

FRED WILSON

When Europe Slept, It Dreamt of the World

I planned to create a simple work on the aspects of Europe that were originally from somewhere else. I thought I would have only a few things to choose from, like spaghetti and gunpowder. However, the more my researcher, Howard Skrill and I looked into it, the more we found. As we looked deeper into the cultural culinary and technological history of Europe, it was astonishing how many things originated from elsewhere. It pointed to the Europeans ability to know a good idea when they see one. It was also surprising how much of a secret it had become.

Even after I stopped researching, the influences have jumped out at me in casual conversations and unlikely television programs, cookbooks, dictionaries and antique stores. Turkish patterns can be found on Swedish fabric from the time of the Ottomans. There are tastes in Italian food derived from the spices of Sub-Saharan Africa. The Indians of the Americas discovered potatoes and tomatoes before Columbus discovered there was a "New World." The notion of money in the form of gold coins developed in the Middle East, long before the Venetian ducat ruled Europe.

The biggest surprise came when I learned that things I thought were quintessentially European turned out to be thoroughly foreign. The familiar stone castles of Europe were mere wooden fortresses until the crusaders encountered the castles of Iran. The throne hails from Egypt. Tulips reminded travelers of what is now Turkey, rather than Holland, until the Dutch brought them home.

Basic things like paper, ink, glass, trousers, and the notion of zero are all imports though now seem to have sprung from Europe, fully formed. The list seems endless. While Europe slept, medicine was developed in Egypt, footwear in Mesopotamia, the smelting of carbon steel in Tanzania. The Indians invented numbers, and the Chinese; the compass. Ancient harvests were found in the Horn of Africa, representing the beginnings of agriculture. The invention of irrigation, in Mesopotamia, flowed outwards. Domesticated cattle were grazing in Egypt at the time of the pharaohs, though they also could be found in Kenya, 1500 years ago.

It is hard to imagine Europe without its great cuisine - without grapes from the Near East; peaches, almonds, and apricots from China; bananas, cucumbers, sugar, and pepper from India; apples, lemons, melons, onions, and garlic from the rest of Asia; spinach and olives from Persia; tomatoes, potatoes, corn, vanilla, chocolate, and sweet potato from the Americas - or the knives and forks to eat them with, from Istanbul.

Even leisure activities like card playing (Persia) and chess (India) were enjoyed elsewhere first. One can see an imaginary super-tourist with huge and heavy luggage as he voraciously collects the world's original ideas and goods: docks from Arabia, tea and porcelain teapots from China, the windmill from Persia, and the tiara from India.

If our tourist returns home and goes into a gothic cathedral, I'm sure he is reminded that the columns, candles, and the pointed arches originated in Egypt, as did the idea of angels and devils. Even the great passion for collecting that has become the museum culture of today began before the *Wunderkammer* or the royal collections of early Europe, by Nebuchadnezzar the second. In the year 2001, it comes as no surprise to any thinking individual that the great advances in art that define modernism were dearly a product of the West's expansion in, and the Western artist's visual engagement with, the rest of the world. It seems almost too obvious to mention the foundational influence of Asian art and philosophy on Impressionism, and African art's seminal influence on German Expressionism, Cubism, etc.

With all the digging come even more layers yet to be unearthed. It is dear that I could continue doing research for this project for a long time, however I am not so interested in defining the historical record than sparking awareness of the inter-relationship of the world. I don't mind destabilizing parochial, narrow-minded notions of who can claim superiority and originality, in the process.

The title of my work, *While Europe Slept* was taken from historical texts and art-work titles where they metaphorically speak of either Africa or the Americas. When you use it to describe Europe, its absurdity is laid bare. There are no somnambulant places in the world. Regions develop differently for different reasons. Those reasons are very much awake and have their own logic.

If all these cultural histories are completely familiar to Europeans, and the rest of the world, I fault my utter ignorance with being American. These days America prides itself on being culturally diverse and all mixedup. Americans believe the rest of the world is not. Since the great majority has never traveled outside of the US they believe in an overly simplistic world. With our president as a sad example, Americans only see the cultures of the world through the narrowest view of news sound bites, and Disney, Hollywood, and television commercials.

However, I imagine is it not only Americans who will find the complexity of Europe's cultural diversity as something new. Non-Europeans are already aware of some aspects of this complexity perhaps, but the fullness of this historical

complexity has never been popularly highlighted.

I ask rhetorically: if most Europeans have known that Europe has been such a cultural melting pot, how could there be a notion of the “exotic” (at best), or of ethnic hatred (at worst)? There are no “them” and “us,” if “we” are “them.”

Unpacking Europe. Towards a Critical Reading

Ed. Salar Hassan and Iftikar Dadi

Rotterdam, 2001

ISBN 90-5662-233-1