Journey to the Seven Wonders

Though only one of the ancient marvels still stands, they still engage our imagination—and launch a thousand tours—more than two millennia later

BY TONY PERROTTET

VISITORS TO THE LOBBY of the Empire State Building in Midtown Manhattan are often surprised to find a series of pictorial stained-glass panels. Added in the 1960s, they were meant to link the great skyscraper to other engineering triumphs. These triumphs, however, are not the great symbols of American modernity you might expect—other massive steel-and-concrete structures like the Hoover Dam or the Panama Canal—but the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The colorful lobby paintings make no attempt at accuracy. Rather, they echo fantasies of the ancient monuments that have been current since the Renaissance—but they are mysteriously inspiring all the same: the Pyramids of Giza, the Pharos of Alexandria, the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia.

Why should a collection of monuments more than two millennia old still capture the imagination—especially when six of the seven are no longer standing?

"It's that word 'wonder,'" says David Gilman Romano, professor of classics at the University of Pennsylvania. "If you just called them the Seven Architectural Marvels, it wouldn't have the same impact." Then, too, the one that does survive—the Pyramids of Giza—is sufficiently stunning to convince us that the ancients weren't exaggerating the splendor of the other six.

It's also our passion for ordering the world. "We are living in a time very much like that of the Hellenic period," says Larissa Bonfante, professor of classics at New York University. "The Greeks loved to have things categorized—they loved anything out of the ordinary—and so do we." In our chaotic age, bombarded as we are with new technologies and rapid cultural change, we still seem to yearn for the security of mutually acknowledged "greats"—whether it be Impressionist painters, *Citizen Kane*, the Washington Monument, Cartier-Bresson photographs or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

ONE OF THE FIRST-KNOWN lists of wonders was drawn up in the third century B.C., when a Greek scholar at the Library of Alexandria, Callimachus of Cyrene (305-240 B.C.), wrote a treatise called "A collection of wonders in lands throughout the world." The essay has been lost, but his choices may have become the basis for later selections, such as the famous list attributed to the engineer Philo of Byzantium around 250 B.C. Of course, the whole idea of Seven Wonders started with antiquity's fondness for the number seven: being indivisible, it gave each of its elements equal status and so enjoyed a privileged position in numerology.

The list also reflected a shift in Western attitudes toward the world, as thinkers began to celebrate man-made creations along with those of the gods. In the wake of Alexander the Great's conquests of the Persian Empire and parts of India (334-325 B.C.), Greeks marveled at their own achievements. "Like the sun," raves Philo of the Hanging Gardens, "beauty dazzling in its brilliance."

From their inception, the ancient Wonders were also rooted in human curiosity. In fact, the sites, originally, were not called "Wonders" at all, but *theamata,* "things to be seen," preferably in person. In the Hellenic era, wealthy and erudite Greeks traveled by land and sea around the cultur-

al centers of the eastern Mediterranean, broadening their education firsthand. Although the lands conquered by Alexander the Great had dissolved into separate kingdoms by the time Philo compiled his list, they were still ruled by Greek-speaking dynasties, and while travel was not yet as safe as it would become under the Roman Empire, the network of Greek culture extended far and wide, offering an open invitation to explore.

Today one can follow the itinerary of an ancient traveler as he—a peripatetic Greek scholar of that time was almost always male—sought out the magnificent Seven. Along the route, he would find passable highway inns and cheap roadside restaurants. At the sites themselves, professional tour guides called *exegetai*, or "explainers," jostled for commissions ("Zeus protect me from your guides at Olympia!" prayed one first-century B.C. antiquarian worn down by their harangues). There were papyrus guidebooks to consult before departing and vendors with whom to haggle over souvenirs: a cheap glass vial engraved with an image of the Pharos of Alexandria has been found by archaeologists as far away as Afghanistan.

THE STATUE OF ZEUS AT OLYMPIA

DEPARTING IN THE SHADOW of the Acropolis from Athens, the traditional center of ancient learning, a scholar-tourist of 250 B.C. would likely have set off on his grand tour with a couple of servants and a pair of pack mules to carry the luggage. The first and easiest Wonder to visit was the great sculptor Phidias' (c. 485-425 B.C.) Statue of Zeus (completed around 435 B.C.) at Olympia, a religious sanctuary in southern Greece and the site of the Olympic Games. An energetic walker could cover the 210 miles in ten days. Arriving at Olympia, visitors beheld a walled enclave where a trio of Doric temples, 70 altars and hundreds of statues of past Olympic victors created a dazzling sculpture garden. The most impressive of the structures was the Temple of Zeus, built between 466 and 456 B.C. and resembling the Parthenon in Athens. Through its grand bronze doors, a constant stream of travelers passed into the flickering torchlight, there to behold a glowering, 40-foot-high, gold-and-ivory figure of the King of the Gods seated on a throne, his features framed by a leonine mane of hair.

"It seems that if Zeus were to stand up," wrote the Greek geographer Strabo, who visited the statue early in the first century B.C., "he would unroof the temple." Beyond its stunning size, viewers were struck by the majesty of the image's expression—even stray dogs were said to be cowed. The sculptor had captured both Zeus' invincible divinity and his humanity. Roman general Aemilius Paullus (c. 229-160 B.C.), an earlier visitor, "was moved to his soul, as if he had beheld the god in person," while the Greek orator Dio Chrysostom wrote that a single glimpse of the statue would make a man forget his earthly troubles.

THE COLOSSUS OF RHODES

FROM OLYMPIA, our intrepid traveler would have caught a merchant ship from the isthmus of Corinth, sailing eastward some 300 miles across the pellucid waters of the Aegean. Since there was no exclusive passenger service, one simply negotiated a price with the ship's captain and took a place on deck. One's servants would arrange the creature comforts, leaving the traveler to enjoy the view and make small talk with fellow passengers.

Arriving a few days later at their destination, the bustling island of Rhodes, the travelers would have been greeted with a breathtaking sight. There, towering majestically above the island's port, so crowded with ships' masts that it was said to resemble a field of wheat, stood a 110-foot-high Colossus—a gleaming bronze statue of the Greek sun god Helios. It was long believed that the statue straddled the harbor entrance, but modern archaeologists say this would not have been possible with the bronze-casting techniques available to the sculptor, Chares of Lindos, when he erected it between 294 and 282 B.C.

While not even a drawing of the statue survives, scholars theorize the Colossus was an upright figure holding a torch aloft in one hand not unlike the Statue of Liberty; Helios' face was quite possibly modeled after Alexander the Great's. Yet, for all its majesty, the Colossus turned out to be the most fragile Wonder of them all—standing for only 56 years before collapsing in an earthquake in 226 B.C. "Even lying on the ground, it is a marvel," wrote Roman scholar Pliny the Elder in the first century A.D. "Few people can even put their arms around the figure's thumb, and each of its fingers is larger than most statues."

THE TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS IN EPHESUS

THE COLOSSUS WOULD HAVE MADE an appropriate introduction to the opulence of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), where the Temple of Artemis mixed Oriental splendor and Hellenic artistry. Size mattered in the ancient world, and in the ostentatious port of Ephesus, citizens built their greatest temple to tower above the city skyline. Though the Parthenon of Athens was regarded as the most perfectly proportioned of all buildings, the Temple of Artemis overwhelmed it in scale. Estimates suggest the interior was about 425 feet long and 255 feet wide, making it nearly as cavernous as New York City's Grand Central Terminal. One hundred twenty-seven columns, painted in gaudy colors, supported its huge ceiling; some visitors felt lost in the dizzying forest of pillars, as imposing as sequoia trunks. Guides warned tourists not to stare at the temple's polished white-marble walls lest they be struck blind by their brilliance. Swathed in clouds of incense, a statue of the mother goddess beckoned with open arms. This was not the svelte, athletic huntress Artemis of Greek lore but a majestic, maternal creation from the East, whose multiple breasts hung like papayas from her torso. Among eunuch priests offering sacrifice at the statue's feet, silversmiths peddled souvenir miniatures of the temple and goddess for the pagan faithful. "Only in Heaven has the Sun ever looked upon its equal," gushed Greek author An-

tipater around 100 B.C.

THE MAUSOLEUM AT HALICARNASSUS

NO LESS SPLENDOR graced the Mausoleum, rising 140 feet into the air like a gigantic wedding cake above the turquoise harbor of Halicarnassus, now the modern port of Bodrum on the so-called Turkish Riviera, about 60 miles from the Colossus. Built, legend has it, around 350 B.C. for King Mausolos, the ruler of Caria, by his grief-stricken sister-wife, Artemisia, the Mausoleum was an art lover's fantasy whose tiers teemed with more than a hundred statues of heroes, kings and Amazon warriors, carved by the five greatest Greek sculptors of the day. "Even today," noted Pliny the Elder in 75 A.D., "the hands of the sculptors seem to vie with one another in artistry." The glittering confection was topped with a statue believed to be of the dead king and his wife riding a golden chariot.

THE LIGHTHOUSE OF ALEXANDRIA

SAILING SOUTH TO EGYPT, a journey of several days, travelers up to 50 miles out to sea could spot the fifth—and the only practical—ancient Wonder: the Pharos, or lighthouse, of Alexandria, whose orange flame guided ship pilots along the Nile Delta's treacherous coastline. Looming above Alexandria's busy Eastern Harbor and surrounded by palm trees and statues of the Pharaohs, the 445-foot, three-tiered limestone tower was taller than the Statue of Liberty. At its pinnacle, a giant burning brazier topped by a statue of Zeus provided a suitably theatrical arrival to the city where Europe, Africa and Asia met. Once ashore, visitors hastened to Alexandria's Great Library to observe the scientists, astronomers and geographers who labored in what amounted to the first government-funded think tank, the Mouseion. It was these learned men who had produced the lighthouse.

THE PYRAMIDS OF GIZA

EVENTUALLY, our Seven Wonders tourist would likely have torn himself away from Alexandria's pleasures to sail up the Nile and gaze upon the oldest and most impressive wonder of them all—the Pyramids of Giza, three pyramids that rise, even to this day, from the undulating sands of the Giza Plateau. (For thousands of years, the Great Pyramid of Giza was the tallest and most precise stone building in the world.) The pyramids were especially dazzling in the Greek era when they were still sheathed in white limestone and covered by hieroglyphics and graffiti, glistening brilliantly in the desert sun. Surrounding the pyramids, the remains of ancient temples dating back to the Old Kingdom—the apogee of Egyptian military power and artistic skill circa 2500 B.C.—dotted the landscape. Shaven-headed priests, acting as tour guides, pretended to translate the pyramids' hieroglyphics, which they said described the construction of the monuments, including even what the Egyptian workmen who built them, between around 2580 and 2510 B.C., ate on the job.

THE HANGING GARDENS OF BABYLON

THE FINAL SITE on our traveler's itinerary would have been the most difficult to visit. He would have had to sail to Antioch, in Syria, then follow 500 miles of desert tracks, either on horseback or by carriage, to gaze upon the gardens' splendor. Babylon, lying some 45 miles south of modern Baghdad, was once widely regarded as the most intoxicating urban center in the world. Travelers entered the city through the Ishtar Gates, inlaid with blue glazed bricks bearing images of lions, bulls and dragons, only to behold a forest of towering ziggurats, obelisks and smoking altars by the Euphrates River.

The Hanging Gardens—a rooftop paradise of sculpted terraces, shade, and perfumed flowers—rose majestically above the human sprawl, watered by a hydraulic irrigation system. ("A work of art of royal luxury . . . suspended above the heads of spectators," noted Greek engineer Philo around 250 B.C.) The gardens had been built by King Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 B.C.) for his wife, a princess from Media, a fertile kingdom by the southern Caspian Sea, who was homesick for greenery; it was said Alexander the Great gazed upon them from his deathbed in the royal palace in 323 B.C.

But much about the gardens is unknown, including their exact location. "The Hanging Gardens, by their very nature, cannot be definitively found," says Richard A. Billows, professor of history at Columbia University. "They would not leave a very clear footprint that says 'this must have been the spot.' This isn't helped by the fact that there is no clear idea of what the gardens looked like."

THOUGH ONLY ONE of the Seven Wonders survives, it and the sites of the six others still launch a thousand package tours each year. Fascination with the Pyramids of Giza is certainly understandable; even stripped of their gleaming limestone—Arab conquerors used it as building material in the Middle Ages—the pyramids' majesty, antiquity and bulk continue to astonish visitors, even if their first glimpse is from a crowded Cairo suburban highway.

But our fascination with the "missing" Wonders is harder to explain. Two of them exist only as fragments on display in museums; others have been scorched entirely from the earth. And yet, they remain curiously compelling. Phidias' Statue of Zeus at Olympia was taken to Constantinople in the fourth century A.D. and was later destroyed in a palace fire, but the sanctuary itself—near the first Olympic Stadium through overgrown ruins buzzing with bees—remains one of the most visited attractions in Greece. All that is left of the Temple of Zeus is its foundation, but the spot where the

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statue stood has been identified. In 1958, archaeologists found, some 50 yards from the temple ruins, the workshop in which the artist Phidias sculpted the statue in the fifth century B.C.—including pieces of ivory and the base of a bronze drinking cup engraved with the words "I belong to Phidias" in classical Greek.

In Rhodes, hordes of tourists cluster each summer at Mandraki Harbor, where the Colossus is thought to have stood. Around A.D. 650, more than eight centuries after its collapse, it was broken up by Arab plunderers and sold as scrap metal. Today, not a toenail remains, though local entrepreneurs peddle souvenir T-shirts, spoons and cups emblazoned with the statue's image. (In 1999, the citizens of Rhodes announced a memorial to be built on the site, though work has yet to begin.)

As for the two Wonders of Asia Minor—the Temple of Artemis and the Mausoleum—they were devastated by earthquakes, barbarians and vengeful Christians. Scraps of both lie in the British Museum in London, but their sites are hauntingly bare. In an ironic genuflection to the cycles of history, chunks of the Mausoleum's original masonry were used to refortify the Castle of St. Peter at Bodrum, which was restored in the 1970s as a museum dedicated to underwater archaeology.

And, as the city of Alexandria reminds us, there is always hope for finding "lost" Wonders. In 1994, Asra el Bakri, an Egyptian filmmaker creating a documentary about Alexandria's Eastern Harbor, noticed some huge stone blocks just below the water's surface off Fort Qait-Bey, on a promontory at the heart of the old city. Within a year, French marine archaeologists had catalogued just under 3,000 chunks of masonry, some of which is thought to be the lighthouse, scattered about the ocean floor. Soon they were raising the magnificent statues that once stood by its side. The sculptures are believed to have fallen there during earthquakes that struck the region from late antiquity to the 14th century A.D.

"As a news story, it was definitely very sexy," says Colin Clement, spokesman for the Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines (CEA), the French organization leading the work. "It seemed like everyone wanted to film or photograph what we were doing." More recently, marine archaeologists discovered the frame of a nearly 40-foot-high double door that was once part of the lighthouse. Using computer graphics, CEA archaeologists are now piecing together how the edifice would have looked and functioned. "Little by little, from campaign to campaign, we have more results," says Jean-Yves Empereur, director of the CEA, emphasizing that he is attempting to reconstruct all of ancient Alexandria graphically, not just a single monument.

One tour company, ignoring warnings that the harbor's untreated sewage may cause typhoid, offers recreational diving to the lighthouse stones as well as to two dozen fragmented sphinxes on the sea bottom. For its part, the Egyptian government has floated plans for an underwater marine park, which tourists would visit in glass-bottomed boats. "Why not?" says Clement. "What's the point of doing the work if it's just for a few academics reading fusty, obscure journals?"

Of course, one Wonder has dropped off today's grand tour entirely—the Hanging Gardens. "Things have been going very badly for Babylon over the last 20 years," says Harriet Crawford, chairman of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. Saddam Hussein's "reconstruction" program, begun in 1987, devastated the Meso-potamian city's venerable ruins. As a self-styled new Nebuchadnezzar, Hussein built a luxurious palace on a hill above the excavations of the original royal palace, then ordered the ancient edifice rebuilt using bricks stamped with his name. The Hanging Gardens—Babylon's trademark feature—played a key role in this farce: courtyards and passageways were built to integrate the supposed site of the gardens into the reconstruction. Ironically, new research carried out by Stephanie Dalley and others of the Oriental Institute at Oxford University suggests the gardens may not have been in Babylon at all, but in Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria in what is now northern Iraq. Nor are they thought to have been built by Nebuchadnezzar, but an Assyrian king, Sennacherib.

Misguided though it was, the work in Babylon shows the power of the past to shape the present. In seeking to connect himself to Iraq's most glorious era, "Hussein saw the significance of Babylon," says Crawford. "He used it as a symbol of national identity and triumph, to unite all the factions in Iraq."

The fate of the original Seven Wonders has long provoked a wide spectrum of reactions, from melancholy meditations on human vanity to the transience of man's achievements. But if their most obvious lesson is that our finest creations will one day turn to rubble, it is a lesson that we resolutely refuse to learn. Which is only as it should be, as the ancient Wonders' durability—if only in our imagination—so eloquently testifies.