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Botanical Illustration in the Fourteenth Century

Sara Anne Hook

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the Botanical Artist

Journal of the American Society of Botanical Artists



No, Really... That's How I Do It:
Scratchboard
by Rhonda Nass

The Art and Science
of the Critique
by Susan T. Fisher

Lasting Impressions:
Jean Emmons
by Karen Kluglein

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American Society of Botanical Artists

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INSPIRATIONS



Tulipa, Queen of Night Tulip II, watercolor on illustration board, ©Karen Kluglein. Best in Show, *Small Works* exhibition, 28th Annual Meeting & Conference, Westchester, NY. Karen grew tulips in hopes of painting their dark shadows and iridescence the following spring. She has long admired Jean Emmons's work and discusses Jean's painting "Double Opium Poppy" in *Lasting Impressions* on page 35.

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OPPOSITE PAGE Leaf 279, *Solanum nachtschede*, from *Gart der Gesundheit* (Mainz, Peter Schoeffer, 1485) Courtesy Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Botanical Illustration in the Fourteenth Century

Elegantly bound and beautifully preserved

STORY BY Sara Anne Hook



"The Stripping of Jesus" from the *Book of Hours of Jeanne of Navarre*, circa 1330-1340



"The Visitation" from the *Small Book of Hours of the Duke of Berry*, circa 1385



Sir Gawain hiding near a cave as he prepares to confront the Green Knight, surrounded by the flowers and foliage of the forest.

LAST SPRING, I TOOK A COURSE CALLED "The Calamitous Fourteenth Century" as part of my MFA program at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. We studied the epic poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, and the "Pearl" or "Gawain" poet, so named because no definitive proof of this author's identity has been found. The single known manuscript of the Gawain poet's work is available in digital form through the British Library (bl.uk/manuscripts/, accessed 10/9/22). Scattered among this manuscript's pages are lavish illustrations by an unknown artist.

In the fourteenth century, texts featuring botanical illustrations focused on the healing properties and spiritual meanings of plants. For example, although many herbals described superstitions associated with mandrake, it was used as an anesthetic. The medicinal value of dandelions was likely derived from Arabic texts; the plants were often used for kidney and liver complaints. Lupin seeds could be ground into meal or used in ointments. Many of the illustrations from these sources are not what we would consider accurate for scientific purposes; however, a series of drawings of plants in a treatise by a London surgeon, John Arderne, are more realistic.

Stylized images of flowers and plants are a characteristic of psalters and books of hours. In this example from a fourteenth century book of hours, a simple yet colorful—almost festive—border of leaves forms a frame for the image and the text, in stark contrast to what is happening to Jesus. In another example, note the elaborate swirls of grape vines with leaves and birds that surround the main image.

Epic poetry from the fourteenth century often includes descriptions of flowers and plants. Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles* is replete with descriptions of the natural world as a backdrop for a poem where birds take the place of human caricatures and Nature is the ruling figure. Although I admire Chaucer's genius, I prefer the work of the Gawain poet. The most well-known of this poet's work is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a precursor to today's preference for fantasy, world-building, and characters with magical powers. The manuscript includes an illustration of Sir Gawain hiding near a cave as he prepares to confront the Green Knight, surrounded by a variety of flowers and foliage of the forest.

Another poem from the manuscript is *Patience*, the shortest of the four works. This poem begins with a narrative about the



The first page of *Patience*, the shortest of the four works. Note the image of an oak tree, acorn, and leaf incorporated into the letter P.



From *Pearl*, the story of a father dreaming of his lost daughter. Note the many trees and botanical details made evident in this 14th century work.



importance of patience as one of the eight virtues in parallel with the Beatitudes in the book of Matthew in the Bible, compared to sloth, its opposing vice. The poem continues with an expansion of the story of Jonah from the Bible to illustrate the differences between this virtue and vice. Of the four works, this is my favorite, not only because it vividly describes Jonah's impatience, but also because it highlights God's love and mercy for all creatures. Note the images of an oak tree with an acorn and leaf incorporated into the letter P.

Pearl is about a father grieving the loss of his young daughter. In a dream, he sees her across a river, where she has been transformed into a heavenly maiden. Throughout the dream, Pearl admonishes her father for the weakness of his faith. The illustrations for this poem are particularly vivid and lush, especially

for being created in the fourteenth century. Note the detail of the landscape, especially on Pearl's side of the river. He awakens from his dream when he attempts to cross the river to be with her.

It is a miracle that only one manuscript containing *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Patience*, along with *Cleanness*, survives, although speculation continues about its authorship, the artist's identity, and how and when the manuscript was compiled. Examining botanical illustration from a variety of literary and scientific sources from the fourteenth century contributes to the rich history of the art that we love. 📖

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