

BOOKS

Flowering Trees and Shrubs: The Botanical Paintings of Esther Heins, by Judith Leet. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987. 148 pages. \$29.95.

JOHN BARSTOW

KATE GRIDLEY

Anyone who has bothered to look closely at plants will marvel at Esther Heins's extraordinary paintings, and anyone who bothers to look closely at this book will marvel all the more. Familiarity with *Flowering Trees and Shrubs*—a collection of sixty-nine watercolor studies painted over thirteen years—breeds even greater admiration for Heins's skill, her keen powers of observation, and her remarkable fidelity to Nature's every color, texture, pattern, form, and blemish.

Flowering Trees and Shrubs belongs to a rich tradition of botanical illustration, but Heins surpasses her predecessors and contemporaries because she scrupulously avoids stylizing her subject. The classic hand-colored "florals" of the last century tend to turn plants into clinical specimens: stems and leaves are unnaturally stiff and thick, as if preserved in solution. They served a scientific purpose, but they denied Nature's ephemeral aspect. Yet contemporary botanical illustrators and artists take their own liberties, accurately rendering every pistil, stamen, and petal, but bending a plant's character to their own aesthetic. The genius of Heins's work is that it takes all its cues from Nature and is still artful. The joining of such artistic ability

with a resolve to remain faithful to the subject is indeed rare; artists seldom decline the chance to interpret reality.

Flowering Trees and Shrubs is organized and written for the enthusiast, not the specialist. It follows the natural order of the seasons (a chapter for each month), not the taxonomic order. It is not a selection of the best or choicest plants for the temperate landscape, nor is it in any sense comprehensive. Its unifying thread is Esther Heins. For many the book will have this additional value: it is a guide to the flowering of the Arnold Arboretum, for nearly every twig and bough depicted came from cuttings in its collection.

A concise and lively essay by Judith Leet accompanies each full-page color plate. This is not an illustrated work in which artist and writer vie for center stage (Leet, a poet, is Heins's daughter), nor are the essays perfunctory, invented merely to fill space with type. Instead, Leet has unabashedly tailored her words to the plates, describing the significant botanical features of each plant not in abstract terms, but in reference to the work at hand.

To this commentary Leet also brings fascinating and informative horticultural history and lore—when and where exotics were discovered by Western botanists, how and why they were brought to North America. Now and again she offers advice on how to use the plants in the garden, or refers to other plates, making useful associations between plants. She was ably assisted by the Arnold Arboretum's assistant plant propagator Peter Del Tredici, who was text consultant for the book. The result is nearly as noteworthy as

the paintings themselves, for the text—unusual in books of the type—contributes to our appreciation of Heins's work.

An unexpected aid to understanding Heins's work is "A Word from the Artist," tucked at the end of the book. Here Heins describes much of the inspiration for her work; her training ("I studied anatomy, perspective, color harmony, design, oil painting, drawing from the cast, drawing from the model, sculpture, crafts. . ."); the materials she prefers; and her work habits ("I can work with pencil under artificial light, but I work with colors only in natural light, preferably morning light."). She forthrightly disclaims scientific training: "When someone said to me, 'You must know botany,' I replied, 'No, I measure, I count, I look.'" And she reveals the naturalist's reverence for her subject: "A tree has so many, many leaves yet no two of them are alike. To me that is a wondrous thing."

Equally wondrous is Heins's ability to depict the subtle differences between the big, dark-green leaves of the ubiquitous Norway maple, the barely discernible translucence of the shadblow's delicate foliage, or the gem-like quality of the porcelain berry's azure fruit. When Heins paints the showy red blossom of a tree peony she also makes us see the fineness of the plant's foliage, the tender woodiness of last year's growth, even the dusting of golden pollen on a scarlet petal.

Heins is uncannily sensitive to plant morphology, though her portraits are of small cuttings, usually several leaves and flowers or berries. You can see in these sprigs and shoots the habit of the entire plant. The first plate—of American pussy willow cuttings in three stages of catkin development—unmistakably says: vigorous, upright, twiggy shrub. The bough of the weeping cherry (*Prunus subhirtella* 'Pendula') falls across the page from upper left to lower right, and we can imagine

the supple grace of the tree. Likewise the arching line of the Japanese hazelnut bough (*Corylus sieboldiana*), which is caught with its leaves in tight bud and its yellow-green catkins drooping. Heins's method is simple: she lets the cuttings set their own lines. "I draw my pencil lightly against the branch to indicate the sweep of the branch, how it divides, where the stems attach. . . ."

Is it fair to compare any book of reproductions to the original paintings? Some would argue no. But we think it's important to be aware that when colors do not ring true the fault lies with modern printing, not with the artist's eye or the time-tested pigments of her palette. We fault the publisher for not exacting the highest standards of color printing. While the job is generally pleasing, certain of Heins's most painterly effects (as in her portrait of the smoke tree's faded bloom or the ginkgo's fall foliage) are unacceptably diminished; the color is anemic.

Responsibility for the book's one real flaw, its design, lies squarely with the publisher. Here, it appears, a New York designer was set loose to try and bend the images and words to his will or that of a budget. It is a shame to see more than a decade of effort tainted in the final moments, but like street noises filtering into a concert hall before the lights go down, this distraction is quickly forgotten; Heins's paintings hold sway.

"I painted the first plate for this book thirteen years ago," Heins says. "Each drawing takes me about a month to complete. Sometimes I do only one leaf in a day, but I am content. For as Ruskin said, 'He who paints one leaf paints the world.'" Heins has given us a vivid glimpse of her world and of the plant world in this book.

John Barstow is Articles Editor of *Horticulture* magazine. Kate Gridley is an artist.



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