



‘The powerful GRACE’

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The relationship between man and plants is as old as time. In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* we first encounter Friar Lawrence, ‘osier cage’ in hand, gathering ‘baleful weeds and precious-juicèd flowers’, soliloquising prophetically that

*‘O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.
For naught so vile that on the Earth doth live
But to the Earth some special good doth give;’*

When the Friar speaks of ‘plants, herbs, stones’, he is describing what is known collectively as *materia medica* – the natural substances used in medicine (there are also some animal components).

The earliest recorded compendium ➡➡

RIGHT From the Herbarium of Pietro Antonio Michiel *Libro Azzurro* n. 6
Vite nera (*Clematis viticella* L.)

ABOVE *Cyanus minor* (*Centaurea cyanus* L.)
One of fifteen Fragments hand-embroidered by Cristina Rebecani, inspired by illustrations in *A Curious Herbal* by Elizabeth Blackwell.

LEFT Cristina setting up her vitrine in the Monumentale of the Marciana Library in Venice.





of these was compiled in ancient Greek in the first century AD by one Dioscorides, a native of Anazarba in Asia Minor.

Revised, translated, annotated, reprinted over centuries in different languages and countries, it exists in many versions. Scholars revising or studying different copies would make notes in the margins, perhaps sketching the plants as described or adding their own suggestions for alternative identifications or remedies.

Some seventy miles across the Veneto from 'fair Verona' lies Venice, where botanical embroidery artist Cristina Rebeccani's exquisite work has spent the last month, sharing the rarified air of one of the Monumental Rooms of Jacopo Sansovino's High Renaissance Marciana Library with some of that city's most precious botanical books and documents, including four versions of the *materia* ➡

LEFT FROM TOP

The exterior view of the elegant windows of the Monumental Rooms of the Marciana Library, seen from the outside.

The interior, where the exhibition was held.

A tiny section of Jacopo de'Barberi's woodcut map of Venice in 1500. The original is in the British Museum – at the Museo Correr you can see the original woodblocks and a print.

Explore the map here

www.cartography.veniceprojectcenter.org/



ABOVE & LEFT A small manual for daily practical use, probably compiled by a physician using a revised version of Dioscorides' text. The analysis of the plants and minerals prescribed for therapeutic purposes is completed by formulae for medicines and tables of the weights and measures used in the pharmaceutical practice. In the margins, pen drawings, rudimentary, yet useful for the identification of the plants.



Another Venetian nobleman, erudite, curious and, most importantly, wealthy was Lorenzo Patarol (1674-1727). Patarol's herbarium reveals not only a particular interest in botanical classification, but an aesthetic sensibility in the elegant arrangements of his dried specimens, as can be seen above and opposite. A charming postscript to a letter suggests that he was constantly on the scrounge for "...any seeds of a curious or rare plant". Patarol's garden still exists, part of the Venetian 'green', something *The Wigwam Club for the Historic Gardens of Venice* is dedicated to protecting and sharing. Members include Italian and foreign garden professionals and enthusiasts, including Cristina.

medica. Curated by Sabrina Minuzzi, the exhibition *Gardens and medicinal virtues: health and beauty between past and present*, explored the extent to which we might, even now, derive some benefit from looking again at some of the most ancient records of this mutual dependency between man and plant.

Gardens and green spaces may not be the first thing you associate with modern-day Venice. Yet Jacopo de'Barberi's woodcut map of La Serenissima in 1500 shows that, tucked behind the high walls of the narrow Venetian streets, were gardens – some tiny, some grand, and many belonging to keen botanists who created herbaria for the plants they collected and studied.

One of the most beautiful, richly stocked gardens in sixteenth-century Venice was that of a wealthy nobleman, Pietro Antonio Michiel (1510-1576). Though his garden no longer exists, the herbarium he assembled throughout his life remains, recording the characteristics and medicinal properties of over a thousand plants, and was on display at the exhibition in fat, leather-bound books resting on supports under glass 'vitrines'. ➡

LEFT & RIGHT The herbarium of Lorenzo Patarol was photographed by Francesca Sacconi – Wigwam Club Giardini Storici Venezia (see left).





BELOW Pietro Antonio Michiel
Painted from a Mexican herbarium sheet,
again obtained through contacts with the
Americas, this fruit tree is impossible to
identify botanically, but is nonetheless
charming for its fantastical style.



Dismissive of second-hand sources, including the many commentaries on Dioscorides' *De materia medica* which started to appear as printing techniques improved, Michiel preferred to make direct observations, describing his methods to a contemporary thus:

"With diligence and perseverance, I found the courage to cultivate the plants, feed them and care for them from beginning to end. Once I had identified all their qualities and characteristics, I presented them to the painter, and he, with his brush, and I, with my pen, extracted everything of value from them."

It was certainly the safest approach at a time when 'kill or cure' depended on the correct identification of plants and how their component parts might be compounded for medicines. Competition between medical professionals was intense, for as Friar Lawrence knew

*'Within the infant rind of this small flower
Poison hath residence and medicine power;'*

Herbals became more reliable as illustrating and printing techniques advanced. Initially, printed herbals were produced with woodblocks, such as Leonhardt Fuchs's *De Historia Stirpium* of 1542. By the eighteenth century, intaglio printing techniques, such as copperplate engraving, started to replace woodblock printing. One of the finest is Elizabeth Blackwell's *A Curious Herbal*, the full ➡

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THIS PAGE & TOP LEFT
Pietro Antonio Michiel (*Solanum Lycopersicum* L.) or wild tomato.
Through diplomatic contacts, Michiel obtained plants from the Americas, such as the wild tomato on this page and the *Capiscum annuum* L., (chilli pepper – opposite, top) both of which he painted from life, having established them in his Venetian garden. At the time, the wild tomato was considered toxic.

BELOW Cristina arranging Fragments in an old carpenter's drawer with compartments perfectly sized to fit the tiny ovals nestling on beds of the dried stems of maidenhair vine from Cristina's garden. **RIGHT** *Daucus carota* L. Wild carrot. Inspired by an illustration found in *Weeds of Grassland, Bulletin No. 41. Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. H.C. Long. London, 1938.*





Chamaemelum



Millefolium

‘Attempting to suggest the look of an old herbarium, Cristina chooses subtle colours, as though the thread has been faded by light over time.’

RIGHT Fragments. A collection of fifteen tiny ovals, each measuring five centimetres by four centimetres and featuring a hand-embroidered fragment of a selection of plants illustrated in Elizabeth Blackwell's *A Curious Herbal*. Cristina's handwritten labels bear the names given in *A Curious Herbal*, published in 1737, sixteen years before Linnaeus's *Species Plantarum* was published, after which the official names (shown below in brackets) were commonly used.

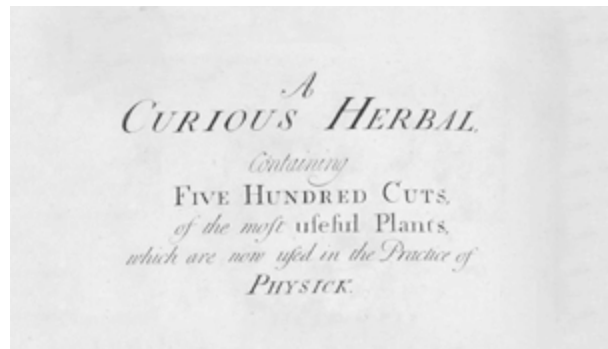
From top row, working left to right on each row:
 -Dracunculus hortensis (Artemisia dracunculus L.)
 -Acetosa (Rumex acetosella L.)
 -Angelica (Angelica archangelica L.)
 -Thymus (Thymus vulgaris L.)
 -Mentha (Mentha spicata L.)
 -Lavendula (Lavandula angustifolia Mill.)
 -Chamaemelum (Chamaemelum nobile L.)
 -Melissophyllum (Melissa officinalis L.)
 -Hyssopus (Hyssopus officinalis L.)
 -Cyanus minor (Centaurea cyanus L.)
 -Millefolium (Achillea millefolium L.)
 -Bursa pastoris (Capsella bursa pastoris L.)
 -Rosmarinus (Rosmarinus officinalis L., synonym of Salvia Rosmarinus Spenn.)

TOP LEFT

-Chamaemelum (Chamaemelum nobile L.)

LEFT Millefolium (Achillea millefolium L.)





title is best shown on the original frontispiece (above).

It was from this herbal that Cristina Rebeccani took inspiration for *Fragments*, fifteen ovals of herbs and flowers, hand-embroidered on antique linen especially for the exhibition *Gardens and Medicinal Virtues*. Cristina has long been fascinated by botany and her own library of antique and vintage herbals and herbarium sheets is considerable. She is as curious as the early Venetian plant collectors and botanists described above about the origins and uses of the plants she embroiders and as concerned to draw attention to the small details with her needle and thread as any botanical illustrator would be. ➡➡

OPPOSITE & LEFT *Malva sylvestris*.
After *The New Herbal* of 1543
by Leonhart Fuchs.

ABOVE LEFT From *Fragments*,
Angelica (*Angelica archangelica* L.)



‘...for the humblest weed is
a treasure-house of interest if
looked at with a seeing eye...’

VERE TEMPLE, *HOW TO DRAW WILD FLOWERS*, 1942

...piece features a particular remarkable work. A Curious Herbal by a young Scottish woman, Elizabeth of the herbal brought together New Worlds, showcasing over 500 by Elizabeth's own hand. A Curious Linnaeus' two-part species names as sum, the first book to officialise 1753.



Linnaea borealis L., Oval Medallion (Walking Herbarium Collection, piece no. 1)
Anemone nemorosa L., Oval Medallion (Walking Herbarium Collection, piece no. 2)
 Inspired by Herbarium, Emily Dickinson Embroidered on antique linen. Crocheted metallic chain.



The exhibition **Gardens and Medicinal Virtues: Health and Beauty between Past and Present** was organised in cooperation between the Humanities Department at Cà Foscari University in Venice and the Marciana National Library. It was curated by Sabrina Minuzzi (Cà Foscari) following the conclusion of her project

"MAT-MED in Transit. The Transforming Knowledge of Healing Plants" (Marie Slodowska-Curie Fellowship (Global) G.A. 844886). Other artists whose work was exhibited were Siân Bowen and Mia von Schülern. You can download the catalogue at bibliotecanazionalemarciana.cultura.gov.it/mostre/giardini-e-virtu-medicinali-salute-e-bellezza-tra-passato-e-presente. Once again, I am incredibly grateful to Sabrina Minuzzi and Cristina Rebeccani for allowing me access to their work and materials in order to include this article in these pages.

For Cristina, being creative is simply paying attention. Yet in attempting to suggest the look of an old herbarium, she stains the linen and chooses subtle colours, as though the thread has been faded by light over time. Her gathering of embroideries in the vitrine were completely at home alongside the infinitely precious and important herbaria and documents and drew at least as much attention from visitors. ❖

Cristina Rebeccani
 @embroiderytherapy

An earlier article which appeared in *The Stitcher's Journal* about Cristina's work may be read at www.carolinezoob.co.uk.

“Venice, its temples and palaces did seem like fabrics of enchantment piled to heaven”

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

