

Pressemitteilung

from 29th September 2020

Paper Gardens: Illustrated Plant Books of the Early Modern Age

Studio Exhibition

1 October 2020 – 26 September 2021

Medical herbology, systematically ordered books about plants and magnificent volumes featuring pictures of impressive gardens: a studio exhibition which opened on Thursday, 1 October 2020 uses books and pictures to provide an insight into the early history of botany. The 12 books and 18 individual pages from the 15th to the 18th century come from the GNM library's eminent holdings, which also include a set of brightly coloured watercolour preliminary drawings on permanent loan from the City of Nuremberg.

At the heart of the studio exhibition is the exquisite Baroque "**Plantae Selectae**" by Christoph Jacob Trew, regarded as the most beautiful German plant book of the 18th century. Over the years, the physician and botanist had amassed a significant number of watercolours of plants, to which he added depictions of distinctive details such as seeds, fruits or pistils. The images served as the prototype for the illustrations in "Plantae Selectae", a personal selection from his collection. For the first time, the book is now exhibited together with the magnificently coloured preliminary drawings.

The history of botany

While treatises about a wide variety of plants existed in ancient times, it was only with the advent of printing that knowledge about the healing power of plants became more widespread. Before then, people focused on simply copying historical sources and accepting ancient knowledge without question, but from the 16th century onwards, physicians and apothecaries increasingly started to study nature themselves, and described the appearance and effect of a wide variety of useful plants based on their own perceptions.

Works by Hieronymus Bock, Otto Brunfels and Leonhart Fuchs, the "founding fathers of botany", are among the earliest testimonies of a discipline that

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gradually became a science in its own right. They meticulously list indigenous and exotic herbs – including from newly “discovered” America – record the properties attributed to them and illustrate their appearance in woodcuts. The historical volumes bear witness to a rational and aesthetic approach to nature: rational, because they record medical and botanical knowledge, and aesthetic because they also offer a godly chronicle of the beauty of the plant world.

From useful to decorative plants

Books about plants from the Baroque period, in particular, attempt to outdo nature itself in terms of realism and beauty. As paper gardens of paradise, they bring the Garden of Eden into the study even in the winter months. Decorative plants become more important. The “**Hortus Eystettensis**” on the Willibaldsburg in Eichstätt was the first botanical garden in Germany, created by a prince-archbishop as a representative outdoor space – the richly illustrated accompanying volume was published in 1613.

Maria Sibylla Merian goes one step further, fascinating her readers with illustrations of exotic plants and their occupants. The exhibition shows a selection of copperplates from her famous **Surinam book** of 1705 with examples of South American flora and fauna. Plants with their flowers and fruits go from being decorative embellishment to the main subject, rendered up-close. She portrays fruits rare at the time in Europe, such as limes, lemons and pineapples, in almost life size and very realistically on imposingly large sheets. The richness and beauty of this genre are astonishing.

Over the course of the exhibition, the pages will be turned three times: the exhibited books will remain in their cabinets, the supplementary individual sheets will be exchanged once every 3 months, enabling new illustrations to be shown.

Changeover dates: 12 January 2021, 13 April 2021 and 6 July 2021

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