

# FROM STITCH TO PAPER

Mary Granville Pendarves Delany was an exceptional woman whose life has filled three fat biographies, each riveting in different ways. This article is concerned mainly with her embroidery designs and the 'paper mosaicks', for which she is justly famous.

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Married at seventeen in 1718, against her will, to a man forty years her senior, Mary Granville Pendarves was released into merciful widowhood at twenty-four. Now single, with sufficient income at her command and a gift for sustaining close female friendships within the highest echelons of society, Mary Pendarves

now embarked upon a delightful life 'intensely engaged with the visual arts'. She embroidered, 'took up crayons' in 1734, developed a passion for shell work and landscape gardening, and a cultivated eye for good painting.

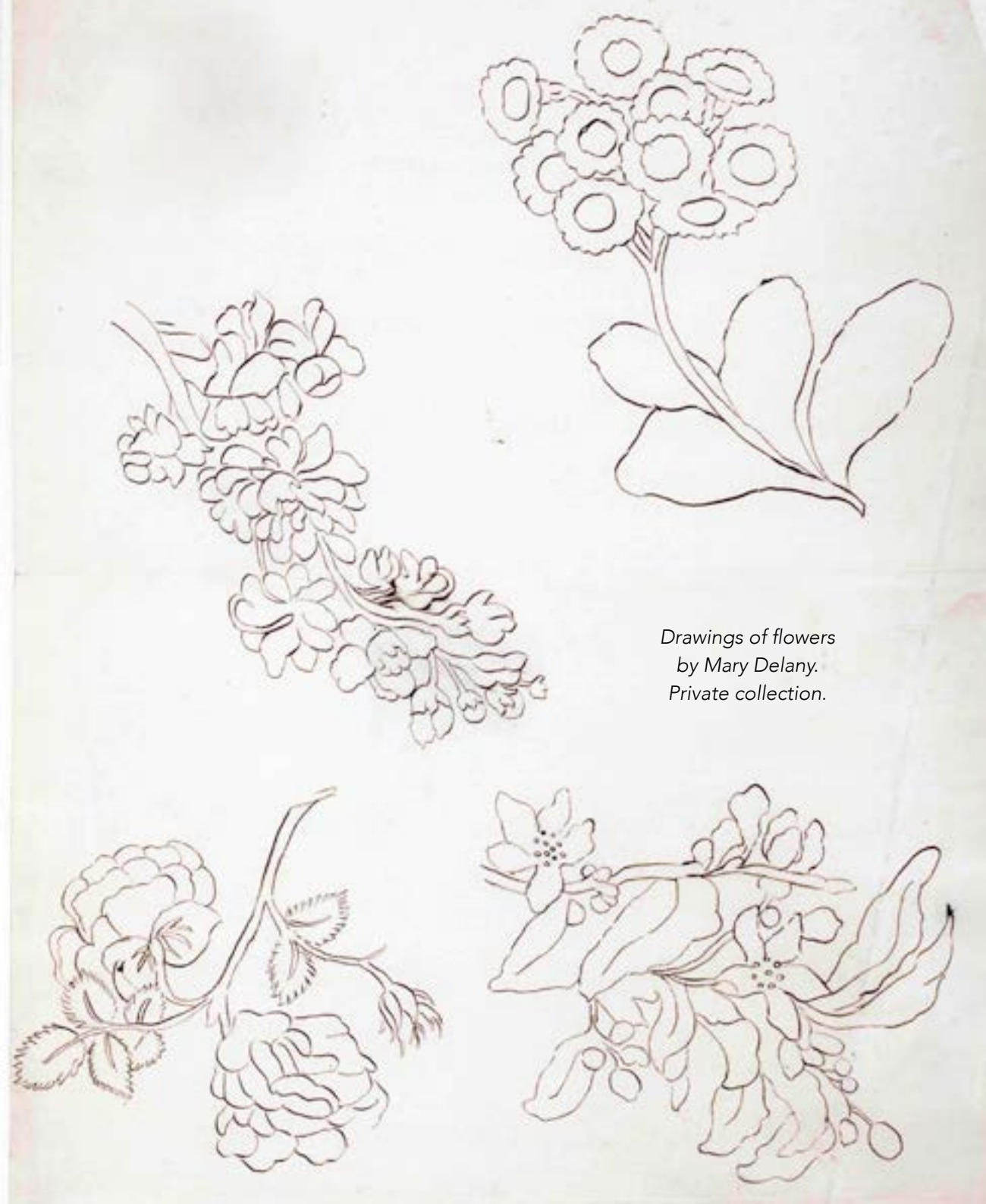
At the age of forty, having received an invitation to a ball given by the Prince and Princess of Wales, she designed, according to her great-niece, '... a petticoat of black satin...entirely covered with various flowers...from nature and executed in embroidery of hard twisted silk of dazzling colours, but exquisitely shaded.' (Lady Llanover in her *Specimens of Rare and Beautiful Needlework*, written in 1860). Elaborate embroidered decoration was highly fashionable, and the ladies of the court vied with each other 'in rare inventions and beautiful designs for their hooped petticoats'. On Mary's petticoat the flowers are naturalistic, as though they have been picked in the garden and scattered over the skirt. The ➤





and laying them on black satin.' It was common for single flowers or 'fancies' to be made like this, often raising them with padding, giving them a three-dimensional effect, but it is a technique requiring the skills of a professional embroiderer. While there is no doubt that Mary could embroider exquisitely, there is little evidence that she derived particular enjoyment from doing so, whereas many letters recount the pleasure she takes in sending off designs to be worked by others. In 1724 she wrote to her sister 'You desire some sprigs for working a gown, which I will send you, though my fancy is not a good one'. In describing her own embroidery projects, mostly for small pieces of soft-furnishing, there is none of the excitement and delight she later expressed when indulging in other handicrafts. Crayons were attractive to her because 'it tries my eyes less than [needle]work, and entertains me better'. Mary had a very full social life and many different interests; it is doubtful she ➤

garden historian Mark Laird, co-editor of *Mrs Delany & her Circle*, considers that her embroideries of flowers 'have the most accurate horticultural detailing... and are remarkable in capturing the essence of a species'. Many of the larger flowers have not been worked on the black satin of the petticoat. Lady Llanover explains, that 'Mrs Delany having a number of groups of flowers from nature already embroidered on another ground, appropriated them...by cutting them out



Drawings of flowers  
by Mary Delany.  
Private collection.

would have had the time to embroider such a vast array of flowers herself.

Over time Mary developed working relationships with well-known, accomplished professional embroiderers, who could interpret her drawings with beautiful raised, shaded work, without using tracing. Mary wrote to her sister 'The work I design sending you (sic) is some I have ready drawn, but it must not be traced – traced work is very ugly and quite out of fashion. You that have a knowledge of shading cannot be at a loss...' I take this to mean that the more skilled embroiderers worked in an organic, painterly way, shading the leaves and flowers with their threads as they worked, rather than tracing out a precise pattern.

Mary did get married again, in 1743, to an Irish Dean, Patrick Delany, and they lived and gardened in Ireland very happily together for some twenty-five years ➤➔

*Right: Detail of the left half of the front panel of a petticoat designed by Mary Pendarves c 1740-41. See also image top left page 14.*

*Embroidery in silk on black satin.*

*Below: Detail showing that some flowers were attached, rather than embroidered, on to the petticoat.*



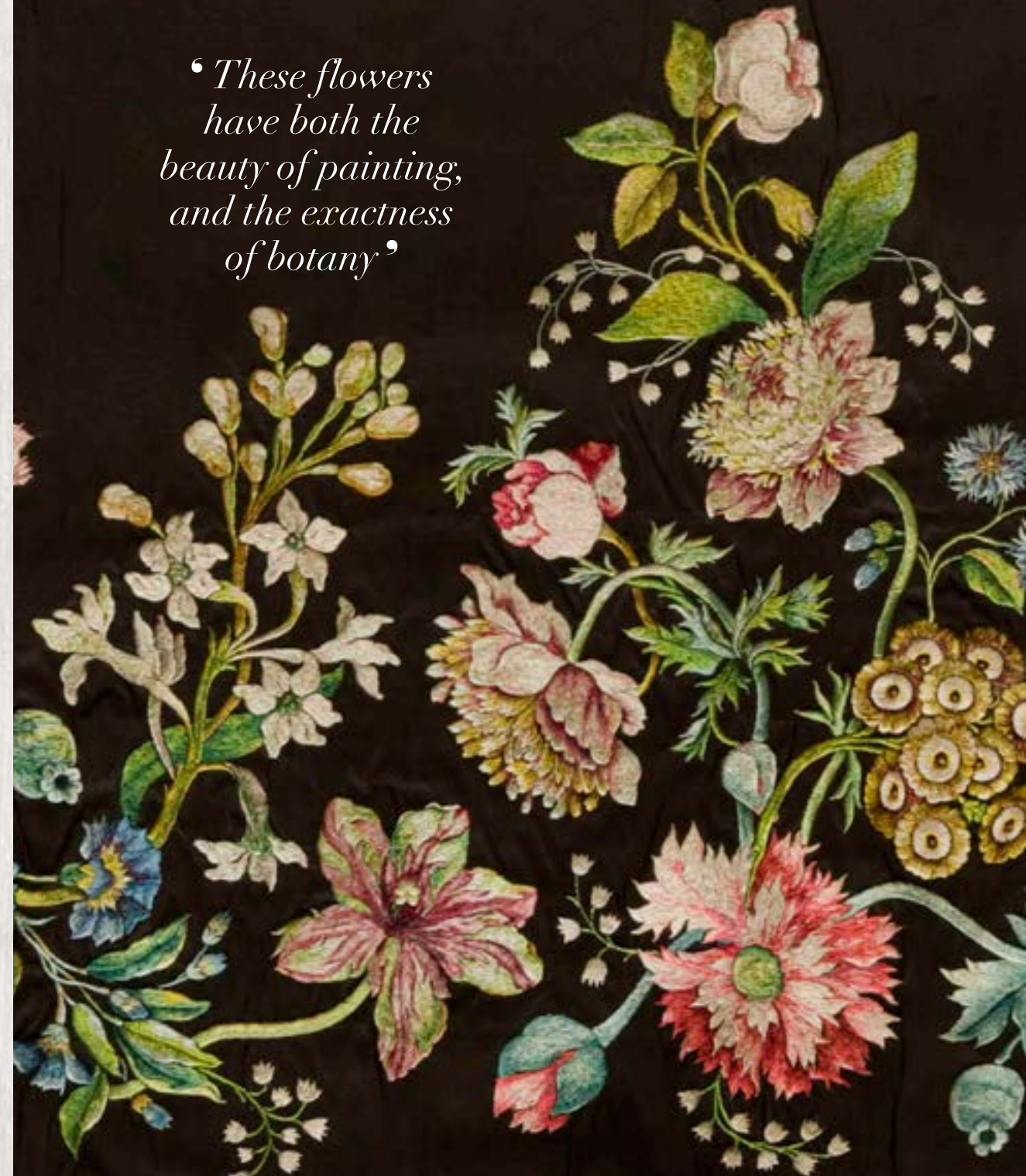
BOTH PRIVATE COLLECTION.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Detail of an apron designed by Mary Pendarves c 1740, showing the reverse (L) and right sides. Private collection. Embroidery in silk floss on black grosgrain. Compare the reverse here to that shown on the previous pages. The section shown is roughly 30 cm wide, so the flowers were life size.



*‘These flowers  
have both the  
beauty of painting,  
and the exactness  
of botany’*





Left: Detail of petticoat (see page 10) An object lesson in silk shading for leaves.

purposes of both botany and embroidery: 'the petals that are like threads, are at the calyx white, by degrees shaded with pale purple, ending with crimson'. It was at Bulstrode that Mary noticed a piece of bright scarlet paper on her table similar in colour to a particularly lovely geranium. Inspired, she cut the shapes of the petals out of the red paper, finding green for the leaves. Mary had always been gifted at cutting paper. There is a tantalising mention in a letter of a chain of paper-cut greyhounds made to amuse a young relative, and a letter to her sister Anne advising her to 'take more pains' in cutting paper.

Now, aged seventy-two and encouraged by the Duchess of Portland and ➡

until his death. He admired and encouraged all of her creative passions, observing proudly that her hands were always busy 'between the coolings of her tea'.

A few years into her second widowhood, Mary wrote 'I have invented a new way of imitating flowers'. Botany was all the rage and as the great friend and companion of the Duchess of Portland, herself a gifted collector and patron, Mary spent a good part of each year at the Duke's seat at Bulstrode, in Buckinghamshire, where she met some of the leading contemporary figures in the fields of botany and science and had access to the spectacular plant collection. Mary had an artist's eye for reading a plant - her descriptions of plants are instructive for the



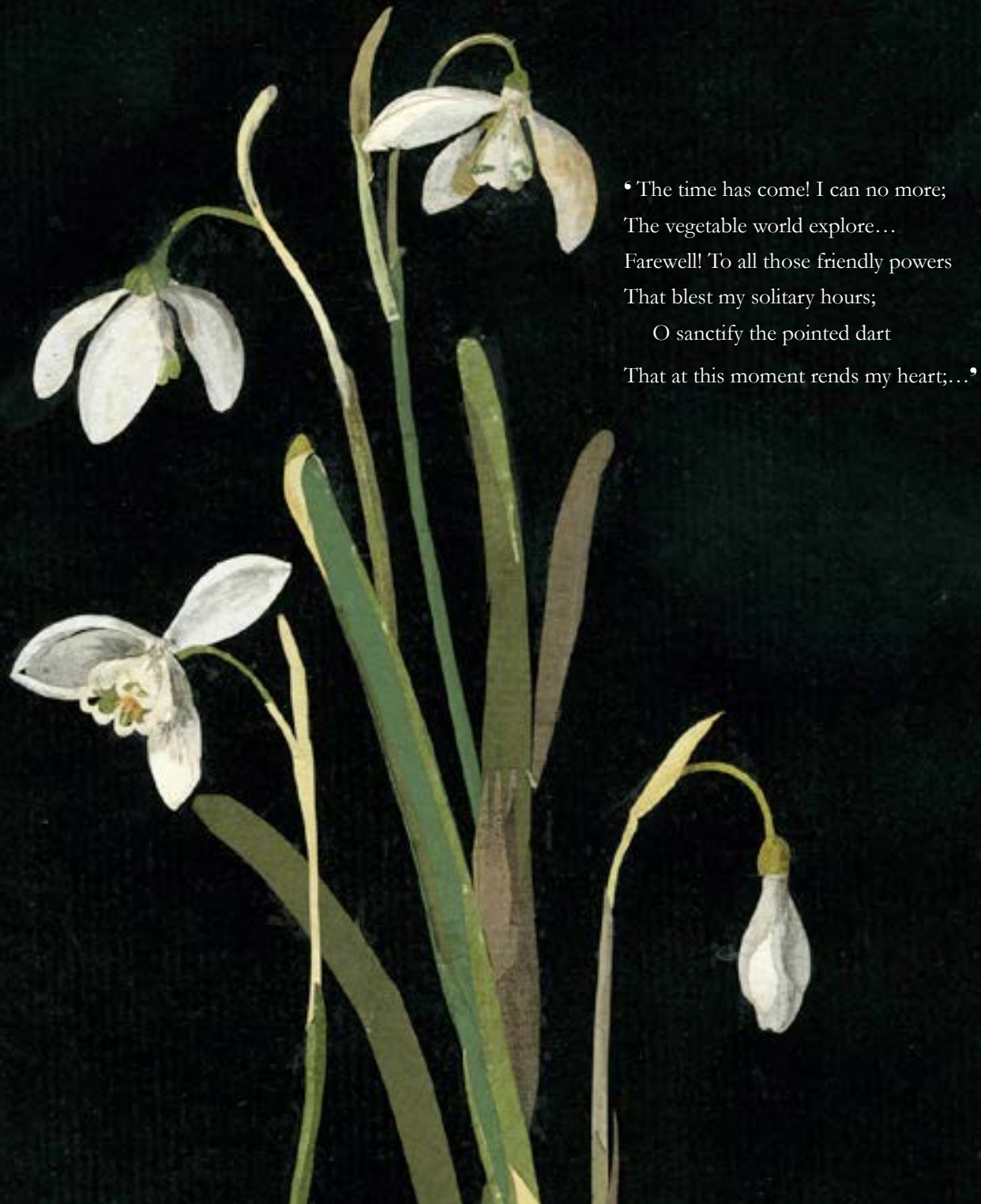
LEFT & RIGHT: © TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

*'I have invented a new way of imitating flowers'*



Left: Detail of Mary Delany Magnolia grandiflora, 1776.  
Right: Helleborus Niger. Both collages of coloured papers with gouache and watercolour.

*Helleborus niger  
christmas rose*



• The time has come! I can no more;  
The vegetable world explore...  
Farewell! To all those friendly powers  
That blest my solitary hours;  
O sanctify the pointed dart  
That at this moment rends my heart;...

others, she set out to create a thousand 'paper mosaicks' of flowers, her *Flora Delanica*:

## PLANTS

Copied after Nature in Paper Mosaic,  
begun in the year 1774

Hail to the happy hour! When fancy led  
My pensive mind the flow'ry path to tread;  
And gave me emulation to presume  
With timid art to trace fair Nature's bloom:...

She judged how to cut her life-size shapes by eye alone, and her tools were scissors, a sharp knife, bodkins and tweezers for manipulating the paper fragments on their flour paste foundation. An entire article could be written about the coloured papers she used, but many were painted by Mrs Delany herself, using watercolour or bodycolour (gouache). Sometimes, she added actual plant material to the collages. The inky black backgrounds made the shapes of the flowers more distinct and increased 'the contrast between the lights and shadows'.

Mary travelled regularly between the great houses of friends, always taking her materials and tools with her. I imagine her in the corner of a large morning room, busying herself with a collage, while conversation hums around her. At the height of her powers, she could produce thirty collages in as many days. The plant collectors of the day, including

Queen Charlotte, whom she saw regularly, would send her precious specimens to copy.

The Queen must have seen Mary working on her collages because she gave her an embroidered pocket case revealing an understanding of the tools she used: 'the outside white satin work'd with gold...line'd with pink satin, and contains a knife, sizzars, pence, rule, compass, bodkin...all gold and mother of pearl...'.

Mary produced her 'plant mosaicks' until 1782, when her failing eyesight (she probably had cataracts) forced her to stop - just short of her target of a thousand. She assembled her *Flora Delanica*, heading the first volume with a poignant verse (see opposite).

Having to relinquish her creative pursuits must have been a 'pointed dart' indeed, but with typical good humour, Mary counted her blessings in the form of precious friendships and remained 'full of life and ingenuity' for a further six years, dying just short of her eighty-ninth birthday. ✚

### **Bibliography**

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