



Smithsonian

Botanical Illustration



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A detailed botanical illustration of strawberries and flowers. The top half shows green leaves and white flowers with yellow centers. The bottom half shows several ripe red strawberries with green stems and leaves. A large, semi-transparent red watermark reading 'Review Only' is overlaid diagonally across the page.

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Bringing Nature to Life

Have you ever drawn a plant that you saw in real life? Did you make sure that you included every leaf, stem, and flower that you saw? Was your work **accurate** down to the smallest detail? Then a job as a botanical illustrator might be a good fit for you. These artists have a big job to do. They draw pictures of plants with lots of details. The plants almost come to life on the pages.

Botany is the field of science that studies plants. It is a huge field of study. There are a lot of plants in the world! An illustrator is someone whose job is to draw. Botanical illustrators draw plants for their jobs.

These drawings are used in different ways. Some people use them to teach about plants around the world. Others put them on display in museum **exhibits**.



A woman observes botanical art in a museum.

A woman draws flowers in a garden.



Botanical illustrations are very detailed.

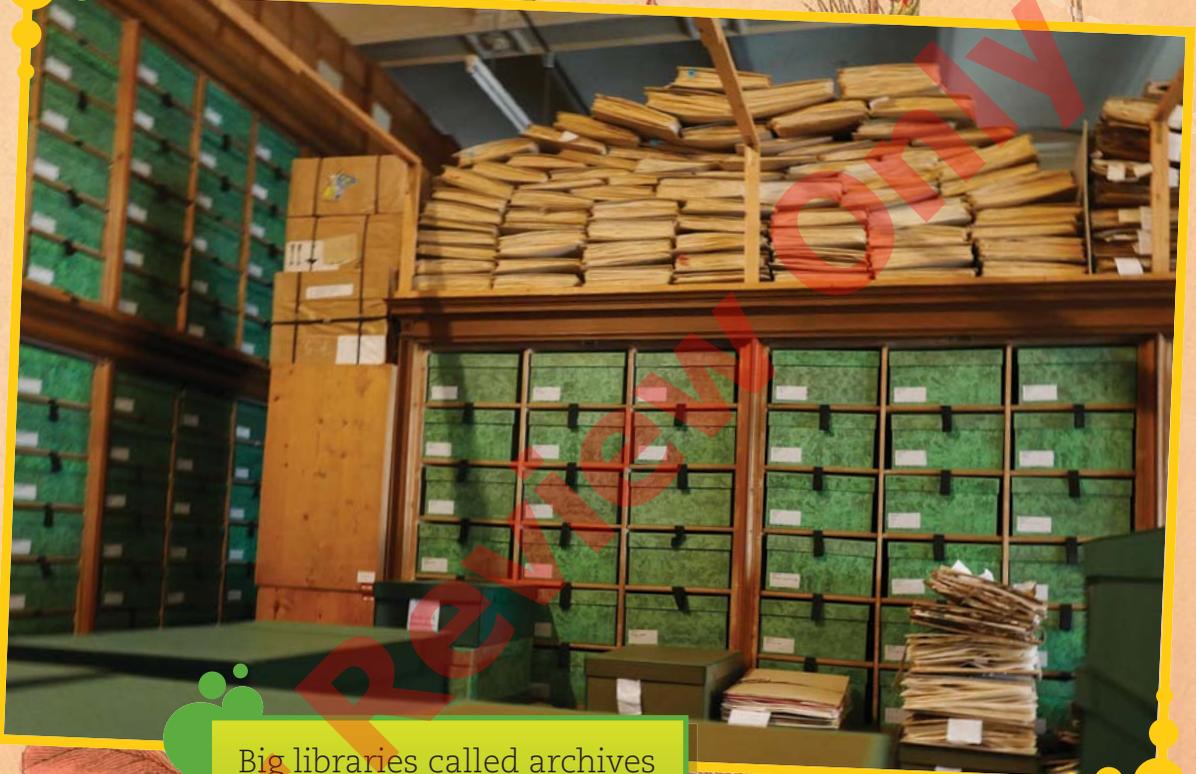
Botanical illustrations can be drawn in black and white. They can also be drawn in color. It all depends on what style the artist chooses. Black and white drawings show more detail. Color helps the art come to life. Artists decide what is best for each drawing.

Many drawings are on plain white backgrounds. They include scale measurements of the plants. Scale is the size of something compared to something else. Parts of the plants may be drawn close-up to show more of the plants' parts. Other drawings have backgrounds. They show what plants look like in their natural landscapes.

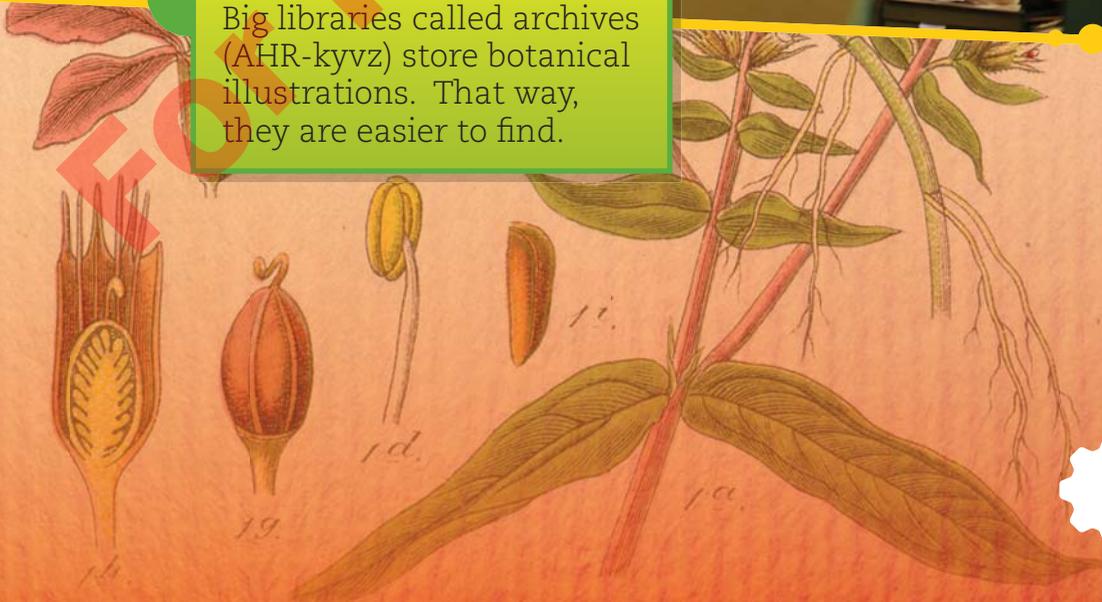
All the drawings show parts of plants, such as the roots, stems, leaves, buds, flowers, and fruit. The drawings are used to help scientists learn more about plants.

Artists choose whether to use color or leave art in black and white.





Big libraries called archives (AHR-kyvz) store botanical illustrations. That way, they are easier to find.



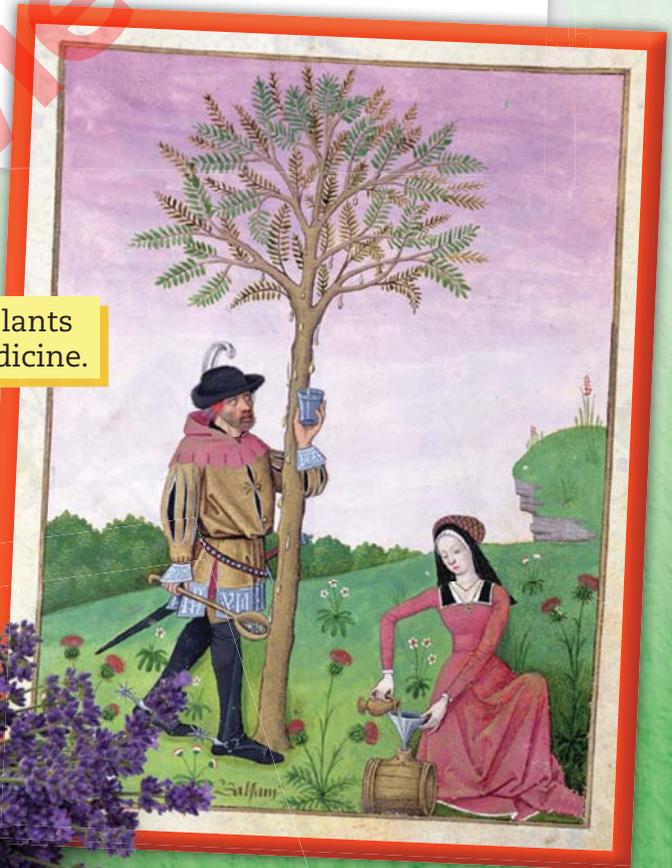
Drawing on the Past

People have drawn plants for thousands of years. All over the world, people made **records** of plants by drawing them. There were no computers or cameras long ago. Drawing was the only way to remember important plants.

Before there was bottled medicine, people used plants to heal their bodies. People put plants on bug bites, cuts, and bruises. People dried plants, too. They were made into teas. The teas were used as medicine. People were able to stay healthy by drinking teas made from these special plants.

Plants used in this way are medicinal (meh-DIH-sih-nuhl). That means they help heal people who are hurt or sick. They were very important. They were the first plants that **botanists** recorded.

People use plants to make medicine.



Two men illustrate plants in the 1500s.



Mint is an **herb** used by people to make stomach pain go away. It tastes great, too!





STEAM CHALLENGE

Define the Problem

Sometimes, botanical illustrators preserve plants before they draw them. Other times, they go to the plants in nature. You have been asked to make an illustration of a plant in your neighborhood. Your task is to find the best way to get a detailed drawing of your specimen that is easily identified by someone else.



Constraints: The plant must be drawn with the specimen in front of you and not from memory.



Criteria: Draw a plant using as many details as you can to help a partner identify the plant.





Research and Brainstorm

Where do artists find plants? How do artists collect specimens? What are the pros and cons to collecting a specimen? What are the pros and cons to drawing a specimen in the field?



Design and Build

Make a detailed plan for how you will draw your plant. Will you draw it outside where it is growing? What materials and tools will you use to draw it? Then, follow your plan and make your drawing.



Test and Improve

After making your illustration, show it to a partner. Can they identify the plant? How can you improve it? Modify your plan, and try again.



Reflect and Share

Think about your experience. What went well? What did not?

