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Illustrating Corsica: The modernist landscape of John Minton's *Time Was Away*

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Abstract

The article considers John Minton's (1917–57) illustrations of landscape for the book *Time Was Away: A Notebook in Corsica* (1948) with an aim to recover their significance in the history of illustration. Certain illustrations are positioned as notable for their ambiguous relationship to the text. I elaborate thinking around text–image relations alongside questions concerning the cross-fertilization of fine art and illustration. In their adoption of modernist principles, Minton's illustrations are significant in recasting the role of illustration in the artistic context of post-war Britain. In melding formalist effects with realist concerns, the illustrations raise broader matters around realism, fine art and the democratic potential of illustration. I show that in seizing on cinematic techniques, Minton offers an effectively modern response to the traditional paradigm of depth associated with landscape and thereby proffers an alternative to the Modernist paradox that a teleological development of painting is at odds with landscape.

Keywords

John Minton
Modernism
Landscape
illustration

The artist John Minton plays a central role during a period across the late 1940s and early 1950s, which issues what some see as a 'revival of illustration' (Hyman 2001: 48). His output was prodigious. Alongside his work as painter, set designer and lecturer,^[1] he produced editorial illustrations for *Radio Times*, *Our Time*, *The Leader* and others, cover designs for the literary magazine *Penguin New Writing* and over 60 book jackets (Martin and Spalding 2017: 7). This article focuses on his illustrations for the book *Time Was Away: A Notebook in Corsica*, which on its publication in November 1948 made a significant impact. It gained a cult following among illustration students (Spalding 2005: 113–14). Shortly after publication it received critical attention; John Lewis in his article 'Book illustrations by John Minton' for issue one of *Image*

(1949) hailed the illustrations as ‘immensely successful’.^[2] Alongside *Time Was Away*, books such as Elizabeth David’s cookery classic *Mediterranean Food*, also illustrated by Minton, were representative of a period witnessing the democratization of affordable illustrated books. Simon Martin (2007: 89) notes how such works, along with periodicals such as *Penguin New Writing* and *Horizon*, stood as the antithesis of private press books and demonstrated how ‘the visual language of an essentially private romantic reverie could become public’. In short, ‘It was a remarkable period for British book illustration’.

In his day many regarded Minton as a ‘star’. Alex Seago (1995: 59) notes Minton’s ‘influence on his contemporaries at the RCA was enormous’. He quotes artist Robyn Denny’s recollection of Minton’s reputation:

Minton was very brilliant. He burned very brightly. He was perceptive and erudite as a critic and as a teacher [...]. He was a star, he had a charisma like a star, and he was very, very famous [...]. There was a sort of yearning at the time for an indigenous British art and Minton seemed to characterise it. Every time you picked up a little literary magazine – *New Writing*, *Horizon*, or whatever, there were these pictures of bright-eyed, visionary young British painters – mainly John Minton, it seemed. (Seago 1995: 57)

However, the position of Denny and his contemporaries in that critical moment of the early 1950s in British art (the coming to terms with American abstraction, the lure of Pop and the reconfiguration of realism) marked out current interests around artistic change that unsettled Minton. He took on a fierce position denigrating abstraction, attacking work by Denny. Increasingly isolated, he committed suicide in January 1957, following the latter stages of a career thwarted by alcoholism and depression (Spalding 2005; Martin and Spalding 2017).

Following his death, interest in Minton largely waned until the late 1980s when the art movement Neo-Romanticism became the subject of both David Mellor’s Barbican exhibition *Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935-55*, and Malcolm Yorke’s *The Spirit of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and their Times*. Chapters on Minton in Mellor’s exhibition catalogue and Yorke’s book, respectively, examined his place in the movement. However, while a scrutineering eye has closely considered his fine art production, attention to Minton’s commercial illustrations has been limited. Furthermore, the critical assessment of Minton *as artist* has appeared tainted by his prodigious output *as illustrator*. That sentiment underlies Yorke’s writing on Minton. He describes the shortcomings of Minton’s painting *The Death of Nelson* (1952):

In its way it is a very impressive canvas, but, close up one can see that every hair is drawn in, every figure has a definite edge and every feature has a line around it. It is essentially an enormous *book illustration* [emphasis added] conceived in line rather than paint. (Yorke 1988: 186–87)

Yorke's assessment points to that broader prejudice against the illustrative in fine art that has coloured strains of formalist art theory across the twentieth century (see Bell 1914; Greenberg [1939] 1992, [1960] 1982), and his final assessment that Minton will become merely a footnote in the history of twentieth-century British art implies the exclusion of illustration in that history (1988: 193). If category distinctions and disciplinary boundaries are maintained, Minton's position may well remain (as a footnote) in the margins of a 'pure' art history scholarship. Thankfully, revisionist histories are better accounting for figuration in the history of mid-twentieth-century British art (Hyman 2001). Nevertheless, a sustained alignment of illustration within that project is needed to better intellectualize the cross-fertilization between fine art and illustration, not to exacerbate a fine art/illustration dichotomy, but rather, to challenge prejudices and better understand the subtleties of disciplinary contexts and practices. Minton himself pointed to conflict in the notion of a parallel practice of drawing for painting, and drawing for illustration, admitting, 'I find illustrator's drawing that is descriptive drawing very different from making drawings for paintings. In fact I feel a definite conflict inherent in "painter's" and "illustrator's" drawing' (Spalding 2005: 115). Frances Spalding (2005, 2017) notes, however, that there was certainly cross-fertilization; for example, several drawings for *Time Was Away* were later worked up into paintings.^[3] I propose that new enquiries that assimilate fine art and illustration in order to aggregate a better understanding of their relationship are needed. James Hyman (2001) has noted a contemporary recognition in the mid-twentieth century that illustration bore democratic potential and while it may be overly reductive to bifurcate art practice into realist and abstract strains, the question of the status of illustration, or the 'illustrative' alongside emergent abstractionism and a Modernist critical trajectory demands more scholarly attention.^[4]

Celebrating the centenary of Minton's birth, the Pallant House Gallery's recent exhibition *John Minton: A Centenary* and catalogue registers a timely re-evaluation of Minton. The fully illustrated monograph shows previously unpublished reproductions, which, together with new essays should help rekindle interest in Minton as 'arguably the leading illustrator working in Britain' in his time (Martin and Spalding 2017: 7).

The origination of *Time Was Away: A Notebook in Corsica*

In 1947 Minton and poet Alan Ross were asked by publisher John Lehmann to go to Corsica and write a travel book. Having parted company with the Hogarth Press, Lehmann had set up his own publishing company John Lehmann Ltd in 1946. Hereon, Lehmann was able to pursue his interest in book illustration, giving work to Edward Bawden, Michael Ayrton, Ronald Searle and other notable artists. Over a six-year period he published over two hundred books, many displaying high

artistic standards with close attention being paid to typography, dust jackets and spine design. Of all the artists Lehmann commissioned, Minton contributed the most: 23 dust jackets and four substantially illustrated books (Lehmann 1966; Spalding 2005: 107).

Lehmann's rationale for *Time Was Away* was undoubtedly promotional. The book would exemplify and distinguish the quality of the publisher's output, but also showcase his interest in contemporary illustration. In his autobiography he recalls that the book 'was in many ways the most ambitious of my early projects, for it was to be an extremely lavish, anti-austerity production' (Lehmann 1966: 35). In the context of the immediate post-war period one can understand the attraction of the proposition.

By 1947, Minton was well-established and attached to Neo-Romanticism. The movement was characterized by a nationalistic interest in the British landscape and a rediscovery of first-wave British Romantic artists such as Samuel Palmer (Mellor 1987; Yorke 1988; Martin 2007; Martin and Spalding 2017). Lehmann himself had a role in promoting the movement during the late 1940s in his capacity as editor for the literary and current affairs journal *Penguin New Writing*, for which Minton contributed regularly from 1945. Lehmann held soirees that Minton attended, and this led to commissions. A friendship developed and some suspected an affair.^[5]

Lehmann's commission accepted and war-time travel restrictions lifted, the Corsica trip commenced with Ross and Minton spending the late summer of 1947 there. Ross would produce the prose and a series of poems. Minton would produce illustrations along with vignettes, the dust jacket and a decorated map of their journey. Together, Ross's prose and Minton's illustrations describe their journey through the island, following in the footsteps of Boswell 200 years earlier and Edward Lear 100 years earlier, a fact not lost on both Minton and Ross.

They arrived first at Ajaccio, roaming the streets for several days visiting churches and bars. Minton wrote to his friend Edie Lamont, 'Corsica is proving very exciting [...] full of Italianate romanticism. The drawings pile up [...]. The Mediterranean heat is unbelievable' (Spalding 2005: 110). The book firmly evidences Minton's productivity; there are close to 100 illustrations. Among these are portraits of locals, historical reveries, narrative illustrations depicting moments of interest (smuggling, brawls, train journeys), but notably landscape as subject is dominant, accounting for around 60 images. Eight interspersed images are visually arresting full-page colour plates using four-colour lithography. The colour scheme, cerulean blue, chartreuse yellow, pale vermillion and a secondary olive green, released Minton from the conventions of British landscape to something more vivid, educing the sensation of bright Mediterranean light. Black and white full-page illustrations depict rural and urban landscapes. Unlike the colour plates, they are captioned simply with geographical location and cursory subtitles.

Spalding notes a sense of Minton's exuberance being translated into the drawings, positing that

rarely have topographical subjects been treated with such freedom and energy [...] [The] glaring light of high noon encouraged his use of rich blacks. These convey not only shadow but heat, his suns gaining in intensity from a surrounding ring of black [...]. His scenes are never static but animated by his fast-moving line and by his attention to the life of the place, to the boats, barrels, nets and figures at work. (Spalding 2005: 110)

Reading the topographical images alongside Ross's prose reveals subtly different perceptions. For Ross, the decay, the dirt, the litter, the ugliness are abject, whereas for Minton, they are formally alluring.

Lewis's article suggests Minton's scrutiny of the topography:

These romantic drawings recall the sultry languor of the Mediterranean [...] Warm, still, yet like some slumbering volcano, ready in an instant to break out into some dread violence. Minton has drawn the bare, rugged rocks of the mountainside, devoid of vegetation but for the prickly pear, and in contrast, the tumbling of sub-tropical luxuriance of the valleys; shows us tall houses of the ports, many empty, many decaying, with here and there a Renaissance feature; or again, the heat of the midday sun on open square, or the shade of the tree-lined streets and the sudden startling cold of the narrow alley-ways. Everywhere the Corsican seeking shade and only mad dogs and Englishmen venturing abroad. (Lewis 1949: 52)

Lewis captures the signification of the sensorial, but also notes that the works do not merely evoke; they also have 'a dry and factual documentary value;' that they maintain a dual character of the romantic locked into nature, alongside a 'decorative realism' (1949: 52-53).

A critical trajectory

If already we see a variety in Minton's approach, how to proceed in addressing the question of text-image relations? And is this a useful question to ask? Seemingly it is and Lewis's article is helpful here. As noted, *Image* supported critical enquiry of illustration. It was fitting, therefore, that Lewis, in considering Minton's illustrations, initiates a discussion from the outset around 'WHAT IS THE PROPER FUNCTION OF THE BOOK ILLUSTRATOR?'. The article's capitalization of the question is echoed here so as to illustrate its importance to Lewis then, and to us now. He asks,

is it to decorate, to present a pictorial setting to an author's words? To enlarge on an author's canvas? To interpret an author's meaning? [...] [A]ny or all of these functions is permissible [...] [but] the success or failure of an illustration lies in whether the artist has come to terms with himself [sic], in determining what line he should take. (Lewis 1949: 51)

While Lewis' answer is open in its non-qualitative permissibility of illustration's functions, he proceeds to distinguish between 'literal' forms of illustration and those which effectuate an 'enlargement' of the text. He identifies illustrators Rockwell Kent and F. L. Griggs as literalists. Their work is wholly dependant on the text, 'illustration [...] concerned with providing a more or less literal pictorial setting to an author's words'. Without the text their work 'may not be particularly distinguished'. Conversely, there are others 'who both set the scene and enrich the author's meaning'. He cites Tenniel's drawings for *Alice*, Bewick's *A History of British Birds* and Cruikshank's for *Oliver Twist*. Such works demonstrate a 'complete fusion of artist and author'. Dismayed at the lack of contemporary examples in commercial book illustration Lewis remarks: 'It is with pleasure, then, that one notes the enterprise of John Lehmann, the publisher who sent the poet Alan Ross and the artist John Minton to Corsica [...] Minton's drawings are both complementary to and an enlargement of the text' (1949: 51-52).

It is worth pausing around Lewis's terms 'complementary', 'enlargement' and 'enrich'; each guides an answer to his opening question. I do not wish to discount the general principle that quality illustration goes beyond the literal. However, some scrutiny of *how* 'complementariness', 'enrichment' and 'enlargement' may function will prevent these criteria being applied casually.^[6] To critically test those terms we can ask, first, and precociously, what illustration does *not* 'enlarge', 'complement' or 'enrich' its associated text? The conjunction of visual and written text leads inevitably to the production of something new, some enrichment, some enlargement of one kind or another. The semantic dislocations of Surrealism come to mind – once pressed upon the viewer, such dissociations inevitably demand intellectual productivity. The problem here is that a notion of enrichment requires critical evaluation and is therefore contingent on the critical positioning and subjectivities of the viewer.

Perhaps a better question is *how* may illustration enlarge, complement or enrich a text? This may lead us to difficult territory; for example, how do we manage the question of 'the proper function of book illustration' where a consequence of artistic quality is the annexation of image from text? How do we direct a critique of illustrations, which motivate intense absorption and call for isolated treatment? The greater complexities of text-image relations fall beyond this article; but, we may note that while the concepts of 'relay', 'anchorage', 'illustration' (Barthes 1977) and recent logico-semantic approaches examining hierarchical status in image-text relations (Martinec and Salway 2005) offer useful methodologies for assessing advertisements and diagrammatic imagery,

they fall short in accounting for the autonomous power of the image. Let me draw this back quickly. Minton's illustrations of the Corsican landscape, it could be argued, operate as art, in the sense of bringing the qualities of *illustration as art* to the fore. This is not to define the works as non-illustrations, as works of fine art masquerading as illustration; rather, that they call for a mode of viewing that extends beyond the text-image structural relationship and admittedly calls upon a mode of viewing that fosters aesthetic and intellectual deliberation. They request a viewer's contemplation, possibly (for some) a disinterested contemplation.^[7] Potentially, they pull the viewer away from the text. The full-page landscape illustrations in 'landscape' format subvert normative reading orientation demanding the reader to rotate the book 90 degrees to view, thus shifting the role of the reader to contemplative viewer. The eight colour plates present themselves as distinctive and exclusive to the remaining 90 or so black and white images. Without titles, unanchored, their independence from the specificities of Ross's text is pushed further, thus augmenting something of their autonomy.

Registers of autonomy: *Time Was Away* and the modernist landscape

Time Was Away reveals a register of text-image relationships stretching from autonomous to supportive. I marshal the term autonomy here, in that it helps manage the criteria of 'enlargement' and/or 'enrichment', the proposal being that autonomy does not preclude enlargement – on the contrary, it is possible to see autonomy as instrumental in enlargement. It is easily assumed that self-serving autonomous illustration must stymie qualities of enlargement, that abstraction from the specificities of the text disrupts a reader's experience. However, in the case of *Time Was Away*, to problematize the immediate semantic disjunctions around text-image relations is to forfeit the greater objective of the book, which is to frame holistically a broader context, seen through both author's and illustrator's eyes.

While some of Minton's illustrations *do* relate closely to scenes described by Ross, others operate autonomously and expansively, evidencing a register of autonomy stretching from independent to supportive. There are cases where the proximity of images to text seemingly defies logic; I exemplify several below. Other semi-autonomous images invite the reader to reconstruct a text-image dialogue, whereby fragments of imagery and fragments of description resonate, but require cross-referencing and reconstructing. An image may evoke a paragraph from an earlier chapter implicitly, hinting at Ross's descriptions, thereby flirting with the reader's memory, and yet, initiating a productive re-imaging of the scene; and vice versa, passages from Ross summon images across the book.^[8] For example, the chapter 'Homecoming' (1948: 74–76) describes the bustling morning scene in the town of Ajaccio, and yet Minton's accompanying facing image *Landscape Near Ajaccio* (Figure 1, p. 75) pictures a nearby rural landscape, unrelated to descriptions of the market, the harbour, cafés, etc. Yet, intriguingly, when we study Minton's drawing, we are cast back to Ross's description some forty-three pages earlier, of the mountain road to Porto Vecchio. Ross writes of the earlier scene:

There is less cactus now, but alternate belts of olive, ilex and pine, interspersed with patches of desiccated scrub and grey rock, under whose shade donkeys lie stretched out. They scatter at the sound of the bus, their nervous, over-sensitive feet knocking loose stones onto the road. (Ross 1948: 32)

Ross's scene resonates with Minton's later image depicting the rural road, the donkey and olive groves. The placing of *Untitled* (Colour Plate 7, facing page 160) (Figure 2) likewise pictures scenery disconnected to its neighbouring text describing a chanteuse and events in bars. As one of the colour plates, its presence is pronounced and lures the reader away from Ross's separate narrative. By this point in the book, though, the reader recognizes that the relationship between text and image is not always predictable. But, how might we better understand these disjunctions? First, the images are contrapuntal – additive, signifying breadth – poetic and suggestive. They emphasize that the representation of Corsica is captured from two subjectivities, at times concordant, at times discrete. Second, they highlight the distinct artistic credentials of each medium. It is interesting that the points at which these disjunctions are most conspicuous coincide with an autonomous and qualitatively 'fine' art to Minton's illustrations. Unlike the black and white narrative illustrations depicting anecdotal events, *Untitled* (Colour Plate 7) (Figure 2) actuates an artistic modernism that vehemently separates itself from the descriptive documentary prose facing the image. To call this work (and others in the book) modernist is to raise significant questions not only about *Time Was Away* but also around the percolation of modernism to wider publics mid-century via illustration, and the cross-fertilization of fine art and illustration. The proceeding analyses open out some possible treatments.

Landscape, illustration, modernism

Minton had absorbed modernism via his contemporaries in London, but also via his interest in contemporary European art.^[9] Following an earlier fascination with Samuel Palmer's landscapes, he became interested in Eugene Berman, Pavel Tchelitchew and Graham Sutherland. Minton greatly admired the art of Sutherland as well as his writings, which called for artists to pursue a poetic drive, alongside the objective study of landscape (Sutherland 1936). For Minton, the objectivity embraced by Sutherland became a central guiding tenet and he would come to dismiss abstraction, claiming that 'the greatest painting has always been made from a real love of the object' (Martin 2007: 95). The modernism pursued by Minton admonished the trajectory of what came to be designated as a 'pure' form of abstraction in Clement Greenberg's ([1960] 1982) theorization of Modernism. Greenberg's theory identified modernism in the arts wherein disciplines investigated the specificities and unique qualities of the medium itself – thus, painting's concern should be with 'the ineluctable flatness of the support' and the particularities of pigment, surface and the two-dimensionality inherent to painting. The prioritization of formalism over content, something which had already been espoused by English critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry (their essays most likely known to Minton), meant that the pursuit of content, of picturing the

social world and the objective visual character of the world as it manifests itself in reality was redundant. For the reader whose allegiances lie with illustration, the Greenbergian formalist trajectory, which came to critical prominence in supporting the nominated zenith of Modernist painting, American abstraction, raises some interesting questions. For one, could Greenbergian Modernism accommodate illustration? Perhaps not. Besides, illustration was a critical target for Greenberg. He derided the illustrations of Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish in his 1939 essay 'Avant-garde and kitsch'. We may also ask, was illustration, as conceived with its function of elucidation^[10] and maintaining figurative and realist traditions, significant in opposing Modernism? Such questions resonate with my earlier remarks around the cross-fertilization of illustration and fine art and may help pursue new thinking around modernism in the visual arts. We might also ask, does the genre of landscape and its traditions somehow fall in with the task of illustration? Are there commonalities? Does the idea of landscape as the illumination/elucidation of the scene chime with the role of illustration as elucidation?

Charles Harrison's essay 'The effects of landscape' points to the paradox of pictorial depth as it pertains to modern landscape. For the pictorial tradition of landscape, depth is a constitutive element owing to its being essential in the optical perception of spatial relations inherent to viewing land. He argues,

the apparent paradox of modern landscape [...] is that to be viewable as a picture within the limits of the genre it must establish reference to a relatively deep space, while to be viewed as significantly modern it must undercut that very form of figure-ground relationship in terms of which the illusion of deep space is traditionally established. (Harrison 2002: 218)

Greenbergian Modernism, with its propensities to surface, flatness, two-dimensionality and abstraction, conflicts with the landscape tradition. Depth is one element of a broader dimension of social reality apparent to landscape rejected by Modernism, with its call to abstraction and disinterested viewing practices.^[11] Modernism renders ideological 'effectiveness' (the picture as signifier of landscape) impotent. For Harrison, the dilemma can, however, be countered. A landscape art of substance addresses its scene, not necessarily topographically, but by way of situating the notional viewer as attendant to the landscape and, importantly, in the presence of the artist. Thus, the viewer recognizes the 'critical form of thematization between making and seeing' (Harrison 2002: 229). This process involves the viewer's sustained negotiation between surface and scene, thereby producing a dialectical critical reflexivity. This alternative couching of modernist endeavour helps evaluate certain illustrations in *Time Was Away*. In a shift away from his earlier romantic leanings, underlying much of Minton's output for the book is what Lewis noted as 'a dry and factual documentary value' (1949: 53). This realist factuality is reinforced by and melds with the topographical; yet, formalist inflections draw the viewer to artistic effects, the technical and the indexical.

Minton's colour plate *Untitled* (Colour Plate 7) (Figure 2) exemplifies the concerns. It sits incongruently within the chapter 'Le Roi Jerome' dedicated to the description of a music bar. In contrast to the neighbouring text, the visual scene, autonomous, presents a rugged, natural coastal landscape twisting around connected bays, devoid of human presence. The foreground and mid-ground are dominated by angular rock structures, expressionist and post-cubist in appearance. Attention is readily drawn to the formal properties of pen and ink, and colour. This, as with the book's other lithographs, bring us close to the original indexical qualities of pen and ink – Minton's loose handling of colour and edges, and the confident fluidity of line. A rock central in the foreground, decorated in yellow, and distinctive, depicts flat planes over which are linear striations of black and brown ink, sometimes dotted, as if to conjure up cartographic markings. Its form is sculptural as if chiselled by some contemporary of Minton. To its left and in contradistinction to its angularity and flat planes, igneous-like forms in black pen are set on a brown background, this brown denoting the significant land mass that projects around the mid-ground and background. To the right, through the mid-ground and background, brown masses laid on top of blue ink form a lighter greyish hue indicating aerial perspective and presenting some illusion of depth.

While emphasizing formalist 'effects', Minton concurrently accommodates pictorial depth. Looking on the page we bridge both surface and the illusion of depth. At times a two-dimensional reading claims the viewer as certain details stymie our sense of a 'traditional perspectival' landscape – the difficulties ascertaining the progression of recession of the central land mass as it moves from mid ground to background. Furthermore, the curious flick of black line spewing out from the mid-ground rock formation to marry with lines denoting striations on top of the land-mass in the background presents an abstract proposition. How to make sense of this detail, and the ambiguous spurting forms springing from the top of a neighbouring rock? A solution is to enact the imaginary role of viewer/spectator, of being in the landscape with Minton witnessing his thematization of scene via pictorial means (see Harrison 2002).^[12] These expressive marks place us both *in* the landscape with Minton, as well as positioning us as viewers, beholding the material surface of the book's flat, inky page. The image moves well beyond topography. Its autonomous capacity shines a light on the illustrator's endeavour as artist; yet, a broader 'enlargement' and 'enrichment' of the text is not discounted.

The image *Untitled* (Colour Plate 4) (Figure 3) more forcibly extends the depiction of the landscape as defined by the natural. Prior to its examination, it is helpful to be reminded of the ontological scope of land(scape) as object. The parameters of enquiry proposed by D. W. Meinig in his 1979 essay 'The beholding eye: Ten versions of the same scene' are useful. Meinig's ten orders are landscape as 'nature', 'habitat', 'artefact', 'system', 'problem', 'wealth' and prescient to the context of this essay, 'history', 'ideology', 'place' and 'aesthetic'. One-to-nine remind us that beyond the aesthetic (which has undoubtedly claimed a dominant role in the artistic

representation of landscape) other criteria may meaningfully assess what we confront when we behold the land. Minton's *Untitled* (Colour Plate 4) (Figure 3) (which was the foundation for his painting *Melon Sellers, Corsica* (1948))^[13] signifies content that presses beyond the aesthetic. As with other works mentioned, this, of two Corsican women in conversation, sits autonomously from Ross's text, the image being sandwiched between a historical interlude and a description of a walk into the hills above Olmeto. Notably, nowhere does Ross describe a scene of two women melon sellers conversing on a beach. As with *Untitled* (Colour Plate 7) (Figure 2), an illusion of deep space is promoted, this time via exaggerated foreshortening emphasized by the oversized fruit in the foreground. Naturalistic perspectival depth is further unsettled by the ambiguous scale of objects and people in the mid-to-background area of the beach. The small scale of the seated figures on the left beneath the boat are inconsistent with the more distant standing figures on the right, and the latter even more so with the moored boat opposite, positioned behind the seated figures.

But these are details. More arresting is the central dominance of the two women seated in conversation. As if sculpted, they appear like casts embedded in the landscape. The formalist effects are writ large – the women's faces in profile recalling ancient classical art, and possibly the island's Greek legacy, Minton's line chiselling out facial features and scratching out shadows in the sand. But this amplified formal scheme and its artistic autonomy in relation to the text should not be read alone; for one wonders about the relationship of the figures to each other, to the landscape and place of Corsica. The figure-ground relationship has to be lodged back into the landscape of Corsica and its context if one accepts that the decorative scheme is not the sole rationale of the work. Meinig's categories of 'place', 'ideology' and 'history' impel us to consider Minton's realism – the allusion to real people in a real landscape impinged with context. A striking detail is the chiselled facial lines, more like deep-set scars; and the close reader of the book will have seen their echo in the full-page illustration *Bastia – Bomb Damage* (Figure 4), where deeply jagged fissures in the recently bombed-out buildings picture the consequences of war.

Porto Vecchio (Figure 5) assists further in repositioning the notion of depth and content to a modernist schema. Minton's application of deep space offers a different resolution to the paradox noted by Harrison above. Unlike the aforementioned colour plates, its subject, the depiction of a shore, is complementary to the immediate facing text. Ross describes the shore,

Littered with dead fish, their mouths bared in the look of soldiers come upon dead in the battlefield, and, round about, rusty steel hoops lay by huge piles of cork, stored like shell cases the whole length of the beach. Anchors, washed up boats, gutted hulls, and huge red buoys straddled the green saucer of sea, paraphernalia no longer wanted; a few yards into the water a charred chair and a rusty table sat waiting for the occupant, macabre and eternal. (Ross 1948: 36)

Minton's beach aligns congruously with Ross's description, perhaps most meaningfully in the way the landscape is punctuated not by the natural order of Corsica – its vegetation, heat, geology and so on – but, rather, by the detritus of human life. Evoking not the natural, but the social history of the island, an anchor set large in the foreground punctures the landscape. Not only does its large-scale cast diagonally across most of the page (as if to resist an unfettered primary aesthetic response to natural aspects of the scene), one of its barbs literally punctures the body of the land. The barb, staked into what looks like driftwood, evokes a claim to the land; Ross's references to 'soldiers', 'the battlefield' and 'shell cases' elicit the troubled history of Corsica – its invasions, occupations, resistances and various claims to sovereignty – the vested interests of the Greeks, Romans, French, Genoese, and British, as well as Vichy France, fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, the French Resistance, the Allies with the US military in the context of the Second World War. Historical depth percolates through much of *Time Was Away* via both text and image.

Visually, the marriage of depth (as bulwark of the landscape tradition) to formalist effects can be seen in other topographical illustrations such as *Propriano – Timber and Lighthouse* where line, structural organization and skewed perspective present stylistic drama. Perhaps then, such reformulations of perspectival depth help us to reconsider alternatives to flatness as a criterion of modernism. While some of Minton's contemporaries were antagonizing the tradition of perspectival depth by flattening out the picture plane, Minton's illustrations provide an alternative resolution to the question of depth and the modernist landscape. That this appears to issue out of the modern medium of cinema makes this all the more convincing. Works such as *Porto Vecchio* (Figure 5) can be aligned with the compositional cinematic techniques of the close-up and deep focus being adapted by Orson Welles. We know that Minton regularly visited the cinema with fellow illustrator and friend Susan Einzig and, as Spalding suggests, he was likely inspired by new cinematic compositional techniques (2005: 117). Andre Bazin ([1958] 2005: 28) was yet to argue that deep focus courted an enhanced reality and a democratic reading of the image, but it is tempting to think that Minton with his commitment to realism and the object (to all its weight as signifying potential) recognised the possibilities of picturing deep space.

For Minton (as for Lehmann), illustration certainly had a sustained appeal in opening out art to reach mass audiences. During the late 1940s, the young critic John Berger was observing the democratic potential of illustration. He would come to support Minton by including works in his 1952 exhibition *Looking Forward* (Hyman 2001: 115). At this point it is worth connecting our discussion to Berger's later interest in Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', to its concern with the emancipation of art via reproducibility and its qualitative assessment of the revelatory character of film – 'film has enriched our field of perception' (Benjamin [1936] 1992). To make the connection is to press further upon the question of the purpose of illustration in the age of the moving image, but also, to see the potential in the notion of 'enlargement' and 'enrichment' in Lewis's terms, and in the case of Minton, to recognize the power of illustration as art. We see the artistic endeavour of Minton's *Time Was Away* drawing variously on autonomy, modernist effects, realism and a topographical elucidation via the vehicle

of book illustration with its broad audience. Significantly, in terms of the illustration of landscape, that endeavour reveals a traditional conception of depth in landscape being revised through a modernism embracing the modern language of cinema. Significantly, in terms of book illustration, it helps us recognize Minton's work as sophisticated in its handling of form and content, text and image, the artistic and the social, the imaginative and the real.

Some concluding observations, which have been made possible owing to the recent publication of *John Minton: A Centenary*, can throw more light on the links between Minton's illustrations for *Time Was Away* and related paintings he worked up from these. Specifically, we can now see that my reading above of the illustration of Corsican Women (Figure 3) brings that realist aspect of the illustration in even sharper focus. The painting *Melon Sellers, Corsica* (1948)^[14] carries forward most of the compositional structure of the earlier illustration; yet, we now see the women pushed further back in space, and the previously depicted details of their faces (those chiselled facial lines echoing the scars and fissures of bomb damaged buildings) receding in significance, demoted in favour of an overarching decorative aesthetic accentuating pattern, flatness and the spatial contradictions of depth. The comparison draws closer attention to the key focus of the illustration – the faces of the Corsican women, their facing each other immersed in their private discourse around their social reality. The clarity of this social aspect hints perhaps of the qualities Berger came to notice in Minton's illustration. Martin and Spalding note that Minton's work was not explicitly political, and yet he had an anti-authoritarian stance (2017: 65–72). Moreover, those authors note how his homosexuality^[15] certainly affected his consideration of art. While this article has focused on landscape, *Time Was Away* featured portraits of local Corsicans,^[16] which reveal Minton's interest in men. These portraits, along with other illustrations in the book, draw attention to book illustration as a discursive vehicle to articulate the subtleties of social existence at many levels. For Minton, that could only be conveyed effectively via a deeper engagement with the subject. He remarked in a lecture delivered in June 1952,

I do not believe you can paint any old thing: you cannot set up the old *batterie de cuisine* and believe if you go on cooking long enough something will happen [...]. For it's something to do with having a real love of the subject, having a real anxiety it will escape: not just tolerating it as a possible subject, but loving it. A man who paints puts his heart on the wall, and in the painting is the man's life: he makes the subject his own, a love of certain things, people, moods, atmosphere, shapes, forms, landscape. (Martin and Spalding 2017: 85–86)

This intensity of engagement with 'certain things, people, moods, atmosphere, shapes, forms, landscape' is distinctive in his illustrations for *Time Was Away*.

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IMAGE LIST

Figure 1: John Minton, *Landscape Near Ajaccio* (illustration for *Time Was Away*, p. 75).

Figure 2: John Minton, *Untitled* (illustration for *Time Was Away*, colour plate 7 facing p. 160).

Figure 3: John Minton, *Untitled* (illustration for *Time Was Away*, colour plate 4 facing p. 64).

Figure 4: John Minton, *Bastia – Bomb Damage* (illustration for *Time Was Away*, p. 89).

Figure 5: John Minton, *Porto Vecchio* (illustration for *Time Was Away*, p. 37).

Notes

1. Minton tutored at Camberwell School of Art, Central School, and the Royal College of Art. See (Yorke 1988; Spalding 2005). [↑](#)
2. *Image* itself attests to the broadening significance of illustration during the period, with its remit to promote and enquire around illustration and the printed arts. Issued quarterly, *Image* was a reincarnation of *Alphabet and Image*. It shed a primary interest in typography for wider concerns with ‘the visual arts in their fine, applied, plastic, pure and other adjectival aspects’. Editor Robert Harling declared ‘a main editorial interest of *Image* will be English drawings’ (1949: 1). [↑](#)
3. See Figure 3 (facing page 64 in *Time Was Away*) and the sister painting *Melon Sellers, Corsica*, reproduced page 50 in Simon Martin and Frances Spalding (2017) *John Minton: A Centenary*. [↑](#)
4. I use Modernism, as opposed to modernism, to attend to the theoretical position advocated by Clement Greenberg in his ‘Modernist Painting’ (1960). Greenberg’s earlier essay ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’ (1939) aligned illustration with kitsch and advances earlier formalist theories such as those of Clive Bell and Roger Fry in the denigration of the illustrative in favour of the formalist preoccupation with aesthetic disinterestedness – a position that serves the principles of abstraction, or rather the critical superiority of abstraction. [↑](#)
5. Spalding thinks an affair was unlikely (2005: 108). [↑](#)
6. Jaleen Grove’s (2013) article ‘How to assess illustration aesthetically’ provides a useful starting point in its recognizing the explicit functions of illustration as central to an enquiry around the illustration as aesthetic image. [↑](#)
7. I am referring here to the philosophy of aesthetics that informed modernist critical theory. Via Kant, critics Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg posit that aesthetic emotion is the product of disinterested viewing – that formal qualities induce aesthetic pleasure rather than illustrated content and matters extraneous to the image. The theory has been contested (see Frascina and Harrison 1982). [↑](#)

8. Such cross-referencing reminds us of Barthes' *jouissance* and of the function of the 'writerly' text (1975). [↑](#)
9. Minton had visited Paris in 1938–39 and came to admire the work of the émigré Russians, Eugene Berman and Pavel Tchelitchew, alongside Picasso (see Middleton 1958; Yorke 1988; Spalding 2005). [↑](#)
10. The author recognizes the febrility and restrictive limitations of a definition of illustration that amounts to elucidation alone, hence the qualification 'as conceived'. Thanks to Jim Walker here for reminding me of illustration as decoration and more besides. [↑](#)
11. I thank Jim Walker for pointing out that 'lack of depth' is also a feature of folk and outsider art and that illustration, arguably, engages with this tradition of image-making more than the vagaries of the artworld. Arguably so, nevertheless, I am situating Minton here in a context of fine art, of debates around modernism, of his practice situated in the locus of art education (institutions such as Camberwell, Central and the R.C.A.) and a community of practitioners Minton was close to, many of whom were directly responding to modernism. [↑](#)
12. He points to the notion of an exemplary qualified viewer – one whom we may imagine being imagined by the artist at the point of composition. To utilize the conception may force us to imagine that on occasion the illustrator's intentions may be to arrest the viewer wholesale, to insatiate the viewer's pleasure in the visual alone. [↑](#)
13. See reproduction in *John Minton: A Centenary*, p. 50. Online reproduction available at <http://www.artnet.com/artists/john-minton/melon-sellers-corsica-NXJoXLprF5NjcXUyFjImsQ2>. [↑](#)
14. See notes 43 and 13. [↑](#)
15. Homosexuality was illegal in Britain during Minton's lifetime. [↑](#)
16. See his pen and ink portraits *Simon and Jean Paul* (p. 47) and *Dominique Santucci* (p. 73). [↑](#)

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LANDSCAPE NEAR AJACCIO

Fig. 1 John Minton *Landscape Near Ajaccio* (Illustration for *Time Was Away* p.75)



Fig. 2 John Minton *Untitled* (Illustration for *Time Was Away*, Colour Plate 7 facing p. 160)

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Fig. 3 John Minton *Untitled* (Illustration for *Time Was Away*, Colour Plate 4 facing p. 64)



Fig. 4 John Minton *Bastia – Bomb Damage* (Illustration for *Time Was Away*, p. 89)

Vertical line on the left side of the page.



Fig. 5 John Minton *Porto Vecchio* (Illustration for *Time Was Away*, p.37)

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