

AMBIENTE FISICO E TERRITORIO

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La Geografia è la disciplina che studia le relazioni fra uomo e ambiente; essa si propone quindi di osservare e classificare i molteplici fatti e fenomeni — fisici e antropici — che si sviluppano sulla superficie terrestre, per arrivare a un'interpretazione relativa all'organizzazione che le società umane hanno dato, o progettano di dare, al territorio. Questa collana vuole pertanto accogliere testi con contenuti di geografia umana e di geografia fisica, in quanto entrambi indispensabili per realizzare tale analisi interpretativa e poter così spiegare i processi sociali, economici e culturali che caratterizzano il territorio stesso.

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Pietro Piana

Paper Landscapes

Topographical Art and Environmental Change in Liguria





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Table of Contents

- 9 *Preface*
by CHARLES WATKINS
- 11 *Abbreviations*
- 13 Chapter I
Introduction
- 17 Chapter II
Geography and Art
2.1. Traditional and Recent Approaches, 17 – 2.2. The Development of a Methodology, 24.
- 35 Chapter III
Biographical Context
3.1. Between Topography and the Picturesque: British Landscape Art, 35 – 3.2. Amateurs, Professionals and Gender, 37 – 3.3. Media and Printing Techniques, 39 – 3.4. The British in Liguria, 40 – 3.5. Biographies of the Main Amateur Artists Analysed in this Work, 47.
- 57 Chapter IV
Between Piedmont and Liguria across the Apennines
4.1. Roads, 59 – 4.2. The Rural Landscape, 65.
- 81 Chapter V
From Country to City: Urban Areas and Change
5.1. Remnants of Rurality in the Bisagno and Sturla Valleys, 82 – 5.2. Historical Floods and Fluvial Landscape in the Bisagno Valley, 97 – 5.3. An Unidentified View, 103.

8 Table of Contents

113 Chapter VI

The Eastern Riviera

6.1. The Aurelia Road, 115 – 6.2. Mediterranean Environments between Genoa and Sestri Levante, 117.

141 Chapter VII

Mountains by the Sea on the Road to Tuscany

7.1. The Bracco Road, 142 – 7.2. The Rural Landscape of the Bracco Pass, 150 – 7.3. Brugnato and the Vara Valley, 156.

163 Chapter VIII

Topographical Art and Environmental Change

167 *Bibliographic References*

183 *Acknowledgments*

Preface*

by CHARLES WATKINS

This is an important book which provides deep insights into the way Ligurian landscapes have changed over the last two hundred years. It is relevant for all those interested in the sustainability of local economies and social and cultural activities. All landscapes are produced by a combination of human activities and practices working on an underlying physical geography and strongly affected by weather and climate. There is increasing interest in the impact of land uses and environmental change on the conservation of soils and nature. This makes the study of changes in the economic geography and land use of landscapes particularly pertinent.

In Liguria, as in many other parts of Europe, there are particular concerns about the abandonment of long standing traditional agricultural practices on contemporary landscapes. These include, for example, the very significant decline in upland grazing by sheep, goats and cattle, the abandonment of most upland agricultural terraces, the collapse of chestnut cultivation and neglect of many olive groves. This abandonment, and the concurrent rural depopulation, has led to the very extensive spread of woodland through semi-natural regeneration of species such *Ostrya carpinifolia* and *Fraxinus ornus*. This means that many hillsides, once a complex mix of agricultural terraces, vineyards, olive groves, chestnut orchards, pastures and meadows, now consist of woodland, much of which has originated since the 1950s.

The future of these secondary woodlands raises many important political and economic questions. How can the new woods contribute to the local economy? Should they be celebrated as making Liguria more 'natural'? How can they be valued for the sequestration of carbon dioxide? On the contrary, what are the negative effects of this woodland for tourism? How important is the loss of the cultural landscapes which they hide? What are the implications of the increase in woodland, and lack of

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management, on the frequency and intensity of flooding? These questions are difficult to answer, but one requirement to help to do so is the study of landscape history, so that we can better understand the way that landscapes were managed in the past.

Pietro Piana, in *Paper Landscapes: Topographical Art and Environmental Change in Liguria* makes an original and significant contribution to our understanding of landscape change over the last two hundred years or so. He focuses on a previously underused and rather unappreciated source of evidence to uncover the distinct environmental changes in contrasting parts of the Region. In so doing he demonstrates the value that topographical art can be, especially in combination with historical archives, travellers' accounts, historical maps, field survey and oral histories, in illuminating the lost landscapes of this fascinating Region. He shows how understanding landscape history is of direct relevance for rural and urban planners. In addition, moreover, it allows an assessment to be made of the extent of changes, and the development of different scenarios for the future of the Ligurian landscape.

Abbreviations*

ASG: Archivio di Stato di Genova.

ASL: Archivio di Stato di La Spezia.

Centro DocSAI: Documentazione per la Storia, l'Arte e l'Immagine di Genova.

IGM: Istituto Geografico Militare.

DTM: Digital Terrain Model.

TNA: The National Archive.

Introduction

Studies of environmental and landscape change increasingly benefit from multidisciplinary approaches which combine human and physical geography methodologies, as well as historical ecology, archaeology and art history. Geographers have long used historical cartography as a source to explore past environments to combine with written and oral sources and field data. Today they increasingly acknowledge the importance of studies of the past for more sustainable land planning and management (Antrop 2005). In this sense, new research and approaches to novel and unconventional sources can be useful to document hidden or forgotten environments and to track change in rural and urban areas. This book originated when a series of early nineteenth-century topographical representations of Liguria made by an English traveller was found. They were inland and coastal landscapes of Liguria and, by depicting representative features, suggested at first sight their potential as sources for environmental and landscape history. The use of topographical art to study change in Liguria appears to be largely unexplored, partly because of the apparent lack of sources especially in remote, rural areas. This work seeks to expand the range of suitable sources for the environmental and landscape history of Liguria by looking at a wide range of topographical views in conjunction with other sources. Due to the significant changes it went through in the last two centuries, the region is an interesting case study where to 'test' a methodology which can be applied to other places. Liguria's coastal areas saw the transition from an economy principally based on sea trade, fishing and agriculture, to the development of tourism since the late nineteenth century, with consequent urban growth and reduction of rural areas. The interior went through a process of significant rural depopulation which meant loss of traditional agro-sylvo-pastoral practices, constant decrease of open, agricultural surfaces and woodland growth, while new infrastructures and industries were established along the valley floors. Since the early twentieth century urban areas have grown considerably to the

extent that today urban sprawl, alongside the abandonment of rural areas and the growing number of extreme weather events is the main reason of the recent increase of floods.

Many cultural and historical geographers have interpreted and analysed art, especially since the “cultural turn” (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Cosgrove 1993). Scholars have looked at landscape and topographical art demonstrating how such sources, if placed in their cultural and historical context, can provide crucial insights into the political and social history of the English countryside (Berger 1972; Barrell 1980; Rosenthal 1983). They all looked at images as a way to read the past, rather than to merely illustrate conclusions “already reached by other means” (Burke 2001, p. 10). More recently, a resurgence of interest on topographical art by minor or amateur artists has opened up a debate on how such sources can be used in geographical research. The distinction between landscape and topographical art is subtle; traditionally the former was associated to great, professional artists such as Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788) or J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) while topographical views produced with tinted drawings were considered “obsolete” and “second rate” (Barrell 2013a, p. 143). John Ruskin distinguished between historical art (topography) and imaginative art, which he defines “Turnerian topography” (1856, p. 16), the latter being “totally useless to geographers and engineers” (1856, p. 23). A topographical view can be identified as the representation of a particular object, a church, a bridge, a castle or an estate: in the nineteenth century a detailed depiction of a defined subject was of minor artistic interest compared to the imaginative ideal landscapes of landscape artists. If the latter aroused an emotional engagement amongst the public, the former would only interest a limited target of people like landowners, local historians, travellers, in general people “in a position to compare the representation with the thing represented” (Barrell 2013b, p. 18). Recently, however, scholars have reconsidered the value of topographical views and their intrinsic value not only on what they depict, but also in their hidden significance. As Barrell stated (2013b, p. 18): “Topographical views are more social than solitary, more about the way landscapes are inhabited, shared, possessed, argued over, exploited — for better or worse humanised”. The drawings considered in this work are ‘topographical’ as they represent specific landmarks of the Ligurian landscape, but they will not be considered as empty representations of space, rather they will be culturally, historically and geographically contextualized, and compared with other documents.

Chapter II examines the most relevant literature on geography and landscape art and it presents the methodological approach which is aimed at the precise identification of the view and its analysis in combination with field data, geographical visualisation software, cartography, written and oral sources and historical photography. The artists' biographies and the historical–geographical context when they lived and worked is the focus of the third chapter that aims to provide insights for the interpretation of the artworks. Chapter IV, V, VI and VII present the case studies of the book for different geographical areas where I look at environmental change focussing on the last two centuries (Figure 1.1). Chapter IV focusses on the central Apennines of Liguria in the Scrivia and Polcevera Valleys. The Genoese countryside is the main object of the fifth chapter which examines English and Italian representations of the eastern part of Genoa. Chapter VI looks at several case studies of the Eastern Riviera between Genoa and Sestri Levante, focussing on the evolution of transports and environmental changes of rural areas. Chapter VII, the last empirical chapter of the book, examines the coastal mountains of eastern Liguria between Sestri Levante and Brugnato in the Vara Valley.

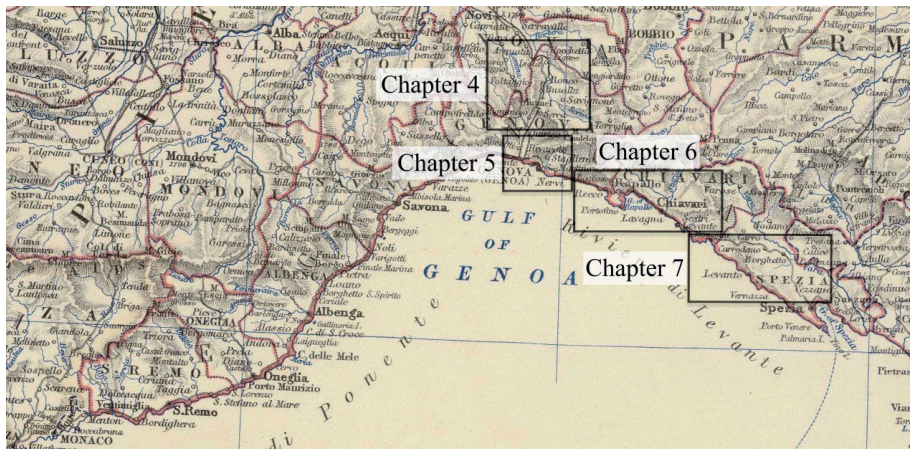


Figure 1.1. The Study Area (North & Central Italy and the Island of Corsica by Keith Johnston F.R.S.E., 1861, detail).

Geography and Art

Geographers have long used drawings and paintings to study environmental and landscape change. Different approaches and interpretations reflect a diverse range of methodologies and uses of subjective sources which, if correctly contextualised, can provide useful insights into the way in which places changed through time (Piana *et al.*, 2018b). In the last years, a resurgence of interest in topographical art is facilitated by the increasing availability of images through online collections, websites and social media. However, there is a solid tradition of works on landscape history and geography by cultural and historical geographers who have interpreted and analysed art, especially since the “cultural turn” (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Cosgrove 1993). Drawing upon traditional and recent works by geographers, this chapter summarises the existing literature and develops a methodological approach which is used in the following chapters.

2.1. Traditional and Recent Approaches

2.1.1. *Art and Landscape Changes: the British Tradition*

Historical and cultural geographers focussed on the relationship between cartography and power, and its importance in the establishment of power and private property (Quaini 1986; Harley 1988). This connection is also central to eighteenth-century British landscape art: the debate around Thomas Gainsborough’s (1727–1788) ‘Mr and Mrs Andrews’ (1748) stimulated a new approach to landscape art where the artworks are contextualised. The painting shows an Essex landowner and his wife, Robert and Frances Andrews, surrounded by the landscape of their estate at Bulmer, called the Auberies. Traditionally, scholars stressed Gainsborough’s Rousseauism of this “enchanted work” of a couple in nature (Clark 1949, p. 34). But this approach has been criticised by historians and geographers

who saw the painting as a powerful depiction of two landowners surrounded by the eighteenth-century enclosed landscape of Britain (Berger 1972). Other scholars looked at the same painting from different perspectives: feminist geographer Gillian Rose (1993) interpreted the painting as a symbol of a gender relation. Rosenthal (1982), Bermingham (1986) and Prince (1988) examined its importance as visual evidence of the new enclosed landscape of eighteenth-century Britain. John Barrell's influential book *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980) develops the idea that British landscape art by famous painters like Thomas Gainsborough or John Constable (1776–1837) reflects the social and political context where these artists lived and operated. His realistic reading of some very famous paintings unveil their symbolism and the “social vision” (1980, p. 133) of the enclosed British countryside, a world of strict hierarchical rules, hard labour and social inequality.

The rich corpus of landscape views of the British countryside produced between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century was widely examined by rural and historical geographers to document rural changes. Constable's paintings reflect the deep intimacy he had with Suffolk, his native country; they are characterised by high topographical accuracy and detail of agricultural features. Rosenthal, for example, analysed a broad range of documentation including modern and old maps, and modern photographs are compared with the paintings which, Rosenthal argues, “follow the topography very closely” (Rosenthal 1983, p. 10). Daniels pointed out that Constable's style, consisting in the use of elevated viewpoints, landmarks and the detailed representation of geographical features, was influenced by “his familiarity with surveying and maps” (Daniels 1993, p. 62). Casey (2002, p. 155) argued that “Constable's lifelong effort to depict the Stour Valley amounts to a virtual mapping of his home region”. In this sense, Constable's ‘Golding Constable's Kitchen Garden’ (1815) is one of the most significant artworks and it was studied by many scholars (Rosenthal 1983; Daniels 1993; Payne 1993). Daniels (1993) pointed out how the geography of fields and enclosures in the painting matches exactly with those represented in the Enclosure Map of 1817. Hugh Prince (1928–2013), focussed on the “material context” of the English countryside (Seymour 2000, p. 203), providing an overview of its evolution by looking at six oil paintings chosen “for their topographic accuracy” (Prince 1988, p. 114). Some paintings like ‘Ploughing up Turnips near Slough’ (1809) by J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) or Constable's ‘Landscape, Ploughing Scene in Suffolk’ (1814) are more than a mere record of

a place; they are, however, characterised by topographical specificity that is “critical for understanding their contents” (Prince 1988, p. 99).

2.1.2. Rural Studies in Italy: Emilio Sereni

Emilio Sereni’s *Storia del Paesaggio Agrario Italiano*, written in 1961 (English translation 1997) is a milestone of the history of the Italian agricultural landscape. As a Marxist agriculturalist, Sereni was concerned with the connection between landscape, power and economy, which is also one of the key themes developed by Massimo Quaini in his *Geography and Marxism* (1974, English translation 1982). In his overview on the Italian agricultural landscape from the Greek period to present day, Sereni combined different sources, including a wide range of iconographical documents selected from thousands of artworks (Sereni 1997). From Sereni’s words, artistic iconography appears to be as a second choice source, although it is “more pertinent with the character and the limits” of a work that was written for a large audience (Sereni 1997, p. 12). The illustrations are used “not so much for documentation as [...] simply to illustrate the exposition” (Sereni 1997, p. 12). Although Sereni limited the use of art to an illustrative function, drawings, illustrations and paintings played a crucial role in the popularization of this book. He had a deep knowledge of these sources and his book constitutes a “pioneering work” in the history of the Italian rural landscape (Agnoletti 2012, p. 235). Rossi and Rombai (2011) have assessed the debate that followed the *Storia del Paesaggio Agrario Italiano* in the fiftieth anniversary of its edition. They referred to the Marxist historian Renato Zangheri who claimed that Sereni inaugurated a new ‘ancillary’ discipline to human geography and agrarian history where the iconographical sources are critically examined for rural history studies. Zangheri refers to the Preface to the book by arguing that Sereni goes beyond his initial purposes of using the artworks only for illustration, although he does it without any damage due to his deep knowledge of the subject. Other scholars criticized this approach and the general enthusiasm that followed the publication of the book. Although being a pioneer of rural studies in Italy, Sereni was never entirely accepted by the academic community and by art historians in particular (Ambrosoli 2013). Art historian Giovanni Romano warned about the daring alterations of iconography by historians who made increasing use of these sources in absence of written or archive documents (Romano 1978). Economist Franco Cazzola had a

similar opinion when arguing that the use of iconographical sources is risky, since artists tend to reproduce pictorially a reality perceived in the past that might have changed (Cazzola 1997).

Almost fifty years after the publication of the *Storia del Paesaggio Agrario*, Moreno and Raggio considered the fundamental scientific heritage of Emilio Sereni (Moreno and Raggio 1999). They argue, however, that Sereni does not consider the field itself to be a valid source of knowledge for the reconstruction of past processes. Balzaretti stated that in Sereni's "misguided book" his "naïve readings of written and artistic evidence were undisturbed by direct observation" (2004, p. 113). In his *Dal documento al terreno* (2018, first edition 1990) Diego Moreno discusses the importance of historical iconography that is considered, with historical cartography, "the best mean of historical documentation for the reconstruction of the history of land use of a site", especially whereas the availability of documents related to different periods allows a multi-temporal comparison (Moreno 2018, p. 35). According to Moreno, the supremacy of official cartography based on the strict rules of geometry has prevented for long time scholars from studying other iconographical sources like manuscripts and sketches of travellers. If combined with official documentation (maps, cadastral documents) these sources can be considered as links between society, local knowledge and practices.

2.1.3. *Art, Historical Ecology and Forestry*

According to Cevasco (2007) photography, cartography, topographical views and artistic iconographies fall under the category of iconographical sources that are part of the wider group of documentary or textual sources. In Liguria, however, topographical art appears to have a very marginal position in historical ecology studies, particularly if compared to historical photography, the latter being widely used thanks to the presence of important local photographic archives. In Liguria, research focussed on areas of the Ligurian Eastern Apennines such as the Val di Vara and the Val d'Aveto where the remote position did not allow "that continuity between landscape art and photography" which characterise coastal areas (Gemignani 2013, p. 85). Moreno and Cevasco (2014) in research on the historical ecology of open lands of Ligurian coastal mountains use a view by the Genoese artist Luigi Garibbo to document the open pastures of the hills around Genoa in the Bisagno and Sturla Valleys, historically characterised by common lands. Outside Italy, other case studies with greater