

The Pear in History, Literature, Popular Culture, and Art

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Abstract

The history of the pear is traced from antiquity to the present emphasizing its role in popular culture and art. The pear has long been admired in many cultures and, although never as popular as apple, remains one of the world's most admired temperate fruits.

INTRODUCTION

The pear is a truly wondrous hardy fruit, widely grown in the temperate regions of the world, with varied size, shape, texture, and flavors. The long-lived trees attain great size and are relatively easy-to-grow. Yet, we cannot ignore the fact that world production of pear is only about one-quarter that of apple, indicating that the appreciation of pear has not attained the universality or the depth of appeal of its better known relative. In many ways, the pear remains a problem fruit to growers and consumers. Producers have to contend with reduced hardiness; early flowering; fire blight, codling moth, and psylla susceptibility; and the inherent difficulty of handling a crop that must be carefully picked and then ripened to achieve maximum quality. To the consumer, tasting a pear is an adventure fraught with anxiety. As the opera lover yearns to witness, but seldom, if ever, experiences the ultimate synthesis of music and drama, so the pear connoisseur strives to obtain, but seldom gets to consume, the perfect fruit at its optimum state of maturity and stage of ripeness, to produce the perfect proportion of texture, flavor, acidity, and sweetness. The pear can be a stately ornamental and the 'Bradford' pear and other selections of *Pyrus calleryana*, are admired as a street tree for its elegant, pyramidal form, red fall color, and white flowers. But, alas, the foul scented flowers, a distinguishing characteristic of *Pyrus*, may be objectionable in mass plantings. We, who love this fruit—fresh, cooked, spiced, fermented, dried, liquid, or even grown in a bottle and smothered by brandy—are convinced that all attempts to overcome any defects, natural or imposed, are worthy of the struggle and we are proud to be a part of this sublime activity.

While the present symposium attempts to present the latest horticultural progress in the world of the pear, the purpose of this article is to review the contribution of the pear to literature, popular culture, and art. For, as horticulture truly provides food for body and soul, so the discussion of each of the gifts of Pomona must be considered not only from the mundane point of view of our palette, our stomach, and our livelihood, but we must also pay homage to our fruits from the broader perspective of our humanity.

ORIGIN

The name *pear*, from the Anglo Saxon *pere* or *peru hu*, is derived from Latin *pirum*; thus, *poire* in French, *peer* in Dutch, *paere* in Danish, *paron* in Swedish and *pera* in Spanish and Italian. The German and Danish name is *Birne* but it is also derived from the Latin with merely a consonant substitution of *b* for *p*. The Greek name for wild pear is *acras*; cultivated pear is *apios*. Plutarch (50–120) explains the derivation of the Greek names for pear. In his *Greek Questions* he asks why boys of the Argives, playing at a certain festival, are called *Ballachrades* (*ballo*, I throw, *achras*, a wild pear). His answer is because their ancestors were nourished on wild pears. The name *apion* derives from *Apia*, the earlier name of the Peloponnesus. The Chinese word for wild pear is *lee* and the cultivated form is *li*. The Japanese word for pear is *nashi*.

The origin and early history of pear is well described in *The Pears of New York* by Hedrick (1921) and this review draws heavily on this great compilation. The genus *Pyrus*,

native to the Northern Hemisphere of the Old World, consists of about 20 species of which half are found in Europe, North Africa, and Asia minor; and half in Asia. These have given rise to two groups of domesticated pears, the soft-fleshed European *Pyrus communis* and the crisp-fleshed Asiatic pears, principally *P. pyrifolia* (*P. serotina*). The pear has continually been a common fruit in the West as well and is considered part of the cultural heritage of Europe. In fact, in present day Spain there is a juvenile expression, *Esto es "La Pera"* (this is the pear), when referring to a particularly wonderful or enjoyable situation or experience. The precise origin of the European pear is still unknown but it has been with us since prehistoric times and dried slices have been unearthed in Swiss cave dwellings of the Ice Age. In Asia, the culture of pear goes back 2500–3000 years and has been chronicled in Chinese writings (*Shi Jing*) from at least 1200 years ago. Pear was long considered a delicacy for the wealthy along with the peach and apricot. A famous book *Tsee Ming Yau Su*, written by Chia Shi-yi in the 6th century summarizes pear growing in the previous 1500 year period (Shen, 1980). Although seed of pear was found as early as the year 200–300 in Japan, the earliest written records are a chapter published in 720 from *Nihon-shoki* (*Japanese Book of Records*). In 1860 by the end of the Edo period (1603–1867), more than 150 cultivars had been recorded and pear was widely planted. During the Edo period, pears were commonly found on the corners of properties to ward off misfortune. The Northeastern corner was considered the Devil's quarter where the demon would enter and thus gates were avoided there. However, when a gate was necessary, a pear tree was planted as a talisman. The basis for the pear as a charm to ward off evil is that *nashi* the Japanese word for pear sounds like the word meaning "does not exist" although the Kanji characters for the two terms are different. While illustrations of pear are rare in Japan, the pear flower is found on the crest of an old dynasty (Lee) in Korea.

THE PEAR IN LITERATURE AND AGRICULTURAL WRITINGS

Antiquity

The first mention of the pear is found in Homer's (9th century BCE) epic poem, *The Odyssey*, confirming that the pear was cultivated in Greece as early as three thousand years ago. The pear is included as one of the "gifts of the gods" which grew in the garden of Alcinöus, the King of the Phaeacians, a legendary country:

And without the courtyard by the door is a great garden, of four plough-gates, and a hedge runs round on either side. And there grow tall trees blossoming, pear-trees and pomegranates, and apple-trees with bright fruits, and sweet figs, and olives in their bloom. ... Pear upon pear waxes old, and apple on apple, yea, and cluster ripens upon cluster of the grape, and fig upon fig ... These were the splendid gifts of the gods in the palace of Alcinöus.

(*The Odyssey Book VII, Hedrick, 1921*).

The grouping of pear, apple, and fig would persist in early Christian iconography, probably as a metaphor for sacred trees.

Theophrastus of Eresos (370–286 BCE) makes several references to pear (Hedrick, 1921). Wild and cultivated sorts are mentioned and cultivated types are named. Pear propagation from seeds, roots, and cuttings is discussed and the observation is made that plants grown from seed "lose the character of their kind and produce degenerate kinds." Grafting is described. The point is made that the nature of the ground regulates the distance of planting pears; lower slopes of hills are recommended as the best sites for pear orchards. Root pruning, girdling the stems, and driving iron pegs in the trunk and other methods of "punishing trees" hasten bearing. The necessity of cross-pollination is recognized. The growth of the pear on various soils and in diverse situations is compared. A peculiar red and hairy worm infesting pears is observed as are diseases (rots) and seasonal afflictions such as freezing, scorching, and injury from winds. Pruning receives much attention:

With the Phocian pear, on the other hand, pruning improves its habit as a tree, but

not its crop, since without pruning the tree shoots up too high and fails to branch and is weak; with pruning it sends out branches and acquires the habit of a tree. Perhaps however this habit would contribute to good fruit production, since as the tree gets stronger concoction is better carried out.

(*De Causis Plantarum II, 15.6* from Einarson and Link, 1956)

Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BCE), known as Cato the Censor, is the author of the famous agricultural manual *De Agri Cultura*, the oldest extant specimen of a treatise in Latin prose. It includes practical aspects of crop and livestock farming, the care of estates, the duties of masters and female housekeepers, the care of slaves. He writes extensively on pomological subjects and describes six types of pear.

The treatise *De Re Rustica* of Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), written in the form of a dialogue, emphasizes the dependence of the commonwealth on a sound agriculture. He gives directions for grafting pear, including inarching, and discusses storage of the fruit.

Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) is the author of *Historia Naturalis*, a monumental encyclopedic compilation of science and ignorance published in 77. Although Pliny appears overly credulous, his *Natural History* is the best known and most widely referred sourcebook on "classical" natural history and coverage of pear is extensive:

For the same reason (as in the case of apples) in the case of pears the name Superba (proud) is given; these are small, but earliest ripe. The Crustumia are most pleasant to all; next to these the Falerna, so called from the wine, since they have such abundance of sap or milk, as it is called; among these are those which others call Syrian from their dark color. Of the rest, some are called by one name in one place and by another in another. Some by their Roman names reveal their discoverers, as the Decimiana, and what they call the Pseudo-Decimiana, derived from that; the Dolabelliana with their long stalk; the Pomponiana of protuberant (full-breasted) shape; the Liceriana; the Seviana and those which spring from these the Turraniana, distinguished by their length of stalk; the Favoniana of reddish color, a little larger than the Superba; the Lateriana; the Aniciana, which ripens in late autumn and has a pleasant acid flavor. The Tiberiana are so called because the Emperor Tiberius was very fond of them. They get more color from the sun and grow to larger size, but otherwise are the same as the Liceriana. These bear the name of the country from which they come; the Amerina, latest of all; the Picentina; the Numantina; the Alexandria; the Numidiana; the Greek and among them the Tarentine, the Signina, which others from their color call Testacea (like tiles, or brick-colored), like the Onychina (onyx) and Purpurea (purple). From their odor are named the Myrapia (myrrh-pear), Laurea (laurel), Nardina (nard); from their season the Hordearia (barley, at the barley-harvest); from the shape of their neck the Ampullacea (flask). The Coriolana and Bruttia have family-names (Coriolanus, Brutus); the Cucurbitina (gourd-pears) are so called from their bitter taste. The origin of the name is unknown in the case of the Barbarica and the Veneria which they call colored; the Regia, which are attached to a very short stalk; the Patricia; the Vaconia, which are green and oblong. Virgil mentions also the Volema, taken from Cato, who names also the Sementiva and the Mustea.

(*Hedrick, 1921, translation by H. H. Yeames, from Historia Naturalis XV15*)

Pear as Temptation

In the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 1:26–30, 2:7–25) the first humans placed in the Garden of Eden committed sin by eating the fruit of a forbidden tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve beguiled by a serpent to eat the fruit also offers it Adam who consumes it as well. The punishment was horrifying. Adam and Eve were evicted from the paradise (garden), man was destined to work by the sweat of his brow, and women to bear children in pain. Even the snake was included, destined to slither forever on his belly without legs. The "original sin" of Adam and Eve was to become a cornerstone of Christian theology. However, the name of the fruit tree is not mentioned in the biblical text, but as early as the 13th century illustrations of the fruit suggest apples

and by the middle of the 15th century the tree of paradise is consistently portrayed as an apple tree (Faust, 1994).

The pear too, was destined to be included, not as a forbidden fruit, but as a temptation for sin by Augustine (354-430) of Hippo, a city in ancient Numidia, North Africa, now considered part of Algeria. Augustine, known as Saint Augustine since the 7th century, was one of the most prolific and influential of the early church fathers. In one of his most famous works known as the *Confessions* (*Testimony* might be a better translation), Augustine spends about half of book 2 on an introspective analysis of the petty theft of some pears committed when he was an adolescent (Wills, 1999). Despite the fact that Augustine had legitimate access to more and better pears, Augustine and his fellows steal some inferior fruit only to dump it before pigs. In an attempt to analyze this senseless and mean spirited act, Augustine in a psychological analysis concludes that the source of the crime was due to mutual provocation induced by a love of fellowship with his comrades rather than evil for its own sake. He compares his sin to that of Adam, who likewise consumes the apple out of a choice not to disappoint Eve but to court her favor.

Medieval

The introduction of the pear in France is unknown. It may have been independently domesticated as two cultivated species grow wild or it may have been introduced by the Greeks who founded Marseille in 600 BCE, but is more likely that the pear was introduced by the Romans. Charlemagne (742–814) the ruler of the Franks in the ninth century, is credited with establishing the first collection of pear in France. The *Capitularies* or “lists of laws” includes comments on pear cultivation in the king’s orchards; orchardists are commanded to plant pears of distinct kinds for distinct purposes:

Plant pear trees whose products, because of pleasant flavor, could be eaten raw, those which will furnish fruits for cooking, and finally, those which mature late to serve for use in winter.

Capitulaire de Villis, Chapter LXX from Hedrick, 1921.

Renaissance

The great Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) reveled in collecting cryptic puns, aphorisms, fables, prophecies, jests, mottoes, and fantastic tales. *Codex Arundel 67* contains several botanical fables including one involving the laurel, the myrtle, and the pear:

The laurel and the myrtle on seeing the pear tree being cut down, cried out in a loud voice: ‘O pear tree where are you going? Where is the pride that you had when you were laden with ripe fruit? Now you will no longer make shade for us with your thick foliage.’ The pear tree replied: ‘I am going with the husbandman who is cutting me down and who will take me to the workshop of a good sculptor, who by his art will cause me to assume the form of the god Jove, and I shall be dedicated in a temple and worshipped by men in place of Jove. While you are obliged to remain always maimed and stripped of your branches [while] men shall set around me in order to do me honor” (Emboden, 1987).

We know from the 1597 *Herball* of John Gerard(e), Shakespeare’s contemporary, that pears were common in England in the late 1500s. He introduces the subject in his chapter *Of the pearetree* as follows (modern spelling):

To write of pears and apples in particular, would require a particular volume: the stock or kindred of pears are not to be numbered: every country hath his peculiar fruit; myself know someone, curious in grafting and planting of fruits, who hath in one piece of ground, at the point of three score sundry sorts of pears, and those exceeding good; not doubting but if his mind had been to seek after multitudes, he might have gotten together the like number of those of worse kinds; besides the diversities of those that be wild, experience showeth sundry dry sorts: and therefore I think it not amiss to set down the figures of some few with their several titles, as well in Latin as English, and one general description for that, that might be said of many, which to describe apart were to send an

Owl to Athens, or to number those things that are without number.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) makes four references to pear, all either “absurd or unpleasant” suggesting that the Bard was not fond of them (Ellacombe, 1884):

as crest-fallen as a dried Pear.
Merry Wives of Windsor iv (5)101

I must have saffron to color the Warden pies.
Winter’s Tale iv(3)48

O, Romeo ... thou a Poperin Pear.
Romeo and Juliet ii(1)37

Your virginity, your old virginity, is like one of our French withered pears, it looks ill, it eats drily; marry, ‘tis a withered pear; it was formerly better; marry yet ‘tis a withered pear.
All’s Well that Ends Well i(1).

Shakespeare specifically mentions two kinds of pear, the Warden and the Poperin. The Warden may be a general name for large, long keeping, and stewing pears, and the name was said to come from the Anglo-Saxon *wearden*, to keep or preserve, an allusion to its lasting qualities. It may also be derived from Wardon Abbey, a Cistercian monastery in Bedfordshire funded in the 12th century where three pears appear on the armorial bearings of the Abbey. The Warden pies dyed with saffron were colored with cochineal in Victorian times according to Ellacomb (1884) and the custom persists in the popular dessert of France where pears are cooked in wine (Pear Lorraine). The Poperin pear, described by the herbalist Parkinson as being of two types, summer and winter, both of them very good, firm, dry, somewhat spotted and brown on the outside, may have been a Flemish pear introduced by the Rector of Popering.

Modern Time

The modern history of the pear in Belgium, France, England, and Central and Western Europe, as well as America is well covered in Hedrick (1921) and readers are referred to this great work for a detailed review of more recent pomological history. The pear has a great tradition in France and there appears to be an explosion of diversity from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Thus, in 1540, Charles Estienne lists 16 pears with brief descriptions in an agricultural work entitled *Seminarium*. De Serres, known as the French father of agriculture, describes various types in *Le Théâtre d’Agriculture* (1608):

There is no tree among all those planted which abounds so much in kinds of fruits as the pear tree, whose different sorts are innumerable and their different qualities wonderful. For from the month of May to that of December pears good to eat are found on the trees. In considering particularly the different shapes, sizes, colors, flavors, and odors of the pear, who will not adore the wisdom of the creator. Pears are found round, long ‘goderonnees’ pointed, blunt, small, and large. Gold, silver, vermilion, and satin green are found among the pears. Sugar, honey, cinnamon, clove, flavor them. They smell of musk, amber, and chive. In short, so excellent are the fruits that an orchard would not be worth while in a place where pear trees do not thrive.

Le Lecier, an attorney of the King at Orleans, collected fruits and describes 254 pears in his catalogue of 1628. Subsequently, 197 sorts are described by Merlet in 1667, 67 by La Quintinye in 1690, 119 by Duhamel in 1768, 102 by the Chartreuse fathers in 1775, 120 by Tollard in 1851, and 238 by Noisette in 1833. Leroy in 1867 claimed 900 cultivars with 3000 names. Synonymy has continued to be a problem with pear. ‘Bartlett’, the most famous pear in North America, was discovered in 1770 in England and named ‘Williams Bon Crétien’ and is still known as ‘Williams’ in Europe.

Finally, in modern literature, the pear is often referred to in passing for various reasons and one example will suffice. In Charles Dickens' autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*, the unctuous Uriah Heep, after being spurned by Agnes Wickfield, expresses his feelings in terms pomological:

I suppose you have sometimes plucked a pear before it was ripe, Master Copperfield? I did that last night, but it'll ripen yet! It only wants attending to. I can wait.

SYMBOLISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

Sacred Symbol

In Egyptian antiquity the pear was sacred to Isis. In Christian symbolism the pear frequently appears in connection with Christ's love for mankind (Jakes, 1961). In China, the pear is symbolic of justice, longevity, purity, wisdom, and benevolent administration. In Korea, the pear typifies grace, nobility, and purity, and the pear tree, comfort. There are a number of Korean legends which involve the pear as endowing fertility to women, good fortune in exams, wisdom, and health, while the pear flower, by its whiteness, is symbolic of the face of beautiful women and the transience of petals is a metaphor for the sadness and coldness of departure. In the Western "language of flowers" the pear blossom is the birthday flower for August 17 symbolizing affection (Ferguson, 1954). In many parts of the world the pear symbolizes the human heart which it resembles.

Verse and Song

There are a number of references to pear in verse and song. In *Les Adeuineaux amoureux*, printed at Bruges about 1478 (Opie and Opie, 1941 p. 343) there is an interesting puzzle verse:

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Trois moines passoient</i> | <i>Three monks were passing</i> |
| <i>Trois poires pendoient</i> | <i>Three pears were hanging</i> |
| <i>Chascum en prist une</i> | <i>Each took one</i> |
| <i>Et s'en demouras deux.</i> | <i>And two remained.</i> |

L'Explication: L'un des moines avoit nom Chascun.

Explanation: One of the monks was named Each.

There is a similar puzzle verse in English:

*Twelve pears hanging high,
Twelve knights riding by;
Each knight took a pear,
And yet left eleven there.*

One solution: Taking advantage of the pear/pair homonym there were eleven pairs of pears plus a single pear and that eleven knights took one pear and one took a pair of them. The other improbable solution, suggested by the French poem, may be that Eachknight is the name of one of the riders.

A charming English nursery rhyme (Opie and Opie, 1941, p. 330) describes a fantastic nut tree bearing a golden pear:

*I had a little nut tree,
Nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg
And a golden pear;
The King of Spain's daughter
Came to visit me,
And all for the sake
Of my little nut tree.*

The illusion to the King of Spain's daughter may refer to the mad Juana of Castile who visited the court of Henry VII in 1506; the Infante de Castille is the origin of the famous misnomer, the "Elephant and Castle," an underground station in London.

The most well-known reference to the pear is the popular English Christmas song *The Twelve Days of Christmas* (Opie and Opie, 1941, p. 119) a "listing" song that begins:

*(On) the first day of Christmas
My true love sent to me,
A partridge in a pear tree*

This line is repeated twelve times as the gifts increase each day (two turtledoves to twelve drummers). The refrain "partridge in a pear tree" may be merely an alliterative conceit, but birds are often associated with pear trees in mosaics and there may be an older association. However, the redleg partridge which commonly perches on trees was not introduced into France until about 1770 which suggests that the song has a French origin.

Music

Erik Satie (1866–1925), the celebrated French composer, titled a piano suite *Trois morceaux en forme de poire* (*Three pieces in the form of a pear*) in response to accusations that his music lacked structure. He later explained to Claude Debussy that if his suite was in the form of a pear, it couldn't be criticized as formless. Despite the title, the set contains seven pieces.

Political Metaphor

In the 1830s the brilliant French caricaturists including Honoré Daumier, Charles Philipon and Jean Ignace Grandville succeeded in making the pear a symbol for the rotund Louis Philippe who succeeded Louis XVIII and Charles X in the Bourbon restoration after the defeat of Napoleon 1815 (Kenney and Merriman, 1991). Louis Philippe's sizeable jowls gave his head a pear shape, which provided an irresistible target for the wicked crayons and pens of the political cartoonists of the day. The "Peer of France" became "the Pear (*Poire*) of France"; the King's initials L. P. corresponded to *La Poire*, which means "fat head" or "simpleton" in French slang. The image of Louis Philippe as a soft and bulbous piece of fruit that rots quickly became a metaphor for a corrupt greedy administration. The phallic association of the pear emphasized in the illustrations was generally understood and considered gleefully offensive. Both Daumier and Philipon were to serve jail sentences for their "pomographic" portrayals of Louis Philippe, which were considered *lése majesté*—violating the dignity of the king. Philipon's losing defense was that if the king's face did indeed resemble a pear, then all pears would necessarily be subject to prosecution. Philipon was fined 2000 francs in addition to his six months jail sentence! His four drawings penned at his trial, transforming the image of Louis Philippe (Fig. 1) to a pear and published in *La Caricature* (1831), helped to make the fruit an enduring symbol of the ill-fated monarch.

Gem Shape

The name for the shape of the pear is literally the fruit itself, as "pear-shaped" or "pyriform," which is the same thing in Latin. (Similarly, the color orange is derived from the name of the fruit and not the other way around.) Gems cut in the shape of a pear or teardrop are thus called "pear-shaped." In the 1949 musical comedy *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (based on the 1925 novel by Anita Loos and later made into a memorable film with Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell), Jule Styne alludes to the allure of pear-shaped diamonds in a famous lyric:

*Men grow cold as girls grow old,
and we all lose our charms in the end...
but square-cut or pear-shape,
these rocks don't lose their shape,
Diamonds are a girl's best friend.*

Body Type

The pear shape vs. apple shape has been used to describe typical body fat accumulation in humans. Those who store their weight around their middle (bulky midsection) are called apple shaped while those carrying extra weight around their hips or

thighs (midsection smaller than hips) are pear shaped. According to the American Heart Association, it is healthier to be pear shaped than apple shaped! The similarity of the pear to the human torso has given rise to a number of erotic drawings and posters that exploit this resemblance.

Alibi

The tragic case of Lizzie Borden, accused murderess of Fall River, Massachusetts, is one of the most sensational cases of the 19th century and is recounted in countless books, novels, a ballet, an opera, movies, a play, and memorialized in a macabre ditty:

Lizzie Borden took an axe

And gave her mother forty whacks;

When she saw what she had done

She gave her father forty-one.

The ditty is not quite accurate; the step-mother received 18 hatchet blows, and Mr. Borden only 11. Lizzie testified at the inquest that at the time her father was murdered, on a scorching August 4, 1892, she went up into a barn loft next to the house looking for lead to make sinkers for a planned fishing trip. At the critical time when her father was being "axed" she testified that she spent the time consuming three pears that she had collected from her back yard after eating one in the morning. She was acquitted. The pear cultivar is not mentioned in the accounts but they must have been delicious because both Mr. Borden and his brother-in-law also consumed them on that very day.

Pear as Medicine

The medicinal property of pears is first reported by Pliny who clearly did not think much of raw fruit:

All kinds of pears, as an aliment, are indigestible, to persons in robust health, even; but to invalids they are forbidden as rigidly as wine. Boiled, however, they are remarkably agreeable and wholesome, those of the Crustumium in particular. All kinds of pears, too, boiled with honey, are wholesome to the stomach. Cataplasms of a resolvent nature are made with pears, and a decoction of them is used to disperse indurations. They are efficacious, also, in cases of poisoning by mushrooms and fungi, as much by reason of their heaviness, as by the neutralizing effects of their juice.

The wild pear ripens but very slowly. Cut in slices and hung in the air to dry, it arrests looseness of the bowels, an effect which is equally produced by a decoction of it taken in drink; in which case the leaves are also boiled together with the fruit. The ashes of pear-tree wood are even more efficacious as an antidote to the poison of fungi.

A load of apples or pears, however small, is singularly fatiguing to beasts of burden; the best plan to counteract this, they say, is to give the animals some to eat, or at least to show them the fruit before starting.

Gerard summarizes the health properties of pear in his 1597 *Herball*:

All pears are cold, and all have a binding quality and an earthy substance; but the choke pears, and those that are harsh be more earthy, and the sweet ones less: which substance is so full of superfluous moisture in some, as that they cannot be eaten raw. All manner of pears bind and stop the belly, especially the Choke, and harsh ones, which are good to be eaten of those that have the laske and the bloody flix.

The harsh and austere pears may with good success be laid upon hot swellings in the beginning, as may be the leaves or the tree, which do both bind and cool.

Wine made of the juice of pears called in English Perry, is soluble, purgeth those that are not accustomed to drinke thereof; notwithstanding it is as wholesome a drink being taken in small quantity as wine; it comfourteth and warmeth the stomach, and causeth good digestion.

Culpeper (1660–1664), the infamous astrologist/herbalist, indicates that pear-trees are so well known that they need no description. He describes their "Government and Virtues" as follows:

This tree is under Venus. For their medicinal use, they are best discerned by their

taste. All the sweet and luscious sorts, whether cultivated or wild, help to move the belly downwards, more or less. Those that are hard and scour, do, on the contrary, bind the belly as much and the leaves do so also: those that are moist in some sort cool, but harsh and wild sorts much more, and are very good in repelling medicines; and if the wild sorts be boiled with mushrooms, it makes them less dangerous. If boiled with a little honey, they help much the oppressed stomach, as all sorts of them do, some more, some less; but the harsher sorts do more cool and bind, serving well to be bound to green wounds, to cool and stay the blood, and to heal up the wounds without further trouble, or inflammation. Wild Pears sooner close the lips of green wounds than others. (Culpeper's Complete Herbal, undated).

In Chinese medicine under the yin yang theory of opposites pears are also considered "cold," (apricots are "hot," apples are "neutral").

The reference to pears in the ancient herbals above suggests to me that neither Pliny, Gerard, nor Culpeper have ever personally eaten many pears, and their descriptions confirm my skepticism of the value of herbals. For myself, I find after a day of tasting ripe pears, the physiological action is just the opposite of "binding," and in the wording of the herbalists, I confirm that pears "purgeth."

The Pear in Art

The pear is common as an art object although much less so than the apple. Paintings of pear are found in the ruins of Pompeli (Fig. 2). The pear fruit is found in Roman mosaics and in sculpted fruit wreaths commonly used on sarcophagi. The symbolic use of pear was carried over in Christian art. In a sixth century church mosaic in Jordan, the pear tree is included as one of four sacred trees (Fig. 3). The pear is found in renaissance religious paintings, the most famous being "Madonna of the Pear" (Fig. 4) by Giovanni Bellini (1426–1516). Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527–1593) makes use of the pear shape to represent the nose in his fantastic portraits completely made up of fruit images. Pear cultivars are lovingly depicted in pomological illustrations including renaissance woodcuts in herbals, paintings, and engravings used to illustrate 17th, 18th, and 19th century fruit books, and tinted photographs are found in *The Pears of New York*. (1921).

Pears are a common feature of Flemish flower and fruit paintings in the 15th to 17th century. In the 19th century the Impressionists incorporated pears in their paintings although not as commonly as apples. Vincent Van Gogh painted both the flowering tree as well as the fruit (Fig. 5) and Paul Cézanne commonly included the pear in his many still lives. Finally, the great 20th century artist Fernando Botero, uses pear both in paintings and sculpture in his unique style emphasizing the obese, but graceful, forms of both people and fruit.

CONCLUSION

The pear is a well-known temperate fruit popular throughout recorded history in the West and the East. Europeans prefer soft flesh, "pyriform" pears that must be ripened to come to optimum quality while the pears of the Asia are round and crisp and do not require softening. Both qualities, although very different, are delectable in their own way. It is not surprising, therefore, that the pear should permeate the cultures that consume it. Yet, in art and literature, as well as pomology, the pear plays second fiddle to the apple, suggesting that the problems of the pear continue to bedevil its champions. We who love the pear must strive to improve it so it can take its rightful place in the pantheon of pome fruits.

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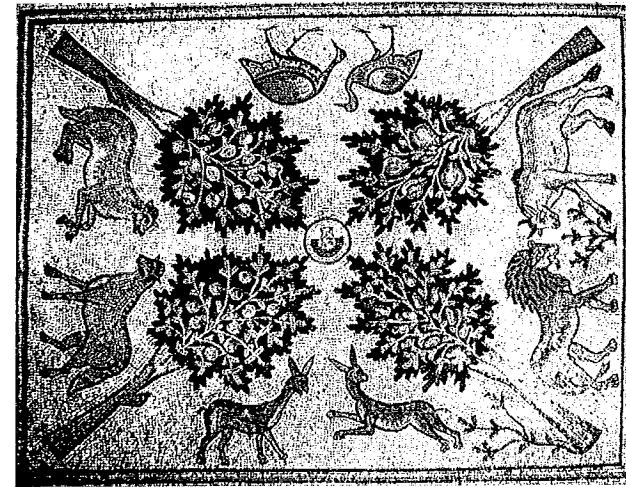


Fig. 3. Four "sacred" trees from Mosaic of the Paradise, late 6th century mosaic from Jordan. (Piccirillo, 1993).

Figures

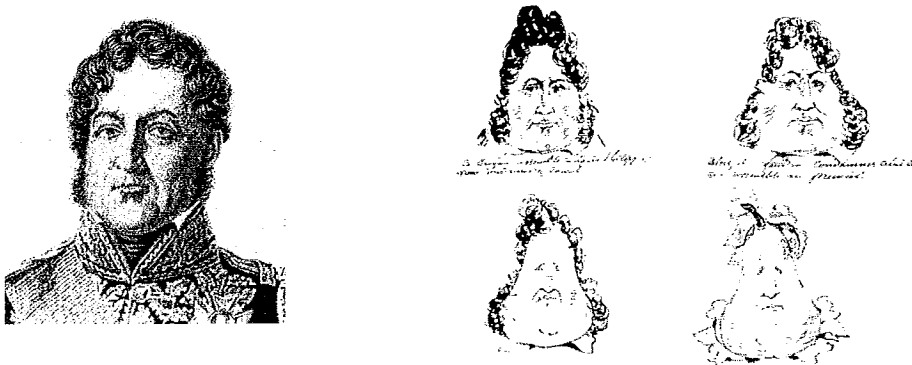


Fig. 1. The transformation of Louis Phillippe to a pear by Charles Philipon (Kenney and Merriman, 1991).



Fig. 2. Painting of a pear from Pompeii, destroyed in 79 (Jashemski, 1979).



Fig. 4. Madonna of the Pear, 15th century by Giovanni Bellini.

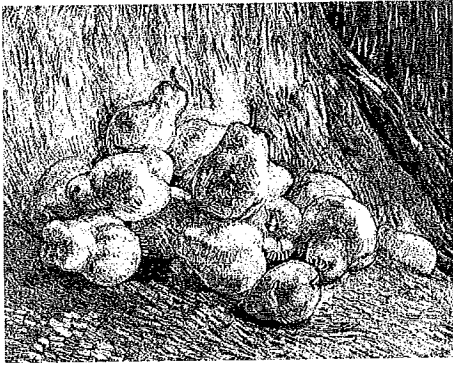


Fig 5. Pear fruit and flowering tree of pear by Vincent Van Gogh.