A Medieval Garden of Botanical Illustrations


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Reference Librarian

A potpourri of botanical illuminations and illustrations in this exhibit show the breadth and depth of plant illustration before 1650. Among the items in this exhibit are modern illuminated pages in the medieval style, books from the Drew University Library collection, and the private collection of Jennifer Heise.

When looking at the diversity and fecundity of pre-modern and medieval art, one may be struck by the vast variety of plant and agricultural subjects. A number of scholars, Wilfrid Blunt and Agnes Arber among them, have traced plant imagery from the earliest surviving depictions in herbals, through medieval decorative and illustrative uses, and into the modern tradition of botanical illustration.

Although surviving Roman-era wall frescoes and mosaics beautifully incorporate botanical subjects, the extant illustrations of plants from herbal and medical manuals in the middle of the first millennium AD seem crude. Scholars, such as Stephen Pollington, author of Leechcraft: Early English Charms; Plantlore and Healing; AngloSaxon Books, 2000, point out that identification of plants from texts such as Dioscorides’ De Materia Medica was hampered by the practice of re-copying illustrations from existing illustrations rather than re-drawing from nature when copying the manuscript. Illustrations in the so-called Vienna codex of Dioscorides’ work, probably produced between 500-600 AD, may have passed through the pens of several generations of indoor scribes.

But by the beginning of the second millennium AD, the monks and scribes were clearly no longer confined to walled scriptoriums. Walafrid Strabo's Hortulus, a poem by the abbot of Richenau (circa 826-849), lovingly describes work in the garden. (The Drew University Library has a copy of Rael Payne’s translation of the Hortulus in its special collections.) Albertus Magnus suggested that monastery gardens contain lawns for the visual refreshment of weary scribes and scholars: “For the sight is in no way so pleasantly refreshed as by fine and close grass kept short.” The Plan of the Monastery of St. Gall, created between 819-826, also at the monastery of Richenau and now viewable online at http://www.stgallplan.org/, shows many garden spaces for monkish relaxation.

It appears that both cloistered and uncloistered illuminators took inspiration from these surroundings. Marian references to the Song of Solomon's "garden enclosed" metaphor brought gardens and flowers into pictures of that ever-popular subject, the Virgin Mary. By the 13th and 14th centuries, flowers, vines, tendrils and leaves appear in the margins of illuminated manuscripts, especially the ‘books of hours,’ expensive and elaborate books of prayers or lay breviaries made for rich patrons. ‘Calendars’ of the year included agricultural and garden scenes. Gardening texts, such as Pietro de Crescenzi’s Ruralium Commodorum and garden-related literature, such as the 14th century French poem Roman de la Rose, offered scope for the horticulturally minded illuminator. Of course, the level of detail might be left to the illustrator; Frank Crisp points out that when an illustrator of the period wishes to indicate a garden, he may resort to the shorthand of merely putting a wattle fence or other enclosure about it. Some illustrators chose their floral emblems for their symbolism-- lilies, for instance, appear consistently in depictions of the Annunciation, symbolic of the purity of the Virgin.

Woodcuts and the invention of the printing press combined to bring out a new form of botanical illustration. As printed medical and dietary texts began to proliferate, woodcuts of their subjects spread with them. These sorts of illustrations were not entirely new; multiple illustrated manuscripts of 12th century Arabic dietary text, Ibn Botlan’s Tacuinum Sanitatis, had been created by the end of the 15th century. Crude woodcuts of the Hortus Sanitatis were appearing by the 1490s. But these illustrations, whether of plants or other aspects of life, do not appear to be for direct identification purposes-- who, after all, would need an illustration of bathing, as appears in the Tacuinum manuscripts, to identify that or other human activities?

Whether it was an effect of the Renaissance, spreading literacy, or the exploratory nature of the 16th century, it’s clear that illustration of plants for identification and documentation purposes became all the rage. Florilegia, or collections of plant illustrations, and Herbaria, collections of dried plants systematically arranged, flourished along with the newfangled botanical gardens being constructed in universities, medical schools, and even guild house premises. Whereas the old medical books were arranged either by plant name or by the diseases for which one might seek a cure, late 16th, 17th and 18th century herbals began to group like plants together, as we see in illustrations from Gerard and Parkinson. Nowadays, when photographic illustrations are cheaply available to us, some texts still use botanical sketches or paintings to elucidate differences and identifying markers for the plants under discussion.

Most scholars, of course, do not believe that the progress of botanical illustration was a smooth and sequential one, with the 17th century botanical illustrations growing out of the flower-strewed borders of the 15th century, or the flowery lawns depicted in paintings and textiles, such as the Unicorn Tapestries, of the time period. Still, this overview of plant pictures from the long ‘middle ages’ allows us (borrowing a phrase from the 19th century) "to wander unchoked through a garden of bright images" (Ernest Bramah, Kai Lung’s Golden Hours).

Note: Call numbers for items held by the Drew University Library appear in brackets [ ] after the title; all other items are from the private collection of Jennifer Heise.

The Exhibit

Case 1: Roman and Early Medieval Pieces

These delicate and detailed decorative botanics from Roman homes contrast with the cruder outlines of the later Dioscorides illustrations.

Penelope Hobhouse. Plants in Garden History: An Illustrated History of Plants and Their Influence on Garden Styles— from Ancient
**Egypt to the present day.** London: Pavilion Books, 1997.
The *Materia Medica* of Dioscorides, illustrated in the 6th and 7th centuries, is one of the earliest surviving illustrated medical/botanical manuscripts in the Western Tradition. However, the simplicity and oft-copied nature of the depictions show that they are memory aids rather than identification guides.

This reproduction from the approximately 6th century manuscript of Dioscorides held in Vienna shows admirable attention to the leaves, but little clarity in the flowers. Compare it to other Dioscorides illustrations.

The reproduced illustration from the 512 AD Byzantine version of Dioscorides' *Materia Medica,* as well as the illustration from the *Herbarium Apuleii Platonici,* c. 1481, show the minimalist nature of early plant depictions in such materia medica.

**Material Artifacts**

*The Secular Spirit: Life at the End of the Medieval Period.* Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: Dutton, 1975, and

Timothy Whitcomb. *Thumb controlled watering pot.* Ceramic, brown glaze. Circa 2001. Modern reproduction. John Worlidge, 1677: “There is another sort of Watring pot that hath a small hole at the bottom and another at the Top, so that when you sink it into a Vessel of Water, it will fill by the lower pipe or hole, the air passing out at the hole at the top where the handle is also: when it is full take it by the handle and stop the hole with your thumb, and when you come to the Plant you intend to water, you may ease the hole whereon your thumb lies, and as you please let the water out at the Pipe in the bottom, and so may you stop it, and open it with your thumbs, at your pleasure. . .”

**Case 2: Botanical Borders**

*The Hours of Catherine of Cleves.* New York: George Braziller, 1966. Collection, Drew University Library. [096.1 H841h]


Flowers and botanical scrollwork were among the common border decorations in 14th and 15th century illuminations, especially books of hours. Some illuminators used a variety of recognizable and fanciful flowers and plants, as here in the Catherine of Cleves manuscript. Others repeated the same floral motif, as the pea blossoms and pods in Michelino de Besozzo. However, a number of schools, especially in the Low Countries, created dazzlingly accurate still lives of flowers, birds and insects in their borders, a style that modern illuminators sometimes refer to as “squashed bug”.

This illustration combines two different types of plant depiction. In the gardens depicted in the main scene from the Romance of the Rose, plants, while well-drawn, are not clear enough to be identifiable. However, the framing border shows close-up and identifiable images of pansies, lilies, carnations, irises, and other flowers, as well as birds.

**Case 3: Garden Depictions**

This illustration of a woman making a rose wreath in a garden incorporates clearly identifiable and detailed depictions of a number of botanical species, including roses (*Rosa Centifolia*) and carnations (*Dianthus sp.*)

These two depictions of gardens, from the 1500s and 1400s, show varying degrees of detail and identifiability in the plants depicted. The 15th
century illustration (recto) for Pietro de Crescenzi’s 1305 gardening text, *Ruralium Commodorum*, shows an orchard with a fruit tree and an apple tree, as well as various flowers and vines. The verso illustration from a ‘Romance’ poem, circa 1500, shows elaborate flower gardens and lawns, as well as finely detailed ‘border’ flowers. In general, later period flower and garden depictions are often more detailed than earlier ones. However, the symbolic style of the Crescenzi illustration is typical where conveying information about the activity, rather than the setting, is of primary importance.


Compare here a highly symbolic sketch of a garden from an early 15th c. manuscript concentrating on the consequences of the Fall from Eden, with the detailed and identifiable painted plants in the “Little Paradise Garden” depiction of 1410. Because of the allegorical nature of the painting, the reader must be able to recognize the plants in order to decipher the allegory.


The illustrations for Parkinson’s and Gerard’s texts both demonstrate the detail and attention to identifiability that characterize 16th and 17th century illustrations. Parkinson's illustrations group similar plants in a single frame, while Gerard's show each item individually. Uniqueness was not prized in this context; nor was plagiarism a concern to be avoided. Gerard's text is actually primarily taken from an English translation of Rembert Dodoens' *Stirpium historiae pemptades sex*, with illustrations taken from the 1588 *Neuw Kreuterbuch* by Jacob Dietrich of Bergzaben.
These modern illustrations are in the 16th century realistic botanical style. The *Buttercup & Viola* and *Cherries* pieces are based on an illumination from *Mira Calligraphia Monumenta* (Flemish, 1575), while *Iris and Narcissus* are based on a page from *Hortus Eystettensis* by George Mack (Nürnberg, 1614-15).

Wall Display

This original modern work incorporates elements from a number of pre-modern illuminations in order to personalize it to the recipient. The adaption of a border (right) from the Luttrell Psalter with humanoid hares rather than the figures used in the original, and the humanoid hare in the central scene, is a ‘canting’ (heraldic form of pun) referring to the name Zajączkowa, the feminized form of the Polish word zająć, meaning a leveret or young hare. Ending a border of scrollwork with a depending cluster of flowers or vines, such as the hearts-ease (viola tricolor) on the left side, is typical of manuscript borders. Compare the depiction of plants in the garden around the Hare Alchemist and her furnace with those in other garden depictions in this exhibit.

Further Reading:

- Arber, Agnes. *Herbals, their Origin and Evolution; a Chapter in the History of Botany*, 1470-1670. 2nd edition. (Darien, Connecticut:...
Hafner, 1970) [582.12 A664h]

**Web Pages**

- Pingel, Claire. "Illustrated Botanical Books in Bryn Mawr Special Collections," Bryn Mawr College Library Special Collections: http://www.brynmawr.edu/Library/speccoll/guides/Botanicals/botanicals.html