NOT ONLY PRINTS: EARLY REPUBLIC-ERA VISUAL CULTURE RESEARCH AT THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA

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INTRODUCTION

Erika Piola

Scholars, the general public, and special collections libraries are increasingly aware of the importance of visual images in examining the past. With the proliferation of sophisticated digitization technologies, researchers now have the opportunity to “see” images in new ways. No longer considered secondary to text and used merely to illustrate the written word, visual materials are taking their rightful place as primary evidence that document the past and influence our understanding of the present. The Library Company of Philadelphia supports this continuing focus on the historical importance of visual culture. An independent research library specializing in American history and culture from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the Library Company was founded as the first subscription library in the country in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin and his Junto of fellow tradesmen. Serving as the library for Congress in the later eighteenth century and the city library during the nineteenth century, the Library Company transformed itself in the mid-twentieth century into a closed-stack research facility to both preserve and provide
the best access to its nationally and locally significant collections of rare books, manuscripts, broadsides, ephemera, prints, photographs, and works of art.

Through its 281-year history, the Library Company has collected visual material and since 1971 has maintained a separate graphics department, with current holdings at over 70,000 items. Among the visual treasures are Peter Cooper’s *Southeast Prospect of the City of Philadelphia*, a circa 1720 painting believed to be the earliest painted view of a North American city; an 1844 William and Frederick Langenheim daguerreotype showing a crowd gathering outside of militia headquarters during anti-Catholic riots, often referred to as Philadelphia’s first news photograph; and the three-volume elephant folio of John James Audubon’s *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* (1845–48), filled with 150 beautifully hand-colored lithographs of wildlife. The Library Company also holds subject and genre collections rich for visual study, including more than 8,000 late nineteenth-century trade cards, many relating to popular medicine; nearly 800 mid-nineteenth-century comic val- entines; and a strong collection of books relating to the history of printing, as well as optics and optical equipment dating back to the sixteenth century.

Launched in 2008, the library’s Visual Culture Program (VCP at LCP) promotes the use of historical images as primary sources for studying the past and fosters research, collection, and interpretation of historic visual material. Through exhibitions, research fellowships, conferences, and public programs, VCP at LCP, under the direction of Curator of Printed Books Rachel D’Agostino and Associate Curator of Prints and Photographs Erika Piola, promotes the creative use of the Library Company’s varied collections of visual materials. These programs have included the 2010 *Philadelphia on Stone* exhibition researching the first fifty years of commercial lithography in the city, and also a talk by local artist Jennifer Levonian describing how the Library Company’s Civil War collections inspired her 2011 animated work “Rebellious Bird,” which is also discussed in a blog about her experience accessible on the VCP website (http://www.librarycompany.org/visualculture/index.htm). The website also provides information about the fellowship program and descriptions of past and forthcoming events, as well as an overview of the visual culture materials related to other subject strengths at the library, including Philadelphiana, women’s history, economics, natural history, popular culture, and African American history.

In the summer of 2011, in further support of the mission of VCP, directors D’Agostino and Piola chaired a panel at the annual meeting of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic (SHEAR). The panel, “Not Only Prints: Early Republic-Era Visual Culture Research at the Library Company...
of Philadelphia," was designed to disseminate awareness of the breadth and depth of the Library Company's visual culture collections, the importance of visual materials as primary sources, and the methods scholars could pursue to perform graphically oriented research. The presenters were Alison Klaum, PhD candidate in English at the University of Delaware; Aaron Wunsch, a lecturer in the University of Pennsylvania's Historic Preservation Program; and Anne Verplanck, associate professor of American and heritage studies at Penn State University. The presenters described the collections they used and why, the insights and conclusions they formed from their work with the materials, and the outcomes from their research.

Klaum, currently completing her dissertation "Pressing Flowers: Floral Discourses and the Development of American Print Culture, 1790–1860," discussed her work at the library for a chapter of her dissertation focused on the historical importance of the interrelationship of graphic depictions and textual descriptions of flowers in understanding nineteenth-century botanical education. Wunsch focused on the Library Company's defining role in forming his understanding of the iconography and construction of the Laurel Hill Cemetery, which he has been researching for over a decade. Verplanck outlined her research at the library for her current project, "The Graphic Arts of Philadelphia 1780–1880." The following pages contain essays derived from the papers presented by Klaum and Wunsch and the summary of all the presenters' work authored by VCP codirector D'Agostino.

NOTE

TALES FROM THE CRYPT: CEMETERY-RELATED NOTES ON LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA RESEARCH

Aaron Wunsch

Asking scholars to discuss their aims, methods, and discoveries is a risky proposition, like pointing a telescope at your navel. Will anyone want to see the view? Years ago a colleague of mine, fresh from a prestigious fellowship
that required him to attend endless academic mixers, captured the problem with this piece of self-mockery: “But enough about me; let’s talk about my work.” Despite the risks, my essay does just that. It summarizes insights I have gained about the genesis of Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill Cemetery while working with graphic materials at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Those insights will be of particular interest to historians of American architecture and landscape who focus on the early to mid-nineteenth century. But there is a larger historiographic moral to the story, and it is this: study the repository as you study your topic. Archivists and librarians will not be shocked by this injunction, and neither will many historians. If the following case study reinforces an old maxim and enhances interest in one of the richest collections of antebellum visual culture in the United States, then this glance backward through the telescope will (almost) be justified.1

Architectural historians tend to put architects first. When I began researching Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill Cemetery as an employee of the Historic American Buildings Survey some fifteen years ago, I quickly discovered that existing scholarship on the site fell into two categories: cultural histories of something called the “rural cemetery movement” and narrower design histories, written by people with training like mine, that explored the work of architect John Notman.2 Laurel Hill, established in 1836, was America’s second major rural cemetery, postdating Boston’s Mount Auburn by five years. Although the differences between the two institutions were marked, their founders shared an interest in burial reform that combined urban civic pride with ideas about health, horticulture, history, class, and family that were as private and sentimental as they were public and scientific. I also learned that the person most responsible for giving architectural form to these impulses at Laurel Hill was John Notman.

Focusing on architects when writing design history isn’t wrongheaded but it can be self-contained and, potentially, self-fulfilling. The scholarship on Notman was generally rigorous and well written. Better still, it fell within my comfort zone. While I quickly perceived that rural cemeteries were complex cultural and material phenomena trailed by disparate business records, drawings, photographs, poems, and diary entries (to name only the most obvious primary sources), it was initially reassuring to know that the story of the cemetery’s creation followed developments in architecture and landscape gardening I had learned about in school and was, at first glance, tidy. It went something like this: Laurel Hill Cemetery took shape on the banks of the Schuylkill River beginning in 1836. The site’s rolling terrain, mature plantings, and river views appealed particularly to John Jay Smith,
the most active promoter of the cemetery plan and the eminent librarian of Philadelphia’s Library Company. He and three like-minded collaborators followed convention by holding a competition for the design of the new institution’s buildings and grounds. The winner was John Notman, a recently arrived Scottish carpenter with significant architectural training who vanquished leading local architects Thomas Ustick Walter and William Strickland. The result was an arboretum-like, gardenesque landscape adorned with neoclassical, Gothic, and vaguely Chinese buildings housing various cemetery functions. While Walter was called in, or perhaps volunteered, to improve Notman’s gatehouse drawing, Notman received credit for the project overall, and it effectively launched his nationally important career.

Notman as lone wolf—or close to it. That story cohered, and it got me through a report for the National Park Service and earned a National Historic Landmark nomination for the cemetery. But there were annoying loose ends. Citing the work of Keith Morgan, historian Constance Greiff suggested that a British architect’s published proposals for Kensal Green Cemetery near London had been available to competition entrants and had influenced both Notman’s ground plan and an unrealized Gothic entrance suggested by Walter. The “Walter” gatehouse sketch appeared on a larger drawing, also attributed to him, showing wildly writhing paths around a central, church-like building (see figs. 1a and 1b). If the latter feature represented another link to the Kensal Green proposal (and Greiff and Morgan felt that it did), why was the overall composition so rough? Could this really be the drawing Walter, a renowned architect with training as a landscape painter, used to persuade cemetery managers to hire him?

These questions brought me to the Library Company in the summer of 2001. A callow doctoral student with a month-long Mellon Foundation fellowship, I wanted to pore over the drawings in question and learn more about the institution that, along with Laurel Hill, had consumed John Jay Smith’s mental energies for most of his adult life. The drawings were a mixed bag. In addition to the one attributed to Walter, there was another, more finished one actually signed by him. This called for an Egyptian Revival gatehouse like the one at Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery. A similar scheme, set forth by William Strickland, was accompanied by a ground plan that showed two stepped terraces (or “amphitheaters”) descending towards the river (see fig. 2). None of this came as a surprise. Other researchers had analyzed these proposals while noting the absence of a signed entry from Notman. But two things became clearer to me. First, the ground plans were based on
**FIGURE 1A:** [Plan of Laurel Hill Cemetery with elevation of the entrance] ((Philadelphia, 1836)). Proposed plan for Laurel Hill Cemetery grounds, problematically attributed to Thomas Ustick Walter. Library Company of Philadelphia.

**FIGURE 1B:** Detail of “Walter” plan, showing sketch of a proposed gatehouse.
the same site survey, showing pre-existing buildings (as hatched rectangles) and trees (as dots). Second, although the drawings were few, they ranged from polished to crude. The putative Walter drawing, indeed, appeared to be a kind of worksheet on which designs were being tested, perhaps by multiple hands.

**Figure 2:** William Strickland, *Plan of the walks and avenues of Laurel Hill Cemetery* ([Philadelphia, 1836]). William Strickland’s proposed ground plan for Laurel Hill Cemetery. Library Company of Philadelphia.
The antebellum decades witnessed enormous quantitative and qualitative changes in the production and consumption of architectural books. Before the rise of public libraries in Philadelphia, the Library Company came closer than any other local institution to serving that purpose. Books on architecture and landscape had long found a home there and it made sense that, when thinking about Laurel Hill, John Jay Smith would avail himself of the collection over which he presided. To my delight, I discovered that Smith had compiled a catalog of the library’s holdings a year before founding the cemetery. Why not peruse the architecture and landscape entries to get a sense of possible design sources?

This sort of exercise is open to criticism. At best, it tends to yield generalizations about what so-and-so “might have seen.” But sometimes one can do better. Thumbing through Humphry Repton’s *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803), I came across a scheme Repton had proposed as the gatehouse for a large English estate (see fig. 3). Not only did it bear a striking resemblance to its counterpart at Laurel Hill, it also showed

**Figure 3:** Humphry Repton’s proposed entrance gate for the Harewood estate in Yorkshire, England in Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London: Printed by T. Bensley for J. Taylor, 1803). Note the pencil marks on this illustration from the Library Company copy. Library Company of Philadelphia.
pencil marks where someone had begun to sketch in the latter building’s doorways and niches. Similar but less satisfying revelations came from other books. John Claudius Loudon’s *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture and Furniture* (1833) was missing page 999. Locating the book at another library, I discovered that the excised image likewise recalled Laurel Hill’s gatehouse in some very specific ways. If John Jay Smith had allowed someone to draw in the Repton book, or perhaps had done so himself, might he have removed a page from Loudon to facilitate deliberations over Laurel Hill’s design or, more bluntly, to instruct Notman?

Whatever its dangers, such speculation prompted me to rethink what I knew about Laurel Hill’s genesis. Notman was new to this country, his youth and lack of reputation perhaps seen as an asset by the founders of a novel and relatively low-budget institution who had design ideas of their own. What if the whole process had been more open and synthetic than anyone believed, with various players chiming in and various print sources being dropped upon the table? This theory worked better than Notman-as-formgiver because it explained more of the evidence. Whatever its origins, the snaky plan attributed to Walter looked still more like a worksheet. Walter might have made the Gothic gatehouse sketch but someone else likely traced out the winding paths that recalled those proposed for Kensal Green. This rough plan was important. Far more than Strickland’s, it prefigured the road and path system that was actually built at Laurel Hill (see fig. 4). Yet Strickland ultimately made a contribution, too. One of his terraced “amphitheaters” found its way into the final design, as did some of the Gothic features Walter (?) had suggested for the cemetery’s street front. A combination of Library Company resources, managerial suggestions, and architects’ proposals, Laurel Hill’s design began to look like a collage.

My conversion of Notman into a cipher worried me a bit. His career, after all, was illustrious, as a trip to the Philadelphia Athenaeum, St. Mark’s Church, or the grounds of the Virginia State Capitol will remind you. But it was the early Notman, Notman-the-near-nobody, whom Laurel Hill’s founders had employed. And it was this humbler, more malleable Notman whose gatehouse design T. U. Walter reworked, making sure the press knew he had done so. Maybe there was a reason no original Notman drawings of Laurel Hill survived. Maybe they embarrassed him. Maybe that unsigned, writhing ground plan is one of them. Again this is speculation. But, again,
it led me in new directions and, ultimately, to more solid conclusions. The critical ones are these:

First, there was no formal competition for Laurel Hill’s design. Architectural historians look for such events as a matter of course but a few handsome rendered drawings do not a competition make. Nowhere in Laurel Hill’s records is there mention of a competition. The beautiful Walter and Strickland proposals at the Library Company were surely meant to land their creators lucrative commissions but the very lack of a formal process for receiving them may have fostered the sort of borrowing and recombination that transpired.

Second, whatever his skills as an architect, Notman was shakier at landscape. He may well have supplied a general scheme for Laurel Hill’s grounds (as he did for later cemeteries) but, as written evidence and a copperplate engraving at the Library Company show, the details were worked out by
surveyor Philip M. Price. Price, incidentally, laid out much of Philadelphia’s Spring Garden neighborhood and went on to survey the city’s Monument and Woodlands cemeteries. A landscape designer without architectural credentials, he remains virtually unknown.7

Before concluding, we might revisit the Library Company and the ways the institution’s history has shaped its collections. Well before John Jay Smith got into the cemetery business, he was immersed in antebellum print culture. And well before he borrowed Library Company books for their images, he was borrowing their texts.8 In the same years Smith was settling into his post as Librarian, he was forging a second, complementary career as an editor of books and magazines. This work depended on the absence of international copyright; almost all of Smith’s publications were reprints, abridgements, or serializations of European works. It likewise depended on Smith’s unrivaled access to the Library Company’s collections. Smith would borrow and serialize recent works, most notably in Adam Waldie’s Select Circulating Library. Whatever gain he received from such ventures, he believed that their contribution to the diffusion of knowledge made them compatible with the Library’s mission; indeed, the name “Circulating Library” played on the connection, as did a host of upbeat editorials. And Smith gave back. When his beneficence was brought to the attention of the current Librarian, he replied: “That explains why we have so many copies of Waldie’s in our basement.”9

Did Smith’s work in the world of print affect the shape and character of Laurel Hill? In the course of my dissertation research, I became convinced that it did. Certainly, there were occasional articles about the cemetery in Smith’s publications—reprints, of course, but flattering nonetheless. More important, I began to recognize the extent to which Laurel Hill was an artifact of the emerging middle-class literary culture of the antebellum decades. Unlike other rural cemeteries, Smith’s branded itself as a literary landscape by placing a sculpture group derived from the tales of Sir Walter Scott at its entrance (see fig. 5).10 Cut by stonemason James Thom, the group features Old Mortality, who traveled the Scottish countryside restoring the epitaphs of Presbyterian martyrs. To the rear stands his faithful pony, while off to the left Sir Walter himself looks on. Historians have seen possible ties between Thom and John Notman, both of whom were natives of Scotland. They have alleged that the sculpture amplified Laurel Hill’s resonance with middle-class religious values and longing for familial perpetuity. But might it also be
noteworthy that John Jay Smith began his literary career by abridging Scott’s *Life of Napoleon* and made a living through similar work?\textsuperscript{11}

There are other such connections, too. Smith clearly valued and, to some extent, shaped, the coverage Laurel Hill received in popular journals such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. (Here it is worth mentioning how poorly *Godey’s* illustrations reproduce online and on microfilm and how important it is to see the originals at the Library Company.) And when in the mid-1840s Smith obtained the American rights to a lithographic process known as anastatic printing, a new world of possibilities for the repackaging of intellectual property opened up that would again resonate with his cemetery and library work. Antiquarian publications, such as *American Historical and Literary Curiosities*, featured autographs of people buried at Laurel Hill. There were pattern books like *Designs for Monuments and Mural Tablets* (1847), whose borrowed English text was followed by images of American cemetery monuments. And, perhaps most intriguing, the anastatic adventure lured Smith into the map publishing business. Perched at the Library Company, he oversaw the tracing of old maps for reproduction. His draftsman was a young English
civil engineer named J. C. Sidney, later a major cartographer and landscape designer. Sidney’s earliest known work in the landscape field is a late-1840s addition to Laurel Hill Cemetery.  

Again, the reader may wonder: what broader lessons can I glean from this story? Here are a few that may be of use, especially to fellow scholars of the built environment. The Library Company’s collections of drawings, maps, and photographs are spectacular. Although it is by no means comprehensive, ImPAC, the library’s portal to its digital-image collection, offers an important starting point. However, the larger imperative to study the repository as you research your topic stands. Although my own work has focused rather narrowly on Laurel Hill and John Jay Smith, I suspect there is much to be learned about the Library’s relationship to the architecture and landscape fields in the antebellum era. Many of the leading architects of the day were shareholders in the Library Company. Some had large libraries of their own, but they may nonetheless have checked out expensive or out-of-print works. Nor should we assume the story ends with the likes of Benjamin Latrobe or T. U. Walter. More than kindred institutions such as the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, the Library Company was dedicated to the popular diffusion of knowledge in the new republic. What did this mean for the circulation of architectural books and periodicals? How did it relate to what historian Meredith McGill has called “the culture of reprinting”—the culture in which John Jay Smith was so steeped? I don’t have the answers but I am hoping future research will get us closer.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at “Not Only Prints: Early Republic Visual Culture Research at the Library Company of Philadelphia,” Session 23 of the 2011 meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, held in Philadelphia. I would like to thank the Library Company’s Erika Piola and Rachel D’Agostino for their subsequent encouragement and revisions.


3. Smith’s fellow cemetery founders were Benjamin Richards (1797–1851), former mayor of Philadelphia, Frederick Brown (1796–1864), a successful druggist, and Nathan Dunn (1782–1844), a China merchant turned philanthropist and collector. Dunn was the venture’s financial backer and, contra standard accounts, the most likely to have brought John Notman to the board’s attention. A month before underwriting the purchase of the Laurel Hill tract, Dunn had similarly subsidized the purchase of a new site for the Philadelphia Museum. Among the proposals he reviewed for the museum’s design was one from John Notman—perhaps the first recorded (but now lost) scheme from the architect. See Charles Coleman Sellers, Mr. Peale’s Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 274.

4. On June 30, 1836, Poulson’s Daily Advertiser announced, “There is now to be seen at the Exchange a very beautiful picture drawn by Mr. Walter, and designed by Mr. Notman, the architect, of the entrance adopted by the company to the new Rural Cemetery at Laurel Hill, near Philadelphia.” Lest readers think Walter acted only as delineator, the following day’s paper added, “a plan [for the entrance], not entirely correct in its proportions, was handed to Mr. Walter, who, as a friend, politely agreed to remodel it . . . without giving an opinion of the merit of the plan.” See Engle and Greiff, “Historic Structure Report,” 12.


9. Author’s conversation with James N. Green, September 2010.


11. Smith, Recollections, 222, 224. Smith’s collaborator in this unlicensed abridgement was Dr. Samuel George Morton, who married Smith’s cousin in the same year (1827). Trained in medicine, Morton later achieved fame as a naturalist who used his extensive cranium collection to argue for the existence of original and distinct human “races.” His work and its social implications are treated in many scholarly studies. A recent contribution is Ann Fabian, The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America’s Unburied Dead (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).


SEEING BOTANICALLY: LINNAEAN INFLUENCE IN POPULAR ANTEBELLUM FLOWER BOOKS AND THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA’S VISUAL COLLECTIONS

Alison M. K. Klaum

In the introduction to Flora’s Interpreter, or the American Book of Flowers and Sentiments (1852), of which the Library Company of Philadelphia has nine editions, Sarah Josepha Hale supplies two reasons for incorporating Linnaean taxonomy into her collection of floral poems.¹ She writes that Linnaeus’s choice to use twenty-four categories of plants “seems most gracefully to round the number of classes” and that his system is also the “most poetical.”² By applying these aesthetic modifiers to abstract botanical theory, Hale links the artistic and the analytical. These surprising associations are indicative of the ways in which writers and editors of many popular nineteenth-century floral texts incorporated botanical theory into their aesthetic study of flowers,
basing their choices on the system’s beauty rather than on its scientific correctness.

Hale’s reference to the work of Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus also indirectly invokes the sensual temptations associated with the floral. Linnaeus was famous for revolutionizing botanical studies by devising his “sexual system” for organizing plants that he outlined in his first publication, *Systema naturae* (1735). Based on the knowledge that flowers house the reproductive organs of the plant, Linnaeus’s system divided plants into classes and orders according to the number and arrangement of the stamens (male sexual organs) and pistils (female sexual organs). As a result of Linnaeus’s sexual system, the flower became integral to the discovery and categorization of new plant species as well as a focal point for metaphors of human desire.

While many scholars have emphasized both the overt and covert sexual associations of floral temptation, they have avoided Linnaeus’s warnings about flowers, and how, though flowers house the very means by which the plant can be identified, other features like color may distract the scientific eyes of the botanist. Linnaeus’s aesthetic caveats about the danger of color in flowers, and his instructions on how botanists must train themselves to perceive abstract ideals in the face of visual variation, also seeped into the discourse of popular American flower books. Common in American educational literature and as subjects for new printing techniques, printed flowers functioned as key sites for cultural concerns about human control and self-restraint, both physical and intellectual.

While Linnaeus’s influence can easily be traced in the many popular nineteenth-century botanical treatises or floral texts that adopt or reference his taxonomy directly, my research at the Library Company revealed other, less obvious textual evidence of his botanical sway. Floral-themed instructional art books such as *A Series of Progressive Lessons Intended to Elucidate the Art of Flower Painting in Water Colours* (1818) promote self-discipline and the careful observation and processing of floral nature in a way that echoes Linnaean botanical ways of seeing even in the absence of direct references to botanical theory. Conversely, American language-of-flower books such as Elizabeth Wirt’s *Flora’s Dictionary* (1829) showcase the vicissitudes and inconsistencies of floral print culture, which challenge Linnaeus’s method for seeing botanically, even as they devote whole sections to descriptions of his sexual system.

Despite their variations in method and focus, these two types of floral genres collectively demonstrate how Linnaean botanical theory contributed
to the diverse applications of floral aesthetics in nineteenth-century American popular print culture. And it was my encounter with these two genres in the archives of the Library Company that has significantly shaped how I look at the relationship between visual and verbal floral vocabularies in nineteenth-century printed works.

How to See Botanically: Linnaean Visual Self-Control

Although Linnaeus likened plant reproduction to sexual relations in the context of marriage, his system still ignited controversy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It inspired Erasmus Darwin’s provocative poem *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), which drew out, through personification of flowers, the illicit potential of multiple female and male sexual groupings. Such associations made flowers tricky objects, but sexuality represented only one facet of their desirability. In *Critica Botanica* (1757), a work that has received little scholarly attention regarding its influence on floral aesthetics in popular culture, Linnaeus identifies several different floral scientific temptations about which the budding botanist needed to be warned. Linnaeus asserts in this work that seeing botanically, or being a botanist, required an ample amount of self-discipline and concentration. According to his binomial nomenclature, or the system of identifying the genus and species of plants through their sexual organs, the reproductive parts of the plant were not illicit but necessary for determining important plant categories. They did not, therefore, present any potential distraction for the botanist. Rather, when it comes to identifying species, being “led astray” by the *non*sexual or aesthetic characteristics of the plant—such as size, color, and scent—was the true danger for the botanist. Among all the distracting attributes of flora that Linnaeus identifies in his *Critica Botanica*, color particularly offends him. It can be dangerously seductive because nothing strikes our senses more through sight than colour: hence it is not strange that the eyes of many have been quite taken captive by it, not to say spellbound. In early times colour was accepted as a means of distinguishing species, and before long became used as a criterion of species... though anyone who is not blind can see that *Mirabilis* and *Impatiens* produce a hundred differently coloured flowers on the same plant.
Since sight is so crucial to botanical categorization, a floral quality that captivates the eye serves as a distraction from a flower’s sexual characteristics, which were more reliable indicators of distinct plant categories. According to Linnaeus, color is “strangely sportive” and therefore more likely to have variations not indicative of separate species. As a result, Linnaeus implored botanists to look for the more dependable floral qualities such as the “number, shape, position, and proportion” of the plant’s anatomy.\textsuperscript{12}

Seeing botanically, however, involved more than just seeking out the right plant details. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison demonstrate in their study of the history of scientific objectivity, Linnaeus and the enlightenment naturalists sought to access an archetype of nature not located by the naked eye alone. Uncovering “truth-to-nature,” suggest Daston and Galison, was not tantamount to forfeiting sensory perception in favor of a blind adherence to Platonic forms; rather, these two approaches worked together. One must be a careful and diligent observer of numerous examples in order to conceive of a generalized or regularized form that “transcended” specific categories expressing “a never seen but nonetheless real plant archetype.” And one became a diligent observer by attending to the right parts of the plant and by employing four crucial skills—“selecting, comparing, judging, [and] generalizing.”\textsuperscript{13}

Seeing as a botanist involved the mental and the physical, the analytical and the concrete, the hidden and the exposed. Linnaeus employed this way of seeing to conceptualize the natural world and to establish standards for scientific botanical images used for plant identification. And while he primarily attempted to systematically categorize plants, his promotion of a disciplined form of botanical seeing shaped popular attitudes about self-control in relation to floral aesthetics in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{14}

### Seeing Botanically in America: Color and Control

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, illustrated instructional monographs designed to teach the art of drawing and painting began to appear in America. Among these works was the Philadelphia publication \textit{A Series of Progressive Lessons Intended to Elucidate the Art of Flower Painting in Water Colours}, which engendered a tradition of American instructional art books devoted solely to floral subjects. Printed anonymously in 1818, this work is generally ascribed to François-Thomas-Louis Francia, a French-born
watercolorist; its colored aquatints are ascribed to John Hill, who became a significant American engraver during the 1820s and 1830s.15

Aimed at a primarily female audience interested in art, *Flower Painting* bears little resemblance to a scientific botanical treatise. Though plates 7–11 focus on the flower alone, as they would in a proper Linnaean botanical drawing, the similarities stop there. A typical Linnaean image would also include cross-sections of the plant’s fructification (flower and fruit) and directly emphasize the plant’s pistils and stamens, neither of which appears in the images of *Flower Painting*.16 Despite these missing elements, *Flower Painting* is still preoccupied with idealized floral forms in the vein of Linnaean theory. Beyond simply promoting genteel feminine accomplishment and leisure, *Flower Painting* endorses concentration, attention to detail, and the disciplined engagement of mind and body reminiscent of Linnaeus’s approach to the natural world.17 One must know flowers intimately but reservedly to be either a floral painter or a botanist and to see botanically.

Like other works of its kind, *Flower Painting* presents the art of watercolor painting in a “series of progressive lessons.”18 This method of painting breaks the process down into a number of small steps, with each lesson increasing in difficulty. While usually reserved for landscape drawing books, this form of instruction seemed particularly well suited for painting a complex and detailed subject like flowers. The first lessons in *Flower Painting* focus on the reproduction of abstract curvilinear lines (see fig. 1) and then proceed to the more recognizable shapes of leaves and greenery (fig. 2) before graduating to tinting (fig. 3) and then to the flower form and the application of color in paint (fig. 4). Once the student has mastered the initial steps, the author entrusts her to paint a colorful bouquet of flowers. Collectively, the plates of *Flower Painting* train the student not only to create an artistic image—building up the flower through layers of pencil, tint, and paint—but to do so by attending to specific parts of the plant, both tasks involving a carefully orchestrated series of actions.

Working in concert with the book’s images, the written instructions emphasize the importance of practicing a disciplined form of floral study to become a proficient watercolorist and to help manage the student’s desires regarding the flower. Rather than focusing on the dangerous sexual temptation of flowers, *Flower Painting*, and other works of its kind, admonish the reader about the temptation of color in a Linnaean fashion. In *The Rudiments of Drawing and Shadowing* (1827), author Maria Turner asserts that, especially
among young people, “there is generally too much eagerness . . . for colouring before they have acquired sufficient practice in Drawing.”19 The author of *Flower Painting* notes the unfavorable results of such premature applications
of color: “There is an absolute necessity for the flower to be drawn with a considerable degree of correctness, before colouring is attempted. The flower must not be painted that is badly drawn; for, like decoration on deformity, the
colours will deride the ill-shaped form beneath.” 20 Color plays a significant role in the floral image, emphasizing rather than masking any underlying problems with the drawing. But the drawing, and proper adherence to the steps, is even more important. If the flower is “deformed,” no amount of color
will beautify it. The student, then, must seriously and diligently attend to the structures of the drawing before she contemplates any application of color.

The one area in the drawing process that the author of *Flower Painting* seems to free the student from self-control is in the creation of the underlying abstract lines of the flower. This process, however, typifies the Linnaean concept of applied abstraction, where the student who has dedicated herself diligently to the study of nature would intuitively apprehend the most
“natural” line. Before the student ventures into the creation of recognizable floral forms (such as the leaf and stem), the author asks her to produce abstract lines upon which she will build the rest of the flower. Rather than relying on very carefully orchestrated movements to create the curvilinear form—a technique that would promote a realistic reproduction of a specific object in nature—the work encourages her to “hold the pencil carelessly,” recommending that “straight and angular markings” should be “rendered subservient to one sweep of freedom.” According to Flower Painting, once the student has drawn a number of lines, “the eye will intuitively fix on one.” The author identifies this foundational abstraction as “the line of beauty” with which the student will be “satisfied, while all others will be rejected in proportion to the pleasure this particular line has elicited.” Not only does this abstract form resemble the generalized floral archetypes that Linnaeus and other naturalists believed in, but the process by which the art student automatically recognizes it also bears a strong likeness to botanical seeing. The student’s intuitive selection of the archetypal “line of beauty” employs a version of Linnaeus’s botanical seeing that results from astute observation and an understanding of abstract forms underlying the natural world.

On the surface, Linnaean botanical thought and amateur flower painting seem quite different: one spurns the beauty and color of flowers while the other embraces them; one is geared toward men while the other is associated with women. Upon closer examination, however, the fundamental ways of seeing the floral world promoted by both are quite similar. The author of Flower Painting concludes his treatise by underscoring the art student’s need to move beyond the pages of the book in order to seek “nature in her boundless charms.” He suggests that taste and genius “always operate in proportion to our attention in observing the works of nature, to our skill in selecting, and to our care in digesting, methodizing, and comparing our observations” (emphasis added). In order to arrive at a floral form that will effectively create and incorporate the “line of beauty,” the art student must first attend to the forms of nature through careful observation and thorough processing. Performing a series of actions similar to those favored by Linnaeus and other enlightenment naturalists, the art student can, in fact, demonstrate her skill and taste before her pencil even touches the paper.

By examining floral-themed art instruction books from the first few decades of the nineteenth century in conjunction with Linnaean theory, we glimpse the covert ways in which eighteenth-century scientific ways of seeing were transmitted through aesthetic popular culture. Later in the nineteenth
century, however, Linnaeus's influence on the practices of aesthetic floral instruction was no longer predominant but still significant as other floral discourses such as sentimental poetry entered into popular culture alongside of botany and horticulture through language-of-flower books.

Languages of Flowers: Personal Taste and the Difficulties of Seeing Botanically

While *Flower Painting* encouraged a way of seeing botanically without any direct mention of Linnaeus or his taxonomy, American language-of-flower books directly incorporated descriptions of his sexual system even as they challenged other elements of his botanical approach such as his standards of botanical drawing, abstract methods, and emphasis on self-control. Flower books like Elizabeth Wirt's *Flora's Dictionary* (1829) and Sarah Josepha Hale's *Flora's Interpreter* (1832) might include a biography of Linnaeus, an in-depth discussion of his sexual system, and even a likeness of him, but they did not nor did they require their readers to see flowers through his botanical eyes. Arranged alphabetically by flower, these works included a sentiment expressed poetically for each flower type. They claimed to promote the development of aesthetic taste among Americans, especially women, and often expressed a hope that the reader would be stimulated to learn more about botany after the brief exposure these books provided. But rather than advocating meticulous observation and processing of the natural world in order to promote the development of taste among their readers, they encouraged them to carefully select and process the poems, sentiments, and images presented within the pages of the books. A preoccupation in these books with the “mystic language” of flora that supposedly began among “Eastern” cultures replaced the interest in perceiving the abstract “line of beauty” promoted in floral painting books. Signifying a shifting site of taste, cultural and personal associations replaced abstractly constructed forms as the objects of study and emulation in the language-of-flower books.

As printing techniques became cheaper and easier, language-of-flower books incorporated more visual images of flowers. Lithographs and engravings appeared where blank pages used to be. By 1855 the style of Elizabeth Wirt's *Flora's Dictionary* merged with the more expensive end of the gift book tradition, featuring gilt binding and ornate floral borders (see fig. 5). In the 1855 edition, an image accompanies nearly every flower featured in
the text, but a limited number of images are repeated throughout, blurring visual distinctions between individual plants. Heavily stylized still-lifes or garlands, the floral visuals are formulaic and highly decorative. In some cases, they do not visually correspond at all to the flower entry they accompany.
Though the images in *Flora’s Dictionary* function as generalized floral types that do not conform to any one specimen, they are markedly different from the floral schematics promoted by Linnaeus. Botanical images should depict floral forms that transcend nature and are “truer” than any actual specimen while still making distinctions between plant categories. The images in Wirt’s flower book, on the other hand, elide significant differences between categories of plants, functioning as generic decorations to ornament each floral entry rather than as useful tools for identifying plants.

Variations in floral meanings throughout language-of-flower books worked in conjunction with the stylized images to transform flowers from objects of observation to objects of association. Since the compilers of these works created links between specific flowers and sentiments by drawing from a variety of sources—scientific, etymological, literary, folkloric—the meanings assigned to specific flowers varied widely across the genre. For instance, one work associates the acacia with platonic love, while others associate it with mystery or elegance. In *Flora’s Dictionary*, Wirt admits that while “very few . . . emblems have been attached without reason”—inspired by British poems, the flower’s botanical or popular name, or unique properties of the plant—some have been “arbitrarily assumed” (her emphasis). But even those associations that have a logical connection to a plant’s specific properties are not part of a stable and consistent system for organizing flowers. Many of the specific plant attributes that she lists are the same ones Linnaeus warns against using for determining species because of their variability in nature: hue, odor, and place and manner of growth. Such inconsistencies highlight the artificiality of the floral system underlying these language-of-flower books’ floral vocabularies. Granted, Linnaeus’s classification system was also artificial—that is, it disregarded natural affinities between plants in favor of a single characteristic (sexual organs) that he selected. But his focus on consistent floral attributes produced a reliable system for organizing flowers. The amalgamation of sources and inconsistent array of floral associations and images in language-of-flower books, on the other hand, pulls the reader farther away from the Linnaean world of archetypal floral forms and self-disciplined botanical observation even as these works showcase his popularity.

While these books did not promote extensive and careful observation of the natural world, they did encourage floral self-expression by incorporating either blank pages or space at the bottom of pages for readers to mark up. As the penciled-in notations in copies of Sarah Josepha Hale’s *Flora’s Interpreter* reveal, when readers interacted with the text they generated highly
personalized floral associations rooted in their individual social world. They focused on their interests, some marking specific sentiments in the index, while others made notations next to favorite flowers or poets. If the books encouraged flower-seeking in nature it was generally with an eye to capturing a favorite poem or emotion embodied in a floral package. And when pressed flowers appeared in the texts, they usually bore an association with a personal memory—a visit to a new place or a gift from a loved one. These floral expressions challenged botanical seeing by valorizing particular specimens and individualized expression and association over archetypal floral forms and a consistent system of categorizing flowers.

It may seem surprising for language-of-flower books, which are so resistant to promoting Linnaean botanical seeing, to include parts of Linnaeus’s botanical theories so openly. Yet these language-of-flower books presented his floral taxonomy as one aesthetic floral discourse among many in the pages of these works. Though Linnaean theory does not function as the basis for their system of floral aesthetics, it contributes to a larger aesthetic matrix that makes up the collective vision of the work, with which the reader could engage to demonstrate her floral taste. Language-of-flower books ultimately situated the floral not as a singular type of study but as a cultural node where meanings could easily link and unlink.

Collectively, flower-painting books and language-of-flower texts demonstrate how scientific and aesthetic ideas commingle as they pass through the cultural site of the printed flower. By demonstrating engagement with aspects of Linnaean theory both within and outside of his commonly studied sexual system, these two genres also ask us to reconsider the nature of Linnaean botanical influence in nineteenth-century popular culture. Seemingly counterpoints to each other, the genres of instructional drawing and language-of-flower books both situate Linnaeus’s system within their covers, charting a transformation over the decades in the popularization of flowers. Though they differ in their didactic methodology, the visual properties in both genres ultimately link Linnaeus to the aesthetic. For while the self-discipline asserted in drawing books seems to dissipate in language-of-flower books, the latter genre functions as a gateway to learn more about Linnaeus (as they could learn about any of the poets, poems, or flowers) if they were so inclined. Either through demanding strictures or subtle suggestion, both genres present Linnaeus’s theories as “graceful” and “poetical” systems well suited to visualizing, selecting, and categorizing the floral world.
PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

NOTES

1. Special thanks to the Library Company for the William Reese Company Fellowship that supported the research for this paper.

2. *Flora’s Interpreter; or, The American Book of Flowers and Sentiments* (Boston: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1832), v.

3. As Gunnar Eriksson points out, Linnaeus was aware that the fruit also contained reproductive organs, collectively forming, along with the flower, the fructification. But Linnaeus gives preference to the flower because they appear before the fruit in the reproductive cycle of the plant. See Eriksson, “Linnaeus the Botanist,” in *Linnaeus: The Man and His Work*, ed. Tore Frängsmyr (Canton, MA: Science History Publications, 1994), 78.


6. Like Beverly Seaton, I use the phrase “language-of-flower books” to designate a subset of popular nineteenth-century flower books that featured a range of floral-themed contents including folklore, poetry, botany, and illustrations, but focused on an alphabetical list of flowers and their cultural associations. Seaton refers to this larger category of nineteenth-century flower books as “sentimental flower books,” a term I avoid in this article because it does not fully account for how these texts gain their cultural resonance through their diversity of sentimental, botanical, and aesthetic associations. See Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 2–3. Despite Vera Norwood’s application of the term “sentimental flower books” to works like *Flora’s Dictionary*, she acknowledges that botany and horticulture also play key roles in these texts. See Norwood, *Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 16. For more about the history of the language of flowers as a broader cultural trend see Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232; Seaton, *Language of Flowers*, esp. chaps. 4 and 5.

7. In *Nature’s Second Kingdom*, Delaporte argues that plant sexuality was based on “permissible human behavior, respectable marriage” (143).

9. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison are a partial exception. Though they do not discuss the work in relation to popular floral culture directly, they focus on the ideas laid out in *Critica botanica* in relation to the larger eighteenth-century scientific milieu. See *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 59.

10. According to Linnaeus, these are among the “deceptive” characteristics of plants that are not “constant, certain, and organic” and therefore cannot be used to make legitimate distinctions between species. See Carolus Linnaeus, *Critica Botanica*, trans. Arthur Hort, rev. M. L. Green (London: Ray Society, 1938), 115, 121.


12. Ibid., 158, 161


The Visual Culture Program at the Library Company of Philadelphia endeavors to bring awareness of the library’s visual collections to scholars, both to enhance ongoing research and to inspire new projects. Our researchers’ ability to discover new ways to use the visual materials we hold is confirmation of the vitality of visual culture studies and the importance of visual culture programs in research institutions like the Library Company.

Visual materials have always played a key role in society, and examining the value placed on them by members of the society can add significant depth to one’s research. Anne Verplanck conducted extensive research at the Library Company in the collection of papers, ephemera, and photographs of mid-nineteenth century Philadelphia-based antiquarian John A. McAllister, for her upcoming book on Philadelphia as a center for artistic production. In the paper she presented at the SHEAR conference Verplanck described her findings about how antiquarians collected, shared, and even created visual materials that depicted their understanding of their city’s and nation’s history (Verplanck’s essay will appear as a separate publication). Examining what they
chose to preserve tells a story about the collectors. While these antiquarians were keen to identify the most accurate image of an individual or the best depiction of an early manifestation of a building, they nonetheless focused their energies on the powerful, and left the powerless to shrink into oblivion with the passage of time. In an 1854 letter to McAllister, New York–based antiquarian Benson Lossing explained that mid-nineteenth-century antiquarians should rely on “patriotism, good taste, and public sentiment” to guide them in the creation of an illustrated history of their time for future generations. Through an examination of resources like the McAllister Collection at the Library Company, we can more deeply engage the creation of that history, while questioning its fundamental tenets.

In the same way that we must look critically at the collectors of our history to determine to what extent they are the creators of our history, we must look at the institutions that are the stewards of that history to get a fuller perspective on it. In his essay, Aaron Wunsch advises us to “study the repository as you study your topic.” Wunsch used the 1835 Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Library Company of Philadelphia to investigate what printed works were available to those who were devising plans for the new rural cemetery at Laurel Hill. This approach had the potential to be particularly fruitful, as the primary devisor of the cemetery was the Library Company Librarian at the time, John Jay Smith.

As Wunsch discovered, the Library Company’s long and active history can tell stories about our city and our nation that are bigger than just the materials we hold. In particular, our catalogs, published at irregular intervals through our history, can shed light on what was available to people in Philadelphia at a particular time, and what was deemed important by our librarians and others who added to our collection. Much more difficult to determine is how the collection was used, but occasionally this too can be ascertained, and can lead to new insights. Wunsch’s examination of drawings in the collection, coupled with his knowledge of the institution’s history, and in particular Smith’s connection to both the Library Company and Laurel Hill Cemetery, led to a reevaluation of the creation of the cemetery. It also led to an examination of how library staff of the time used our collections to further their own goals—a not entirely comfortable revelation! Without the visual resources in the Library Company’s collection, it would have been impossible to reconstruct the creative process that formed Laurel Hill Cemetery.

Much can be learned by examining how visual materials were viewed, used, and perhaps abused by their contemporaries. We can also learn a great
deal by studying how and why they were created in the first place. The important influence of visual materials was appreciated long before developments in printing processes, such as lithography, made it easier to mass-produce illustrations for advertisements. Carl Linnaeus understood the capacity of visual stimuli to thwart the proper classification of species. Color was particularly dangerous. His approach stressed the importance of self-control while seeing botanically. Through an examination of two genres of works dealing with floral description (poetic language-of-flowers books, and floral-themed instructional art books), Alison Klaum studies how the self-control advocated by Linnaeus was exhibited in nineteenth-century floral art. A Series of Progressive Lessons, Intended to Elucidate the Art of Flower Painting in Water Colours taught flower painting in a way that emphasized the importance of self-control and the resistance of the temptations brought on by color. On the other hand, while language-of-flower books often linked themselves to Linnaeus by including a description of the botanist and his sexual classification system, they readily allowed for the seduction of color and other sensual stimuli, and were less than stringent in their regard for the accuracy of depictions of particular floral species. This disregard for botanical accuracy only increased as new printing techniques emerged that allowed for more heavily illustrated works. As Klaum describes, the volumes became so full of garlands and decorative motifs that they strayed farther and farther from accurate depictions of the particular flower being discussed. It is intriguing that Linnaeus held such sway that he was discussed and paid homage to in these books, while his actual approach to floral classification was almost entirely disregarded. Thus, an examination of these visual materials can inform our understanding of the intersection of science and art, and the priority of each, in one demographic sector of nineteenth-century America.

Through their use of the visual materials in the Library Company’s collection, Klaum, Wunsch, and Verplanck were able to approach traditional historical scholarship from a different angle, and deepen their understanding of the histories they studied. It is the goal of the Visual Culture Program at the Library Company to support such new and innovative uses of our collection, and to enable discoveries only possible through an examination of our visual history. These essays serve as a testament to this goal.