A disheartened painter gives the world the telegraph

In 1982, a painting called *The Gallery of the Louvre* was purchased by a museum in Chicago for $3,250,000 ï the highest sum ever paid until then for a work by an American artist. And that artist was Samuel Finley Breese Morse (April 27, 1791 ï April 2, 1872). This is one of many fascinating facts I learned by reading a recent book entitled *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* by historian David McCullough (Reference 1). The significant work has recently come to the publicôs attention because it has been put on public display at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, for a year through July 8, 2012.

Americans travel to Paris for culture and education

The book starts in the early 1800s when America had almost nothing in the way of an artistic tradition, no medical schools and no art museums to speak of. Even before steamships made it relatively easy to get across the ocean, some adventurous young Americans ï artists, writers, doctors, politicians, architects and others of high aspiration ï took month-long sailboat passages to go to Paris, which then was the world center of culture, art and medical science. The book tells the story of a number of such people who made this journey and then returned to make a large impact on American society, and among them is Samuel Morse.

Within his family, he was called ñFinleyò, and his first great love was painting. He was in the very first wave of talented, aspiring Americans bound for Paris, which by the 1830s had become steadily increasing numbers. They were not in any diplomatic or official capacity such as been

Benjamin Franklin, John Adams or Thomas Jefferson. Instead, they were ambitious to excel in work important to them. They were headed to Paris with the ambition to learn, live and work in the company of kindred spirits, all inspired by great teachers and in a vibrant atmosphere of culture far beyond anything available in the United States. They saw Paris as essential to achieving that dream, although there was also the possibility of ña little pleasure concealed in the bottom of the cup.ò

Even someone as accomplished as Morse deemed Paris essential. He began painting during his college years at Yale, after which he went to London to study art. He became so proficient that at age 28 he was commissioned to paint a portrait of President James Monroe; soon thereafter, in 1825, the City of New York chose him to paint a full-length portrait of Lafayette. The friendship he struck up then with this Frenchman, who was a key general in the American Revolutionary War, would later serve him well during his time in Paris. He was also instrumental in founding the National Academy of the Arts of Design in New York and became its first president. Despite these accomplishments, Morse felt compelled to go to Paris because, ñmy education as a painter is incomplete without it.ò He was weary of doing portraits and was determined to move beyond that, to become a history painter.

He departed for Paris in November 1829, having just suffered the sudden death of his wife, and on his passport he listed his occupation as ñhistorical painterò.

An expensive adventure

It wasnôt until 1838 that steam-powered ships crossed the Atlantic, so these adventurous Americans traveled by sailing ship. One could hope to make the passage in three weeks, but a month to six weeks was more likely. Further, there were no regular passenger ships. They booked passage on a packet, a cargo ship that took on passengers, but even the most expensive accommodations were far from luxurious: cramped quarters, little or no privacy, dismal food and plenty of unrelieved monotony – along with the ever-present prospect of going to the bottom. The most desirable berths with the least motion were near the middle of the ship. Fare from the American east coast to Le Harve was expensive, near $140.

After his arrival in Paris, Morse travelled around Europe to examine in person the great works of art. He returned to Paris in September 1831 ready to take up his most ambitious project ever: a giant interior view of the Louvre. The canvas for this technical masterpiece was quite large at 6 x 9 feet. He wanted to reproduce a sampling of what he considered the worldôs greatest works of art, in total 38 paintings. His goal was to bring these masterworks of European art home to his own people who, because of the limited trans-Atlantic travel at that time, had little exposure to the great art of Europe. It was his own imaginary museum, which he would take on tour back in the US.

No American prior to Morse had set himself so great and difficult a Paris subject. He took the elegant Salon Carre, the heart of the Louvreôs picture galleries, and redesigned it to his own liking. He selected works from the museumôs collection and arranged them as he saw fit. This in itself was an enormously ambitious undertaking, meaning walking through the Louvre for weeks to select among the 1250 paintings and then decide how to arrange them. He chose mostly 16th and 17th century European masterworks from the Italian Renaissance, works he loved by artists he admired, but also works he felt his fellow Americans should know and learn to appreciate.

Each and every one of the 38 pictures by 22 artists in his painting had to be copied painstakingly so it had the exact look of that particular artist. The largest painting in the Morseôs personal arrangement was also the largest painting in the Louvre, *The Marriage at Cana* by Veronese. To create an accurately foreshortened version of so complicated a painting was in itself a tour de force (see the large painting on the far left). Also, can you spot the miniature of the *Mona Lisa*?

Morse worked from a tall, moveable scaffold of his own design, which he shifted from point to point in the galleries to copy his chosen subjects, some of which were hung quite high. He worked seven days a week from 9 a.m. until just before 4 p.m. when the guards closed the museum. He even continued working through the 1832 cholera epidemic in Paris which left 18,000 dead in six monthôs time. Towards the end of that year he left Paris with the work unfinished. While at the Louvre he concentrated on the replica paintings themselves; later on in the US he added the frames and the human figures, including himself in the center, giving instructions to an attractive young art student, presumably his daughter Susan Walker Morse.

Disappointing reception

He sailed back on October 6 with *The Gallery of the Louvre* stowed securely belowdecks. Besides the painting, though, he brought back something of more importance with him – an idea inspired by a system used outside Paris to send overland messages using mechanical arms from atop tall towers spaced six miles apart and read by telescope (and only in good weather). The word ñtelegraphò first came into use for this system.

Back in New York, by the summer of 1833 Morse had put the final touches on *The Gallery of the Louvre*, and in an effort to educate his American audience he also published the *Descriptive Catalogue of the Pictures from the Most Celebrated Masters, Copied into the ñGallery of the Louvreò*. This massive painting went on public view at a large bookstore in New York, and admission to see it cost $0.25. It was highly praised by critics and a few connoisseurs, but this type of picture had little narrative interest and was poorly received by the public. Crushed by the response, he sold the painting and its frame to G. H. Clarke, a wealthy New York landowner, for $1300; Morse had hoped to get $2500.

During his subsequent time in New York, to earn money he took on a position as professor of art at New York University. For a long time, though, his greatest single ambition was to paint a historic scene for the Rotunda of the Capital in Washington. This would be his crowning glory as a history painter and also earn him $10,000. In 1834, he started to lobby his influential friends for this commission, but he also got involved in an anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic movement to ñpreserve the American way of lifeò. He argued that monarchy and Catholicism were inseparable and unacceptable if democracy were to survive.

Focus turned from art to the telegraph

When word reached Morse that he had not been chosen to paint one of the panels at the Capital, his world collapsed. It is speculated that Morse himself had inflicted the damage on his reputation with the open intolerance of his anti-Catholic newspaper essays and an ill-advised dabble in politics. He considered this the ultimate defeat of his life as an artist. As a result, he gave up painting entirely. The thing to which he then turned his undivided attention was the telegraph – which he likely would not have invented had he continued to paint. This later chapter of Morseôs

life, including his struggles to obtain patents and recognition, is also examined in McCulloughôs book, which many of you might find as fascinating as did I. – Paul, HB9DST

References:

1. David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris*, Simon & Schuster, 2011, ISBN 978-1416571766.

2. David McCullough, ñReversal of Fortuneò, *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2011, pgs 80 - 88.

3. www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2011/morse/morseinfo.pdf (details about the painting *The Gallery of the Louvre* including a key to all the works of art Morse selected to include in his)

4. An audio interview with David McCullough about the painting by National Public Radio can be heard at http://www.npr.org/2011/07/03/137472386/the-best-of-the-louvre-on-a-single-canvas