

of that century. He worked with artists such as Pietro Fabris to accurately depict the volcano and its surrounding area of edifices and craters. This region, known as the Phlegraean Fields, was then considered one of the wonders of southern Italy.

The great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 also brought Earth sciences to the attention of the elites of Europe. This event is well documented in the book, which includes stories such as how Joseph I of Portugal was stricken with claustrophobia after he escaped from the disaster, and how the Marquis of Pombal rebuilt the city.

Observations of volcanoes and earthquakes fed into theories about the origin and evolution of Earth during the eighteenth century. Enlightenment scholars' scientific explanations of biblical catastrophes such as the Great Flood fostered the divergence of science and religion. Disciplines such as mineralogy, palaeontology and glaciology began, and Scottish geologist James Hutton proposed the concept of geological deep time. Artistic interest in geology led to detailed depictions of minerals and rocks, such as those by Fabris and the French artist Jean-Pierre Houël, while the Swiss painter Caspar Wolf, among others, chose to focus on glaciers.

Chimborazo, an inactive volcano in the Cordillera Andes, Ecuador, was thought to be the highest mountain in the world until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and became a source of artistic inspiration after German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt climbed it in 1802. It was painted in 1864 by US artist Frederic Edwin Church, a famous exponent of the Hudson River School art movement, bearing witness to his fascination with geology and von Humboldt.

The book's coverage of natural disasters falters when it reaches the twentieth century. Only Alfred Wegener's theory of continental drift is mentioned through a coloured map of tectonic plates, perhaps reflecting the opening of a gap between science and art. In Hamilton's day, the two were interlinked — observation was key to both endeavours. Yet today, with the exception of a few individuals such as the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, who applies a modern eye to the structures of glaciers, the gulf between the disciplines is deep. The rise of photography might be partly responsible, having distanced painters from their role of recording landscapes and geological forms.

The Illustrated History of Natural Disasters helps us to understand that catastrophes are part of the history of humanity, while reminding us of the vulnerability of the human species in the face of nature's wrath. ■

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Nature trapped in glass

Works by Danish glass artist Steffen Dam, inspired by animal and plant morphology, will be on show next month in Seattle, Washington. Rows of cylindrical jars seem to imprison jellyfish whose tentacles swirl in slipstreams of frozen air bubbles, while translucent panels appear to house various sections of botanical or zoological specimens. Yet Dam's evocative productions are inanimate works of chemistry, entirely crafted using clever glass-making techniques.

Dam's artworks reflect a childhood spent poring over colour illustrations in his grandfather's natural history books. He still consults such visual resources when developing ideas, but puts them aside before entering his studio. Gathering molten glass from the furnace at 1,100 °C, he first rolls it in aluminium powder, which melts at 660 °C, forming globules that make up the innards of his faux jellyfish (pictured). After adding another layer of molten glass he rolls it in bicarbonate of soda. The alkali burns and releases carbon dioxide, which

is caught within the cooling glass to create the fine bubbles that suggest propulsion through water. Dam casts some objects as a cylinder, the curvature of which magnifies his trapped marine species.

The internal structures of his pseudo plants and animals are etched in a palette of greys and browns, achieved using combinations of commercial glass containing arsenic, lead and cadmium salts and exploiting the effects of oxidizing or reducing atmospheres in the kiln. Dam painstakingly assembles these works by slicing sections from the annealed shapes and trimming them

into perfect rectangles; the 'slides' are then aligned and fixed onto a single sheet of plate glass. With tremendous skill and a fine eye, Dam creates harmonious designs for his contemporary cabinets of natural curiosities, which evoke those of nineteenth-century museums. ■

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