

Book review

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Book review

Flora Japonica. – Kew: Kew Publishing, 2016. – ISBN 978-1-84246-612-4. – 24.2 × 28 cm, 252 pp., 80 full colour paintings, English, softback. – Price: GBP 20. – Available at <http://shop.kew.org/flora-japonica>

The Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art situated near the Temperate House in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, hosted in 2016–2017 an exquisite exhibition of botanical illustrations made by contemporary plant illustrators from Japan. This book is the volume accompanying the exhibition, which in its profile was restricted to the documentation of vascular plants native in Japan, as well as hybrids and cultivars selected from these.

Following a foreword by HIH Prince Akishino (Akishinonomiya Fumihito), a member of the Imperial family of Japan, and a preface by Keiichi Hayashi, a former ambassador of Japan to the United Kingdom, both texts in English and Japanese, four introductory chapters acquaint the reader with the world of botanical illustration in Japan. Martyn Rix and Masuni Yamanaka set the general frame, Hideaki Ohba gives an excellent overview of the historical developments from e-maki scrolls in the Heian period (794–1184) to the diverse spectrum of botanical illustrations during the Meiji period (1868–1912) and after. Because of the breadth of his approach, including e.g. a discussion of the exquisite collection of Japanese plant images kept in the library of the Komarov Botanical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg, this is clearly the most significant text of the introduction. Jin Murata focuses on the history of the Koishikawa Botanical Garden of Tokyo University, since 2002 a Japanese national historic landmark, with an emphasis on Chikusai Katō, and Tetsuo Koyama deals with the botanical illustrations of Tomitaro Makino and the latter's association with two institutions – the Makino Botanical Garden located in the Kochi prefecture, and the Sessai Hattori and Makino Memorial Garden & Museum in Nerima, a suburb of Tokyo. The latter text is a revised version of Koyama's paper in *The Botanical Artist* (21: 30–31, 2015).

These introductory chapters are followed by the catalogue, which is arranged in alphabetical order of the names of the plant illustrators contributing to the exhibition. While the 86 plant illustrations are mainly placed on the left-hand pages, the commentary is found largely on the right-hand pages. Each entry starts with (1)

the name of the plant illustrator, e.g. Maki Nishimura, followed by (2) the scientific name of the plant documented, e.g. *Albizia julibrissin*, (3) a brief biography of the plant illustrator, (4) general notes on the species dealt with, (5) the Japanese name given in katakana and in romanized transcription, (6) the scientific name plus author citation with the place of valid publication based on the *Flora of Japan* (Iwatsuki & al. 1993 and subsequent volumes), (7) a brief description of the respective plant and (8) notes on distribution and habitat in Japan, also based on the *Flora of Japan*. At the bottom of the page, technical details are given, such as in the case of the *Albizia*: “Painted from flowering specimens collected in Setagaya, Tokyo on 23 June 2014. Watercolour on paper, 340 × 390 mm”. Among the illustrations we find many plants well known and widely cultivated in Europe, e.g. *Acer japonicum*, *A. palmatum*, *Albizia julibrissin*, *Camellia japonica*, *Chaenomeles japonica*, *Hydrangea macrophylla*, *Iris japonica*, *Kerria japonica*, *Paulownia tomentosa*, *Rosa rugosa* and *Wisteria floribunda*. Others are rarely seen in cultivation, e.g. *Adonis ramosa*, *Asarum muramatsui*, *Epimedium sempervirens*, *Hibiscus hamabo*, *Leontopodium discolor* and *Viola shikokiana*.

There is a wealth of information in these texts, e.g. on cultivation, on the discovery and naming of the respective species as well as data on the museums and collections where images of the respective plant illustrator are kept or where he or she had exhibited previously, often at the Royal Horticultural Society's shows in London or at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh.

Embedded in the text are the little gems, enjoyed by the present reviewer, e.g. the note that in *Albizia julibrissin* the epithet is “probably derived from the Turkish word *gülibrişim*”, which indeed is the case. Agglutinating the words “gül” [rose] with “ibrişim” [silk thread], this is the Turkish denomination of the tree, which goes back to the Farsi name “gole abrisham” [flower silk]. Many more similar notes could have been added to the texts but were not because of lack of space, e.g. a note on the oldest herbarium specimen of *Hortensia macrophylla* known to exist. It was collected in 1771 by Jeanne Baret, Philibert Commerson's assistant, the first woman to circumnavigate the world, in a garden in Mauritius, where it must have arrived with cargo from Japan (see Jolinom 2004); it is now kept in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. It would also

have been appropriate to mention the 152 wood blocks decorated with botanical illustrations conserved in the Botanical Museum Berlin, all of which carry the red stamp of Chikusai Katō, while the series kept at Kew is only a fraction of the size (Lack & Ohba 1998). When dealing with “sakoku”, Japan’s political and economic self-isolation during the late Edo period, Rix and Yamana and Ohba could have mentioned Kaempfer’s predecessor on Deshima island in Nagasaki harbour: Andreas Cleyer, his gardener Georg Meister, and the first reports of *Lilium auratum*, *L. speciosum* and *Platycodon grandiflorum* including illustrations of these species published in Nürnberg as early as 1690–1696 (Lack 2014). The application of morphological terms is largely correct with, possibly, the exception of “ovulate [sic] shoots” (p. 46) for megasporophylls in *Ginkgo biloba*.

The book ends with a very brief list for further reading and short biographies of Masumi Yamanaka, a freelance artist based at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the organizer of the exhibition, and Martyn Rix. This is followed by a register of the names of the plant illustrators and of the scientific names of the plants depicted.

In short, this is a beautiful book produced on the same level of sophistication as the illustrations prepared by the cream of contemporary plant illustrators from Japan.

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