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Romanticism and Religion: The Superb Lily

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Romanticism and Religion: The Superb Lily

Abstract

“The Superb Lily,” was donated by Geoff Jackson, class of 1991 and beloved benefactor of Gettysburg College, to Special Collections. This first edition piece was published in the twenty first page of the book, *Temple of Flora*. This text is considered the greatest and most famous florilegia of the twentieth century due to its accuracy of descriptions and vast size. It contained a total of thirty five floral prints. The publisher, Robert Thornton, produced numerous copies of this book in the same year, however, the exact number of copies is unknown. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

the superb lily, romanticism, religion, Renaissance, Chamber of Wonders, science, knowledge, curiosity cabinets

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

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Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/the-superb-lily/>

Romanticism and Religion: The Superb Lily

“The Superb Lily”

By Alexis Marie Michelle Zilen



The Superb Lily, Published by Doctor Robert Thornton, June 1st, 1799 The unframed piece is 14.75" x 19.5" and measures 21.75" x 26.5" framed. Gift of Geoff Jackson, class of 1991, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College

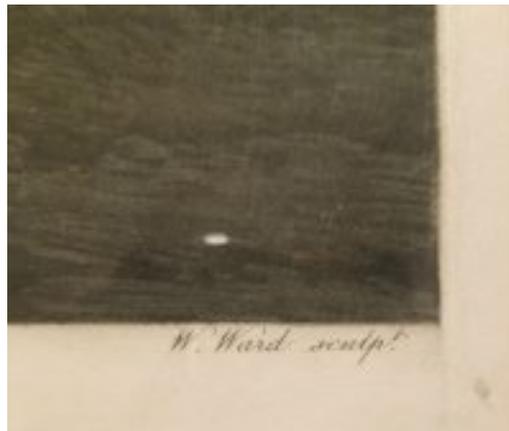
“The Superb Lily,” was donated by Geoff Jackson, class of 1991 and beloved benefactor of Gettysburg College, to Special Collections. This first edition piece was published in the twenty first page of the book, *Temple of Flora*. This text is considered the greatest and most famous florilegia of the twentieth century due to its accuracy of descriptions and vast size. It contained a total of thirty five floral prints. The publisher, Robert Thornton, produced numerous copies of this book in the same year, however, the exact number of copies is unknown.



Inscription in the lower left corner of the print indicating the painter was Reinagle

The Lily print was made by using a combination of [mezzotint](#) and [aquatint](#). To learn more about these processes, click on the links to watch a video demonstrating each technique. Mezzotint is the process of coloring a print made from an engraved copper (or steel) plate and which the surface has been particularly roughened, for shading, and partially scrapped smooth, giving light areas. This technique was heavily used in the seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century. Aquatint is an intaglio print making technique and variant on an etching. The artist makes marks on a copper (or zinc) plate that is capable of holding ink. This is the most precise method of creating tones, meant to resemble watercolor paintings. This was heavily used in the late seventeenth century till the eighteenth century. These techniques, along with traditional watercolor were the most popular methods of coloring prints and books of this period.¹

Thornton used many engravers and painters to complete his book; however, this particular print gives names to its creators at the bottom of the image. In the lower left hand corner, as pictured above, is inscribed with “Reinagle pinx.” This marking is a Latin abbreviation of pinxit, which indicates that the painting was done by Phillip Reiangle, who was a premier painter for *The Temple of Flora*. While Reiangle was the only painter for each version of this print, “The Superb Lily” had two different engravers, which offer very slight changes in their images. This particular print was engraved on a copper plate by William Ward, as revealed by the inscription in the bottom right hand corner “W. Ward sculp” as pictured below. Sculp is the abbreviation of the Latin word *sculpere* meaning to carve.



Inscription in the lower right corner of the print indicating the engraver was Ward.

Botanical Images' Role in Collection Cabinets

Botanical imagery as a category of art flourished in sixteenth century Europe. These images thrived all over Europe but especially in the Netherlands. They grew in numbers because of a rise in interest with recreating the natural world, a rise of a middle class society who desired art, and an increased demand for secular paintings other than portraits. Floral images and prints became especially prominent because of artist ability to execute, with high precision, the detailed texture of the flowers. The mid-seventeenth century, brought a new wave of floral still-lives. There was a shift to focus on aesthetic and decorative appeal, rather than a more naturalistic appearance. Painters also depicted luxurious glassware, gold and silver encrusted flatware and goblets within the floral paintings. This would largely be credited to the Netherlands influx of wealth and other trade goods.² Floral imagery thus became an important

staple of art in Europe flourishing under the new age of wonder and enlightenment. These images were more than just ornate pictures rather they were catalogs for botanists. Many of these botanists engaged in fieldwork, collecting samples in order to study. Since these plants could not be held in time forever, these collectors turned to documenting the plants in herbals, or florilegia texts. These books would have woodcuts (or an analogous treatment) of plants and often accompanied by long descriptions and uses, making them an essential part of a collection cabinet.

For a broad overview of botanical imagery visit the [Botanical Illustrations](#) section by clicking the link or the cabinet items on the right.



An example of botanical imagery: Basilius Besler's print of a red and white lily as found in *Hortus Eystettensis*

Lilies in Botanical Imagery

Lilies were first cultivated in the United Kingdom in the beginning of the seventeenth century. From there, breeders began to crossbreed them to create new bolder colors and shapes.³ They were primarily used as a connection to religious meanings. Even before lilies were cultivated, they held a high place among flora. During the Assyrian (1392 till 1056 B.C.) and Egyptian (30 B.C. till 641 A.D.) empires, the lily was used as an emblem of royalty and a symbol of virginity. This imagery was furthered by the lilies use in Crete, where they adorned the throne hall, and the throne of the king in the Knossos Palace. These lilies were mostly white during these periods, hence their relation to purity. However, it was later seen in Akrotiri, an island of Greece, red lilies with a different meaning. The upright position of the buds, with leaves at the bottom, and red petals were used in wedding ceremonies, bridal chamber, suggesting the opposite of purity.



Breughel's painting of the Madonna feature several floral including lilies, painted around 1608. This painting was commissioned by Cardinal Frederico Borromeo, who was an art collector and Catholic reformer, in order to respond to help restore the image of the Virgin Mary.

Then in the Renaissance red lilies seemed to shift along the lines of the white lilies, both used to represent the Madonna.⁴ As seen in Jan Breughel the Elder's Madonna, shown above, which utilizes both red and white lilies, among other flowers to frame the Virgin Mary.



Red lilies as depicted in the Breughel painting.



White lilies as depicted in the Breughel painting.

The Two Lilies in *Temple of Flora*

Thornton was attempting to capitalize on the growing trend of botanical imagery, especially flowers, which had risen to fame in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, then continued to be a popular field of study well beyond. Flowers usually had some symbolic link related to the subject of the print, usually used as an attribute, with clues to the identity of the matter or provided a moral theme. These themes were often related mostly either to religious symbolism or to medieval herbal meanings. More than the flower bud itself could be used as symbolism "the plant's shape, color, taste, smell, and season of blooming, usually lent themselves to a moral connotation."⁵ The variety of symbols meant various, often conflicting meanings. Such as the color white being used for purity while juxtaposed with bent stalks. However, Thornton was careful to produce a constant theme in his use of lilies, their color, leaves, and positions in the image.



The White Lily



A white lily stalk as found in nature.

Thornton added two different types of lilies into *The Temple Flora*, white and red, as pictured above. He wanted to demonstrate the show the shifting religious symbolism and cultural value of the plant.



The Superb Lily



A red (tiger) lily as found in nature.

Besides the obvious color difference between the prints, there is a very distinct theme behind each print. “The White Lily” is the flower untouched by humanity, hidden away in the forest, just on the outskirts of society, but yet remaining unseen. Thornton adds a wink to religion by

adding a temple as the only hint of light within the print. Furthering the holy and pure symbol of the lily.⁶



The only source of light within the print illuminates the temple. This temple would be a place of worship, relating the lily to an image of purity and holiness.

Second, the two flowers, white of the same species, are clearly growing in two distinct directions. “The Superb Lily” had buds facing the ground, bent at awkward angles that would not be feasible, as shown below. This shows the taint of humanity on the lily.



The stalks are bent at a distinct but awkward angle towards the ground.

This is juxtaposed with the flowers of “The White Lily.” These buds stand up right, showing their full beauty to anyone who viewed them. “In the presence of such beauty, a person must invariably appeal to the heavens for explanation.”⁷ Thornton placed these two prints together in

understanding of the role of religion in the world; hence enhancing the symbolism in his book, *The Temple of Flora*.

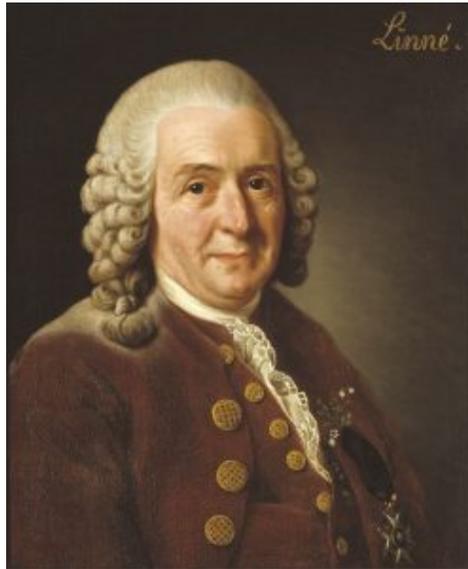
The Temple of Flora was supposed to be a vast collected knowledge of floras, however, it did not reach its intended potential, only including a little under half of the intended total of seventy plates. This project was brought to its knees mainly by two factors. Thornton had a strict attention to detail that bordered on obsessive; causing many designs to be redrafted. Thornton also worked with at least five different artists in order to create the perfect print of his book, draining a considerable amount of money in the process.



Temple of Flora Frontispiece

These comprised of a series of “sumptuous depictions of flowers notable for their epic and unusual settings. Interwoven amongst the images are various descriptions, histories, and poetic odes regarding the flowers featured.”⁸ Even with a host of artists assisting Thornton, his worked maintained a notable homogeneity in style throughout the whole book. Though this is not done without care or by chance. Many of the plates needed to be reworked or were wholly withdrawn from production. They were ornate, with each image focused on the flora of the picture which is showcased by the surrounding background. There was also a decadence in coloring every picture in the book which lead to a beautiful book and help establish its importance in florilegia.

Romanticism in Science



Portrait of Carlos von Linnaeus, who helped begin the basis of romantic science.

Romanticism in science rose in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This type of science “emphasized the scientist’s role in scientific discovery, holding that acquiring knowledge of nature meant understanding man as well; therefore, these scientists placed a high importance on respect for nature”⁹ Thornton’s *Temple of Flora* was the third part of a larger series, titled *New illustration of the Sexual System of Carolus von Linnaeus* and was used to contextualize romantic science in botanical images. The Linnaeus system of classification originally only based on structural similarities of different organisms, meaning referring to plant piece as one would refer to genitalia and reproduction of plants almost sexually. this was considered highly controversial at the time, however, in modern times, the Linnaean system has been highly favored among scientists for classification.



Cupid Inspiring Plants with Love, appearing in *The Temple of Flora*, is considered a perfect example of blending romanticism and science.

Romantic botanists, including Thornton, sought to reunite man with its natural state. “Thornton argued that the mathematical, logical character of taxonomy was a ‘noble exercise’ ... By stressing the dispassionate character of classification, he was consciously confronting the accusation that the sexual basis of Linnaeus’s method was an obscene perversion of the innocence of plants and besmirched botany as a study... Thornton was determined that the Linnaean system should serve as the taxonomic science of the flower bed and not as a justification for abandoning the proper regulation of the human nuptial chamber.”¹⁰

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