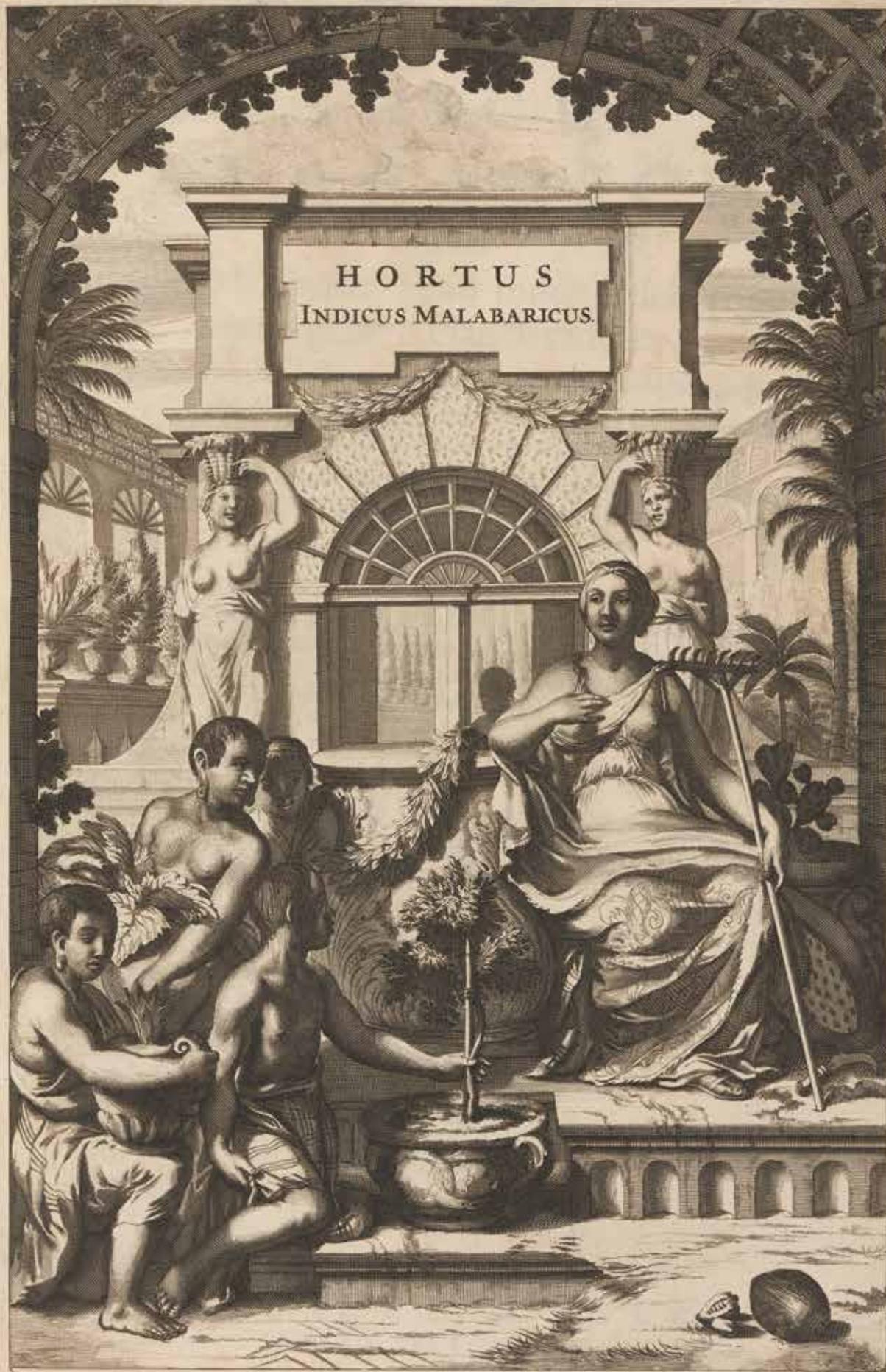


The Weight of a Petal: Ars Botanica

EDITED BY SITA REDDY

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AMSTELODAMI, Sumptibus { JOANNIS VAN SOMEREN
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JOANNIS VAN DYCK. Anno cDcLXXVIII.

Ars Botanica: Refiguring the Botanical Art Archive

SITA REDDY

Without the gift of flowers and the infinite diversity of their fruits, man and bird, if they had continued to exist at all, would be today unrecognizable.... The weight of a petal has changed the face of the world and made it ours.

—Loren Eiseley¹

Ars Botanica / a:rs bəutænɪkə / n. Latin-derived for:

1. the arts of botanical science
2. the science of botanical illustration
3. the craft or process of botanical art production
4. the documentation of all the above, a visual genealogy of botanical art traditions at the interface between art and science

BOTANICAL ART, A GENRE POISED BETWEEN THE WORLDS OF ART AND SCIENCE, HAS genealogical roots that run both ways—toward beauty as well as utility; toward medieval flower paintings meant solely for pleasure as well as illustrated herbals of antiquity meant to identify medicinal plants. For as long as there have been these beautiful “plant portraits” in the service of empire or science or trade, there have been efforts to collect them by *region*. From Mughal-era florilegia (illustrations of flora from a specific garden) to colonial Floras (botanical catalogues of specific regions), these collections gathered plant images on the page through exquisite engravings, watercolours, lithographs or pen-and-ink drawings. This issue of *Marg* brings together some of these dispersed images in order to refigure the archive: to reunify the art that came from particular botanical gardens; the illustrations that once sat together in bound volumes; the artists who painted these images.² As the world’s first globalizers, plants travel constantly and rarely sit still; indeed, the very word diaspora has botanical roots (dia/across + spora/scatter). *Portraits* of plants from a specific place may be one way to trace and historicize these processes of dispersal.

In the Indian context, botanical artworks form a small subgenre of what has been called Company School painting (or *Kampani kalam*). Kampani style is a broad term applied to a variety of hybrid, Indo-European 18th- and 19th-century painting traditions that developed in India by Indian artists under the patronage of the East India Companies.³ In one of its early definitions, Kampani style was thought to blend traditional elements from Rajput and Mughal miniature painting with a more European treatment of perspective, volume and recession, usually reflecting a change in medium from gouache and opaque layers of paint to watercolour or sepia wash on European paper.⁴ Most Kampani paintings were small and intimate, although natural history paintings of plants and flora were usually life-size.

In defining the Kampani *botanical* subgenre, one has to begin with the fact that most Company commissioners were surgeon-botanists; that art (Ars) served science (Botanica). A key feature, then, was a unique visual tension between the naturalistic depiction

1. Frontispiece of *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*, Vol. 1, 1678. Copperplate engraving. Courtesy Wellcome Collection. The illustration depicts a woman, presumably symbolizing Indian botany, seated in front of a conservatory, rake in hand and a pruning knife at her feet, being presented with plants.