

# Chinese leaves

Between 1817 and 1830 a tea inspector stationed in China bought and commissioned superb drawings of plants and animals to send back to London. Information about those held by the Society has recently come to light. **Kate Bailey** takes up the story. Images from RHS Lindley Library

**ONE OF THE TREASURES** of the RHS Lindley Library is the Reeves Collection, a set of eight early 19th-century albums containing nearly 900 Chinese botanical watercolours, originating from Canton and Macau. Relatively little was known about these pictures until an RHS-funded research project, instigated three years ago, brought to light new information about the collector, John Reeves, and about the Chinese painters and the pictures themselves.

## Early years in China

John Reeves (1774–1856) first went to Canton (now Guangzhou) in 1812 as Assistant Tea Inspector for the British East India Company (which then had the monopoly on trade between Britain and China). He worked for short periods in London in 1816, 1817 and again in 1824, but lived in China (in Macau and in Canton), until he retired back to the UK in 1831.

Reeves was also a keen naturalist. During his first stay back in the UK, he was elected Fellow of the Linnean Society and of the Royal Society. His connection to these and to the fledgling Horticultural Society of London (later to become the RHS) led him to offer to send back drawings and Chinese plants new to UK cultivation, which the Society accepted in 1817. Reeves was also interested in animals, especially fish: London's Natural History Museum has a collection of 2,000 watercolours of animals he sourced. ▶819

**TREE PEONY** A splendid pink-flowered *Paeonia suffruticosa*, titled 'Kung Fan Mau Tang', painted by an unknown Chinese artist. One of many drawings commissioned in the early 19th century by John Reeves

## RESTORED FOR THE FUTURE

Many of the paintings from the Reeves Collection have deteriorated due to changes in paint pigments, discoloration from glue used in binding or, in some cases, water damage. The conservation and digitisation work, with the support of the KT Wong Foundation, will ensure the pictures' future.

**i Availability** Work is likely to last three years, so the collection cannot be viewed. Once complete, it will be available by appointment



Discoloration before treatment



Restored detail after treatment

'THESE PICTURES WERE USED AS A "PLANT CATALOGUE" FROM WHICH THE SOCIETY COULD SELECT PLANTS IT WANTED REEVES TO SOURCE TO IMPORT AND INTRODUCE INTO CULTIVATION'

**SACRED LOTUS** A white-flowered selection of *Nelumbo nucifera*, showing leaf, flower and seedhead. Imperfections such as leaf blemishes were reproduced by the Chinese artists

816► Reeves returned to Canton for the 1817 winter 'tea season'. He must have lost no time in selecting his first painter, described by botanist and Linnean Society founder Joseph Sabine as 'one of the best native artists', because the minutes of Council for July 1818 reveal that 29 commissioned drawings had been received, together with others Reeves had purchased. The commissioned pictures were painted on cream English papers measuring 37 x 48cm (14½ x 19in); the purchased drawings were made on smaller, fine, white Chinese papers.

The commissioned drawings demonstrate both Chinese and western styles of painting. The painters detailed insect-eaten and damaged foliage in the Chinese manner, but also included dissected plant parts as required to help identification by the Linnean system of taxonomy. These pictures were used as a 'plant catalogue' from which the Society could select plants it wanted Reeves to source to import and introduce into cultivation in Britain.

Because the images were bound into albums, their colours, obtained from traditional Chinese pigments such as blue azurite, green malachite, yellow gamboge and vermilion, remain as bright today as they were nearly 200 years ago. Reeves also provided translations of the Chinese plant names. We learn from one of Joseph Sabine's articles in the *Transactions of the Horticultural Society* for 1824 that some of the 'curious and fanciful' names of Chinese chrysanthemums included 'the White Waves of Autumn', 'the Purple Pheasant's Tail' and 'Yellow Tiger's Claw'. The paintings are primarily of ornamental species; besides chrysanthemums there are azaleas, camellias and roses, together with a few fruit, vegetables and even bonsai.

Three pencilled inscriptions have been discovered on the pictures, all in Reeves' handwriting: 'Achew', 'Akut' and 'Akam', which match the names of painters found in the only two of his notebooks extant (held by the Natural History Museum). Since Chinese painters were usually anonymous, the Reeves Collection is highly unusual in having them attributed to their creators. From the notebooks it has been deduced that each painter produced approximately one picture per day and was paid about one dollar for three paintings. Accuracy was vital, and it was said in his obituary in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* that Reeves had the paintings 'executed in his own house, under his own superintendence in order to secure himself against the deceptions practised by the native draughtsmen'. Chinese export artists had a penchant for embellishing upon nature in order to boost sales of their pictures.

#### Later history of Reeves Collection

During the 1820s, Reeves sent back hundreds of pictures, and many plants, all prepared carefully for the voyage home. By then, however, the Horticultural Society was running into financial difficulties. Surplus pictures were disposed of to raise funds, and in 1830 Reeves was asked to discontinue his collecting on the Society's behalf.

More than 30 species of animals bear his name, including *Muntiacus reevesiana* (Reeves' muntjac deer) now naturalised in much of England, and plants, including *Skimmia japonica* subsp. *reevesiana*. On retirement, John Reeves contributed to the success of Robert Fortune's first trip to China in 1843, and remained involved in the Society up to within a week of his death, on 22 March 1856. Described by the *Gardeners' Chronicle* as 'among the Nestors of Horticulture' (after the oldest and wisest of the Greek rulers involved in the Trojan War), Reeves is perhaps best remembered for sending back a specimen of *Wisteria sinensis* that flourished in the Society's garden at Chiswick for many years, and for introducing *Primula sinensis* to British gardeners.

In 1859 the Society took the drastic step of selling off its entire library. For some decades the Reeves albums were 'lost', their whereabouts unknown, but in 1936 five albums, still with the RHS seals, were bequeathed to the RHS by Reginald Cory. A further three albums were purchased in 1953, using money from Cory's bequest. The Lindley Library now holds almost all the pictures that were sold in 1859, and these continue to yield important information about Chinese plants, painting techniques, pigments and much else. The work of John Reeves lives on, both in our gardens, with the plants he introduced, and in his superb collection of watercolours. ■

Kate Bailey is completing PhD research into the history, materials and conservation of the Reeves Collection

**i Further reading** A more detailed article about the Reeves Collection, showing more of the paintings, can be seen in the December issue of *The Plantsman*, sister publication to *The Garden*. Subscribe online at: [www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman](http://www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman) or call 020 7821 3401



#### LASTING LEGACY

Amateur naturalist John Reeves (above) sent plants and portraits from China to the Horticultural Society of London (which became the RHS). Scarlet-flowered *Bombax ceiba* (cotton tree) (below) is a tree often grown as an ornamental in tropical regions. Reeves ensured that the drawings depicted botanical details such as seeds and fruit, a convention new to the artists he commissioned

