

Linnaeus: Art & Nature

Three displays at Elizabeth Bay House celebrate the achievements of Carl Linnaeus to mark the tercentenary of his birth. Reflecting on his legacy, they explore the dual nature of scientific art – to ‘satisfy the mind and please the eye’. By **Scott Carlin**

Herbarium Amoris is an exhibition of photographs by Swedish photographer Edvard Koinberg, and a major travelling exhibition funded by the Swedish Institute. Koinberg’s studies of plants from his own garden were inspired by the ‘Sexual System of Classification’ devised by Linnaeus, whereby flowers were classed by a simple mathematical audit of their ‘sexual parts’ – such as their anthers and stamens.

First published in 1729, Linnaeus’ system revolutionised the understanding of plant biology. With an emerging scientific language unequal to the radically new concept he used anthropomorphic terms to describe individual flowers as ‘brides and suitors’. Revealing quotes from Linnaeus accompany Koinberg’s images:

“The leaves around the flower itself, contribute nothing to the breeding ceremony, but otherwise do the duty as the Bridalbed, which the Great Creator so gloriously arranged, with so noble dressed up Bedcurtains, perfumed by so many delicious scents, in order that the Bridegroom with his bride can celebrate his Nuptials with so much greater solemnity.”

Responding to this, in Koinberg’s *Paeonia lactiflora* the pressed flower seems to coyly drape a single petal over its centre, while *Zantedeschia aethiopica* is unabashedly sexual. His sinuous *Tulipa* draws on the artistic heritage of Dutch and Swedish flowerpieces.

The impact of Linnaean theory on contemporary ‘natural philosophy’ was celebrated most beautifully in Robert Thornton’s great florilegia, *The Temple of Flora*¹, published in 1807. The famous illustrations from this lavish revision of the

‘sexual system’ are reproduced in countless garden histories, yet few visitors to the exhibition will have seen the actual plates, 18 of which are on show along with an intact folio.

Thornton (1768 – 1837) employed the finest British artists, engravers and poets, patriotically intending to secure Britain’s place at the pinnacle of scientific and artistic production. Without the backing of a wealthy patron or Society, funds were raised by subscription, the sale from 1799 of individual plates and even a grand lottery. The phenomenal costs ultimately defeated the project, and an incomplete folio was published in 1807, with only 33 of an intended 70 plates, in varying combinations.

Thornton stressed the importance of the background to the plates. These scenes were as much to establish the plants ‘character’ as their origin, which explains the curious migration of the Night-Blowing Cereus (*Selincereus grandiflora*) to an English churchyard, where, as the extraordinary flower opens, a convenient clocktower strikes midnight. The folio influenced a wave of painters, including artists in the colony, and recalls the work exhibited by many women artists at the Royal Academy.

Thornton’s text is an intriguing insight to late 18th and early 19th century botany: references are given to hothouses, plant hunting, economic botany, patronage and taste. *The Sacred Egyptian Bean* is one of the most compelling, as a discussion of the sacred lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) leads into comparative religions, international politics, and a flattering poem on the lavish folio. The companion to this plate, *The Blue Egyptian Water Lily*, (*Nymphaea caerulea*) identified as the lotus of antiquity, sees Thornton in a wash of national



Tulipa, Edvard Koinberg, *Herbarium Amoris*, 2003.



The Night blowing Cereus, Dunkarton, after Philip Reinagle and Abraham Pether From Robert Thornton's *The Temple of Flora*, 1807, Rare Books Collection, State Library of NSW.

pride celebrating the defeat of the French at the Battle of the Nile, seemingly at odds with the earnest pleas for international peace made earlier in the folio.

Alexander Macleay (1767 – 1848) was secretary of the Linnean Society of London until 1825, after which he took up the post of Colonial Secretary in New South Wales. He owned copies both of Linnaeus' *Systema Natura* (10th edn.), and *The Temple of Flora*. Several portrait plates from the folio, including the well known 'Linnaeus in his Lapland dress', and James Edward Smith, hung in his picture collection. Smith had acquired Linnaeus' vast collections and founded the Linnean Society, becoming its first president. Like many botanists, including Linnaeus, Erasmus Darwin, William Curtis and Thornton, Smith began his career in medicine, where medical botany was a long established discipline.



19th century parasite from an Indian flying fox. Robyn Stacey, *Museum*, 2007.

The 1875 subdivision brochure for Macleay's Elizabeth Bay House estate depicts what is probably a 'Linnaean spiral'². This was a distinctive garden form described by J. C. Loudon – whom Macleay had nominated as a Fellow of the Linnaean Society - where plants were arranged according to Linnaean principles. His nephew William John Macleay (1820 - 1891) greatly diversified the family's collections, and created a hall and garden for the newly formed Linnaean Society of New South Wales, nearby on the site now occupied by *Boomerang*. In 1888 he donated the Macleay collections to Sydney University.

The extraordinary diversity of the Macleay Museum is celebrated in contemporary Australian photographer Robyn Stacey's new body of work, *Museum*. Stacey's heightened photographs, placed as 'interventions' amongst the artworks at Elizabeth Bay House, contemplate the dual nature of scientific art - for both the accurate recording of information and for aesthetic pleasure. Her use of titles reflects this duality: some, like Koinberg's flower studies, are named by their binomial classification, reflecting Linnaeus' most enduring legacy; some carry a prosaic description based on a museum label; others, such as *Beau Monde Green*, claim the specimen as art. Her baroque assemblages recall the progenitor of the modern museum, the 'cabinet of curiosities', and have an affinity with Fanny Macleay's *Flowerpieces of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*.

Together, the three components of *Linnaeus: Art and Nature* reflect on the impact Linnaean theory and taxonomy had in his day, to his successors, and on to the present. The period from the late 18th through to the mid 19th centuries bridges the worlds of the Enlightenment and modern science, and the use of art captures, and - quite literally - illustrates this.

Herbarium Amoris

BY EDVARD KOINBERG

Sponsored by the Swedish Institute
10 October – 10 December 2007

- **Temple of Flora**
10 December 2007 – 3 February 2008
- **Museum by Robyn Stacey**
10 October – 3 February 2008

Elizabeth Bay House

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See www.hht.net.au for associated events.

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¹ The folio, actually titled a *New illustration of the sexual system of Carolus von Linnaeus*, is known by the title of its third section, *The temple of Flora: or, Garden of nature*, which contains the botanical plates.

² Scott Carlin, *Elizabeth Bay House, A History and Guide*. Historic Houses Trust of NSW. 2000