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Jane's Smart Art Guides™ really are

By Félix Alfonso Peña

Travel editor

Knowledge in depth and in-hand - that's a nice thing to have when stepping into a microcosm that encompasses centuries of art and history within its stone walls.

And such is what "Jane's Smart Art Guides" provide the traveler: audio guides to some of the most renowned European art sites, illuminating not just the art on the wall, but the artistic, historical, political, cultural and religious milieu in which it is set.

Created by Jane McIntosh, who describes herself as an experienced tour-guide, art expert and history buff, the art guides are available for CD, Ipod or MP3 players.

The most obvious advantage of this format is freedom. The traveler will have his or hands free, as opposed to thumbing through a guidebook, and he or she will not have to depend on the availability of a guide or on-site audio guides.

All the traveler need worry about is making sure the batteries are fresh.

Three guides in this new series are currently available: St. Peter's Basilica (the only one reviewed here) and Sta. Maria del Popolo, both in Rome, and Our Lady Cathedral in Antwerp.

The guide to the Fra Angelico frescoes at San Marco in Florence is scheduled for release in MP3 format this month.

The St. Peter's guide, a three-disc set, was awarded the 2005 Communicator Award of Excellence, which recognizes audio communications.

Included with each guide, a booklet provides a detailed track list and tips for tailoring the tour to one's own interests and schedule ("highlights tour"), as well as a floor plan helpfully keyed to the track list, and a glossary.

The "Slice of History" segment on each audio guide provides background for the onsite tour, and should be listened to beforehand.

The information on each disk is ample. Disc 1 opens with "Slice of History," tracks 1-9, and progresses to the "Guide to Piazza," tracks 10-14. The "Slice of History" for St. Peter's Basilica alone is over 53 minutes, while the guide to the piazza takes about 20 minutes.

Discs 2 and 3, both guides to the interior, are both about one-and-a-quarter hours long, respectively.

The division into tracks makes it easier to navigate through the disc, although some of the tracks can be almost nine minutes long.

The discs come in a sturdy plastic box, each in a clear plastic sleeve that is securely held on plastic posts. The posts and the foldover top on each sleeve make it less likely that one will lose a disk on opening the box.

The narration and sound quality on the disks are excellent. Thankfully, McIntosh does not dumb her material down, and she assumes that her listeners have a basic grounding in history.

The publicity for the series promises that, "You'll learn about the artists, their patrons and their subjects. You'll hear anecdotes about their lives and character, vignettes of history and legend, and the values and customs of the time. Jane offers commentary and perspective on aesthetic and technological developments, stylistic variations and influences, composition, materials and technique. Each tour is set in the context of the surrounding city's long and tumultuous history, to provide a deep and lasting appreciation of the place."

After listening to "Jane's Smart Art Guide to St. Peter's Basilica's," the reviewer can say that it certainly delivers on its promise.

McIntosh opens the St. Peter's Basilica guide with a caution from Goethe, "The traveler sees in Rome only what he takes to Rome."

Barring the art historian and art buff already immersed in the history and art of the Basilica, whoever takes this guide will see much more and leave enriched.

Audio guide details

Jane's Smart Art Guide to St. Peter's Basilica.

By Jane McIntosh

Three CD set, also available for Ipod and MP3. / About 3½ hours of audio.

Context Audio Guides, LLC
P.O.Box 414, Ringoes, NJ 08551

Includes a booklet with a detailed track list, a highlights list, a floor plan keyed to the track list and a glossary.

To play: Requires a portable audio player (CD, iPod or MP3) and earphones. A standard audio splitter allows two people to share.

Also available in this series: "Sta. Maria del Popolo in Rome," and "Our Lady Cathedral in Antwerp." The guide to the Fra Angelico frescoes at San Marco in Florence is scheduled for release in MP3 format this month.

Availability: On CD or downloadable MP3, priced at \$19.95 (2-disc title) or \$24.95 (3-disc title). For more information visit www.janessmartart.com or e-mail MJM@JanesSmartArt.com

(Jane's note: I have corrected the timing indicated in the original article. The Reading Eagle subsequently published a correction.)