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Of Botanical Art: The American Society of Botanical Artists as a Discourse Community

The greatest flower artists have been those who have found beauty in truth; who have understood plants scientifically, but who have yet seen and described them with the eye and hand of the artist.

- Wilfrid Blunt - Ch. 1 The Flower Artist in "The Art of Botanical Illustration"

Introduction

Botanical art is usually viewed by the general public as a beautiful artwork of a plant, but much like the art itself, this category of art contains much more detail and specifications. As Michelle Myer, a botanical artist and President of the American Society of Botanical Artists during 1999, says, "Botanical art is art in the service of science" (Ben-Ari, 1999).

Unlike a still-life painting one might create in art class, botanical art has a scientific purpose, to illustrate a book or act as a record of a plant species or plant part. Because of its need for accuracy, botanical artists are expected to be proficient in botany and plant anatomy. This makes it stand apart from most types of art as it requires scientific realism, and be representative of its species, rather than the individual, which would require botanical knowledge of which imperfections of the sample/model to ignore. (Rix, 2012)

Botanical Art has been present in our civilization since we could draw, developing from ancient doodles to more refined forms that helped advance our civilization in science, art, medicine, agriculture, and many more. ***The purpose of this essay is to raise awareness on the historical significance of botanical art and its form and practices in this present time.*** The American Society of Botanical Artists as a Discourse Community will be largely discussed as a modern approach and attitude to botanical art, and their purposes, dedication, and programs will be observed to better understand how the culture of botanical art has developed to today.

Background



Figure 1. *Darlingtonia californica*, petal, stamen and pistil, transverse section of ovary – all magnified. Printed from "Darlingtonia Californica", by W. Fitch, del. et lith. 1871, *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, Vol. 27, pg.192.

At its peak of sophistication and refinement of botanical art from around the 18th century to present times, the aesthetic value and technical accuracy of botanical art was what defined it. In such creations, "all these works share an emphasis on careful observation and accurate rendering of botanical subjects so that the image is clearly "readable" by the viewer" (Ben-Ari, 1999).

Botanical art or illustration can be used interchangeably although some sources define botanical art as a scientifically and botanically accurate rendering of a plant, emphasized on the aesthetic value, but without the complete information of the plant required by a botanist to be able to identify and classify it "at least to genus, if not to species" (Ben-Ari, 1999), unlike botanical illustration. An illustration will include a depiction of all relevant aspects of the plant, including all its stages in its typical life cycle (Figure 1). As this paper wishes to cover botanical art and illustration as a whole, for this purpose, botanical art will be

denoted as the umbrella term to refer to this art form, including any that would technically be considered botanical illustration.

To understand the importance and motivations in creating and preserving botanical art, this paper will provide a **brief origin and development of botanical art through history** and **utilize a present-day discourse community** which is bonded by a common passion and shared goals to preserve and celebrate botanical art. The American Society of Botanical Artists, founded in 1994, is a community that serves to “provides it members with unparalleled access to a vibrant, interactive community of individuals and institutions that share a common interest in botanical art”. Currently the ASBA has over 1600 members that are from 48 states in the U.S and 34 other countries around the world. Open to all who practice and appreciates contemporary botanical art, they use these artworks to “educate, raise ecological awareness and enrich the lives of its members and the general public through exhibitions, interpretative programming, publications, collaborations and educational outreach in the United States and around the world”. (ASBA 2015 Strategic Plan, 2015) The American Society of Botanical Artists will be referred to as the ASBA for concision.

Methods

To achieve this purpose, a historical overview of the prevalence of botanical art will be provided followed with the advantages of botanical art over the modern camera. The discussion of the ASBA as a Discourse Community will then proceed by establishing the ASBA as a Discourse Community based on Swale’s Six Characteristics of a Discourse Community, while performing a close examination of the organization’s online database which includes the consideration of ASBA’s common goals, vision and mission statement, ASBA’s definition of botanical art, important exhibitions, and a brief analysis on the Member Benefits survey distributed in March 2015. Most of the information here is taken from the ASBA’s Quinquennial Strategic Plan that was adopted by the ASBA Board on October 14, 2015.

Results and Discussion

History of Botanical Art

Antiquity and Before:

Earliest records of Botanical Art dates back to hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, from many ancient civilizations from the East to the West. In China, records of herb illustrations date back 4,500 years ago. In Greece, Asia Minor, and Babylon, drawings and descriptions of plants were used for medical treatment (Rix, 2012). Aristotle and Theophrastus were also one of the first to study medicinal properties of plants systemically. The JAC (*Juliana Anicia Codex*) or the *Codex Vindobonensis* is one of the oldest surviving and most popular revised edition (AD 512) of Greek Herbal entitled [On Medical Matters] by Pedanois Dioskurides in the year 65. Based on the 1500th Anniversary publication of the JAC, it states that “[i]t was destined to be one of the most famous books on pharmacology and medicine but is also rich in horticulture and plant ecology.” (Janick & Hummer, 2012)



Figure 2. Lamb's tongue (*Plantago lanceolata*): JAC 29v



Figure 3. Columbine, watercolor on paper, Albrecht Dürer

The Renaissance: As science, medicine, and technology developed, so did the greater demand for realism in plant illustrations. In the early times of this period, botanical art shook free of the Byzantine style of art and became more realistic, although some are religiously rooted. The artists would also add in the scenery and add relevant objects in the background (Rix, 2012). By the 15th-16th century, botanical art was drastically refined when “both scientific precision and artistic sensibility were introduced by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Albrecht Dürer (1471 – 1528).” (Buck & Rice, n.d.)

The Age of Exploration: Approximating the 18th to 19th century was what was

considered the golden age of botanical art as it the period of exploration and discovery. With the interest in finding new species, the accuracy of specimen portrayal became the most important. Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish naturalist became the father of modern taxonomy by creating the binomial nomenclature system that revolutionized the scientific process had his beginnings with plants. Botanical artists travelled closely with scientists and voyagers to be the first to record foreign plants. Florilegium, a collection of botanical drawings and paintings designated to plants in a region were popularized. Wealthy people would become patrons for botanical artists and would highly commission these artists to create artworks or florilegium of their gardens or exotic places. After the invention of the cameras, the demand of botanical art diminished.

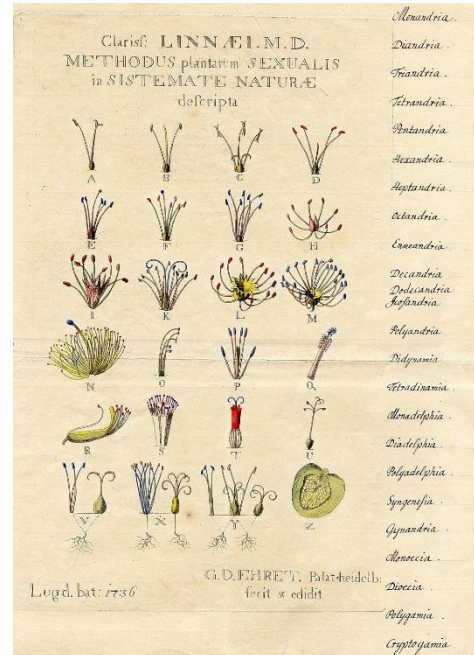


Figure 4. (above) “Methodus Plantarum Sexualis in sistemate naturae descripta” (Leiden 1736) Images according to Linnaeus's 24 classes of the sexual systems of plants (the names of which are on the right) illustrated by Georg Dionysius Ehret.



Figure 5. (left) Sydney Parkinson (1768-1771) *Erythrina variegata* Cook First Voyage Artwork Collection. From JSTOR Global Plants. Retrieved from https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.visual.nhm-uk-l-a391788a-024b-m-1?searchUri=si%3D276%26ff%3Dps_repository_name_str__ps_collection_name_str%26fq%3DcHNfdHlWZToolldhdGVyY29sb3Jzlik%253D%26so%3Dps_group_by_genus_species%2Basc%26Query%3Dps_collection%253ACFVA

Figure 7. (right) Georg Dionys Ehret. 18th century. Many of the exotic fruits such as the Paw-paw and Pineapple discovered on the voyages of discovery quickly became fashionable in Europe. (n.d.)



Botanical Art Over the Camera? Although the technological development of cameras has decreased the importance of Botanical Art, it has not yet able to make this art obsolete. The advantages of Botanical art over modern digital photography are as follows:

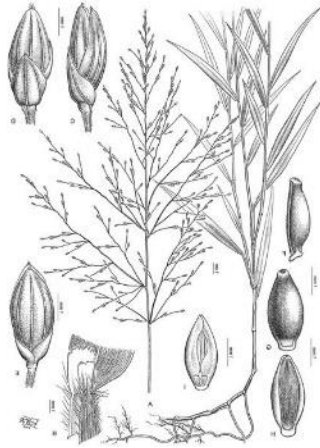


Figure 8. Darwinion Institute Art Collection; Rojas, F. 2010, *Acroceras excavatum* (Henrard)

1. Able to depict the plant as a representative of its whole species or genus, rather than the specific image of the individual plant with possibly individualistic traits identifiable by only botanical expertise
2. Merge features of a plant that may not appear at the same time, such as seasonal changes of a plant
3. Scaling can depict various features of the plant and its relative size (such as the size of the pollen, the seeds, petal length, leaf length)
4. Will only depict required details, no distracting background, or presence of other plant species
5. Aesthetically uniform, such as having no unnecessary lighting differences, or bent leaves
6. Demonstrates the accurate colors and hues based on direct human observation, various cameras or photographic situations may alter the coloring or saturation

(pvaldes, 2020)

ASBA

Establishing ASBA as a Discourse Community: (Swales, n.d.)

1. *“A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.”*
ASBA’s 2015 Revised Mission statement is “To provide a thriving, interactive community dedicated to perpetuating the tradition and contemporary practice of botanical art”. Their 2015 Revised Vision statement is: “Botanical art will be considered a significant, relevant, and respected contributor to 21st century art, recognized for its unique power to educate, promote ecological awareness and enrich our lives.” Because of these agreed upon purposes and common vision that gets revised and updated based on the major consensus of the society, it can be concluded that this society has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
2. *“A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members”*
ASBA clearly states their Member Engagement Goals and outline goals or activities to continue, pursue, and consider/defer within each goal. Their goals include:
 1. Increase inclusion, participation and engagement of all members (individual, institutional, chapters and circles, international, and at-large) in the activities of the organization
 2. Improve level, quality, effectiveness and timeliness of communications with all members
 3. Increase opportunities for networking, affiliation and interaction among members
 4. Increase support, encouragement and guidance provided to members in their pursuit of botanical art-related endeavors

Information is currently distributed to members through the monthly eNewsletter (*Highlights*), Constant Contact email blasts, quarterly journal, website and Facebook page.

3. *“A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.”*
 Within the board members, ASBA plans to increase board member satisfaction with their experiences and expectations upon joining the board, after first term of service, and upon leaving the board. Within the Member Engagement goals, ASBA conducts periodic surveys using Constant Contact to obtain opinions and feedback on specific topics. Through conferences, ASBA plans to pass session survey comments onto session instructors to be able to incorporate feedback in their future teaching.

4. *“A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.”*
 ASBA utilizes many mediums and genres in spreading awareness, communicating news and information, and developing and promoting many types of publications that continuously shine the spotlight in botanical art. Examples of publications and mediums include catalogs, annual activity reports, history books, educational and/or instructional art books, exhibitions, conferences, workshops and many more.

5. *“In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.”*
 Along with a mutually agreed upon definition and criteria of what is considered Botanical Art, members of this community are typically expected to have a general knowledge of botanical art history, famous and influential artists, and widely-used jargon regarding this subject, such as some artistic terms, botanical or scientific terms, or botanical art-specific terms such as Florilegia.

 Their unique definition of botanical art is also an acquire lexis, and is not meant to be viewed as the sole definition, but the definition that is most suitable in “defining the genre in the context of the organization” (ASBA 2015 Strategic Plan 2015). Artistically, the work should have an aesthetic appeal, and able to elicit intellectual or emotional response from the audience. The work should also be a scientifically accurate portrayal. Lastly, the work should reflect the intimate knowledge and understanding of the specimen the work was based on procured by firsthand observation.

6. *“A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise.”*
 Although the ASBA does not have many requirements for one to become a member, its board members do all have an abundance of experience in engaging botanical art with their community such as in arts education, participating in exhibitions, being a part of other botanical art organizations, publishing illustration books, and many others.

Important Events – Exhibitions

Curating, organizing, or participating in botanical art exhibitions are valued events of the ASBA that take place in numerous beautiful venues around the world, and provides artists venues to display and sell their artwork. They curate the ASBA Annual International at The Hort and the NYBG (New York Botanical Garden) Triennial. They wish to further “recognize excellence in botanical art through acceptance in juried exhibitions and exhibition awards” and curate more themed exhibitions. Other exhibition goals include creating more opportunities for members to be more involved in all regions and levels, and expanding the geographic reach of ASBA exhibitions within the United States and

around the world. This aligns with their organization's purpose to increase the general public's awareness and appreciation of botanical art, as well as recognizing and encouraging the making of botanical art.

Artistic exhibitions are a chief method in pursuing the goals of the organization by maximizing engagement within the organization as well as outside the organization through venue advertisement before, conversation during the event, and articles and reports of the event after. Workshops or lectures also tend to be hosted coinciding with the exhibition. The artists, artwork, awards, events and the opening are all described and recorded and recognized.

Unlike the membership requirements for joining the ASBA, in which a variable fee is solely required, the requirements and details for entering artwork(s) for exhibitions through or for the ASBA are slightly more stringent. Per entry, one can submit 3 artworks and submissions must be digital files only with a specified resolution. Presentation framed size limit is 40" x 48", and it must be for sale. Submitted images are automatically allowed for use in "promotional, educational or interpretative materials, either in print or electronic media, before, during and after the exhibition. (Call for Entries, n.d.)

Member Benefits Survey

Benefits in participating in this modern botanical art community can be seen as an applied approach for present day practice regarding the celebration or personal appreciation of botanical art. A survey was distributed to all ASBA Members in March 2015 and received 300 responses regarding what benefits were (1 = Do not value, 2 = Value somewhat, 3 = Highly Value). The top 3 benefits of highest perceived value are:

1. Subscription to "The Botanical Artist" quarterly journal (3)
2. Opportunities to see artwork of other members to gain insight and inspiration as an artist (2.9)
3. Newsletter and email notices about ASBA and botanical art related events (2.8)

The subscription to the journal was most highly valued, as well as benefits related to interaction and link with other members. Most benefits are more interesting to botanical artists themselves, to inspire their work and be connected with the artistic community, rather than being a collector, or for perceived uninteresting benefits such as being listed in certain categories online, which were the lowest perceived benefits.

Conclusion

Botanists, biologists, physicians, and pharmacists have all used pictures to classify and analyze plants. Before the invention of the high-resolution camera, botanical illustration was a vital and indispensable source of information for food and medicine. Botanical Art provided the groundwork of modern Taxonomy, and was a much celebrated art and scientific form through the 19th century.

Although botanical art is currently not in the same demand, due to commissions being much more specialized and expensive, and recent plant taxonomy can be analyzed in a molecular level due to new technology, botanical art is still an art form that within it hold centuries of tradition and history, and provides modern botanists valuable insight camera could not. **In present times, botanical art is therefore focused less on its scientific novelty and its essential contribution to science, but more on the preservation of this artistic tradition and engaging the community in the appreciation of this art form.**

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Source: John Swales, *The Concept of Discourse Community, Writing About Writing*