

On Contemporary Botanical Art

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Botanical art travels from various historical forms into a contemporary approach that calls for a bold redefinition of its practice. This article aims to introduce the reader to the general context of botanical art production today, and to its core new facets, mirroring environment, education and new understanding in creative industries. Its relevance lays in its capacity to connect the wide public to general core climate and environmental debates; also botanical art is called to raise awareness on the interconnectivity of higher education sectors that whiteness the dissolution of their (de)limitations by hybrid new age creative approaches.

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1. What is Botanical Art today?

As a centuries long practice worldwide, Botanical Art faces uncertain times in front of aesthetic and functional changes brought by intensive access to technology and mobility. So questioning its relevance and therefore its contemporaneity seems completely legitimate, both among botanical artist's gilts and wide public. We relate to Botanical Art (sometimes addressed to as "botanical illustration" with emphasis on its scientific rather than artistic character) as a practice that employs both scientific and artistic skills, in order to produce graphic depictions of plant specimens. Since we're not witnessing major natural history discoveries, nor are we in great urge of photographic documentation outside photography itself in the last decades, why bother? Digitalisation seems to have it all. And here we are, remembering the preoccupation of such abrupt questioning back in the 19th century, when photography had seemed to be taking away painting's main task, that of depicting reality in true representations. It was then, when Impressionism shined through, calling on the subjectivity of painting as opposed to the fidelity of photography, for what shall be painting's core asset. Such so today, more than a century later, in a perpetual natural cycle of things, Botanical Art detaches itself from the photographic accuracy by focusing on its artistic sensibility. While

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employing scientific abilities, this becomes its voice in advocating for contemporary realities of the plant realm. Botanical art is nevertheless clear, descriptive, true to nature and carefully designed to express the complexity of the plant. But the particular mixes of techniques, the thoughtful compositions and the subtle emphasises laid over core subjects of the depiction could easily set such work at the limit between scientific illustration and modern minimal art.



Figure 1. Sorbus, artist Irina Neacșu, people’s choice award at the ASBA “Small Works” exhibition at the ASBA annual conference, New York, 2022. Credit: Irina Neacșu

1.1. Advocating culture, science and environment

Botanical artists grow in number worldwide. Gilts and regional groups develop particular styles and are keen in depicting local subjects, showing off exceptional plant geometries, unique chromatics, and a fascinating mechanism of copying in specific environments. Through such extensive approaches, botanical art becomes a story teller. Not anymore so much a tool of documentation, botanical art tells the story of endangered environments, of fragile natural chains and of inevitable changes that not only affect the environment, but also both science and culture, in their aim to adapt. In a continuously spinning wheel, art generates environmental

awareness, which calls for interest in scientific research and support, which leads to new cultural perspectives. We witnessed the way artistic documentation of the newly discovered western mountainous landscape in Northern America, in the 19th century, generated an enormous body of work among Romantic painters, a reverie that eventually led to the establishment of the first national parks and of what we could now call a proto-environmental movement. It was also then when mountaineering brought new fashions in gardening, such as the Victorian rock gardens, an era of massive botanical art production related to all these novelties. Change, as a general topic, has been always vividly circulating among practitioners in all these domains, culture, science and environment. Weather to adapt or to resist, might only find



Figure 2. Botanical art studio, 2021. Credit: Irina Neacșu

relevant answers through a broader understanding of the inevitable interconnection of the three. What seems to have been separated practices are now various perspectives of a single holistic approach. This is how botanical art serves such a wide group of interests and researches. Botanical art accompanies text or functions as self-standing work body through botany, environment and horticulture research; it illustrates science and promotes education; it continues a long lasting tradition of decorative art and it is more and more often requested by contemporary art galleries, as artists do persist in going the extra mile for finding exceptional subjects and ways of portraying them. The intensive interest in botanical art grows rapidly and illustrates an overall need of being aware, understanding, being educated and educating the next generation, making a change without changing one's vision, but guiding it. "In the end, we will conserve

only what we love; we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught.”²

1.2. Botanical art in higher education and broader perspectives

Botanical art relies on botany studies, in-field and herbarium research, drawing and painting skills, and an overall good observation and active interest in vegetal subjects. As Deborah Lambkin (botanical artist working on a freelance basis for the Royal Horticultural Society and the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the Eric Young Orchid Foundation in UK) was explaining with the occasion of the RHS Art and Photography Show opening in London 2022, botanical artists will fall either on the environmental or gardening side. Personal interest and life style will probably dictate what side of botanical art should one approach, based on which core education and on what particular resources one has access to. As a study discipline, botanical art is often referred to as „botanical illustration” in order to explain the above stated intersection of interests and requested skills, rather than a singular approach that is artistic. It is linked to some of the most prestigious botanic gardens worldwide, such as The New York Botanical Garden, Denver Botanic Garden, The Royal Botanical Garden Kew, The Royal Botanical Garden Edinburgh, all of these offering diploma and certificate courses³. Whereas most of the students are adults complementing their main studies, graduates would very probably display a variety of particularities, proving again how botanical art could be a red thread through various cultural studies.

When it comes to higher education, this topic misses from most art faculties, as well as from horticulture, forestry or design ones. The Ruskin School of Art employs botanical drawing with Sarah Simblet as a means to learning coherent abstraction through plan subjects. University of Virginia includes botanical sketching in the landscape architecture curriculum as a method of teaching manual graphic expression and in-field spatiality. The Horticultural Correspondence College teaches botanical illustration as complementary skills of observation and composition. Such examples tend to multiply worldwide, as young graduates require a broader-than-before spectrum of knowledge in order to fit hybrid jobs or flexible freelancing activity. It could be fair to say that skills such as composition mastery, chromatic knowledge or graphic accuracy may very well serve a designer, as well as a gardener or a book editor; drawing and line handling may serve both

² Baba Dioum, Senegalese forestry engineer, statement presented in New Delhi in 1968 at the triennial meeting of the general assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN)

³ <https://www.botanicalartandartists.com/diplomas-and-certificates.html>

writers and planners; botany may serve environmental planners, as it serves painters; while all of them should know how to handle online presence, social media identity, marketing, and nevertheless to carry their offline and online practice through a multitude of media that could only reveal the potential complexity of the projects. No good project could stand the test of time if it ignores the wider-than-ever community we are all part of through mobility and globalization, and this includes awareness of both cultural and natural realm, an environment that we should stress to keep in balance.



Figure 3. Botanical art studio, 2021. Credit: Irina Neacșu

2. The gentle act of being remarkable

It takes lifelong careers to prove oneself in art, and mostly in a field which lays at the border of mimicry. Accumulating skills, perfecting style, embracing personal changes while being true to one's creed, these are slow steps on becoming a good botanical artist. But even so, how would this be relevant to a public who is not necessary aware of botanical art? How can such life-projects matter?

In a broader understanding of concepts such as “botanical art,” “botanical illustration,” “botanical design,” we refer to artists and designers that carried this subject beyond pure aesthetical pleasure. William Morris perused the idea of creating affordable qualitative design in an era of chaotic transition from decorative (rich) art to serial (poor) production of the 19th century Britain and his stylized botanical art is still recognizable today as one of the most expressive and rich pattern palette. Karl Blossfeldt started botanical photography out of his keen research on developing a consistent method of teaching design at the Berlin Art and Crafts School and his book “Urformer der Kunst” (1929) was ranked in 2001 as one of the most prestigious photographic books of the 20th century. Such notable examples are now showcases of the interconnectivity of art and technology, influencing fashion, and the cultural picture of their days. But even without employing design practices, botanical art stands out as a self-standing, eligible and coherent voice, acting as a gentle form of art, remarkable for its delicacy and boldness at the same time. Not afraid of crisp lines and well established compositions, it carries the fragility of the plant subjects and the hidden beauty of unobvious subjects.

3.1. Artists who stand out

There are plenty of examples of exceptional botanical artists. But among these, a few stand out for their bold, courageous, committed intention of changing the world.

Maria Sibylla Merian was a German naturalist at the threshold of the 17th and 18th centuries, one of the earliest to observe and study insects, a vivid traveller and prolific artist, established as botanical artist in an age where women were not permitted such preoccupation, and therefore a pioneer in proto-feminism.

Margaret Mee left England in 1952 at the age of 42 to live in Amazon and document its flora for the next 30 years. Through her art and borderline adventures in the wilderness of Amazonian territories, she was one of the first people interested in environmental issues who highlighted the impact of mining and deforestation on the Amazon Basin.

Rory McEwen was a writer and performer, one of the leading voices in the post second world war folk revival, and an art director for the *Spectator* magazine. He only decided to devote himself to visual art in 1964, at the age of 32, giving in to his interest in floral subjects. His botanical art is among the most timeless modern examples, and proves, in a different note from the environmental example of Mee, how botanical art is an expression of a person committed to changing the world through proving a core role model. Standing out is not a reason, nor a task, but these artists, among others of their size, are being rediscovered and revalued, as botanical art becomes a more ethical, than aesthetical practice.

3.2. Books and publications which made a difference

Publications worldwide focus on botanical art as means to transferring environment related issues into a contemplative and well curated visual cabinet of curiosities, with the aim of raising awareness of the immediate need of protection. Among these, the Florilegia projects occupy a distinctive place. Extensive anthologies of plants from a specific area, Florilegia are dedicated mainly to the ornamental rather than the medicinal uses of flowers/ flowering plants. These books have a history of royal commissioning for portraying exotic plants, which can be traced back to the 17th century. Modern Florilegia now seek to record collections of plants and to focus on endangered species from a specific property, garden or area. They retain most lush aspect and rich content, and are among luxurious, expensive and collectable books, handmade with the involvement of exquisite artists, celebrating the slow process and enormous value of botanical art. Among the contemporary Florilegia, some of the most remarkable ones are The Highgrove Florilegium, documenting flowers in King Charles III's (back then Prince of Wales) Highgrove estate in Gloucestershire, England, and The Grootbos Florilegium, documenting plants at the Grootbos Private Natural Reserve in South Africa.



Figure 4. Transylvania Florilegium, photo taken at the Bucharest National Museum of Art during the book launch event, 2019. Credit: Irina Neacșu

3.2.1. *The Transylvania Florilegium*

The Transylvania Florilegium is a two volume large size book recording the flora of Transylvania. Published by Addison Publications in 2018, it was the initiative of HRH the Prince of Wales, now HM King Charles III, who also has written the preface, hand signed on each book. Drawing attention on the precious wild flora of what is called to be the last medieval landscape in Europe has been the six-year project of producing 124 botanical illustrations with a team formed by some of the finest botanical artists of the moment. Curated by Helen Allen FLS, artist and Principal of the School of Botanical Art at the Chelsea Physic Garden, the Transylvania Florilegium benefits from the comprehensive information written by botanist Dr. John Akeroyd FLS, who has been working on Transylvanian flora for over fifteen years. The 36 artists crafted these botanical illustrations in watercolour on paper mainly in the two locations where HM has his properties: the Saxon village of Viscri and the more remote village of Zalanptak.



Figure 5. Transylvania Florilegium, photo taken at the Bucharest National Museum of Art during the book launch event, 2019. Credit: Irina Neacșu

3.3. Associations and chapters active in this field

Botanical artists' associations help create active communities, through education programs, group exhibitions, publications and exchanges. ASBA (The American Society of Botanical Artists) has the largest membership and functions as a stepping stone in botanical art worldwide, with its local chapters and worldwide affiliates. As an example of projects that involve botanical art into a global discourse on food and waste and resources management, we have "Abundant Future," an ongoing ASBA exhibition traveling in 2023 from Denver Botanic Gardens, Colorado, to the Oak Spring Garden Foundation in Virginia, raising awareness on crops diversity, and importance of facing near future droughts and aridity. 2025 will see the next "Botanical Art Worldwide" event⁴, with a similar topic of crop diversity. After a first edition of 25 participating countries, through their botanical art association, the new edition expects an even more enthusiastic response worldwide. Romania will be at its first participation, through RSBA, the Romanian Society of Botanical Artists. Such topics, related to food and crops through climate change, but also fungi and lichens as nutrient sources, are research directions to which botanical art is invited to participate and to disseminate scientific subjects through art.



Figure 6. Ivy, artist irina Neacșu, silver-gilt medal at the RHS Botanical Art and Photography Show, London, 2022. Credit: Irina Neacșu

⁴ <https://www.botanicalartworldwide.info/>

4. One final word

Ethical.

Contemporary botanical art is a practice of ethics. As we call it art, it employs very much so literature, botany, horticulture and design, in order to respond to modern criteria of aesthetics and functionality. However, above all, it aims to remain ethic. Not decorative, nor pleasant, even if vague.

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