



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Capital
Eateries and Museums (I)**

Capitol Hill: Eateries and Museums

March 31, 2005

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, who is on the streets around the nation's capital. I made an attempt to visit some of Washington, DC's museums this week. I thought the time and climate would be ideal for avoiding crowds: rain, middle of the week, non-tourist season. So off I went into the District...to encounter thousands of children.

Tiny humans. Masses of them. Corner to corner. They were oblivious to the elements and environment. Wet from a steady downpour, they walked across intersections as if they were passing across their lawns at home. They blocked the titans of commerce and politics from conducting transactions. Coca-Cola trucks were stranded. Black limousines idled, waiting for seemingly endless lines of tiny tots to migrate to a destination completely unknown to their small brains: the next museum.

Holding one another's hands, they formed inseparable chains, linking themselves to a nearby Smithsonian. It was an amazing scene: They inundated street crossings and took-over sidewalks. It was an invasion of hordes of little folks who had absolutely no idea why they were there in the first place.

Their weandrings led me to question: Why were all these children congesting the National Mall? I had forgotten the season. Thanks to their first grade teachers, who had applied for a taxpayer-subsidized program to get out of Detroit for a few days, they had invaded the nation's capital for the spring break.

What should I do? Sulk back to Virginia? Meander away from the crowds, searching for a museum not yet invaded by hundreds of kids on a holiday? Hm. A possible solution. I had not conducted research recently on Hennessy XO. Problem solved. Just find a watering hole that sold the stuff. What is more, my day suddenly became tax-deductible.

Granted, it was only 11 A.M., a bit early for imbibing, even for economic research. No matter, the XO could follow a noon meal. The problem was the selection of the restaurant. I had many choices. DC has scores of fine dining rooms, and I was tempted to go the Prime Rib, my sentimental favorite. The Capitol Grille was popular, and also one of my favorites.

I had heard about the Monocle, a place near Capitol Hill and one supposedly frequented by famous politicians and powerful hangers-on, such as lobbyists and consultants. There I went. Here is what happened.

A Fine Restaurant

If you are in the nation's capital, I recommend you go to the Monocle for a meal. The restaurant serves fine food, and the prices are reasonable. After I had finished my meal, I had these conversations with the bartender and a bar patron.

- Bartender, “Sir, I hope you enjoyed your meal. Can I get you anything else?”
- Reporter, “Yes, a Hennessy XO.”
- Bartender, who apparently thought “anything else” was coffee, replied, “Eh...sure. Hm. Well, where is it?” As he turned his attention to the bottles at the bar.

The bar patron sitting next to me was a beltway insider, a retired attorney who had worked for many years as chief counsel for a House committee. I knew he was a privileged person at the Monocle because (I discovered later) his position at the bar was reserved for him alone. Status on Capitol Hill: A reserved stool at a lunch-time bar. We talked a bit, and he listened to the XO discussion.

- Bartender, “Sir, we don’t seem to have Hennessy XO in stock. I even checked the store room. Can I get you something else? We have quite a few other choices.”
- Reporter, “No, I’m doing research on Hennessy XO. Just some coffee. Tell me, what would you charge me if you did serve an XO?”
- “Let me check,”...as he shuffles around his cash register.....Then he responds, “It would be \$19.00 sir.”
- “Nineteen dollars! Are you serious?”
- “Sorry. Too high?”
- “Give me a case of the stuff!”
- “Ah. Too low! Well, I’m sort of winging it with the price, but...”
- Bar patron, “No buts about it. This place charges reasonable prices. Try the steak here. A good deal and not very expensive.”
- Reporter, “I will, and I’ll be back.”

Amazing. Nineteen dollars. My accountant, leery of my tax deductions on XO research, would be impressed. And off I went to a nearby museum exhibit, one I suspected would be free of children: An exhibit of Toulouse-Latrec’s paintings of Montmartre.

What child could possibly want to see paintings of loose women and bullfighters dancing on Paris streets? As it turned out, the answer was that no children were in attendance, but the place was so packed with adults it was difficult to get an unobstructed view of his work. I wished the Toulouse-Latrec exhibit had been populated by kids. I could have looked over their heads to view his extraordinary works of art.

Two Exhibits

If you come to Washington, DC, the National Art Gallery should be on your list of places to visit. For this rainy afternoon, I was confident the museum’s East Gallery would be relatively uninhabited. As mentioned, would a teacher bring his or her students to see the kinds of works shown in Figure 1?

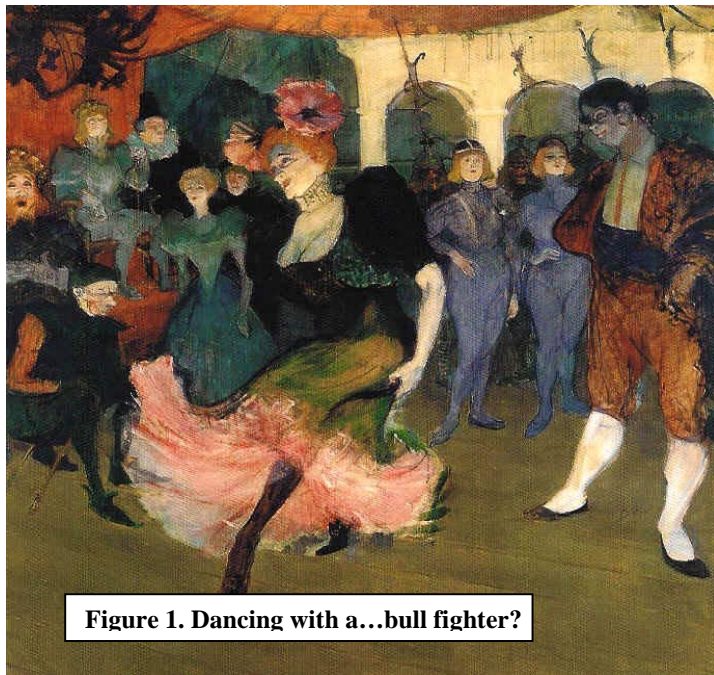


Figure 1. Dancing with a...bull fighter?

No, but the teacher would go to see them. Beautiful. Lively. A sensational exhibit. This picture was especially intriguing: A female dancer cavorting with what appears to be a bull fighter. As I viewed the picture, I wished I had finished “Art Appreciation for Dummies.” Perhaps I would have learned the allegorical significance of a bull fighter gallivanting about without his bull.

Is the look on the female dancer’s face one of joy? Is she just doing the routine for a client, trying to look happy? Or is it one of ecstasy? Primping for the bull fighter? Or dancing for the joy of dancing? The beauty of a work such as this painting

by Toulouse-Latrec is that it allows, even challenges the viewer to make his/her own interpretation of its message. After all, if Mr. Toulouse-Latrec told us what he intended the painting to mean, many of us would come away disappointed because of our artistic insensibility.

As mentioned, so many people were walking around the paintings I could not view the works. After a few minutes, I gave up. A bit dismayed, partially for not drinking an XO at the Monocle, I looked for another exhibit.



Figure 2. The image of Washington.

For most of my life, I have wanted to see an original picture of George Washington. I admit my curiosities are not in the mainstream of average curiosities. And don’t get me wrong, I’m as fond of Playboy centerfolds as the average male. Still, for many years, I have wondered what Washington actually looked like. I have read that he didn’t resemble his image on the one dollar bill (Figure 2). That he was balder, or fatter, or skinner, or less regal.

Finally, I had a chance to see for myself. The National Art Gallery had another special exhibit: the works of Gilbert Stuart and his paintings of George Washington. A childhood dream come true. So again, off I went to another part of the National Art Gallery....But soon realizing: George Washington. Easter Week. Children. History. Teachers..... Well, give it a go.

To my surprise, the exhibit room was almost empty. No children were present at the Gilbert Stuart show. There were few adults as well. George Washington, the parent of our country. No takers, to speak of.

It seems history is passe. I read recently that Harvard offers no class on the American Revolution; a regretful, amazing situation. Granted, my crabby nature is showing. As is my respect and awe for the one of the most remarkable persons this country has birthed.

On the other hand, cutting some slack here, which would you rather see? The dancers in the Toulouse-Latrec exhibit or the portraits of father George? One of which is shown in Figure 3. (I've flipped Stuart's painting 180° in order to ease the comparison to the image on the one dollar bill).

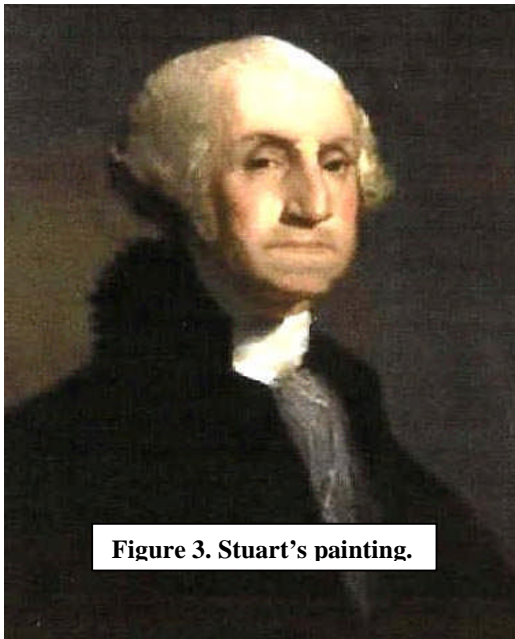


Figure 3. Stuart's painting.

I leave it to you to make your own decision. I prefer the dancer, but I'm partial to dancing and females.

To finish-up this report, let's compare Stuart's work with the picture on the one dollar bill. See any difference? Yes. The mouth looks different. The dollar bill image has been altered: George isn't hiding his false teeth. The U.S. Treasury Department has doctored its own money. I could be wrong, but I looked through Gilbert's paintings of George, and could not find an image that looked like the one-dollar bill rendition.

Stuart said, "What a shit business is this of a portrait painter; you bring him a potato and expect he will paint you a peach."¹

Don't worry, Mr. Stuart, after you are long gone, someone will change your potato into a peach. Which, as you see from the dollar bill, they did.

A rainy day on the street. Too many children. No XO. It was of no consequence. It was a fine day in a captivating city.

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¹Sourced from the exhibit.