

A short History of Cloud Observations in Art and Science

Tuesday, 17 May 2022 19:30 (1h 15m)

Looking up. Our eyes are drawn to the sky. The sky can promise rain, sunshine, storms, clouds in a variety of forms ... in this talk, we trace a history of observing the sky, particularly the history of observing clouds and observing air pollution. In the 19th century, an amateur meteorologist, Luke Howard, gave clouds their names (cumulus, stratus, etc), which grew into the first International Cloud Atlas in 1896. Today, a team of scientists has forged a new language of the skies in the tradition of Howard and the Cloud Atlas (with names such as fish, flower, gravel, and sugar), whose changing forms play a role in predicting climate change. Recent work also suggests that the language of the sky has imprinted its historical evolution, and hence past climate changes, on art and culture. We show how trends in air pollution can be identified through the paintings of J.M.W. Turner and Claude Monet, who painted scenes of London and Paris in the 19th century during early industrialization. We discuss how art and science are both products of human observation and imagination and give complementary perspectives about the natural world and our role as actors and observers of environmental change.

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