

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Botanical Sketchbooks

Helen Bynum & William Bynum (Editors). 288 pages, 250 color illustrations, 20.5 x 26.5 cm (8.4 x 10.9”), hardcover. ISBN-10: 1616895888; ISBN-13: 978-1616895884. New York, Princeton Architectural Press, and London, Thames and Hudson, in association with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2017. Ca. €35.00, \$40.00.



Let me begin, for once, with the quality of the physical book itself. Solidly bound with particularly thick cardboards, with the spine in black editorial canvas, the book is printed on a beautiful opaque, heavy (I would say more than 120 gr/m<sup>2</sup>), off-white paper, which enhances the quality of the print, do not tire your eyes with unnecessary reflections, and gives great justice to the beauty of the original works. These are often printed in full page, and it is a pity that the layout has not taken into consideration the option of printing the works without borders to maximize the quality of the details. The very dimension of the book, conceived as a coffee table book, is not excessively large and makes it easier and more pleasant to flip through the pages when the volume is not resting on a plain.

The curators of the book, Helen and William Bynum, are both historians of science and medicine, and passionate about botany and horticulture. They made

an excellent job in gathering the best and more diverse among the millions of botanical sketches made by modern botanists, artists, adventurers and simple (but often famous) people passionate of plants, to write a story made up by preparatory sketches, first impressions, scribbled notes, and unfinished works. Through a long journey, which begins in fifteenth century to reach early 1900s, *Botanical Sketchbooks* focuses not on the final product of botanical illustration (the print, the painting, the catalog) but instead on the “making of”, the taking of quick notes around the wonders of nature on a piece of paper or in the pages of a diary with quick and fresh signs, colors and descriptive annotations. In this way, the Bynums illuminate a range of intriguing characters from many different countries and cultures, giving unprecedented insights to the immediate reactions of humans facing the glories of the plant world. So, proper sketchbooks are intermixed with journals, albums, note-

books, manuscripts and letters, loose pieces of paper and vellum, herbarium sheets and even drawings on the back of envelopes, sourced from collections all over the world. The works are often presented in their complete physical context, which allow the readers appreciate the kind of tactile qualities of the bindings, folders and albums used in this six-century story.

The selection of the 80 artists pays obvious tribute to the exploratory and colonial efforts made by British and North Americans, but nonetheless also includes artists from Australia, Germany, France, Italy, together with some non-Western authors from Japan and China. The cast is impressive, featuring well known names as Charles Darwin, Leonardo Da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, Carl Linné, Pierre Joseph Redouté, and Josh Ruskin, together with other maybe less known (but not for that less relevant) figures, as Fabio Colonna, John Day, Niccolò Gualtieri, Margarte Mee, Beatrix Potter, the sisters Hellen and Margaret Shelley, and Robert Schomburgk, just to cite a few. Particularly noteworthy is how amateurs (and even accidental) sketchers are profiled by the curators alongside famous artists and scientists, with the same sympathy and respect.

The book is organized in four main thematic chapters (drawing on location, for science, for art and for leisure), in turn divided in sub-chapters, each devoted to different figures in the world of plants and plant illustration: explorers, collectors, naturalists, and botanists. Biographical portraits and artist profiles, enlightening the main type of work the artists are known for, are provided along the entire book. Being a compendium of how plants have been observed, studied, and immortalized in art, and how the strange beauty of the natural world fired the imagination of travelers and naturalists, it is not surprising that orchids are preeminently featured among the presented works as they often captivate the attention also from the most accidental observer.

Three flower views of *Angraecum eburneum* var. *giryamae* (p. 27) are portrayed by John Kirk, medical officer and botanist to Dr. Livingstone's second Zambesi expedition. A preparatory sketch of *Catasetum macrocarpum* by Margaret Mee is reproduced on page 37. The "prospector" of South America, Frierdich Carl Lehmann (a proficient illustrator, whose work has been extensively discussed by Cribb, 2010) is represented by six beautiful sketches of *Pescatoria*, *Oncidium*, *Dracula*, *Maxillaria callichroma* (erroneously refered to *Masdevallia*), and *Epidendrum* sp. (correctely, *Prosthechea hartwegii*).

Another beautiful species of *Oncidium* (*Odontoglossum*), *O. hallii*, is illustrated from the sketchbook of its discoverer, the Colonel Francis Hall. On the other side of the world, another British Colonel, John Eyre, succumbed in front to the beauty of *Renanthera coccinea* (p. 72). Other orchids are taken from the scrapbook of the victorian British clergyman Rev. Charles Parish (pp. 84–89), who revealed the orchid richness of Burma (Myanmar). Male and female flowers of *Cycnoches clo-rochilon* (p. 104), and a flower of *Prosthechea cochleata* (p.106) were sketched by Juan de la Cerda or Atanasio Echeverría, two of the illustrators of the "Expedición Botánica a Nueva España", who traveled together and let several unsigned drawings that can not be attributed with any certainty to either one. Darwin's crude and famous sketch of *Gavilea patagonica* is reproduced on page 119. A beautiful sketch of *Stanhopea grandiflora* (p. 225) is taken from the illustrations prepared by Alfred Riocreux, one of the last Redouté's pupils, for the *Herbier général de l'amateur* by Jean Luois Auguste Loiseleur-Deslongchamps. Finally, they could not miss the examples of the great master of the sketch of orchids, the British wine merchant John Day, who ordered his collection in ten greenhouses and travelled to the tropics to fill his scrapbooks with glorious and famous images. Six pages, of his sketchbooks are reproduced, with paintings of *Aerides rosea*, *Anguola clowesii*, *Dactylo-rhiza incarnata*, *Paphiopedilum fairrieatum*, *P. purpuratum*, and *Vanda coerulea*, and a gorgeous double-page illustrating *Grammangis ellisii* (pp. 267–267), a now rare, endemic species from Madagascar.

Frequently thought just as preparatory stages of something more elaborate, the first botanical impressions on paper by the artists weren't often saved and many have probably disappeared. However, they represent "another glance" at documenting the beauty of the natural world, a look behind the scenes of the finished drawings and paintings of which they form the foundation. Hidden and locked away in private collections and the rear of public collections, sketches are rarely seen and appreciated: Bynum and Bynum's work has the great merit of bringing them to the fore.

Franco Pupulin

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Cribb, P. (2010). The orchid collection and illustrations of Consul Freidrich C. Lehmann. *Lankesteriana*, 10(2,3), 9–30.