

# Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

OWEN CLARK | Natural Selections

The Catskills Indian Head Mountain provides a scenic vista.

## When Autumn Leaves Start to Fall—Weekend Getaways for an Indian Summer

OWEN CLARK

“Autumn in New York, why does it seem so inviting?” It’s tough to argue with that sentiment, especially when it’s delivered by way of Billie Holiday’s epochal, melancholic timbre. If there’s ever a time when New York transcends its already esteemed, almost mythical status, it’s the fall. The leaves are turning and change is in the air. The haze of summer’s adventures slowly kindle into nostalgia, and exciting holidays are on the horizon. Perhaps most importantly, the weather is finally palatable—sandwiched in between summer’s oppressive sauna-like, trash pile-cooking heat; and winter’s face-stinging, filthy snow bank-accumulating cold—is about a month of near perfect temperatures. But, if like me you’ve delayed your summer travels to avoid the price gouging and hordes of school kids, your wanderlust (yes I said it) is probably imminently approaching critical levels, and you’re in need of a weekend getaway. Luckily for us there’s a whole host of options for a September sojourn. So here’s a quick run-down of some top picks I’ve amassed while dreaming my way through Google Maps.

### The Catskills

Given its excellent proximity-to-

beauty ratio, this should be a mainstay for every resident of the Big Apple. I’m planning to visit in October so hopefully this won’t inspire *too* many people, over-running the trails with Tri-I scientists. At a mere two hours drive from the city, the Catskill Mountains boast some of New York State’s most magnificent scenery, which comes all the more alive during the fall foliage season. Hiking forms the bread and butter of any trip to the region, with trails like [Slide Mountain](#) and [Indian Head](#) providing jaw-dropping views to those willing to put in the miles. If you’re feeling particularly adventurous, Hunter Mountain is home to North America’s longest, fastest [zipline](#), which can even be traversed under cover of starlight, on the Night Zip Tour. As far as accommodation goes, the Catskills are home to several quaint Bed and Breakfasts that start as low as \$105 a night—at the slightly eerily named [Twilight Lodge](#)—ranging to \$225 at the more upscale, regal sounding [Clark House](#) (get it?). For those wanting to truly get back to nature, New York State has kindly provided several campsites, such as [North-South Lake](#) and [Devil’s Tombstone](#), generally running in the region of \$15-25 per night. For something in the middle, try an AirB-

nB such as [this one](#), conveniently located above an upscale pizza joint.

### Mystic, Connecticut

Very slightly further afield (just under three hours drive, or five hours on the train) is the idyllic seaside village of Mystic. Yes that’s right, the Mystic of [Mystic Pizza](#) fame. The restaurant [really exists](#), although the movie wasn’t actually shot there. Don’t be fooled by its diminutive stature (the village’s population sits at just over 4,000 people), there are plenty of adventures to be had here, primarily nautical in nature. Mystic is home to the largest maritime museum in New England—the famed [Mystic Seaport](#)—where landlubbers can try out their sea legs on historic colonial era vessels, the most notable of which is the Charles W. Morgan, the last wooden whaleship in the world. The [Mystic Aquarium](#) forms another unique attraction, home to the North East’s sole population of Beluga whales! Once you’ve got your Beluga selfie you can head to downtown Mystic, where you can soak up the atmosphere of a bygone era, gazing at colonial buildings while enjoying a bite of locally sourced sea-

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food. Cap off a perfect trip with a sunset [river cruise](#), and be sure to head back next summer for the outdoor concert series.

## Portland, Maine

When I think of autumn, I think of New England, and nothing screams New England quite like the great state of Maine. With its quintessential lighthouses towering over jagged rocks, keeping watch over the expansive, deep blue Atlantic—the East Coast’s northern most state represents a picture-perfect paradise. Although it might seem a bridge too far for a weekend trip, Maine’s most populous city of Portland is only a five and a half hours drive from New York, and just over an hour’s flight (you can snatch a September round-trip for under 200 bucks). There’s a whole host of things to do in this charming, seaside town, including art galleries and [museums](#); [brewery tours](#) exploring the thriving local beer scene; and of course sampling the local delicacies of lobster and chowder, which the state is famous for. Once you’ve soaked up the vibrant atmosphere of the city itself, you’d be remiss not to visit the scenic spots of the surrounding area, such as [Crescent Beach State Park](#), and nearby [Two Lights State Park](#)—featuring that classic lighthouse/rocks combo that will get those precious Instagram likes rolling in. If that’s not enough to satiate you, consider extending your trip to visit the stunning Acadia National Park (three hours drive from Portland), where you’ll feel truly removed from the hustle and bustle of New York—waking up to the fragrance of pine trees and the salty sea air, at the rustic [Acadia Cottages](#).

## Cape Cod

Last on the list is another classic New England destination, Massachusetts’s own Cape Cod. Again, although it seems pretty far away, at just under five hours drive, it’s easily doable for a long weekend. If driving isn’t your game, you can ride to Boston on the cheap with [Megabus](#), then beat the traffic with a 90-minute [ferry trip](#). Best known for its scenic grassy beaches, there’s a lot to explore on the Cape—ranging from the more highbrow [glass-blowing museum](#) in Sandwich, to the raucous debauchery of Provincetown. [Whale watching](#) is a must, with the local waters being home to a sizable population of Humpback, Finback, Minke and Pilot whales, as well as dolphins, seals, and course the Great White



A picture-postcard—Two Lights State Park sits just 25 minutes from bustling Portland, Maine.




Sculptures sit amongst a vibrant palette of autumn leaves at the Storm King Art Center.

sharks made notorious in Spielberg’s 1975 classic *Jaws* (though your chances of seeing one are slim to none). As far as accommodation goes, the Cape has [several charming](#) bed and breakfasts to choose from, although their rates dramatically spike during the high season. Spots fill up quickly, but if you can brace the cooler nights I highly recommend camping at [Nickerson State Park](#). My childhood bedroom is filled with photo album after photo album of all the snakes and turtles I used to catch on the park’s numerous lakes when visiting with my family as a young boy.

So there you have it. Though this land is vast, there’s much to see just a stone’s throw from New York City. If you find yourself wondering where the time goes and you’re running out of free weekends, or simply low on cash flow (the lowly scientist’s default state), then don’t worry,

there’s still plenty of options for day trips closer to home. Bear Mountain is usually at the top of the list for New Yorkers in search of that elusive thing called nature, but just slightly further afield is the ever impressive [Storm King Art Center](#), where abstract sculptures come to life amongst the painted hues of the surrounding fall foliage—viewers of the Netflix show [Master of None](#) will recognize the park from [season 2, episode 9](#). Equidistant from New York, but this time heading east up the I-495, Long Island’s [Caumsett State Park](#) provides a scenic setting for hiking, cycling, and gazing upon the tranquil Long Island Sound—with several miles of bridle paths leading to secluded beaches, forests, and the historic Henry Lloyd Manor house, built in 1711. Wherever the season takes you, make sure to [time it right](#), bring your camera, and above all, enjoy the autumn breeze.





## It Could Happen Here

MIGUEL CRESPO

PHOTO COURTESY OF HULU

In late 2016, the streaming service Hulu produced a series of ten episodes based on the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. The first three episodes dropped on April 26, 2017 and scored the biggest debut in Hulu history. In May this year, the show was renewed for a second season to premiere in 2018. There have been numerous adaptations since the book was published: theater, opera, ballet, film, and radio. A graphic novel release is also scheduled by the end of the year. Given the recent interest in *The Handmaid's Tale*, now is the perfect time to revisit the 1985 dystopian novel.

The story takes place in Gilead, a society organized by power-hungry leaders, according to a not-so-extremist interpretation of a biblical account. The story that was originally used as a reference was that of Jacob, who had two wives and two handmaids. In an era of declining births due to chemical pollution and sexually transmitted diseases, a new order is established where certain women are used as “handmaids”. Deprived of all of their rights, handmaids are considered objects destined to serve as child bearers for affluent families. The story is narrated in the first person by a handmaid named Offred. Interspersed within flashbacks, she provides an account of her previous life. Together with her husband and daughter, she had tried to flee to Canada, only to be abducted, brought back, and re-educated in the new values. An entire indoctrination system is revealed to the reader: the

Republic of Gilead. This new society is stratified such that everybody has a well-defined position and function. As a patriarchal system, power is held by older men called commanders. They are married to wives but have the privilege of owning a handmaid for reproductive purposes. In this oppressive atmosphere, strict rules on language, daily activities, and ultimately thought are reinforced by a secret service known as The Eyes of God. One night, Offred defies the system and becomes involved in illicit activities that bring an element of risk to her life.

Offred's story falls into the tradition of dystopian novels like *Brave New World* or *1984*. As such, the author creates a unique language in which terms for the new social classes abound. The word “sterile” is banned, and women who fail to abide by the strict social rules are considered “unwomen” and sent to shovel toxic waste in the colonies. Throughout the story, the author also plays with the mock Latin aphorism *nolite te bastardes carborundorum* in a recurrent and intriguing fashion; readers have a chance to team up with Offred to try to unravel its meaning. *The Handmaid's Tale* remains hard to classify. Deemed a futuristic fable, political satire, or even science fiction, Atwood prefers to consider her novel speculative fiction. In her own words, “science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen.” When crafting the story, Atwood purposely avoided including anything in the book that had not happened.

Like Offred and her family, Americans fleeing their own land for the neighbor to the north has become a common theme in history. During the Vietnam War, thousands of draft-age men fled to Canada. Before the Civil War, many slaves reached southern Ontario through the underground railway. Even earlier, New England Puritans left for a toilsome life in Nova Scotia. They wanted to create a theocratic utopia in America, and yearned for a city on a hill that would never be realized. The Gilead society seems remote to us, but oozes historical realism, and similarities in recent history are countless: American polygamy, slavery, baby stealing, group executions in the Argentinian dictatorship, and even book burnings, as in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. In the same way in which Bolsheviks expelled Mensheviks, the Gileadian Christians persecute Catholics and Baptists, or so are we told by the news. In Gilead, government-issued news are never reliable, just as was the case in Orwell's *1984*.

Atwood wrote the novel in 1984 in West Berlin and Alabama. At this time, the USSR governed with an iron fist, severely limiting personal freedoms not only at home, but also in their eastern European satellite states. During these years, in countries such as East Germany, Poland or Czechoslovakia, silence was imposed among the people who lived in fear of being spied on. Within the same region, un-

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PHOTO COURTESY OF HULU

der the Romanian dictatorship of President Ceausescu, who wanted to increase his country's population, birth control and abortion were banned after 1966. Atwood had also travelled to Iran and Afghanistan, where theocratic governments were at play and women's rights still had some room for improvement.

*The Handmaid's Tale* also reveals the importance of environmental issues and their detrimental consequences for society. It is hard to read it without remembering recent nuclear plant incidents. The depiction of Gilead's environmental situation might sound implausible, but it does not seem so far-fetched when compared with places like China, where pollution and toxic waste have reached levels that are incompatible with human health.

These striking parallels to our current society are disturbing, and have become more palpable since the last Presidential election in the U.S. *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes how little it took for Americans to change their minds about things. It is Offred, in her inner soliloquy, who reflects on the fact that "next generations of women will not complain because they will not know better."

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In Gilead, minorities are targeted by the new regime and there is no room for dissent. In the eyes of the Gileadian society, the traumatic events that led to this new order are blamed on Islamic extremists. Nowadays, hate for certain groups seems to be on the rise, as are far-right movements with overwhelming impunity. For many, freedoms, rights and long established orders are endangered. As simplified language and prohibition of books are a constant in *The Handmaid's Tale*, comparisons with emerging trends of communication via Twitter become unavoidable.

The story is rich with irony and complacency. Atwood takes this opportunity to courageously remind us that when repression replaces order, people are ready to trade their personal freedom for what they perceive of as security. Offred is a victim, a tease, and a witness. In an act of hope, she keeps a diary that she hides for future generations. Its timeliness remains unambiguous and tantalizing, as we hear her voice speaking to us. Perhaps we are at a crucial moment in our history. Perhaps we need *The Handmaid's Tale* now more than ever.

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## A Lab Grows in Brooklyn

AILEEN MARSHALL

Most of us here at Rockefeller and the Tri-Institutions community, who work in science in one form or another, do so because we love science. Sometimes we are curious about other aspects of science outside of the specific area in which we work. Sometimes we want to talk to friends about exciting areas of research, but it can be hard to explain it to them. Or we may have ideas for an experiment or project, but don't necessarily have the means in our own labs to carry them out. All of these desires can be fulfilled in a community biolab.

What exactly is a community biolab? There doesn't seem to be an official definition, but it is a growing trend. There are at least a dozen such organizations in the United States, and interest seems to be growing. In broad terms, community biolabs are non-profit organizations that provide lab space, equipment, supplies and training to anyone curious about any aspect of biology. They try to support citizen science and science literacy through this access, and have classes and other types of events geared toward the pub-

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lic. While they do take donations of all kinds, they survive through membership and class fees, so they are dependent on a critical mass of members to survive. As a way to obtain equipment, a community lab in California called LA Biohackers found some old thermal cyclers and a DNA sequencer in the dumpster of University of California, Santa Cruz.

There is a community biolab right in New York, in Brooklyn, called Genspace. It was founded by life scientists who wanted to improve the public's science literacy and support citizen science. They do this through classes, talks and events for the public, and as incubator space for startups, or those who are just curious.

Ellen Jorgensen was a scientist working in the pharmaceutical industry when she came up with the idea for Genspace. She was working at a biotechnology company when she saw an article about DIY spaces. At that point, most of these types of organizations were geared toward the computer and electronics industry, but there was growing interest in biolabs. She started lurking on the Google Group mentioned in the article and saw that there was a lot of interest in such a lab in the city, but not much actually happening. In 2009, she sent a message to the group proposing to meet at a coffee shop near the Beacon Theater. Four other people showed up: reporter Daniel Grushkin, artist Nurit Bar Shar, and two Columbia college students. The students were there because they were interested in the iGem competition, but there was no support available from the school. iGem is a synthetic biology competition where participants are given components such as promoters, terminators, reporter elements, and plasmids, and challenged to create a new system within a cell. Bar Shar had learned how to grow cell cultures in fractal patterns and was interested in continuing that work. They started meeting in Grushkin's living room, where they would lay a plastic sheet on the kitchen table and Jorgensen would provide equipment, such as a gel apparatus from her job. In this makeshift lab, Jorgensen says she was impressed with the reactions of others and began to "appreciate the privilege to work with the tools of science." However, working in the apartment, they realized that they couldn't store any of their work or forge any long-term projects. Then they heard about the Metropolitan Exchange Building at 33 Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. The building's owner was very passionate about using the space for promoting human ben-



BioRocket Interns

AILEEN MARSHALL | Natural Selections

efit. The building also housed an architecture firm, Terraform One, that was playing with the idea of constructing buildings from living materials. This concept failed to eventuate, so the architecture firm gave the space to Genspace in 2010, even building a biosafety level 1 lab enclosure for them. At this point Genspace became a non-profit, starting the lab with equipment donated from Jorgensen's old company.

Genspace offers several different types of events. There was the art exhibit, *Stranger Visions*, where an artist took chewed gum, cigarette butts, and hairs found on the streets of the city, used them to sequence the DNA of these individuals, and from that created busts based on how these people might look. It was meant to be a statement on biological surveillance and how genetics determine how we look. The artist did all this work at Genspace. There are adult classes, such as how to make paper and textiles from bacteria, how to make paint from glowing microbes, and also the occasional book signing. In the past, they have offered classes in basic molecular biology techniques and one on the new gene editing method, CRISPR, which has recently received a lot of press. There will be a lecture by Chris Mason of Cornell University on designing genomes. The BioRocket Internship is an after school and summer program for New York City public high school students, giving them a chance to obtain lab experience.

Membership costs \$100 a month to have access to the lab, and is open to anyone, following an initial safety class. It can be used as a space for scientists to do their own thing. For example, a company called Opentron actually started at Genspace, by a group from New York University that found pipetting repetitive—as bench scientists can attest to.

They developed an automated pipettor with intricate software that costs less than \$5,000, and formed a company that is now comprised of about twenty employees in the U.S. and China. Membership at Genspace is also "good for proof of concept work," Jorgensen notes. Genspace has been hosting iGem teams over the years as well.

Recently, Genspace has given rise to an even more wonderful organization, Biotech Without Borders. While Genspace continues to focus on the intersection between science and art, Biotech Without Borders focuses more on opportunities for hands-on science. The mission of Biotech Without Borders is to help improve the public's understanding of biology and DNA technology as a way to encourage democratizing science, provide space for a curious public, and maybe to eventually help bring biotechnology to developing countries. There are periodic lectures and classes on such topics as biotechnology, synthetic biology, and techniques, that are very reasonably priced. They have a recurring free event called *PCR and Pizza*, where one can bring some organic material that they were curious about, and have it sequenced, or you can sequence a piece of your own DNA, or just engage in conversation about science. There are plans to start a program called *Hack the Helix*. Intended for city public high school teachers, the program will provide an affordable opportunity to learn biotechniques to present to their classes. There will also be a program for high school students. Biotech Without Borders plans to collaborate with Know Science on some events.

For information on specific events at Genspace, go to [www.genspace.org](http://www.genspace.org). To learn more about what Biotech Without Borders, go to [www.biotechwithoutborders.org](http://www.biotechwithoutborders.org).



## Opening European Borders

FRANCESCA CAVALLO

For decades, Europe has been a dream destination for many immigrants in search of a better life. As a symbol of democracy, stability and opportunity, the old continent attracts more and more people every year. But an escalating migration crisis is testing the European Union's (EU) commitment to human rights and open borders. The current geopolitical situation in several regions bordering Europe has been boosting the immigration stream, leading to new debates concerning immigration policy and regulations as well as to an intensification of nationalist and right-wing movements in many European countries. Before delving deeper into the consequences of this massive immigration, let's analyze the roots and the reasons of this immigration wave that is afflicting the EU.

Europe's history has been immensely shaped by migration. For centuries, merchants, craftsmen, and intellectuals crossed the continent to practice their trades or start new lives. Millions migrated from Europe, first to the colonies and later to the Americas. At the same time, Europe also has a long history of forced migration: from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain to the population shifts in southeast Europe caused by the many wars between the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Large-scale immigration into western Europe has been more recent. From 1960 to 1973, the number of foreign

workers in western Europe doubled from 3% to 6% of the workforce. It was the highest in places like the UK and France, with relatively open access for citizens of their former colonies. In Germany, too, the number of foreigners (nearly half of them Turks) rose by 4 million between 1960 and 1985, although they seldom became citizens. But primary immigration into Europe—driven by labor needs—all but ended with the oil crisis of 1973. Since the late 1980s, the number of people applying for asylum has increased sharply. In 1984, there were only 104,000 applications in western Europe. This figure grew to 692,000 in 1992 and then declined again during the 1990s.

Thus, asylum has become one of the principal means of immigration into the EU. The end of the Cold War caused a number of small wars and ethnic conflicts around the world. In this type of warfare, the combatants—regular troops complemented by paramilitaries—often target civilian populations. Many people that applied for asylum were from Bosnia in the early 1990s and Kosovo in the late 1990s. Also, with the end of communist rule, many eastern Europeans believed that their aspirations for a better life could only be served in the west. Therefore, it's not surprising that many tried to emigrate westward. The problem is that tens of thousands have tried to use the asylum process to do so,

which has led to backlash in some countries against all types of immigrants. Even Ireland, whose modern history is one of mass emigration, saw asylum applications leap from 39 in 1992 to more than 4,600 in 1998. Some countries have experienced much larger increases than others. Germany has consistently received more refugees than other EU countries—more than 60% of all those who applied for asylum in western Europe in 1992. During the last decade, Austria, Holland, Sweden and Switzerland have received high numbers of refugees per head of their populations, whereas some of the larger states, especially France, Italy and Spain, have received relatively fewer. Britain is in the middle of the field.

Today, Europe is experiencing one of the most significant influxes of immigrants and refugees in its history. To understand the situation the EU is facing today, it is essential to clarify the reality that Europeans had to endure during most of 2015. What made the situation in 2015 evolve differently from the past was the scale of the new immigration wave that appeared during the spring, added to the political motivation of immigrants who were mainly escaping civil conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Composed mostly of refugees moving out of Syria and Iraq under the pressure of endless fighting in

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these two countries, this influx of immigrants introduced numbers never seen in recent years, with 800,000 people stepping onto European territory in less than eight months, or 6,000 per day. By the end of 2015 a new route was paved through Turkey, Greece, and the Western Balkan countries toward EU nations, starting with Hungary, Austria, and Germany and then spreading to many more countries. The sudden surge of immigration in the EU took the European institutions by surprise. Close monitoring of the Syrian crisis from 2011 on revealed that the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) stemming from the Syrian conflict at the start of 2015 amounted to nearly half of the Syrian population (approximately 4 million refugees and almost 8 million IDPs).

For the first few months of 2015, this level of immigration pressure the EU had to confront was rather traditional. Europeans were profoundly confused about how to respond to these new challenges. In the age of imperialism, Europe justified settling foreign lands with the confident belief that they were bringing the benefits of civilization to more backward parts of the world. But post-imperial, post-Holocaust Europe is much more wary of asserting the superiority of its culture. The big question in the coming decades is how Europe's faith in universal liberal values will withstand the impact of mass immigration.

For the first time, the EU had to find a collective response to this crisis because of its scale, intensity, and the involvement of many countries along the route followed by the immigrants. Europe's response was essentially shaped by a sense of urgency. It was a

short-term fix that allowed the EU to regain control of its external borders. An agreement with Turkey set up practical arrangements that contributed to calming the situation on the ground and updating processes for asylum applications and returns. However, deep-seated political divisions in the Union on the immigration issue remain. In particular, not all member states are ready to accept a fair share of the immigration burden, thereby undermining the principle of unity, and risking fragmentation and freedom of movement.

Detailed decisions presented in the European Council conclusions of February 18, March 7, and March 18, 2016, focused on three main issues. First, the EU gave clear support, including financial resources and expertise, to the frontline states, in particular Greece, to help deliver humanitarian assistance to the refugees and facilitate the different stages of the administrative processes required by the EU for border control and asylum requests. This action consisted of first setting up reception centers ("hot spots") for the purpose of rapidly examining newly arrived immigrants, and selecting between those whose asylum requests could be processed and those who could go no further, and then establishing transit centers for possible candidates for asylum, or other types of international protection. Second, the EU rapidly established a new body of EU border and coast guard forces through relevant legislation. Third, the EU reached an agreement with Turkey that provided both sides with a clear understanding of their mutual obligations and rights with regard to the influx of refugees and immigrants moving into Europe, out of Turkey. Provisions were adopted both on the current immigrants, with the return to Turkey of ir-

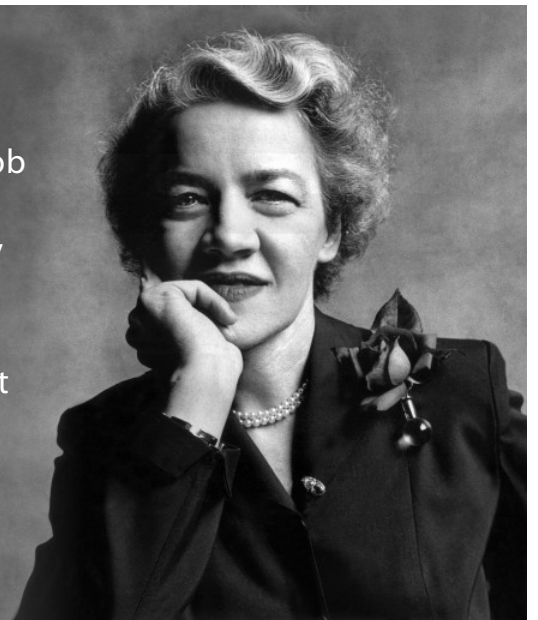
regular immigrants who had already landed in Greece, and on future inflow, with the possible resettlement in Europe of regular immigrants on the condition that their asylum applications be processed through procedures in Turkey. These procedures assisted Turkish authorities in stemming smuggling and trafficking channels. Moreover, significant improvements to Syrian refugees' daily lives could be seen in Turkey, where they had access to the labor market, and education for refugee children in local schools. Meanwhile, EU leaders agreed to substantial compensation for Turkey's efforts by allocating a €6 billion (\$6.6 billion) financial package for 2016 and 2017, accelerated visa liberalization for Turkish citizens traveling to Schengen countries, and the relaunch of Turkey's stalled EU accession negotiations. Last but not least, from the Turkish point of view, the EU formally reinvigorated its strategic partnership with Ankara with a commitment to convene a yearly summit between the leaders of the two sides. What the EU urgently needs now is a more long-term plan based on a combination of genuine solidarity and creative flexibility. Solidarity is needed, immigration is not fatalistic; it can be controlled and can open the door to benefits for all. For this to happen, Europeans need to change their current thinking and consider immigration as an opportunity. They must agree to discuss the issue among themselves, promote dialogue with their external partners, and leave aside the temptations of intolerance and isolation. Flexibility is necessary as any decision on immigration must take into consideration the specific problems of every member state and, more substantially, facilitate the need for a progressive rollout of any integration approach.

## Quotable Quote

My creed is that public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly. It must be a complete dedication to the people and to the nation with full recognition that every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration, that constructive criticism is not only to be expected but sought, that smears are not only to be expected but fought, and that honor is to be earned but not bought.

**Margaret Chase Smith**

U.S. Congress Representative and Republican Senator, 1897-1995



## Culture Corner | Ubiquitous Art

BERNIE LANGS

*I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises, and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air—look you, this brave overhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! **The beauty of the world.** The paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me.*  
--Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2

Ah, yes, the famous malaise of the pseudo-mad Danish Prince, the speech of Hamlet to his school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the depressive bent that has overtaken his disposition, even while recognizing that the magnificent wonders of the world cascade before his very eyes. I believe that many of us also communicate a similar despair through email, text, Facebook, or in conversation with our friends, of our inner conflicts about the depressing state of politics in our troubled nation. Personally, I lay no claim to the insights of a Hamlet, yet, as I've hit my 60<sup>th</sup> year of life on this planet, I find it hard at times to muster the strength to care and gather excitement for professional sports and for what currently passes as art and entertainment. And I've long given up hope for the salvaging of the higher ideals of America's revolutionary concepts of democracy and government. Yet I know in my heart that there are many times when my dreary, lazy pessimism can be shoved aside and temporarily forgotten, such as when at an art exhibition I've dragged myself to exhilarate my soul, or the moment an orchestral or guitar passage at a concert rises to heavenly heights granting momentary freedom of mind. Unfortunately, like the feeling I get after consuming a bag of Doritos, I sink back into unsatisfied appetite, and the opiate high of stimulated intellect crashes down, mired in the dreary muck and Dickensian soot of the times in which we live. I always knew the world would change in my lifetime, but I could never have imagined or anticipated a place of constant stimulation mixed with the underlying hum of continual disappointment.



*Saint Catherine of Alexandria by Raphael, National Gallery, London*

Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, pinpoints the source of so much of what bothers me now in the arts. Benjamin was the first to recognize a deadly and serious danger that the art world would confront going forward. He realized that the ease of reproducing great works of art would cast a shadow over the unique qualities of the actual images and first-hand experiences. If the *Mona Lisa*, for example becomes available as a cheap postcard churned out by the hundreds of thousands and in art history textbooks again and again, over and over, the mind of the beholder loses the ability to conceive of what made the

actual physical painting a masterpiece in the first place. This uncomfortable understanding stretches out widely in the arts, rippling forever outwards like the waves set in motion by a sudden disturbance on the surface at the center of a placid lake.

Of course, art should be sustenance for all and available to everyone; that is something I've never doubted for a moment. But what art philosophers such as Walter Benjamin realized was that by cheapening the "primary" object of art, people who never visit the original work or take the time to experience

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true art amid this barrage of valueless clutter will never experience its “aura” or have what art historian Kenneth Clark terms as a “moment of vision.” The essence of the spiritual power and the feat of the technical creation is diluted, or worse, completely lost, replaced by a tawdry mechanized imitation.

In music, for example, it appears that we’ve created a world of the most casual of listeners. Songs are available at any time and in any place. You can halt a Beethoven symphony on a hand-held device in the middle of a violinist’s most passionate stroke of the bow. Few people take the time to ponder a classical piece as an entirety, to struggle with its complex structuring and discover its meaning as a totality, as a bold statement of a nuanced idea. Pop music is ubiquitous, piped in at shopping malls, in pharmacies, even in restaurant restrooms. Has anyone ever been in a Target store or a CVS pharmacy and paused to say, “Wow, I love this song, let me stop and listen?” Pop music has long been the loving cash cow of an aggressive music industry, and it is the songs that are thus devalued as mere commodities. We’ve now reached the point where the capitalist-generated brand of music as a “product” latches on like a deadly virus to the artistic *expression* of the song, and unbelievably, the artists themselves are transformed and morphed into becoming the physical “face” of a commodity such as soda, a bank, or snack food. In my mind this is a horrific dehumanizing concept that the ghosts of economic opposites Karl Marx and Adam Smith must both be choking on.

When I studied art history on my own,



*Beyoncé as the “face” of Pepsi*

for many years I took in Raphael’s High Renaissance depictions of Saints and Madonnas, through photos in books. For years I viewed them with disdain, seeing them as sugary and overly sweet and not close in conception to the works or genius of his contemporaries, such as Michelangelo and Leonard da Vinci. But standing in front of the very same paintings at the National Gallery in London or the National Gallery of Art in Washington I ex-

perienced jaw-dropping, intense moments of revelation. No photo in a book, no postcard or computer image can capture the textures of skin and clothing in Raphael’s paintings. The artist’s depiction of ethereal time and space, religious realms juxtaposed with temporal dimensions, and the souls and complex emotions within the depicted individuals are best experienced *in situ*. There are mind-blowing, often indescribable details and nuances that can never be captured in widely dispersed and carelessly conceived reproductions.

There’s a funny story that when Dustin Hoffman was making the 1976 movie *Marathon Man*, there was a scene where he’s fleeing some would-be killers, and to prepare for the filming of that moment he was standing alone on the film’s set doing all kinds of physical and mental calisthenics to prepare for the action. As he was going through all of this, his older, legendary co-star, Sir Laurence Olivier, walked up to him and said, “Why don’t you just try *acting*?” I felt quite the same last year when I went to see the overwhelming, powerful paintings by Van Gogh at the Metropolitan Museum. I couldn’t see much of them because people were blocking the masterpieces taking photos with cell phones and large iPads. What I wanted to say was, “Why don’t you just try *looking*?” The primary source itself had become for many visitors just a living postcard, a photo op with a piece of famous canvas. The power of Van Gogh was lost to them in their snapping haste, as if the vital paintings were nothing more than soda cans in the flesh bearing the face of their favorite stars. Yes, the soul of genius reduced to the muzak equivalent of a special effects *Starry Night*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FORBES



Dawn of the City

NAN PANG | Natural Selections



## Life on a Roll

### *A Day in the Gulf of Kotor, Montenegro*

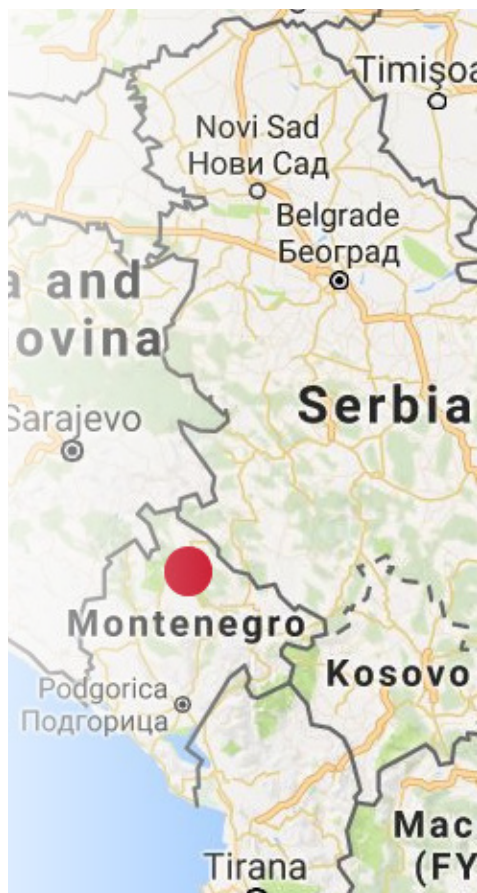
ELODIE PAUWELS

<https://elodiephoto.wordpress.com>

I have recently spent a few days in Dubrovnik, Croatia. One of the highlights of my trip was a one-day trip to Montenegro, since it was not planned and I therefore had no idea what to expect. I didn't even realize the currency is Euro (I'll let you Google this!).

I was given the full tour of the Gulf of Kotor. Imagine a landscape of fjords and mountains, with Mediterranean vegetation and clear blue water. Pretty nice, isn't it? Like most cities in the area, the old city of Kotor (a UNESCO world heritage site) is surrounded by fortifications and walls. If you're fit enough, you can climb 1500-plus steps up to St. John fortress, built by Emperor Justinian in 535.

I also discovered Perast, a tiny village on the Gulf, and its two small islets, Our Lady of the Rocks (the only artificially-built island in the Adriatic sea, shown here), and St. George.



Kotor



Perast



Our Lady of the Rocks