may well feel they are missing something. And indeed they are. There is very little historical context in either Black's essay or the website as a whole, almost no mention of the education system that prepared the tourists for the locations, art and culture they would encounter, and very little about the legacy of their journeys on the architecture, politics, art and society of Britain.

Edward Chaney's account of one hundred years of scholarship on the Grand Tour takes readers from Herbert Thurston's *Holy Year of Jubilee* to Carole Paul's *The Borghese Collections and the Display of Art in the Age of the Grand Tour*.⁽²⁾ In this sense his contribution is comprehensive and certainly provides scholars with a fine reading list. However, it is perhaps the checklist quality of his essay that makes it appear rather out of place within the wider project. Chaney's account is likely to be of most interest to serious scholars of both the Tour and the study thereof, and is therefore arguably mismatched to a website in which the majority of contextualising material is apparently targeted at the general reader.

Rosemary Sweet's essay represents the most traditionally academic material on the site and yet, by virtue of its organisation by city, also the most accessible secondary account. Her account takes us from Florence to Rome and on to Naples and Venice. Although the focus is Italy, rather than a more geographically inclusive interpretation of the Tour, Sweet makes important connections between the political context of the Continent at large and the specific experiences of the individuals upon whose accounts historians rely. Furthermore, by focusing upon the cities as they were encountered by the tourists themselves, rather than the antique remains they examined so self-consciously, Sweet provides a fascinating analysis of 18th-century attitudes to urbanisation. Street plans, lighting, crime and hygiene are revealed as common preoccupations among travellers. By providing such a distinctive and original perspective, Sweet makes a valuable contribution to Grand Tour scholarship.

Sweet and Chaney's essays are certainly both specific in their intention and scholarly in their execution. However, as there are only two such essays, their presence possibly unbalances the project and throws into question the motivation behind their inclusion. They would sit more comfortably within a larger collection that reflects the true breadth of contemporary scholarship on the subject, and which might also include: women and the Grand Tour, a survey of cartographic sources, an art historian's perspective, an essay on the

development of the Continental hospitality industry during the 18th century, and any number of other, equally specific and well-researched subjects.

Inconsistencies in the length, depth, and format of these three essays also serve to compromise the potential impact of this element of the website upon the wider research community. The absence of something as immediately noticeable as a consistent referencing system across the three essays, robs the collection of any sense of being a single, coherent publication. Perhaps this is quite proper and resources such as *The Grand Tour* should be perceived much more as 'libraries', 'scrapbooks' or, to use the jargon of the moment, 'hubs' of information rather than formal publications. However, if this is to be so then the editorial boards of such projects may need to rethink their target audience and cease to present such resources as comparable to more rigorously copy-edited and peer-reviewed printed publications. Furthermore, if such a concession was to be made, and online resources awarded a special status in the field of scholarly publishing, then such projects may find it increasingly difficult to attract high-calibre scholars, when the perceived status of the final product, whether rightly or wrongly, is commensurate to that of an erudite internet blog.

None of these points are intended to impugn the quality of the scholarship that is clearly evident here in the essays and the website as a whole. But *The Grand Tour* does highlight the persistent and, as yet, unresolved challenges that pervade academic publishing online. Perhaps applying a consistent 'house style' to these essays would have meant that they sat a little more comfortably with the academic audience who, by virtue of the cost of subscription and the consequent reliance upon institutional subscriptions, will surely comprise the largest proportion of the site's readership. Notwithstanding these issues, by collating and indexing such a varied and fascinating array of verbal and visual sources, *The Grand Tour* represents a valuable and, what will surely prove to be a much-utilized, digital resource on this popular subject.

Notes

1. Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour* (London, 2003); *The British Abroad* (Stroud, 1992).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Herbert Thurston, *Holy Year of Jubilee* (London, 1900); Carole Paul, *The Borghese Collections and the Display of Art in the Age of the Grand Tour* (Burlington, 2008).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

[3]

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4304>

[2] <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/Collections/Grand-Tour.aspx>

[3] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>