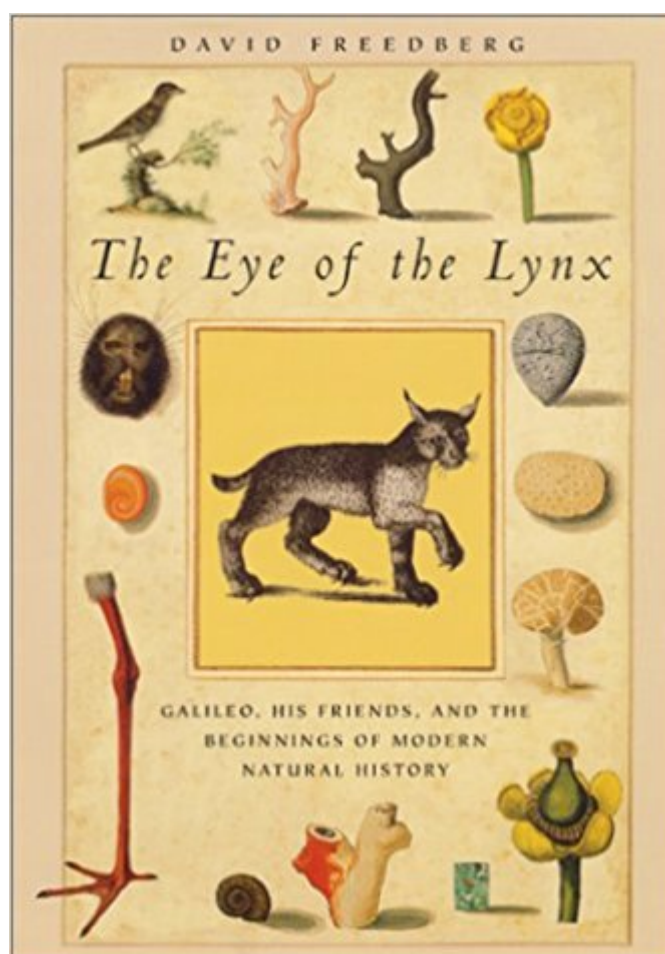


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The Eye Of The Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, And The Beginnings Of Modern Natural History



Synopsis

Some years ago, David Freedberg opened a dusty cupboard at Windsor Castle and discovered hundreds of vividly colored, masterfully precise drawings of all sorts of plants and animals from the Old and New Worlds. Coming upon thousands more drawings like them across Europe, Freedberg finally traced them all back to a little-known scientific organization from seventeenth-century Italy called the Academy of Linceans (or Lynxes). Founded by Prince Federico Cesi in 1603, the Linceans took as their task nothing less than the documentation and classification of all of nature in pictorial form. In this first book-length study of the Linceans to appear in English, Freedberg focuses especially on their unprecedented use of drawings based on microscopic observation and other new techniques of visualization. Where previous thinkers had classified objects based mainly on similarities of external appearance, the Linceans instead turned increasingly to sectioning, dissection, and observation of internal structures. They applied their new research techniques to an incredible variety of subjects, from the objects in the heavens studied by their most famous (and infamous) member Galileo Galilei--whom they supported at the most critical moments of his career--to the flora and fauna of Mexico, bees, fossils, and the reproduction of plants and fungi. But by demonstrating the inadequacy of surface structures for ordering the world, the Linceans unwittingly planted the seeds for the demise of their own favorite method--visual description--as a mode of scientific classification. Profusely illustrated and engagingly written, *Eye of the Lynx* uncovers a crucial episode in the development of visual representation and natural history. And perhaps as important, it offers readers a dazzling array of early modern drawings, from magnificently depicted birds and flowers to frogs in amber, monstrously misshapen citrus fruits, and more.

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Customer Reviews

"Freedberg's work put technologies of seeing and modes of representation at the heart of the history of science, taking the field in new and fruitful directions. The Eye of the Lynx is a visual as well as an intellectual treat, and every turn of the page makes it clear how seeing could lead to believing with the new science." (Deborah Harkness, author of A Discovery of Witches)

Some years ago, David Freedberg opened a dusty cupboard at Windsor Castle and discovered hundreds of vividly colored, masterfully precise drawings of all sorts of plants and animals from the Old and New Worlds. Coming upon thousands more drawings like them across Europe, Freedberg finally traced them all back to a little-known scientific organization from seventeenth-century Italy called the Academy of Linceans (or Lynxes). Founded by Prince Federico Cesi in 1603, the Linceans took as their task nothing less than the documentation and classification of all of nature in pictorial form. In this first book-length study of the Linceans to appear in English, Freedberg focuses especially on their unprecedented use of drawings based on microscopic observation and other new techniques of visualization. Where previous thinkers had classified objects based mainly on similarities of external appearance, the Linceans instead turned increasingly to sectioning, dissection, and observation of internal structures. They applied their new research techniques to an incredible variety of subjects, from the objects in the heavens studied by their most famous (and infamous) member Galileo Galilei--whom they supported at the most critical moments of his career--to the flora and fauna of Mexico, bees, fossils, and the reproduction of plants and fungi. But by demonstrating the inadequacy of surface structures for ordering the world, the Linceans unwittingly planted the seeds for the demise of their own favorite method--visual description--as a mode of scientific classification. Profusely illustrated and engagingly written, Eye of the Lynx uncovers a crucial episode in the development of visual representation and natural history. And perhaps as important, it offers readers a dazzling array of early modern drawings, from magnificently depicted birds and flowers to frogs in amber, monstrously misshapen citrus fruits, and more.

I am interested in the topic of natural history illustration and a college prof, but I found this writing

overly academic. The theoretical underpinnings and deconstruction of the images got in the way of the story. I was enticed by this sentence in the description of the book "Some years ago, David Freedberg opened a dusty cupboard at Windsor Castle and discovered hundreds of vividly colored, masterfully precise drawings of all sorts of plants and animals from the Old and New Worlds." I wanted to know more about that event. It is in the book, but the account is not very vivid. The design of the book has 2-inch wide outside margins. I expect this design statement to make the book resemble a Renaissance-era volume. The paper stock is not ideal for marginal notes, even if I was inclined to add notations. As a result of the wide margins the type is small and the illustrations, the whole point of the book, are reproduced smaller than the page allows. This design also makes for a very heavy book. This volume will likely please a serious scholar. It is my loss, but I found the text hard to follow. I just checked the index; Foucault appears 3 times. Alas, I was looking for something a bit more accessible.

This was a marvelous though flawed piece of social history. It connected science and art as well as the history of religious deception. The title is somewhat misleading because it is far less about Galileo than it is about the Academy of Linceans and their founder, Prince Frederico Cesi. The Academy was named for Lynceus the Argonaut of mythology noted for his keen eyesight. This idea became a major subplot of Freedberg's book. The goals of the Academy were simple in one sense and that was to "not only to acquire knowledge of things and wisdom, and living together justly and piously, but also peacefully to display them to men, orally and in writing, without any harm." A second goal especially for Cesi was the upending of peripatetic view of the natural world that reigned for nearly two centuries. It was at great risk politically as the Holy See saw things differently. Cesi et al had to be surreptitious in their writings or risk censure or possibly the same fate as Giordano Bruno. Galileo became the sixth member of the Academy in 1611. Through Cesi's financing Galileo was able to write several of his books including the Assayer in 1623. In the entire scheme of this book Galileo and his history take up less than 5% of the over 500 pages. The book's characters are many but certainly Frederico Cesi and his philosophy was the most important part of the story. Essentially The Eye of the Lynx, was about the newish idea of empiricism. Specifically to understand nature according to what you could see. The Lynx is an animal known for its special eyesight and the animal served an iconic purpose for the Linceans. So on the grand scale the naturalist gains much by seeing things. Then what? Cesi used a particular heuristic to assay the visuals that provided scientific fodder. He filtered what was seen into a question that would be considered and studied and ultimately a position could be made on the

subject at hand. This was essentially what his compatriot Francis Bacon suggested with the scientific method. Cesi's methodology was put to good use mostly. Some of which he wrote was tempered noticeably in order to appease in advance, any papal or inquisitorial negation. In other words he pretty much lied in introductions so as not to be viewed as heretical or anti-Aristotlean. That aside, Cesi did produce much value for the early days of modern science and it is a shame that his name carries so little merit in the history of science. Cesi's concern for visuals was as philosophical as it was fragile. How does one accurately measure that which they see? The potential for anthropomorphism and similitude are brought up by Freedberg on far too many occasions in the book. While that became tedious it did not become incorrect. The subjectivity of sight and its manifestation in drawings was a significant problem for the empiricist. John Berger made a career of studying and writing of this. There was also the issue of ensuring that religious authority blessed any depiction of various species in the form of art. Never the less "Oculo teste" was Cesi's motto, "According to the testimony of the eye." To make matters more complicated technology thrived with the new and nebulous inverted telescope dubbed microscope by By Giovanni Faber as the author reminds us routinely throughout the book. Galileo as well as many others across Europe, were very interested in optics and someone discovered that looking through the objective lense through to the optical one allowed one to see that which is miniscule. Galileo was probably the first to create a compound microscope using a convex and concave lens and naming it the occholino (little eye). He introduced this tool to the Academy in April of 1624. It was a godsend (heh-heh) and provided the philosophers with a powerful tool as well as a bane. They often learned too much. Another desire of Cesi's was to know the species. He struggled with his taxonomy which had sound scientific merit even a hundred years prior to Linnaeus. He was particularly worried about borderline species or ones that simply did not fit well into a defined grouping. Much of his short life was spent on this trouble. The book is about much more and is a boatload of information enhancing the history of science especially in its nascence in 17th century Italy. It is not without its textural flaws. A noticeable one is the anachronistic style floating from one event to another seamlessly even if chronologically they were very disparate. The reader must stay sharp and focused continually in the long endeavor. Otherwise they will find themselves lost in time. Freedberg also was painfully redundant. He never failed to mention Cesi's untimely death in 1630. Had he done so the book could have been fifty pages shorter. Another fifteen pages could have been lopped had he not reminded the reader that it was Faber who coined the term "microscope". Once he had mentioned that about 30 times the reader will never forget. The next twenty times were just frosting.

If you love old crazy history and the illustrations this book has it all. Fast service too!

This book, by David Freedberg, tells the fascinating story of Freedberg's discovery, on a tip from the notorious spy and brilliant art historian Anthony Blunt, of a group of amazing antique drawings stashed away in an obscure cupboard in Windsor Castle. The images, gracefully drawn and beautifully colored, depicted a bizarre range of flora and fauna: deformed lemons with claw-like legs, flamingoes, dramatic portraits of badger faces, strange plants...The discovery marked the beginning of a great adventure told in the book--of Freedberg's search for and discovery of the source of the drawings: a 17th-century gang of noblemen and eccentrics based largely in Rome who took as their mission nothing less than the discovery, analysis, and visual record of all natural knowledge. They called themselves the Accademia Lincea, or Academy of Lynxes. This was the age of Galileo, who was in fact a member, and whose work the Lincea edited and published. With the aid of microscopes, telescopes, and other instruments, the Lincea and their peers began to develop a picture of the natural world in all its details that profoundly challenged traditional views of Heaven and Earth, supported by the Roman Catholic Church. Freedberg's manner is at once learned and accessible. He tells a gripping story of a group of fascinating characters, some brilliant, some insane, and their grand projects, including a decidedly obsessive interest in bees. Lavishly illustrated in color and black-and-white, this is surely one of the most attractive, novel, and important works of history this year.

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