

# Charles S. Peirce in Europe: His “Aesthetic Letters”<sup>1</sup>

*Charles S. Peirce na Europa: Suas “Cartas Estéticas”*

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**Abstract:** Charles Peirce always remained fascinated by the phenomenon of art, although his theoretical remarks about it are sketchy. His personal connection with art can be found in the letters he wrote during his five visits to Europe between June 1870 and September 1883, especially in the letters of his first trip (June 18, 1870 – March 7, 1871). In this paper we focus on those letters, which show how Europe produced in the young philosopher a deep cultural shock. First, historical and biographical data concerning Peirce’s first visit to Europe are provided, and the correspondence from that trip is presented; in the second place, we gloss Peirce’s comments about some of the places he visited. Finally, as a conclusion, we suggest tentatively how those perceptions could have influenced the thinking of Peirce. The feelings he experienced in Europe were seeds which bore fruit in later years, so as to yield a harvest in which new ways of understanding science and art would be developed.

**Keywords:** Peirce. Europe. Art.

**Resumo:** *Charles Peirce manteve-se sempre fascinado pelo fenômeno da arte, apesar de seus comentários sobre o assunto serem superficiais. Sua conexão*

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- 1 This paper was presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> International Meeting on Pragmatism, PUC, São Paulo, 5-8 November, 2012. In his comments to the paper, Nathan Houser pointed out that “Peirce’s European visits, the first an extended tour when he was 30 years old, certainly had a great effect on this young American from Cambridge, Massachusetts, especially on the course of his career in science; but what the correspondence reveals about his aesthetic sensibility and the impact of his travels on his aesthetic development is of particular interest. I am convinced by the evidence of the letters Nubiola and Barrena quote, that the richness and variety of Peirce’s European encounters, many of which were deliberately focused on artistic or aesthetic subjects, did somewhat overwhelm the young Peirce, and doubtless had a lasting impact on his sense and appreciation of beauty”. A previous version of some paragraphs of this paper were published as “Charles Peirce’s First Visit to Europe, 1870-71: Scientific Cooperation and Artistic Creativity”, *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, I, 1 (2009), 1-18. We are extremely grateful to the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad for the support given to our project “Charles S. Peirce en Europa (1875-76): Comunidad científica y correspondencia” [FFI2011-24340FISO] in which this paper is inscribed.

*peessoal com a arte pode ser encontrada nas cartas que ele escreveu durante suas cinco visitas à Europa, entre junho de 1870 e setembro de 1883, especialmente nas cartas de sua primeira viagem (18 de junho de 1870– 07 de março de 1871). Neste artigo, focalizamos essas cartas, que mostram como a Europa produziu no jovem filósofo um profundo choque cultural. Primeiro, serão fornecidos dados históricos e biográficos sobre a primeira visita de Peirce à Europa, e apresentada a correspondência dessa viagem; em segundo lugar, compararemos os comentários de Peirce sobre alguns dos lugares que ele visitou. Finalmente, como conclusão, sugerimos exploratoriamente como essas percepções podem ter influenciado o pensamento de Peirce. Os sentimentos que ele experimentou na Europa foram sementes que deram frutos anos mais tarde, de forma a produzir uma colheita na qual novos modos de entender ciência e arte poderiam ser desenvolvidos.*

**Palavras-chave:** Peirce. Europa. Arte.

Charles S. Peirce has been commonly identified as the most original and versatile intellect that America has ever produced (WEISS, 1934: 403; FISCH, 1981: 17). He was not only a philosopher, but a true polymath. His deep involvement in scientific activity over a period of several decades provided him with a genuine acquaintance with scientific practice that enabled him to develop a theoretical understanding of scientific creativity and of the real logic of discovery. Moreover, Peirce was also sensitive to the artistic dimension of creativity. Even though his theoretical remarks about art are sketchy at best, he always remained fascinated by the phenomenon of art. Both elements—a real interest in science and a personal connection with art—which appear already in the early stages of Peirce’s thought may be seen as a mirror of his experience of life, and can be found in the letters he wrote during his five visits to Europe between June 1870 and September 1883. It is our conviction that a careful reading of these letters—until now not easily accessible—may change the common image of Charles S. Peirce as an isolated thinker, locked up in his house in Milford, PA.

In the last fifteen years we have paid a great deal of attention to Peirce’s visits to Europe. Although those trips were a mixture of scientific research and tourism, the study of Peirce’s documents of those years has somehow transformed my understanding of his thought. A better understanding of Peirce’s “cosmopolitan period”—to use Max Fisch’s expression (1986: 227)—will provide a richer and more sympathetic approach to him. In this paper I focus on Peirce’s first trip to Europe (June 18, 1870-March 7, 1871), and on the comments in the letters he wrote about the various cities he visited. Also I will pay some attention to his comments about England in April and May of 1875 on his second trip to Europe (April 3, 1875-August 1876) since those months are the period which in recent weeks we have been studying with more attention and publishing in the web.<sup>2</sup>

2 We have published in our webpage all Peirce’s letters related with the first trip and by now only the letters of the first three months of the second trip [<http://www.unav.es/gep/SegundoViaje.html>]. We expect to finish the publication on-line of all this extremely valuable—and neglected—documentation on 2014, as a contribution to Charles S. Peirce Centennial.

The impressions that Europe left in the young philosopher exhibit a deep cultural shock and have more interest than might appear at first sight: the importance of these letters by far exceeds their anecdotal content. I want to bring your attention to a text of his that we have chosen as a motto for the project of our *Grupo de Estudios Peirceanos* on Peirce's European correspondence:

Philosophy is a study which needs a very protracted concentrated study before one [...] begins to be at all expert in the handling of it, if one is to be precise, systematic, and scientific. I gave ten years to it before I ventured to offer half a dozen brief contributions of my own. Three years later [1870], when I had produced something more elaborated, I went abroad and in England, Germany, Italy, Spain, learned from their own mouths what certain students at once of science and of philosophy were turning in their minds. (C. S. Peirce, Letter to *The Sun*, MS 325, p. 4, c.1907).

As this late quotation testifies, his trips contributed in a significant way to Peirce's personal development as a scientist and as a philosopher. The first contribution is obvious: Peirce was part of the most important American scientific research agency of his time, and the trip made it possible for him to become acquainted with European scientists and to further his international reputation as a researcher. The second contribution, the influence of that trip on Peirce the philosopher, is perhaps more striking, and is what I will somehow explore in this paper, paying special attention to his expressions of a cultural shock.

To that end, this paper is arranged into three parts. First, historical and biographical data concerning Peirce's first visit to Europe and the correspondence from that trip will be presented; in the second place, I will gloss Peirce's comments about some of the places he visited. Finally, in conclusion, I will suggest tentatively how these perceptions could have influenced the thinking of Peirce.

## 1. Some Historical and Biographical Data

Charles S. Peirce traveled to Europe on five different occasions. The five trips occurred between the years 1870 and 1883, all of them in the service of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, at that time the chief scientific agency of the United States. The first trip to Europe extended from June 18th, 1870 to March 7th, 1871, all in all almost nine months. When leaving, Peirce was a young man of thirty years, with "high hopes," as he writes to his mother in his brief farewell letter from Sandy Hook, New York, on June 18th.

A total of 23 letters by Charles S. Peirce from his first European tour have been preserved. Most of them are written to his mother and his wife Zina, who would not join him in Europe until a few months after his departure. In his letters Peirce refers to the amazing multitude of feelings, sensations and impressions to which he has been exposed and which he wants to hold on to. In his letter of August 28th, he writes: "I thought today I would rest & write letters. I have seen so much that unless I go over it in my mind it will escape me. I feel I have now forgotten ever so many things which interested me greatly". The sheer wealth of such feelings may explain why Peirce's letters to his family sometimes feel more like a journal than personal letters. In his letter of September 4th, written while sailing towards Greece and addressed

to his wife, he literally writes, “for the next few days I shall be able to keep a regular journal,” and two days before, in a letter from Constantinople, he regrets not having more time to describe everything that appears around him: “There is such a flood of complete novelty before my eyes everywhere that I have no time to get used to it at all even enough to describe it. What shall I begin with?”

And five years later, when describing his arrival into London, Peirce will write to his family, “to give one’s impressions of London is a particularly futile undertaking. Ideas succeed one another here with such rapidity that there is hardly time to seize them and to register them would be quite out of the question” (April 24th, 1875).

The main goal of Peirce’s first trip to Europe was to identify possible locations suitable for establishing observatories in order to study the total solar eclipse that was to take place at noon on December 22nd, 1870 over the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, his father Benjamin Peirce wanted to introduce his son to several European scientists. On June 18th, Peirce sailed for London in the company of his brother Jem, on the steamer *S.S. Deutschland*. The brothers separated in London, and Charles crossed to the continent. In the fall, Charles would be joined by his father, Benjamin, his wife Zina and the rest of the team of observers in charge of the observation of the solar eclipse. Charles Peirce’s itinerary led him from London to Berlin, Dresden, Prague, Vienna, Pest, the Danube river, Varna (Bulgaria), the Black Sea, and, finally, Constantinople. From Constantinople Peirce traced the path of totality, that is to say, the path of the locations where the total eclipse would be visible, scouting for the most suitable locations for scientific observation. He pointed out locations in Greece, Italy, and Spain, and thereby contributed to the success of the scientific expedition under the command of his father Benjamin. Finally, he observed the eclipse, together with one of the American teams, from Catania, in Sicily.

This journey constituted an important experience for the young Charles Peirce. His letters are full of accounts of the impressions that the various places made upon him, and they also show the human side of Peirce, as when he worries about getting robbed or ill, or when he is subject to mood swings and changing sentiments. As a cosmopolitan traveler, Peirce writes pages and pages with comments about the climate and the weather, the dirt of the cities and places where he stays, about wines and food, prices and bargaining, clothes, means of transportation, and, in sum, about the customs and curiosities of the many places he is visiting. There are days where he feels on top of things, and there are days where he feels wretchedly homesick. Thus, on September 15th, he confesses to his mother in a letter written from Messina, Sicily, that “I begin now to feel the shortness of my time acutely at the same time that I am often quite homesick & long to be home”. A few days before, on September 2nd, he writes to his mother: “Considering how much pleasure I have had, I ought to be willing to put up with a fortnight pain,” while on November 16th he writes, again to his mother: “This traveling about alone is good to teach a man the gift of silence. You won’t find me such a rattle pate when I return.” Clearly, Peirce feels himself confronted by a world entirely different from the one he was used to. In a letter written from Constantinople and addressed to his wife, he added “If you could see what another world this is, you would wonder” (August 28th).

It seems to me that it is in order to remember that, although Peirce was a philosopher and a logician, he was first and foremost a real practitioner of science.

Not only was he trained as a chemist at Harvard, but for thirty years (1861-91) he worked regularly and strenuously for the U. S. Coast Survey as a metrologist and as an observer in astronomy and geodesy. His reports to the Coast Survey are an outstanding testimony to his personal experience in the hard work of measuring and obtaining empirical evidence. For instance, when I was preparing this lecture I was working at the same time on the annotations on Peirce's letter of April 30, 1875 to Carlile P. Patterson, the superintendent of the Coast Survey. Peirce was extremely happy about having been able to consult in Cambridge with John Clerk Maxwell about his research on measuring gravity through pendulum swinging and also to meet other scientific luminaries of his time.

A glance at his *Photometric Researches* produced in the years 1872-75 immediately confirms this impression of a man involved in solid scientific work (W3, 382-493). I agree with Victor Lenzen—whose serious studies about Peirce's scientific work are nowadays almost completely forgotten—that "Peirce's scientific work is relevant to his philosophy, for his philosophical doctrines indicate the influence of his reflective thought upon the methods of science" (LENZEN, 1964: 33), and with Ketner's judgment, "Peirce was not a dilettante in science, but a master scientist" (KETNER, 2009: 42). To summarize this in Fisch's words, "Peirce was not merely a philosopher or a logician who had read up on science. He was a full-fledged professional scientist, who carried into all his work the concerns of the philosopher and logician" (FISCH, 1993; W3, xxviii-xxix).

Having said this, I want to pay attention to Peirce's aesthetic impressions of Europe. I am convinced that a better understanding of Peirce as a solid scientist with a very rich personality enhances the value of all his philosophy. This seems to me particularly valuable in the context of this Meeting toward the 2014 Charles S. Peirce International Centennial Congress.

## 2. Peirce's Impressions of Europe

In her letters to her sister Zina, Peirce's wife, Amy Fay, provided two suggestive descriptions of Charles Peirce as a young traveler, explorer and cosmopolitan man, willing to take advantage of his trip in order to get to know all the parts of Europe that were worth visiting:

You ought to see Charlie with all his contrivances—his guide books, his pedometer, his new umbrella, his new trunk, his new opera-glass, his new bag, his new cane. He sits down & enumerates one after the other the places he is going to. Can't you hear him saying 'from Berlin to Dresden, from Dresden to Vienna, from Vienna to Prague, from Prague to Pesth,' etc.?' (August 6th).

And a few days later: "Charlie behaved most angelically the whole three weeks that we spent together, and made himself as sweet as possible. He is going through Europe in the thorough way in which he does everything & what he doesn't see won't be worth seeing" (August 23rd).

Peirce tried not to miss anything. He stayed in several of the most important European capitals: London, Berlin, Vienna, Constantinople, Rome and Madrid. Nevertheless, the first thing to note is that Peirce did not particularly like big cities.

In a letter of August 11th to his brother Jem, he wrote that there was “nothing in a city so beautiful like the country nor nothing in the country so full of animation etc. & in short so like the city”. Let me quote with some extension his impressions of London in April 24th, 1875:

Of course the first thing which strikes one in approaching London is the darkening of the light from the smoke. Everywhere in England on the brightest days there seems to be a veil over the sun which is by no means disagreeable but London is decidedly too dark. Very soon another thing strikes one and that is that whenever you have been out for a few hours and take off your hat and look in the glass there is a plain line of demarcation between the clean part of the forehead which the hat has covered and the brown part which has been exposed to London smoke. The next thing which strikes one is the immensity of the city and the enormous throng of vehicles and especially of handsome equipages extending for miles and miles. [...] But it is not so much the extent of the city as the life and rush of it. In Oxford St. near Regent Circus where it is wide enough for five carriages abreast and more than two miles from the heart of the city there is a jam half the time although the rapid driving tends to keep the streets free very much.

It can be said that Peirce was not a typical tourist, or at least that he did not pay attention to the things that attract attention at first sight. He was not impressed at all by grandeur or magnificence. On the contrary, in several letters he writes disparagingly of important monuments and pays attention to lesser-known works of art or anodyne details. For example, while he had a good time in Berlin, as a city “it seemed rather small potatoes” (August 11th), and about Rome he said that it “seems like a one horse place in some aspects after Naples but it is wonderful how much there is to see here. It’s no great shakes of a city but it is the city of the soul—I think they call it, do they not?” (October 14th). Peirce wrote that there were so many things to visit there that

in three days I don’t seem to have seen any considerable proportion of what I have to see & I am perfectly confused with the amount I have before me. Yet I make it a strict rule not to look at anything not particularly worth seeing & I pass over a great many of those things (October 16th).

In Rome the decayed situation of the Coliseum drew his attention, “a mere shell”, and he wrote about Santa Maria Maggiore:

This church is one of the very finest & largest in Rome. It was originally built about A. D. 350! Old enough! But as it is its general effect belongs to work done upon it a hundred years later. It is very rich & beautiful. Here is a picture of the Virgin which they pretend was painted by St. Luke. I was greatly struck by this church (October 14th).

However, Peirce felt disappointed by his visit to the Vatican:

There is an absence of true belief about St. Peter’s. It’s got up. It confirmed me however in thinking that St. Paul’s in London is really a very fine church. It is the enormous size & perfect proportions of St. Peter’s that impresses one. Beyond that there is nothing great about it (October 14th).

His views about some places are very often, at least, peculiar. For instance, he obviously enjoyed London ("I am pleased with England, the air is so mild and moist and one can walk and eat so much. The country is very picturesque and the city is too in another way"), but not Berlin, and he complains in several letters of its awful smell (June 30th, August 11th and September 4th). Peirce advises against visiting Berlin, unless you go there to visit someone you know, and he writes that its architecture and sculpture do not transmit anything:

The architecture and sculpture have a very artificial and made up look, generally imitations of classic style and fail altogether of any real effect even when you must acknowledge them to be fine. The finest thing is the Victory over the Brandenburg Thor and that has the effect of a small bronze. The artist has taken no advantage at the large size to produce any particular effect of greatness or sublimity (July 30th).

He describes Pest as "a rather pleasant place to stay" (August 25th) and he writes that Constantinople is "by all odds the most beautiful & fascinating place I have been in yet" (September 2nd). Constantinople seems to him a completely different city: "There is such a flood of complete novelty before my eyes everywhere that I have not time to get used to it at all even enough to describe it. What shall I begin with?" (August 28th). Peirce was surprised there by the mixture of races and languages, and also by the veiled women. He visited the Mosque of Suleiman and the Hagia Sophia. His opinion about the Turks is somewhat ambiguous: "The Turks are a pleasing people, honest, clean, decent & dignified; but their vices are so different from ours that we mutually despise each other as disgusting & debauched fellows" (September 2nd).

Peirce seems to be most comfortable in the most picturesque places he visited, which include the following locations: Cavalla, the first walled city he had ever seen (September 5th); Volo, an "odd looking town" which will appear later in his fictional story, "*Topographical Sketches in Thessaly with Fictional Embroideries*", in which he intended to convey his fascination with Greece; Bern, where he liked the fountains and the cathedral; Dresden, where he noted his surprise that none of his acquaintances who had been there had spoken of the beauty of this city; Narbonne, where he visited the cathedral and an interesting local museum.

Peirce pays attention to curious details, monuments and works of art, that usually are not the most visited ones. While the antiquities of Catania seem to him "many & insignificant & therefore every way calculated to bore the visitor" (September 22nd), he wrote in the same letter that he "couldn't tire of looking at" a beautiful bust of Faustina. In Syracuse it is the same: "I went & saw ever so many antiquities, some very absurdly uninteresting—the fount of Arethusa for example. I wanted to laugh when I saw it" (September 22nd). Also in Rome: "I then went first to the Palazzo Doria where is the largest collection of pictures in Rome. Most of them I found very uninteresting" (October 14th). Furthermore, Peirce's opinion about Michael Angelo is very meaningful: "But to appreciate Michael Angelo's statues requires more knowledge of the history of art than I have got. They seem to me horrid misshapen disproportioned things". On the contrary, a forgotten triumphal arch drew his attention in the Palatine: "On the way I passed the Palatine Hill with some ancient ruins on it, I don't know what—perhaps an imperial palace. I passed under a triumphal arch



erected in honor of one Claudius Drusus Germanicus B. C. 8. It has two marble columns & is pretty good” (October 16th). For instance, of his visit to Madrid, he only mentions a statue of an obscure artist: “at Madrid there is a statue half reclining of a woman by an artist now living Marissa I think is the name which is one of the most beautiful things I have seen” (November 16th). The references may be multiplied and these seem enough for our conclusions.

We will add only one quotation from the second trip which we are now studying. See, for instance, his description to his family of the cathedral of Chester in England (April 14th, 1875):

[...] the character of its architecture is a degraded & late Gothic—partly perpendicular & partly a sort of flamboyant with only here and there a bit of more ancient work which has been preserved by being thickly whitewashed or covered with earth or with stone. The nave, like that of Winchester which is also perpendicular has no triforium but it is far inferior to Winchester in grandeur. The transepts & choir are getting restored at present & are filled with workmen. But I saw very much that interested me there though it might not have excited the attention of a less enthusiastic admirer of Gothic.

### 3. Some Conclusions: Europe in Peirce’s Thought

While Peirce claims to not be well acquainted with aesthetics (*CP*1.191, 1903), he always was interested in it. It is unclear why he did not write more on this field: perhaps it is due to the ‘scientific’ atmosphere in which he spent all of his life. In spite of the fact that Peirce did not develop the issue in depth, aesthetics is located in a very important place in the overall architecture of his ideas, as shown by the fact that at the turn of the century he develops his idea of aesthetics as the foundation of the other normative sciences. Perhaps the trips through Europe and the contemplation of so many works of art and historic sites, left in his memory the impressions which are at the basis of the importance that Peirce would assign in his later years to art and aesthetics.

Beauty, for Peirce, is the only thing that we admire in itself and not in respect of something else. But this does not answer the question concerning how beauty is to be recognized. What works of art may be considered beautiful? The letters examined provide an excellent source of insight into Peirce’s conception of beauty. The specific experiences to which he refers in those letters, his comments on the works of art that he saw in Europe, and his personal way of observing them give us a glimpse of his mature conception of art. Peirce was totally captivated by the expressive force of Antonio Canova’s sculptures, as he writes in his letter of October 16th from Rome:

There are two monuments by Canova here. One of them very striking. I greatly admire Canova. My opinions on the subject of painting & sculpture I am generally hold very timidly but not this one. I think Canova great—very, very great. I was first struck—indeed quite overwhelmed—by his Theseus Killing the Minotaur in Vienna. Then I was greatly pleased with his Pauline Borghese & now this monument of Clement XIV I think has great power.

Peirce considers beautiful anything that somehow impressed him, that conveys something, magnificent or not, anything that has a soul or a “Motive”, as he writes in his letter of November 16th. In his letters Peirce often dwells on his admiration for



beauty, whether in nature or in artifacts, and he enjoys sharing with his reader the feelings which the contemplation of beautiful things elicits in him. The core of his aesthetic experience is often related to *this* admiration. For Peirce, art has precisely this capacity of grasping or fixing the qualities of feeling and of exhibiting them so they can be contemplated. The artist takes as the source of his work the matter found in his experience of the world: the sentiments, the impressions that his life, historical contexts or social occasions cause in him. For Peirce, the artist is someone who, in a surprising and almost magical way, grasps feelings of qualities that by their very nature are isolated and hidden, and who then succeeds in making them in some sense reasonable, understandable.

In his letters Peirce refers to the amazing multitude of feelings, sensations and impressions to which he was exposed in Europe and which he wanted to hold on to. In his letter of August 28th, he writes: "I thought today I would rest & write letters. I have seen so much that unless I go over it in my mind it will escape me. I feel I have now forgotten ever so many things which interested me greatly". At the same time, his great desire to give an account of the strong impressions raining down upon him is matched by his awareness of how difficult it is to do justice to them, simply because their character of firstness resists all attempts to put them into words or even drawings. In his letter of September 22nd, he points out that "it is difficult to give a notion of the character of a country so unlike what you have seen".

Peirce's European experience may well have been an important source of Peirce's later view of the artist as a person who is able to give form to what cannot be commonly expressed, making *reasonable* the admiration which something inspires in him. Thus, metaphorically Art may be said to colonize and to tame feelings. Beauty arises when harmony and equilibrium come into the picture, when a perfect adjustment is achieved between the feelings expressed and the form in which they are expressed, so that a "reasonable embodiment" occurs. In this way, in order for a work of art to be beautiful, it should move us or it should provoke in us some type of emotion, of feeling, and at the same time move us to some reflection.

In sum, the study of Charles Peirce's correspondence during his trips through Europe helps greatly in order to better understand him, as a scientist and as a philosopher, but furthermore as somebody profoundly human and alive, always open to the full impact of the experiences and impressions to which he was subjected while traveling. The feelings he experienced in Europe were seeds which bear fruit in later years, so as to yield a harvest in which new ways of understanding science and art would be developed. Peirce's thought cannot be separated from his life, and his European trips provide us with a better understanding of one of the greatest American thinkers of all time.

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