

*Iris 'Night Gown', by  
Jean Emmons, USA*

The striking execution of this Pacific Coast iris portrait counterpoints perfectly the depth of the brooding tones and velvety texture of the flowers against the strappy foliage. The depiction of water droplets and die-back of leaves hint at the plant's need for moisture.

✦ Painted 2005. Exhibited: Botanical Art Show BBC Gardener's World Live 2005. Gold medal.

✦ One of four such iris paintings from the artist in the RHS Art Collection held by the Lindley Library.

# *Rendering a living masterpiece*

The passion for botanical illustration has encouraged a new generation of artists to reinterpret traditional techniques, as this month's RHS exhibition will show >>

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Images: **RHS Lindley Library**



***Primula auricula* 'Queen Bee', by Brigitte Daniel, UK**

The accomplished execution of this auricula captures the plant's simple, clean outlines, depicting the farina that dusts its blossoms, as well as the sherry tone of the petals and pale green leaves. The image is set against a stark white background, without loss of detail.

✦ Painted 2004. Exhibited: London Botanical Art Show 2007. Gold medal.

✦ One of three auricula paintings from the artist in the Lindley Library collection.



The practice of creating an accurate image of a plant is a discipline stretching back almost half a millennium, rooted in the illustrations of herbals. Today, botanical illustration attracts increasing numbers of amateur and professional practitioners, their work in turn captivating legions of admirers.

In part this wave of popularity has been stimulated by the work of Shirley Sherwood OBE, namesake of the Gallery of Botanical Art opened at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in 2008, and also by the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Pittsburgh, USA, along with a number of dedicated societies. Although this art form may today seem an anachronism, in skilled hands it can still powerfully convey information about plants in ways photography does not. In concert with herbarium specimens, paintings were the only way a living plant could be captured for posterity. Botanical artists were employed on expeditions by scientific institutions and patrons receiving the fruits of discovery.

However, botanical art has changed over the last 400 years. Artists today exhibit greater control over presentation, such as selecting which stage of the life cycle or plant part to illustrate. The examples reproduced here, selected from 30,000 paintings held at the RHS Lindley Library in London, vividly illustrate the highly skilled approach that embodies their work.

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***Hydrangea*, by Noriko Watanabe, Japan**

A departure from traditional plant portraiture, with its use of a restricted colour palette, this execution still maintains botanical accuracy.

✦ Painted as part of a series, *Hydrangeas in Watercolour*. Exhibited: London Botanical Art Show 2006. Gold Medal.

✦ Donated by the artist to the Lindley Library collection in 2007.



***Rheum* roots, by Norma Gregory, UK**

The rootstock of plants has hitherto been the Cinderella of botanical illustration, but here an example is uncompromisingly positioned centre stage. The gnarled tissues and roots are potently observed and vividly contrast with the scarlet leaf-stalks.

✦ Part of a series, *Rooted Fascination*. Exhibited: RHS London Orchid and Botanical Art Show 2011. Gold medal.

✦ Purchased by the Lindley Library in 2011.



***Abies firma*, by Kimiyo Maruyama, Japan**

The artist's technical ability is fully realised in this meticulously observed study where minute differences in orientation and coloration generate a composition approaching photorealism.

✦ Painted 2008. From a series, *Trees of the Pinaceae in watercolour*. Exhibited: RHS London Orchid and Botanical Art Show 2010. Gold Medal and Best Exhibit in Show.

✦ Purchased by the Lindley Library, March 2011.

***Brassica oleracea* var. *capitata rubra* 'Marner Early Red', by Clare McGhee, UK**

There has been an increase in botanical painting of vegetables in recent years; here the perspective results in the cabbage appearing to grow from the page and highlights its glaucous foliage.

✦ Painted 2009, from a series *Vegetables*. Exhibited: RHS London Orchid and Botanical Art Show 2010. Gold Medal.

✦ Purchased by the Lindley Library in 2010.



***Dragon fruit*, by Sam Cook, UK**

The execution of this study of yellow dragon fruit or pitahaya (seedpod of cactus *Selenicereus megalanthus*) is contemporary, yet embraces traditional principles, including use of graphite and ink to realise botanical detail. Presented as a herbarium sheet, the fruit is analysed through various cross sections, including a dissection of spines and seeds.

✦ Painted 2005, from the series *Exotic Fruits in Watercolour*. Exhibited: London Botanical Art Show 2006. Gold Medal.

✦ Purchased by the Lindley Library in 2006.



## Historical pioneers

Scientifically informed botanical art arose in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries to support the burgeoning interest and developments in science, medicine and exploration, including cataloguing of the natural world.

It reached its zenith in the 18th and 19th centuries and significant past masters included Alexander Marshall (c1620–1682), Claude Aubriet (1665–1742), Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–1770), Francis and Ferdinand Bauer (1758–1840 / 1760–1826), Pierre-Jean-François Turpin (1775–1840) and renowned Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840), who took a more painterly approach to plant portraiture. ●



### *Tamarindus Raii* Hist, by Claude Aubriet 1703–1742

This plant, known now as *Tamarindus indica*, is the subject of one of a set of images of exotic culinary plants introduced to Europe in the early 18th century. It is typical of the period, drawn in two dimensions. Aubriet was among the first to paint in the field on expeditions and was artist in residence at Jardin du Roi, Paris.



### Seed pods by Pierre-Jean-François Turpin, 1820

Regarded as one of the most talented botanical artists of the 19th century, Turpin rendered this detailed study on vellum, taken from JLM Poiré's book *Leçons de Flore*. Important elements are highlighted in gold, originally a medieval technique.

### Tulips by Pieter van Kouwenhoorn, 1630

This Dutch artist recorded prized tulips that helped fuel the craze known as 'tulipomania'. Probably commissioned around 1630, these are the earliest paintings held by the RHS and form an album of 47 sheets entitled *Verzameling van Bloemen naar de Natuur geteek door* (Collection of flowers drawn from nature).



## RHS London Orchid & Botanical Art Show 16–17 March

The RHS Lindley Library Art Collections comprise more than 30,000 original botanical illustrations, dating from about 1630 to the present day. The collection is maintained by library specialists and acquisitions are recommended by the RHS Picture Advisory Committee, composed of professional experts and botanists. Some library images will be exhibited at this month's show in the Horticultural

Halls, Westminster, London, along with:

- ❖ Previously un-judged illustrations from more than 20 artists, many new to RHS shows. Illustrations will be judged by the RHS Picture Advisory Committee.
- ❖ In celebration of The Queen's Diamond Jubilee, the Lindley Library will display images celebrating the long patronage of the Royal Family to the RHS.
- ❖ The Hampton Court Palace Florilegium

Society will exhibit part of its botanical art collection, which comprises work painted at Hampton Court Palace: [www.florilegium-at-hamptoncourtpalace.co.uk](http://www.florilegium-at-hamptoncourtpalace.co.uk)

❖ **Thursday Preview Evening:** 15 Mar, 6:30–8:30pm, £12 (includes readmission on one public day).

❖ **Public days:** 16–17 Mar, 10–5pm, members £5, non-members £8. Tickets: 0845 612 1253, or visit [www.rhs.org.uk/londonshows](http://www.rhs.org.uk/londonshows)