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Traveler shares her insights on famous sites

By Jeremy Gulish

Jane McIntosh follows the words of Romantic poet and consummate traveler Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "The traveler sees in Rome only what he takes to Rome." What McIntosh wants those travelers to take with them is knowledge; the same knowledge that she gathered through endless hours of studying Roman history, architecture, politics and religion in Italy and at her home office in East Amwell.

She hopes that tourists' intellectual curiosity draws them to buy her self-titled audio guidebook, Jane's Smart Art Guides. Her curiosity is how her guided journey began.

"We went to Rome and didn't have a great guidebook," said McIntosh. She and her husband were at the Church of St. Maria Del Popolo in Rome. The church contains two paintings and two sculptures by Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio and by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. The lighting was dim, the font was small and worst of all, after searching through the book, there was no mention of who sculpted the statues. "This is ridiculous," she thought. "I want to know what I am looking at." Those words chimed in her head for days.

When she went along with her husband to a business trip in Belgium, she promised herself that this time she would know what she was looking at. As he did consulting during the day, she spent "hours and hours" inside Antwerp's Our Lady Cathedral. "Just for fun I started doing research," she said. It quickly became a "hobby" that got out of control.



After a few trips and a vast amount of research, she wrote a script for an audio tour. The walking tour was more than three hours long, not including an hour of background history. She was pleased with her work but thought the detail was a little overwhelming for a cathedral of its size. Just this month she put the finishing touches on shortening the tour so visitors can have a more thrifty experience. The Our Lady of Cathedral recording will be available the week of Aug. 22 for \$19.95.

After understanding Our Lady Cathedral, she endeavored to explore St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. She believed Rome to be the quintessential place to begin an understanding of history in a global sense. "The history of Rome is more layered and rich and complex and enduring than any place on earth," she said. "Getting to really know this city can take a lifetime of return visits." What she attempts to do is allow visitors the same insight that she has developed over her numerous trips and hours of searching through stacks of books.

The audio tour is split into sections beginning with a "slice of history," background context that can be listened to before reaching the site. Next is a guide to St. Peter's Square outside the cathedral. That leads to the interior, with an extensive two-and-a-half-hour tour. She puts particular emphasis on the most famed work inside the cathedral, the Pieta. The marble and granite statue shows Mary holding Christ on her lap after his crucifixion. She presents the work's rich history and suggests Michelangelo's "maternal tenderness" comes from his relationship with his abusive father. As her listener observes the piece, she explains, "Michelangelo minimized the narrative element of this Pieta, instead the virgin, with the simple gesture of her extended left hand, presents the dead Christ to the onlooker. Mary's emotion is rendered with supremely classical restraint, her meditative features frozen by grief."

For those that don't want such detail they can skip forward and use the abridged highlights tour, which cuts about 40 minutes of the monologue.

To keep costs low, McIntosh did all the recording by herself. Since she speaks Spanish, French, and Italian besides English her soft voice carries easily through the language that is often difficult due to the diction necessary to explain how the cathedral came to be. "From a strategic perspective, it is important to get as many titles as I can out quickly," she said. Though large bookstores now have large sections for audio versions of books, McIntosh would rather have her guides shelved with the travel books. She believes it is a different experience than a typical nonfiction book, since people must interact visually with their surroundings while listening.

Hopeful of the art guides' potential, McIntosh is looking to expand the guides. She has developed a Web site, www.janessmartart.com and is looking to find historical scholars to create more guides for her collection of audio tours. Through Princeton University, she has made contacts who have expertise in Venice and Paris. If the idea is well received, she plans to explore less classical locations such as architectural walking tours of major cities throughout the world. She is also working on getting the recordings translated into different languages.

Though McIntosh wants to explore the world over, she admits it is difficult to move on into different directions when she is caught up in the intellectual curiosity that drew her to places like St. Peter's. She said, "Every time I think I am close to having done Rome, I catch a toe on a corner of another layer which on peeling back reveals a whole new field of view."