Elly’s May 2017 trip to Stockholm and Rome: from water to woods

The week after we finished teaching, there was a workshop in Stockholm on a topic I really am into (negative existentials) and a science festival in Rome. My stay coincided with the French presidential elections and Trump’s firing of Comey, so lots to talk about. Stockholm is amazing and the weather was too some of the time and freezing (with actual snow) the other times; Rome was warm.

Stockholm and West

I had last been in Stockholm as a student many years back and I vaguely remembered the railway station, Gamla Stan, Strandvägen, and City Hall. I remembered a police presence in the station trying to move out people who had had too much to drink. The station has kept its old core but added a modern layer with the usual coffee places. The city seems so much larger but has ‘only’ gone from a city of half a million to one close to a million in that time span. Gamla Stan has become touristy but that’s inevitable.

The university is in the north of the city and consists of the below, modern center of towers and an older part. The workshop was held in Hus C, the third building from the left, and was really wonderful, loads of new data and insights.
A lot of people seem to smoke, e.g. the students under the 'no smoking sign' in the picture to the right, although Sweden is said to have low numbers (17% of men) and the lowest in Europe. Another cultural phenomenon I noticed is the noisy fancy car racing. Even in Stockholm, cars rev up and produce a lot of noise to go fast for short periods and then brake. I can’t find anything on the internet on this practice but my brother says he knows it from Swedish films. This practice is different from it and so is folk racing and ice-racing, because the cars that I saw are expensive, new porsches, for instance!

I walked a lot of the downtown: Gamla Stan to Södermalm (between which a new Slussen is being built to go from the Mälaren Lake to the Baltic Sea), to Skeppsholmen, Kastellholmen, to Djurgården, etc. The city of Stockholm is built on 14 islands so there is water everywhere.

The museums are wonderful. The Modern Museum has an excellent permanent collection with some early Edvard Munchs I hadn’t seen (and acquired before 1920), Francis Picabia, Louise Bourgeois, Francis Bacon, and much more. There were two special exhibits, the mainly performance art of Marina Abramović (which I am not wild about) and the very interesting work by Josef Frank, an originally Austrian architect and designer who thought about the role of furniture and stairways in houses.

The Vasa Museum is remarkable! The museum is built around an early 17th century 64-gun warship that sank right after its launch; the masts stick out of the roof of the building. The museum also has a conservation site, open to the public, and helpful exhibits about the people who were sailing on it and the gear they used. The ship was built by Dutch builders but no information was available in the museum on that. It said the builders had to go on frequent trips to borrow money (see below) but that
doesn’t make sense if the king commissioned it. Some people around me remarked that the ship was just too opulent to survive!

The Nordic Museum is housed in a beautiful building and has exhibits about the Nordic Lights, the Sami, Swedish folkart. Across the street from it, Skansen preserves many old buildings from all over Sweden. It was the first such “open-air” museum in the world to preserve its disappearing heritage. I may have missed parts but the Oslo one has a lot more farmer buildings. Skansen also has European bison, bears, lynx, and wild boar. Sad to see them confined. The young bears were of course enjoying themselves playing in the trees, but the older one was on edge. By the way, the two Skansen pictures show you how the weather changed from one moment to the next; these buildings are adjacent!
Prince Eugens Waldemarsudde is advertized as ‘Sweden’s most beautiful’ artmuseum. It is housed in the former residence of Prince Eugen and has exquisite Scandinavian artwork as well as that of Prince Eugen. He was the fourth in line for the throne so decided painting was the thing to do! In the 1890s there was a ‘union’ between Sweden and Norway which was dissolved in 1905. Before that, Prince Eugen had been suggested as a possible King of Norway (e.g. by Knut Hamsun) because of his interest in Norway’s nature and artists. He had the house built in 1899 and it became a museum after his death in 1947. There was an exhibit about Joan Miró that had stunning pieces.

The final museum I visited was also worthwhile, the Historiska Museet, with a goldhoard and lots of prehistoric and Viking remains.
Countries differ in how mechanized they are. In many countries, I have had trouble finding mailboxes. That is not the case in Sweden. Also, the conductor on the train just cancels one’s ticket with a pen. No fancy hand-held machines that scan your ticket!

My hotel in Stockholm was in Norrmalm and my room looked westwards: idyllic, but one afternoon, the balcony was covered with snow!
Strängnäs
I visited an acquaintance/friend in Strängnäs, about 80 km west of Stockholm. It is a sleepy town with a beautiful old center, a 13th century Cathedral (Domkyrka), and wooden windmill. The town is trying to get more people to move to it and commute to Stockholm for work. Strängnäs is situated on the Mälaren Lake and very picturesque. The church had a very interesting exhibit interpreting orthodox icons in a contemporary way (amazing eyes) and its permanent medieval altar from Brussels. Nothing was to be found on the internet about these either!

After Stockholm, it was on to Rome where the dominance of the water gave way to that of trees and greenery!

Rome and Vatican City
I had been to Rome but always on layover events. This time, I set apart a few days to see Rome and one of my goals was the Vatican Museum and the Sistine Chapel of which I took the above picture inadvertently (one isn’t allowed). Rome turned out to be wonderful: new vistas around each corner; interesting people; and very fast traffic with smart cars. It is amazing how much green there is; sometimes, one doesn’t think one is in the middle of a capital! And overgrown gasstations!
On my first day, I went to the Vatican Museum, Sistine Chapel, and St. Peter's Basilica and was amazed by the size and scope of the art but also my own feminist and anti-opulence feelings. This is a patriarchal institution and it makes me mad. I walked around the Museum and Sistine Chapel twice although there were loads of people and, although the art is stunning – how can they keep the colors this way – the museum building is oppressive. Once you are in, there is no way to skip a part!
In the afternoon, I had a break from the Vatican and went to the Etruscan museum. Pre-Indo-European Etruscans lived in this part of the world 1000 BCE and left interesting tumuli with burials.

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<th>Ceramic portraits</th>
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The Etruscan Museum was only 10 minutes away from my hotel, with great overgrown staircases and other old palazzios.
Some museums open early and stay open late so that’s great. One morning I visited the Modern Art one; lovely collection, e.g. the Klimt and Renoir below! The super-modern museum (MAXXI) followed in the afternoon because it was close to the conference site. The 1998 Kiefer was the highlight although not XXI art which various video presentations were e.g. ‘Please come back’ on prisons.
The last day, I walked a great route. From Via Filippo Civinini, to the Via Flamina, Via di Ripetta (past the Mausoleum of Augustus), Via Arenula to the bank of the river. That area, opposite the island in the river Tiber, had had the old Jewish ghetto and currently has a synagogue and in the back the remnants of the Portico of Octavia (25 BCE), a medieval fish market, and the Theatre of Marcellus. This was a wonderful area with so much unexpected.
From the former ghetto, I went to the neighborhood of Testaccio but didn’t find much. The fancy mercado is closed on Sundays. Then back to try to find the Aventino, one of Rome’s seven hills and on to the island in the river, which is delightful. The bridge to the island, shown below, was built in 62 BCE.

From then to the nationalistic and, depending on your aesthetics, pompous Monument to Victor Emmanuel II, the first king of a unified Italy. You can walk half way up (to the base of the columns) and then an outside elevator takes you about 10 stories. The view from the top is stunning.

A real surprise, although I had seen it in movies, was the Fontana di Trevi (fountain of three roads). It came around the corner as a complete, beautiful surprise. The Spanish steps were interesting (again known from movies) but less amazing. From there, up to another hill (Borgese area) and yet another with amazing pine trees.
By the way, the Rome conference was a major event (with speakers like Jane Goodall), sponsored by National Geographic, Nissan, ... It was nice to be picked up at the airport and the hotel by a zero-emission Nissan with the conference logo on the side.
Appendix on street art

There is very little street art in Stockholm itself but there was some on trains and viaducts. Rome too has little art in the city but lots of tags. The below is just a selection.

Södermalm, along Stadsgårdsliden

Norrmalm, Västmannagatan

In the north of Rome

Bridge to the island
Along Flamina

Along the river

Along Ripetta