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Patricia Mainardi

book review of

Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1760–1870 by Christiana Payne

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Christiana Payne,
Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1760–1870.
Bristol: Sansom & Co., 2017.
192 pp., 98 b&w and color illus., bibliography, index.
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In this period of ecological awareness, our attitude towards trees has undergone a major transformation, bringing it closer to that of our ancestors. Christiana Payne's ground-breaking study *Silent Witnesses* traces this earlier period in Britain, when trees weren't just greenery but held an entire spectrum of meanings. They constituted the foundation of imperial might, when vast quantities of oak were necessary for the construction of the ships through which Britain maintained international political and commercial influence. They were visible signifiers of wealth and respectability, as in the trope of the "family tree." Trees played important roles in both classical and northern mythology, personified by both the Greeks and the Druids alike; they adorned private parks for the educated upper classes, and, eventually, public parks for everyone else. In this important contribution to the social history of art, Payne takes us through the tree's entire spectrum of signification in a series of chapters, each devoted to a separate aspect. For those of us for whom a tree is just a tree, she quotes Edward Kennion, who wrote in 1815, "we think it is necessary in painting to make the clearest distinction between a cow and a horse, while an ash and an elm are depicted under the same general scrawl called a tree" (67). While most of us may be guilty of this, recent writings like Peter Wohlleben's, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016), Suzanne Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering Wisdom in the Forest* (2021), and Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (2019) attest to the changing attitudes of our present day.[\[1\]](#)

After an introductory chapter providing a splendid overview of the scope of her study, Payne devotes a chapter to specific types of depictions. Her breadth of knowledge is impressive as she makes her points through an array of high-quality illustrations, quotations from novels and poetry, artists' writings and art criticism, horticultural tomes, even drawing manuals. A chapter treats "The Tree in Patrician Culture: 1760–1800," where the survival of the forest was linked to the continuity of the ancestral line. Plantations of trees signified the permanence, the authority, and the respectability of the upper classes, to say nothing of their wealth, and the depiction of such trees in commissioned paintings proclaimed England as

the place of established customs, old families, and paternalism. The English were proud of keeping their ancient trees, and criticized France where old trees were often cut down for timber; after 1789, as might be expected, the metaphorical significance of this disparity was intensified. Throughout the book, Payne emphasizes the significance of the four British native species: oak, elm, beech, and ash. Although later imports did become popular, these four never lost their patriotic connotations, often accompanied by more than a whiff of reactionary politics—as has become characteristic of the “native species” movement in other countries as well.

In the Western world, the most important tree was the oak, identified with Zeus/Jupiter; in England its significance was multiplied, as the oak was not only used in ship-building, but was esteemed by the ancient Britons as well as in classical literature. Country estates were distinguished by the amplitude of their wooded areas, and old trees became symbolic of old families, with all the concomitant political ramifications. She points out that the landed gentry took pains to commission family portraits that included both old trees, representing their ancestral line, and young trees, their patrimony. After reading Payne’s explication, accompanied by numerous illustrations, family portraits by artists such as Gainsborough and Zoffany assume even greater depths of meaning.

A chapter on “Woodland Anatomy: The Drawing of Trees” surveys the numerous British manuals published in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century for the use of artists and amateurs. These not only illustrated the four native species (always given pride of place), but also later imports such as birch, poplar, and willow. These manuals ensured that artists did not depict just a generic tree but a particular species, and they differed from botanical illustration in that they emphasized the general character of each tree, not their botanical detail. This leads naturally into the chapter “‘Idolatry with Some Excuse’: Portraits of Remarkable Trees.” While the British were not alone in venerating specific trees (e.g., Courbet’s *Oak of Flagey* [*Vercingetorix*], 1864), the British reverence for individual historical specimens far exceeded anything in neighboring countries. Numerous books with illustrations and “biographies” of celebrated trees were published during this period, as well as engraved portraits and photographs of famous trees. Artists and writers often depicted them, to the enjoyment of a wide public, and they even became tourist attractions.

A chapter on “The Pleasures of the Woods” follows, a plebian contrast to the celebrity trees of the previous section. Here Payne discusses the shift in meaning of woods, once seen as a source of wealth for their timber, but at the same time representing freedom from the strictures of society, Robin Hood their symbolic dweller. Gradually they became recreation areas, retreats from the noise and pollution of ever-expanding cities. While the oak was the odds-on favorite celebrity tree, the beech tree became the signifier of contemplation and withdrawal from urban hurly-burly. Woods became synonymous with contemplation, reading, poetry. Although Payne’s book is largely limited to Britain, she ventures some international observations by comparing mid-century British woodland scenes to those of the Barbizon artists on the other side of the Channel. She identifies the trope of checkered sunlight as one invented by British artists, decades before being adopted by Impressionist painters, and points to the international influence of the photographer Gustave Le Gray who worked extensively in the forest of Fontainebleau. She thus opens her field of inquiry to other scholars who would do well to continue her research elsewhere.

After these chapters largely devoted to British native species, Payne devotes one to “Exotic Trees: A Taste of Paradise.” Even when naturalized in Britain, such specimens never lost their cultural significance; and a knowledge of these tree species was essential for artists who wanted to depict foreign regions. The rise of travel and tourism throughout the British Empire and beyond increased interest in these exotic trees, which artists were obliged to depict accurately. Italianate scenes were identified by the presence of cypresses and stone pines, à la Claude Lorraine. Orientalist paintings featured banyan trees, cedars of Lebanon, and palm trees, a specialty of Edward Lear. And alpine views were required to include the European larch and Norway spruce. Drawing manuals depicted all these species of trees, and knowledgeable art critics and art lovers insisted on their accurate representation.

In the last chapter, “John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Tree: 1840–1870,” Payne explores the tension between specificity and generalization in the depiction of trees. In suggesting the rise of photography as another influence on the accurate depiction of trees, Payne further expands the field of inquiry. She suggests that it was possibly through the influence of photography, the Pre-Raphaelites painted individual leaves, a practice that their otherwise champion, Ruskin, condemned. Ruskin produced his own manual, *Elements of Drawing* (1857), in which the representation of trees was a major interest, including a hundred-page section “Of Leaf Beauty.” A champion of structure, Ruskin preferred an understanding of ramification, branching, over the carefully delineated leaves and bark of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, whose very gift was the distinction of detail. In a prescient passage in *Modern Painters* that foreshadows twenty-first century thought, he compared trees to communities, nations, colonies, families, calling them “strange intermediate beings” who deserve “boundless affection” from us.^[2]

Payne’s study includes discussions and illustrations of all the major British landscapists: Paul Sandby, John Constable, J.M.W. Turner, Samuel Palmer, Edward Lear, and the Pre-Raphaelites, especially William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, among many others. We learn that Constable named his favorite trees, that Turner depicted the Italianate tree to raise the status of his landscapes, even before he travelled to Italy, and that Edward Lear’s exhaustive knowledge of trees began with his study of drawing manuals and continued through his extensive travels.

The brief overview that I have presented here cannot do justice to the richness of Payne’s thought, and her study includes numerous discussions that could stand alone as separate articles: a section on the motif of the cottage door beneath the sheltering tree, for example, a trope that became widespread throughout Europe; the persistent metaphor drawn between trees, both young and old, and political thought; the choices that individual artists made to depict specific tree species. *Silent Witnesses* is both visually and intellectually a pleasure, and should be read by everyone interested in landscape painting.

Patricia Mainardi

The Graduate Center of the City University of New York
Pmainardi[at]gc.cuny.edu

Notes

[1] On Simond, see also Ferris Jabr, “The Social Life of Forests,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 6, 2020, 32–41.

[2] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (1860), 5, quoted in Paine, *Silent Witnesses*, 174.