

Oregon Botanical Artists (OBA) - meeting notes, March 9, 2013



A show and tell of rare botanical books in the special collections room at Portland, Oregon's Central Library, presented to members of Oregon Botanical Artists, a local ASBA artists' circle.

(following is a draft of an article written for ASBA's quarterly journal, "The Botanical Artist", to be published in June, 2013, about our group's visit to see botanical treasures in the downtown library)

attending: Janet, Jane, Janene, with guests Sabina Wohlfeiler and Salomon Escot
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Our local art circle recently took a look at a few of the botanical treasures in the Multnomah County Library here in downtown Portland, Oregon. When I stopped in a few months ago to meet Jim Carmin, the library's director of The John Wilson Special Collections, to ask if it was possible to get a presentation of the holdings that might interest a small group of botanical artists, he enthusiastically said, "Sure, just give me a couple of weeks' notice and a head count and I can easily pull enough things to keep your group interested for an hour or two."

Portland, known as "The Rose City", is home to an international rose test garden dating back to 1917, and an annual Rose Festival, complete with parade and Rose Queen. Perhaps for that reason, Jim started his presentation with Volume 1 of Pierre Joseph Redouté's "Les Roses" (1817-1824).

The library has, naturally, a very large rose collection, so we were treated to several other beautiful examples of roses in botanical art. A personal favorite and new to me, was the work of Annica Bricogne in "Choix du Plus Belles Roses" (1845-1854).

Other items Jim shared with us included a Japanese Moribana accordion-fold book from 1936, and several modern hand-made books. One standout was "Effigies", by local artist, Sarah Horowitz. For this, the artist made ink drawings onto indigo-dyed paper.

Saved for last, we were treated to a look at several plates of John James Audubon's "Birds of America" double elephant folios. Bound in 4 enormous volumes, the library owns one of only 105 complete sets in the world.

All of the books shown on our visit were hand-colored engravings. It's remarkable to look at these with modern eyes. Today we're accustomed to seeing color printed in the 4 process colors (cyan, magenta, yellow and black), where, under magnification, it's easy to see the dot pattern, and even the individual color plates slightly off-register. How different it is in these hand-colored works where there is no dot pattern, no registration of plates. This is actual watercolor applied by a human hand to each individual page. On page after page after page. It is exquisitely applied in the Annica Bricogne book, where each petal is a stunning example of gradated washes, in subtly differing warm and cool red hues.

Redouté was renowned for his technique of stipple-engraving, which allowed for subtle tonalities to be suggested in the engraving. In less refined engravings, the onus was on the colorist to suggest shading and shifts in tone. Apparently women and children were often employed to do this delicate handwork. It was fascinating to see the varying range of skill in the examples we were shown.

I know we'll be back, if only to see more of the Redouté and Audubon. In addition to these really rare treasures, the collection also has a few wonderful facsimiles, including one of Maria Sibylla Merian's "Metamorphosis, Insects of Suriname". It's free of charge, and library staff is eager to share the wealth so it's easy to access these treasures again and again.

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