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Bartram the Artist: A Field Guide

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Books under Review

David Attenborough, Susan Owens, Martin

Clayton, Rea Alexandratos, *Amazing Rare Thing* (Yale University Press, 2007).

David Elliott and E. Nelson, eds., *The Curious Mister Catesby* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

Joseph Ewan, *William Bartram: Botanical and Zoological Drawings, 1756-1788* (American Philosophical Society, 1968).

Thomas Hallock and Nancy Hoffmann, eds., *William Bartram, The Search for Nature's Design* (University of Georgia Press, 2010).

Nancy Keeler, *Gardens in Perpetual Bloom* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 2010).

Judith Magee, *The Art and Science of William Bartram* (Pennsylvania State University 2007).

Sue Ann Prince, ed., *Stuffing Birds, Pressing Plants, Shaping Knowledge* (American Philosophical Society, 2003).

Tony Rice, *Voyages of Discovery* (Firefly Books, 2008).

Sarah Simblet, *Botany for the Artist* (DK 2010).

Andrea Wulf, *Founding Gardeners* (Knopf, 2011).

Consider it the first Florida postcard: A thick palm and its fringy fronds anchor

the left margin. Next to the palm a curious shorebird is poised between odd plants, watching intently over its shoulder. At the center of the image branching rivers wind through the open area, and strutting birds occupy the dry places. With them several deer and a single horse graze in the open, swampy meadow. Palms and pines and wide oaks dot the sparse landscape around the savanna. In the far right corner, serpentine birds fly toward the margin into the next world.

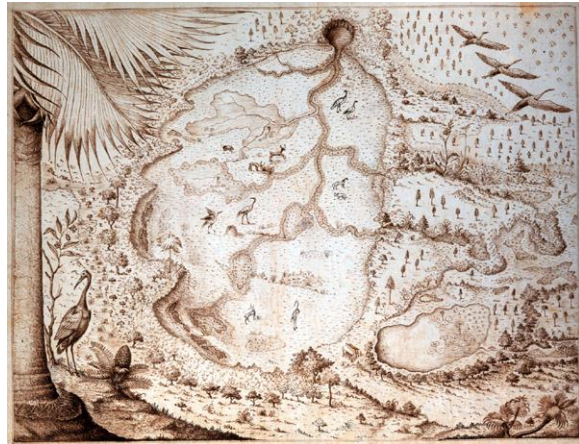


Figure 1: "The Great Alachua Savanna."
Courtesy, American Philosophical Society.

This idealized montage by William Bartram of the Alachua Savanna, known and preserved today as Paynes Prairie, illustrates his work, *Travels*

through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws. Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of Those Regions; Together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians. This lengthy and ambitious book recounts Bartram's journey to the southeastern colonies from 1774-1777. His expedition, one of many founded and funded by eager gardeners in Europe, pushed the frontiers of natural philosophy by surveying far-away landscapes. While Bartram is just one of many 18th century travelling naturalists, he stands out as a unique figure whose work—both artistic and literary—catalogued the southeastern landscape of the British colonies before the American Revolution.

William Bartram grew up happily exploring the outdoors. In 1728, his father John Bartram purchased land that he would later develop into Bartram's Garden. John collected and propagated many native plants, setting up a successful seed catalog business, capitalizing on the demand for new, exotic plants in Europe. His were not formal gardens, stylized with topiaries and hedgerows shaped into mazes, but

rather incubators for cultivating native species, collecting their seeds, and experimenting with microclimate conditions that would allow them to flourish. Growing North American plants became quite the fashion in England (where gardening remains a blood sport to this day), and John's business flourished as a result. Meanwhile, John gave young William the run of his gardens to observe and sketch the native plants his father had collected. In the process, William honed his artistic talent by drawing constantly.

However ordinary his Philadelphia childhood, William enjoyed some unusual advantages that led to rich experiences and eventually to a life-changing opportunity. His family was well-connected to important figures in the colonies, as well as men of means in the field of natural philosophy. While he was still young, his father had shared many of William's sketches with Peter Collinson, a merchant and botanist who had helped him set up his seed catalog business through his own European contacts. Collinson was active in the lively seed and plant trade between England and the colonies, and

he and John Bartram exchanged many letters along with merchandise. In this way, John sent a number of William's sketches to Collinson. Collinson praised the drawings, and widely shared them among the community of natural scientists in England. This connection to the European world of gardeners would later prove instrumental in William's adult life. In addition to the relationship with Peter Collinson, the Bartrams also enjoyed exchanges with men who would later become major figures in the colonies. An extensive record of correspondence through the years still exists, with both John and William exchanging letters with such notable figures as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and St. John de Crèvecoeur—all of whom were instrumental figures in the active field of 18th century natural history.

As a young man, William attempted to find a trade or a livelihood in North Carolina and briefly in Florida. Despite financial backing from his father, William couldn't seem to succeed. After struggling for a few years, William finally got an opportunity that may have sounded tenuous to his more settled father. But to a young, dreamy,

well-traveled William, it was the chance of a lifetime.

William's knowledge of the American landscape, his detailed botanical illustrations of the plants he found there, his family's powerful connections, all drew the attention of Dr. John Fothergill, an English physician with a love for botany. Fothergill had been friends with Peter Collinson, who had shared William's drawings with him. Fothergill's admiration of William's artistic work and his own desire for knowledge of the American landscape led him to offer support to William for another expedition in the southeast. Having received the patronage of Dr. Fothergill, Bartram went well-supplied with money and sketchbooks on his second journey south.

William documented his wanderings through the southeast in diaries and drawings. During a long, rambling excursion, he explored and documented an area that, though inhabited by natives for hundreds of years and colonized by Spaniards since the early 1500s, had not been closely recorded. Bartram would later revise the journals into a single work recounting his

adventures among alligators, cranes, cold springs, and Miccosukee Indians. When *Travels* was finally published in 1791, the book included very little in the way of artwork to supplement the author's florid descriptions of the landscape. However, some of his most striking illustrations published elsewhere stem from that time in Florida—a sassy sandhill crane, delicate savanna-pinks visited by a golden moth, a pair of smoke-breathing alligators, and the postcard-scene of the Alachua Savanna.



Figure 2. Florida Sandhill Crane. Courtesy, Natural History Museum (London).

Bartram seemed to have a gift for capturing birds and plants on the page. Many of his scenes include birds in their element, whether perched in a tree or

wading along the shore. His knack for depth and the weight of his lines bring the scenes to life. By following his instincts, Bartram furthered the ecological style of drawing, placing companion plants and animals together as they might be found in the wild and capturing moments of action.

Travels sold better in England than it did in the US and caught the attention of natural philosophers and Romantic poets alike. Bartram's rapturous descriptions of exotic flora and fauna was reputed to have influenced William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who like many Europeans were fascinated by accounts of the North American continent, its inhabitants and landscape, down to its very seeds. *Travels* reads as a montage of Linnaean plant names, rich descriptions of southern skies and swamps, strange and fanciful encounters with wildlife, and meditations on the meaning of Creation.

Over 200 Bartram drawings survive, scattered among such institutions as the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and the Natural History

Museum in London. The whereabouts of some are unknown, perhaps stored within private collections. Bartram's *Travels* provides great insight into several artistic and philosophical fields: the role of illustration in the development of natural history; the formation of American identity; the tradition of travel-writing; and the shift from Neoclassicism's refined symmetry to the Romantics' embrace of nature untamed and unfettered. These philosophical and aesthetic accomplishments have not gone unnoticed. A number of important books investigate Bartram's unique contribution to the field of botanical illustration.

Those who want a conventional view of Bartram should peruse Judith Magee's *The Art and Science of William Bartram* (2007). It reads like an illustrated coffee table book with an extended biographical entry, laying out the details of Bartram's life. Magee borrows heavily from Bartram biographer Thomas Slaughter, author of *The Natures of John and William Bartram* (1996). Magee clearly uses her position as special collections manager at the Natural History Museum in London to

her advantage, publishing the Bartram's illustrations held by the Natural History Museum in full color.

These collected illustrations, sometimes enlarged for the chapter frontispieces, make reading this book an astonishing experience. The sixty-eight Bartram drawings, all of which were sent with reports to his patron Dr. John Fothergill are all still housed in the Museum's collection. Bartram's other drawings are scattered—some still lost—and collecting so many of them in one place allows readers to gauge influences on his work and note variations in his style.

The only previous work to accomplish this feat was Joseph Ewan's *William Bartram: Botanical and Zoological Drawings, 1756-1788* (1968), but this book can be difficult to procure. Both Magee and Ewan showcase the Fothergill folio from the Natural History Museum, but Magee includes illustrations by others, such as Mark Catesby (whose work predated and influenced Bartram) and Alexander Wilson (known for establishing American ornithology), to exhibit the evolution of natural art and Bartram's

place in it. Bartram and his contemporaries had to tread a fine line. Grounded in the Enlightenment and funded by European direction, they were shaping American natural history. But inevitably they broke new ground and explored and painted the new world on their own terms. The images of American wildlife produced by Catesby and Bartram reinforce the oncoming departure from neo-classical art, from Enlightenment perspective, from order and symmetry and closed systems.

Bartram's drawings sometimes imbue animals with facial expressions, betraying his enchantment with his subjects. From a strutting sandhill crane to an especially perplexed fish, Bartram's animals seem to take on human characteristics, and this liveliness is a striking contrast to Bartram's more technical natural history language. But this visual anthropomorphism wasn't unique to Bartram. *The Curious Mister Catesby* (2015) examines the world of Mark Catesby, an influential artist whose drawings of southeastern species shaped a new style of illustration given to lively interpretations of animal and

plant behavior. Catesby remains a vague figure, but his ambitious volume of wildlife in the Carolinas, Florida, and the Bahamas became a standard for the reports of natural history expeditions. Editors E. Charles Nelson and David J. Elliott offer twenty-six essays that study Catesby's art and methods. Although relatively little is known of Catesby's life, his work speaks for itself. The collection of essays in *The Curious Mr. Catesby* encompasses a broad view of Catesby, his work and its influence on later artists such as Bartram. Because of the variance in style, approach, and authorial background, some essays better establish their points than others. The range of supplementary images spans not only Catesby's engravings, but also portraits of his peers and predecessors, studies of places like Charleston Harbor or a plantation in Virginia, pressings of collected plants, and photographs of species that Catesby had sketched.

The particulars of habits or habitat are less engaging than the illustrations themselves. Catesby spent seventeen years producing his *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*

carefully hand-engraving thousands of plates for its volumes. The drawings reveal his enchantment with these otherworldly species. A green snake drapes around a beautyberry branch; a kingfisher peers coyly as he brandishes a half-swallowed fish; a flying squirrel squats on a branch with its fruit.



Figure 3. Mark Catesby, Blueish Green Snake [*Opheodrys aestivus*] and *Frutex baccifer*, *verticillatus* [*Callicarpa americana*]. Courtesy University of North Carolina Libraries.

Catesby and some of his contemporaries experimented with a style known now as “ecological,” arranging species that live amongst each other into a scene on the page. Some artists simply pair a bird with a specific tree or a butterfly with its host plant, while others fill the frame with more complex compositions displaying a plant and its various shoots, seeds, and blooms. Catesby’s charming drawings contributed to a rift among 18th century naturalists, scientists,

botanists, and others over the purpose (and therefore form) of illustrations.

Looking backward, forward, and outward, Tony Rice’s, *Voyages of Discovery* (2008) takes readers through ten major expeditions that influenced the fields of the sciences (including botany, ecology, and oceanography), and focuses on the illustrations from these sojourns. The book is billed as “A Visual Celebration of Ten of the Greatest Natural History Expeditions,” and covers a variety of expeditions: localized and focused (Jamaica, Ceylon, Surinam); ambitious (Amazon River, Polynesia, Australia); famous (Sir Hans Sloane, William Bartram, James Cook, Charles Darwin); and the less familiar (Maria Sibylla Merian, Alfred Russel Wallace). The text introducing each expedition is perfunctory, offering just enough biographical information, historical context, and amusing anecdotes. Annotations to the drawings tell more of the story as well, with many that include artist’s notes about the species and its habitat.

This book offers a comprehensive look at scientific art across two centuries. Relying chiefly on images, Rice tells the

story of global exploration visually. The early chapters depict how these extraordinary voyages and their artists contributed to and shaped scientific knowledge. The final voyage presents a new means of illustration-- photography, illustrating a shift in scientific exploration that coincides with shifts in technology.

Rice organizes the chapters to show how explorers report their findings, as well as how they illustrate current practices in art and representation. The illustrations from Sir Hans Sloane's trip to Jamaica were meant to capture the living plants he saw there and supplement the dry specimens that were sent home. Sloane, a life-long collector, is perhaps better known for bequeathing his vast collection of dried plants, books, and coins to King George II, a bequest that became the genesis of the British Museum. Found in one of these collections were the striking watercolor illustrations by Maria Sibylla Merian, who observed the miniature world of insects in her travels to Surinam. One picture of spiders capturing and devouring unfortunate bugs (and oddly a hummingbird) plays up the fascinating symmetry of spider

and web through visual rhymes, with the legs and the web radiating out from their respective centers. Merian also depicted squat frogs, astounding snakes, and magnificent lizards. It's tough to find a straight line in her drawings; everything seems to leap, crawl, fly, strike, or bumble off the page. Her style would be influential on William Bartram, whose work is featured in a subsequent chapter. While overall thin on prose, this book is a fascinating visual study of how nature illustration nudged the frontiers of science wide open.

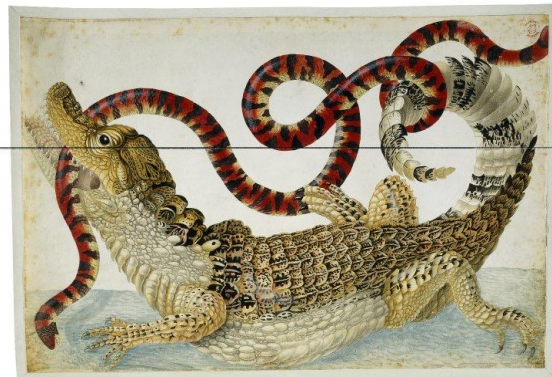


Figure 4. Merian, Crocodile wrestling with a red and black snake. (Wikipedia Commons).

Other menageries await in the library or bookstore. World-renowned naturalist David Attenborough headlines the editor list of *Amazing Rare Things* (2007). This book introduces the works of five artists, including Merian and Catesby, whose

illustrations belong to the Royal Collection, held at Windsor Castle, Buckingham Castle, and the Palace of Holyroodhouse. Parts of the book read like one of Attenborough's documentaries, with his intermittent notes from the field embedded among the drawings and companion essays.

For a more academic approach, *Stuffing Birds, Pressing Plants, Shaping Knowledge* (2003) features four major presentations from the proceedings of the American Philosophical Society in 2003. The authors examine some of the more technical procedures: preserving plants for shipment and study, drawing methods and tactics that preserve specimens on paper, and resulting changes in the field.

Selected correspondence makes up the first half of *William Bartram and the Search for Nature's Design* (2010), edited by Thomas Hallock and Nancy Hoffman. With the letters from Jefferson and Crèvecoeur, as well as Bartram's benefactors and supporters, Peter Collinson and Dr. John Fothergill, readers can gain a more complete perspective of Bartram's development as artist and botanist. The second half

of the book looks at other artifacts of Bartram's, such as his commonplace book—kept at the behest of Jefferson, recording notes about the climate and sketches of common plants—and an anti-slavery tract. The range of drawings throughout also demonstrates the emergence of Bartram's skills, and his eventual range as both a scientific illustrator and an artist with a whimsical touch.

For an intriguing angle on the role that gardening and natural history played in shaping early American identity, *Founding Gardeners* (2011) lays out a compelling narrative. Author Andrea Wulf focuses here on the importance of gardening and agriculture in the early years of the Republic. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Adams take center stage throughout the book, but there is a chapter that recounts their visit to Bartram's Garden, and its impact thereafter is clear. For all of these men—Bartram included—their relationship with the landscape was vital in shaping American identity. As a living repository of American plant life, Bartram's Garden was a sanctuary of several kinds—not only a haven for North American plant life, but also a

place for contemplation and respite. The artwork collected in *Gardens in Perpetual Bloom* (2010) bridges the gap between European and American depictions and follows the aesthetic development of botanical illustration. It's the companion book for an exhibit from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and provides a lovely stroll through a garden within a museum.

Finally, for those who want to take pencil to paper, a good starting point among the many books about illustration is *Botany for the Artist* (2010) by Sarah Simblet. Her book is grounded in a discussion of the tradition of botanical drawing, and throughout its chapters emphasizes the need for accuracy as well as techniques for capturing beauty—and how each feeds the other.

Venturing out across the globe, dozens of artists shaped the field of natural history with their captivating illustrations, and to visit the expansive catalog of their drawings is to wander respectively through a *jardin zoologique*, to the insect-ridden microcosms that spangle a rainforest's understory, out along the cusp of earth

at a shoreline, and finally into a wide grassland with large birds breaking the calm expanse of sky. Their works proliferated as they recorded unimagined realms and encountered inexplicable species, feeding the hunger in Europe for knowledge of the exotic. Drawing knowledge out of the subject at hand takes deep contemplation, a pencil or brush, and the time to really know the subject in its setting. Imagine such an explorer, equipped not merely with machetes and shotguns, but pencils and brushes, hunched over a sketchbook, perfectly still except for the scratch of the pencil, capturing the shifting world of fishes and flowers, bugs and birds.