

## FROM VASES AND MURALS TO INSTAGRAM: A BRIEF HISTORY OF BOTANICAL ILLUSTRATION

Capturing the beauty of plants has excited people for several thousand years. Although the tradition of botanical (or floral) art has dramatically changed since its emergence in such agricultural civilizations as Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt nearly 4000 years ago, its contemporary display is still deeply rooted to those origins. The first known visual depictions of plants were often used to decorate the walls of tombs and temples, more rarely — vases and wine vessels. However, most of them were highly stylized, which is why the similarity with depicted plants was very approximate.

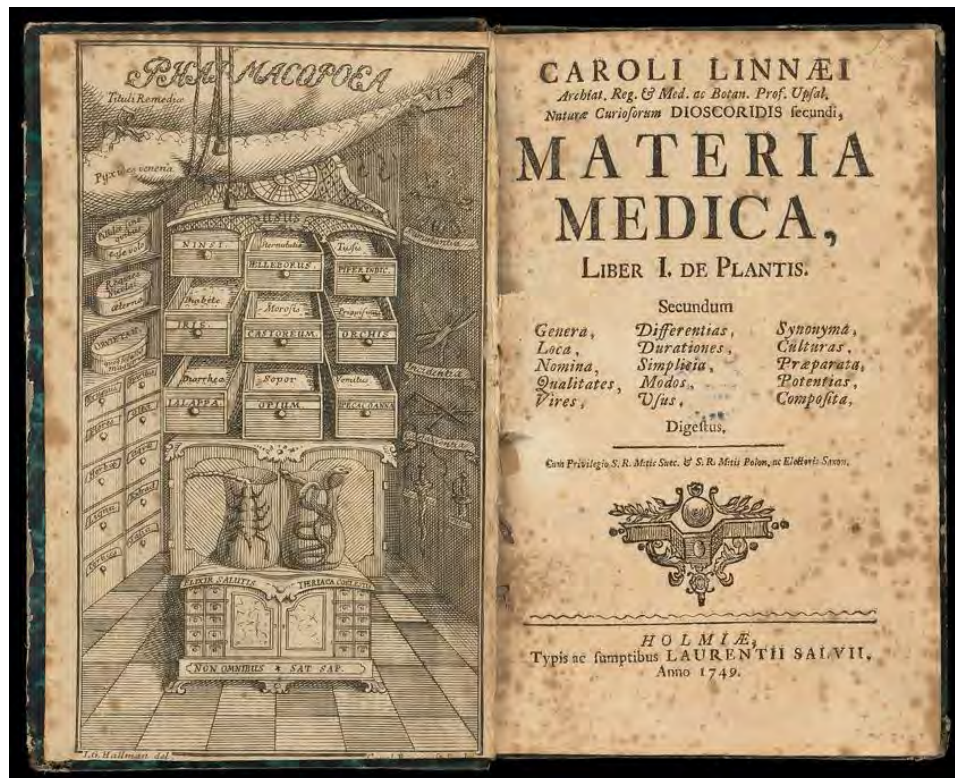


*Ripe barley, Egypt, limestone relief, ca. 1353-1336 BC.*

As the main idea of botanical art in its traditional reading is to represent a plant so that it could be identified and classified, some researches place its starting point at 1600 BC. Around that time a beautiful mural including images of red lilies of Greece (*Lilium chalcedonicum*) was painted in a house on the island of Santorini. Because of the recognizability of the plant, it is considered the first piece of botanical art, which laid the basis for the whole genre. Later, semi-realistic figures of different herbs, flowers and trees were widely used in Roman and Greek art to decorate coins, ceramics, weapons and even clothes of wealthy people.

However, it was only in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC when botanical illustration started playing a huge role in studying and classifying plants. Around that time healers and sorcerers realized that medicine had no future without a proper body of knowledge about curative properties of herbal plants. Several ancient manuscripts from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC mention Krateus, a physician from Greece, who drew flowers and other plants for scientific purposes. Today he is considered the father of botanical illustration.

The next milestone in the history of the field is the creation of *De materia medica*. A pharmacopoeia of medicinal plants was written and illustrated by another Greek physician Pedanius Dioscorides between 50 and 70 AD. Surprisingly, it had not lost its importance and relevance until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was widely used both as a standard in botanical art and as the most accurate and full source of information about medicinal herbs for more than 1500 years, which makes it the longest-lasting natural history book that has ever existed.



Dioscorides, 'De Materia Medica', reprint from 1749.

For many centuries the tradition of floral illustration had not experienced any significant changes. However, in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) brought scientific precision to the world of rather crude and primitive botanical art. From that time on artists have been trying to depict plants in a very detailed way with all their structural complexity, "true to nature".



Albrecht Dürer, 'Tuft of Cowslips', 1526.

The 1750-1850s was the Golden Age of botanical art. Such artists as Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1766-1854), Franz (1758-1840) and Ferdinand (1760-1826) Bauer, Margaret Meen (1751-1834) and many others made a huge contribution to the field and enriched the centuries-long tradition with new techniques and different approaches in visual representation of flora. Expeditions and lectures, books and catalogues, exhibitions and natural science conferences — all brought botanical illustration to the spotlight. However, due to rapid popularization of photography in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century floral art lost its scientific and academic importance and went back to its mainly decorative basics.



Pierre-Joseph Redouté, 'China Aster (*Aster Chinensis*)', no date.

Fortunately, in 21<sup>st</sup> century botanical illustration has revived, so that many artists and scholars claim the period to be the Renaissance of the genre. Although it does not serve scientific purposes as much as it used to, floral art has found many other ways to stay relevant. Colouring books, wallpaper and clothing prints, street art and eco-products design — this is only a top of the botanical art iceberg in today's world. Thanks to different social media platforms (mainly Instagram), the tradition is not just alive, it is getting more and more attention and becoming one of the most prosperous contemporary forms of visual art.

*If you want to find out more about botanical illustration and improve your own drawing skills, here are some sources you might find helpful and inspiring:*

Books:

- '*Botanical Sketchbook*' by Mary Ann Scott and Margaret Stevens
- '*The Joy of Botanical Drawing: A Step-by-Step Guide to Drawing and Painting Flowers, Leaves, Fruit, and More*' by Wendy Hollander
- '*Art Forms in Nature: The Prints of Ernst Haeckel*' (and other books with Haeckel's prints)

- *'Botany for the Artist: An Inspirational Guide to Drawing Plants'* by Sarah Simblet
- *'Botanical Art Techniques: A Comprehensive Guide to Watercolor, Graphite, Colored Pencil, Vellum, Pen and Ink, Egg Tempera, Oils, Printmaking, and More'* by American Society of Botanical Artists

Contemporary botanical artists' Instagram pages:

- @lizzie\_harper\_illustrator

Lizzie Harper, a free-lance botanical artist with more than 25 years of experience. She illustrated dozens of natural history books and magazines. Following the tradition of highly detailed style of the Golden Age of floral art, she uses watercolor to create the most accurate and 'true to nature' drawings of plants, insects and birds.

- @boelterdesignco

Philip Boelter, a contemporary artist from San Diego, California. His distinctive yet very simplistic style of painting made him one of the most recognized artists in the field, whose work and practical tips would be very helpful for beginners and those who prefer a stylized and less detailed techniques.

- @alicelovesdrawing

Alice Loves Drawing is one of the most popular botanical illustrators on Instagram with more than 1.1 million followers. Her step-by-step instructional videos is a perfect starting point for those who want to learn the skills and composition of botanical art.

- @katiekatiecott

Katie Scott is a British botanical artist, whose style was highly influenced by aforementioned Ernst Haeckel. She is well-known for her beautifully illustrated natural science books and distinctive wallpaper prints.

- @jenkinscarolyn

Carolyn Jenkins is one of the most critically-acclaimed contemporary botanical illustrators. Her almost hyperrealistic watercolor paintings of flower buds and vegetables can be seen in such prestigious venues as The RHS Lindley Library in London and The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh, USA.

Websites and online resources:

1. Shayda Campbell's YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/c/ShaydaCampbell/videos> Botanical art tutorials for illustrators of all skill levels, regular Q&A sessions and livestreams with a botanical artist Shayda Campbell, recommendations on drawing supplies, and much more — everything you need to find inspiration and start your own botanical drawing journey on one YouTube channel.
2. 'Smithsonian', a project of the National Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C, aimed at promoting natural history and ecology. It provides free access to one of the most diverse and extensive online botany collections with more than 1.7 million specimen records, including thousands of floral illustrations. <https://naturalhistory.si.edu/research/botany>
3. 'Botanical Art and Illustrations from HMS Endeavour'. A fully digitalized and easily-navigated collection of botanical illustrations from Captain James Cook's first Pacific, or the so-called Endeavour voyage (1768-1771) created by the world-famous Natural History Museum, London. <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/endeavour/>

Used images (in order of appearance):

1. *Ripe barley*, limestone relief, ca. 1353-1336 BC.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ripe\\_barley MET 1985.328.24 EGDP010144.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ripe_barley_MET_1985.328.24_EGDP010144.jpg)  
(Accessed 08.03.21)
2. Pedanius Dioscorides, the title page from '*De Materia Medica*', reprint, 1749.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Titlepage to %27Materia Medica%27 Wellcome L0051528.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Titlepage_to_%27Materia_Medica%27_Wellcome_L0051528.jpg) (Accessed 08.03.21)
3. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), '*Tuft of Cowslips*', 1526.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albrecht Dürer, Tuft of Cowslips, 1526, NGA 74162.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albrecht_Dürer,_Tuft_of_Cowslips,_1526,_NGA_74162.jpg) (Accessed 08.03.21)
4. Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759-1840), '*China Aster (Aster Chinensis)*', no date.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vintage Flower illustration by Pierre-Joseph Redouté, digitally enhanced by rawpixel 74.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vintage_Flower_illustration_by_Pierre-Joseph_Redouté,_digitally_enhanced_by_rawpixel_74.jpg) (Accessed 08.03.21)