

Background and Breadth of the Smithsonian's Botanical Art and Illustration Collection

The first United States Exploring Expedition returned to Washington in 1842 with thousands of natural history specimens and hundreds of original illustrations of the plants and animals observed during the four year journey around the world. This early documentation of the natural and cultural history of the Earth became the foundation of the Smithsonian Institution founded in 1846. The United States National Herbarium was created to study the 50,000 plant specimens collected during the Exploring Expedition and formed the basis of the Smithsonian's Department of Botany that has grown into a world renowned center for the botanical sciences. Currently the Department houses 16 scientists conducting research around the world, over 4.7 million well-documented plant specimens, the Botany and Horticulture Library, and facilities for carrying out modern investigations in the plant sciences.

Since the mid-1800's the collection of botanical art and illustration, which serve to document the plant species discovered and described by Smithsonian botanists, has grown to include thousands of pen and ink drawings as well as watercolor renditions of plants. Currently a database of each art work is being developed that will provide a complete listing of our collection. Although the majority of these works of art are housed at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, many are maintained off-campus at other institutions due to lack of space and personnel to curate them on-site.

Currently 3400 illustrations are listed in the Botanical Art Catalogue at NMNH with another 2100 illustrations yet to be inventoried. In addition nearly 4800 illustrations are on temporary loan to the Hunt Institute in Pittsburgh. The collection at NMNH includes 22 Margaret Mee paintings, 50 Frederick A. Walpole drawings and paintings, and 311 watercolors by M.E. Eaton from the 4 volume work, "The Cactaceae", by Britton and Rose. Nearly 2700 pen and ink drawings, 550 watercolors and 150 other graphic media are represented in the collection.

