

Scent from Nature: Beauty's botanical origins

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Containing some of the earliest examples of botanical illustration, **Scent from Nature: Beauty's botanical origins**, centres around the Fitzwilliam's exceptional collection of botanical art, looking at plants which have been used in the beauty and fragrance industry. The collection was bequeathed by Henry Rogers Broughton, 2nd Lord Fairhaven in 1966 and 1973, his bequest transformed the museum's collection so it is recognised as one of the most important botanical collections in the world.

Rare watercolours by major botanical artists Nicolas Robert (1614-85), Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708-70) and Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759-1840) will go on show alongside ancient Egyptian and Greek perfume bottles, ornate eighteenth and nineteenth-century English scent bottles as well as twelfth-century Korean cosmetic pots and oil containers.

The healing and medicinal properties of plants have long been recorded in ancient and early modern herbals. Containing some of the earliest examples of botanical illustration, the herbals reveal much about the resins, juices, smells and colours that could be extracted from plants, along with recipes on how to mix, consume and apply them. This was useful not only for medicine, but for the beauty and fragrance industry as well.

The Rosa gallica, Iris germanica, Rosa damascena, Pelargonium graveolens, Camellia japonica and Rosa canina are just some of the flowers whose roots, petals and seeds have been used in perfume and skincare for many centuries. All of these plants have been depicted by botanical artists and flower painters, including Nicolas Robert (1614-85), Pieter Withoos (1655-92), Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708-70), Joseph von Plenck (1738-1807), Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759-1840) and George Salt (1903-2003).

Roses in particular have been used for their fragrance and healing properties since antiquity. The Roman author and naturalist, Pliny said of roses '*I am inclined to believe that the scents most widely used are those made from the rose which grows in abundance everywhere*'. He was talking about the Rosa gallica, one of the first roses to be cultivated in Europe and one of the most highly fragrant. It is known as the Provins rose after the town of Provins to the south-east of Paris where it was commercially grown for perfume and medicine; it also goes by the name of Apothecary's rose.

In the sixteenth century the Rosa gallica 'versicolour' appeared, also known as the Rosa mundi and is distinguished by its striped petals as seen in the seventeenth-century watercolour by Pieter Withoos in which he has faithfully recorded the gently curled petals and the insect damaged leaf. Withoos was a painter of flowers and insects and received support from Agnes Block, an important seventeenth-century Dutch Mennonite art collector and horticulturalist, who commissioned artists to paint watercolours of plants in her garden in Vijverhof along the river Vecht, south of Amsterdam.

Another of the old roses in the show painted by an unknown artist called C. M. Bucher will be the Rosa damascena or the damask rose, which is a hybrid of the Rosa gallica and Rosa moschata. The damask rose is much celebrated for its numerous petals and intense scent. In 1629, the English botanist and herbalist, John Parkinson wrote that the damask rose has 'the most excellent sweet pleasant sent, far surpassing all other roses or flowers, being neyther heady nor too strong, nor stuffing or unpleasant sweet, as many other flowers.' It has been grown for thousands of years for its essential oils that were used initially in medicine, but which have become more and more important to the perfume industry.

The damask rose is closely associated with the village of al-Mrah in rural Damascus, Syria where masses of the flower are grown for rose oil, known as attar of roses. It also produces rose water and is used to flavour foods, including jam. The roses are picked in May and June in the morning when their scent is most intense. The petals are then treated and first made into rose water, and from there the essential oils are extracted. It takes ten to twelve tonnes of flowers to produce one kilo of essential oils so it is incredibly labour intensive and as a result rose oil is very expensive. The practices and craftsmanship associated with the damask rose in this Syrian village is now on the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Due to the wars in Syria, many refugees grow the rose in Cyprus and Lebanon. Turkey and Bulgaria are also significant producers of rose oil.

The *Camellia japonica*, called Tsubaki in Japanese, grows in the wild in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. It is a flowering shrub or tree that can grow to eleven metres in height. After the seeds of its beautiful flowers are harvested, they are crushed into a powder, steamed and then squeezed to release their oil. This oil was used for glossing the hair of geisha and sumo wrestlers and is still used today. This flower was brought to Europe in the seventeenth century and was listed in the survey of plants at the Jardin du roi in Paris in 1774. Redouté was employed here from 1786 and painted this watercolour in the year the garden was renamed Jardin des Plantes of the Museum national d'Histoire naturelle during the Revolution.

Nicolas Robert's watercolour of *Ricinus communis* is part of an album of 62 botanical drawings in the Museum's collection. He was one of a series of artists who contributed to the king's collection of natural history drawings and was greatly favoured by Gaston, Duke of Orléans (1608-60), who commissioned him to record the plants and animals in his botanic garden and menagerie in Blois, a city in central France. After Gaston's death the drawings passed to Louis XIV, and in 1664 he was appointed 'Painter of Miniatures'. Highly poisonous, the *Ricinus communis* is also known as the castor oil plant. Its seeds need to be roasted before the oil is extracted. The oil is considered beneficial to the skin and is also used to make soap. Found in eastern Africa, India and south-eastern Mediterranean, it reached France in the fifteenth century. The plant may have been available to Robert in the botanic garden where it was treated as an ornamental.

Alongside these watercolours will also be a range of ancient Egyptian and Greek perfume and scented oil containers such as alabastron, aryballos and amphoriskos, along with an amulet of the Egyptian god of perfume and aromatherapy, Nefertum. There will also be ornate eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English scent bottles as well as twelfth-century Korean cosmetic pots and oil containers. Many of these perfume vessels were treasured objects made of glass, clay or stone. This will offer a chance to look at packaging as it is estimated that the global beauty industry produces 120 billion units of packaging every year.

A watercolour by Georg Dionysius Ehret depicts a cork tree, which grows in the Western Mediterranean, particularly in Portugal, Spain, France and Italy, as well as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa. Cork is extracted from the outer bark of the tree, which grows back eight to ten years later, when it is harvested again. The tree, therefore, does not need to be felled to obtain the cork, and because of this is considered a sustainable method of production; it can live for over 150 years. Waterproof and completely recyclable, cork has been turned into bottle stoppers, shoes, insulation, floor tiles and is now being used to make cosmetic pots.

As we become more conscious and mindful of our health, wellbeing and our impact on the environment, the exhibition intends to draw attention to the Clean Beauty movement, which calls for a ban on the use of certain chemicals in our beauty products in favour of sustainable plant-based, natural ingredients instead. The international COSMOS Natural certification, set up by the UK's Soil Association along with organisations in France, Germany and Italy, is awarded to companies whose products are completely natural.

Scent from Nature: Beauty's botanical origins will be on display in the Shiba gallery free of charge

For all other enquires please contact the Fitzwilliam Museum Press Office:
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Notes to Editors

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funded programme. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation. www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk / <https://beta.fitz.ms>

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00; CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday .

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