

## Aspects of Franconia

### Paper Gardens: A special exhibition at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

Entitled “Paper Gardens: Illustrated Plant Books of the Early Modern Age”, this special exhibition which opened on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, has now been extended until April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Essentially all about the early history of botany, it is a delight for anyone interested in plants and insects, and, aware that many of our members are keen gardeners, I thought it worthy of a recommendation. However, you don’t have to be a gardener to enjoy it. It’s certainly worth a visit in these cold winter months for anyone with a liking for art.



The exhibition has as its centrepiece the exquisite Baroque “*Plantae Selectae*” by Christoph Jacob Trew, who was born in Lauf on the Pegnitz in 1695 and died in Nuremberg in 1769. Many regard the “*Plantae Selectae*” as the most beautiful German plant book of the 18th century. Over the years, the physician and botanist, who was also a member of the Royal Society in London, amassed a significant number of watercolours of plants, to which he added depictions of distinctive details such as seeds, fruits or pistils. This example is of the beautiful Turk’s cap lily (*Lilium superbum*).



*(The *Lilium superbum* is a species of true lily native to the eastern and central regions of North America. One of its common names is Turk's cap lily, derived from the reflexed shape of the flower petals, which presumably resemble a type of hat worn by early Turkish people.)*

The advent of printing in the early modern age allowed the study of botany to become accessible to wider circles. Works by the botanist and physician Hieronymus Bock, Otto Brunfels, praised by Carl von Linné as one of the “fathers of botany”, and Leonhart Fuchs after whom the “fuchsia” is named are among the earliest testimonies of a discipline that gradually became a science in its own right. They meticulously list indigenous and exotic herbs – including many from newly “discovered” America – record their medicinal and other properties and illustrate their appearance in woodcuts. These historical volumes bear witness to a rational and aesthetic approach to nature: rational because they record medical and botanical knowledge, and aesthetic because they chronicle the beauty of the plant world.

And, lastly, we cannot omit mention of the famous Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), considered by David Attenborough to be among the more significant contributors to the field of entomology. She was one of the first naturalists, entomologists, and botanical illustrators to depict the life cycles of plants and insects. The exhibition shows a selection of engravings from her famous Suriname book of 1705. The tropical country of Dutch Suriname lies on the north-eastern coast of South America and was visited several times by Merian. Plants with their flowers and fruits go from being decorative embellishment to the main subject, rendered up-close. She portrays fruits rare at the time in Europe, such as limes, lemons and pineapples, in almost life size and very realistically on imposingly large sheets. The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to study them from a close distance.

If you go along to the exhibition, do let me know how you found it. And remember, Sunday afternoon from 2pm to 4pm is a good time to visit. A competent member of the museum’s staff will be present to answer your questions.

Frank Gillard