

washingtonpost.com

In Paris, the Scrawl of Fame

Sunday, November 14, 2004; Page P08

Didn't anyone here study penmanship!?

That was my first thought as I strolled through the display cases at Paris's new Musee des Lettres et Manuscrits (Museum of Letters and Manuscripts), an institution that seems dedicated to revealing the manual ineptness of history's heaviest hitters.

On a variety of stationery and in a range of inks, a slew of kings, popes, presidents, painters and writers prove that status definitely did not confer style -- at least not in handwriting.

The Spanish painter Joan Miro could fill a page with his bombastic and spasmodic signature alone. Belgian mystery novelist Georges Simenon, by contrast, could smash some hundred lines of writing on a page, thanks to his Lilliputian script. It might have saved some trees, but it must have driven his editor into near-blindness.

And let's not even get into aviator Charles Lindbergh's pompous jottings. Summary: very ornate, totally unreadable.

Located in a 17th-century town house in the St. Germain des Pres district -- former haunt of Hemingway and headquarters of the French publishing biz -- the 6,500-square-foot museum contains the personal papers from a gamut of civilization's public figures. From Antoinette (Marie) to Zola (Emile), the folks inside have left behind an impressive pile of pulped wood.

And much more, in fact. In addition to letters and manuscripts, the roughly 2,000 documents housed in the museum include photographs, musical scores, government forms, telegraph cables and postcards. There's even a signed dinner menu from Teddy Roosevelt's 1909 hunting trip in Africa. (The evening's repast included turtle soup, queen croquettes "Uganda Style" and something called "illuminated ice cream").

Though the exhibitions are mostly curated in French, a non-native speaker can still have an enlightening experience poring over the many fascinating writings in the collection.

I certainly didn't need a Berlitz book to appreciate the sheer range of international leaders and royalty whose papers were in front of me. The museum showed off stuff from a veritable Mount Rushmore of historical heads of state -- including Catherine the Great, Winston Churchill and Gandhi (composing in Gujarati script) -- as well as some beheaded heads of state, like Louis XVI.

Likewise, my nonexistent skills in German did little to diminish my wonder at beholding Mozart and Beethoven's chicken-scratch ideas for compositions, or Albert Einstein's scientific doodling from the period in which he was devising the Theory of Relativity. The arrangement of bright red couches spelling out the formula "E=MC²" was a nice touch, too.

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Being able to speak French did allow me one important insight: Famous people love to complain. Poet Charles Baudelaire, in a note to his mom, grubs for money. And Napoleon, writing to his sister, grouses about feeling "sad and tired."

Actually, as an American, I was pleasantly surprised to find plenty of my compatriots from across the pond. An entire section of the exhibition space was devoted to John F. Kennedy's personal photos, letters and drafts of speeches scrawled on a yellow legal pad.

Other small pieces seemed to have floated up from the wreckage of our country's most earth-shattering events. From his quiet home in Springfield, Ill., Abraham Lincoln sent a short note to a friend, dated June 1860. In less than six months he would be elected president and the South would secede.

And tucked quietly nearby I found a military cable sent by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower in the waning days of World War II. Dated May 7, 1945 and labeled "Top Secret," it announced in flat military language the completion of a mission at "0241, local time." That mission was the negotiation of the Nazis' unconditional surrender.

But even Ike wasn't above a testy missive. Sometime in 1947, still basking in public admiration for his role in winning WWII, he composed a reply to a letter from an old West Point acquaintance.

In elevated prose that barely masked a deeper frustration, the military hero and future two-term president responded to suggestions that he run for national office with an aggressively underlined declaration: "I want no part of any political job."

I scrutinized the page carefully to make sure I was reading this denial correctly. Fortunately, he had typed it.

-- **Seth Sherwood**

The Museum of Letters and Manuscripts is on 8 Rue de Nesle in the 6th arrondissement. Nearest Metro: St. Michel or Odeon. Admission is about \$10. Details: 011-33-1- 4051-0225.

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