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## Botanical Illustrations

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# Botanical Illustrations

## **Abstract**

Botanical illustrations were an integral facet of botany in the Renaissance era. Many naturalists and physicians studied plants in collections to observe and record the naturalia. In many collections, specimens were displayed for visitors to draw and then create illustrations or prints. With an illustration, detail in plants could be captured and visually understood instead of learning through text. The great feature of illustrations was the fact that the specimens could be exotic yet still studied. Kusakawa says, "Pictures enabled scholars to access unobtainable objects, build knowledge of rare objects over time, and study them long after the live specimens had died away." The illustrations were paired with text information about the plant and often distributed in herbal volumes. Herbal volumes were series of illustrations and knowledge published to spread knowledge. These botanical illustrations are samplings of three different 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century figures to record plants. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Maria Sibylla Merian, botany, anemone, Basilius Besler, tulips, Ulisse Aldrovandi, red orange ranunculus

## **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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Audio guide on botanical illustrations included.

# Botanical Illustrations

By Emily Roush

Botanical illustrations were an integral facet of botany in the Renaissance era. Many naturalists and physicians studied plants in collections to observe and record the naturalia. In many collections, specimens were displayed for visitors to draw and then create illustrations or prints. With an illustration, detail in plants could be captured and visually understood instead of learning through text. The great feature of illustrations was the fact that the specimens could be exotic yet still studied. Kusakawa says, “Pictures enabled scholars to access unobtainable objects, build knowledge of rare objects over time, and study them long after the live specimens had died away.”<sup>1</sup> The illustrations were paired with text information about the plant and often distributed in herbal volumes. Herbal volumes were series of illustrations and knowledge published to spread knowledge. These botanical illustrations are samplings of three different 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century figures to record plants.

## Maria Sibylla Merian



Maria Sibylla Merian, *Insects of Surinam*, Plate 37, 1726, <https://www.nhmimages.com/>

The first plant, the anemone, was illustrated by Maria Sibylla Merian. This print is featured in Merian's book *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*. If you would like to browse *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* click [here](#). The illustration displays a full-blooming vibrant mauve anemone on a stem including another ivory anemone. The center flower's pistils are a deep burgundy and golden yellow. There are a few other flowers that have yet to bloom. To the right of the ivory flower there is a moth hovering above. Maria Merian was one of the first naturalists to combine insects and plants in illustrations. Merian was a German Naturalist who lived from 1647-1717<sup>2</sup>. She was influenced to illustrate by her step-father, Jacob Merall. She was best known for her plant and insect illustrations from South America. Her

juxtaposition of plants and insects were signature to her illustrations. The exoticism of her illustrations brought new knowledge to Europe. She published many volumes with engravings of her studies. Merian continues to be recognized as one of the most well-known and influential naturalists of the Renaissance era.

## Basilus Besler



Basilus Besler, Tulipa from *Hortus Eystettenis*, 1613, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Besler\\_H.E.\\_tulipa\\_2.jpg/](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Besler_H.E._tulipa_2.jpg/)

The next botanical illustration is tulips, by Basilus Besler. Besler's tulip illustration is in his published flower book, *Hortus Eystettenis*<sup>3</sup>. If you would like to view more prints from *Hortus Eystettenis*, click on the following link for a scan of the book [here](#). This illustration features three warm colored tulips. There are orange, white and red tulips in a row. The veining detail is shown on the petals. At the end of the stem, he includes the bulb of the plant in the illustration. Besler was a German Botanist and Apothecary who lived from 1561- 1629<sup>4</sup>. He wasn't exactly like Merian and Aldrovandi. His focus was more on the look of flowers, rather than studying information regarding them. He worked with documenting plants in gardens. He published these illustrations into a florilegium<sup>5</sup>. A florilegium was a series of plants from a garden to celebrate God's creation and record the garden. His famous work was, *Hortus Eystettensis*. These botanical illustrations are just a sampling of how the beauty of flowers were recorded and featured during the Renaissance. Besler showed influence on the aesthetic value of plants during this era.

## Ulisse Aldrovandi



Immagine adattata allo schermo, Ulisse Aldrovandi,  
file:///Users/emilyroush/Desktop/exhibition%20/Immagine%20protetta%20da%20Copyright%20©.webarchive/

The last botanical illustration is tulips from Ulisse Aldrovandi. This illustration features a red orange ranunculus. In this illustration, the greenery leaves are very detailed and three-dimensional. He also makes the bulbs and emphasizes in the illustration. Aldrovandi was an Italian Naturalist and Physician from 1522-1605 <sup>6</sup>. He initially pursued the studies of law, latin, and philosophy, which were considered the typical studies of the Renaissance era. After studying medicine in Padua, he returned to Italy to become the first professor at the University of Bologna. At the university, he founded botanical gardens to study plants. In fact, he was considered the curator of the gardens at the University. Botanical gardens were a place to study and gain knowledge, rather than the aesthetic appeal. Aldrovandi published 4 volumes of engravings of his research. If you are interested in viewing more of Aldrovandi's work click on the following link [here](#). With his tremendous amount of specimens, his museum was given to Bologna after his death in 1605 <sup>7</sup>.

## Flowers in Society

The botanical illustrations had an immense impact on the dissemination of knowledge around this time. People could travel to different collections to study and illustrate these specimens. This gave an opportunity to study naturalia that was not necessarily available to study from life in Europe. The publishing of many herbal volumes allowed the information to be available for studying and understanding. Even though botanical illustrations had impact in the world of naturalia, the subject of flowers had impact beyond this field. In society at this time, flowers were the craze and highly sought after. More specifically, tulipmania was the event when tulips were extremely popular and flourishing. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century around the Netherlands, tulips were in high demand <sup>8</sup>. Anyone and everyone wanted to have a tulip. People would pay extreme amounts just for a flower. In fact, the most rare tulip, a semper augustus, sold for 5,500 guilders.

Tulips were so popular due to their rarity. The flower has the ability to look different than other kinds. The variety of the flower was an engaging aspect. Tulips were even considered exotic, whereas in today's society they are very common. This flower showed a parallel to art trading. Tulips were almost considered art due to the high regard and vibrancy. The environment of trading created connoisseurship regarding the flower<sup>9</sup>. The phenomenon of nature taking of art arose. Tulips became the subject matter for many things like, embroidery, cloth, and tapestries.



Willem Van Aelst, *Vanitas Flower Still Life*, Oil on canvas, 1656.

Another area where flowers became the subject matter was, art. Still life paintings became very popular of elaborate flowers in vases. There were a variety of flowers featured in the paintings. This is when art tries to take over nature. The paintings were not illustrations, rather for aesthetic appeal and décor. The paintings embodied beauty and royalty. Many of the flowers had symbolism behind them as well. Flowers had various associations, such as, religious, moral and rebirth<sup>10</sup>. Many specific flowers or colors correlate to represent meanings. The anemone can represent the feeling of fading hope and anticipation, the tulip can declare love, and the ranunculus radiates charm<sup>11</sup>. Symbolism of flowers can link meaning to the luxurious still life paintings. Flowers have shown great impact within botanical illustrations and in society as well.

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