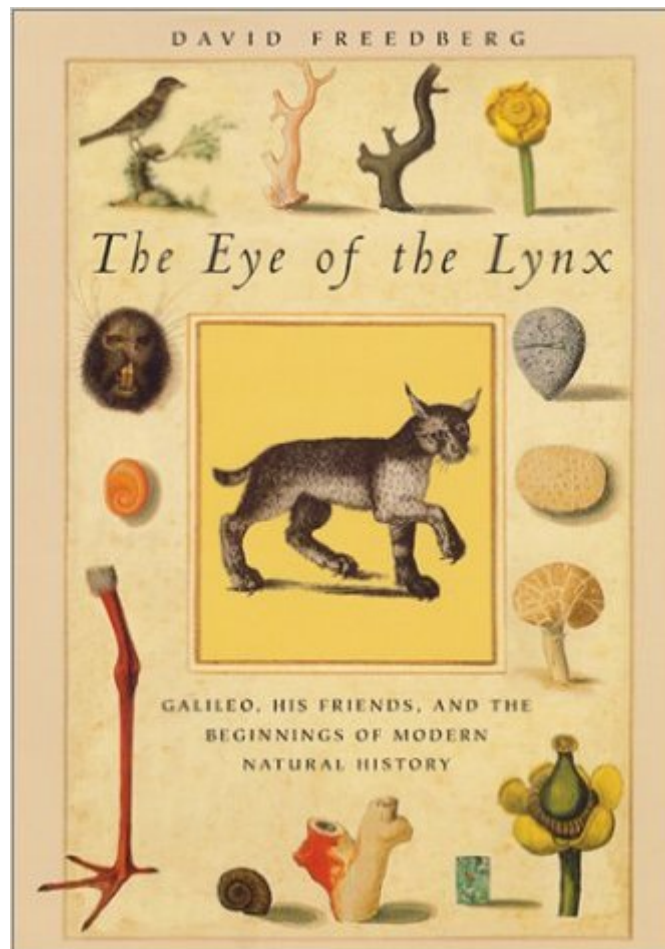


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The Eye Of The Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, And The Beginnings Of Modern Natural History



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

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.

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