

Capturing Flora

Passion for the Exotick: Australian botanical art 1700–1900

The works in this exhibition cover the first 200 years of image-making inspired by the Australian flora, from the early European exploration of this continent down to Federation. They have been selected for this display from the exhibition *Capturing Flora: 300 years of Australian Botanical Art*, presented at the Art Gallery of Ballarat in 2012.

While the images you will see here are all 'botanical', in that their *raison d'être* was to aid the analysis and identification of the Australian flora, there are several distinct themes or sources of inspiration.

The works in the first section come from journals and scientific publications that were produced in the wake of government-sponsored voyages of exploration. The botanical art from this period was inspired by the newly-formulated theories of scientific classification, particularly those of the legendary Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus.

These are followed by botanical illustrations produced in Europe between 1790 and 1870 when 'exotick' plants from far-away places, including New Holland, became extraordinarily popular with gardeners, in spite of the difficulty of cultivating frost-tender plants in the northern climate. A vast illustrated literature developed to promote these plants, which flourished in stove houses from London to Vienna and beyond.

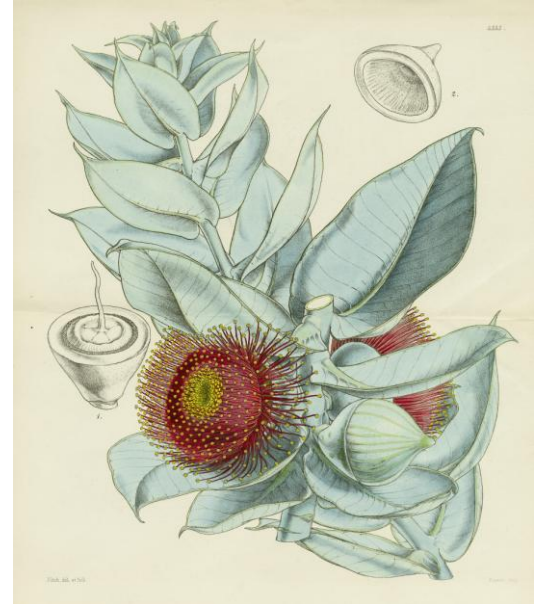
The final section of the exhibition moves from Europe to the Australian colonies themselves. From the middle of the 19th century, each of Australia's eastern colonies founded botanical gardens and employed botanists to run them and to conduct research in herbaria. Great botanists such as Ferdinand Mueller in Melbourne and Joseph Maiden in Sydney had recourse to a series of talented artists when publishing Floras for their respective colonies.

Simultaneous to the 'official' documentation of Australian plants, an amateur tradition also developed in Australia in the 1830s as upper middle class women settled in the colonies, bringing with them a passion for capturing the beauties of nature using their genteel skills of draughtsmanship. By the end of the 19th century, some of these 'lady amateurs' had succeeded in working as paid artists for the Government botanists. These works will be seen in the latter section of the exhibition.

The last works in the show manifest a pride in things Australian that became so evident in the decade leading up to Federation. New South Wales, home to some of the most iconic Australian wildflowers, took the lead in botanical art at the beginning of the 20th century.

“When a botanist first enters on the investigation of so remote a country as New Holland, he finds himself as it were in a new world... Whole tribes of plants, which at first sight seem familiar to his acquaintance, as occupying links in Nature’s chain...prove, on a nearer examination, total strangers.”

James Edward Smith *A specimen of the botany of New Holland* 1793



“So numerous indeed are the peculiarities of this Flora, that it has been considered as differing fundamentally... from those of other lands: and speculations have been entertained that its origin is either referable to another period of the world’s history from that in which the existing plants of other continents have been produced, or to a separate creative effort from that which contemporaneously peopled the rest of the globe with its existing vegetation...”

J.D Hooker *On the Flora of Australia* 1859

Images (left to right):

Joseph PAXTON *Hibiscus multifidus* 1840, engraving, hand coloured, Collection: Art Gallery of Ballarat

Charles LEMAIRE *Clianthus dampieri* 1858, colour lithograph, Collection: Art Gallery of Ballarat

Walter FITCH *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* 1847, lithograph, hand coloured, Collection: Art Gallery of Ballarat

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Gallery Hours: Tuesday – Sunday 11am-5pm

Sunday afternoons @ the Gallery – Special guest talks each Sunday at 3pm

Admission: \$7/ \$5 Concessions / \$4 National Trust members / children under 12 free



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