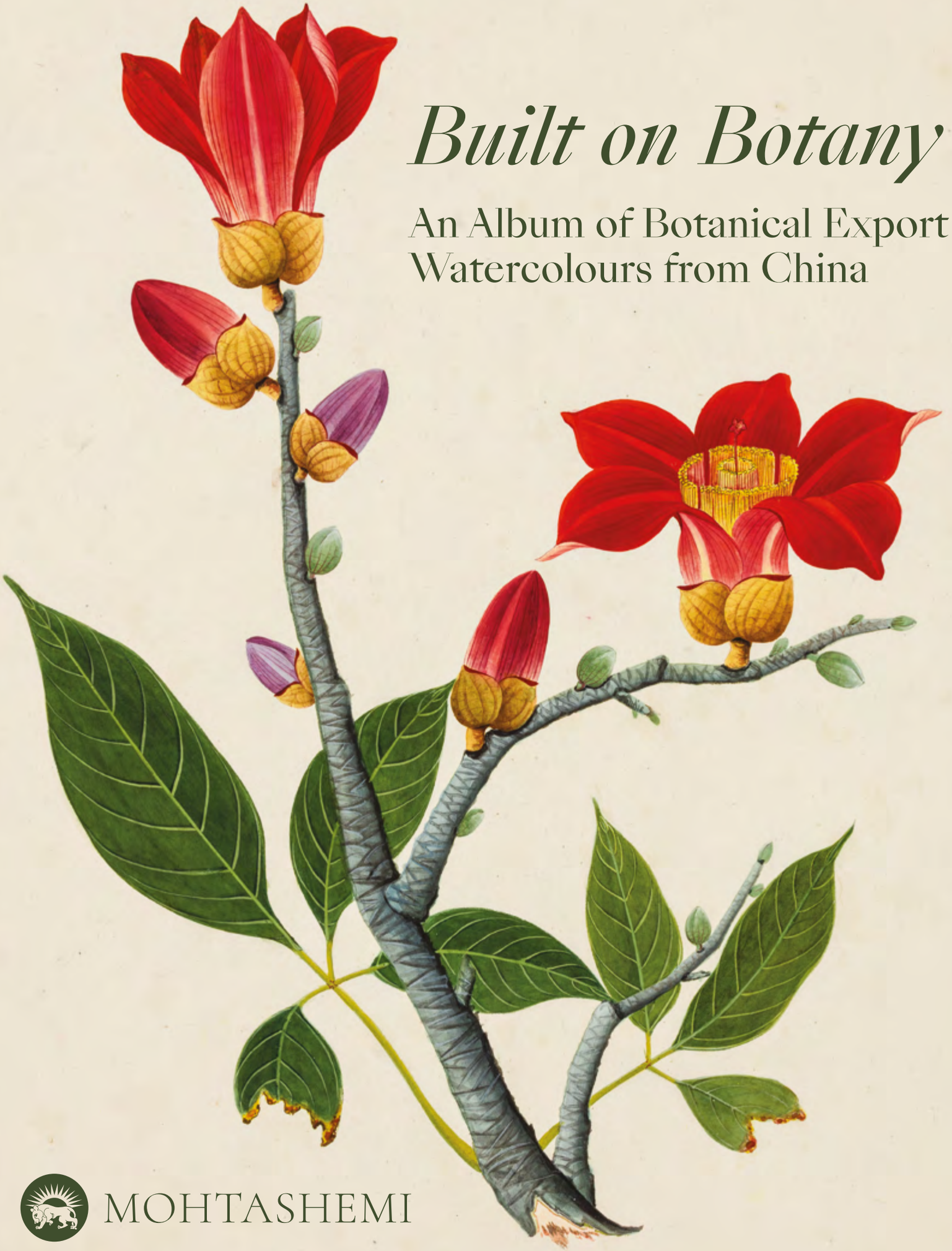
Built on Botany

An Album of Botanical Export Watercolours from China



MOHTASHEMI

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The Album

A COLLECTION OF 87 BOTANICAL AND ENTOMOLOGICAL STUDIES
Canton (Guangzhou), China, c. 1810–1830
Watercolour and gouache on European paper
Each 30.5 cm x 39.5 cm,
mounted on pages approx. 41 cm x 53.5 cm

Provenance
Winifred Bois (1875–1966).
Probably sold by Bois to WT Spencer, London, between 1930 and 1966.
Purchased by Henry Roger Broughton, 2nd Baron Fairhaven (1900–1973); thence by descent until 2022.

The 87 artworks presented in this catalogue come from a large album of Chinese export watercolours, bound into nine volumes under the title *Dessins originaux chinois* ('Original Chinese drawings'). Three volumes were dedicated to professions and customs, one to punishments, and one to sailing boats. The remaining four volumes, dedicated to natural history and botanical studies, are the source of the watercolours in this catalogue.

The album's earliest known owner was Winifred Bois (1875–1966), a collector of Chinese art who grew up in a mercantile family in Sri Lanka. She likely acquired the album in the 1930s, corresponding with the date on her bookplate (reproduced on the inside cover). The second known owner of the album was Henry Roger Broughton, 2nd Baron Fairhaven (1900–1973). Combining his twin passions for gardening and collecting, Baron Fairhaven built an extensive natural history library at his home in Windsor. Much of this collection was gifted to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, upon the Baron's death in 1973. The remainder, including this album, stayed in the family until 2022. Though it is unclear how Baron Fairhaven acquired the album, it is likely that he purchased it from the London bookdealer WT Spencer, to whom Bois had regularly sold Chinese watercolours.

At some point after 2022, the watercolours were cut out of their albums and dispersed. We are proud to have reunited all but one of the flower studies from the original album, and many of the natural history studies.

The paintings that feature insects and plants were originally bound in the natural history volumes. In this catalogue, however, they have been included among the botanical studies. We have further subdivided the album into four categories according to their use: ornamental, industrial, culinary, and medicinal. Though there is overlap between these categories, they have been classified by their primary economic function.

European plant collectors would commission local artists, usually in Canton, to produce the illustrations. The artists were provided with the finest European paper and pigments, as well as some examples of Western scientific illustrations.[1] The resulting paintings exhibit a hybrid of Western scientific and traditional Chinese techniques. The practice of colouring the undersides of leaves with a paler shade of green — as visible in the two coconut magnolia studies (cats. 23 and 24) — derives from Chinese bird-and-flower painting. The blemishes seen on fruits like the jujube (cat. 49) or gingko (cat. 59) would probably have been avoided by Western botanical artists.[2] Similarly, the use of blue washes to make white petals stand out from the paper, as in the case of the narcissus (cats. 26 and 27), also derives from Song dynasty techniques.[3]

It was common practice for individuals to commission multiple sets from the same workshop. It seems likely that this was intended either as insurance for the perilous voyage back to Britain or to allow sets to be divided between different scientific institutions. In this case, at least three sets were created. Several of the studies appear in pairs — pink tree peony (cats. 3 and 4, and 5 and 6), Cherokee rose (cats. 8 and 9), oleander (cats. 20 and 21), narcissus (cats. 26 and 27), cotton plant (cats. 35 and 36), canna lily (cats. 55 and 56), tiger lily (cats. 62 and 63), yangmei (cats. 50 and 51), and ixora (cats. 68 and 69) — suggesting the amalgamation of two different sets. The other sets are dispersed across collections and museums. Royal Horticultural Society Lindley has a large collection from the same workshop in an album named *Plantae Japonicae Icones* (see cats. 3, 22, 66, 73, 77). Others are part of the famous Reeves collection of the Natural History Museum (see cat. 22), and an album of twelve watercolours in the Worcester Art Museum (see cats 77 and 82). The largest set from the same workshop belongs to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, donated by a Mrs A MacDonald in 1886 (see cats. 16, 31, 55, 62, 66, 70, 73, 83, 85).

These comparative examples help to date our album. The set in the Worcester Art Museum was gifted to a Sarah Russell of Boston in 1829, meaning the watercolours must have been completed in the 1820s or earlier. The watercolour of an orange daylily in the Victoria and Albert Museum (accession no. D.318-1886) is dated 1812 in pencil, providing another approximate date for the group.

Botany & Empire

From tea and tobacco to cotton and coffee, the wealth of the British Empire was built on botany. By the early nineteenth century, when this album was created, plant collecting was already a vast colonial enterprise. Between 1770 and 1820, Joseph Banks, the first director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, recruited some 126 collectors outside Europe to send him any plant that was either 'useful, curious, or beautiful'.[4] Many of his plant collectors were East India Company merchants, such as the tea inspector John Reeves and the Company surgeon John Livingstone.[5] To this day, a majority of the 100,000 specimens in Kew's botany collection date back to this time.[6]

Once the plants arrived in England, they could be categorised, studied, and hybridised so that they could be successfully grown in Britain or transplanted to other areas of the Empire, where they could be grown on plantations and sold back to their native lands at a premium. There was particular concern about China's monopoly over crops like cotton and tea, with Banks writing:

> Why should we not then, if proper means are taken, discover … the plants which produce the articles they want, and by means of the Garden … undersell the Chinese at their own market, and diminish at least, if not annihilate, the immense debit of silver which we are annually obliged to furnish from Europe?[7]

Home to a greater range of plants than the continental United States and Europe combined, China proved a fertile resource for both the acquisition of plants and local knowledge.[8] Few plants, however, survived the journey from China to Britain. The changeable climate and limited fresh water aboard the ships proved fatal to most live specimens, while seeds often rotted on the journey. In the 1770s, John Livingstone estimated that only one in a thousand plants survived the journey from China.[9] Only after 1829, with the invention of the Wardian case, could live plants be reliably transported to Britain. In the likely event that all specimens perished on the journey, scientific illustrations, such as those presented in this catalogue, proved a valuable substitute.

Ornamental Flowers

Historically, flowers have played an important role in the culture of China. In ancient China, the cultivation of ornamental flowers was a hobby of scholars, who developed exclusive 'friendships' with their favourite plants.[10] Peonies, roses, and camellias were a favourite muse of Tang dynasty poets, who attributed human characteristics to the flowers based on their habits and habitats.[11] The narcissus, for example, grows in clean water and therefore became associated with purity, while the hibiscus was associated with fleeting beauty: once cut, it does not last long.[12]

Chinese plants were adopted remarkably quickly into English gardens, in part due to the similarity between the climates of China's temperate uplands and England.[13] Chinese roses, for example, are so widespread because they were among the first live plants imported from China that survived a British winter outside a greenhouse.[14] By 1764, a seed shop selling exotic species from China had been set up in Fenchurch Street, London.[15] By 1813, the head gardener at Kew, William Townsend Aiton, recorded a total of 120 species that had been introduced from China.[16]

The peony and the rose are the best represented plants in the album, reflecting their status as some of the most beloved flowers in both China and England. The *Paeonia x suffruticosa* (cats. 2–7) or *mu dan* was sometimes known as *hua wang* (prince of flowers) in China.[17] It was one of Joseph Banks's most wanted plants, which he counted 'among our greatest desiderata'.[18] By 1800, the peony had become so familiar in Britain that the wallpaper in Queen Victoria's bedroom in the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, featured the flower.[19] Similarly, though there are fourteen roses native to Britain, it was the introduction of new perennial species from China that prompted the first rose gardens, now a staple of the English country house.[20]

There are three studies of the oleander (*Nerium oleander)* in this album. Its Chinese name, *jia zhu ta*, means narrow bamboo peach, referring to its bamboo-like nodular stem, elongated leaves, and fragrant flowers.[21] Its Latin name, *oleander*, refers to the olive tree, with which it shares thin, leathery leaves with a thick cuticle.[22] It is easy to cultivate and resistant to drought and flooding, making it an attractive option to grow in Britain. Today, the oleander can be found on roadsides in most cities in China due to its ability to absorb pollutants.[23]

Many of the plants in this section had practical as well as aesthetic uses in China, but were treated primarily as ornamentals when they arrived in Britain. The Arabian jasmine (cat. 34) has been used to flavour jasmine tea since at least the fifth century CE.[24] However, it was first introduced to Britain as an ornamental flower called 'sambac' in the eighteenth century. Similarly, all parts of the pink lotus (cat. 29) are edible. The flowers and leaves are used to produce tea, and the starchy rhizomes are often served pickled or milled into flour.[25] Yet when Joseph Banks introduced them to Britain in the eighteenth century, he classed them as ornamental water lilies.[26]

cat. 1

Herbaceous peony (*Paeonia lactiflora*)

cat. 2

Pink tree peony (*Paeonia x suffruticosa*)

Courtesy of the Royal Horticultural Society, Lindley Library
(*Coloured Drawings of plants by Chinese Artists, vol. 3*,
A/ChiB/V3/57).

cat. 3

Pink tree peony (*Paeonia x suffruticosa*)

cat. 4

Pink tree peony (*Paeonia x suffruticosa*)

cat. 5

Pink tree peony (*Paeonia x suffruticosa*)

cat. 6

Pink tree peony (*Paeonia x suffruticosa*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.106-1890).

cat. 7

Yellow tree peony (*Paeonia x suffruticosa*)

cat. 8

Cherokee rose (*Rosa laevigata*)

cat. 9

Cherokee rose (*Rosa laevigata*)

cat. 10

Peach-leaved rose (*Rosa chinensis var. longifolia*)

cat. 11

Pink rose (*Rosa sp.*)

cat. 12

Red rose (*Rosa sp.*) with insects

cat. 13

Pink rose (*Rosa sp.*) with insects

cat. 14

Rambling rose (*Rosa multiflora var. cathayensis*)

cat. 15

Confederate rose (*Hibiscus mutabilis*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.990-1886).

cat. 16

White hibiscus (*Hibiscus syriacus*)

cat. 17

Double flowering Chinese hibiscus (*Hibiscus x rosa-sinensis*)

cat. 18

Chinese hibiscus (*Hibiscus x rosa-sinensis*) with insects

cat. 19

Camellia (*Camellia japonica*)

cat. 20

Oleander (*Nerium oleander*)

cat. 21

Oleander (*Nerium oleander*)

Courtesy of the Natural History Museum, London (John Reeves Collection of Botanical Drawings from Canton, China, plate 704).

Courtesy of the Royal Horticultural Society, Lindley Library (*Plantae Japonicae Icones*, A/PJI/28).

cat. 22

Oleander (*Nerium oleander*)

cat. 23

Coconut magnolia (*Magnolia coco*)

cat. 24

Coconut magnolia (*Magnolia coco*)

cat. 25

Hong Kong rose (*Rhodoleia championii*) with butterflies

cat. 26

Narcissus (*Narcissus tazetta*)

cat. 27

Narcissus (*Narcissus tazetta*)

cat. 28

Hardy begonia (*Begonia grandis*)

cat. 29

Pink lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*)

cat. 30

Passionflower (*Passiflora sp.*)

cat. 31

Passionflower (*Passiflora sp.*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.1018-1886).

cat. 32

Golden spider lily (*Lycoris aurea*)

cat. 33

Blue flax lily (*Dianella ensifolia*)

cat. 34

Arabian jasmine (*Jasminum sambac*)

Industry

Several of the plants depicted in the album relate to the manufacture of textiles, eighteenth-century Britain's second-largest economic interest after grain.[27] Cotton (cats. 35 and 36) was a practical material that was more comfortable to wear than wool, which had been the primary material for clothing until the seventeenth century.[28] Though it is not a native species, cotton has been grown in China since at least 200 BCE.[29] It was China's most important agricultural crop, after grain, making up over a fifth of China's cash crop by 1850.[30] Similarly, the red silk-cotton tree or *Bombax ceiba* (cats. 37 and 38) was of interest for its seed floss, known as *kapok*. It can be spun into a cotton-like fibre, but it is chiefly used as insulation or an alternative to down in mattresses. The cape jasmine or *Gardenia jasminoides* (cat. 39) had been used in traditional Chinese medicine under the name *zhi-zhi* for its febrifuge properties, and its attractive white flowers and pleasant jasmine-like fragrance has made it a popular ornamental.[31] Yet the primary interest of the British was in its application as a yellow-scarlet dye in the textile industry.[32] During his time in Amoy, southeast China, the Scottish surgeon James Cunninghame wrote a lengthy treatise on the use of *G. jasminoides* as a dye.[33] The botanist John Ellis noted in 1770 that the seeds give a 'very lively yellow colour, which is much wanted among the dyers'.[34] Correspondence from Ellis documents the transfer of *G. jasminoides* seeds from China to Britain.[35]

Another hugely important cash crop was tobacco (cat. 43). Native to the Americas, it first arrived in East Asia with Portuguese merchants in the sixteenth century.[36] It was consumed through smoking, snuff, and water pipe. Shortly after this, Chinese farmers began to cultivate tobacco. By the 1750s, it had become one of the most important commercial crops in China.[37]

Black ebony (cat. 40) is a widespread tree, primarily cultivated for timber, though as a close relative of the persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*), its fruits are edible. The fibrous bark was used to make twine, while the dense, smooth wood was used in construction and cabinetry.[38] The chinaberry tree (cat. 41), also known as cape or Persian lilac, was similarly prized for its timber. A member of the mahogany family, its wood is an attractive deep red. The mu oil tree (cat. 42) was also cultivated for use in carpentry, its seeds producing an oil which is prized as a wood varnish.[39] The discovery of new timber sources was of particular interest to a maritime empire like Britain. By the 1770s, there was such a severe shortage of English-grown wood that Parliament passed a bill restricting the use of native oak to the Royal Navy, forcing the East India Company to look abroad.[40]

cat. 35

Cotton plant (*Gossypium*)

cat. 36

Cotton plant (*Gossypium*)

cat. 37

Red silk-cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*)

cat. 38

Red silk-cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*)

cat. 39

Cape jasmine (*Gardenia jasminoides*)

cat. 40

Black ebony (*Diospyros ferrea*)

cat. 41

Chinaberry tree (*Melia azedarach*)

cat. 42

Mu oil tree (*Vernicia montana*)

cat. 43

Tobacco plant (*Nicotiana tabacum*) with insects

Culinary

Europeans have been enjoying spices from Asia since ancient times, with the Romans importing black pepper from southern India.[41] In the sixteenth century, spices such as ginger, cinnamon, and turmeric (cat. 55) were brought to Europe by Venetian and Portuguese merchants, with the former taking the traditional overland route and the latter the newly discovered maritime route via the Cape of Good Hope.[42] By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the European demand for spice was higher than the Portuguese could meet, so the Dutch and English entered the spice trade.[43] Early modern recipes show that turmeric was known in England from at least the mid-seventeenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, the growing popularity of curries and pickles drove imports of turmeric to triple between 1820 and 1840.[44]

Several of the species in this section are native to the Americas, having arrived in Southeast Asia with Spanish and Portuguese merchants. The canna lily (cats. 56, 57, 58), sometimes known as 'Indian shot' due to its hard, bullet-like seeds, is native to South America. Though it is now a popular ornamental flower, it was primarily grown for its edible starchy rhizomes until the mid-nineteenth century.[45] The guava (cat. 49) is native to Central America, while the pineapple (cat. 44) is native to the West Indies. Pineapples became such a symbol of luxury in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain that they could be hired for display at parties.[46] Pineapple finials on many Victorian and Georgian buildings, including towers on the western side of St Paul's Cathedral, are a relic of this fervour.

cat. 44

Pineapple (*Ananas comosus*)

cat. 45

Peach blossom (*Prunus persica*)

cat. 46

Chinese white pear blossom (*Pyrus bretschneideri*)

cat. 47

Nashi pear (*Pyrus pyrifolia*)

cat. 48

Pear (*Pyrus* sp.)

cat. 49

Guava (*Psidium guajava*)

cat. 50

Jujube or Chinese date (*Ziziphus jujuba*)

cat. 51

Yangmei fruit (*Myrica rubra*)

cat. 52

Yangmei fruit (*Myrica rubra*)

cat. 53

Chinese chestnut (*Sterculia monosperma*)

cat. 54

Morning glory (*Ipomoea turbinata*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.1009-1886).

cat. 55

Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) with insects

cat. 56

Canna lily or Indian shot (*Canna indica*)

cat. 57

Canna lily or Indian shot (*Canna indica*)

cat. 58

Canna lily or Indian shot (*Canna indica*)

Medicine

The hunt for new medicines derived from plants, or 'bioprospecting', was perhaps the most valuable service botanists could provide.[47] Botanically derived substances comprised the vast majority of drugs in nineteenth-century Britain.[48] As the Empire expanded, British soldiers were increasingly at risk of contracting unfamiliar diseases.[49] For some time, the official policy of the East India Company was to seek only local cures for tropical diseases.[50] Given that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) employs at least 5,000 different plant-derived treatments, it is unsurprising that a majority of the plants in this album have medicinal applications.[51]

Cholera decimated the British population both at home and in the Empire. Between 1818 and 1854, over 8,500 British soldiers stationed in India died from cholera.[52] In addition to its attractive flowers, the Japanese flowering quince (cats. 86 and 87) was valued for its use in the treatment of cholera in TCM, whilst the fruits of the black nightshade (cat. 76) were used to soothe the gastrointestinal symptoms of cholera.

Malaria was the second biggest killer in British India, after cholera. Repeated military campaigns were halted by the disease, with some British platoons losing half their men to malaria in the 1820s.[53] The common wormwood (cat. 72) was used as an insecticide in TCM, while all parts of the peacock flower (cat. 75) and the seed of plants in the *Datura* genus (cats. 78 and 79) were used in the treatment of malaria.

Tuberculosis also devastated the British economy: by 1815 it was the cause of a quarter of deaths in England, largely among young working-class people.[54] The tiger lily (cats. 63 and 64), the Asiatic lily (cat. 65), the Bletilla orchid (cat. 67) and the ixora (cats. 68 and 69) were all treatments for tuberculosis in TCM. More general treatments for infectious diseases include the noon flower (cat. 80) and crinum lily (cat. 70) which were used as febrifuges.

Castor oil, produced from the seeds of *Ricinus communis* (cat. 85), has been used medicinally since ancient times.[55] In TCM, the oil was used as an anthelmintic or antiparasitic, while the leaves were used to treat ulcers and wounds.[56] Records show that castor oil was employed by the East India Company in the early nineteenth century, when a labourer in their London warehouse was prescribed a course of leeches and castor oil for inflammation of the lungs.[57]

Many of the featured plants are still used medicinally, not only in TCM but also in Western medicine and cosmetics. *Aloe vera* (cat. 61) is popular in moisturisers and after-sun lotions due to its cooling and hydrating properties. The same humectant properties that made the musk mallow (cat. 73) a popular treatment for sore throats in TCM have been utilised as a hydrating agent in moisturisers.

cat. 59

Gingko tree (*Ginkgo biloba*)

cat. 60

Sow thistle (*Sonchus* sp.) with butterfly

cat. 61

Aloe (*Aloe vera*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.318-1886).

cat. 62

Orange daylily (*Hemerocallis fulva*)

cat. 63

Tiger lily (*Lilium lancifolium*)

cat. 64

Tiger lily (*Lilium lancifolium*)

cat. 65

Asiatic lily (*Lilium* sp.)

cat. 66

Orchid (*Cymbidium tigrinum*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.975-1886).

Courtesy of the Royal Horticultural Society, Lindley Library
(*Plantae Japonicae Icones*, A/PJI/17).

cat. 67

Orchid (*Bletilla striata*)

cat. 68

Ixora (*Ixora chinensis*)

cat. 69

Ixora (*Ixora chinensis*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.954-1886).

cat. 70

Crinum lily (*Crinum asiaticum*)

cat. 71

Rose periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*)

cat. 72

Common wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.1010-1886).

Courtesy of the Royal Horticultural Society, Lindley Library
(*Plantae Japonicae Icones*, A/PJI/65).

cat. 73

Musk mallow or musk okra (*Abelmoschus moschatus*)

cat. 74

Passionflower (*Passiflora caerula)*

cat. 75

Peacock flower (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*)

cat. 76

Black nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*)

Courtesy of the Royal Horticultural Society, Lindley Library
(*Plantae Japonicae Icones*, A/PJI/20).

cat. 77

Solanum (*Solanum* sp.)

Courtesy of the Worcester Art Museum
(accession no. 2010.35.6).

cat. 78

Devil's Trumpet (*Datura* sp.)

cat. 79

Thornapple (*Datura innoxia*) with a lanthorn fly (*Pyrops candelarius*)

cat. 80

Noon flower (*Pentapetes phoenicea*) with insects

cat. 81

Indian coral flower (*Erythrina variegata*)

cat. 82

Water apple (*Syzygium aqueum*) with butterflies

Courtesy of the Worcester Art Museum
(accession no. 2010.35.7).

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.974-1886).

cat. 83

Climbing ylang-ylang (*Arbotrys hexapetalus*)

cat. 84

Mussaenda (*Mussaenda* sp.)

Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum
(accession no. D.1034-1886).

cat. 85

Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*)

cat. 86

Japanese flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*)

cat. 87

Japanese flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*)

Notes

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