FRIDAY - SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 6 - 8, 2009

WEEKEND JOURNAL.

EUROPE

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From Australia's outback to Spain's pilgrimage route, train journeys with cruise-ship class

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WEEKEND JOURNAL.
EUROPE

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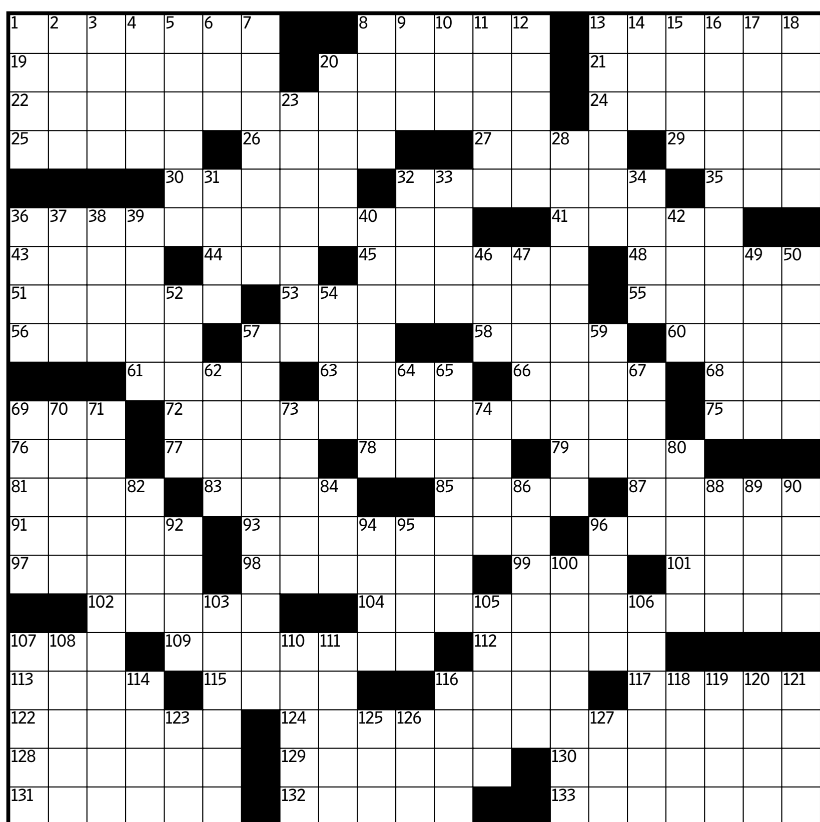

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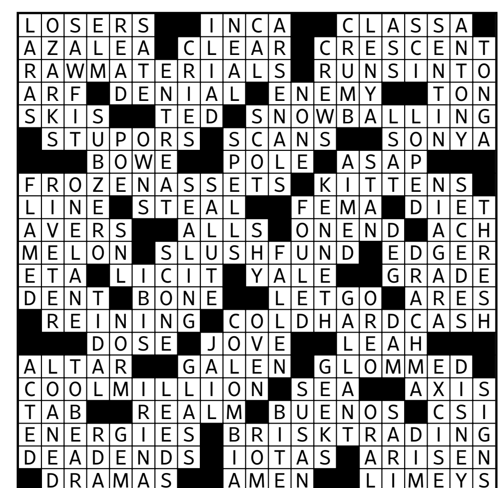
Last Week's Solution



Inside a bastion of old-school power attire

On Style
CHRISTINA BINKLEY

AT LAW FIRM Bickel & Brewer, even the mailroom clerks wear suits and ties. Until recently, that might have been considered extreme. But now, power dressing is coming back in style, and the old-school law firm has a new relevance.

As law-firm layoffs mount, fear of unemployment appears to be speeding up the resurgence of power clothes, even among the youngest recruits. Legal interns have begun flouting business-casual dress codes and wearing suits instead, says Gretchen Neels, a Boston communications consultant who works with law firms and graduate schools. "In our economic times, you really want to have your game on. You can't be too formal," she says.

Power clothes are selling well at menswear retailer Paul Fredrick. Those white-collared, colored dress shirts that Gordon Gekko favored in the 1987 movie "Wall Street" have been big sellers in recent months, says Dean White, executive vice president of merchandise. So are yellow power ties, another 1980s dress-for-success accessory.

The return of old-school power dressing is something of a "duh" moment for Bill Brewer, Bickel & Brewer's co-founder and managing partner. He never really got the appeal of khakis and rubber-soled Gucci loafers at the office. He prides himself on custom three-button suits with a center vent and shirts from Bruce Clark in New York. His voice tightens with disdain when he describes "those square-toed club shoes" that some young recruits wear to the office.

"I think people expect high-powered lawyers to look like high-powered lawyers," Mr. Brewer says.

Even six months ago, that kind of talk might have sounded as outmoded as John Molloy, who penned "Dress For Success," the 1980s bible of corporate style. Casual clothing has long been seen as a sign of a modern attitude and has become an important job perk. In a 2007 column I wrote, a number of young lawyers defended working in Ugg boots, jeans and clingy T-shirts, arguing that they needed to be comfortable at work. They felt entitled.

But people's sense of job entitlement has evaporated as unemployment figures rise. Ms. Neels suggests that any law graduate with a job should prepare to invest in whatever the firm asks. "If they want you to dress up like Big Bird every day, for $160,000 a year, just do it!" she says, citing the going starting salary for law associates this year.

Alicia Russell, an executive recruiter for legal jobs with Boyden Global Executive Search, says Bickel & Brewer's all-inclusive power-dress code is unusual. "I can't say that I've ever been in a law firm where every single person is in formal business attire," she says. But she isn't opposed to the concept. In fact, she recommends that lawyers stick with dark, conservative suits. Men should wear ties and women should add an accessory that has "panache"—such as a piece of jewelry or a sharp-looking purse or briefcase.

At Bickel & Brewer, the power code is made clear when recruits are invited to "Call-Back Weekend" in Dallas, which takes place each fall. "When I greet them at 9 a.m. that Saturday, I'm in a suit and tie—and so are they," says Michael Gardner, the firm's hiring partner.

In conversation, Mr. Brewer, 57, and Mr. Gardner, 39, manage to sound like the calendar says it's 1985. Far from the lifestyle concerns of the past decade, they describe a work-hard-and-play-hard ethos, tossing around hard-driving sports analogies to convey that work comes first. And second. "This is a star system," says Mr. Brewer.

Mr. Gardner sounds as though he'd like to hold his nose when he discusses business casual. "It's actually a little offensive to my sense of style," he says.

Young lawyers who arrive ignorant of the power-suit ensemble get a little tutoring from Mr. Gardner "in a mentoring way," he says. Let's just say that if Mr. Gardner invites you for a quick cup of joe at Starbucks, you might want to reconsider your footwear. Next door to the Starbucks in the lobby is a shoeshine shop. "You know," he tells those with scuffed shoes, "I'm going to get my shoes shined. Why don't you join me?"

Adam Sanderson, an associate of the "millennial" generation born after 1981, accompanied Mr. Gardner to the shoeshine shop after joining the firm in 2006. Mr. Gardner says Mr. Sanderson's shoes were too trendy. "I was thinking the next best thing would be to get his shoes shined," Mr. Gardner recalls. But he didn't stop there. "I just told him, 'We gotta get rid of those shoes.'"

There was a time that even Mr. Brewer's confidence in power attire wavered. In the late 1990s, says Mr. Brewer, "we were doing work for people who were very high-profile in the new space—high tech. Many of them were business casual, or less than casual." Mr. Brewer asked during a corporate retreat whether the firm should test business-casual for the summer.

"That's ridiculous," he says his partners countered. "That's not Bickel & Brewer."

Email Christina.Binkley@wsj.com

WSJ.com

Dress code
What does your work attire convey about you? Join a discussion, at **WSJ.com/Fashion**

Clark Perkins

Litigators Michael Gardner (left) and Bill Brewer.

Arbitrage

The price of a string of pearls

City	Local currency	€
Hong Kong	HK$2,850	€285
London	£470	€521
Paris	€600	€600
Rome	€600	€600
Brussels*	€755	€755
Frankfurt*	€799	€799
New York	$1,768	€1,372

Note: 40-cm necklace of 8-mm freshwater Grade A white cultured pearls from China with a gold clasp; prices, including taxes, as provided by retailers in each city, averaged and converted into euros. *42-cm necklace

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Golf's grande dame played with the greats

Golf Journal
JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

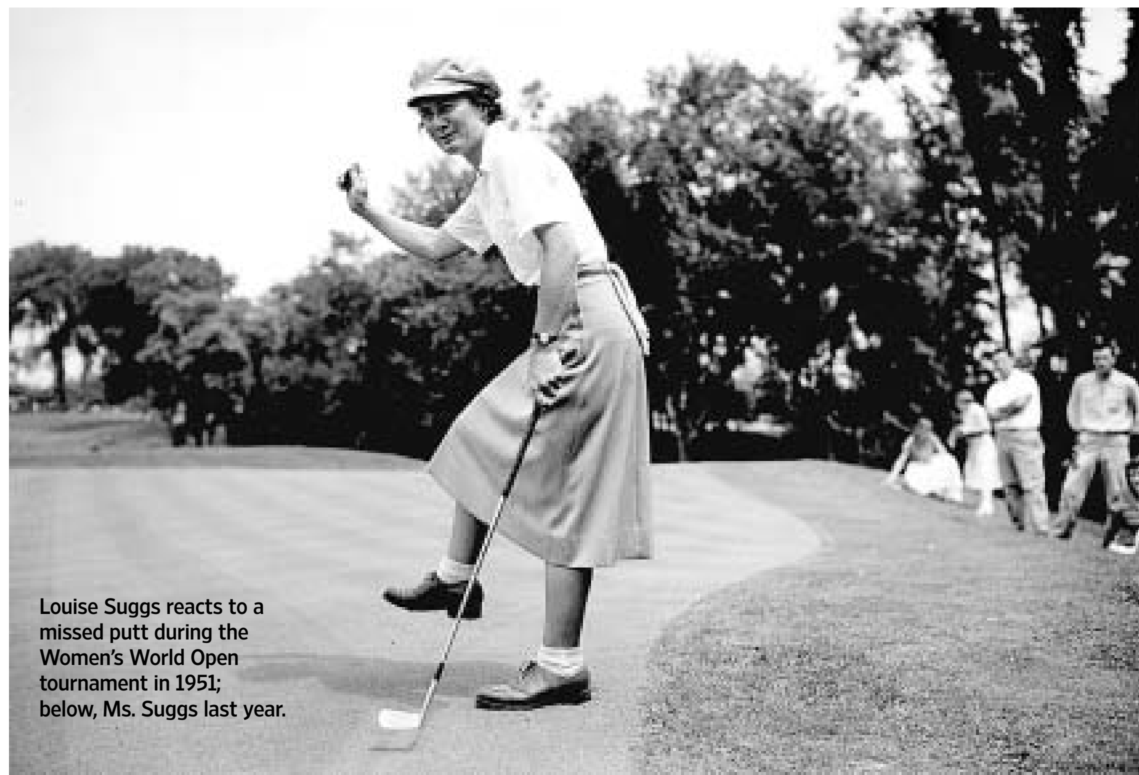
St. Augustine, Fla.

LOUISE SUGGS'S MEMORY in golf goes a long way back. She remembers chatting in the early 1940s with the legendary course designer Donald Ross, when she was competing as an 18-year-old at one of his Pinehurst courses in North Carolina. She played frequently with her fellow Georgian, Bobby Jones, including in his final round at East Lake in Atlanta.

As a 22-year-old amateur, she played for the first time with Ben Hogan. Partnered with him in a tournament in Chicago, hitting from the same tees, she beat him on the second nine, 35 to 36. Amid the teasing that ensued ("Hey, Ben, where's your skirt?"), he spoke hardly a word to her the next day, until finally she called him out: "Mr. Hogan, I don't think you're a gentleman." That broke the ice with the Ice Man. They went on to win the event and become great friends.

She most delightfully remembers the time she beat Sam Snead in a professional event, again playing from the same tees. "Sam and I just never gee-hawed somehow," she told me last week when I paid a visit to her home here near the World Golf Hall of Fame, of which she is a longstanding member.

That 54-hole tournament was staged to promote the opening of a nine-hole executive course in Palm Beach, Fla. "Afterwards I could tell Sam was mad because he had come in third. He couldn't stop heckling me for winning. Well, after so long I started to get a little miffed myself, so I said, 'Sam, I don't know what the hell you're bitching about, you weren't even second.' That did it. He scooted out of there in a second and left a half-inch of rubber in the parking lot."


Louise Suggs reacts to a missed putt during the Women's World Open tournament in 1951; below, Ms. Suggs last year.

Associated Press

Valerie A. Smith

At 85 years old, the blue-eyed Ms. Suggs is robust and sharp-witted, although a bad back has prevented her from playing golf for several years and she was scheduled to have her second knee replaced on Monday. For most of our conversation, she sat back in a recliner with her black toy poodle, Damit, asleep in her lap.

Mostly we talked about the early days of the LPGA tour, which Ms. Suggs co-founded in 1950 with 12 other women, only six of whom remain. "Looking back, I don't know how we did it," she said with a laugh. "The girls on tour now, they don't have any idea how hard it was."

For the first three or four years, the leading golf companies of the day—Wilson, MacGregor and Spalding—supported the tour just enough to get it off the ground. But when that money dried up, the players—a core of only 35 or 40—were on their own.

Most of the early tournaments, organized with the help of local service clubs like Kiwanis, Rotary and Civitas, included three rounds of pro-am play and a final round of the pros by themselves.

"We played in small towns as a rule, and would do anything to help promote," Ms. Suggs said. "We gave speeches and did radio and went to baseball games to hit balls over the scoreboards. We even went to wrestling matches."

The tour's three superstars were Ms. Suggs, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, the former Olympian and basketball star, and Patty Berg. The three got along only because they had to. "Someone once asked me whether Babe, Patty and I got together to figure out who was going to win each week," Ms. Suggs said. "My answer was, 'Have you ever seen three cats fight over a plate of fish?'"

Of the three, Ms. Suggs was arguably the most talented. When she turned pro in 1948, she held five of the world's leading amateur trophies, including the U.S. and British Amateurs, and several significant open titles as well—a feat of Tiger Woodsian dimension. By 1962, when she dropped out of serious competition, she had won 11 majors and 58 tour events overall, fifth on the all-time list.

Nevertheless, Ms. Berg and Ms. Zaharias, with their outsize personalities, overshadowed her, a slight that still stings. "With all due respect, the tour couldn't have made it without Babe. She was the headliner," Ms. Suggs acknowledged. "But she was a publicity hound and didn't care how she got attention."

Ms. Suggs, by contrast, was Hoganesque in her reserve. "I tried to keep how I felt about things under wraps, for the good of the tour, but as a result I got a reputation for not being very nice," she said.

More than reserve was involved, however. The grind of those years wore her down emotionally. Even a top LPGA player in that era couldn't make a living wage. Ms. Suggs, who never married and has no children, had career winnings of less than $200,000 in total.

So she earned her keep by giving clinics and playing exhibitions wherever her sponsor, MacGregor, pointed her.

For eight years, she said, she lived out of her car, without any permanent residence, driving hundreds of thousands of miles a year, a young woman alone. She was lucky to return three times a year to her parents' house near Atlanta.

Finally, she broke down—an episode she hasn't talked about publicly until now. "Everything just went kind of vague; it was a blackout, I guess you'd say," she said. "I won tournaments I didn't remember winning, I went places I didn't remember going. My brain kept me going, but all of a sudden it wouldn't go any more. So I checked myself into the Cleveland Clinic and stayed there for a month."

She continued to play sporadically after that incident (she cannot remember the precise date), sometimes going along with cover stories explaining her last-minute tournament withdrawals. But when, in 1962, the tour fined her $25 for one of those withdrawals, despite a letter from her doctor, she became upset and decided to move on, reducing her tour appearances to scattered invitationals and other special events. For most of the next 40 years she taught golf at Sea Island, Ga.

In the last few years, she's won virtually every lifetime-achievement award golf has to offer. "I'm more famous now than when I was famous," she said. The LPGA, her true family, has been especially attentive.

"I'm like an old trophy they show off, but I appreciate it," she said. The only thing she doesn't appreciate is the occasional griping from today's rich young players. "When I hear that," she said, "I want to smack 'em."

WSJ.com

Top golf gear
Read John Paul Newport's blog from the PGA Merchandise show in Orlando, Fla., at **WSJ.com/Sports**

Wine Notes: Should you mix or match?

BY DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER

BASED ON YOUR recommendation, I bought some Torrontés from Argentina, which was very pleasant. I tried something with it that you may want to consider as a slightly different approach. In this case, the very floral qualities of the Torrontés made me think of Grüner Veltliner from Austria and Kerner from the Alto Adige region of Italy, so a bunch of us tasted those three against each other. I was surprised more by the differences than the similarities, but it was an interesting experiment.
—Louis Barash, New York

When we conduct blind tastings for this column, we generally prefer apples with apples because we believe, for instance, that white Burgundy should be white Burgundy while American Chardonnay should be American Chardonnay. One type of wine is not necessarily better than the other; they're just different, and we believe in celebrating the differences. That said, it is both instructive and interesting to taste different kinds of wines against each other from time to time because their similarities and differences do indeed show more starkly. That's one reason we often suggest that you spend some time at a good wine bar. Many wine bars offer flights of wine that have some sort of theme in common (such as "summery white") as opposed to a grape or a geographic area. This wine thing should be fun, after all, and this is one way to have fun with the different tastes.

We recently had a Piper-Heidsieck Brut Champagne. My husband and I both noticed that this Champagne had lots more bubbles than other Champagnes/sparkling wines, including pricier Champagnes. Does the number or sustainability of the bubbles signify quality or anything?
—Nancy Hom, Moraga, Calif.

Many factors affect the number of bubbles, from the age of the wine to the kind of stemware you're using and how it was washed. We focus less on the number of bubbles than their size. We generally find it a good sign of quality when the bubbles are pinpoint size and elegant. We've had some so-so sparklers that had bubbles the size of beach balls. But that's our opinion. We wondered how a sparkling-wine maker would answer the question, so we asked Judy Jordan, the owner of J Vineyards and Winery, one of our favorite California bubbly producers. She replied:

"The size, number and sustainability of bubbles, in my opinion, is relative to the quality and the age of the wine. Our theory is the following: The bubble size and number of bubbles can be directly proportional to the amount of tirage time, in other words, the amount of time the wine ages on yeast.

"At J Vineyards and Winery, we age our sparkling wines for a minimum of four years on the yeast. As the wine ages, it becomes creamier due to yeast autolysis. Yeast autolysis technically means that the yeast cells break themselves down and give the wine a creamier flavor and consistency. As the wine becomes older, it also becomes more viscous due in large part to the gradual integration of the CO2 and the wine. The older, creamier and more viscous sparkling wine has less room for bigger bubbles to form. As a result, more and more small bubbles appear to release the effervescence present inside the wine. The lovely visual for our taster of this aged sparkling wine is a more delicate and bountiful flow of beautiful small bubbles which look like elegant beads in a glass."

AFP

Email us at wine@wsj.com.

Sony Pictures Classics

François Bégaudeau in 'The Class.'

'Class' is a lesson in drama

SINCE THE SUBJECT of "The Class" is education, let's begin by giving it the grade it deserves: A+, with extra credit for no neatness.

It's tempting to be neat in movies about teachers and students. Either the students are crazed, the teachers are clueless or the classroom is a sacred place where, against long odds, a noble spirit (the teacher's) manages to civilize

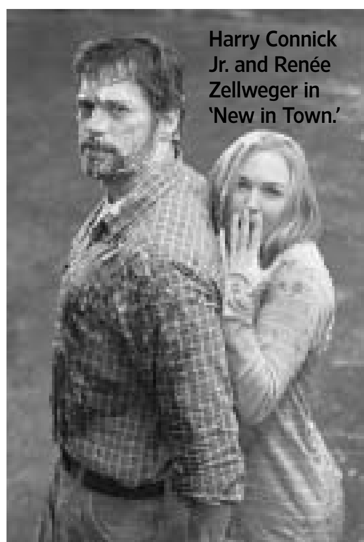
Film
JOE MORGENSTERN

a bunch of charming savages. Remarkably, Laurent Cantet's documentary-style drama ignores such familiar formulations in favor of a heightened reality that makes room for real-world complexity.

The students, a racially and ethnically diverse group in a tough Parisian high school, bring a frightening arsenal of attitudes to class. Many of them are from immigrant families; most are angry, insolent, petulant, quick to be wounded by words and just as quick to wound. Yet they're open, every now and then, to nibble-size nuggets of knowledge, or to random notions that strike their fancy. The teacher, François—played by a real teacher, François Bégaudeau—relies on wit, zest and daring to sustain himself in a daily high-wire act that balances gadfly provocation with Socratic dialogue. He's a no-nonsense scholar with a dazzling gift for language—ah, the French—yet he puts himself in danger with loose talk. His classroom, as holy as a desanctified church, is an urban battleground where precarious order contends with incipient chaos. Yet it's also a place where, against overwhelming odds, sporadic education does occur.

"The Class" was adapted, by the director and Mr. Bégaudeau, from "Entre les Murs," a book written by the latter as a factual account of one year in a French school. The fictional students in the film, loosely based on those in the book, are played by real-life students, rather than professional or occasional actors. That's hard to believe when you see the intricacy as well as the formidable energy of their performances. And the line between fact and fiction is blurrier still. During rehearsal, the kids in the cast, like the teacher playing their teacher, were encouraged to improvise on the basis of their own experiences and intuitions. But the results aren't blurry in the slightest. If the movie looks like a documentary, it feels like what it is, a powerful work that mixes fact and fiction in the service of truth.

To tell my own truth, I found it tempting, at least for a while, to take the teacher's side, to see him as a hero stuck with the hopeless task of bringing fractious 14- and 15-year-olds into a society they want no part of. (His dogged attempt to explain the imperfect subjunctive devolves from confusion into pure farce.) But the beauty of "The Class" is that it doesn't take sides; it takes note without passing judgment.


Rebecca Sandulak

Harry Connick Jr. and Renée Zellweger in 'New in Town.'

François is heroic, to be sure, but with a hero's flaws. And his classroom antagonist, Souleymane, an angry young man from Mali, pushes the teacher heedlessly, even ruthlessly, past the point of self-control. Still, the film catches Souleymane at a fleetingly sweet flirtation with photography, for which he might have a gift. And reveals the smoldering rage behind the diffident demeanor of a transfer student named Carl. And discovers that Esmeralda, a troublemaker with a venomous smirk, has a genuine interest, however brief and bizarre, in Plato's Republic.

"The Class" is clearly a microcosm of contemporary France, beset by social and economic tensions. More than that, though, it's a saga of education's struggles in many parts of the modern world. If only the film were pure fiction.

'New in Town'

"New in Town" takes the Nostradamus approach to screenwriting—every deadly dumb scene predicts the way it's going to end. You needn't be a seer to see that this wretched film will come to a very bad end. It's unfunny at best and borderline-amateur at worst, notwithstanding the desperate efforts of Renée Zellweger. She plays Lucy Hill, an ambitious corporate executive who is sent from her headquarters in Miami to shake up a dying factory in dead-of-winter Minnesota. (Harry Connick Jr. is the union rep she falls in love with.) Much of the low comedy turns on the low temperature in New Ulm, a real town where the fictional residents outwoebegone Lake Woebegone by speaking in farther-gone-than-"Fargo" accents and behaving like bumptious idiots. The month of January has come to be known as a graveyard for bad movies, but how bad can it get? This one answers the question.

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Opening this week in Europe

- **Bolt** Belgium, Finland, Netherlands
- **Bride Wars** Belgium, France, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Turkey
- **Defiance** Greece
- **Doubt** Belgium, France
- **Fost/Nixon** Denmark, Iceland, Poland, Spain
- **Hotel for Dogs** U.K.
- **Milk** Czech Republic
- **Rachel Getting Married** Portugal
- **Slumdog Millionaire** Netherlands, Spain
- **The Reader** Italy, Portugal, Spain
- **The Wrestler** Belgium, Netherlands, Norway
- **Valkyrie** Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland
- **Waltz with Bashir** Spain

Source: IMDB

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George Duffield

Rupert Murray, director of 'The End of the Line.'

A documentary filmmaker looks at the future of fishing

By Leigh Dyer
Special to The Wall Street Journal

BRITISH FILMMAKER Rupert Murray first made waves with his 2005 documentary, "Unknown White Male," which chronicled a friend's struggle with amnesia. Now he moves from storyteller to advocate with his new film, "The End of the Line," in which he tackles the issue of global overfishing.

Based on the book of the same name by Charles Clover, "The End of the Line" debuted at last month's Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Mr. Murray hopes to bring it to European theaters later this year.

The film posits a world depleted of edible fish by 2048 if current trends continue. Mr. Murray uses footage of fishermen at work and interviews with experts warning that current fishing policies are unsustainable.

Mr. Murray is no stranger to controversy. "Unknown White Male" told the story of the director's childhood friend, Doug Bruce, who woke up on a subway car in New York with no memory of who he was. The film was initially well-received, garnering a British Independent Film Award nomination among others. But Mr. Murray was soon on the defensive when some journalists questioned the veracity of Mr. Bruce's story. Mr. Murray stands by the film's facts.

"The End of the Line" was part of a wave of eco-documentaries at Sundance in the wake of 2006's global-warming smash, "An Inconvenient Truth." Other environmentally themed movies this year included "The Cove," about dolphin fishing in Japan; "Big River Man," about pollution; and "No Impact Man," about a family's effort to live without environmental impact for a year.

Mr. Murray, a resident of the London suburb of Fulham, spoke to us about his film during the festival.

Q: How did you get started on this project?

I was in Heathrow Airport and I was looking for a book to read, and I found this strange little book called "The End of the Line." When I got off the plane, I realized this is the film I have been wanting to make about the seas all my life, really.

I had sort of toyed with the idea of doing natural history. This is the real story of what's been happening to the world's oceans. Natural history films, as fantastic as they are, as much as they inspired me to make this film and fed my passion in the subject matter, they don't tell the whole truth. They perpetuate this myth that the oceans are somehow in this kind of biological pristine bubble, unaffected by man.

Q: After making this film, do you still eat seafood?

I'm a very careful seafood eater now. I made the film because I want to continue eating seafood. I want my daughter [who's two and a half years old] to taste seafood. And there's a real chance she won't.

Q: Why are environment-themed documentaries so popular this year?

It's what's actually happening. These are the stories that are beginning to define our age, as resources become scarcer and scarcer, as environmental degradation impacts us. I felt I couldn't make a film about the oceans without including the story of how man has destroyed [them]. Overfishing is having as big an impact on the oceans as global warming. And it's not pollution, which people thought about for a long time. Overfishing is being talked about by a single industry, and not a very large industry at that. One of the great things about Charles' book is it showed in very simple terms how we can solve this.

Q: Your film presents overfishing as more urgent than global warming.

The thing about overfishing is there isn't the same scientific argument. There's a consensus about what's actually happening. What they argue about is, "Is it 75% or 90% depletion?" They agree generally on how things need to be changed. Some folks prefer marine protected areas, others prefer reduction of [fishing] capacity. But unlike global warming, there isn't a massive difference of opinion within the scientific community.

Q: Do you consider this issue's solutions, and this film, an easy sell?

The difference between global warming and overfishing is that the sacrifices you have to make are minuscule. You need to eat fish slightly less frequently and give it the respect it deserves as a wild animal. Make sure they're sustainably caught by looking for certification guides. Check online seafood guides. Ask questions of your chefs and supermarkets. As consumers, we can really change things.

Q: What's your next film project?

I am very interested in a follow-up film project concentrating on marine protected areas. I'm also currently working on a film about the opening ceremony of the next Olympic games and trying to find out what that ceremony says about my hometown, London, and being British.

Songbird of the 'Slumdog' soundtrack

By Ethan Smith

HIP-HOP ARTIST M.I.A. recently rocketed from the experimental underground to the pinnacle of the entertainment world. "O Saya," her collaboration with Indian composer A.R. Rahman from the "Slumdog Millionaire" soundtrack, is one of three nominees for the best-song Oscar. And her track "Paper Planes" is in contention at this weekend's Grammy Awards for record of the year—the Recording Academy's top honor.

Born Mathangi Arulpragasam in Britain, the future singer returned with her family to her parents' native Sri Lanka when she was 6 months old. The family, who are members of Sri Lanka's ethnic-Tamil minority, moved to Jaffna, in the island nation's north.

Not long afterward, the country erupted into civil war between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government, and violence consumed Jaffna.

As a child, Ms. Arulpragasam rarely saw her father, Arul Pragasam, who was involved in the Tamil-separatist movement—though she says he was part of a more political faction than the violent and better-known Tigers.

At age 10 she fled with her mother, elder sister and younger brother first to India and then back to London, where her mother now works as a seamstress and M.I.A. attended art college.

Ms. Arulpragasam says her harrowing life has informed both the lyrics and sound of her songs. After her song "Paper Planes" was included last year in a trailer for the stoner comedy "Pineapple Express," it became M.I.A.'s first hit—and an unlikely one at that. The song's signature element, gunshot sounds that are part of its rhythm bed, generated controversy. The song's refrain is the seemingly aggressive chant: "All I wanna do is"—Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!—"and take your money." But M.I.A. calls the song an ironic comment on the way Westerners perceive Third World immigrants.

Hip-hop artist M.I.A.

Management+Artists

Ms. Arulpragasam now lives in Los Angeles, where she is starting a family of her own under far gentler circumstances than the ones in which she was raised. She and fiancé Benjamin Brewer are expecting her first child as soon as this weekend.

Q: Your lyrics address issues like human trafficking and guerrilla warfare in a telling-it-like-it-is, almost amoral way that's similar to the way gangsta rap treated drug dealing and urban violence in the 1990s. Do you see a connection?

I've seen, with my own eyes, a lot of s— go down. I've seen people get massacred in front of me. My school was burned to the ground when I was 6 years old. When you come from that kind of background, you do become matter of fact, and tell it like it is.

Q: What do you say to critics, like the Sri Lankan rapper Delon, who accuse you of glorifying terrorism?

If you think lyrics about guns are bad, I shouldn't have been shot at when I was 7 years old.

Q: Your Oscar-nominated song sounds very different from your own music. What was it like collaborating with A.R. Rahman on a lushly orchestrated song for a Hollywood movie?

I'm not used to recording in $1 million studios. I approach music as an experimental artist. I go out in the street and record people in their element; I play around with drum machines and samplers. I make a whole bunch of mess and see what works. A.R. Rahman works in a much more professional way than I do, with a lot of professional people. But I love him musically. He's been the only composer in every Tamil film that I've watched and liked.

Q: Was it set up as a meeting of two Tamil stars?

When I first met A.R. [while recording her album "Kala"], I wasn't that big. My music wasn't Tamil-sounding, it didn't sound like average music coming out of the West, but it wasn't mainstream Indian, either.

Q: Your father was involved in the Tamil independence movement in the 1970s and '80s. Was he a Tamil Tiger?

He was a member of a group called EROS—Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students. He was an intellectual who intellectualized the war, even while it was going on. He tried to mediate between the [Sri Lankan] government, the Indian government and the Tamil Tigers. That was his dream, to mediate an agreement. When he failed, he got discouraged and quit politics. He moved to Cambridge to research and write books about sustainable development.

WSJ.com

Sound bites
Listen to clips of 'O Saya' and 'Paper Planes,' at **WSJ.com/Lifestyle**

From the Stax label, the heart of soul

By Jesse Drucker

IT WAS THE LITTLE soul label that could. Stax Records was the Memphis music machine that produced the likes of Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, the Staple Singers, Isaac Hayes, Booker T. & the MG's, William Bell, Rufus and Carla Thomas, and many others. It was founded in 1957 by two white Memphis siblings—Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton (the Stax name came from combining the first two letters of their last names)—who converted an old movie theater into a recording studio and adjoining record store. The label's ambitions reached new heights under a new African-American co-owner, former disc jockey Al Bell. The Stax style, particularly in the early days, was characterized by cutting a record in only a few takes, with no overdubbing and lots of ad-libbing. Every studio record was essentially a live record. Live and raw.

Stax had a long run, before sliding into bankruptcy in 1975. The studio was torn down in 1989. But in 2006, the building was reconstructed according to the original designs and reopened as the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. The old Stax label has also been revived, signing such contemporary artists as neo-soul singer Angie Stone. Beginning in force in 2007, Stax began issuing a series of superb CDs and DVDs commemorating some of the greatest soul music ever recorded. This month, the label will reissue a remastered version of Hayes's classic album "Black Moses."

Here are a few of the best:

'Otis Redding—Live in London & Paris': Redding was the finest singer to come out of Stax—and arguably the most outstanding male soul singer ever. No one better exemplified the rough-hewn, sweaty, impromptu approach to recordings there. This album captures Redding at the height of his powers—just a few months before his death in 1967—in his best setting, in front of the audiences in Europe that made him understand the reach of his fame. Highlights include his trademark version of "Try a Little Tenderness," in which he is joined for an ad-libbed ending by Sam & Dave and Carla Thomas, who were also on the European tour.

Michael Ochs Archives

'Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story': This lovingly done documentary, narrated by Samuel Jackson, captures so many of the twists and turns in the rise and fall—and rise and fall again—of Stax. Unlike too many music documentaries, this one actually lets viewers hear the music. And the filmmakers did great reporting, doggedly tracking down nearly every important person associated with Stax. They expertly chronicle the rise of a mom-and-pop record label that became a soul-music powerhouse, then was nearly laid low by Redding's death and, a year later, was transformed by the assassination, in Memphis, of Martin Luther King Jr. His death forever altered the city, making impossible the biracial magic that had been such an integral part of Stax. Among the remarkable footage here: Isaac Hayes rehearsing "Shaft" in the studio, sitting alongside director Gordon Parks; concert clips of the likes of Sam & Dave; and, finally, scenes from the auction of assets when Stax's fortunes took a terrible turn.

'Dreams to Remember: The Legacy of Otis Redding': The definitive Redding documentary features one jaw-dropping clip after another. Highlights include a 1967 London performance of "Satisfaction" featuring Redding on fire—pumping his fist, his body glistening with sweat. He looks as though he might explode. The filmmakers also discovered the only two known recorded Redding interviews, one with Dick Clark. Just as charming are several TV clips, where Redding is surprisingly awkward as he tries to dance, sans microphone, and sometimes cracks up as he forgets some of the lyrics he is supposed to lip-sync. He was just 26 when he died in a plane crash in Lake Monona in Wisconsin.

'Wattstax: Music from the Wattstax Festival and Film': As the civil-rights movement transformed into the Black Power movement in the 1970s, Stax underwent a similar change. The label's heights were reached when it organized a seven-hour concert in Los Angeles in August 1972 to commemorate the city's riots a few years earlier. The event drew 100,000 people to the Los Angeles Coliseum and was also the subject of a woefully under-recognized film, which captures a unique expression of artistic black pride from that period. This reissued and re-edited version of the accompanying concert album features memorable appearances and performances by the Staple Singers, Richard Pryor, Rufus Thomas, the Soul Children, Isaac Hayes, and Jesse Jackson, who opens the event by leading the crowd in a chorus of "I am somebody: black, beautiful, proud."

'Johnnie Taylor—Live at the Summit Club': Taylor is one of the great soul singers of this period, a gospel and R&B protégé of Sam Cooke. This record captures a live show at a Los Angeles nightclub—hastily arranged after his appearance at the Wattstax event was scrapped due to scheduling problems. It was just as well. This is an astonishing album. Taylor's energy is fierce and intense, and he is backed by a great, funky band. One performance from this show is included in the Wattstax film—"Jody's Got Your Girl and Gone"—and it is one of the movie's most electrifying performances.

'Judy Clay/Veda Brown—The Stax Solo Recordings' (issued by Kent Records, not Stax): Two lesser-known singers who did a handful of recordings for Stax, both of these women sang deep, gospel-drenched soul. Veda Brown's "Short Stopping" is a Stax classic. Many of these songs capture the later Stax sound, much of which was actually recorded with another important soul rhythm section in Muscle Shoals, Ala.

Introducing Lily Allen—for the second time

After visa problems tripped up her first attempt, the British singer tries to conquer America

By John Jurgensen

London

A PAPARAZZI CONVOY six vehicles deep snakes through traffic in pursuit of a car carrying Lily Allen. In the passenger seat the pop singer reads Google headlines about herself on a BlackBerry. Some of the stories say that she's feuding with a rival singer from America. Others claim that she's been cast on the TV show "Dr. Who." An online poll determines that people should let her be happy.

None of it is true, she says, except for the last item: "I'm glad I have the right to enjoy my life."

With a hit album full of cheeky attitude and retro flair, Ms. Allen broke out in 2006 and has been in the spotlight in Britain ever since. She faces a much different scenario across the Atlantic, where her rise was cut short.

She had an almost effortless introduction in the U.S., championed by bloggers, critics and other tastemakers, but then an immigration snag shut her out of the country. Touring and promotion plans evaporated, and potential album sales went off the table. In the years since, a parade of young British singers have followed, competing for pop-cultural market share in the U.S.

Ms. Allen, who at the age of 20 drew her first listeners on MySpace, was held up as an example of how musicians with a strong sound and a direct line to fans could succeed, even as traditional record companies withered. Now, with her second album ready for release on Feb. 10, that blueprint will be tested. Her record company, the recently restructured EMI, hopes to build on her grassroots base and punch through to the mainstream. Doing that, however, will require some old-fashioned tools—radio play, touring, exhaustive promotion.

"Touring will be the death of me," Ms. Allen says, recalling her last experience with the revelry and monotony of life on the road with "20 smelly boys." On her first U.S. outing—and before her immigration blow—she canceled about 10 concerts, saying on her MySpace page that her shows had suffered because she was "tired" and "getting really drunk because I'm nervous."

Now, with a new album, Ms. Allen says she's ready to "put the work into it that I think it deserves."

The first album from Ms. Allen, "Alright, Still" was spiked with ska and rock steady, vintage musical styles related to reggae. But her spin on the sound was fresh, updated with taut beats and Ms. Allen's delivery, which mixed laid-back singing with a savvy patter that wasn't quite rap. In her lyrics she told snarky stories and dressed down sad-sack exes, as on the biggest single, "Smile," which includes the line, "Now you're calling me up on the phone, so you can have a little whine and a moan."

Her sly tone continues on the new album, "It's Not Me, It's You." But there are changes. While pop albums typically comprise tracks from multiple producers, Ms. Allen wanted the potential continuity and professional rapport of working with only one. She chose Greg Kurstin, a veteran of the Los Angeles music scene and a member of an acclaimed duo, the Bird and the Bee.

Simon Emmet

Above, Lily Allen; below, the singer performing last week at the KOKO nightclub in London.

The producer, whom Ms. Allen calls "a modern-day Burt Bacharach," used an array of live and electronic instruments to give some songs a loungey, continental feel. On other tracks he added unexpected elements, including accordion and country twang, into a club-ready pulse.

Ms. Allen's lyrics still hinge on her sense of humor, such as in the song "Not Fair," a lewd complaint to an underperforming lover. But on other tracks Ms. Allen experiments with broader commentary, tackling matters like drug use, materialism, God and self-doubt, a theme Ms. Allen revisits often in song and in her personal life.

To Nick Gatfield, EMI Music's president of artists and repertoire for North America and the U.K., this signals Ms. Allen's transition from "a quirky English pop star to an artist with substance." But if Ms. Allen is attempting to join the handful of artists who can sing about weighty issues from a woman's perspective and still make it work at Top 40, including Madonna, Beyoncé and Christina Aguilera, she's not ready to admit it. "I just wanted to write an album that meant something, really, to me. Something that felt right from start to finish," Ms. Allen says.

She thinks of herself as more of a lyricist than a singer. Her songwriting is "quite personal," a more-structured version of the MySpace blog that she has used to share candid information about everything from record-label relations to a miscarriage she suffered last year. She has cut back on these posts because they become tabloid fodder.

WENN/Newscom

"I wanted the blog to be somewhere I could develop my writing. It could have been like a Bridget Jones column. But it can't. People treat it like it's news, and that was never the intention."

Still, her musical persona is at the root of her appeal to many fans. "She's a personality, and an authentic one. It's not contrived," says James Diener, an industry executive not connected with Ms. Allen. Mr. Diener—the president of A&M/Octone Records, home to acts such as Maroon5—says Ms. Allen faces an uncertain outlook with her second album. Sophomore releases are notoriously problematic for artists who enjoyed splashy debuts. "In my view, there's anticipation and a healthy interest in her because she's known as a real talent," he says. "But there wasn't enough exposure [during her first round in the U.S.] to confirm her without some question mark."

In August 2007, about six months after "Alright, Still" had received a U.S. release, Ms. Allen was detained at the Los Angeles airport by immigration officials who canceled the visa she needed to enter and work in the country. Citing privacy issues, U.S. officials won't comment on the incident, and neither will Ms. Allen's current management. But her manager at the time says it was likely linked to a police citation she had received after an altercation with a photographer in London. Ms. Allen was forced to return to England and cancel a high-profile itinerary, including a performance with rappers Kanye West and Common on a televised MTV awards show and a string of West Coast concerts.

"The record was ascendant when it got cut short," says Mr. Gatfield (who joined EMI in 2008). Powered by word-of-mouth recommendations, a "Saturday Night Live" appearance and a handful of club dates Ms. Allen completed before her visa problem, "Alright, Still" sold a respectable 526,000 copies in the U.S., according to Nielsen SoundScan. (A total of 2.5 million copies have been sold world-wide, EMI says.) However, had Ms. Allen not been benched, "we could have done 250,000 or 500,000 more" in the U.S., Mr. Gatfield says.

Ms. Allen is sanguine about the setback: "I think people understood that it wasn't just me giving up on America." (A representative says she is clear to enter the country next month to work.)

Going forward, however, her bigger challenge may be comparisons with the string of British singers that followed her, including a few who made a bigger commercial impact by some measures. The debut U.S. albums by British soul singer Amy Winehouse and Welsh newcomer Duffy sold 2.15 million and 696,000 copies, respectively, according to Nielsen. Yet "Alright, Still" outperformed albums by other Britons, including singer-rapper Estelle (185,000) and bluesy vocalist Adele (374,000), both of whom are nominated for Grammy awards in multiple categories.

The differences between these artists in sound and image may be lost on casual listeners, says Bruce Warren, program director at WXPN-FM, a prominent noncommercial radio station in Philadelphia. "From a musicologist's perspective they were very different, but to most people they all fell into the same category," he says.

Ms. Allen is tired of the debate, especially after being pitted against Ms. Winehouse constantly in the U.K. media. "I've never been so compared to someone in my life, and I just felt like, what's this all about? We're both just girls. That's the only thing we have in common," she says. "What defines me isn't that I'm young and I'm female."

It's sentiments like these that fuel much of her new music. "The Fear," the album's lead single, is a satirical song about material excess, set to a glammy pulse. With echoes of Madonna's "Material Girl," Ms. Allen sings about being "a weapon of massive consumption," hoping for riches and coveting diamonds. "I hear people die when they're trying to find them," she sings.

When the song was written, she says, "I honestly thought it was about someone different. Now, in retrospect, I see that 'The Fear' is all about me and everything I feel guilty about."

Such issues would be depressing for her and a bore for listeners, she says, if she didn't joke about them in song like she does in life. As Ms. Allen travels from a magazine shoot to a lunch appointment where photographers will close in on the sidewalk (a shot of Ms. Allen in a frilly blouse and spike heels will later appear in a national tabloid with the headline "How to get Lily's style"), the singer makes a call to a Cartier store. Talking with a nasal accent, she pretends to be a rich Texan shopping for her debutante daughter as she inquires about a panther ring crusted with diamonds and sapphires. She leaves the salesman with a fake name and a real phone number.

Stars don't typically invite discussion about their artistic insecurities, but Ms. Allen offers hers up frankly and often. She says she fought through writer's block while making the new record. "If I'm not coming up with something I get very upset and start questioning it all. 'I can't get it out. I'm not worthy of the money I'm getting paid. There are people who are so much better.' I really beat myself up," Ms. Allen says with a laugh.

Now, however, with the album ready for release and about a year of road work ahead of her, Ms. Allen seems confident in her place in the pop landscape—and in her own skin. She says, "It makes me feel like I'm doing the right thing. Like I've got something to contribute."

WSJ.com

Try, try again
Listen to clips from Lily Allen's new album, and see an audio slideshow about other British singers, at **WSJ.com/Lifestyle**

Luxury lines: Railway journeys that offer cruise-ship class

Here and below, the Eastern & Oriental Express.

Ron Bambridge

By Steve Mollman

Special to The Wall Street Journal

WHILE SOME new trains represent alternatives to air travel—speedy and hassle-free—the growing luxury-rail branch has taken a different route entirely: Traveling on one of these trains isn't so much about the getting there as about the going. Rather than airplane alternatives, these are cruise ships on land.

And in keeping with the cruise industry, luxury-rail travel has been picking up steam in recent years, with new trains and routes not just in Europe and Asia but also in Russia and Africa.

"There are more older people with more time and more money," explains Mark Smith, the train fan behind rail-travel Web site Seat61.com. "It's the same thing that has driven the increase in cruising."

Like cruise ships, some luxury trains have their ports of call, where passengers may alight on their own or take part in tours or other activities offered by the train operator or its partners (sometimes at an added cost). And like cruise ships aiming for the standard of fine hotels that just happen to float, many of these trains aim to be fine hotels that just happen to have wheels, with food and service equal to what you'd find in an upscale property. On some trains the on-board hospitality is managed by a premium hotel chain.

While the global economic crisis could derail the industry's growth, for now rail operators and governments are jumping on the trend. In India, for example, following

Ian Lloyd

A four-page section on great train trips, from Thai temples to the Spanish coast

the success of the Palace on Wheels in Rajasthan, there's now the Deccan Odyssey in Maharashtra, the Golden Chariot in Karnataka and, as of last month, the Royal Rajasthan on Wheels. (Each state's tourism department typically helps promote and finance the trains.)

Orient-Express Hotels Trains & Cruises, which runs routes in Europe and Asia, recently upgraded the Presidential Suites on its Eastern & Oriental Express and added two new routes, Bangkok-Chiang Mai and Bangkok-Vientiane. (That train ride actually ends on the Thai side of the Mekong River; buses take passengers across into Vientiane.) "We have seen an increasing interest in our luxury trains," says Yann Guezennec, the company's sales director.

The luxury standard keeps rising. The Golden Chariot, for instance, has a fitness and massage area. "I had a couple of spa treatments," says recent passenger Ina Kota, who works for a consulting firm in the U.S.

Of course, there's only so far a train can go in imitating a hotel or cruise ship. Cabins grow larger, but space in a railcar will always be at something of a premium. Shaving and sudden sways will never be a good mix. Don't expect silence: Some noise is inevitable in rolling steel boxes, even with modern soundproofing techniques (bring ear plugs for the first night if you're sensitive).

"You will get some clattering," says June Baker, an Australian train buff and frequent traveler who was on the inaugural run of Great Southern Rail's Platinum Service from Adelaide to Darwin. "But that's part of rail travel."

Indeed, for true train lovers, the sway and clatter are part of the romance of rail. No matter how luxurious some offerings grow, rail travel will always retain a feeling of adventure. There's more a sense of arrival and departure than in an airplane, says Web site operator Mr. Smith, and of being immersed in the place you're traveling through. By contrast, he says, "If you take a dozen flights, you will have one experience a dozen times."

Here, luxury rail offerings that are experiences unto themselves.

The Thai Explorer

Eastern & Oriental Express, a train that has offered journeys between Singapore and Bangkok since the early 1990s, added this route about five years ago.

The train's upgraded Presidential Suites feature a spacious combined bathroom/dressing area with a vanity counter and a nod to modernity in the form of an iPod docking station. The State Compartments, smaller but still comfortable, are actually better in one way: The sofa faces the windows instead of sitting at a right angle to them. (The Pullman Compartments, though, are claustrophobic—and equipped with bunk beds.)

One especially nice feature that sets this train apart is the open-air section of the observation car in the rear. This alone more than compensates for the few areas where the E&O falls short of the competition. One is the windows. The route passes beautiful landscapes of rice paddies with mountains as backdrop, and they deserve a larger frame. Another is the beds: Only singles are available, even in the recently revamped Presidential Suites—subtracting some romance from the romance of rail travel.

Otherwise the atmosphere is full of romance of a historical kind; the interior design features high-quality woodwork that recalls craftsmanship of an earlier era. Motifs in the design draw inspiration from the cultures encountered along the route.

Even the guests seem to evoke a time past, says Leesa Lovelace, the train's general manager. No flip-flops here: Passengers dress nicely and really deck themselves out for dinner. As on other cruise trains, socializing tends to occur in the lounge car before and after dinner. Menus include both Western and regional dishes.

The route through northern Thailand allows more time for local excursions—as a proportion of the trip overall—than the Singapore-Bangkok trek. In fact, most of the second day is set aside for exploring greater Chiang Mai. Optional activities include a city tour, a handicrafts workshop, and an elephant camp where you can try being a mahout.

On the third day, heading back to Bangkok, there's a morning visit to Si Satchanalai, a Unesco World Heritage Site whose impressive 13th-century Buddhist temples go unseen by many tourists because the location is relatively inconvenient by car. Then in the afternoon, the train spends time in the charming little town of Lampang, known among Thais for its colorful horse-drawn carriages—during which passengers can take a trip to Baan Sao Nok, an 1890s home-turned-museum where you drink tea and learn about the area's history. Both the Si Satchanalai and Lampang tours are included in the train fare.

Bangkok to Chiang Mai round trip (four days, three nights), €3,920 for two in a State Compartment.

☎65-6395-0678

www.easternandorientalexpress.com

The Ghan; below, the train's dining car (left) and the station platform in Alice Springs.

Alamy

The Ghan

The Ghan line has linked Adelaide, on Australia's southern coast, with the interior town of Alice Springs since 1929. (It's named for the camel drivers who had plied that same route; though they actually came from many countries, they were called "Afghans.")

About five years ago, the route was extended to Darwin on the northern coast, enabling three-day coast-to-coast journeys through the middle of the country.

But making the trip in serious style has been possible only since September, when Great Southern Rail launched its Platinum Service. At 3.65 meters by 2.1 meters, the cabins are about twice the size as those in the next-best Gold service.

Ms. Baker, who caught the first run of the Platinum service with her husband, a retired farmer from the Yorke Peninsula, west of Adelaide, says she was surprised by the level of attention even before they boarded: They were picked up at their hotel and delivered straight to their cabin, thanks to a small road that parallels the track.

With its smooth wood-paneled walls and carpeted floors, the Ghan is more modern and less ornate than some luxury trains, leaning toward the practical and comfortable rather than recalling earlier eras or reflecting particular cultural influences. Not that there isn't a nod to Australiana: The menu includes grilled kangaroo loin and barramundi, a large river fish.

The cabin was big enough for a double bed that Ms. Baker describes as among the most comfortable she's ever slept in, moving or still. The spacious private bathroom—today's luxury trains have moved beyond the old train standard of a shared bathroom down the hall—gave her a shower the way she likes it, with a strong flow and plenty of hot water.

Stops include Alice Springs—among the options is a tour on camel-back—and Katherine, with a chance to take a helicopter ride over the sandstone cliffs of Katherine Gorge.

Both fans of rail travel, the Bakers were aboard just to experience the Platinum service (they returned home from Darwin by air). One other feature Ms. Baker appreciated: the "huge" panoramic windows. Larger than those in other classes, and on most trains for that matter, they allowed her to take in the full majesty of the desert, with its subtle variations and artistic hues of blue and orange.

If there's a downside to this journey, it's one that will lead many to opt for a one-way rather than round-trip ticket: the long stretches of relatively unvaried landscape. But that's a matter of taste.

"The scenery—a lot of nothing—is wonderful," says Ms. Baker.

One-way between Adelaide and Darwin (three days, two nights), A$6,100 (about €3,000) for two.

☎61-8-8213-4592
www.gsr.com.au

The Golden Chariot

The Indian state of Karnataka rewards visitors with culture, history and exotic cuisine—but punishes them with potholes.

"We would not liked to have used the roads," says Robert Upward, a retired engineer from the U.K. who recently visited with his wife. "We would have ended up physical wrecks."

Instead they traveled from the tech capital of Bangalore to the beaches of Goa on the Golden Chariot, which launched early last year (and is in fact purple). Not only is the ride smoother than on the roads, but just in case of a twinge there are massage rooms (go with the Ayurvedic) in the spa and fitness carriage, along with a full gym. Backs are further soothed by the comfortable double beds available in the cabins.

Fitting for a train starting out from Bangalore, the cabins include wireless Internet access, a DVD player and an LCD TV with satellite channels. But Ms. Kota, the consultant, says the picture was never very good, and Mr. Upward would have liked one more remote control—for adjusting the air conditioner, which had only an on/off switch.

The train moves largely at night, leaving much of the day for sightseeing. Among the stops on the eight-day journey: the Kabini wildlife refuge, where the maharajahs used to hunt, and the city of Mysore, home to the ornate Mysore Palace and the Brindavan Gardens, which may be a familiar setting for Bollywood fans.

"The train is by far the best way to see Karnataka," says Ms. Kota, explaining it's almost impossible to see so much in so little time any other way.

Mr. Upward particularly liked Hampi, a village in the north that was the last capital of the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar, and whose temples and palaces have been declared a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Places like Hampi and Mysore inspired the train's royalty-themed interiors. The ornate Indo-Saracenic arches of Mysore Palace echo clearly in the lounge bar's mirror frames, and in the beds' headrests. The cabins feature hand-woven silk sheets and hand-carved wood panels.

On- and off-board hospitality is handled by the Mapple Group, which runs a collection of luxury hotels in India. Both the food and service were excellent, says Mr. Upward.

Ms. Kota, traveling with her husband, sister and parents—both born in Karnataka—describes the food as "simply outstanding" and vouches for the trip overall: "We all loved it and thought it was a great historical and archeological tour of our home state."

Bangalore to Goa (eight days, seven nights), 202,056 rupees (about €3,000) for two in a double cabin during high season (September to March).

☎91-11-2334-8016
www.thegoldenchariot.co.in

Alamy

Left, Lotus Mahal in Hampi; right, the Golden Chariot's dining car.

On El Transcantábrico, a railway

By Mariana Schroeder
Special to The Wall Street Journal

THE RAILWAY station at Ferrol is quiet—freight trains no longer use the narrow gauge railroad that runs along the north coast of Spain. On its own fenced-off platform sits a blue and white diesel locomotive at the head of 14 vintage train cars stretching far beyond the station. Like all proper passenger trains of a certain age it has a name: El Transcantábrico.

Light fog shrouds the station. Inside the train, passengers sleep in snug, wood-paneled suites. The only activity is in the lounge car, where José Ramón Fernández, the head waiter known to everyone as Monchu, and his staff prepare breakfast. At 8 a.m., crew member Rafael Fernández Cuervo moves down the narrow corridor of the sleeping compartments—as he's been doing for nearly 25 years. He raises the shades on the windows, careful not to let them snap, and rings his brass wake-up bell. For the passengers a memorable voyage on El Transcantábrico is about to begin.

A viaduct along the route of El Transcantábrico; right, the dining car (above) and a stateroom; below, the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

El Transcantábrico

The train snakes its way along Spain's spectacular northern coast, closely following the Way of St. James, a historic route for religious pilgrims on the way to Santiago de Compostela. But this trip isn't about penitence; it's all about luxury and leisure. Each stop along the line features a particular insight into Spanish culture and cuisine. A comfortable tourist bus meets El Transcantábrico at each stop and brings travelers to points out of the reach of rail. There are tours of historic cities and meals taken in local restaurants ranging from quaint and picturesque to gourmet palaces. The region's gastronomy and wines are a major focus.

FEVE (Ferrocarriles Españoles de Via Estrecha), the company that runs the train, calls it a "cruise" and stresses such luxurious touches as the ability to have a sauna while the train is moving. Passengers are provided with cloth slippers and other bathroom amenities, and there is no need to touch a piece of luggage or show a ticket for the duration of the journey.

An eight-day trip on this line is filled with the kind of railroad nostalgia that evokes Agatha Christie and "Murder on the Orient Express." Indeed, on a recent voyage from Santiago de Compostela to León, I encountered a colorful cast of characters almost right out of that book. But instead of a Belgian detective, a dour French businessman enters the dining car and critically assesses the croissants on the breakfast buffet. The smell of fresh coffee and toasting bread floats through the train. An American woman in her 50s takes a seat by the window and orders a café Americano. She has a stack of reading material on the starched tablecloth. Monchu fills her glass with freshly squeezed orange juice.

From the station in Ferrol the passengers go by bus to Santiago de Compostela. Guide Daniel Escudero keeps up a running commentary on the way, pointing out historically interesting places.

Since the Middle Ages pilgrims have been coming to Santiago de Compostela to pray at the tomb of St. James the Apostle, whose relics are believed to repose in a silver casket inside the cathedral. The city still attracts around 100,000 religious pilgrims each year.

The pilgrimage ends at the Praza do Obradoiro, where all the many roads to Santiago de Compostela come together. On one side is the town's towering granite cathedral. Next to it is the royal hospital built to house poor pilgrims by Isabella and Ferdinand at the beginning of the 16th century. Today it is a Parador, a five-star hotel of the Spanish state-owned chain. To this day the first 15 pilgrims who line up at the door get free breakfast.

Inside the cathedral of Santiago, the raison d'être of the city, sweaty pilgrims with backpacks mix with tourists and pious Gallegos. Most pilgrims line up behind the high altar to climb the narrow stairs leading to the saint's 12th-century statue and embrace it. Hundreds of years and millions of arms have worn him

The journey to Santiago de Compostela was never so plush

out and the statue currently on display is a modern copy.

While medieval pilgrims often had to beg for their food, El Transcantábrico's passengers dine in style in the magnificent banquet hall of the Parador Reyes Católicos. A mussel cocktail in sea urchin vinaigrette is on the menu along with scallops on the half shell. It was here, after all, that French pilgrims learned to make coquilles St. Jacques. Still, it is hard to feel virtuous after a superb lunch washed down by ample amounts of Albariño, the local white wine, and finished off with *filloas rellenas de crema y manzana con Sorbete de Orujo*, tiny pancakes filled with apple flavored cream and topped with a scoop of sorbet made from the local version of grappa.

Back at the train, it's time for

AFP

the first leg of the voyage, from Ferrol to Viveiro. The passengers climb aboard. Some repair to their compartments, others take seats in the bar or lounge cars to read newspapers, sip espressos and watch the scenery flash by. The train rarely goes faster than 50 kph. Usually it chugs along at a stately pace of about 30 kph, swaying gently on tracks that are just a meter wide, making the comforting clattering sound of metal wheels on steel rails.

This wasn't always a luxury line. The first stretch of the narrow gauge railway was built in 1894 between Bilbao and León to haul coal and steel between the two industrial cities. It was dubbed El Hullero, the Coal Train. Later it was extended along the northern coast to transport workers from the impoverished fishing villages to industrial cities where jobs were available. Altogether, 1,267 kilometers of rail were laid, making it Europe's longest narrow gauge railroad.

By the 1980s the mines were exhausted. Industrial cities had to find new sources of energy and convert to cleaner industries. In Bilbao the Guggenheim Museum gentrified the city's industrial heart and tourists brought new prosperity even to the once poor villages of Cantabria and Galicia.

In 1983 the first luxury tourist train began to chug along the old tracks. It consisted of three vintage British saloon cars, four sleepers, a generator boxcar and a crew wagon.

The narrow gauge of the track limits the width of the cars. The cabins are small but comfortable. Each is equipped with a bed covered in russet striped silk. Matching curtains decorate the windows, but most passengers prefer to keep them open and watch the countryside slip by. The train crosses Galicia's many estuaries on soaring arched bridges. At times it seems to float between the blue-green sea and the sky.

Food is a major attraction on the trip. Breakfast is the only meal regularly served aboard the Transcantábrico. One lunch or dinner is usually catered aboard the journey. All other meals are taken in restaurants and Paradors in the

pilgrimage along Spain's north coast

El Transcantábrico(3)

towns along the route. They are chosen for menus featuring the local seafood and specialties like Cantábrian white bean stew, and serve the crisp white wines of the region or the rich reds of Rioja.

It is possible to begin the trip either in Santiago or León. No matter which direction you're heading, the itinerary includes stops in Luarca, Gijón, Llanes, Santander, Bilbao and Cistierna. The trains operate from Easter until the end of October. The fare is €2,600 per person in a shared cabin and €3,500 single occupancy, and includes food and accommodations but not flight transfers or drinks.

The train travels during the day only; nights are spent in the stations to ensure the passengers get a peaceful night's sleep. The train sometimes departs in the early morning and passengers awake to its rocking movement even before Rafael comes by with his bell.

By the third day passengers seem to slip into the rhythm set by the slow passage of the train. The Frenchman spends less time on the computer in the lounge car, no longer gesticulating wildly when a tunnel or mountain passage interrupts Internet access (the train is equipped with Wi-Fi). A maximum of 52 passengers can occupy the 26 double sleeping compartments, but rarely is the train that full.

Newspapers in several languages are available every day in the lounge car. During the stretches between stops passengers gravitate to the bar or lounge cars to sip coffee, sherry or cava, the sparkling Spanish wine available from breakfast to nightcap. After dinner passengers can explore the local nightlife on their own or join night owls in the bar car for live music provided by local entertainers along the way.

By the time the train arrives at Bilbao, the passengers are on a first-name basis. The French businessman sips cava with the Hungarian beauty who is traveling alone. The English couple who barely spoke to each other at the beginning of the trip have switched from afternoon tea to gin-and-tonic. The banker from Zurich has given up his daily conversations about the stock market. Even the honeymooning couple from Madrid have started to mingle.

The last night before departure from the train and from each other, passengers gather in the bar car for one last drink and an exchange of business cards, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. The crew—Monchu, the head waiter with his easy manner and gentle smile; Geli, Nieves and Jacqueline, the waitresses—say their goodbyes. Mr. Escudero, the multilingual guide who kept everyone in a good mood throughout the journey, loosens his tie for the first time in eight days and begins telling jokes in three languages. Another bottle of Rioja is opened and Rodrigo, a Spanish-American guest from Miami, begins a sad song of farewell.

Many passengers promise to return. The next day means transfers to airports and a return to the faster pace of the 21st century. But few who travel on El Transcantábrico could forget the sound of the rails or the gentle swaying of its cars—something they'll feel in their step for days to come.

Stops along the way...

SOME OF THE STOPS along the route of El Transcantábrico train journey.

Ribadeo

This nearly forgotten town has a sleeping-beauty kind of charm. Many of its neo-colonial villas were built by local sons who had made fortunes in the Americas and returned to live out their lives in style. The stop here includes a boat trip on the Ría del Eo. Passengers spend about an hour cruising the tranquil waters. Later they board the bus for a trip two kilometers south to the hermitage of Monte de Santa Cruz, for spectacular views of the Galician and Asturian coastlines.

Oviedo

This is the capital of Asturias, a region famous for its rugged mountains and spectacular coastline, known as Costa Verde. The excursion to Oviedo includes a stop at the eighth-century church San Julián de los Prados, with one of the earliest existing examples of mural painting in Europe. There is just enough time to stroll through the elegant city with its fine 14th-century cathedral, interesting shops and lively market before returning to the train for lunch.

Picos de Europa

A mountain range of soaring peaks, green valleys and pristine mountain lakes. The train stops at Arriondas. From there the bus negotiates the curves up to Lake Enol, framed by the Peña Santa mountains. Sheep and cows graze the gentle slopes around the lake and a rustic tavern serves traditional cider and cheese made by the farmers of the area. Cider, or *sidra*, is the drink of choice in the Asturian mountains and served in *chigres* or *sidrerias*—where waiters serve the tart, fizzy drink by pouring it from a bottle held above their heads in order to give the cider enough oxygen to make it palatable. The process is called "throwing the cider" and involves a great deal of spillage, which the Asturians don't mind at all.

Alamy (4)

Top, the Transcantábrico's locomotive; (clockwise from above) pintxos in Bilbao; San Julián de los Prados in Oviedo; a barman pours cider in Oviedo; Ribadeo's Pazo de los Morenos.

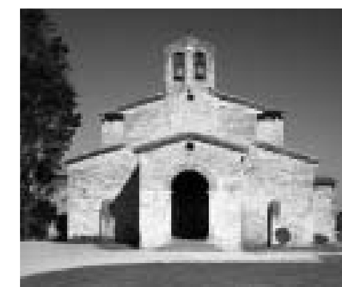
Cabezón de la Sal

Salt has been mined here since Roman times, and the town is now famous for prehistoric art. It is not possible to visit the original Altamira cave with its stunning prehistoric art unless you have applied several years ahead for permission. But the museum offers the next best thing, an exact reproduction of the vividly colored paintings created around 12,000 B.C.

Bilbao

The highlight here is, of course, the Guggenheim Museum. Canadian architect Frank Gehry's titanium tribute to art is one of the world's masterpieces of urban reinvention. The visit also includes a guided tour of the old city, or Casco Viejo, and a sampling of quaint bars serving *pintxos*, the Basque version of tapas: delicious morsels of food that combine predictable and totally surprising flavors in bite-sized portions.

—Mariana Schroeder



A critic remembers the meals of a lifetime

By Ian Brunskill

THE LATE RICHARD Olney, that most exhilarating and exacting of American writers on food, prefaced his classic "Simple French Food" with a ringing condemnation of the "dreary old cliché" that "one should eat to live, not live to eat." It was, he said, "an imbecile concept, a deliberately fruitless paradox born of the puritan mind."

His own aim was to persuade his readers "that food and wine must be an essential aspect of the whole life, in which the sensuous-sensual-spiritual elements are so intimately interwoven that the incomplete exploitation of any one can only result in imperfection."

Lisa Haney

Olney was primarily concerned with the ways in which that "intimate interweaving" of elements might shape our day-to-day lives. He spent his last decades on a hillside in Provence, in search of a society that had resisted the advance of puritan imbecility and still cared about what it ate.

But food's combination of the sensuous, the sensual and the spiritual can shape our histories too. Proust's famous madeleine is perhaps the supreme instance, past and present intermingling in the delicate taste of a pastry, each bite conjuring people, places and feelings long forgotten and long gone.

Moira Hodgson, food columnist of the New York Observer, seems to subscribe wholeheartedly to Olney's view of the place of good food in any life worth living, and she begins her engaging culinary memoir with some madeleine moments of her own. Hers, however, is a more pragmatic approach than Olney's, and her flavors are rather more robust than Proust's.

A dish of mint ice-cream in a smart restaurant takes her back to the French lycée in Stockholm, shuddering at the related recollection of boiled cod; a club sandwich evokes a childhood picnic in Vietnam; the smell of beef curry is associated with unhappy times at an English boarding school.

And where Proust, of course, offers nothing as mundane as a recipe for his madeleine—thereby tempting writers and cooks (Julia Child not least among them) to try to recreate one ever since—Ms. Hodgson makes no such mistake. In measuring out her past in memorable meals, she makes sure that those meals can be shared.

Ms. Hodgson was born into a British middle-class family in the last years of World War II. Upper-middle class might be more precise. Perhaps. Those tiny, daunting distinctions, more marked then than now, especially in the claustrophobic expatriate communities in which she grew up, caused endless, needless torments to her beautiful, highly strung mother. Her father, more relaxed but more remote, seemed to take them in his stride.

The long childhood section of Ms. Hodgson's book is a delight. Her father worked for the British Foreign Service in an obscure, unspecified capacity; only much later does the nature of his work become clear. It meant that as a child she traveled the world almost continuously, her father's postings taking the family from Dorset in southern England, where she was born, to Egypt, Lebanon, Sweden, Vietnam and Berlin, all by the time she was 15. She later settled in the U.S.

Throughout that roving, restless childhood "food was a not just a symbol of comfort but of continuity, which our lives lacked. It was also a way of establishing a connection to a place." She spent her early years adapting to strange environments and strange tastes and has gone on adapting to new things ever since.

She writes vividly of first encounters, not all felicitous, with artichokes, kidneys, snails, pig's heart, oysters, steak tartare. In doing so she manages to convey the louche charm of postwar Beirut, the danger-tinged exoticism of Vietnam on the brink, the pristine dullness of Stockholm, the dark paranoia of Berlin before the Wall.

The narrative is interspersed with detailed recipes that map her well-traveled life—from the austere ersatz confections of Britain at War (wartime sponge, wartime cream, a thousand and one ways with dried egg) to the palate-dazzling pleasures of Vietnamese shrimp mousse wrapped on sugar cane.

Her father's final posting was at the United Nations in New York, and when her parents returned to England, Ms. Hodgson stayed behind. At his point her narrative turns to lovers—she is 20—and in place of childhood anxieties and excitements there are adult disappointments and adult hopes. But the focus is still on food.

She gave her first dinner parties in a cramped apartment on 10th Street. The kitchen "was in a disused closet off a long narrow hall." Its only window was above the refrigerator and opened just a couple of inches—into the bathroom next door. The refrigerator itself, wedged against the stove, buckled and burned on one side whenever the oven was hot. There was no work surface, unless she moved the dish drainer out into the hall.

None of this deterred Ms. Hodgson. She invited a couple of dozen people and roasted a suckling pig, cutting it in half when she found to her horror that it would not fit in the oven, then reassembling it for the table with a Hawaiian-style band of flowers to hide the join.

She drifted into journalism by accident, as so many of its best practitioners seem to do. Her book makes detours to Mexico and Marrakesh and to a London that had only lately ceased to swing. In Tangiers, Paul Bowles confides the secret of his much-praised fabulous tea ("a Lipton's teabag").

But the latter part of the story is set largely in the world of Manhattan's haute bohème. The dinner parties go on, but the guests now include the likes of Diana Trilling, Virgil Thomson, Ned Rorem, Merce Cunningham, John Cage. Thomson's kitchen, in the Chelsea Hotel, was even smaller than Ms. Hodgson's own. She gives his recipe for leg of lamb.

Just when the diet of dropped names threatens to cloy, Ms. Hodgson returns to England, where her father is dying. She writes affectingly of his last days. The penultimate recipe in her book is for a shepherd's pie that she cooked for him but that he was too ill to eat. The evening after his death, she finds the pie in her parents' freezer. It prompts her to a moving personal formulation of that intimate interweaving Olney described.

If her thoughtful, enjoyable recollections may be said to have a theme, it is this: "Food for sympathy, food for love, food for keeping death at bay."

Mr. Brunskill is a senior editor at the London Times.

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Art-world jitters ahead of contemporary auctions

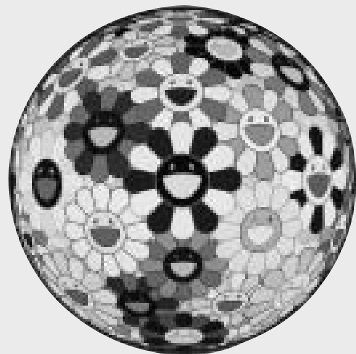
Collecting
MARGARET STUDER

WITH CONFIDENCE in the contemporary art market now decidedly low, international auction houses are using cautious language in the lead-up to next week's big London contemporary sales. The auctions all feature works by artists whose prices soared in the boom times.

"Estimates were done taking into account the new circumstances of the market," says Phillips de Pury chairman Simon de Pury. He hastens to add that this modest approach "offers collectors great opportunities" at his sales on Feb. 12 and 13.

At Christie's, international director of postwar and contemporary art Pilar Ordovis notes that the auction house's prestigious evening sale on Feb. 11 will offer "a carefully curated selection of works of the most established artists of the last 60 years."

Here, some highlights from next week's sales.



Christie's

'Flower Ball (Brown),' from 2007, by Takashi Murakami; estimate: £300,000-£500,000.

Francis Bacon's "Man in Blue VI" (1954) leads Christie's auction. Estimated at £4 million-£6 million, this haunting picture of a businessman in a blue suit is being offered at auction for the first time. Prices for Bacon paintings soared before the global financial crisis.

Another potential market bellwether: American kitsch artist Jeff Koons's "Monkeys (Ladder)," a three-meter-tall painting from 2003 with two inflatable monkeys in the foreground set against a naked female torso representing, according to Christie's, "the innocence of youth contrasted against the sexuality of adulthood" (estimate: £1.4 million-£2 million).

Japanese artist Takashi Murakami was one of the darlings of the boom years with his colorful and playful works filled with childlike vitality. At Christie's, his "Flower Ball (Brown)," from 2007, a circular painting of happy flowers with smiling faces, is expected to fetch £300,000-£500,000.

At Phillips de Pury, Mr. Koons leads with the installation "Five Encased Rows" (1983-1993), five rows of pristine basketballs and soccer balls in their original packaging and encased in a Plexiglas cube. Estimated at £1.8 million-£2.2 million, Phillips de Pury says these "innocent icons... confront the viewer with their desires and reality."

Another work worth watching at Phillips de Pury will be "Happy Chopper" (2005) by British street artist Banksy, whose prices have risen phenomenally in recent years. Depicting a military helicopter flying in a pure blue sky armed with a big pink, birthday bow, the ironic spray-painting is estimated at £200,000-£300,000.

Also at Phillips de Pury, collector Francesca von Habsburg is offering 30 works from her Thyssen-Bornemisza Contemporary Art Collection. They include American artist Robert Longo's large charcoal drawing of a thundering wave from his monster series (estimate: £60,000-£80,000). Ms. Von Habsburg will use funds raised to support art in Iceland.

Meanwhile, this week's big impressionist and modern art sales in London showed that there's plenty of life in this leading sector. At the prestigious evening auctions, the sold-by-lot rate was a very respectable 83% at Christie's and 76% at Sotheby's.

The top lot of the week was Edgar Degas' iconic bronze sculpture "Petite danseuse de quatorze ans," which fetched £13.3 million at Sotheby's (estimate: £9 million-£12 million)—an auction record for a sculpture by Degas.

Top seller at Christie's was Claude Monet's "Dans la prairie" (1876), which fetched £11.24 million (estimate: £15 million).

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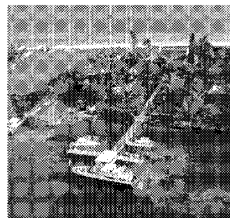

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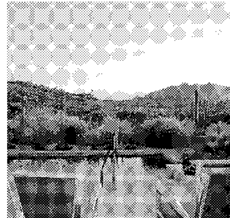

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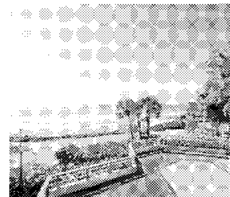

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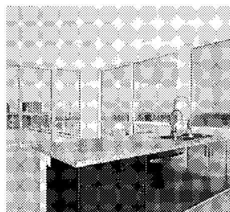

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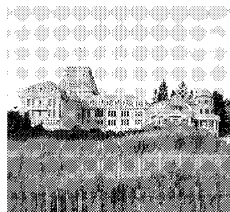

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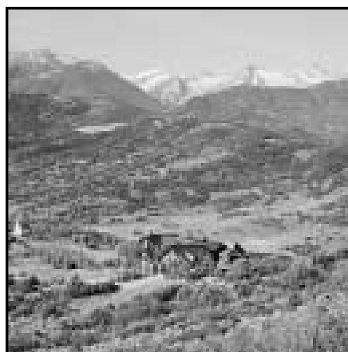

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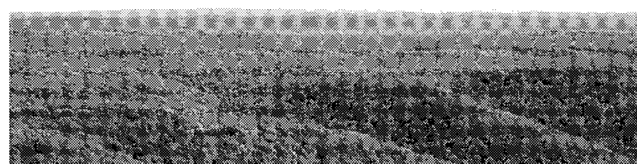

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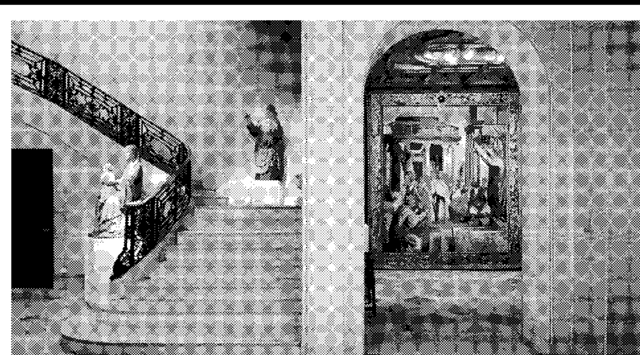

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Tales from a mango farm

By Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg

AFTER SALMAN Rushdie read Daniyal Mueenuddin's short story "Nawabdin Electrician" in The New Yorker magazine, he decided to include it in a book he was editing, "Best American Short Stories 2008"—even though Mr. Mueenuddin lives in Pakistan, not America.

"It had wit, freshness and suppleness of language, everything a short story should be," says the Mumbai-born Mr. Rushdie. "And I'd never heard of him."

Mr. Mueenuddin, the son of an American mother and a Pakistani father, has now written a debut collection of short stories, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders," that will be published Feb. 9 by W. W. Norton. Three of the tales have previously appeared in the New Yorker. David Remnick, the magazine's editor, said via email that he looks forward to a new piece by Mr. Mueenuddin "the way I would to something by J.D. Salinger or Philip Roth when they were writing short fiction."

What distinguishes this collection is that it focuses on class struggles within Pakistan. This isn't the immigrant experience in America, as chronicled by such writers as Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri, who was born in London but raised in the U.S. Much as Isaac Bashevis Singer recreated the lost Jewish shtetl in many of his short stories, Mr. Mueenuddin unveils a nuanced world where social status and expectations are understood without being stated, and where poverty and the desire to advance frame each critical choice. "He captures the experience of the class system," says Jill Bialosky, who acquired the book for Norton.

Author Daniyal Mueenuddin was born in the U.S., but lives in Pakistan.

Cecilie Brenden

Mr. Mueenuddin, pronounced Mween-o-Dean, is flying to the United States from Pakistan for a two-week tour beginning Feb. 23. The author lives on a medium-sized farm in Pakistan's southern Punjab, where he nurtures mango orchards and grows vegetables in plastic greenhouses—a technique that he says enables "us to get to market before our competitors."

The 45-year-old Mr. Mueenuddin has a complex personal history. He says his mother, late in her pregnancy, returned to the U.S. and that he was born in Los Angeles. Soon afterwards, they flew back to Pakistan, where he lived until age 13. His parents then enrolled him in the Groton School in Groton, Mass., from which he graduated in 1981. Later came degrees from Dartmouth and Yale Law School. He worked as a corporate lawyer in New York between 1998 and 2001. After deciding he needed a career change, he enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Arizona at Tucson, where he earned a degree in 2004.

"There is no balancing my sense of identity. I'm always rolling back and forth along the spectrum, from Pakistani to American, depending on what I'm doing and where," he said. "I believe that this fluid identity is useful to me as a writer, because I'm always looking at myself and my surroundings from the outside."

Although he jokingly says that he hopes to sell a million copies of his new book, it has always been difficult to interest readers in nugget-sized fiction. "Many readers believe they don't like short stories because they want something long, something that will put them to sleep over a period of a week," says Paul Ingram, a buyer for Prairie Lights Books in Iowa City, Iowa, who has ordered Mr. Mueenuddin's book.

There has been an influx of well-received English-language fiction writers from India in recent years, among them Kiran Desai, author of "The Inheritance of Loss"; Vikram Chandra, author of "Sacred Games"; and Rohinton Mistry, author of "A Fine Balance." Aravind Adiga's novel "The White Tiger" won the U.K.'s Man Booker prize in 2008 for best fiction.

On the Pakistani front, such writers as Mohsin Hamid, author of "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," and Mohammed Hanif, author of "A Case of Exploding Mangoes," have been widely praised. "There are distinctions between Indian and Pakistani writers," says Sonny Mehta, editor-in-chief and chairman of Bertelsmann AG's Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. "The Pakistani writers are addressing change and what's happening today in the world. There is something completely contemporary in this writing."

But introducing a debut collection is never easy. In a serendipitous bit of good timing, Mr. Mueenuddin's eight linked stories, which take place in Pakistan in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, offer readers a look inside a culture that is in the headlines. It is the voice of Pakistan from within Pakistan, a fresh perspective rival publishers say should give the book an edge. Mr. Mueenuddin doesn't "research" his books. Rather, he says, they are mostly based on personal experience.

Each story is grounded in simple needs. In "A Spoiled Man," a lonely old man lives in a portable cubicle and briefly finds happiness with a woman of limited intelligence. In the title piece, a young woman is willingly seduced by a wealthy landowner while allowing herself to imagine that she might be accepted by society. In "Lily," a bride convinces herself that she'll enjoy life on a Pakistani farm, only to discover she's not the woman she thought. Norton is printing 20,000 copies, a good press run for a debut collection.

Although he is conversational in both Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, as well as Punjabi, Mr. Mueenuddin says that he writes in English because he was educated in English in private school and college. "It's very much a class issue, with the elite speaking mostly in English," he notes. "I have Pakistani friends from Lahore who literally do not speak Urdu and know one Punjabi politician who finds it remarkable that I can count to a hundred in Punjabi."

These days, Mr. Mueenuddin is at work on a novel, although he's convinced that the short story as a form is under-appreciated.

"A novel is a baggy thing with pieces hanging off," he says. "It can have lots of extraneous bits, and it won't destroy the form. But with a short story you only have a reader for a moment, and you need a beginning, middle and end that will be seen almost simultaneously. If you remove one line it falls apart."

A debut novelist explores China's political killings

By Lauren Mechling

YIYUN LI MOVED from Beijing to Iowa when she was 23 to pursue a Ph.D. in immunology. Her boyfriend remained in China, and she enrolled in a community writing course to pass the time and improve her English. Her stories soon appeared in the Paris Review and The New Yorker, and her 2005 short-story collection "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" won the Guardian First Book Award. Her debut novel, "The Vagrants," which came out this week, concerns a cast of outsiders in a newly industrialized Chinese city. The characters range from a disabled girl to a beautiful news announcer working for the Communist party. None of Muddy River's citizens are spared profound pain and suffering, which makes for a harrowing read. Ms. Li, now 36 and reunited with her college boyfriend (now husband), spoke with us from her house in Oakland, Calif.

Author Yiyun Li

Corbis

Q: Why did you choose to set the book in 1979?

It was a historical year for China. It was 2½ years after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the year of the Democracy Wall movement in Beijing. All of a sudden there was the idea of opening the country to the rest of the world. And, selfishly, I was 6 and 7 in 1979 and I had a lot of memories of that change.

Q: The novel is bookended by political executions. Did you witness counterrevolutionaries being executed?

They were not executed in front of me but before the execution, they would parade people around from one neighborhood to the next. They would have a gathering and they would have a short ceremony and the police would announce their crimes. I went a couple times when I was 5 and 6.

Q: Did these ceremonies trouble you?

I don't think when you're young you're troubled by those things. You're just curious. You're in daycare and then all of a sudden the routine is interrupted and you take a field trip. It was a ritual and all the neighborhood people were there. Our gathering site was very near the building where my family lived. They'd set up a makeshift stage and parade the people up there. I remembered all the policemen had starched white uniforms.

Q: You were made to spend a year in the Chinese re-education army before college. Tell me about that.

I was in it from 18 to 19. I went to Peking University, which was really active in the Tiananmen protests, so the university ordered something they called "the changing of blood." That meant that for four years, the incoming class was sent to the army. After four years, the blood of the whole college was cleaned.

Q: Were you against going?

I was very much against it. I was very bad. I talked about the people who were killed in Tiananmen Square a lot. A lot of my fellow students did not believe that happened and I could not shut up about those things. But I also had a very memorable time. I learned more than any other year about human behavior.

Q: For example?

We had this squad leader who was also just a student among us. Once she was appointed squad leader she had all this power over other people and she was only 17. . . . She knew I could write and every week every squad had to submit a propaganda-ish article, and she made me write it every time. I said, "That's not fair," and she said, "If you don't write it, I'm going to assign you to clean the pig sty." I wish I'd acted rebellious and cleaned the pig sty, but I did not want to clean the pig sty, so I would write for her. I didn't pursue my idealism because I did not want to clean the pig sty. We all compromised.

Q: Why did you decide to set "The Vagrants" in a fictional town?

Muddy River is modeled after my husband's own town which is in the Northeast, on the border of China and North Korea, 16 or 17 hours from Beijing. I did not want to write about Beijing because it was the center of the action. I wanted to go into a provincial town and see how people changed or did not change.

Q: Have any of your friends or family back in China told you they found the book offensive?

Not yet. It will happen, I am sure.

Our Obsession with Perfection Is Bad for Art

By Eric Felten

When Jennifer Hudson stepped up to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Super Bowl, there was a sense of high drama. This was her first appearance on the national stage since the October murder of her mother, brother and nephew: Would Ms. Hudson be able to master her emotions and make it through the anthem? In the end, it was a cinch. There was nary a catch in her voice, no unwanted, creeping tremolo. In fact, her vocal performance was remarkable in its near-perfection—or would have been remarkable had she actually been performing. Instead, the voice we heard was from a track she had prepared in a studio well in advance. So much for high drama.

Ms. Hudson's producer made no apologies for her lip-synching. "That's the right way to do it," Rickey Minor told the Associated Press. "There's too many variables to go live. I would never recommend any artist go live because the slightest glitch would devastate the performance." His justification echoed Itzhak Perlman explaining why the all-star classical quartet at the Obama inauguration was prerecorded. "It would have been a disaster if we had done it any other way," Mr. Perlman told the New York Times. "This occasion's got to be perfect. You can't have any slip-ups."

My, what a standard of perfection is now demanded. No longer is a good or even a great performance good enough. Now we must have performances free from the "slightest glitch." And since no one—not even a singer of Ms. Hudson's manifest talent nor a violinist of Mr. Perlman's virtuosity—can guarantee that a live performance will be glitch-free, the solution has been to eliminate the live part.

> Since when is 'great' not good enough?

Where does this expectation of flawlessness come from? Perhaps it's of a piece with our age: Plastic surgery and air-brushing are no longer sufficient improvements on models who already possess impossible beauty—now it's common for their images to be digitally manipulated, their lithe figures stretched into even more preposterous images of perfection. Or perhaps the trend is rooted in something more mundane—a fear of YouTube. Embarrassing flubs that once would have been reserved for the occasional blooper reel now go into immediate and eternal replay online.

Whatever the motivation, the fear of risking mistakes has led musicians to deny who they are as performers. The most disheartening thing about the Inauguration Day quartet's nonperformance was the length to which they went to make sure that nothing they did on the platform could be heard. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma put soap on the hair of his bow so that it would slip across the strings without creating even a wisp of sound. The inner workings of the piano were disassembled. There is something pitiful and pitiable about musicians hobbling their own voices.

Not only are we told that prerecording is "standard operating procedure," but we're supposed to believe that it is a virtue: The performers, you see, care too much about their art to risk presenting something substandard. But what is art without risks? Any live performance is a high-wire act. Nowadays, it seems that—when it really counts—musicians are willing to put the wire on the pavement and walk along it as if they were doing something daring.

But far worse, the emphasis on technologically assisted perfection is at odds with a human conception of artistic beauty. "In all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty," wrote the 19th-century British critic John Ruskin. "To banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality."

Which is what happened at the Capitol grandstand: An opportunity for glorious exertion and vitality was missed. Imagine the sight of some of the world's greatest musicians struggling against the elements—coaxing sound out of their reluctant instruments, willing their numb fingers to be nimble. I suspect it all would have come together quite well, if a bit out of tune here and there.

But what if it hadn't? What if Mr. Ma had suffered one of the catastrophes of which he warned—a broken string? Imagine the heroic struggle as he switched his fingering on the fly to find the necessary notes on another string. Mr. Ma is among the rarefied artists who could have pulled something like that off (and probably pulled it off with none but his fellow musicians even noticing). How fantastic it would have been to see him do it. Instead we got play-acting.

Jennifer Hudson

But what of the conceit that a Super Bowl or an inauguration can somehow be ruined by a less-than-stellar musical performance? I would suggest that the great events of our lives are rather more sturdy than imagined, and the musical accompaniment to them somewhat less important than the musicians would like to think.

Barack Obama's big day survived the mediocrity of the official poem and the stumblings of the chief justice. It would have survived even a piano with saloon intonation. The real threat to such events comes from unrealistic and unreasonable expectations: The bride who demands a "perfect" wedding nearly ensures that her veil will be one of tears.

The synthetic perfection of faux-live performance may enjoy an appealing gloss, but you can say the same thing about supermarket apples—and we know how good they taste. One of the main challenges of the organic food movement has been to get people to see past the scuffs and dents and blemishes of honest produce, to focus on authentic flavors. Velveeta, of course, is flawless in its way, but over the past few years some have found that rough-hewn blocks of stinky, crumbling cheese are preferable to the homogeneous perfection of processed cheese product.

I wonder if, just as there have been efforts to label organic foods with a seal of green approval, there might be room for some enterprising organization to offer a seal of authenticity in live performance. It might be quite the task—rather on the order of sending arms inspectors to track down traces of plutonium in Pyongyang. But we now know there are at least a couple of easy tests to determine the veracity of a live performance: For starters, check the cellist's bow for soap.

Mr. Felten writes the "How's Your Drink?" column for the Journal.

Masterpiece / *By Christian C. Sahner*

A Medieval Castle in the Middle East

Al-Husn, Syria

If Umberto Eco were given the chance to build his dream castle, he might draw up plans for something like Crac des Chevaliers. With its impenetrable walls, winding corridors and massive towers, Crac des Chevaliers is a tour de force of medieval architecture. But a dissonant note sounds above this Gothic symphony. Listen hard and you'll hear something unexpected: the voice of a muezzin calling the Muslim faithful to prayer. Far from the Welsh marches or the banks of the Loire, a rural corner of western Syria is the unlikely home to the world's greatest medieval castle.

Crac des Chevaliers was built by Crusaders between the mid-12th and late 13th centuries. Its name probably derives from the Syriac word *karak*, meaning "fortress." About 90 miles northwest of Damascus, atop a steep hill, it guards a crucial gap between the Mediterranean coast and inland Syria. A local emir controlled a fort on this site when the armies of the First Crusade arrived in 1099. By 1110 it was taken by European forces, and in 1144 the Knights Hospitaller assumed custody. The Hospitallers were among the renowned "military monastic" orders that flourished during the Crusades, charged with defending pilgrimage routes and the Christian kingdoms of the Holy Land.

Upon arriving in 1144, the knights began expanding the fortress. Eventually, the inner castle was protected behind two concentric rings of walls, separated by moats and platforms. The final product could accommodate 2,000 men. During the late 12th century, the castle survived two major assaults—first by the Fatimid sultan Nur al-Din, and then by the great Arab general Saladin. Saladin's armies found the fortress so impenetrable, however, that the siege was called off after only a day.

Some 800 years later, Crac des Chevaliers still conveys the impression of impregnability. Visitors first encounter massive curtain walls encircling the compound. The walls are punctuated at roughly 150-foot intervals by round towers. Narrow slits perforate each tower, providing a vantage for archers hidden inside. The most vulnerable, and thus most heavily fortified, stretch of wall is along the south end. Here, the steep slope of the hill comes level with the fortress, enabling attackers to more easily breach the defenses. It was also the place where the castle's aqueduct entered the compound. To protect this critical area, the Hospitallers dug a massive ditch and installed the largest defensive wall anywhere in the castle, nearly 100 feet thick.

The main gate—a massive stone portal covered with Arabic inscriptions—leads the visitor into a vaulted corridor that steeply ascends. The cavernous corridor is wide and tall enough to accommodate two horsemen riding abreast. Its path changes direction abruptly at several points. Even if besieging armies breached the gate, they would have found it difficult to gather momentum in the winding corridor—and to withstand the arrows, excrement and boiling water that the Hospitallers poured on them from the trap doors in the ceiling.

A siege army that successfully penetrated these outer defenses would have met a second, still "steeper" challenge. The inner walls of the Crac are ringed by a smooth slope called a glacis. This stone slope was hard to scale, and had the added effect of raising the inner fortifications high above the curtain wall. From this disadvantaged position, the most a siege army could hope to accomplish was to "mine" one of the towers of the inner castle. This involved digging a tunnel beneath a tower and burning its foundations. If the tower collapsed, it created a gaping hole in the interior walls, enabling an army to push through.

Corbis

Western Syria is the unlikely home of Crac des Chevaliers, a treasure of the Crusades.

The capable assailant who penetrated the outer and inner walls would have stepped into the calm of the central fortress. It was here that the Hospitallers feasted and prayed. Confidence in the security of the fortress insulated this space, though it was only a few hundred feet from the main gate. Such detachment from exterior reality is nowhere more palpable than in the Crac's small Romanesque chapel. No Christian imagery is visible today; after taking the Crac in 1271, the Mamelukes converted the chapel into a mosque, a transformation obvious in the stone pulpit and the niches pointing the way toward Mecca.

The most elegant feature of the courtyard is the Gothic colonnade, or loggia, designed as an entrance to the great hall and graced by beautiful peaked vaults, which race upward as daringly now as when they were built in the late 13th century. The delicate arches seem out of place in this rough-hewn stone behemoth; indeed, with its perfect proportions and refined stone rosettes, the loggia would fit comfortably in Chartres Cathedral and other medieval masterpieces. The loggia, along with the chapel, is a visible reminder that peace prevailed within the walls of the Crac. A surviving Latin inscription on one of the lintels may be interpreted as a warning against complacency to knights too assured of their safety: "Grace, wisdom and beauty you may enjoy, but beware pride, which alone can tarnish all the rest."

Many Crusader castles dot the countrysides of Syria, Lebanon and Israel. When visiting them, it's tempting to consider the Crusades in light of more modern military campaigns in the Middle East. Many Arabs have come to see Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan as a revival of the Crusading spirit. It's a culturally compelling but historically mistaken comparison. The Crusades, though complex, were foremost a religious campaign aimed at restoring the Holy Land to Christian European rule—a goal far removed from the geopolitics of today's conflict.

In 1271, with enthusiasm for the Crusades waning in Europe, the knights at the castle found themselves outnumbered and demoralized. After a brief siege, the Mamelukes forged a letter from a Hospitaller commander in Tripoli, gaining them entrance. The knights and the Mamelukes drafted a settlement, and the castle passed permanently into Muslim hands.

Crac des Chevaliers continues to glower over the Syrian countryside. For some it is a reminder that conflict between Islam and the West stretches back centuries. For others it is an extraordinary example of a bygone medieval aesthetic.

Mr. Sahner, a former Bartley Fellow at the Journal's editorial page, is currently a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University.

time off

Museum für Gestaltung Zürich

Amsterdam

photography

"Richard Avedon: Photographs 1946-2004" features more than 200 works by American photographer Richard Avedon (1923-2004).

Foam
Feb. 13-May 13
☎ 31-2055-1650-0
www.foam.nl

art

"Van Gogh and the Colours of the Night" exhibits 33 paintings and 22 letters and drawings by the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) exploring the atmosphere of the evening and night.

Van Gogh Museum
Feb. 13-June 7
☎ 31-20-5705-200
www.vangoghmuseum.nl

Athens

archaeology

"From the Land of the Golden Fleece" shows 140 objects including 100 pieces of jewelry, sculptures and funerary items from the fifth to the second century B.C., excavated from sanctuaries and tombs at Vani (present day Republic of Georgia).

Benaki Museum
Until April 6
☎ 30-210-3671-000
www.benaki.gr

Berlin

natural history

"Darwin—Voyage to Knowledge" presents artifacts collected by British naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) during his voyage on the HMS Beagle (1831-1836).

Museum für Naturkunde
Feb. 12-Aug. 12
☎ 49-30-2093-8540
www.museum.hu-berlin.de

Brussels

art

"Mig Quinet" shows paintings, watercolors and drawings in bright and cheerful colors by Belgian artist Mig Quinet (1908-2001).

Galerie Quadri
Until Feb. 28
☎ 32-2-6409-563
www.galeriequadri.be

Dublin

music

"12 Points! Europe's New Jazz Festival 2009" features 12 young European Jazz bands.

Projects Arts Center
Feb. 11-14
☎ 353-1670-3885
www.12points.ie

art

"Vermeer, Fabritius & De Hooch: Three Masterpieces from Delft" exhibits "The Goldfinch" by Carel Fabritius (1622-1654), "The Courtyard of a House in Delft" by Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), and "Woman Writing a Letter with her Maid" by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675).

National Gallery of Ireland
Feb. 13-May 24
☎ 353-1-6615-133
www.nationalgallery.ie

Leipzig

art

"Carte Blanche V: Leon Janucek—Dieter Finke" presents the animal sculptures by German artist Dieter Finke (born 1939).

Museum of Contemporary Art
Until March 22
☎ 49-341-1408-126
www.gfzk-online.de

Courtesy Galleria d'Arte Maggiore, Bologne

'Les Masques' (1973), by Giorgio de Chirico, on show in Paris; top right, Acaralate 2E Geigy canister (1967), designed by Markus Löw, in Zurich.

Linz

art

"The Fuhrer's Capital of Culture" examines Nazi influence on the culture of Linz and Upper Austria.

Schlossmuseum
Until March 22
☎ 43-0732-7744-190
www.schlossmuseum.at

Ljubljana

art

"Marc Chagall: From Death Souls to the Circus" presents prints on paper by the Russian-Jewish artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985) dating from 1923 to 1980.

City Museum Ljubljana
Until March 29
☎ 386-1241-2500
www.mestnimuzej.si

London

photography

"Kiss" shows images featuring kisses by a range of photographers including Deborah Anderson, Giuliano Bekor, Amanda Eliasch, Patrick Lichfield, Craig Lynn, Tony McGee, Patrick McMullan, John Swannell and others.

The Little Black Gallery
Until March 28
☎ 44-20-7349-9332
www.thelittleblackgallery.com

art

"Rodchenko & Popova: Defining Constructivism" showcases 350 objects created by Russian artists Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) and Lyubov Popova (1889-1924) between 1917 and 1929.

Tate Modern
Feb. 12-May 17
☎ 44-20-7887-8888
www.tate.org.uk

photography

"Darwin at Down" presents photographs of the British naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and his family at their home Down House in Bromley.

Horniman Museum
Until June 7
☎ 44-20-8699-1872
www.horniman.ac.uk

Madrid

art

"Shadows" brings together 140 works by more than 100 artists, including paintings, photographs and film projections, exploring the depiction of shadows in art from the Renaissance to the present day.

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza
Feb. 10-May 17
☎ 34-9136-9015-1
www.museothyssen.org

Manchester

art

"Subversive Spaces: Surrealism + Contemporary Art" exhibits surrealist paintings, sculpture, photography, video and film.

The Whitworth Art Gallery
Until May 4
☎ 44-161-2757-450
www.subversivespaces.com

Paris

art

"Dvâravatî: The Origins of Buddhism in Thailand" showcases Buddhist art from central Thailand between the sixth and 12th centuries.

Musée Guimet
Feb. 11-May 25
☎ 33-1-5652-5300
www.guimet.fr

art

"Giorgio de Chirico: Dream Factory" presents 70 paintings, sculptures and sketches by Surrealist Greek-Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978).

Musée d'Art moderne
de la Ville de Paris
Feb. 13-May 24
☎ 33-1-5367-4000
www.mam.paris.fr

Prague

architecture

"Adolf Loos—Works in the Czech Lands" showcases photographs, glass pieces, furniture and original plans by Czech architect Adolf Loos (1870-1933).

City of Prague Museum
Until April 5
☎ 420-2210-1291-1
www.muzeumprahy.cz

Rome

natural history

"Darwin 1809-2009" presents notebooks, pictures, models and specimens alongside stuffed animals and plants in an exhibition on the life and work of Charles Darwin (1809-1882).

Palazzo delle Esposizioni
Feb. 12-May 3
☎ 39-06-3996-7500
www.darwin2009.it

Vienna

art

"Ernst Barlach and Käthe Kollwitz" exhibits more than 40 sculptures and 100 drawings by German Expressionist Ernst Barlach (1870-1938) and Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945).

Leopold Museum
Feb. 13-May 25
☎ 43-1-5257-00
www.leopoldmuseum.org

Zurich

design

"Good Design, Good Business: Swiss Graphic Design and Advertising by Geigy, 1940-1970" examines the influence of the product package designs of the J. R. Geigy A.G. chemical concern on Swiss graphic art and advertising.

Museum of Design
Until May 24
☎ 41-4344-6676-7
www.museum-gestaltung.ch

Source: ArtBase Global Arts News Service, WSJE research.