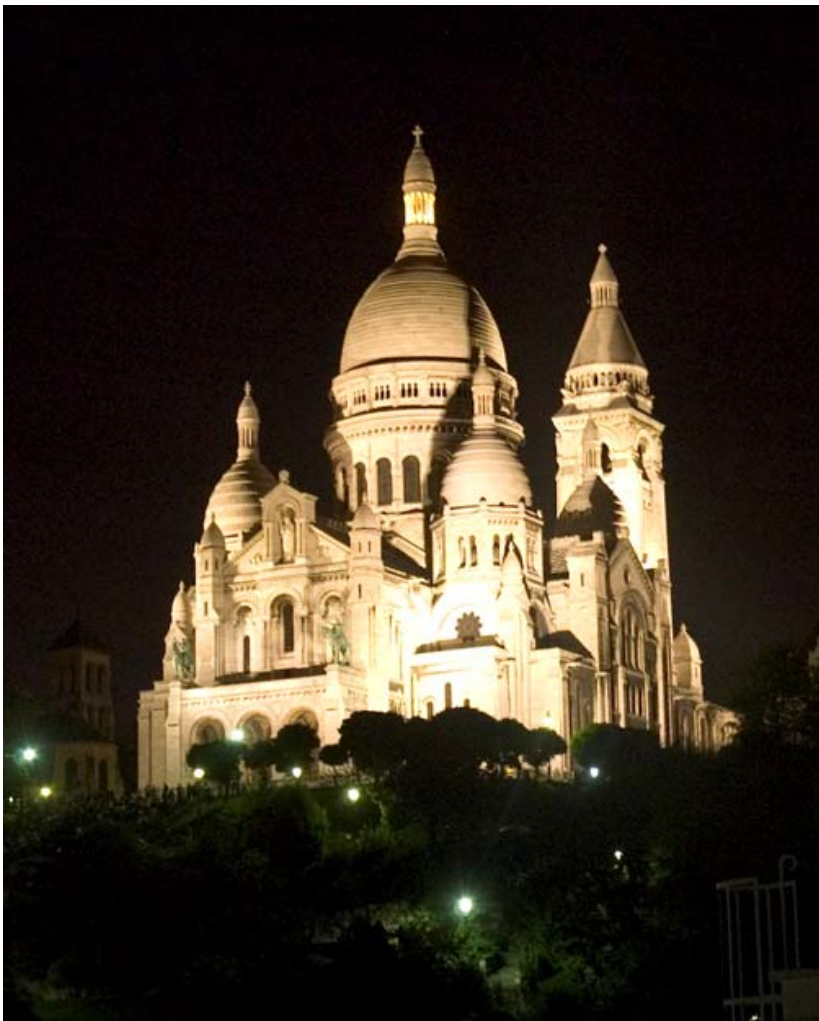


Paris # 2

9/14/2005

Well, Elise (my *ex*-girlfriend – ‘Sex-Girlfriend’ was a typo of epic Freudian proportions, for which she gave me much ribbing), has left. Kind of lonely here in the apartment now, so I must re-double my efforts to explore. Truth be told, it’s been a long, long time since I’ve been on vacation alone. Usually, it’s Elise, or my kids.

The apartment. Really nice, small, well laid out studio. Right in Montmartre, which is quite the tourist-trap, but my street is surprisingly quiet. I sleep well with the big windows open on a cool and mostly quiet Paris. Here’s the view out my leftmost window, at night, of the famous church of Sacre Coeur (sacred heart):



The other night we ate at ‘Dan La Noir’ (‘In the Dark’) – a place where you eat in absolute pitch blackness, served by a staff of blind waiters and waitresses. Really interesting. One odd thing was how absolutely at home I felt in the dark. I’d believed when I was a young boy that I’d been blind in a past life, and maybe it’s true. It felt oddly familiar, which I found oddly disturbing. The other oddity was how changed my taste buds were! Rice tasted like barley, duck tasted like beef, and the sweet desserts were

sweeter than I could bear. But it was great fun, and when someone invariably knocked something off of their table, the room erupted in good-natured cheers for the unfortunate diner. The food, while not steller, was good, and the experience was unforgettable. I highly recommend it.

Unlike Venice, where Elise and I were so enamored with walking that we barely hit any museums, Paris is not such a great walking city (too big, too many funky neighborhoods and streets interspersed w/nice ones), but it is a spectacular museum city, and we've been busy. Though so far I've resisted the massive Louvre, I've visited quite a few other museums with Elise.

One of the great, virtually unknown museums of Paris is Arts et Metiers – a museum of technology from the middle-ages to the present. I'm still not used to the fact that you can take photos in Parisian museums (as long as you don't use a flash), so I was midway through before I started clicking. This is unfortunate, because I can't show you the stunning collection of astrolabes and other navigational devices (intricately carved gold platters with arabesques inscribed on them), drafting tools, and all sorts of apparatus from the dusk of alchemy well into the age of applied chemistry and physics. There were scales and flasks to measure the weight of oxygen and hydrogen, gorgeously-designed concatenations of tubes and electrodes that did god-knows-what, and even an early cloud-chamber and particle accelerator.

Those of you who got my Prague letters will remember the 'wonder cabinet' collection at the monastery – wooden cases filled with biological specimens from around the world. This place is sort of a giant wonder cabinet of technology. Old wooden vitrines faced with rippled glass containing everything you could think of, from models of blast furnaces (working models, used to train workers in the new Bessemer techniques), to cotton gins to telegraph pole insulators, to encryption machines. We stumbled into this place expecting a modest collection, and instead found a vast, daunting, fascinating collection, an homage to human ingenuity and human curiosity about the natural world. I've never seen a museum like it before.

Here are some images from the collection:



(An idea of the place, rooms and rooms lined with vitrines of models and displays of life-size items too.)

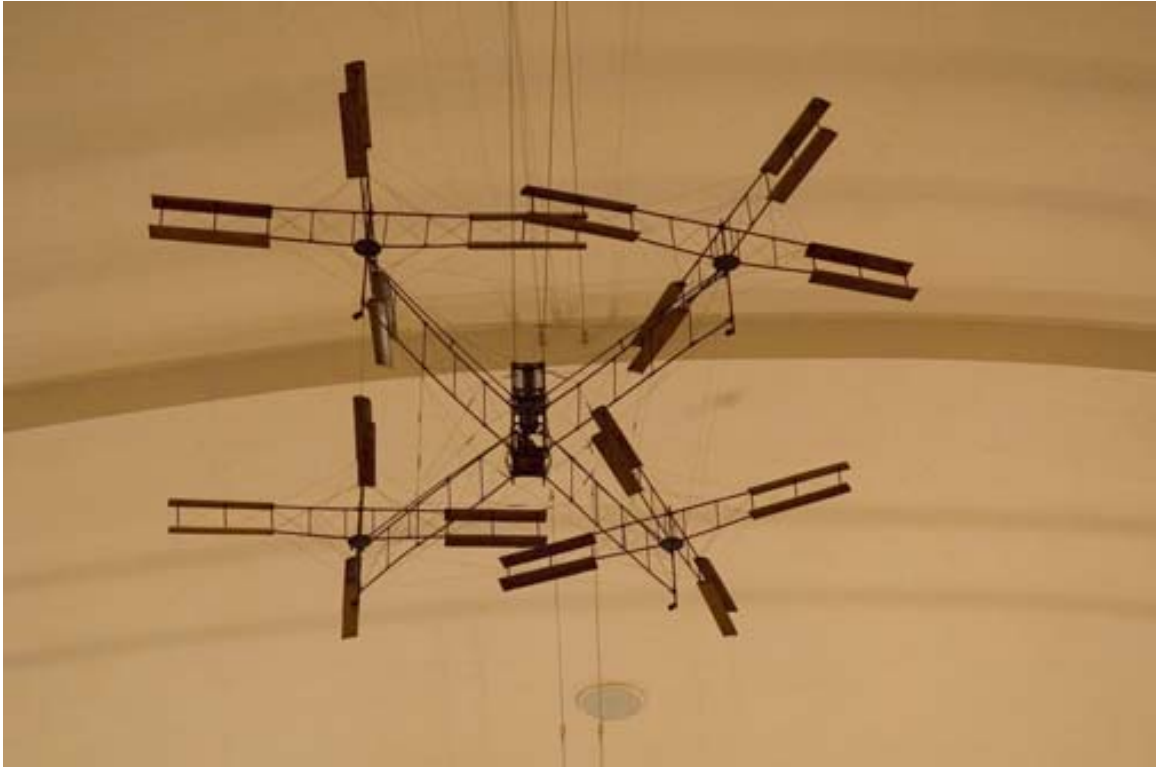


(From a display of wind-up toys and automatons. This one actually played this little working hammer dulcimer. I would love to have seen it in action, but the films of it weren't showing the day we were there).

More wind-ups:



(A wind-up tiger, with the mechanism taken out and placed beside it.)



(A model of an early attempt at a helicopter.)

The museum opens into a large hall where there is a model of the ‘first aeroplane’ (ahh, French pride rears its head). This Bizarre looking, bat-inspired, steam-driven, feather-duster-propellered monstrosity takes up the entire space:



It supposedly ‘flew’ a few hundred meters, though I can’t see how. At any rate, it was not a controllable vehicle (no wing-warping or ailerons that I could see), which means that it

is one of a long list of craft that got off the ground before the Wright brothers, but was not steer-able and hence, not a real airplane.

It is fun, though, and its ingenious super-lightweight steam engine is a miracle of late 19th century engineering.

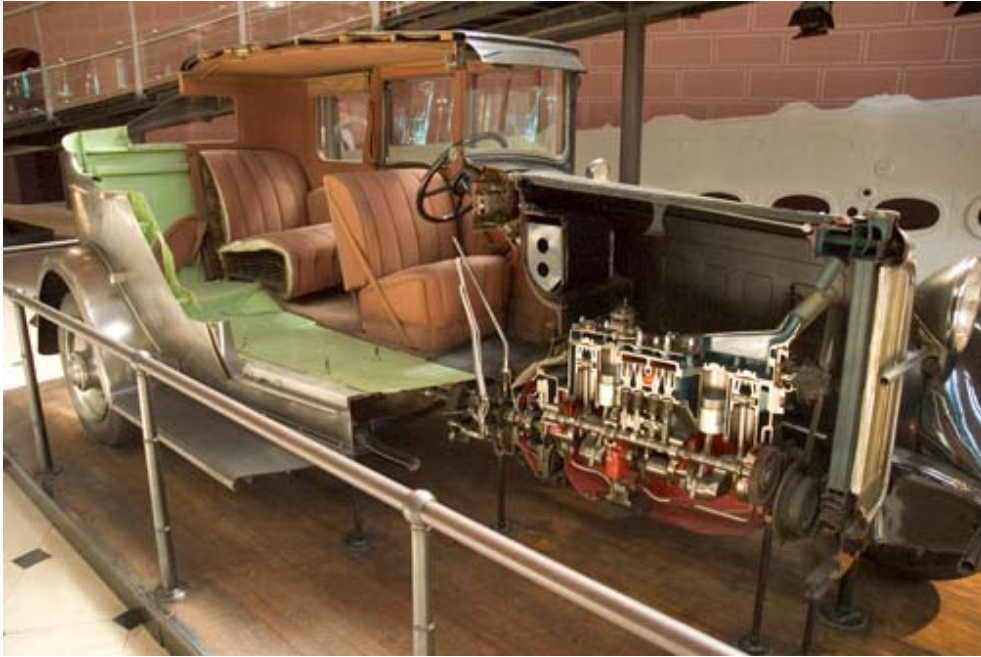
Another look:



The museum's piece de resistance to rationality and empiricism wraps up, ironically, in an ex-church. Here there are many planes from the early days of aviation, a Foucault's pendulum, autos and bicycles etc. It's quite a stupendous sight, and sort of reminds me of the hall of the dinosaurs at the American Museum of Natural History.



There's a car cut in half:



A lovely wooden bicycle with an incredibly elegant wrap-around rear frame:





And even an early proto-motorcycle, with the internal combustion engine built *into* the front wheel!!!



The semi-circles of steel are a type of spring suspension for the solid steel ‘tires’. If you look at the NASA ‘Lunar Rover’ – the ‘SUV’ of the Apollo program, that they drove around the moon, the tires are very similar, and were supposedly inspired by this.

If technology, beautifully-wrought craftwork, and human ingenuity and curiosity inspire you, you must visit this museum when you come to Paris. But leave an afternoon at least – it’s a big place!

It was also deserted, which was a terrible shame, through Paris is obviously proud of it (the ‘Arts et Metiers’ stop on the metro is done up in coppery metal and portholes – sort of like the inside of a Jules Verne submarine – easily the coolest station I’ve seen yet).

A few words about the Metro, whilst I’m at it. Although I am a deeply partisan New Yorker, I’ve got to admit, the Metro beats the NYC subways hands-down. First of all, it’s EVERYWHERE, and unlike New York’s linear orientation, the Metro’s more like a web, and an incredibly efficient one at that. I’ve yet to find the need to take more than two trains (i.e. one transfer) to get to anywhere (this is not the case in New York, at times, without going way out of your way (think A train to # 7 to # 6, for example). The trains come quickly, and the stops are much closer together. Usually you are in *easy* walking distance to two or three stops on one or two different lines. Also, the signage is better than New York (almost anywhere has better signage than New York in general), and only one train runs per platform (and no expresses/locals dichotomy), so it’s really hard to get lost.

The down sides? 1) Usually as ratty and dirty as NYC. 2) Urine (wheew!), 3) Sometimes you need to keep your ticket to transfer from one line to another. Only sometimes, and for no rhyme or reason that I can divine, but if you've tossed your ticket, you're screwed. So far, it's the most efficient transit system I've seen. Now, if it could only be as clean and tidy as Zurich's equally enviable system of trams...

Next: the Cartier Center for modern and experimental art in Montparnasse, the Pompidou center for Modern Art, and the Rodin Museum. Don't worry, there will be some scenery as well. Here's the obligatory shot of the Eiffel tower. I've got to say that I think it's prettier from a distance. I haven't been to the top (long lines, big bucks), but I probably will go up at least once, perhaps at night.

OK, a couple of shots... plus some miscellany, for those of you who are overdosed on Art et Metiers:







A little public art...



The Palais Royale reflected in a fountain.

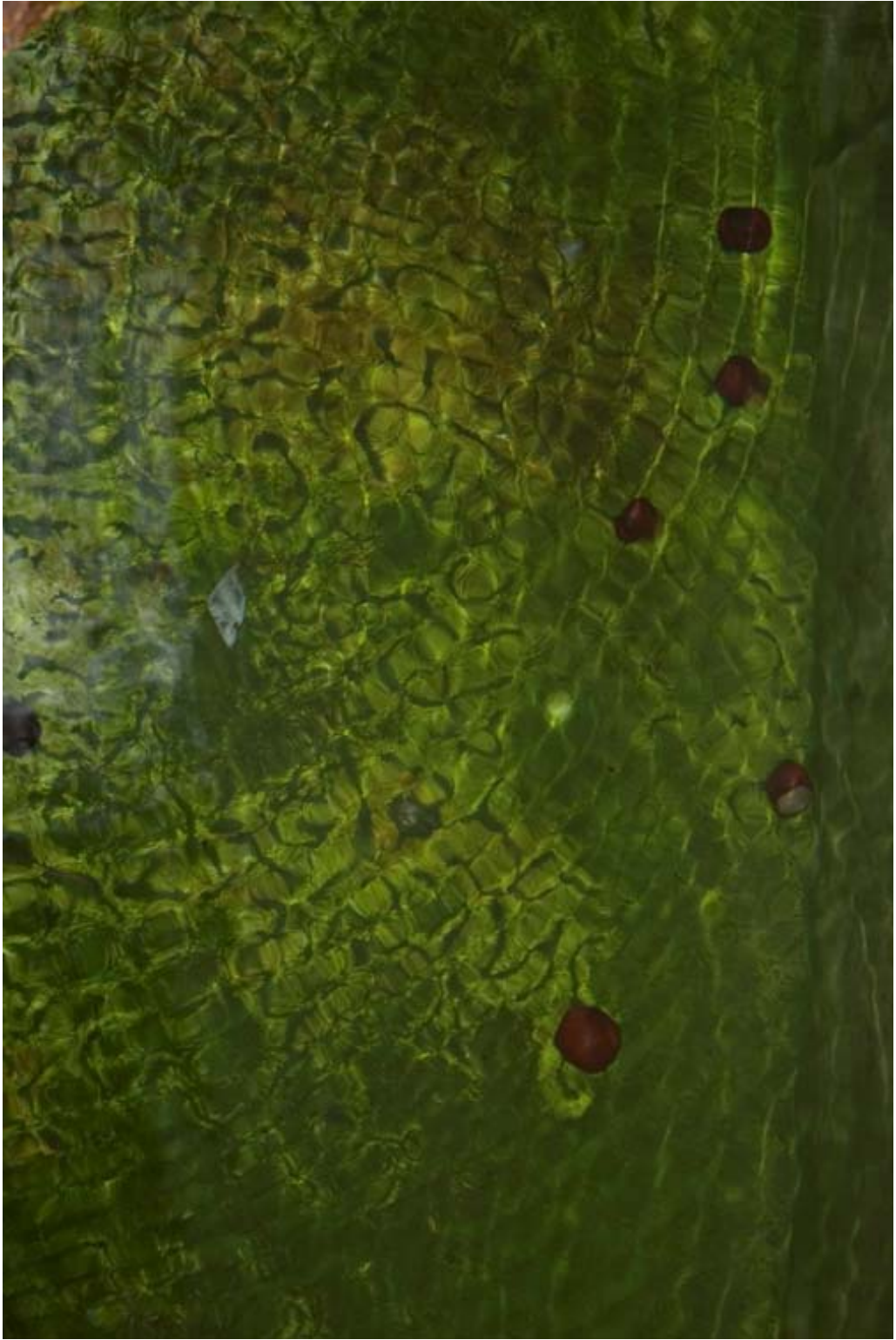


The remains of flyers on a fence on the Pont Neuf, Paris' oldest, longest bridge over the Seine.



Ducklings in a pet shop window.

And I'll leave you all with some reflections, rain, chestnuts and leaves in a fountain in back of the Cartier Foundation.





Namaste – Samuel.