

Jean-François de Villages: a curious, eighteenth-century gentleman

Patricia MICALLEF, M.Phil.

Department of French, University of Malta Junior College

e-mail: patricia.micallef@um.edu.mt

Abstract: *Manuscript 480, conserved at the National Library of Malta, consists of a series of logbooks in French kept by the knight Jean-François de Villages. In the five voyages undertaken, he progresses from a novice-knight to an experienced traveller at the service of the king of France. Particularly during his second and third voyages, Villages gives concise but captivating descriptions of the places of interest visited such as Naples and Florence, together with an artistic appreciation of paintings and artefacts that strike him most. This curious traveller who does not disdain adventure is particularly attracted by the theatre and museums, whose impressions he would like to pass on to posterity. Through his writings, Villages, a French gentleman par excellence, offers the contemporary reader a faithful glimpse of the eighteenth-century culture and mentality.*

Keywords: *eighteenth-century, museums, theatre, volcanoes, ugliness, beauty*

Introduction and context

During the Age of Reason and Change – the Enlightenment – eighteenth-century Malta was a hub of maritime and social activity. Although its insular characteristics shielded it from the immediate influence of contemporary European mentalities, the island kept its contact with other countries by the continuous stream of passengers who disembarked at Malta's busy harbours. Ruled by the Order of St John of Jerusalem, the small Mediterranean island became the place of residence of numerous men who had vowed their life to this chivalric ideal.

Manuscript Library 480, in quarto, written in French and conserved at the National Library of Malta, contains five logbooks kept by the knight of Provence, Jean-François de Villages, who started his career within the Order when, at the age of 12, he was accepted as one of the pages of Grand Master Manoel Pinto.¹ Son of Jean-Baptiste de Villages de Villevieille and of Elisabeth de Fortia de Piles, both of noble origin, Jean-François-Gabriel-Alphonse de Villages-Villevieille was born and baptized on 5 April 1742 in Marseille, at the church of Notre-Dame des

¹ Elected grand master on 18 January 1741, Pinto died on 23 January 1773, aged 92.

Accoules.² This is the date of birth verified by the four commissioners appointed by the Order to examine the proofs of nobility of the young candidate. It is interesting to note however that there are various dates attributed to his birth: according to the *Liste de messieurs les chevaliers, chapelains conventuels et servants d'armes des trois vénérables Langues de Provence, Auvergne et France, faite par des commissaires nommés par les trois vénérables Langues l'an 1771*,³ he was born on 3 April whereas National Library of Malta, Arch 2096,⁴ gives 4 April as his date of birth. Having his elder brother Toussaint-Alphonse already a knight of justice,⁵ Jean-François was accepted within the auberge of Provence mostly on behalf of the proofs of nobility already presented by this member of the same family.

Once Jean-François arrived in Malta, he wore, like the other fifteen pages, the livery of the grand master, who also paid the necessary expenses for the boy's upkeep, and was placed under the guidance of the master of pages.⁶ Lessons in artillery, calligraphy, and horse-riding were regularly followed and he also accompanied the grand master during the religious services at the conventual church.⁷ When he turned fifteen, as was the rule for all pages, Jean-François received a grant from the Treasury and was sent home to reflect upon his future. Having decided to pursue his career within the Order, he was then obliged to undertake the caravans or four voyages of six months each, on board the galleys of the Order.

A traveller

The first logbook found in NLM 480 is a rather dry account of Villages' third caravan undertaken in 1765, consisting of two voyages on board the vessel of the Order, the *Saint-Zacharie*. Young and adventurous, the novice knight looked forward to the trepidation brought by the sight of the enemy at sea and he gives a fair idea of corsairing. Although personal comments are sparse in this account, the reader can sense the ambitious character of Villages when, during the chase of an Algerian xebec, he analyses the tactics employed and writes: 'I think it is appropriate to make some comments on today's chase, which will eventually be of use in other

² See N[atational] L[ibrary] [of] M[alta], Arch. 3631, f. 1 v.

³ *Liste de messieurs les chevaliers, chapelains conventuels et servants d'armes des trois vénérables Langues de Provence, Auvergne et France, faite par des commissaires nommés par les trois vénérables Langues l'an 1771*, Malta, 1772.

⁴ NLM, Arch. 2096, Volume stampato 'Lista dei cavalieri cappellani conventuali e serventi d'armi della Lingua di Provenza, Alvergnà e Francia, 1685-1787', p. 13.

⁵ See NLM, Arch. 3631 f. 1r. Unfortunately, the proofs of nobility of Toussaint-Alphonse de Villages-Villevieille are not available at the National Library in Valletta, and his name does not figure in any of the lists of knights published.

⁶ See NLM, Libr. 79, vol. I, f. 69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 68.

occasions in which I will find myself.’⁸ Being a gentleman who is not afraid to confront failure, he analyses with precision the elements which made the ship suffer, and his strong character can be witnessed in the assertion: ‘I am convinced that our ship sailed better than the xebec. We should have caught it. Here are the mistakes we made ...’⁹

During his four consecutive voyages undertaken at the service of the king of France, Villages progresses in rank: no indications are given of his position on board the frigate *La Chimère* (1767) but he is an ensign on the *Caméléon* (1768) and the *Provence* (1770), and lieutenant on the *Engageante* (1773). In his logbooks, Villages is seen as an officer who commands both the sea and the contemporary eighteenth-century style of writing. Sensitivity being proof of a noble soul, Villages gives short descriptions well adapted to the keeping of a logbook, and at times he gives accounts of visits to places of interest with the underlying intention of informing fellow travellers.

On board *La Chimère*, Villages visited Naples and its hinterland. During the second half of the eighteenth century, Southern Italy and Sicily attracted travellers who frequently climbed Mount Etna and the Vesuvius to observe closely their eruptions. The description of the ascension of Mount Etna by Patrick Brydone described in his *Tour through Sicily and Malta* (1773) became a classic in all Europe. It presented the volcano as a sublime phenomenon which was both frightening and admirable and which could also be used as a metaphor for the violence of passion. Another eighteenth-century volcano enthusiast was William Hamilton, ambassador of England to Naples, who described the eruption of the Vesuvius of 1766 in an account for the Royal Society. For Hamilton, volcanoes had their logic and their beauty.¹⁰

Visiting Naples in 1765, Villages was not immune to this enthusiasm and he states: ‘Being thus near the Vesuvius, I did not want to leave Naples without seeing this famous volcano. Several officers manifested the same desire, so we set out together at 4 o’clock in the morning in carriages,’¹¹ ready to climb this terrible mountain. Villages is a man of his time where sensitivity also extended to the surrounding scenery: he describes nature as being constantly bereaving, since no

⁸NLM, Libr. 480, f. 21. Direct quotations from the manuscript will be rendered in modern French. *Je crois qu’il est à propos de faire quelques remarques sur la chasse d’aujourd’hui qui pourront me servir dans la suite dans les occasions où je me trouverai.*

⁹Ibid. *Je suis persuadé que notre vaisseau marchait mieux que le chébec. Nous devons donc le prendre. Voici donc les fautes que nous avons faites.*

¹⁰ See *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, dir. Michel Delon, Paris, 2007, p. 1253.

¹¹ NLM, Libr. 480, f. 62. *Me trouvant aussi près du Vésuve, je ne voulus pas quitter Naples sans voir ce fameux volcan; plusieurs officiers ayant le même dessein, nous partîmes tous ensemble à quatre heures du matin dans des voitures.*

vegetation grew on this mountain and rivers of lava or burnt rock offered only an image of destruction. The French officer gives a singular description of the river of lava covering the volcano: contrary to most visitors, he describes the flow of lava as moving upwards, towards the top, since he is seeing the molten rock from the foot of the mountain. As the volcano was continuously spitting fire or smoke, Villages gives a breathtaking account: 'We set out along the way. Two men carrying steel-tipped sticks had put belts around their waist and walked in front of us. We held on tightly to their belts, supporting ourselves while our guides dragged us along. In this way we reached the mountain top, having made several stops.'¹² In this eighteenth-century mentality, feelings were no longer to be obscured or condemned and Villages did not hesitate to confess: 'I had to make an unbelievable effort [to climb this mountain], especially when we got near the summit, because the old lava had turned to cinders.'¹³ Often risking losing foothold, one could only climb with great difficulty but the effort was well rewarded as once on top, the party assisted to a moderate explosion announced by huge fumes followed by a large quantity of fire and burning rock. Aware of the fact that the reader might not be familiar with such an experience, Villages turns to common knowledge to be better understood: 'the mountain resounded with a din similar to that of thunder.'¹⁴ For this eighteenth-century gentleman, the reader is to be given authentic information: the exact measurements of the circumference of the craters had to be reported and a quarter of an hour was spent examining the mountain top. Facts had to be proved and dangerous situations were sought so as to be evermore convincing. If Villages was avid for a unique experience, he was not going to be disappointed: 'We were ready to descend when we saw in the furnace huge pieces of rock moving up and down, similar to coffee put on boiling water. All of a sudden, there was a frightening explosion. These rocks burst and the mountain threw up fire and burning stones. Some of them reached us. The noise was dreadful. The ground bellowed and its heat was barely bearable beneath our feet.'¹⁵ It was necessary for the group to wait for the volcano to resume its normal state before

¹² Ibid. *Nous nous primes le chemin. Deux hommes, qui avaient des bâtons ferrés avaient mis des ceintures autour de leurs corps et marchaient devant chacun de nous; nous nous cramponnions à ces ceintures et nous nous soutenions sur elles tandis que nos guides nous entraînaient en quelque façon. Nous gagnâmes ainsi le haut de la montagne.*

¹³ Ibid., f. 62–3. *Il me fallut des peines incroyables, surtout en approchant du sommet, parce que l'ancienne lave s'étant réduite en cendre, on ne peut gravir qu'avec beaucoup de difficultés.*

¹⁴ Ibid., f. 63. *La montagne retentissait partout d'un bruit semblable à celui du tonnerre.*

¹⁵ Ibid. *Nous nous préparions à descendre lorsque nous vîmes dans la fournaise de gros quartiers de rocher se hausser et se baisser comme du café que l'on met sur de l'eau bouillante; tout à coup il se fit une explosion effroyable; ces rochers se crevant et les bouches lançant une quantité de feu et de pierres enflammées dont quelques-unes nous touchèrent. Le bruit fut épouvantable. La terre mugissait sous nos pieds et sa chaleur était à peine supportable.*

trying to descend and Villages is not ashamed to declare: 'I confess that this spectacle created fear in my soul.'¹⁶ As an officer who would like his writings to be useful to posterity, he offers practical advice: 'One must not undertake such an adventure on an empty stomach as it is easy to fall ill due to the great fatigue, which I myself felt. It would be wise to have some liqueur or fortifying tonic with you to use in case of need.'¹⁷

Another practical suggestion is given following the visit to the baths of Tivoli, commonly known as the baths of Nero: 'There is quite a long road along which the heat, at first moderate, becomes finally excessive.'¹⁸ What he found interesting is the fact that it was not at the far end that the heat was strongest but at about two thirds along the way. Villages states: 'In order to be able to breathe, it is necessary to walk extremely bent. Fresh air from the outside creates a current below the air inside and it is fresh enough to prevent you from suffocating.'¹⁹

Experience is another very important element for Villages. What makes his logbooks stand out is the fact that he himself verified hearsay information. At the far end of the baths of Tivoli, one could find a spring of boiling water and to confirm this statement, Villages set out on a quick and easy experiment: 'I put in some eggs which hardened immediately.'²⁰ Another experiment to which Villages assisted was carried out at the 'Grotto of the dog' at Agnano in the suburbs of Naples. He describes: 'I saw this experiment being carried out: a dog is forced to lie down on his belly. At first it struggles, then it gradually stiffens, having great difficulty breathing, then it remains motionless. It is thrown out of the grotto and little by little, it regains its previous liveliness.'²¹ If the common traveller was satisfied by this demonstration of the effect of carbonic acid, Villages decided to go a step further: 'I wanted to try out the effect of this vapour. I lowered myself to about eighteen inches from the ground. I felt a terrible smell of sulphur mixed with rotten mud. I had hardly been in this position for a minute when I had great difficulty

¹⁶ Ibid. *Ce spectacle élevo, je l'avoue, quelques mouvements de crainte dans mon âme.*

¹⁷ Ibid. *Il faut prendre la précaution de ne pas monter à jeûne car il est très aisé de se trouver mal par la grande fatigue que l'on essuie et je l'ai éprouvée; il serait prudent d'avoir de la liqueur ou quelque chose de fortifiant avec soi pour s'en servir dans le besoin.*

¹⁸ Ibid., f. 57. *Il y a un chemin assez long où l'on trouve une chaleur qui, d'abord modérée, devient excessive. Ce n'est cependant pas tout à fait au bout où elle est la plus forte. C'est environ aux deux tiers.*

¹⁹ Ibid. *Il faut alors, pour pouvoir respirer, marcher très courbé. L'on trouve l'air du dehors qui fait canal sous l'air intérieur, et qui est assez frais pour vous empêcher d'étouffer.*

²⁰ Ibid., f. 58. *J'y mis des œufs qui se sont durcis tout de suite.*

²¹ Ibid., f. 61. *J'ai vu faire cette expérience : on prend un chien que l'on tient de force couché sur le ventre; il se débat au commencement, ensuite il se raidit peu à peu, ayant beaucoup de peine à respirer, enfin il reste sans mouvement. On le jette alors hors de la grotte, il reprend ses forces par degrés et redevient aussi gai qu'auparavant.*

breathing and I felt a very violent headache. I went out very quickly and fresh air gradually dissipated my headache.²²

The love of theatre

During this visit to Naples and its surroundings, Villages also witnessed the uncovering of the city of Pompeii. What intrigued him most was its theatre: in this town, he saw a circular one consisting of stones badly placed. Disappointed, he states: 'I did not take any pleasure in seeing all these shacks.'²³ He regretted not being able to visit Herculaneum as according to the information given to him, there was a quite well-conserved theatre with seven rows of boxes.²⁴ Like any other well-educated French gentleman, Villages was familiar with the theatre, not only in his native country but also in Malta. Having spent a number of years on the island, he had surely witnessed the enthusiasm for the theatre during the eighteenth century. Following the decision of Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena²⁵ to have a theatre constructed for the honest entertainment of the knights and of the Maltese, Malta was endowed with a theatre with four rows of boxes, a moderately deep stage, without any passageway, ideal for a one-scene play which does not require any machinery.²⁶ The young knights themselves were divided in two theatrical groups: the French staged comedies whereas the Italian knights, made up of good musicians, preferred the opera. Theatre life in Malta attracted travellers and Roland de la Platière describes it thus:

The knights play comedies on a big stage, in a rather pretty hall, furnished with four rows of boxes. They represent French and Italian plays; the latter are badly rendered because there are few good actors. They play female roles but their black chin and husky voice give them away and bestow on them, as on actors of the same genre in Italy, a caricatural look.²⁷

²² Ibid. *Je voulus essayer moi-même l'effet de cette vapeur. Je me baissai et à environ dix-huit pouces du sol de la grotte, je sentis une odeur horrible mêlée de souffre et de boue pourrie; je n'eus pas resté une minute dans cette situation que j'eus beaucoup de peine à respirer et je fus saisi d'un mal à la tête très violent; je sortis bien vite et l'air le dissipa peu à peu.*

²³ Ibid., f. 64. *Je ne pris aucun plaisir à voir toutes ces masures.*

²⁴ Ibid., f. 67.

²⁵ Elected grand master on 19 June 1722, Manoel de Vilhena died on 12 December 1736, aged 76. The construction of the theatre in Valletta was undertaken on 20 March 1731 and it was completed in ten months.

²⁶ See Claire-Eliane Engel, *Histoire de l'Ordre de Malte*, Switzerland, 1968, p. 274.

²⁷ Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, *Lettres écrites de Suisse, d'Italie, de Sicile et de Malte, Par M***, avocat en Parlement, de plusieurs académies de France, et des Arcades de Rome, A Mlle ***, à Paris, en 1776, 1777 et 1778*, Amsterdam, 1780, vol. 3, p. 78. This French traveller visited Malta in 1776. *Les chevaliers jouent la comédie sur un grand théâtre, dans une assez jolie salle, garnie de quatre rangs de loges ... Ils donnent des pièces françaises et italiennes; celles-ci réussissent mal parce qu'il y a peu de bons acteurs pour les bien rendre. Ils font les rôles des femmes; mais le menton noir et la voix rauque les décèlent et leur donnent, comme aux acteurs du même genre en Italie, un air de caricature.*

Villages had a similar experience during his visit to Izmir in 1773, where he was taken to a *cazin* with a small *salle de spectacle* where French businessmen staged comedies. There were no women and their role was played by young people.²⁸ The French also developed a subtle linguistic distinction evolving round the theatre: the *salle de spectacle* designated the internal space where representations were held, whereas the word *théâtre* was employed to denote the theatre building. During the eighteenth century, the theatre was no longer reserved to courts but it became an art of the city and in France, it was turned into a space where society and its problems were staged.

In spite of the enthusiasm of the French for the theatre, it was in Italy that the first theatres were constructed, when dramatic interpretations gave place to the baroque exuberance of the opera. Born in the princely courts of Florence and Rome, the opera had, in the Republic of Venice as from 1637, its first paying theatre, contemptuously called *del soldo*, with its oval hall and floors of overlaying boxes.²⁹ A century later, the same plan was adopted in the opera house of Lyon, built by Jacques-Germain Soufflot in 1754. Living in an age in which the theatre occupied a very important place in the social and intellectual life, the French gentleman was determined to visit the opera hall in Naples at all costs: he deemed it very beautiful, although in May 1767 he writes with regret:

I did not see it lit up, as the theatre group was on holiday. I was surprised with its stretch. There are several rows of boxes and one can see the stage very well; it is not the same as with our *salles de spectacles*; ours are too elongated whereas these are more circular. The stage is of a huge scale: it can hold 80 horses. It is a place worth the curiosity of a foreigner, especially when there are representations, because Naples is swarming with excellent musicians.³⁰

Being highly familiar with this culture, Villages reported in his logbooks anything related to the theatre: at the Museum of Portici, he noticed the theatre tickets in ivory, having on them a number indicating the box, and other similar ones in the form of geese.³¹

²⁸ NLM, Libr. 480, f. 335.

²⁹ See *Dictionnaire européen*, p. 1191.

³⁰ NLM, Libr. 480, f. 55. *La salle de l'opéra est très belle. Je ne l'ai point vue illuminée, le théâtre étant en vacances. J'ai été surpris de son étendue: il y a sept rangs de loges et on voit très bien la scène, de chacune. Il n'en est pas de même dans nos salles de spectacle parce qu'elles sont trop longues, au lieu que celle-ci est plus ronde. La scène est d'une grandeur immense: 80 chevaux y sont évolués. C'est un lieu digne de la curiosité de l'étranger surtout lorsqu'on y représente, car Naples fourmille d'excellents musiciens.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

The advent of museums

If the theatre struck Villages, so did museums, which were another eighteenth-century phenomenon. It was during this period that the three criteria which transformed a collection into a museum were elaborated: permanence and indivisibility – the collection had to belong to an established entity such as a State, town, church, or university; it had to serve a public purpose – the collection had to be accessible to the public to be viewed or studied, and spatiality – a museum had to have its own territory. Towards the end of the Age of Enlightenment, a Europe of museums, endowed with the responsibility of protecting the works conserved, was formed: Italy boasted Rome with its Capitol museum and the museums of the Vatican; Naples and the Pinacoteca of Capodimonte together with the Portici museum; the Uffizi gallery in Florence; the Ambrosiana art gallery in Milan; Venice; Turin and the archaeological museums in Urbino. Germany took pride in the towns of Dresden, Munich, Mannheim, and Dusseldorf whereas the reality in France was quite contrasting: until the opening of the Louvre in 1793, France had only a few provincial museums – Arles exhibited antique artefacts, whereas Dijon had a museum of design founded in 1766.³²

Although this interest in museums started to manifest itself towards the end of the fifteenth century, it is around 1750 that a structure was formed, thus transforming the private status, confidentiality, and randomness in organization of certain collections into museums, responsible for the safeguarding of the local heritage. In such a spirit, the museum of Portici was created to exhibit the archaeological discoveries, while preventing visitors from taking them away. Villages admired the rather well-conserved colours of the paintings found during the excavations and noted the effort done to allow travellers to enjoy this heritage: ‘They were forced to see the stone to be able to carry away the painting.’³³

Paintings in art galleries became models to be imitated whereas the *naturalia* and *artificialia*, familiar or exotic products of nature, objects and instruments made or invented by man, together with curiosities of any kind, were added to collections for the general interest. When the *Caméléon* moored at Leghorn in 1768, Villages disembarked to visit the artistic treasures of Florence, where he spent two days. Villages goes round the town where ‘a connoisseur can enjoy a delicious pleasure’.³⁴ In the Gallery of the Grand Dukes, he noticed a multitude of statues made of beautiful black, white, and yellowish marble³⁵ whereas in the *chambre des arts*,

³² See *Dictionnaire européen*, p. 859–64.

³³ NLM, Libr. 480, f. 67. *On a été obligé de scier les pierres pour pouvoir enlever les peintures.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 133. *Un connoisseur peut y jouir d'un plaisir délicieux.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 134.

works in ivory, masterpieces of skill and patience, together with cabinets made from precious wood, decorated with columns of oriental alabaster, and bas-reliefs in ivory, of inestimable work, were exhibited and appreciated. A particular cabinet with lapis lazuli columns enriched with precious stones, together with capitals and mouldings in gold, decorated with bas-reliefs of the same metal, attracted Villages' attention who pays tribute to its maker, the famous Flemish-born Italian sculptor Jean de Boulogne also known as Giambologna.³⁶

Antique statues, paintings and a thousand other curious objects fine-tuned the French officer's artistic knowledge. When in 1767, Villages visited the Portici museum and admired all the rarities of Pompeii and Herculaneum placed in several chambers forming part of the royal apartments. He states: 'I cannot go into details of all that I have seen because of the very short time I took in visiting it.'³⁷ He did, however, give a systematic description of the museum, guiding the reader through a quick tour of the galleries. As an informed visitor, he observed, compared, and judged: an old tripod stand in bronze, supported by three satyrs, merits this judgment: 'It seems to me that it deserves all its praises.'³⁸ The cult of Priapus also impressed the visitor: various figurines representing this deity, among which one of the greatest beauty, were exhibited in the museum; charms of this deity adorned with small bells or wings abounded and one could also find an earthen vase from which women wanting to conceive would drink the liquid gathered from the well-pronounced attribute of the statue.³⁹

In Florence, among the *artificialia*, Villages' sensitive personality was struck by two machines of diabolical invention, one of which was used during the troubled times of the Republic. The French officer speaks of a kind of lantern to which was attached a dagger, opened by a spring when the person recognized in the lantern's light proved to be the enemy. The second item described was made up of four pistols bound together in the form of a hat. This treacherous invention was then covered with a true hat and carried on the arm, to be used mercilessly when one greeted the enemy. Villages tries to analyse the origin of such inventions: it was only the demon of civil war that could give rise to such hatred, whereas an armour of a king, whose use Villages prefers not to describe, owed its creation to the demon of jealousy and suspicion.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., f. 138. Giambologna, born as Jean Boulogne (1529 – 13 August 1608), was known for his marble and bronze statuary in a late Renaissance or Mannerist style.

³⁷ Ibid., f. 64. *Je ne pourrai pas entrer dans un détail bien circonstancié de tout ce que j'ai vu à cause du peu de temps que j'ai eu à le parcourir.*

³⁸ Ibid., f. 65. *Il m'a paru mériter tous les éloges qu'on en fait.*

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., f. 136.

Ugliness and beauty

Betrayal and death led Villages to the description of another curious exhibit: hideous wax models which made him reveal his disgust and terror in front of the ravages of death. The French traveller gives the following description:

There are two niches walled by glass: in one niche all the stages of putrefaction are represented, in such an authentic way that one feels appalled. In the other, the plague is realistically represented. One finds piles of corpses, heaped on each other. The hideous image of death is repeated with variety and energy. These two admirable pieces belong to Gaetano Giulio Zumbo who has excelled in this disgusting branch. When one closely examines these scenes, one needs to constantly remind oneself that they are just wax models. The subjects they represent are so true that they even seem to act on the sense of smell. On a table in the middle of this room is a man's head, in the same style. The skin is removed on one side and one can see the brain; one can make out every muscle, every nerve, and the eye can follow the veins even in their tiniest ramifications.⁴¹

As a rational man, Villages did his utmost to fight auto-suggestion while conveying the exceptional realism of the artist's works.

The second half of the eighteenth century was also marked with a debate about how to organize and present artefacts. Catalogues were prepared to guide visitors: the century of Enlightenment invented a simple guide, easy to carry and to consult. Villages would have liked to be enclosed for a month at the royal house of Capodimonte to enjoy the paintings exhibited. Among the paintings that struck him most, he pointed out a *Danae* by Titian, a *Mary Magdalene* by Guido Reni and a *Venus*, each painting estimated at 40,000 *écus*. Villages, well-versed with the commercial strategy, declares: 'They have blown up the value of these masterpieces to increase their esteem, but nonetheless their beauty is felt even by those who are not well-versed with paintings.'⁴² During the eighteenth century, mixing schools of

⁴¹ Ibid., f. 65. f. 135–6. At the service of the Grand Duke Cosimo III de Medici from February 1691 to April 1695, Zumbo made four works illustrating various stages of the decomposition of the human cadaver: *Corruption I* or *The Triumph of Time* and *Pestilence* for the Grand Prince Ferdinando de Medici, son of Cosimo III, while for Cosimo he sculpted *Corruption II* or *The Sepulchre* or *Vanity of human greatness* and *The Consequences of Syphilis*, nowadays conserved at the *Museo della Specola* in Florence. Moreover, Florence still conserves the model of the skinned head. *Il y a encore deux niches fermées par une glace, dans l'une sont représentés en cire tous les degrés de la putréfaction, mais dans une si grande vérité que la nature en est révoltée, dans l'autre est représentée une peste digne de son pendant. L'on y voit des monceaux de cadavres entassés les uns sur les autres; l'image affreuse de la mort y est répétée avec autant de variété que d'énergie. Ces deux morceaux admirables dans leur genre, sont d'un Sicilien nommé Gaetano Julio Zumbo, qui a excellé dans cette partie si dégoûtante. Lorsqu'on examine ces tableaux, on a besoin de se rappeler à chaque instant que c'est de la cire; les sujets qu'ils représentent sont rendus avec tant de vérité qu'ils semblent faire illusion sur l'odorat même. L'on voit encore sur une table de cette chambre une tête d'homme dans le même genre. La peau, qui est enlevée d'un côté, laisse voir à découvert l'intérieur du cerveau; on y distingue chaque muscle, les nerfs les plus déliés, et l'œil peut y suivre les veines jusque dans leurs plus petites ramifications.*

⁴² Ibid., f. 55. *On exagère pour donner une idée plus relevée de ces chefs d'œuvre, mais il n'en est pas moins vrai que la beauté s'en fait sentir même à ceux qui se connaissent le moins en peinture.*

painting was not the result of the inability to classify genres but rather a conscious choice: different paintings were placed next to one another to delight the amateur by proposing an amusing sight of a variety of subjects and styles; this was also useful to artists who could observe an exemplary school of art or the perfection of different schools; on a broader scale, this attempt was carried out to strengthen the awareness of a cultural and national identity.⁴³ Being a very methodical gentleman, Villages was against haphazard displays and confusion, which might have been detrimental to an artist's reputation and he clearly manifests his desire: 'I would like to see a bit more order in the galleries of Capodimonte, for the complete satisfaction of visitors: one has placed the most famous masterpieces alongside with the poorest painting.'⁴⁴ For Villages, a sense of order generated appreciation, as one could calmly enjoy a work of art, while assimilating its details which made it evermore precious and unique.

If the representation of death struck the French visitor, Villages was also sensitive to beauty: according to the eighteenth-century French painter, master of still-life, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, 'The presence of beauty inspires love as naturally as ice or fire generate the ideas of cold or heat [...] Essentially, beauty is a quality which acts mechanically on the human mind through the intervention of the senses.'⁴⁵ Beauty impressed Villages in various forms: at the famous St Martin's charterhouse, with its breathtaking view, what struck him most among the various treasures of the church was a golden monstrance, 2.5 feet high, decorated with precious stones. Villages felt at a loss about what to admire most: whether the richness of the work or the ability of the worker.⁴⁶ As in all Italian churches, the French visitor found some good paintings and, in the room of the prior, he came across one of a small crucifix. According to the Carthusian brother who accompanied Villages, it was a replica of the famous crucifix Michelangelo painted after a crucified man but Villages frankly states: 'This is an absurd tale.'⁴⁷

At the Gallery of the Grand Dukes, artistic beauty took hold of Villages:

One cannot see anything more pleasant than the *Venus* of Titian, his masterpiece: it depicts a naked woman lying on a mattress of white silk. In her right hand she is holding a crown of flowers; her left hand, lying negligently along her body, covers the charms that the spectator can only imagine; a small spaniel is lying at her feet and in the background a woman is kneeling down looking for

⁴³ See *Dictionnaire européen*, p. 386.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 56. *Je voudrais, pour la satisfaction des étrangers, qu'il régnât un peu plus d'ordre dans les Galeries de Capodimonte: on a mis les chefs d'œuvre des plus fameux artistes à côté du tableau le plus faible.*

⁴⁵ See *Dictionnaire européen*, p. 177.

⁴⁶ NLM, Libr. 480, f. 56.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 57. *Le frère chartreux nous a dit être une copie de ce fameux crucifix que Michel-Ange peignit d'après un homme crucifié, ce qui est un conte absurde.*

something in a chest; the carnation is of the greatest beauty, but who can well describe the look and expression that the painter has put in the eyes and in the features of this head? One must not be a connoisseur to be touched by the beauty of this painting. They say that it is the portrait of one of Titian's mistresses.⁴⁸

This seemingly innocuous comment will lead Villages to pass a judgment in a light but meaningful manner:

Above this Venus is another Venus by the same painter, but the beauty of this painting has nothing to do with the beauty of the other. They say that Titian wanted to paint his wife in the latter. If this is the case, one can say that he has very well illustrated the difference between marriage and love.⁴⁹

However, it was the famous Venus de Medici that surpassed all sense of beauty and Villages immortalized the sensual pleasure it evokes:

This statue, a precious remain of antiquity, is the masterpiece of sculpture. It is made of white marble with a very fine grain, but a little yellowish by time. It is slightly taller than five feet; Venus is on a conch, besides her is a dolphin, head downwards with its tail in the air and two small cupids in front. This statue is a model for the beauty of contours and proportions. On seeing it, one says that the marble is breathing, and in reality, one would be tempted to desire it.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Archeological discoveries, natural phenomena, theatre, museums, artistic beauty: nothing escapes Villages' keen sense of observation. A worthy son of the eighteenth century, he did not disdain adventure and discovery and he eagerly profited of any occasion presented to broaden his cultural and practical knowledge. Endowed with curiosity, ambition, and determination, Jean-François de Villages eventually took leave of the French marine to pursue a career within the Order of St John, where

⁴⁸ Ibid., f. 137. *On ne peut rien voir de plus agréable que ce tableau, qui passe avec raison pour le chef d'œuvre de Titien. Il représente une jeune femme entièrement nue et étendue sur un matelas de satin blanc. De la main droite elle tient une couronne de fleurs. Sa main gauche étendue négligemment tout le long du corps va couvrir des charmes que le spectateur est réduit à imaginer. A ses pieds est couché un petit épagneul, et dans le fond du tableau est une femme à genoux qui paraît chercher quelque chose dans un coffre. La carnation est de la plus grande beauté mais qui pourrait bien décrire l'air et l'expression que le peintre a mis dans les yeux et dans tous les traits de cette tête? Il n'est pas nécessaire d'être connoisseur pour être touché de la beauté de ce tableau. On prétend que c'est le portrait d'une maîtresse de Titien.*

⁴⁹ Ibid. *Au-dessus de cette Vénus est une autre Vénus du même peintre, mais il s'en faut bien que ce tableau n'approche de la beauté de l'autre. On dit que c'est sa femme que le Titien a voulu peindre dans ce dernier. Si cela est, on peut dire qu'il a très bien marqué la différence de l'hymen à l'amour.*

⁵⁰ Ibid., f. 138. *Sa hauteur est d'un peu plus de 5 pieds. Elle est posée sur une conque marine. A côté d'elle est un dauphin la tête en bas et la queue en haut, et au devant sont deux petits amours. Cette statue est un modèle pour la beauté des contours et des proportions. A la voir, on dirait que le marbre respire, et en vérité, on serait tenté de le désirer.*

he made his profession as a knight on 30 November 1783.⁵¹ He was made captain of the galley *La Vittoria* in 1784, went corsairing⁵² and did his utmost to obtain a commandery. Villages died in Port-au-Prince in 1791,⁵³ a commander of a fleet, at the age of 49.

⁵¹ NLM, AOM 587, f. 246 v.

⁵² NLM, Libr 818, vol. II, f. 71 *et seq.*

⁵³ C.E. Engel, *Les chevaliers de Malte*, Paris, 1972, p. 103–04.