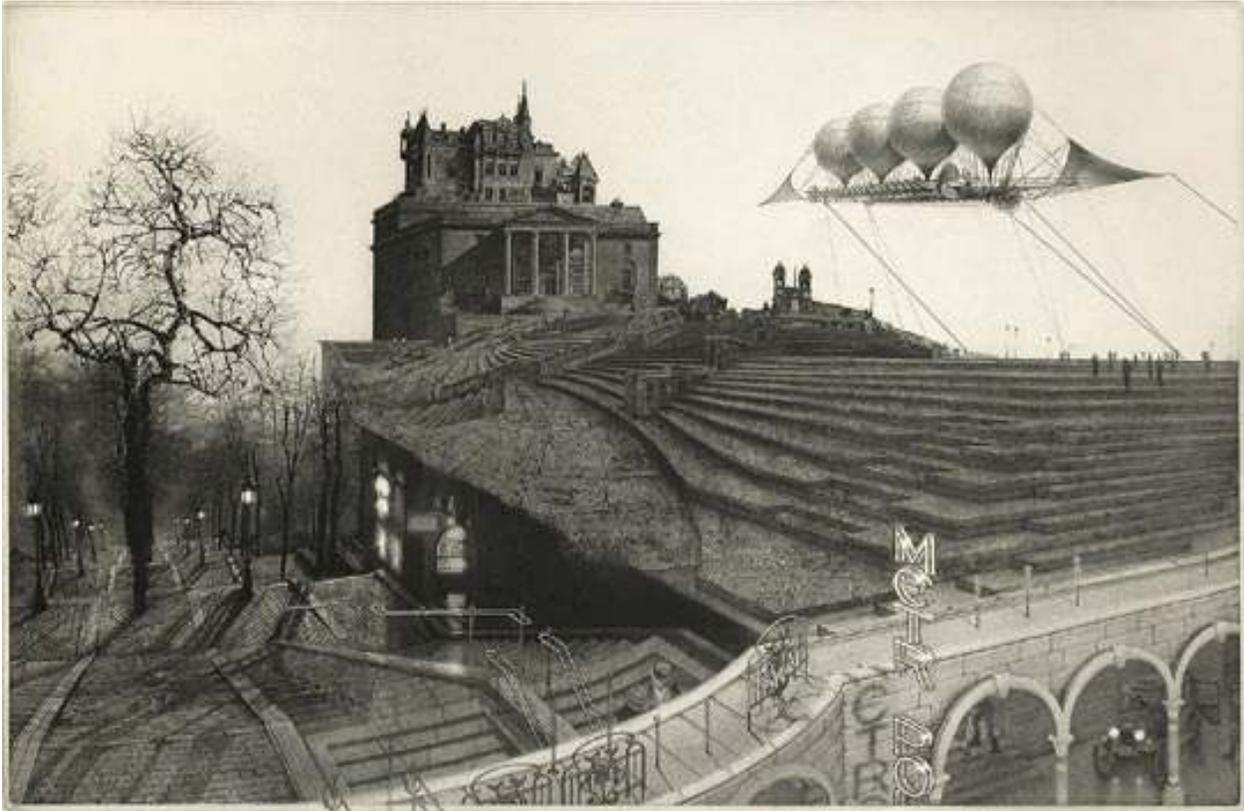


PETER MILTON



Notes on: *Hidden Cities II: Embarkation for Cythera*

A central element in my 1975 *Daylilies* was taken from an anonymous nineteenth century photograph of a strolling holiday crowd which has come to see a dirigible. For *Daylilies* I thought the dirigible was too quaint and never included it— the crowd, deprived of purpose, began to merge with the shadows of other figures disappearing over the horizon. The figures took on an air of drifting and melancholy which evoked my identification with them.

Twenty-nine years later I have returned to my mysterious crowd, and I have restored their airship to them. But this time the airship has become a spectacle of such majestic buoyancy that it must be tied down. I imagine it moored to take on passengers. The mooring took me down a long line of associations. From the idea of a voyage, I went to Antoine Watteau's painting, *The Embarkation for Cythera*, then to Cythera,

Aphrodite's mythic island sanctuary of "*luxe, calme et volupté*," back to Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, and finally to the concept of beauty itself, a notion so sadly neglected in the contemporary aesthetic canon, that the poignancy haunting Watteau's image seems to have been put their from the start, just waiting until the present for the painting to blossom into its full expression of loss.

The original impulse for this image came from my lifelong obsession with space and urban immensities. The two core inspirations are both European cityscapes. The left is a long descent, improvised from the steps of Montmartre in Paris. The right is a long ascent, improvised from the Spanish Steps in Rome.

Large spaces have such a palpable living presence that I decided to eliminate the competing presence of central figures altogether. The human figure remains in small details—peering, lurking, disappearing. But there is the suggestion of a whole population below. There is a city inside the city, unobserved.

SUBTEXTS AND DIVERSIONS

The Buildings. On top, a 19th century villa in Dresden which survived the 1945 fire bombing. Underneath, a recreation of 16th century building by Antonio Palladio. At the far top of the Spanish Steps, the Trinità dei Monti.

METR POL. A subway? A cinema? The sign has lost its "O;" There are *Art Nouveau* fragments of the Paris Metro work of Hector Guimard.

The Taxi. The same cab from *The Ministry* of the ill-fated ride of Marcel Proust and James Joyce. Now there are other goings-on.

The Tree. Mabery Street in Santa Monica, my daily winter walk.

The Café. On the Montmartre steps. I call it "*d'Orfée*," or the Orpheus Café. Orpheus can only bring Eurydice out of Hades if she follows behind him and he doesn't look back. Here, there's a woman who looks back.

The Airship. Taken from a 1850 drawing of an "aerostatic locomotive" by Petin. It had moveable louvers, steam-driven propellers and was hydrogen filled. It was never built.

The Embarkation for Cythera. Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting can be viewed at the **Web Gallery of Art** (<http://www.wga.hu>).

The Title: *Hidden Cities*. A chapter heading from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.
Calvino's persuasive sense of the fantastic gives me permission to shrug aside the inhibiting dictum of my teacher, Josef Albers—"Boy, there are a hundred wrong solutions to an esthetic problem. And only one right one."

Etching and engraving on Hahnemuhle paper. Image size: 24"x37", Paper size: 32"x46".
Edition size: 140.

Cities and Memories

When a man rides a long time through wild regions he feels the desire for a city. Finally he comes to Isidora, a city where the buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells, where perfect telescopes and violins are made, where the foreigner hesitating between two women always encounters a third, where cockfights degenerate into bloody brawls among the bettors. He was thinking of all of these things when he desired a city. Isidora, therefore, is the city of his dreams: with one difference. The dreamed-of city contained him as a young man; he arrives at Isidora in his old age. In the square there is a wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by; he is seated in a row with them. Desires are already memories.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*. Chapter 1:2