

**Lycaste Shoalhaven 'Grouville'** by Deborah Lambkin, 2009. Award of Merit for Eric Young Orchid Foundation, Jersey.



**Paphiopedilum micranthum 'Bonbon'** by Gillian Young, 1986. Award of Merit. Cultivar of a species from Vietnam and China described in 1951.



**Masdevallia Memoria Barry Firby 'Anne'**, by Deborah Lambkin, 2012. Award of Merit.

**Rhyncholaeliocattleya Dorothy 'Dell Park'** by Nellie Roberts, 1929. First Class Certificate. Hybrid of multiple genera.

**Paphiopedilum Lilian Greenwood** by Nellie Roberts, 1897. Award of Merit at Roberts' first Orchid Committee meeting as artist.



# Orchids and art

The RHS London Orchid and Botanical Art Show on 12-13 April will feature not just plants, but some of the finest examples of botanical art from across the world

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Orchids have always been in the vanguard of the Society's work with plants; their exotic flowers, mystique – and eccentric growers – invariably make them a highlight of RHS shows. This month's London Orchid and Botanical Art Show will combine the cream of the orchid world with some of the best botanical art from around the globe.

The nexus of the RHS and orchids began in the 1830s when the Society's Assistant Secretary, botanist John Lindley, named and described many new orchid species arriving from overseas. The RHS itself sent out plant collectors to the tropics in the first half of the 19th century, explorers such as George Don and Karl Hartweg returning with new floral treasures.

A display of paintings at last year's show.



Many were painted for the record by the best botanical artists of their day, including Franz Bauer, John Nugent Fitch and John Macfarlane.

Engravings or lithographs of these images found their way into books and journals such as *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* and Edwards's *Botanical Register*. Later that century 'orchid fever' struck, the wealthy and titled

competing to acquire the largest and rarest orchid collections: the Rothschilds, Schröders, Courtaulds and others became avid players in the orchid world, and in the RHS.

As a result, exotic plant nurseries thrived. Firms such as Veitch, Linden and Sander had scores of collectors in the field sending back plants, fostering an increased demand for orchids to be painted for their owners or for nursery advertising.

## Hybridization

Using wild-collected introductions, innovative growers attempted to create artificial orchid hybrids. *Calanthe Dominyi* was the first, flowering at the Veitch Nurseries in 1856. Many others soon followed, fuelling competition to produce the most flamboyant man-made blooms. Today the RHS, as the

International Cultivar Registration Authority for Orchid Hybrids, has recorded more than 154,000 names.

The greatest showpiece of the history of orchid growing and breeding is the RHS orchid paintings collection, which began in 1897 and remains an important working reference library for the Society and its Orchid Committee. The history of this unique resource began when RHS President Sir Trevor Lawrence and the members of the newly formed Orchid Committee, under the chairmanship of nurseryman Harry Veitch, recognised that all orchids that had been given one of the Society's quality awards should be painted for posterity. The watercolour paintings would also act as a reference when assessing

future plants. The paintings were to be of uniform standard, frontal views and life-size in scale.

The first official artist was 24-year-old Nellie Roberts, appointed in January 1897 to paint all plants given a First Class Certificate or an Award of Merit. The collection grew steadily – at her retirement almost 60 years later there were no fewer than 4,500. Several other fine botanical artists followed in Roberts' footsteps as official artist to the Orchid Committee, among them Jeanne Holgate, Iris Humphreys, Gillian Young, Cherry-Anne Lavrih, Gillian Barlow, and the current incumbent, Deborah Lambkin.

The portrait collection now numbers more than 7,000. It still forms an important tool for the Orchid Committee in assessing plants: because of the truthfulness of scale, colour and proportion, paintings are still seen as the most reliable way of recording awarded orchids. Photographs and descriptions form additional resources.

A programme has begun to digitize the paintings; the ultimate aim is to make the whole collection available online – history going forward into the future. ●



The RHS Orchid Committee view a painting in 1917.

## The RHS Orchid Committee

The Orchid Committee was established in March 1889. It is one of the seven RHS Plant Committees, and the Society's source of expertise and support on all matters regarding orchids.

There are 24 members today, plus 'corresponding members', several from overseas. Membership is voluntary, drawn from plant breeders, nurserymen, botanists and amateur growers. The committee's flower quality awards system (such as Award of Merit and First Class Certificate) is widely used across the world. Orchids are now the most popular house plant and interest in their cultivation is increasing rapidly; the Orchid Committee is actively encouraging this trend. The committee meets monthly at various venues around the country to discuss business and assess plants for awards.

In addition to flower quality, the committee recognises the skills of individual growers with its Certificate of Cultural Commendation. Recently, the committee has begun selecting orchids to be given the RHS Award of Garden Merit, and providing guidance on the orchids best suited to growing in the home.

**More from the RHS** For details of the show see RHS Life, p100.

❖ The Society's collection of orchid paintings in the RHS Lindley Library, London can be seen by appointment: visit [www.rhs.org.uk/libraries](http://www.rhs.org.uk/libraries)  
❖ Orchid awards appear in *The Orchid Review*, sister publication to *The Garden*. [www.rhs.org.uk/orchidreview](http://www.rhs.org.uk/orchidreview)