

By
Anca
Colbert

ART & ABOUT...

DOUBLE TAKES FROM ANOTHER TIME

This stereoview of oranges and their blossoms dates from 1897. The image draws the eye into a circular motion to the unusual sight of the mature fruit and its flowers growing on the same tree; the juxtaposition of oranges, greens and whites is muted, yet almost phosphorescent against the grays and blacks of the vintage photograph; the legend printed on the back catches the imagination by the simplicity with which it expresses wonderment. No author is mentioned. Here is an excerpt:

“The land of gold and of golden fruit. California seems like the far western land of Greek mythology, where the Hesperides guarded the golden apples, symbol of love and fruitfulness, which Earth produced as a wedding gift for gods. But the fables of the ancients are far surpassed by the realities of this modern Garden of Eden, where all may eat from all the trees, with blessings instead of curse. One of the interesting and beautiful features of the orange tree is the presence of the pure white fragrant blossoms beside the golden ripe fruit; the sight can never be forgotten.”

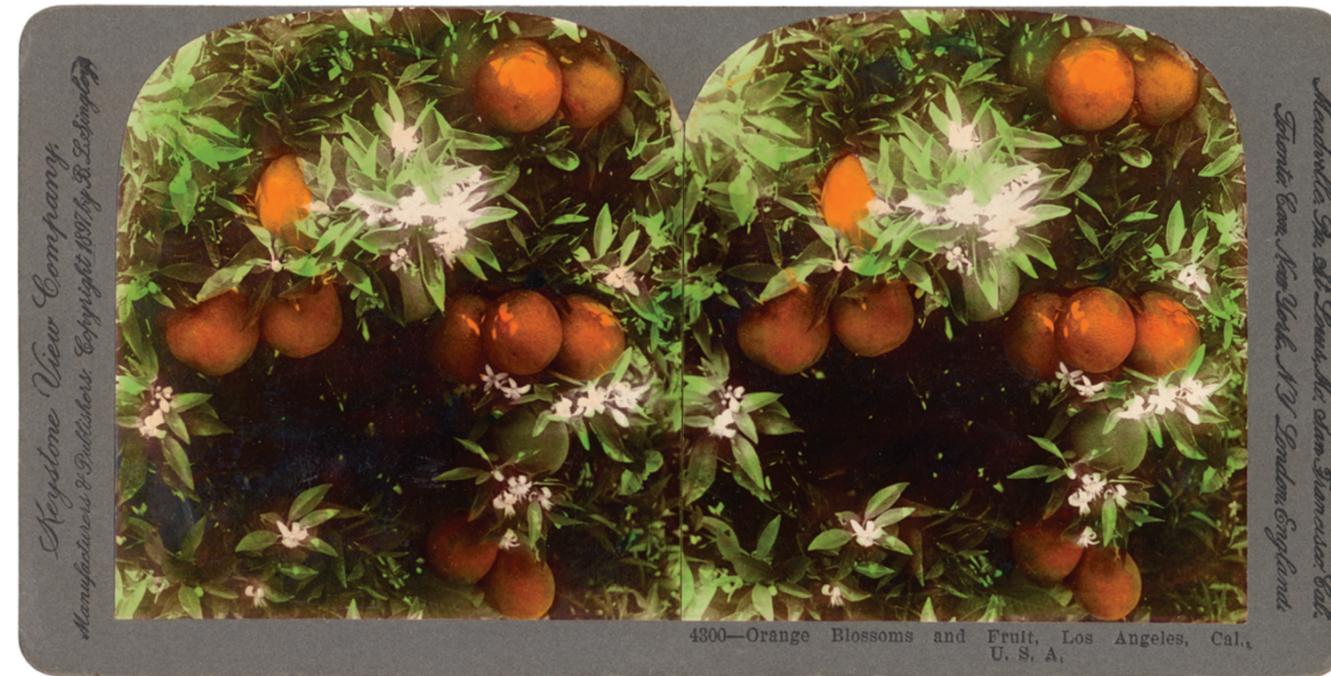
Neither can the scent. It is intoxicating, and indeed unforgettable.

The orange orchards of the Ojai Valley provide a particularly enchanted experience in sights, smells and sounds (yes, sounds, the bees are quite busy buzzing around the fragrant flowers). It is all so physical, potent and sensual, yet so far beyond the reality at hand. As you walk slowly through the East End, the light gently envelops you with a sense of another time, maybe a lost Paradise. Time goes from linear to circular, softly suspended.

At the turn of the previous century, when these images were photographed, cameras were still a rarity, movies were just emerging; no phones, television, computers or fast digital toys. It was a quieter world, a more “black and white” world.

Stereo photographs are taken by a camera with two lenses. The method produces two separate images 2.5 inches apart. The pictures appear identical, but they are slightly different. By using a stereoscopic viewer equipped with prismatic lenses, the two views are merged into one three-dimensional image. The 3D effect is astonishing.

Stereoviews were extremely popular between 1850 and 1915. People relied on them for education, travel and home entertainment. They allowed the discovery of distant lands otherwise not easily accessible -- such as California, the fabled Garden of Eden.



Top: “Orange Blossoms and Fruit, Los Angeles, California” by B. L. Singley. Stereoview published by the Keystone View Company, Meadville, Pennsylvania. (Private collection of Anca Colbert.)

This is about two of those tiny images which captured my imagination: oranges and calla lilies. Both are rich in symbolic meaning. They moved me. Art lovers know that feeling: You see an artwork (by unknown or famous artists, it hardly matters) and then you feel an energy shift, a “spark” inside, that sure sign an image



Above: “Ten Acres of Calla Lilies, Southern California, U.S.A. Stereoview from 1913 published by the Keystone View Company, Meadville, Pennsylvania. (Private collection of Anca Colbert.)

has touched your center. Intrigued, I started searching for facts and stories about agriculture around Ojai.

We know that F.S.S. Buckman was the first to plant and irrigate orange orchards in the Ojai Valley, around 1875, and that the first citrus fruit was marketed by him around 1880 (Tony Thacher kindly

confirmed these dates). But did you know that the whole cut-flower industry in California was started by a Ventura housewife? While researching the history of calla lilies in this region (because of a mysterious vintage photograph in my collection which looked like it might have been taken around this valley) I gleaned much useful information from the website of the California Cut Flowers Commission. It shed some light on the image of that angelic little girl picking calla lilies in the early 1900s:

“The state’s cut flower business goes back to the late 1870s when a Ventura housewife, Theodosia Shepherd, was inspired to sell the flowers she raised in her garden, notably the abundant calla lilies that thrived in Southern California’s Mediterranean climate. Other women began to follow suit by bringing their own backyard beauty to the local market...”

An industry was born; flower farms sprang up all around Ventura County. Theodosia and her husband William, an attorney, lived at Poli and Chestnut streets, near the current Ventura City Hall. Soon after starting the cut-flower business out of their backyard, Theodosia also began a flower seed business (presumably by transforming an old piano crate into a greenhouse!) and she turned that into a nationwide success.

“Soon after Mrs. Shepherd and her fellow homemakers discovered that raising flowers was a respectable, enjoyable way to earn extra money, flower farming blossomed on a larger scale. Many Japanese families new to California turned their love of beauty and their botanical talents to producing flowers.”

Meanwhile, in France, the Impressionists developed a passion for painting in natural light: They took their easels out of the studio to paint outdoors, *en plein air*. Their new approach inspired artists around the world to become Plein Air painters. A number of artists in California embraced that approach, and many in Ojai continue to work in that tradition, inspired by the valley’s abundant nature and magnificent light quality.

As the pace of life is accelerating all around us in the world, Ojai and its fertile valley still offer glimpses of paradise. There is a different experience of the passage of time here. Walk slowly, look with quiet eyes and imagine. Most of the magic is in the light. ■

Below: “Orange Grove in California, near Ventura.” This vintage postcard depicts a grove in the Ojai Valley. (Private collection of Anca Colbert)

