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John Ramsay (and his Italian diary)

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Abstract

In 1782, John Ramsay undertook a journey to Italy with his father Allan, King George III's Painter in Ordinary. Their tour lasted two years and for the entire duration of their stay, John Ramsay kept a diary in which he recorded his busy social life and shared his experience of practices of sociability in Italian cities. Being the son of a renowned artist, he was invited to attend many concerts, plays and *conversazioni* where he met a great number of people including artists, Grand Tourists, ambassadors and even the King of Sweden.

John Ramsay's Italian diary was published by *The Walpole Society* in 2003; it is accompanied by a short introduction by John Ingamells, as well as an index containing the names of all the people Ramsay met during his stay in Italy. Preserved at the National Library of Scotland, this diary was written in two notebooks. The first entry is from 11 December 1782 and the last from 5 May 1784. For almost a year and a half, and almost daily, John Ramsay (1768-1845) wrote of his life and activities as he travelled through Italy in company of his father, the famous portrait painter Allan Ramsay (1713-1784). From the first pages, the reader understands that it was not a diary intended to be published one day, but rather a writing exercise imposed by his father, anxious to offer his son the best possible education. The descriptions provided by the young Ramsay are often very synthetic, but nonetheless of particular interest. Indeed, they constitute a precious testimony to the importance of the practices of sociability of British travellers at the height of the Grand Tour, an educational journey which was no longer reserved only for the nobility. It is also one of the rarest testimonies because few Italian travel diaries written by such a young [Grand Tour](#) traveller have come down to us. Most often it is through correspondence with the family who remained in Great Britain or the diaries kept by the tutors accompanying the young travellers that we learn about the life of these Britons and the social practices in which they took part while in Italian cities.

When they set out on their journey, John Ramsay was fourteen years old while his father, Allan, was sixty-nine. Allan Ramsay, who had opened his portrait studio in London at the end of the 1730s, had quickly established himself as one of the most popular artists in the English capital. In 1767, he was appointed Painter in Ordinary to King George III, who preferred him to his rival Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). His notoriety went beyond the borders of Great Britain as he was also famous in France and Italy, where he had studied between 1736 and 1738. Before making the trip with his son John, he had returned to Italy twice from 1754 to 1757, then from 1775 to 1777. The fame of the painter as well as his extensive network undeniably benefited the young John who was thus able to enjoy a busy social life during his trip across the peninsula.

His journey led him to visit three of the Italian cities which were then among the main stages of the Grand Tour: he resided in Rome, Naples and Florence. His stay was organised as follows: Rome from December 1782 to mid-April 1783; Naples from mid-April 1783 to the end of June 1783, then again Rome and its surroundings (Tivoli and Licenza) from the end of June 1783 to the beginning of October 1783; finally, from the beginning of October 1783 to the beginning of May 1784, he lived in Florence. The Ramsays, father and son, left the capital of the Duchy of Tuscany at this time to return to London.

John's diary, which ends on 5 May 1784, does not mention the return trip, which proved to be particularly trying since his father died on their arrival at the port of Dover on 10 August 1784, making him an orphan at the age of sixteen. Throughout his stay, John Ramsay had engaged in activities aimed at consolidating his cultural and artistic education through courses, readings, and visits. This trip was also intended to provide him with a worldly

education through contact with other travellers and European social elites and allow him to build up a network of relationships that were to be useful for his career upon his return to Great Britain. His father's network, which included some of the main actors in the cultural and artistic life of Rome, proved particularly beneficial and allowed him to thrive in a privileged social and cultural environment. Thus John studied mathematics and perfected his mastery of Latin with Father François Jacquier (1711-1788);¹ it was in the studio of Pompeo Batoni (1708-1787),² an extremely popular portrait painter, that he improved his drawing techniques. His trip was also meant to allow him to study the art of the ancient period and the Renaissance and this part of his education was carried out in the company of other travellers during visits organised and commented by a guide or *cicerone*, as the British then used to call them. John Ramsay notably had the opportunity to visit the Uffizi gallery in Florence, the Capodimonte collection in Naples and the main ancient monuments in Rome. In his diary, he regularly mentioned his visits as, for example, in the entry dated 15 January 1783 where he wrote: ‘After breakfast I returned to the tomb of the Scipios. The Ciceroni there, shewed me a Room in which he had collected together all the bits of inscriptions &c. which he had found in [the] *vincoli* several of which I copied’.³

The Scotsman [James Byres](#) (1713-1817) was the guide and art dealer, whom he frequented the most when he resided in Rome. In his diary, John repeatedly mentioned Byres's presence at the dinners his father organised and to which he invited his compatriots and close friends such as Byres and the Abbé Peter Grant (1708-1784), British travellers who stayed in Rome as well as artists and antique dealers from all over Europe. Among those who were regularly invited to the Ramsays' were the painters Hugh Douglas Hamilton (c. 1740-1808), Gavin Hamilton (1723-1797) and Jacob More (1740-1793) as well as Charles Morris (1736-1791), Father Jacquier and Jean-Baptiste-Louis-Georges Seroux d'Agincourt (1730-1814). John Ramsay did not specify the subjects of the discussions at these dinner parties. He did, however, indicate on several occasions that the guests brought British newspapers, pamphlets and works of ancient literature, which suggests that the conversations were partly about political news or about questions related to ancient civilisation, a subject then at the heart of cultural and artistic debates.

The young Ramsay also had the opportunity to develop his network of relations and to perfect his social education during the many dinners and salons to which he was invited. In Rome, he went to visit James Byres regularly and was thus able to frequent many British travellers whom the guide and art dealer welcomed in the hope of selling them some of the works of art he had acquired. On 22 December 1782, John Ramsay wrote:

‘Brakfasted with Mr Byres where was Mr Slaney, Mr Norton, Mr Beauclerk, Sr Giuseppe [*i.e.* *Gianfigliuzzi?*]. After brakfast Mr Byres carried us into his Room of Antiquity's in which he show'd us some very valuable things. Particularly a very fine picture of *Corregio* (Venus rising out of the Sea) & a very fine landscape by *Claud Lorrain*.’ (Ramsay 93)

In Naples and Florence, he was very regularly invited to dinners and salons organised by the British diplomats Sir [William Hamilton](#) (1731-1803), Ambassador to the court of Naples, and Sir Horace Mann (1706-1786), Envoy at Florence, who were close friends of Allan Ramsay. This allowed John Ramsay to be in contact with the British elite passing through these cities, the local nobility as well as members of European royal families undertaking the Grand Tour. Thus, on 3 December 1783, while residing in Florence, he wrote in his diary: ‘Went to Sr Horace's at 8 found the King of Sweden and all the company come and most of them playing at cards. We set down to a very fine supper about 12 o'clock very elegantly served up. Came home about 2.’ (Ramsay 145) A few days earlier, on 30 November 1783, Ramsay had already had the opportunity to meet the King of Sweden when he took part in a salon held by Lord Cowper (1738-1789), an event which he described in these terms:

‘At 8 with Mr Dawkins to Ld Cowper's where we found a great deal of Company. The King and his suite were already come. After he had been there about half an hour the *Fantastina* who was there begged for a theme to improvise upon and had one give in by one of the [*?guests*] which was the best *Love or Friendship*. On which the theme she sung for near a quarter of an hour and ended by preferring Love and with a fine compliment to Lady Cowper. Went over about 38 of us to supper at three tables at about 12 o'clock. The supper was very fine.’ (*Ibid.*)

These two entries from John Ramsay's diary are of particular interest since they refer to two other social practices popular with Grand Tour travellers: card games and concerts. The young Ramsay mentioned games of back-gammon several times in December 1783 (Ramsay 93) and ‘paoma’, which he had the opportunity to play (146-147). He also indicated the concerts and operas he attended throughout his stay in Italy and which gave him the opportunity to meet many people. Moreover, he took advantage of his trip to attend the theater assiduously. In Rome in January 1783, thanks to James Byres, he was even able to use the Countess of Albany's box at the Teatro Argentina (97). A few months later, in Naples, he attended performances at the *Teatro dei Fiorentini* (115) in the company of Lord Tilney, in his private box; in Florence he spent many evenings at the *Teatro Nuovo*. The carnival period also gave John Ramsay the opportunity to take part in sociable entertainments where travellers from all over Europe mingled with Italians from all social classes. For these festivities, John Ramsay attended the *Via Del Corso* parade in Rome and, to take part in the carnival evening organised at the Aliberti theatre, he even acquired a costume and a mask as explained in his diary:

‘Wednesday 26th [of February 1783] Went to Pompeo's as usual. After I had done with him I went to the Corso to get a *Domino* &c. for the festino. Mr Slaney called at four for me. Went to the Corso where we staid till it was all over. When I came home I found Comte Guastaldi & Mr Morris with my

Father. Went with Count Guastaldi to see the play at the Nazareen College which was exactly the same as the night before. As soon as the play was over I went to Mr Slaney's. After supper we went together to the *Festino* which was at the Aliberti. We found there Sr George & Lady Beaumont, Ld S* Asaph, Mr Bromley, Mr Parker, Mr Cozens Sc Mr Hackert. The company tho very numerous was not very brilliant. The most eminent masque was the Pope's neice who was dress'd in a Turkish habit and had a great quantity of Jewels in her Turban. The Theatre which is very large being all light up from the top to the bottom had a very fine effect. Came home in Mr Parker's carriage about 5 in the morning.' (Ramsay 102)

John Ramsay's diary bears witness to the great diversity of social practices in which British travellers on the Grand Tour were active participants during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The stay in Italy was both an essential step in the education of travellers and a rite of passage to adulthood. As Ramsay's travel diary points out, worldly education was as important as cultural and artistic education. Indeed, the social interactions between European travellers and the Italian nobility enabled them to acquire refined manners, thereby preparing them to hold the rank of the function for which they were destined. These interactions also helped them develop their networks of relationships which would be useful for the career to which they aspired. Thanks to the notoriety of his father and the network he had himself woven during his first three trips to Italy, John Ramsay was able to enjoy a very busy social life. Although there is nothing to confirm it with certainty, the contacts made during his stay in Italy may have contributed to the success of the military career he began shortly after his return to Great Britain. John Ramsay was appointed as a captain in 1787, then he became a general in the British army. Throughout his life, he showed a marked taste for travel and had the opportunity to stay in Rome again in 1828. The cultural and artistic environment in which he evolved during his trip to Italy also fuelled his interest in ancient civilisation and contributed to making him an art collector.

1. Father François Jacquier was a French Franciscan mathematician and physicist. For more on François Jacquier, see Gilles Montègre and Pierre Crépel, *François Jacquier. Un savant des Lumières entre le cloître et le monde* (Nancy : Presses Universitaires de Lorraine, 2018).
2. On Pompeo Batoni, see Edgard Peters Bowron and Peter Bjorn Kerber, *Pompeo Batoni: Prince of Painters in Eighteenth-Century Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).
3. John Ramsay, 'John Ramsay's Italian Diary', ed. John Ingamells, *The Volume of the Walpole Society* (vol. 65, 2003), p. 89-160, here p. 97.

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[Assemblies in Rome \(1781\)](#)