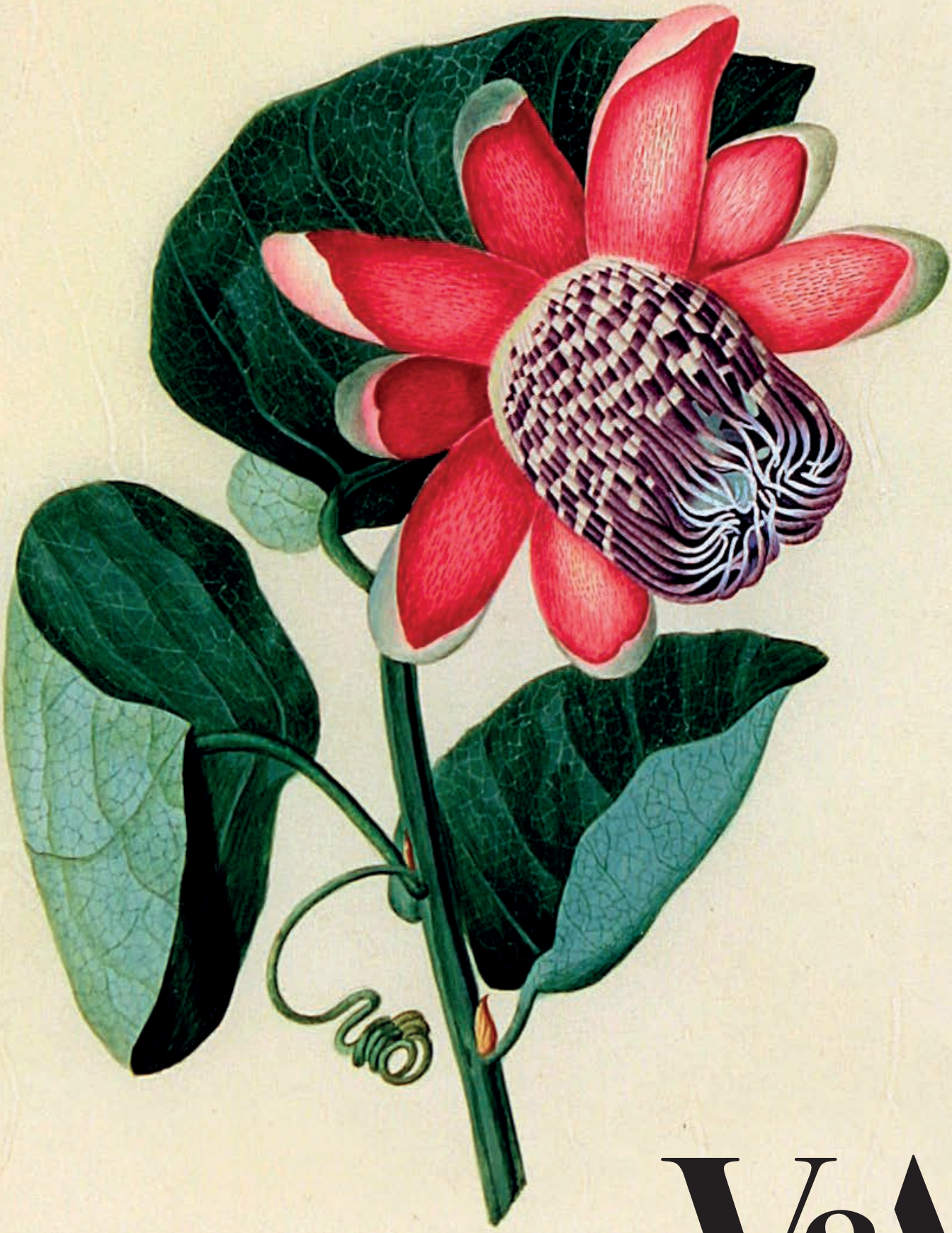


Botanical Illustration

V&A

Introduction

Since its foundation in 1856 the V&A has collected examples of botanical illustration in all graphic media. These range in date from the 15th century to the present day. The purpose of acquiring such material is varied. Botanical prints chart the development of printing, from the woodcut process used for early herbals to hand-coloured etchings and colour-printing. Whilst printed and painted florilegia have been used as pattern books by artists and designers such as William Morris and Alexander McQueen.

Contents

Box 1: Botanical Illustration

Unknown
Chicory, *Cichorium intybus L.*
15th or 16th century
Gouache on vellum
Museum no. E.1045-1986

Unknown
Lesser Periwinkle, *Vinca minor L.*
15th or 16th century
Gouache on vellum
Museum no. E.1046-1986

Jacques Le Moyne De Morgues (1533?–88)
Borage, *Borago officinalis L.*
About 1568–72
Watercolour
Museum no. AM 3267K-1856

Simon Verelst (1644–1721)
Tulips, *Tulipa sp.*
Late 17th or early 18th century
Watercolour
Museum no. 263-1876

Jacob van Huysum (about 1682–1749)
Gentian, *Gentiana alpina* Vill.
Early 18th century
Watercolour and bodycolour
Museum no. 4274

Pierre Bulliard (1742–93)
Cuckoo's Pint, *Arum maculatum L.*
Plate from *Herbier de la France*
Published in parts in Paris
About 1780–95
Colour engraving
Museum no. 29638:534

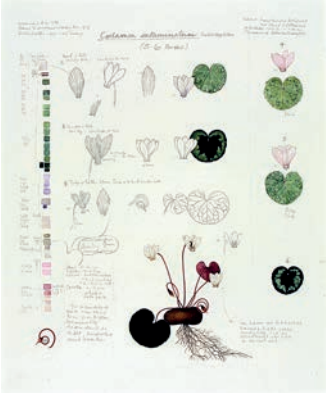
Peter Brown (active about 1758–99)
Giant Granadilla
Passiflora quadrangularis L.
About 1758–99
Gouache on vellum
Museum no. D.2-1893

William Kilburn (1745–1818)
Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale* F. H. Wigg. aggr.
Plate 107 from *Flora Londinensis*
Published in parts by William Curtis in London, 1777–98
Hand-coloured engraving
Museum No. E.455-1996

Samuel Holden (active 1830–50)
Walker's Cattleya, *Cattleya walkeriana Gardner*
1847
Watercolour
Museum no. 8377.15

Samuel Holden (active 1830–50)
Showy Banksia, *Banksia speciosa R.Br.*
1838
Watercolour
Museum no. 8377.9

Roger Phillips (born 1932)
Winter Aconite, *Eranthis hyemalis (L.)* Salisb.
Plate from Wild Flowers of Britain, London, 1977
Photograph
Museum No. E.578:2-1994
© Roger Phillips.



Jenny Brasier (born 1936)
Winter Aconite, *Cyclamen intaminatum*
1993
Pencil and watercolour
Museum No. E.354-1994
with kind permission of Jenny Brasier

Unknown

Chicory, *Cichorium intybus L.*
15th or 16th century
Gouache on vellum
Museum no. E.1045-1986

Lesser Periwinkle, *Vinca minor L.*
15th or 16th century
Gouache on vellum
Museum no. E.1046-1986

These gouache studies painted on vellum are probably pages from a manuscript herbal. We know that the pages were once part of a bound volume because three of the four edges of the sheets have been gilded. The textile designer James Mitten (1812–54) once owned these drawings in the early 19th century. He probably used them as source material when designing floral and foliage patterns.

Herbals were concerned with how plants could be used medicinally rather than how they could be identified and the illustrations were secondary to the authoritative text. Here, the lesser periwinkle is shown without its flowers, because its medicinal use came from the leaves. The drawing of chicory is fairly crude and oversimplified, and you can see from the small drooping central leaf that the artist lacked the skill to represent foreshortening. Nevertheless, the detail of the plant's structure is very accurate.

Jacques Le Moyne De Morgues (1533?–88)

Borage, *Borago officinalis L.*
About 1568–72
Watercolour
Museum no. AM 3267K-1856

The V&A holds 59 studies of fruit and flowers painted by French artist Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues. These drawings were probably intended to serve as a reference for designers and makers of jewellery, embroiderers or other craftsmen.

In the 16th century botanical illustrators revived the practice of working from real plants. The degree of naturalistic detail in the borage suggests that Le Moyne was studying living plants. In his drawing, Le Moyne not only depicts every tiny hair that covers the plant but also the damage suffered by the lower leaf and broken stem.

The watermark in the paper is the same as that used in Paris and Arras in 1568. It seems likely that the watercolours date from the period between 1568 and 1572, when Le Moyne fled to England with other Huguenots (French Protestants) to escape religious persecution in France.

Simon Verelst (1644–1721)

Tulips, *Tulipa sp.*
Late 17th or early 18th century
Watercolour
Museum no. 263-1876

These studies of tulips are clearly intended for a decorative rather than a scientific purpose. Simon Verelst was a noted Dutch painter of flower pieces, decorative compositions in which the artist brought together flowers that would never bloom simultaneously in nature. To create such a composition an artist would work through the seasons to build up a collection of drawings and watercolour studies, such as this, to work from. We know that it was a widespread practice for artists to work from their own 'library' of sketches because it is sometime possible to identify a sketch with the same specimen in a finished oil painting or to find the same flower repeated in different paintings.

This study may well have been painted in England. Verelst was born in the Hague in 1644, but he came to London in 1669 and stayed until his death in 1721. At the height of his career he had a number of important patrons among the English aristocracy, and King Charles II bought several of his paintings.

Jacob van Huysum (about 1682–1749)

Gentian, *Gentiana alpina* Vill.
Early 18th century
Watercolour and bodycolour
Museum no. 4274

Whilst offering us scant botanical detail, this diminutive study nevertheless captures the essence of the alpine Gentian. This drawing may be a study for one of the floral still-lifes for which Dutch artist Jacob van Huysum became particularly famous, and which fetched high prices. Van Huysum was experimental in his painting style and was the first to use light backgrounds and light paints. His style was widely imitated and his watercolour originals were engraved by others and used to illustrate publications devoted to new and rare species of the early 18th century.

Pierre Bulliard (1742–93)

Cuckoo's Pint, *Arum maculatum L.*
Plate from Herbier de la France
Published in parts in Paris
About 1780-95
Colour engraving
Museum no. 29638:534

This print is one of about 600 illustrations from Bulliard's Herbier de la France, published in parts between 1780 and 1795. All of the prints in this ambitious herbal were drawn, engraved and colour-printed by the author. The delicately modulated colour is achieved entirely by printing with three tint plates over an engraved black outline and shading. The Herbier de la France is one of the most impressive examples of colour printing in the history of botanical illustration, and is unusual in needing no supplementary hand-colouring.

The way in which the book was organised provides an interesting example of the confusion that reigned during the period. When labelling each plant, Bulliard embraced the classification system developed by the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707–78) in the mid-18th century. This system, still in use today, relies on grouping plants according to their reproductive similarities and giving each species a fixed, two-part Latin name. However, when determining the order of the book, Bulliard retained a much older herbal convention in grouping them according to their use, whether edible, medicinal or, like the cuckoo's pint, poisonous.

Peter Brown (active about 1758–99)

Giant Granadilla
Passiflora quadrangularis L.
About 1758–99
Gouache on vellum
Museum no. D.2-1893

This drawing is painted on vellum, a material prepared from the skin of animals such as cow or sheep. Vellum's smooth surface allowed for fine detail and added natural sheen to the leaves and petals. Peter Brown possibly painted these and his other plant subjects in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. His patron, Lord Bute (1713–92), advised Princess Augusta on the development of Kew, and in 1784 Brown became botanical painter to George, Prince of Wales (the future George IV). Brown's drawings are similar in presentation to those of the renowned botanical artist Georg Dionysius Ehret, under whom he may have studied.

William Kilburn (1745–1818)

Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale F. H. Wigg. aggr.*
Plate 107 from *Flora Londinensis*
Published in parts by William Curtis in London
1777–98
Hand-coloured engraving
Museum No. E.455-1996

William Kilburn worked as a botanical illustrator. He produced most of the plates in the first volume of William Curtis's *Flora Londinensis,* a field guide to the wild flowers growing within ten miles of London. This was a serial publication that came out between 1777 and 1798. Unusually for the time it was made, Curtis' book shows the plants complete with roots, recalling earlier herbals. This engraving is based on Kilburn's design. The original watercolour survives in the Botany Library of the Natural History Museum in London.

Kilburn had served an apprenticeship (a period of training for a trade) in a cotton-printing factory in Dublin in Ireland. When he moved to London he continued to sell designs to calico-printers. He gave up his work as a botanical illustrator to go back to the textile industry, where he could earn more money. Eventually he owned his own calico-printing factory, for which he designed exquisitely detailed floral patterns. A volume of his designs for textiles is in the V&A collection.

Samuel Holden (active 1830–50)

Walker's Cattleya, *Cattleya walkeriana Gardner*
1847
Watercolour
Museum no. 8377.15

Showy Banksia, *Banksia speciosa R.Br.*
1838
Watercolour
Museum no. 8377.9

Samuel Holden seems to have specialised in the illustration of orchids and newly discovered exotic species. Holden painted many orchids in private collections, sometimes annotating his drawings with the location of his specimen. He was quick off the mark with this Cattleya drawn from an example in the collection of Sigismund Rucker of West Hill in Wandsworth. Rucker was the first to cultivate this particular species in England in 1847, the year of Holden's study.

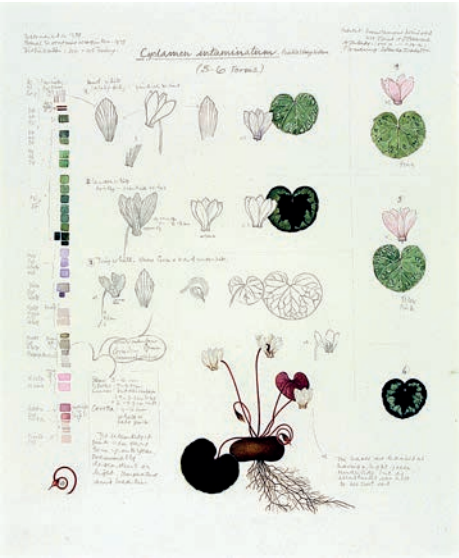
The second plant here is a particular variety of banksia, a species of large shrub or small tree, which was first brought to Britain as a dried specimen in 1805 by Robert Brown, author of the definitive flora of Botany Bay.

Roger Phillips (born 1932)

Winter Aconite, *Eranthis hyemalis (L.)* Salisb.
Plate from *Wild Flowers of Britain*
London
1977
Photograph
Museum No. E.578:2-1994
© Roger Phillips.

This photograph is one of a series Roger Phillips produced for the 1977 field guide *Wild Flowers of Britain*. Moving away from the established practice of arranging species by plant family, the photographer thought his field guide would be of more use to the amateur naturalist if the plates were organised according to flowering season.

Interestingly, though it might be imagined that photography would have rendered botanical drawing redundant, the camera lens cannot draw out important features in the same way that the artist's pencil can. Compare this image with Jenny Brasier's drawing of cyclamen for instance.



Jenny Brasier (born 1936)

Winter Aconite, Cyclamen intaminatum
1993
Pencil and watercolour
Museum No. E.354-1994
with kind permission of Jenny Brasier

This drawing is in effect a summary of the variants the artist found within one species of cyclamen, the Cyclamen intaminatum. It was produced as a working drawing, a final version of which would appear in the *Cyclamen Society Journal*. To facilitate subsequent works, the artist made detailed notes on the plant's pertinent features and the palette she had used.

Box 2: Botanical Illustration

Basil Besler (1561–1629)
Hyacinthus Anglic, Cinericeus; Palma Christi maculata; Hyacinthus Comosus spurius; Dracunculus Aquatilis
1613
Hand-coloured engraving, folio from Hortus Eystettensis, Third Order of Spring, Volume 1, published in Nuremberg, Germany
Museum no. Circ.526-1967

Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–70)
Bull Bay, *Magnolia grandiflora L.*
1743
Watercolour and gouache on vellum
Museum no. D.583-1886

Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–70)
American Turk's-cap Lily, *Lilium superbum L.*
1740s
Watercolour and gouache on vellum
Museum no. D.589-1886

Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–70)
Abutilon, Convolvulus arvensis, Alsine and *Iris*
1748–59
Hand-coloured etching, Table VIII from Plantae et Papiliones Rariores, published in London
Museum no. E.221H-1887

Unknown
Passionflower, *Passiflora incarnata L.*
Late 18th or early 19th century
Watercolour
Museum no. 7890-21

Peter Charles Henderson (active 1791–1829)
The Engraver
Joseph Constantine Stadler (active 1780–1812)
Carrion Plant *Stapelia hirsuta L.*
1801
Colour aquatint with additional hand-colouring, plate from Temple of Flora, published in parts in London, 1799–1807
Museum no. Circ.524-1967

Basil Besler (1561–1629)

Hyacinthus Anglic, Cinericeus; Palma Christi maculata; Hyacinthus Comosus spurius; Dracunculus Aquatilis
1613
Hand-coloured engraving, folio from Hortus Eystettensis, Third Order of Spring, Volume 1, published in Nuremberg, Germany
Museum no. Circ.526-1967

This is a plate from a magnificent florilegium (a decorative flower book) known as the *Hortus Eystettensis*. The work contains 374 plates illustrating more than 1,000 flowering plants in the gardens of the Prince Bishop of Eichstätt. Besler managed the project over a period of 16 years. The illustrations are notable for their elegant design and decorative layout. Each plant is shown with its roots as was conventional in botanical illustration at the time. The plants are illustrated in order according to their season of flowering.

Correspondence surrounding the book's production shows that it was designed to be coloured, and a number of variant hand-coloured copies survive. An intact 'white' (uncoloured) edition of the *Hortus Eystettensis* is in the National Art Library at the V&A.

As the first of its kind, this book triggered a rush of similar books commissioned by the owners of notable gardens for their personal delight and as a way of showing others that they had the means to cultivate such outstanding plant collections. Because these books were produced primarily as celebrations of ownership, they rarely contained any useful text. Nevertheless, they did provide botanists with a record of the new and exotic species arriving in Europe from abroad and were also useful to designers as a pattern source.

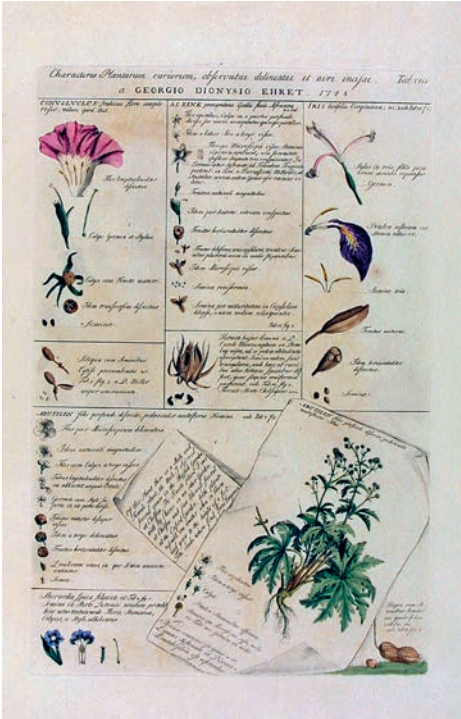
Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–70)

Bull Bay, *Magnolia grandiflora L.*
1743
Watercolour and gouache on vellum
Museum no. D.583-1886

American Turk's-cap Lily, *Lilium superbum L.*
1740s
Watercolour and gouache on vellum
Museum no. D.589-1886

An outstandingly successful botanical artist, Ehret was well-connected to study new species in private collections. The magnolia first flowered in Europe in the garden of Sir Charles Wager at Parson's Green. Ehret walked from his home in Chelsea to draw it and studied each stage of the unfolding flower to make 'a perfect botanical study.' Ehret studied the Turk's-cap Lily in the garden of Peter Collinson, an avid collector of new plants who lived just outside London. Ehret notes that this lily 'first flowered in August 1738'.

Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) was the first scientist to classify plants not according to the way people used them, but by physical similarities between their reproductive parts. The influence of this new system is apparent in these drawings. They focus on the flowers and are represented according to the standard conventions of botanical illustration in silhouette against a white ground. Ehret, though, always favoured the pictorial rather than the diagrammatic style of botanical illustration and here he has painted the seeds and seedpod of the Magnolia with shadows as if they were actually lying on the page. Although Ehret helped publicise and promote the binomial system of plant classification devised by his friend Linnaeus, the captions to these drawings prefer the older method of using a string of descriptive Latin terms.



Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–70)

Abutilon, Convolvulus arvensis, Alsine and *Iris*
1748–59
Hand-coloured etching, Table VIII from Plantae et Papiliones Rariores, published in London
Museum no. E.221H-1887

The book *Plantae et Papiliones Rariores* was a personal venture published, drawn and etched by Ehret himself. An odd hybrid publication, neither a proper scientific treatise nor a florilegium (a type of decorative flower book produced in the 17th century). It illustrated plants that would have been unfamiliar to a general audience at the time and presented species in eccentric ways, sometimes as bouquets, or as if growing in a garden and accompanied by butterflies. This plate is presented as a pseudo-scientific table showing the various parts of dissected flowers, but it has a trompe-l'oeil style, designed to look as if loose prints and drawings have been casually spread out on top.

Unknown

Passionflower, *Passiflora incarnata L.*
Late 18th or early 19th century
Watercolour
Museum no. 7890-21

This drawing shows a passionflower, so named because its structure suggested Christ's crown of thorns. From the inscriptions we know that it was presented to the Horticultural Society of London (later the Royal Horticultural Society) by Baron Joseph Franz von Jacquin (1766–1839) in 1822. In the inscription he comments that it is a better illustration than the 'old one' published in 'Icones Plant. Rarior'. This presumably refers to Nikolaus Joseph Jacquin's work *Icones Plantarum Rariorum* (*Pictures of Rare Plants*), which was published in Vienna between 1781 and 1793. Nikolaus Jacquin, who was created a baron in 1806, died in 1817. His botanical projects were continued by his son, Joseph.

Peter Charles Henderson
(active 1791–1829)

The Engraver
Joseph Constantine Stadler
(active 1780–1812)

Carrion Plant *Stapelia hirsuta L.*
1801
Colour aquatint with additional hand-colouring, plate from Temple of Flora, published in parts in London, 1799–1807
Museum no. Circ.524-1967

Robert Thornton's *Temple of Flora* was an ambitious and, in many ways, a magnificent botanical publication. Its large-scale illustrations represent exotic plants in a melodramatic way. Though visually impressive, the illustrations were often botanically deficient, for the artists were painters of portraits and landscapes, and none of them had any botanical training. The plants were shown in elaborate picturesque landscapes containing few clues as to their real country of origin. In his introductory text Robert Thornton describes 'the maggot-bearing stapelia' (Carrion Plant) as shown with 'a green African snake, and a blow-fly in the act of depositing her eggs in the flower, with the maggots produced from this cause'. In the illustration the plant is misleadingly shown in a mountainous forest landscape though stapeliads are found only in the arid deserts of southern Africa.

Thornton published his great work in parts between 1799 and 1807. At this time there were many competing publications. He failed to sell sufficient copies, and he eventually went bankrupt from the costs of producing the plates.

Box 3: Botanical Illustration

Jacques Le Moyne De Morgues (1533?–88)
Wild Strawberry and Female Emperor Moth, *Fragaria vesca L.* and Saturnia pavonia
About 1568–72
Watercolour
Museum no. AM.3267BB-1856

Jacques Le Moyne De Morgues (1533?–88)
Three Pinks and Two Marigolds, *Dianthus sp.* and *Tagetes sp.*
About 1568–72
Watercolour
Museum no. AM 3267F-1856

Nikolaus-Friedrich Eisenberger (1707–77)
Snake's Head Fritillary, *Fritillaria meleagris L.*
About 1750–73
Watercolour
Museum no. E.4107-1911

John Miller (1715–90)
Orange, *Citrus sp.*
Plate from An Illustration of the Sexual System of Linnaeus
Published in parts between 1770 and 1777
Engraving coloured by hand
Museum no. E.42-1892

John Miller (1715–90)
Globethistle, *Echinops ruthenicus M. Bieb.*
Plate from *An Illustration of the Sexual System of Linnaeus*
Published in parts between 1770 and 1777
Engraving coloured by hand
Museum no. E.48-1892

Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840)
Canterbury Bells, *Campanula medium L.*
1787
Watercolour on vellum
Museum no. E.91-1947

Francis Sansom (1780–1810)
Butterbur, *Petasites hybridus* (L.) G. Gaertn. et al.
Plate 134 from Flora *Londinensis*
Published in parts by William Curtis in London, 1777–98
Engraving, coloured by hand
Museum no. E.458-1996

Unknown (1759–1840)
Unidentified species
About 1760–1825
Watercolour
Museum no. E.1756-1924

Unknown (1759–1840)
Peanut, *Arachis hypogaea L.*
About 1760–1825
watercolour
Museum no. E.1754-1924

A. Power (active late 18th and early 19th century)
Hydrangea, *Hydrangea macrophylla L.*
Watercolour on vellum
Museum no. D.1393-1891

Samuel Holden (active 1830–50)
Bucket Orchid, *Coryanthes machrantha Hook.*
About or after 1837
Watercolour
Museum no. 8379:3

Anna Atkins (1799–1871)
Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*
About 1854
Cyanotype
Museum no. PH.382-1981

Jacques Le Moyne De Morgues (1533?–88)

Wild Strawberry and Female Emperor Moth,
Fragaria vesca L. and Saturnia pavonia
About 1568–72
watercolour
Museum no. AM.3267BB-1856

Three Pinks and Two Marigolds,
Dianthus sp. and *Tagetes sp.*
About 1568–72
Watercolour
Museum no. AM 3267F-1856

Whilst some of Le Moyne's drawings are derived from the generalised illustrations of earlier books, others show him working directly from nature, including all the imperfections and particularities of individual specimens. With its mouth-wateringly realistic berries but strangely stiff stems this drawing of a wild strawberry lies somewhere in between the two modes: though it shows a familiarity with the living plant, the general outline has been copied from an earlier illustration by the botanist Leonhart Fuchs. The pinks and marigolds, on the other hand, appear to have been drawn from nature.

The V&A holds 59 studies of fruit and flowers painted by French artist Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues. These drawings were probably intended to serve as a reference for designers and makers of jewellery, embroiderers or other craftsmen.

The watermark in the paper is the same as that used in Paris and Arras in 1568. It seems likely that the watercolours date from the period between 1568 and 1572, when Le Moyne fled to England with other Huguenots (French Protestants) to escape religious persecution in France.

Nikolaus-Friedrich Eisenberger (1707–77)

Snake's Head Fritillary, *Fritillaria meleagris L.*
About 1750–73
Watercolour
Museum no. E.4107-1911

Eisenberger was a painter and engraver who worked in the German city of Nuremberg. He seems to have specialised in botanical subjects. Here he follows the botanical conventions of the time by including a dissection of the flower. As the abbreviated Latin inscription suggests ('ad viv. fec.'), it was drawn from life. This drawing is livelier and looser than illustrations intended for scientific publications.

An engraving of this drawing appeared on plate 25 in the first volume of *Hortus Nitidissimis* (published 1750–68), for which its author, Christoph Jacob Trew, commissioned some of the drawings from local illustrators. This was not a scientific work; its subtitle translates as 'The flower-garden in finest bloom throughout the year, or pictures of the most beautiful flowers'.

Celebrated in one 16th century book for 'beautifieing... our gardens, and the bosoms of the beautifull', the Snake's Head Fritillary has been a favourite of botanical illustrators and, though it had no medicinal use, it even appeared in herbals.

John Miller (1715–90)

Orange, *Citrus sp.*
Plate from An Illustration of the Sexual System of Linnaeus
Published in parts between 1770 and 1777
Engraving, coloured by hand
Museum no. E.42-1892

Globethistle, *Echinops ruthenicus M. Bieb.*
Plate from *An Illustration of the Sexual System of Linnaeus*
Published in parts between 1770 and 1777
Engraving, coloured by hand
Museum no. E.48-1892

Miller displays the orange and thistle at different stages of their development to give a fuller picture of the plants' lifecycles. Dissections of flower, fruit and seeds are also given. In this way Miller was able to give a complete account of each plant's structure in a single plate.

The book from which these illustrations are taken attempted to illustrate the Linnaean classification system. The Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) was the first scientist to classify plants not according to the way people used them but rather by the physical similarities between their reproductive parts. Once classified, each species was given a fixed two-part Latin name which indicated the family and species.

Miller's *Illustration of the Sexual System of Linnaeus* was one of the most successful books of the time. The plates were extravagantly praised by Linnaeus as 'more beautiful and more accurate than any that had been seen since the world began'. His correspondent John Ellis wrote on 28 December 1770 that 'the figures are well drawn, and very systematically dissected and described'.

Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840)

Canterbury Bells, *Campanula medium L.*
1787
Watercolour on vellum
Museum no. E.91-1947

Redouté made this watercolour as a gift to the botanist James Lee, whilst staying in his house in Hammersmith in 1787. Such was Redouté's skill that over two hundred years later the flowers remain alive on the page and we can almost hear the insects buzzing.

This piece is also a good example of the ease with which Redouté moved between painting plants professionally and for enjoyment. During his career he worked alongside established botanists producing drawings for serious scientific study whilst also making illustrations for publications devoted to the simple enjoyment of beautiful flowers.

Francis Sansom (1780–1810)

Butterbur, *Petasites hybridus* (L.) G. Gaertn. et al.
plate 134 from Flora *Londinensis*
Published in parts by William Curtis in London, 1777–98
Engraving, coloured by hand
Museum no. E.458-1996

John Ruskin singled out this plate for special praise in his work *Prosepina: Studies of Wayside Flowers* (1888). William Curtis's *Flora Londinensis*, a field guide to the wild flowers growing within ten miles of London, was a personal passion of his. The book was a commercial failure, but the plates were remarkable for the accuracy and delicacy of their hand-colouring. However, one subscriber to the book, Sir Thomas Frankland, wrote to Curtis criticising the use of opaque pigments for the colouring because it sometimes obscured the botanical detail. This plate has been coloured throughout, except for a single large leaf at the back. This was deliberately left uncoloured, so that the flowers could be seen clearly.

Curtis was a botanist who worked at the Chelsea Physic Garden and then established the London Botanic Garden at Lambeth. He later found commercial success with the *Botanical Magazine* from 1787, for which Francis Sansom became the principle engraver.

Unknown (1759–1840)

Unidentified species
about 1760–1825
watercolour
Museum no. E.1756-1924

Peanut, *Arachis hypogaea L.*
About 1760–1825
Watercolour
Museum no. E.1754-1924

In China, at the time these drawings were made, foreigners were confined to the island of Macao and allowed into Canton only when their ships were in port. To obtain drawings of Chinese plants they had to commission native artists, often through the agency of the East India Company. They gave the artists examples of European illustrations to copy and trained them in the conventions of Western botanical drawing. Although the Chinese artists were adept copyists, their drawings and watercolours can easily be distinguished from those by European artists. They tended to use a limited number of flat tones as can be seen in the leaves and the two-tone flowers on both of these drawings. The unidentified drawing labelled 'beora(?)' has a very distinctive Chinese look with the stalks rendered in fine strokes of different colours.

With this peanut plant the artist recorded every detail. In traditional Chinese flower painting natural forms were abstracted and idealised. But when working for European clients, the artists were instructed to give precise botanical details and produce a literal transcription of the individual specimen. Thus, in this picture each yellowing and withered leaf is precisely delineated.

A. Power (active late 18th and early 19th century)

Hydrangea, *Hydrangea macrophylla L.*
Watercolour on vellum
Museum no. D.1393-1891

This bold illustration of a hydrangea is the work of A. Power, an artist based in Maidstone, Kent, and active around 1800. Very little is known of the artist's life or identity, although his or her work was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1780. This work is painted on vellum and is in the style of Georg Dionysus Ehret (1708–70), and it is possible that Power was one of his many pupils.

The artist has chosen to present the hydrangea in a rather flat and diagrammatic style. It is a competent drawing, and accurately represents the botanical details, but it is slightly stiff and formal, which suggests that it is the work of an amateur rather than a professional artist.

Samuel Holden (active 1830–50)

Bucket Orchid, *Coryanthes machrantha Hook.*
About or after 1837
Watercolour
Museum no. 8379:3

We know very little about Samuel Holden, though he was a prolific painter of exotic plants, especially orchids, in the 1830s and 1840s. He studied most of them in the private collections of plant enthusiasts and collectors in Great Britain, sometimes annotating his drawings with the location of his specimen. Victorian plant collectors were fanatical about orchids, with some enthusiasts amassing more than 18,000 examples.

The Coryanthes species here is annotated 'Chatsworth House', home to William Cavendish (1790–1858), Duke of Devonshire. Cavendish developed an interest in horticulture because Chatsworth bordered on the grounds of the Horticultural Society. He began to collect exotic species and Chatsworth became the world's largest collection of orchids at the time

Anna Atkins (1799–1871)

Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*
About 1854
Cyanotype
Museum no. PH.382-1981

This is probably the first photographic portrait of a dandelion. It comes from Anna Atkins's finest album, *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Flowering Plants and Ferns*, which she presented to her friend and co-photographer Anne Dixon in 1854. To make a 'photogram' with the cyanotype process, the photographer laid an object on paper impregnated with iron salts, then exposed the paper to sunlight for a few minutes. When washed in water, the area where the plant had blocked the light remained white, but the area that was exposed came out a rich blue.

As a botanist and early photographer, Atkins quickly realised the benefit of using the cyanotype process to record specimens of plant life and was the first person to print and publish a photographically illustrated book, *British Algae, Cyanotype Impressions* (1843). She took up what she called 'Sir John Herschel's beautiful process of cyanotype' as soon as it was invented in 1842. Unlike print processes such as woodcut or engraving, where multiple identical copies could be produced from the original block or plate, cyanotype could only produce a single unique print. It was therefore of little use for mass-produced books.

PRINTS & DRAWINGS STUDY ROOM
Visitors can study and enjoy over 750,000 objects not on display in the galleries, including designs, fine art prints, watercolours, old master drawings, photographs, commercial graphics, greetings cards, playing cards, fashion plates, posters, wallpapers and much more!

Find out more about the Prints & Drawings study room, and all other V&A study rooms at: vam.ac.uk/studyrooms