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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Rica to the same in Smyrna

The inhabitants of Paris are endowed with a curiosity that verges on extravagance. When I got here, I was regarded as if I had been sent from heaven : the aged, men, women, and children all wanted to see me. If I went out, everyone was at the windows ; if I was in the Tuileries, [1] a circle immediately formed about me, even the women made a rainbow of a thousand shades surrounding me ; if I was at the theatre, a hundred binoculars were immediately focused on my face. In a word, never has any man been as much seen as I. I would sometimes smile hearing people who had almost never left their own room saying to each other : You have to admit he really looks Persian. What a wonder ! I found portraits of me everywhere ; I saw myself reproduced in all the shops and on all the mantelpieces, so did they fear they had not seen me enough. [2]

So many honors do not fail to be tiresome. I did not think myself a man so curious and so rare ; and though I have a very good opinion of myself, I would never have imagined that I could trouble the calm of a great city where I was not known. For this reason I decided I would quit my Persian costume and don a European one, to see whether there would still remain something remarkable about my physiognomy. This test let me see what I was really worth. Free of all the foreign ornaments, I was evaluated very closely. I had cause for complaining to my tailor, who had caused me to lose the public's attention and esteem in a moment, for I suddenly entered a frightening void. I would sometimes remain an hour in a company without been looked at or pressed to open my mouth ; but if by chance someone told the company that I was Persian, immediately I heard a buzzing around me : Ah, ah, Monsieur is a Persian ? How extraordinary ! How can a person be Persian ? [3]

Paris this 6th day of the moon of Chalval 1712

[1] See letter 124, note 1.

[2] Siamese ambassadors who came to Paris in 1686, Moroccans in 1699, the Persian ambassador in 1715 (see S. L. 4), had excited immense curiosity, evidence of which is in Antoine Coypel's painting *Louis XIV reçoit l'ambassadeur de Perse* (1715), which was immediately published in engraved version. But this phenomenon might also reflect the observations of Montesquieu as friend of the young Chinese visitor Arcadio Hoangh or Houange, whom he knew in Paris in 1713.

[3] The exclamation "*Comment peut-on être Persan ?*" became proverbial and has been echoed in many variations down to the present in French culture.