1. Introduction

In his twenties, a young Italian man named Francesco Algarotti (1712-64) visited England twice (1734-36, 1739-40) to research further on Newton’s optics and also to search for the position where he can perform his life’s work. Those who became acquainted with Algarotti were charmed by his personality. Among them were Lord Hervey (John Hervey, 1696-1743), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), Voltaire (1694-1778) and the Marquise du Châtelet (Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelet de Brteuil, 1706-49) - the latter two, he met on his way to England.

In eighteenth-century England, the Grand Tour - sending sons to the Continent to let them see the
world - was extremely popular among the aristocracy. For Algarotti, his tour to England was a kind of Grand Tour in the opposite direction.

In 1736 he was elected as a member of the Royal Society and during his first stay in England he continued his study in optics, which was to be published in 1737 under the title of Newtonianismo per le Dame. He also had a chance to learn the concept of the English landscape gardening which was to come into fashion in the middle of the century. We can say this encounter with English aesthetics played an important role in his career. Later Algarotti was invited to the court of Frederick the Great (1712-86) of Prussia where he could finally find a satisfactory place to stay.

Between his stay in England and the one in Prussia, he had the opportunity to go to Russia. In this paper I would like to examine the significance of this voyage in 1739. It was on this occasion that Algarotti first met Prince Frederick of Prussia. But also this voyage to the East let Algarotti deepen his insights about the Eastern idea of aesthetics, which was to be the basis of his idea of art.

2. Voyage to Russia

Algarotti went on his journey to Russia with Lord Baltimore (the fifth, 1699-1751) in 1739. We can tell what the trip was like by his epistolary work, Viaggi di Russia (1764), the English translation of which was published in 1769 under the title of Letters from Count Algarotti to Lord Hervey and The Marquis Scipio Maffei. We can easily see from the English title that this work can be divided into two parts according to the recipients. The work consists of twelve letters, and the eight letters are written to Lord Hervey while the latter four are addressed to Maffei (1673-1755).

The letters to Lord Hervey were presumed to have been written in 1739 during the voyage, but those to Maffei were written in 1750-51 when Algarotti stayed at the court of Prussia (Berlin and Potsdam). In this paper, I would like to pay more attention to the ones to Hervey.

In the first letter to Hervey, Algarotti mentions about the countries such as Holland, Denmark and Sweden, located on the way from the North Sea to the Baltic Sea. For example, he noted that the houses in Holland all looked the same and the Swedish coasts seemed wilder and more naked than those in Denmark.¹

In Letter II, he wrote about the naval forces of Denmark and also of Norway. As to the naval forces, Algarotti mentions that Russia was inferior compared with the other countries:

The Russians strive however to remedy these inconveniences, as much as they can, and it may be said that they almost force nature. Every year they make expeditions up the Baltic, with squadrons of seven or eight ships full of youngmen, whom old seamen instruct; . . . (Letter III)
In the eighteenth century, especially because of the rivalry between the Bourbons and the Hapsburgs, many wars broke out in Europe. As Vice Chamberlain and Lord Privy Seal serving under King George II (1683-1760), Lord Hervey must have known the importance of diplomacy. Later, as Hervey himself could not find a favourable status for his friend, Algarotti in the political world nor at the court in England, he agreed to permit the latter’s going to Prussia to serve under Frederick II. As we have seen in his letter, Algarotti wrote about the naval forces in the northern European countries. This kind of information is of great importance when one considers international relationships in war time. Hervey must have thought that Algarotti could play an important diplomatic role between England and Prussia.

As to the forces of Russia, Algarotti further analyzes them in Letter V. In those days the forces of Prussia were something that no other nation could neglect. Nonetheless Algarotti’s observation tells us that Russia could be a potential military power:

Though Europe seems now to decree the military palm to Prussia, I doubt whether more exactness in the evolutions and other different exercises would be found at Berlin.

Certain it is, that there does not seem to be any nation fitter for war than the Russians.

Thus, if I may be allowed the expression, there is nothing farther wanting in Russia, to complete the temple of Mars, but an establishment in favour of invalid soldiers. (Letter V)

Fur from Siberia is a specialty and Russia trades with many countries, such as Sweden, Poland, France, Turkey and China. At that time, it normally took three years for a caravan to go to Peking (Beijing) and back via Siberia. Algarotti tells that in Peking the caravan people were shut up in a place just like the Dutch were in Japan. From China they bring back “tea, little gold, raw silks, old stuffs, porcelain (worst sort)” (Letter IV). As the caravan could not trade freely in the city, they were likely to get the rubbish. Algarotti tasted exquisitely well flavoured tea from China (Letter II) and as to the fine porcelain, he commented on them on his way back from Russia.

3. Way back from Russia

As is mentioned above, Algarotti first met Prince Frederick of Prussia on his way back from Russia. During his stay in Dresden, he mentioned about the fine porcelain coming from the East:

. . . to copy the old porcelain of Japan and China; the shapes of which, like the plants and animals that are brought to us from those countries, have in them a somewhat noble and exotic at the same
time. Above all, I believe that this trade, already very considerable, would become much greater still, if the Saxons applied themselves to the imitation of antiques. (Letter VIII)

This observation sounds quite interesting when considering the history of Meissen china which developed during the eighteenth century under the great influence of China and Japan (Kakiemon).

Moreover, later, during his days in the court of Prussia, Algarotti became an advisor (1742-46) to the Elector of Saxony, Augustus III (1696-1763) and helped him to enlarge the collections at his gallery, buying a lot of paintings from Italy (Canaletto, Tiziano, Veronese, Tiepolo and so on). (2)

In the last part of the last letter addressed to Lord Hervey, Algarotti mentioned about young Prince Frederick:

What shall I say to you, my Lord, of the Prince Royal, the lover and the favourite of the Muses? Several days which we passed with him, in his castle of Reinsburg, seemed to me but a few hours. He is the most intelligent and most amiable of men. Though I could notice only his private virtues, I can boldly assure you, my Lord, that the world will one day admire his royal qualifications; and that when he shall be upon the throne, he will show himself to be the greatest of Sovereigns. There is all the reason in the world to believe that he will seek out for great men, with as much eagerness as his father does for giants. (Letter VIII)

The above Letter VIII was dated from Hamburg, 30th September, while Frederick himself wrote a letter to Algarotti on 1st September:

Je n’oublierai jamais les huit jours que vous avez passes chez moi. Beaucoup d’étrangers vous ont suivi; mais aucun ne vous a valu, et aucun ne vous vaudra si tôt. (3)

Frederick really became charmed with Algarotti’s personality and we can say that his road to Prussia had already started from the first moment. After coming back to London, he stayed on Bond Street, but the next year, in 1740, he was ardently invited by Frederick succeeding his father. After leaving his home country and searching for a place in England, Algarotti finally got the social status in Prussia. Later in 1747, Frederick II (the Great) created him a count.

4. English landscape gardening and Chinese influence

Algarotti was born in Venice, so he must have already felt the winds from the East while growing up.
When he stayed in England, he learned the idea of English landscape gardening through the works of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and the new practical movements by the Earl of Burlington (3rd Earl of Richard Boyle, 1694-1753) and his circle at Chiswick.

Algarotti regards very highly the idea of English landscape gardening when analyzing the scenery on stage in his *Saggio sopra l’Opera in Musica* (1762):

> The objects I propose to the imitation of our artists, from which pleasing ideas will arise and delightful scenes may be drawn, are the gardens of that most ingenious nation; for the gardeners there are so many painters, who do not lay out their ground with the same regularity which architects observe in building houses. No. They take nature for their guide, and employ all their efforts to imitate her noble disregard of symmetric order and her fondness of variety. . . . (chapter V)\(^4\)

Here we can easily recognize that Pope’s famous phrase: “In all, let Nature never be forgot. . . . Consult the Genius of the Place in all, . . .”\(^5\)is echoed. As to the origin of this English garden style, which is clearly different from the French symmetrical style, Algarotti points out the Chinese influence:

> The English have derived their present taste in gardening from the Chinese, by which means it is their Kent, and Chambers, Brown, have so far surpassed le Notre, who, before their time, was esteemed to be the unrivalled master of the art of laying out gardens.\(^6\)

Later this Chinese taste in English gardening (culture) was to be transformed with the publication of *The Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1772) by William Chambers (1723-96).\(^7\) But here there is still a time-lag.

Because of his voyage to Russia and also because of his observation about Chinese porcelain (related with Meissen and Saxony), Algarotti can accept more easily the Eastern idea from China.

5. Concluding remarks

As I mentioned before, Algarotti’s visit to England can be regarded as his Grand Tour. On his way to England he met Voltaire and the Marquise du Châtelet, and between his two visits to England, he stayed with them to finish his work on optics. In England he found that Lord Burlington and the people had reevaluated the Italian architect, Palladio (1508-80). Algarotti learned the new trend of gardening in England, different from the French style and the Italian.

Through his voyage to Russia, he could learn more about the East, and this seems to have given him a
basis of internationalism. After coming back, he served under Frederick the Great and could have a chance to come into contact with more people coming from all over Europe.

During his stay at the court of Saxony, he introduced many Italian paintings to the Elector. Algarotti also wrote a book on arts, Saggio sopra la Pittura (1762), and advised a painter to use a tool, <camera obscura>. He is also said to have a great influence on the Italian painters, Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal, 1697-1768) and Piranesi (Giovanni Battista, 1720-78) as to the idea of <capriccio>. Algarotti, while traveling, came to understand that the aesthetics of China had an effect on European culture. Whether it is good or not for Europe, is not his question. But to some extent, he can find universal standards in Eastern aesthetics. It seems to me that for Algarotti, the question is how the standards of art can pass across the border and can be universally accepted.

Truly his voyage to Russia is a very important occasion for him and also for his later career.

Notes

* This article is based on research supported by the grant of Inoue Enryo (2003) at Toyo University.
(1) Unless otherwise specified, the reference to Viaggi di Russia is to the following edition. Francesco Algarotti, Viaggi di Russia, ed. William Spaggiari (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo, 1991). All quotations from this work are to the following English translation. Letters from Count Algarotti to Lord Hervey and The Marquis Scipio Maffei (London: Johnson & Payne, 1769).
(3) Correspondance de Frédéric Second Roi de Prusse avec le Comte Algarotti (Berlin, George Gropius, 1837), pp. 5-6.
(4) An Essay on the Opera written in Italian by Count Algarotti (Glasgow: R. Urie, 1768)
(6) An Essay on the Opera, op.cit., chapter V.
(8) Cf. An Essay on Painting written in Italian by Count Algarotti (Glasgow: R. Urie, 1764)
Algarotti and his Voyage to Russia

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Summary
A young Italian man named Francesco Algarotti visited England to research further on Newton’s optics and also to search for a satisfactory place to stay. He had the opportunity to go to Russia and this voyage to the East let him deepen his insights about the idea of aesthetics. Later he was invited to the court of Prussia, and served under Frederick II. The significance of this voyage is to be examined in this paper.

Key words : Grand Tour, Algarotti

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