

TRAVELLERS, CONNOISSEURS, AND BRITONS:  
ART COMMENTARIES AND NATIONAL DISCOURSE IN THE TRAVEL  
WRITINGS OF DANIEL DEFOE AND TOBIAS SMOLLETT

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explore the interrelationship of two facets characterising eighteenth-century travel writing – art commentaries and national discourse. It is demonstrated that one of the reasons behind the travellers’ repetitious attempts to fashion themselves as connoisseurs was a need to re-affirm their national identity. To this end it offers an analysis of two travel texts coming from two different political moments – Daniel Defoe’s *A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–1726), constituting an attempt to read the British as a “great” and prosperous nation after the union of 1707, and Tobias Smollett’s idiosyncratic *Travels through France and Italy* (1766), shedding light on the British attitude towards the South in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War and at the outset of the cult of feeling in Britain. It will also be argued that the numerous art commentaries throughout the narratives had a political agenda and supported the national discourse underpinning the texts.

Keywords: Daniel Defoe; Tobias Smollett; travel writing; art commentary; national identity; Britishness.

One of the earliest extant pieces of travel literature is a text written by a Greek geographer while living under Roman rule. In trying to capture in writing his motherland’s distinct identity in the face of the current political affairs – or “(re-)construct Greekness like a jigsaw” (Pretzler 2007: 30) – he devotes most of his attention to art, thus implying that the enduring presence of cultural heritage

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may well withstand imperial dominance and safeguard national pride. Pausanias's *Description of Greece* from the second century AD is then a powerful example showing the interrelationship between art commentary and national discourse and the possibility of these two becoming central preoccupations of a travel account.

In eighteenth-century Britain, when travelling both at home and abroad was conceptualised as a predominantly gentlemanly endeavour, the issues of connoisseurship and nationality – stock topics of both coffee-house debates and polite conversations – could not have possibly escaped the attention of a well-bred traveller. In the formative text of the period – Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705) – the correlation between art commentary and national discourse is clearly established already in the opening “Letter from Italy”, included in the second revised edition from 1718. The poem sketches the wealth of natural scenery and cultural heritage offered by Italy, enumerating highlight sights, such as the Coliseum, and works of art, like those coming from the brush and pencil of Raphael. The speaker's tone, however, changes once a political message is introduced:

How has kind Heav'n adorn'd the happy Land,  
And scatter'd Blessings with a wasteful Hand!  
But what avail her unexhausted Stores,  
Her blooming Mountains and her sunny Shores,  
With all the Gifts that Heav'n and Earth impart,  
The Smiles of Nature, and the Charms of Art,  
While proud Oppression in her Vallies reigns,  
And Tyranny usurps her happy Plains?

(Addison 1718: vii)

In the light of (Popish) “Tyranny” all the beauties of nature and art seem to have been bestowed by a “wasteful Hand” and to no avail. In contrast, Britain, seemingly deprived of such marvels, is the kingdom of Liberty: “’Tis Liberty that Crowns *Britannia's* Isle, / And makes her barren Rocks and her bleak Mountains smile” (Addison 1718: viii). What is more, while others delight in their heritage, Britannia has a far greater responsibility:

Others with tow'ring Piles may please the Sight,  
And in their proud aspiring Domes delight;  
A nicer Touch to the stretcht Canvas give,  
Or teach their animated *Rocks* to live:  
’Tis *Britain's* Care to watch o'er *Europe's* Fate,  
And hold in Balance each contending State.

(Addison 1718: viii–ix)

This discourse of responsibility would be later on adapted to the needs of Britain's developing culture of museums and art galleries, which would depend for their legitimacy on the sanctioning of the politics of collecting (to put it mildly) and appropriation.

Charles Batten in his seminal study of eighteenth-century British travel writing persuasively demonstrates that Addison's narrative served as a kind of guidebook not only for travellers, who sought in it factual information on the country and its noteworthy artefacts as well as patterns of supposedly proper responses to what they were about to see, but also for travel writers, who for several decades to come modelled their accounts on *Remarks*, adopting its narrative techniques and the impersonal mode. As Batten shows, Addison was a significant point of reference even when the "scientific" approach of early eighteenth-century travel writers was gradually superseded by a more personalised, idiosyncratic, and eventually sentimental discourse (Batten 1978: 15–33). Consequently, Addison's manner of correlating art commentaries with national discourse would eventually become a widely employed convention.

In what follows I seek to explore this interrelationship, with the hope that it will demonstrate that one of the reasons behind the travellers' repetitious attempts to fashion themselves as connoisseurs was the need to re-affirm their national identity. To exemplify this, I will for the most part refer to two travel texts coming from two different political moments – Daniel Defoe's *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–1726) and Tobias Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy* (1766). I will argue that the numerous art commentaries throughout the narratives had a political agenda and were part of the national discourse underpinning the texts.

Maximillian E. Novak rightly observes that for a man whose interests covered literally everything, from brick-laying to spiritualism, art and especially painting simply had to be a significant field of interest, not least because of the growing prominence of painting, and its commodification, under the reign of William III (Novak 1996: 2)<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, Daniel Defoe repeatedly and, as one would expect of him, in different forms of writing reveals not merely an interest in it but also considerable expertise. As for the *Tour's* immediate context, the text worth mentioning here is the poem *Compleat Art of Painting*, most probably from the year 1720<sup>2</sup>, which was a translation of Charles-Alphonse Du

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<sup>1</sup> See also Pears (1988: 57–64).

<sup>2</sup> P. N. Furbank and W. R. Owens in their attempt at re-visioning the Defoe canon raised doubts as to the authorship of the poem. See Furbank & Owens (1998: 276). Novak, on the other hand, believes these doubts to be unsubstantiated and treats the translation as Defoe's whenever addressing the novelist's artistic interests; see, for example, his *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions* (2001: 636). Given his expertise in the field of Defoe and the arts, I am inclined to subscribe to Novak's opinion.

Fresnoy's treatise *De arte graphica* (1668). As Novak (1996: 7) argues, this work was a practice ground through which the novelist prepared himself for making comments on the art of painting in the years to come, especially in the *Tour*.

In his book-length study of Defoe's *Tour*, Pat Rogers labels the narrative "a hymn to abundance" (Rogers 1998: 20). This is an apt metaphor, given the economic perspective adopted by the traveller and the historical context of the journeys. "Journeys" rather than "journey", as the account consists of Defoe's observations and reflections made in the course of several decades and a number of travels, even if the actual writing, as Rogers argues, was done in 1722 and 1723. It was published when Britain, in Rogers's words, "reached a new access of nationhood" (Rogers 1998: 19), not even two decades after the Act of Union of 1707, shortly after the first Jacobite rebellion (1715) and the success of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), which strengthened national spirits and brought about political stability and economic growth. It was a time regarded by some as the "financial revolution" (on the grounds of the financial reforms in the aftermath of 1688), which ushered in a period of prosperity and marked the beginning of imperial expansion. Defoe's vision of the British revolves around such categories as industry, resourcefulness and, consequently, greatness and superiority. His take on the arts corresponds with the British character thus defined, and this parallel, by way of a very similar one, is indicated by Defoe himself. When marvelling at the architecture on the bank of the Thames, he observes: "Here they [i.e., the buildings] reflect Beauty, and Magnificence upon the whole Country, and give a kind of Character to the Island of Great Britain in general" (Defoe, Letter II).

The first extensive art commentaries are included in Letter III, in which Defoe offers a lengthy description of Hampton Court. Unsurprisingly, what draws his attention are the famous cartoons by Raphael. He singles out two pieces – St. Paul preaching on Mars-Hill to the self-wise Athenians and St. Peter passing a sentence of death on Ananias – and devotes a paragraph to each, dramatising them and concentrating on the realist depiction of the passions. In this, Defoe follows in the footsteps of his contemporaries, who evaluated art with respect to mimetic categories. Defoe's peculiarity, however, lies in the way he interweaves conventional responses to artwork with mercantile remarks, so that his art criticism fits the economic perspective throughout the account. As was stated before, Defoe focuses on collections amassed by wealthy noblemen. On the one hand, the collections themselves are indicative of the country's prosperity, being described with superlative adjectives and such phrases as "not to be match'd in Europe" (Defoe, Letter III); on the other one, the process of them being built up has been strictly related to developing trade networks. Both phenomena are central to Defoe's construction of national identity throughout.

Commenting on the cartoons, the traveller adds:

The king brought a great many other fine pieces to England, and with them the love of fine paintings so universally spread itself among the nobility and persons of figure all over the kingdom, that it is incredible what collections have been made by English gentlemen since that time; and how all Europe has been rumag'd, as we may say, for pictures to bring over hither, where, for twenty years, they yielded the purchasers, such as collected them for sale, immense profit (...)

(Defoe, Letter III)

The Continent was “rumag'd”, Defoe writes, so that the British could do business, with merchants making money as intermediaries and the nobility supporting their status. Betty Schellenberg writes that one of the images governing Defoe’s vision of the nation is that of “the nation as a network” (Schellenberg 1995: 296). The passage above shows that the art market, with works of art as transferable and profitable commodities, was one of the fields strengthening the network.

The conventional binary between Britain and Continental Europe indicated in the quoted excerpt is furthered by the introduction of the French. Defoe refers to unverified rumour about the late French king’s interest in the pieces: “’Tis reported, but with what truth I know not, that the late French king offer’d an hundred thousand louis d’ors for these pictures; but this, I say, is but a report” (Defoe, Letter III). The cartoons were originally purchased by Charles I for 300 pounds. The amount allegedly offered by Louis XIV would have been roughly 300 times the price paid by the English king. Two messages seem to be implied here: first, the British know how to invest, and second, the country does not need French money and deems its heritage priceless.

The same strategy of combining art commentaries with economic and thus national discourse appears elsewhere. For example, “the best, if not the greatest collection of rarities, and paintings” at Wilton House could well compete with the Luxemburg Gallery in Paris; “’tis worth the labour of any lover of art to go 500 miles to see it; and (...) several gentlemen of quality have come from France almost on purpose” (Defoe, Letter III). Commenting on Burleigh House, in turn, Defoe first writes about the late host Earl of Exeter’s visit in Florence, where he could “purchase many excellent pieces at reasonable prices”, and then focuses on his favourite “Seneca bleeding to death” by Luca Giordano, adding that “the King of France offer’d the earl 6000 pistoles for it” (Defoe, Letter VII).

In sum, Defoe’s descriptions of notable collections metonymically mirror his vision of Britain as an enterprising, rapidly developing and great country. They are not to be matched, just like Britain finds no equal on the Continent, especially after the War of the Spanish Succession. It is also implied that some of the collections, like the one at Burleigh House, were amassed thanks to the

host's Grand Tour, and thus – by extension – they serve the same political and national agenda. The works of art function like trophies gathered by the travelling British gentleman, maintaining a proper distance from the visited places and encountered people, so that he could pass disinterested judgements and appropriate whatever he wants. In the end, such collections gave way to the culture of museums, and the corresponding ideology of the British responsibility for protecting the Mediterranean heritage.

Some of these issues are in question in Horace Walpole's account of his Continental travels, to give but one example. Especially in relating his sojourn in Rome, Walpole resembles a typical Briton rummaging, as Defoe would have it, the Mediterranean. In the letters written during the stay the traveller recycles stock motifs, such as anti-Catholic sentiments or the threat of the Roman malaria, and is in general largely disappointed with the Eternal City. Be that as it may, Walpole the connoisseur and antiquary made the most of his stay. In a letter to Henry Conway for 23 April 1740, he writes: "How I like the inanimate part of Rome you will soon perceive at my arrival in England; I am far gone in medals, lamps, idols, prints, etc. and all the small commodities to the purchase of which I can attain; I would buy the Coliseum if I could" (Walpole 1974: 57). The list of his "baubles", as he labels the collection elsewhere, is impressive, and includes both ancient artefacts, such as tables, mosaics, urns, vases, or medals, and Baroque paintings by Paolo Pannini, Carlo Maratti, or Pietro da Cortona, among others. Walpole's fondness for "the inanimate part of Rome" is contrasted with his aversion to "the animate part", in which he foreshadows the "splenetic" type of traveller, best exemplified by Tobias Smollett.

Like Defoe, Smollett too demonstrated considerable expertise in the arts. As Richard Jones argues, his medical background (he was a trained physician) drew his attention to the issues of perception and the mind-body problem, which were being tackled in the artistic and literary circles of mid-eighteenth-century Glasgow (Jones 2011: 48–49). What is more, in the *Critical Review* Smollett continuously published essays on the fine arts and reviewed contemporary works, while in the *British Magazine* he endorsed the Society for the Improvement of the Arts and took part in the ongoing debates on aesthetics and artistic practices (Jones 2011: 51–52). *Travels through France and Italy*, as Jones aptly observes, was further testimony to his engagement in the world of the arts and devotion to the practice of reviewing (Jones 2011: 53).

Smollett's *Travels* is a collection of forty-one anonymous letters dated from 23 June 1763 to 13 June 1765, and published on 8 May 1766. The travels took place shortly after the Seven Years' War, and at times, the narrative creates an impression of an account written by a military commander evaluating the

possibilities and odds of the success of British imperial expansionism<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, the text is also illustrative of the changing tastes in eighteenth-century travel writing, when the “scientific” paradigm was gradually giving way to the “sentimental”, eventually best conceptualised by Sterne<sup>4</sup>. One fundamental difference between these paradigms was in the level of personalisation. The post-Addisonian factual and impersonal accounts were thus gradually superseded by largely personal, idiosyncratic, and impressionistic narratives. Among other things, this new poetics was achieved by writers by means of largely non-standard responses to conventional objects of presentation, including works of art. This is certainly the case of Smollett’s narrative.

Shortly after the narrative was appreciated on its own merits when it was published, it was negatively popularised by Laurence Sterne in his *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768). Sterne’s Mr Yorick recalls having met “the learned Smelfungus”, and offers a short commentary on the other’s manner of travelling:

The learned SMELFUNGUS travelled from Boulogne to Paris—from Paris to Rome—and so on—but he set out with the spleen and jaundice, and every object he pass’d by was discolored or distorted—He wrote an account of them, but ’t was nothing but the account of his miserable feelings.

I met Smelfungus in the grand portico of the Pantheon—he was just coming out of it—’Tis nothing but a huge cock-pit, said he—I wish you had said nothing worse of the Venus of Medicis, replied I—for in passing through Florence, I had heard he had fallen foul upon the goddess, and used her worse than a common strumpet, without the least provocation in nature.

(Sterne 2002: 37)

The passage has been interpreted as an expression of personal resentment or criticism of the type of traveller Sterne earlier defines as “the splenetic traveller” (Sterne 2002: 15)<sup>5</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that a central consideration here is Smollett’s response to art, which is taken as representative of his attitude towards whatever he has seen abroad. If the *Travels* is a “litany of complaints”, as John Skinner puts it (1996: 178), an important part of it, even if not the most extensive, comprises rather non-standard judgments of artwork.

In the above passage Sterne focuses on Smelfungus’s reaction to “objects”, which he “discoloured or distorted”. Admittedly, however, Smollett paid equal attention to the manners of the people encountered, and naturally this is where the question of national identity comes to the fore. Smollett, a Scot by birth, and one who suffered considerably being marginalised in London high life, would have

<sup>3</sup> See Skinner (1996: 181).

<sup>4</sup> See Moroz (2013: 50, 95).

<sup>5</sup> For a persuasive argument questioning the aptness of Sterne’s label, see Ross (2007).

enjoyed the perspective of a Briton on the Continent and delighted in conventional binaries. A major contrast he establishes is the one between delicacy and simplicity, on the one hand, and ornamentality and affectation, on the other one. This was one of the main binaries organising the rhetoric of sensibility in the second half of the eighteenth century, defining the British as naturally predisposed to sentimentalism. It goes back well to the beginning of the century. For example, the *Spectator* for 28 June 1711 quotes John Tillotson's sermon "Of sincerity towards God and Man", in which "the Old English Plainness and Sincerity" is contrasted with "foreign manners and fashions", especially those coming from "none of the best of our neighbours" (Steele 1711: 373). Accordingly, Smollett devotes one whole letter from Paris to minutely characterising French affectations, focusing on appearances, linguistic exuberance, and luxury, criticising at the same time those of his countrymen who imitate these fashions. This was appreciated by Smollett's early readers. For example, a reviewer for the June 1766 issue of *Critical Review* (which was first edited by Smollett, from 1756 to 1763) argued that "a work of this kind does more service to Great Britain than fifty acts of parliament for prohibiting French fripperies and foreign commodities, or even forbidding the exportation of fools, fops, and coxcombs" ([no author] 1766: 406).

As for the famous French collections of art, Smollett is rather enigmatic:

I don't talk of the busts, the statues, and pictures which abound at Versailles, and other places in and about Paris, particularly the great collection of capital pieces in the Palais-royal, belonging to the duke of Orleans. I have neither capacity, nor inclination, to give a critique on these *chef d'oeuvres*, which indeed would take up a whole volume. I have seen this great magazine of painting three times, with astonishment; but I should have been better pleased, if there had not been half the number: one is bewildered in such a profusion, as not to know where to begin, and hurried away before there is time to consider one piece with any sort of deliberation.

(Smollett 2010: 93–94)

This is not the only instance of Smollett's self-proclaimed modesty; similar remarks will later on appear in his account of Florence and Rome, where he does not shun offering extensive critical commentaries, but one can sense here a tinge of irony, especially in the wording "this great magazine of painting", and criticism of the French tendency to exaggerate.

On the level of details, a curious correspondence between art and manners can be found in Smollett's disapproval of draperies. When reporting his visit to the abbey church in St. Denis, he thus comments on the tomb sculptures inside:

There are some fine marble statues that adorn the tombs of certain individuals here interred; but they are mostly in the French taste, which is quite contrary to

the simplicity of the ancients. Their attitudes are affected, unnatural, and desultory; and their draperies fantastic; or, as one of our English artists expressed himself, *they are all of a flutter*.

(Smollett 2010: 90)

In the same vein, Smollett disapproves of French dress:

It would be superfluous to attempt proving from the nature of things, from the first principles and use of dress, as well as from the consideration of natural beauty, and the practice of the ancients, who certainly understood it as well as the connoisseurs of these days, that nothing can be more monstrous, inconvenient, and contemptible, than the fashion of modern drapery.

(Smollett 2010: 99)

In both passages draperies are contrasted with simplicity, associated with the ancients. As a result, Smollett connects “the connoisseurs of these days” – that is, British gentlemen – with the ancients, their noble predecessors, which was generally part of Augustan ideology and an implied message in Grand Tour accounts<sup>6</sup>. A similar policy can be discerned in Defoe’s descriptions of paintings representing Roman emperors in English collections, and generally in his references to the Roman history of Britain, and in Walpole’s idea to commission a medal of King Edward imitating Roman models. At the turn of the eighteenth century this ideology will be used to excuse British archaeological exploits in the Mediterranean, in particular in attempts to justify the archaeological ventures of Lord Elgin<sup>7</sup>.

As for Italy, the binary of simplicity vs. excess organises Smollett’s extensive discussion of Roman gardens. In the letter of 5 March 1765 we read:

He who loves the beauties of simple nature, and the charms of neatness will seek for them in vain amidst the groves of Italy. In the garden of the Villa Pinciana, there is a plantation of four hundred pines, which the Italians view with rapture and admiration [...]. The flat, regular alleys of evergreens are cut into fantastic figures; the flower gardens embellished with thin cyphers and flourished figures in box [...]. The water, of which there is great plenty, instead of being collected in large pieces, or conveyed in little rivulets and streams to refresh the thirsty soil, or managed so as to form agreeable cascades, is squirted from fountains in different parts of the garden, through tubes little bigger than common glyster-pipes. It must be owned indeed that the fountains have their merit in the way of sculpture and architecture; and that here is a great number of statues which merit attention: but they serve only to encumber the ground, and destroy that effect of rural simplicity, which our gardens are designed to produce.

(Smollett 2010: 262)

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<sup>6</sup> For an excellent study of the phenomenon, see Ayers (1997).

<sup>7</sup> See McCue (2014: 41).

This criticism, as one would expect, is contrasted with a detailed description of what the English garden is like. While the Italians impose a burden on nature, the English help nature be more “natural”.

The letter continues in the same vein and invokes similar arguments in the discussion of St. Peter’s. In general, Smollett has mixed feelings about the basilica, and his dislike of excess stands behind some of his more controversial judgments. He is particularly critical of the altar:

The altar of St. Peter’s choir, notwithstanding all the ornaments which have been lavished upon it, is no more than a heap of puerile finery, better adapted to an Indian pagod, than to a temple built upon the principles of the Greek architecture. The four colossal figures that support the chair, are both clumsy and disproportioned. The drapery of statues, whether in brass or stone, when thrown into large masses, appears hard and unpleasant to the eye (...)

(Smollett 2010: 265)

On the other hand, both at St. Peter’s and in the Vatican Museums, Smollett praises the work of Guido Reni, at times even valuing it higher than some of the more renowned pieces by Michelangelo or Raphael. “I am extremely fond of all this artist’s pieces” (Smollett 2010: 264), he writes. In this, he is again in line with the tastes of British sentimentalism. A number of “Guidos” found their place in British collections, and the cult of feeling saw many of his portraits become iconic sentimental figures. Smollett appreciates Guido’s “tenderness and delicacy”, despite “affected and unnatural” postures (Smollett 2010: 264). In a letter of 30 March 1765, devoted entirely to art commentaries, Smollett is capable of criticising Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, suggesting that he “had very little idea of grace”, only to add shortly after that what pleased him the most were Guido’s *Aurora* and *Magdalene*, which were already part of British sentimental iconography (Smollett 2010: 278). William Gibson insightfully argues that Smollett’s highly individualised observations become “a form of iconoclasm”, which allows the traveller to pass subjective judgement irrespective of the decades-long tradition of art appreciation or false connoisseurship (Gibson 2007: 14, 109–136). Some of his remarks cannot but surprise, but this is how Smollett goes off the well-trodden path of art criticism for the sake of what we would now call a close viewing of artwork.

Admittedly, the several decades separating Defoe’s and Smollett’s travel accounts, and consequently their distinct political and cultural backgrounds, resulted in not only dissimilar but at times even antithetical approaches to art and national identity. Daniel Defoe, in an attempt to strengthen the emergent sense of nationhood in a period of prosperity after 1707, appreciated pathos and splendour in art, thus reaffirming his country’s greatness and abundance. Tobias Smollett, in turn, writing in a time of changing social norms, when the cult of

feeling was gradually taking precedence over Augustan values, was a fierce critic of meretricious pomp and excessive ornamentality, and put forward the image of a simple, plain, and thus sincere nation, very much unlike the affected inhabitants of the Continent.

On the other hand, the common denominator of the two texts is that both travellers modelled their vision of Britain with reference to classical heritage, even if they invoked its different aspects. For Defoe, imperial themes in the art collections he described, as well as the Roman pre-history of Britain visible through the remnants of ancient architecture, helped him construct an image of a new, rapidly developing empire. For Smollett, in contrast, the Continental fashions and embellishments violate the classical Greek rules of simplicity, cultivated by the true (British) connoisseurs of his time. In both accounts the British figure as inheritors of the ancient tradition – the Roman Empire and Greek refined taste, respectively.

Finally, both texts are testimony to the interplay of art and national discourses in the travel writing of the period. Tellingly enough, however, having been written and published before the establishment of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768, which marked a revival of attempts at conceptualising the idea of inherently British painting, the narratives – in contrast to the founding text of Pausanias – put forward a vision of a nation referring for the most part to originally foreign art. In this, the texts exemplify the politics of superiority and appropriation characterising eighteenth-century British writing about the Continent, in general, and its artistic heritage, in particular. The two texts capitalise on two different variants of this policy: whereas Defoe implies a political and economic dominance reflected in the market value of artwork, Smollett operates predominantly on the symbolic level of taste and manners. As I indicated before, in the subsequent decades, these approaches would eventually become entangled in a discourse that politicised connoisseurship and the culture of museums. This would be best manifested in the Anglo-French rivalry about the arts during the Napoleonic wars.

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