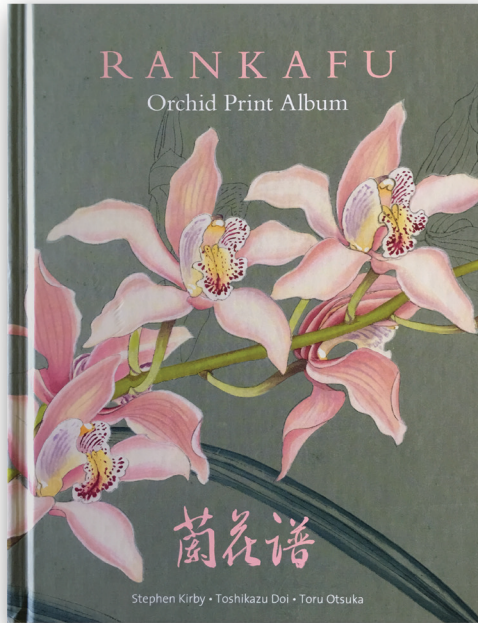


BOOKS

Rankafu. Orchid Print Album, by Stephen Kirby, Toshikazu Doi & Toru Otsuka. Richmond, Surrey, UK, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2018. Volume in octavo (19.5×25.3 cm), x, 289 pages, 250 illustrations in color, 31 black and white photographs. Hardbound. Special price at Kew Gardens, £25.00.



Rankafu is a remarkable book, which tells the story of a remarkable set of Japanese orchid woodblock prints from the early 20th century, and through them the story of three remarkable men.

Shotaro Kaga (1888–1954), the eldest son of a wealthy family, was a banker and a pioneer horticulturist, whose work and collection helped to start an orchid craze in Japan that continues to this day. He built what probably was the best Japanese nursery of its times, taking advantage of the direct experience he had acquired through the acquaintance with renowned collections like that of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and with famous British growers like Sander in St. Albans, who he visited in 1910 and from whom he would buy hundreds of plants over the next decades.

To ensure his plants were cultivated to their best, Kaga had them grown under the care of Kenkichi Goto (1895–1981), who had been in charge of the Imperial Nursery of the Shinjuku Garden as a specialist

orchid grower and had acquired direct experience on the natural life of orchids through collecting trips in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and India. In the greenhouses of Kaga's Oyamazaki Villa, where some ten thousand orchids were grown, he made more than 1,100 crosses and germinated hundreds of hybrids, some of which were portrayed for the Rankafu collection. He retired from his position shortly before Kaga's death in 1954.

Finally, Zuigetsu Ikeda (1877–1944) was hired in the early 1930's, and for the next twelve years he was the main artist at the Oyamazaki Villa, where he sketched and portrayed in watercolor thousands of plants. Of these, 83 found the way to be immortalized into the Rankafu woodblock prints. Another series of 60 water colors, intended for a second volume of the work, were never printed. Ikeda painted his last orchid from Kaga's collection in 1942.

Faced with the difficult choice about the best botanical art printing available at the time, "no

matter how expensive and costly” (Kaga 1946), Shotaro Kaga asked help from the authorities on art printing in Japan, but the results failed to fulfill his expectations. Then, Kaga directed his attention to an old Japanese printing technique, that of wood engraving. This technique had began in Japan in the mid XVIII century and reached its highest standards during the XIX century.

I guess that, until Kirby and his colleagues decided to publish their meticulous research on *Rankafu*, just a handful of westerners had any knowledge of traditional Japanese wood engraving. Their work was instrumental not only to disclose the refined beauty of *Rankafu* to a larger audience, but also to the organization of an exhibition of the same name, held since last October at the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art, Kew Gardens, which will run until March 2019.

Woodblock prints represent a spectacular art form, and a technical challenge but, as the used inks are water-based, it is particularly adapted to reproduce watercolour paintings. Highly specialized woodblock carvers transform the painting into prints, carving away the areas that are not to be printed on individual blocks of cherry tree (*Prunus serrulata*) for any of the colors of the painting, and leaving raised areas that may be as small as a fraction of a millimeter. Such fine details must then be perfectly aligned from one block to another. In the process, the original watercolor is usually lost, and no original *Rankafu* painting that corresponds to woodblock prints remains. The book is very instructive in describing the technique and the materials of woodblock printing in great detail.

Eventually, by the end of 1944, during the difficult years of the war, 83 sets of *Rankafu* were printed at two different workshops and by at least six famous printers. Apart from the printings prepared from Ikeda's watercolors, Kaga wanted to have printed in the *Rankafu* also a few black and white photographs taken by Toyo Okamoto, and nine conventional color print copies of colour oil paintings done by one of Kaga's classmates, Seitaro Nakamura. Also five conventional copies (not woodblocks) of Ikeda's painting are included into the prints collection. All these images are duly reproduced in the book together

with the core section of woodblock printings. The superbly printed book showcases in full color the set owned by the senior author. Particularly well featured are species and hybrids of the *Cattleya* alliance, *Cymbidium*, *Dendrobium*, and slipper orchids, plus a number of orchid species from different groups, which were among the preferred orchids by Shotaro Kaga. The quality of the prints, and the delicacy of the compositions prepared by Ikeda, are simply stunning.

In 1954, Shotaro Kaga died, and by 1958 the greenhouses were in disrepair. In 1967 Kaga's heirs sold the Oyamazaki Villa, and by the 1970s the greenhouses had been demolished. It was the end of an era. The villa was fortunately brought back to its splendor during the 1990s, when the Asahi Beer Corporation acquired it and expanded it into the Oyamazaki Museum of Art, an important regional museum.

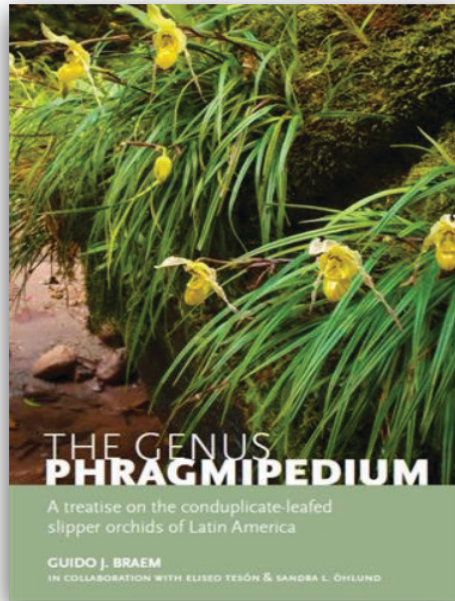
As to the woodblocks, a series of originals for twelve woodblock printings were discovered in 2003 in Kyoto, in the warehouse of the Muira Printing Company. A set was reprinted with traditional woodblock printing methods, and was sold in 2005.

Fortunately, the book by Kirby, Doi and Otsuka has now made available the complete set of these spectacular prints, which for their level of accuracy and artistic expression are justly considered masterworks of botanical art.

I just want to echo the words by Phil Cribb, who introduced the book, warmly recommending this extraordinary work on a single collection of orchid prints, not only as a great introduction to a less known and highly decorative form of art, but also to the history of early modern Japanese orchid culture and some of its greatest progenitors. It is an informative, varied, and really entertaining lecture.

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The Genus *Phragmipedium*. A treatise on the conduplicate-leafed slipper orchids of Latin America. by Guido J. Braem, Eliseo Tesón and Sandra L. Öhlund. Atlanta - Belgium, privately printed by the author, 2018. ISBN 978-3-00-056249-5. Volume in small octavo (17×23 cm), 305 pages, 208 figures. Hardcover with dust jacket. \$110.00.



If you are interested in slipper orchids, *The Genus Phragmipedium* is a must have. The richly illustrated and colorfully executed book by Braem and collaborators is an essential guide.

The book starts off with a short chapter on general considerations provided by the first author. This is followed by a very practical and detailed chapter on the cultivation of *Phragmipedium* species written by Eric Sauer. The main body of the book is composed of the treatment of individual taxa. Each is accompanied by a wealth of useful information from someone who clearly knows these plants first hand. Personal experience is transmitted throughout the book. Every accepted species includes a synonym list, type information, etymology, a discussion on history and a morphological description. Each of them is appropriately adorned with watercolors, photographs and plates. The rich illustrative material presented in the book includes photographs of the flowers of every species and also of varieties, subspecies and forms. How species are found in nature is well exemplified by the many plants that are photographed *in situ*.

Plates with floral details are provided for several species as well, allowing easy comparison among closely related taxa. A few “orchid people” are also featured, including Henry Oakley and Cassio van den Berg.

The book is full of short stories and side notes which make it very entertaining. An example is the story about the discovery of *Phragmipedium lindenii*. Three slightly different versions are provided, starting with that of Linden himself. The discoverer of this notable species is famously quoted to have encountered the orchid when escaping from a bear. His account reads “It was a bear that made me discover it, and this circumstance, coupled with my astonishment at the sight of this flower, hitherto unknown, with such a strange form, will always prevent me from forgetting such an encounter”. I will not further spoil the story and encourage the reader to procure their copy of the book. Historical information is provided for several species. Especially interesting are the extensive commentaries surrounding the controversial discoveries and introduction into cultivation of the

beautifully flowered *Phragmipedium bessae* and *Phragmipedium kovachii*.

The taxonomic treatment of each species is meticulously carried out. The reader is given all the elements that the authors use for each particular decision. They are extremely precise in arguing each detail in favor or against the recognition of taxa. Ample explanation of which morphological features are useful in species recognition is given throughout, this is extremely helpful to understand some of the lesser known names in the group. This objectivity is unfortunately lost when the taxa that have been described by the authors are involved. One example is the use of *P. popowii* Braem, Ohlund & Quéné over *P. humboldtii* (Warsz.) J.T. Atwood & Dressler. The discussion as to the correct name of this species, which has already been the subject of at least five articles in recent years, takes up several pages in this book. I am no expert on slipper orchids, nor on Germanic languages, but the code is clear. Article 46.2 explicitly states that a name can be ascribed to someone other than the author of an article it appears in. As Reichenbach filius clearly cites Warszewicz as author and provides a, albeit brief, description, the taxon is for all effects validly published regardless of Reichenbach's own opinion. Another is perhaps the interpretation of "good" species within the *Phragmipedium schlimii* complex. *Phragmipedium anguloi* and *P. fischerii*, both described by the senior author are accepted, whereas *P. manzurii* and *P.*

ramiroi, which are not, are regarded as synonyms. The arguments used to recognize these taxa are similar in each case, and not particularly strong.

Nevertheless, taxonomic interpretation is always up for debate and the book loses no merit for what is an understandable defense of the authors' own work. At the end it is far more important to document orchid diversity well and that is the biggest success of this magnificent compendium. Perhaps the only serious drawback of *The Genus Phragmipedium* are the recurrent personal attacks on fellow botanists that appear on several instances throughout the otherwise highly entertaining read. Rather than give the book, or any argument therein, additional strength, the unnecessary critiques become tiring. The book would be much better without them. Besides these minor details, Braem, Tesón and Öhlund present a wonderful treatment of the genus *Phragmipedium*. The book should be in the hands of every orchid enthusiast, especially those interested in slipper orchids. It should not be missed by anyone looking to know more about the historical details behind the controversial discovery and description of orchids with potential commercial value. The beauty, diversity and intrigue of *Phragmipedium* is uniquely represented in this outstanding work.

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