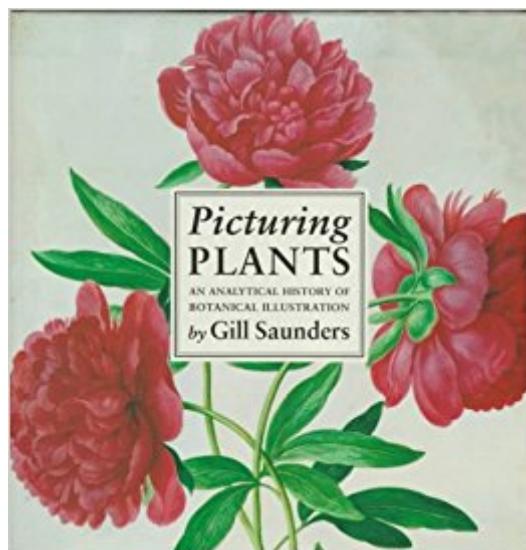


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Picturing Plants: An Analytical History Of Botanical Illustrations



Synopsis

Some of the most ravishing images in the history of illustration have been those of plants. But who drew plants, and why? How have these images reflected our changing relationship with the natural world? This beautifully illustrated book explores the purpose and function of the whole range of botanical art, from early woodcut herbals and painted florilegia, botanical treatises and records of new discoveries, to gardening manuals, seed catalogs, and field guides for the amateur enthusiast. Gill Saunders complements the sumptuous illustrations with detailed captions and an informative text, making this a book for both specialist and lay reader. Drawing on a rich archive of material in the Victoria and Albert Museum, much of it unpublished until now, Saunders presents works ranging from the fifteenth-century printed book to the art of contemporary illustrators. She includes acknowledged masters such as Ehret and Redouté as well as lesser-known examples from China, Japan, and India. In addition to their intrinsic beauty, plant illustrations have mirrored the curious and fascinating relationship between art and science. The artist's challenge has been to reconcile the often conflicting demands of those disciplines within a single image. Picturing Plants captures both this complex cultural history and the distinctive loveliness of botanical illustration, bringing a fresh approach to a perennially fascinating subject.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A fascinating inside look. . . . The book is definitely worth reading, if only for the illustrations alone, but Saunders' text points out the subtleties of representation."--Anne M. Hancher, "Hort Science

Gill Saunders is a Curator in the Collection of Prints, Drawings, and Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Her publications include *The Nude: A New Perspective* (1979) and *Recording Britain* (1990), as well as studies of botanical artists Georg Dionysus Ehret and William Kilburn.

Not as many pictures as I imagined there to be.

At the simplest level, 'Picturing Plants' can be enjoyed simply as a pretty book, with 100 illustrations (many in excellent color) from the Victoria and Albert Museum, where Saunders is a curator. Saunders covers 500 years of botanical illustration, and her incisive comments would help sharpen any connoisseur's eye. Probing a level deeper, there is the evolution of intent, as well as of method. Early book illustrations were woodcuts, unsuited to capturing the delicate organs of plants. But at first there was no need to depict them. The herbals of the 16th century tended to ignore blossoms in favor of roots, because plants were valued for their medicinal properties. Today, of course, flowers are everything. The brief text of 'Picturing Plants' is full of substance, including at least a few references to Asian modes of illustrating plants, for comparison to western European practices. But Saunders' text still hangs in midair, without support at either end. It is true that she is a curator of drawn illustrations, but in an analytical survey, however brief, one would have expected at least a mention of attempts to depict plants in other media. Before the printed book there were stone illustrations -- the leaves of Southwell Abbey, for example -- and just before the perfection of color photography there were the glass flowers that are the most popular attraction at Harvard's Agassiz Hall. Saunders' theme is that depictions of plants, even by color photography, always are based on compromises. The compromises, in turn, are influenced by cultural conventions. 'The objective reality is always enveloped by local and national differences in perception, and in the graphic conventions and techniques available.' It's indisputable, but Saunders' relentless pursuit of political correctness twists that thought into some odd shapes. Anyone not inclined to worship at the altar of anticolonialism will find this book constantly irritating. Thus, in commenting on Chinese and Japanese plant illustrations done for Europeans, she charges that 'by imposing Western pictorial conventions such as perspective, the West colonized native perceptions of the flora, and effectively devalued "other" ways of seeing and representing what was seen.' This can be demonstrated to be wrong in every respect. For one thing, there are the actual plants to look at. For another, I can walk into Shirokiya (or could until it went broke) and buy any amount of Japanese goods illustrated with

plant motifs that owe nothing to western ideas. And it's possible that mathematical perspective had an intrinsic appeal to craftsmen who had not thought of it themselves, and was adopted not merely by compulsion. But if you assume that western imperialism was irresistible even in such a minor corner as picturing plants, the logic of your ideology results in even stranger results. A sad example refers to my backyard, where Saunders assumes that the great collector Joseph Banks acquired his specimens (of cultural and botanical things) as 'booty.' This contradicts the facts of how they were acquired, and also devalues the shrewdness of the 'others,' who bargained and, I would assert even if Saunders can't, made satisfactory trades. If they thought a wife was worth a nail, it is only triumphalist Eurocentrism to say they were wrong to do so. It is also hilarious to see Saunders refer to Mughal painting as 'native' to India. Still, as long as Saunders sticks to the subject at hand, 'Picturing Plants' well repays time spent. Like a seed, this book encompasses a lot of information in a little space.

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