

Media Release:



Auckland Museum's Most Prized Possessions on Display in Exhibition of Rare Illustrated Books

In the Age of Discovery, intrepid explorers returned to Europe with so many exotic plant and animal specimens extracted from Africa, the Indies and the New World that chaos loomed for naturalists. Botanists and illustrators scrambled to classify and catalogue the newfound natural wonders. These rare and remarkable illustrations feature in Auckland Museum's exhibition *Illustrated Leaves: Florilegia from the 16th to 21st Centuries*.

Illustrated Leaves showcases six centuries of illustrated books from Auckland Museum Library's extensive collections. The exhibition opens in the Museum's Pictorial Gallery on Friday, 2 October.

More than just an exhibition of botanical art, *Illustrated Leaves* explores the shifting motivations behind the exquisite production of florilegia – a Latin word describing anthologies of flowers. Once a means to record and classify plant-life never before seen by European eyes, they now present an opportunity to document plant-life the world may never see again.

The exhibition features Matthias de L'Obel's *Plantarum, seu, Stirpium historia (Plants, or, an account of their lineage)* published in 1576. Bound in parchment, written in Latin with 1441 woodcuts, L'Obel's work pioneered a new system of plant classification based on leaf form. It is considered a landmark in botany and is one of the Museum Library's most prized possessions.

From woodcuts to the delicate hand-painted plates of esteemed 18th century artist Georg Ehret, to lithographs and contemporary coloured digital prints, *Illustrated Leaves* traces innovations in methods of production.

On James Cook's first voyage to New Zealand in 1769, the young artist Sydney Parkinson sketched exotic plant-life new to science. Working in cramped and difficult conditions, Parkinson recorded hundreds of specimens. Parkinson died at sea from dysentery, however when Cook returned to England, 185 of the artist's sketches were made into engravings, several of which are featured in *Illustrated Leaves*.

The exhibit also showcases one of two volumes of *The Highgrove Florilegium*, a recently acquired contemporary collection of 63 prints of plants found in the Prince of Wales' organic garden at Highgrove. Just 175 copies of the *Florilegium* were created, each embossed with gold and bound in leather. Their covers have been hand-marbled with the spine covered in red chieftain goatskin.

The Highgrove Florilegium features the work of award-winning New Zealand botanical artist Susan Worthington, who personally presented her art to the Prince this year.

Illustrated Leaves is an exhibition for treasure hunters and curious minds; an opportunity to explore rarely seen illustrated books from the Museum Library's extensive research collections.

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What: *Illustrated Leaves: Florilegia from the 16th to 21st Centuries*

When: Opens Friday, 2 October

Where: Auckland Museum Pictorial Gallery

Cost: Admission included with entry donation

Download images here: <http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/655/media-kit-2009>

Additional Notes:

What are Florilegia?

A florilegium – the plural of the word is florilegia – is a Latin word referring to a compilation of excerpts and illustrations. The word is formed from the Latin *flos* (flower) and *legere* (to gather): literally a gathering of flowers. Although it is most commonly used to refer to anthologies of plant life, it can apply to any compilation of literary or scientific character. Illustrated plant anthologies were printed soon after the invention of Gutenberg's press in the mid 15th century. Known as 'herbals' these anthologies combined folklore and home remedies, information from classical sources, and religious symbolism in a popular mix of botanical and medical advice.

A Prized Possession

The oldest florilegium in the Museum Library's collections is *Plantarum, seu, Stirpium historia* ("Plants, or, an account of their lineage") by Matthias de L'Obel (1538-1616). French-born L'Obel was a physician and gardener to William I, Prince of Orange, and later in life, a botanist to King James I of England. L'Obel's florilegium was published in 1576. Bound in animal-skin parchment, lined with Latin manuscripts and illustrated with 1441 woodcuts, his

work pioneered a new system of plant classification based on leaf form. The anthology is considered a landmark in botany and is one of the Museum Library's most prized possessions.

What do you Call That?

John Gerard (1545-1612) is a famous English botanist. Gerard was educated in Willaston, and later studied medicine and travelled widely as a ship's surgeon. Gerard's *The herball, or generall historie of plantes* (1597) arranges plants according to the system pioneered by Matthias de L'Obel. In 800 chapters, Gerard describes with flourish the medicinal properties and virtues of more than 1000 plants "both useful and ornamental." His work contains the first woodcut illustration and written description in English of the potato (introduced to Europe by Sir Walter Raleigh).

The Highgrove Florilegium: A New Zealand Connection

Volume two of *The Highgrove Florilegium* is a recently acquired contemporary collection of 124 prints of plants. The *Florilegium* presents a broad cross-section of the plant-life at Highgrove, described by the Prince of Wales as home to "plants both decorative and useful, plants that are rare and in decline, the commonplace and the ravishing." The second volume of the *Florilegium* showcases the work of New Zealand botanical artist Susan Worthington. Born in Stratford, Taranaki (1944), Worthington first studied Landscapes and Fibre at Whitecliffe Art School in Auckland. In 2006, she completed a Diploma in Botanical Painting at the English Gardening School in the Chelsea Physic Garden in London. An internationally acclaimed botanical artist (she has won a silver medal at the prestigious Royal Horticultural Society's art show in London), Worthington was invited to submit work to *The Highgrove Florilegium*. Prints of three of her watercolours are included in volume two.

The Museum Library

The Museum Library is one of New Zealand's oldest. It is a major resource for research about the natural and human history of Auckland, New Zealand, and the Pacific. Books, maps and pictorial collections, dating from the 16th century onwards, record human exploration and discovery. Its extensive manuscripts collection (more than 1000 linear metres) includes personal papers, diaries, letters, memoirs, business and organisation records. The Library is open to the public.

Illustrated Leaves highlights

- *Plantarum, seu, Stirpium historia* (1576) by Matthias de L'Obel with 1441 woodcut illustrations
- *The herball, or generall historie of plantes* (1597) by John Gerard
- *Plantae et papiliones rariores* (1748) by Georg Dionysius Ehret with 15 coloured plates of botanical art and butterflies
- Sydney Parkinson, Joseph Banks' and Daniel Solander's lithographs with late-twentieth century colour reproductions
- A selection of *Curtis' Botanical Magazines* published since 1787 and hand painted until the 1940s.
- *The second volume of The Highgrove Florilegium* (2009) with 63 prints of plants found in the Prince of Wales' organic garden at Highgrove in Gloucestershire.