

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

A NOTE ON THE BOTANICAL PRINTS AND DRAWINGS*

It is perhaps insufficiently known that the Wellcome Institute Library has, in addition to manuscript and printed illustrated herbals and botany books, a very fine collection of loose botanical prints and drawings, in all nearly 4,000 illustrations. Although the majority are of flowers, there are also some of fruits, leaves, wood anatomy, etc., and, among the non-flowering plants, twenty-seven genera of ferns and thirty-one genera of fungi are represented. Over 1,500 genera of the higher orders are represented, covering all the major families, and only a few of the more obscure families have no illustration at all.

Of the 450 drawings and watercolours, most are studies of English wild flowers, from the end of the nineteenth century. Others include a collection, dated 1885–1906, of nearly 100 species of fungus growing in woods near Clevedon, Somerset. (It would be interesting to know how many fungi survive there today.) There are also depicted some forty kinds of exotic orchids, apparently forming a record of the private collection of Sir Edward Elton of Clevedon Court. One charming set of watercolours painted in 1846 shows eight named types of palm-tree growing in British Guiana. Although few of these illustrations are true botanical studies, they all show well the form and colour of the plants, sometimes together with their habitat and colour changes through the seasons.

However, two watercolours by the botanical artist, Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–1770), deserve special mention. Painted on folio sheets of fine vellum, they show, with botanical details of the floral parts, *Hyoscyamus aureus* (yellow henbane) (Fig. 1), and *Lycium Aethiopicum*, *Pyracanthae folio*, now called *Putterlickia pyracantha* (Fig. 2). Although they bear no date, research has established that they were painted in the spring of 1736.

The prints, which range in date from the mid-seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century, have been taken out of botanical and travel books. This vandalization of illustrated books is not a modern phenomenon, but, unless it is possible to trace the source of the print, a valuable botanical illustration remains nothing more than a pretty flower picture, without name or date. By estimating stylistically the date of the print itself, tracing the native country and date of introduction to Europe of foreign plants, and checking it against the botanical and travel literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it has been possible to discover the sources for all but a few of the prints in the Wellcome collection.

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The earliest are flower studies by the French flower-painter, Nicolas Robert (1614–1685), from his *Variae ac multiformes florum species*, published about 1660, and copper-engravings of native plants from the eight-volume *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*, 1678–1703, by the Governor of Malabar, H. A. van Rheedee tot Draakestein (1636–1691). They were, of course, printed in black and white. One of the first nurserymen's catalogues and, incidentally, one of the first botanical books with coloured illustrations, the colour added to the engravings by hand, was the folio volume, *Catalogus plantarum*, 1730, edited by Philipp Miller (1691–1771), Curator of the Chelsea Physic Garden. The Wellcome collection has twelve of the twenty-one plates. From then until the end of the eighteenth century, botanical illustrations invariably took the form of large folio engravings, coloured by hand, and usually published in sets of ten, to form volumes with little or no text. The most splendid of these "plate works", as they were called, were published towards the end of the century, such as *Hortus botanicus Vindobonensis*, 1770–1776. Of the three volumes, which contain 300 lovely plates by N. J. von Jacquin (1727–1817), physician, professor of botany and Director of the University Botanic Garden at Vienna, the Wellcome collection has nearly the complete set.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the first botanical periodicals came into being: Curtis's *Botanical Magazine*, 1787 to the present day, and Andrew's *Botanical Repository*, 1797–1814, whose small format, octavo and quarto respectively, contrasts markedly with the usual folio volumes of that period. In the Wellcome collection are several examples of hand-coloured engravings from these works. They were soon followed by many more periodicals and by popular botanical and horticultural literature in the smaller format with illustrations using the new technique of lithography. At first, the plates were printed in black and white, and coloured by hand, as in Mrs. Loudon's *British wild flowers*, 1846, in quarto (Wellcome collection, twenty-six plates out of sixty), but, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the plates were printed in colour, either by the process of chromolithography or by using wood-blocks, as seen in Miss Anne Pratt's *The flowering plants . . . of Great Britain*, 1855, in octavo (Wellcome collection has fifty-five plates from this five-volume work). The fact that both these authors were ladies is indicative of the readers to whom this type of book was intended to appeal. The new printing techniques for the illustrations allowed for mass-production and these books were very popular with the middle classes, who wished to stock their conservatories and gardens and do a little botanizing in the local fields and woods.

Travel books describing scientific expeditions and the journeys by government officials to distant lands have been published ever since the seventeenth century. They often contain descriptions of the native fauna and flora, the illustrations being generally uncoloured engravings in quarto format or in folio in the case of official publications. Those to *Travels to discover the source of the Nile*, by James Bruce, 1790, were later republished as a separate "atlas" in 1805. They are in quarto and typical of this type of book. The Wellcome collection has the complete set.

The prints and drawings in the Wellcome collection are catalogued under the names originally given to the plants, with some names cross-indexed with common names, if

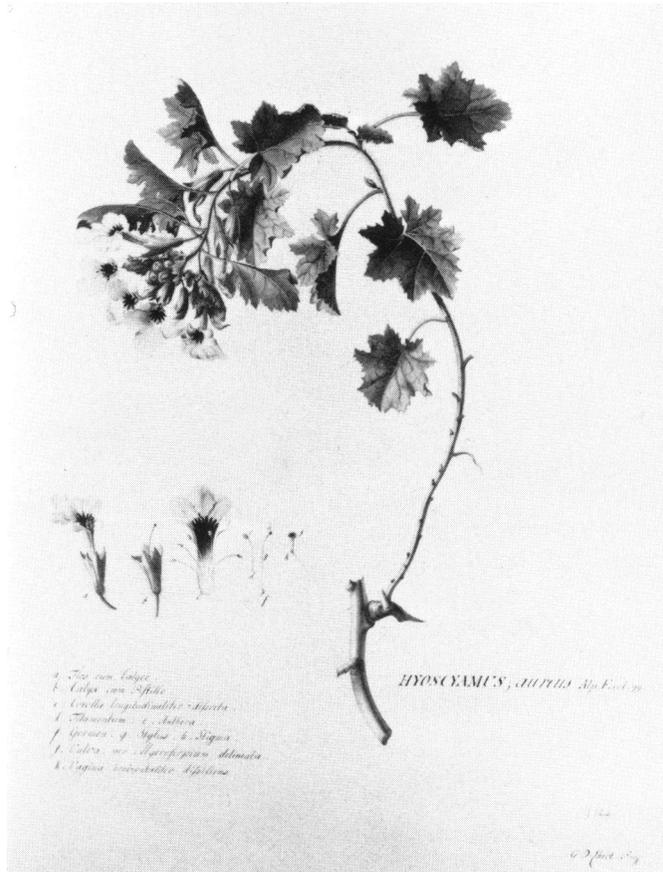


Figure 1. Georg Dionysius Ehret (1710–1770). Watercolour on parchment: *Hyoscyamus aureus*, 1736. In the Wellcome Institute. (By courtesy of the Wellcome Trustees.)

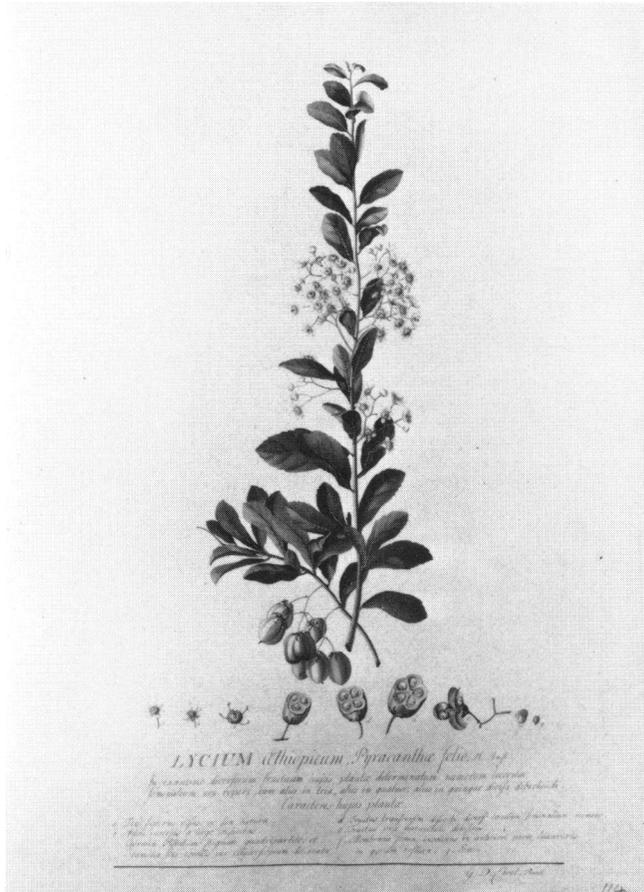


Figure 2. Georg Dionysius Ehret (1710–1770). Watercolour on parchment: *Lycium aethiopicum*, 1736. In the Wellcome Institute. (By courtesy of the Wellcome Trustees.)

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those also appeared in the original publications. Where possible, modern botanical nomenclature has been added to pre-Linnaean names. There are, as well, indexes to the artists, engravers, and publishers. The genera are listed under families according to the modified system of Bentham and Hooker, *Genera plantarum*, 1862–83, used by the Botany Department of the Natural History Museum, London. The prints have been found to come from over 200 sources, the list of whose authors in itself forms a valuable survey of literature containing botanical plates or plant illustrations. Access to the illustrations and to the catalogues is available on application in the Wellcome Institute Library.