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The Culture of Camelias

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Department of Rare Books
& Special Collections

The Culture of
CAMELLIAS

an exhibition

chiefly from the

Phelps Memorial Collection
of Garden Books

Mezzanine Exhibition Gallery
Thomas Cooper Library
April-June 1999

The Phelps Memorial Collection of Garden Books

Among the University of South Carolina's hidden treasures is a major collection of rare illustrated books about the camellia, its growth and early varieties.

The collection was formed by Mrs. Sheffield Phelps (Claudia Lea). Mrs. Phelps was the first president of the Garden Club of South Carolina (1930-33), and her daughter Miss Claudia Lea Phelps succeeded her as the Club's third president (1936-38).

The Phelps Memorial Collection of Garden Books was donated to the University by Miss Phelps in 1959 on her mother's death, with additional donations in the 1970s after the dispersal of the Phelps home.

The Phelps family gardens, at Rose Hill, in Aiken, SC, were renowned for their trees and shrubs, including many camellias. There are camellia varieties named for both Mrs. Phelps and Miss Claudia Lea Phelps.

The Exhibit

This exhibition tells the story of how camellias were brought in the early 1700s from the Far East to Europe, and then to America, how they were identified and named, and how the major varieties were developed by 19th-century specialist growers.

The exhibit includes some of the very earliest published depictions of the camellia, from as far back as 1702, as well as handcolored copperplate engravings from the heyday of camellia books in the

early and mid 19th century.

In addition to items from the Phelps Collection itself, the display features books from several of the library's other outstanding natural history collections--the Richard Wingate Lloyd Collection, the Alfred Chapin Rogers Collection, the Ethelind Pope Brown Collection, and the library of the original South Carolina College.

An overview of exhibit highlights

The exhibit starts at the left of the main library staircase, and is arranged in five islands going towards the entrance of the Graniteville Room.

Island 1 documents the first European awareness of the camellia and the various names that were used for it. Displayed are early engravings of the camellia and the related tea-plant from Petiver (1702), Kaempfer (1728), Edwards (1745), Ehret (1778), and Curtis (1788), along with the sasanqua from Staunton's *Embassy to . . . the Emperor of China* (1797).

Island 2 covers the establishment of the camellia as an English stovehouse or greenhouse plant, both varieties such as the single red, the red *waratah* and the white Lady Hume's Blush imported by the captains of the East India Company's ships, and varieties such as *chandlerii* developed by enterprising commercial nurseries. Along with Buckingham and Chandler's *Camellia Britannica* (1825) and Booth and Chandler's *Illustrations* (1830-31) are shown plates from *Transactions of the Horticultural Society* and original illustrations for Conrad Loddiges's *Botanical Cabinet*.

Island 3 starts with further examples of

British camellia varieties and greenhouse designs, and then turns to developments in continental Europe, with a brilliant double red (*rubra plena*) from the Baumanns' *Bollweilerer Camellien-Sammlung* (1828-35) and the first efforts at camellia classification by the Paris-based Abbe Berlese in successive editions of his *Monographie du genre Camellia* (1840 and 1845).

Island 4 is devoted to sample volumes from the two major European illustrated camellia series, Berlese's *Iconographie du Genre Camellia* (1841-43) and the Verschaffelts' Belgium-based *Nouvelle Iconographie* (1848-1860). Note also the lithograph of the great Verschaffelt greenhouses and the case of camellias named for the great nationalist heroes of 1848, such as Garibaldi and Kossuth.

With **Island 5**, the focus moves on to camellias in the United States, with varieties named both for cities and presidents. Shown here with the New York grower Hermann Bourne's *Flores Poetici* (1833) and Margaret Rion's *Ladies' Southern Florist* (1860) are Miss Phelps's own *Camellia note book* (1940) and an illustration of the variety *Cam. Jap. Claudia Lea*. The final case takes up another of Miss Phelps's interests, in South Carolina trees, juxtaposing the magnolia engraving from the Phelps copy of Catesby's *Natural History of the Carolinas* with an original 18th century water-color from the Ethelind Pope Brown Collection and the magnolia description from Loudon's *Arboretum et fruticetum Britannicum* (1838), recently purchased with support from the Pope Brown Endowment.

The greatest camellia book

Among the most stunning items in the Phelps collection are the Clara Maria Pope engravings for Samuel Curtis's *Monograph on the Genus Camellia* (1819). The original bound volume is simply too big to fit in the mezzanine display cases, but is displayed (with a copy of the same plate before hand-coloring) in the Graniteville Room (open Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-4.30 p.m.). Two of the plates are reproduced in the main exhibit (in islands 3 and 5).

Exhibit hours and access

The exhibit is located in the mezzanine exhibition gallery of Thomas Cooper Library, on the University of South Carolina's main Columbia campus, near the corner of Greene and Sumter Streets. It is open to visitors during all regular library hours through June (for library hours, call 777-4866). The gallery can be reached both by the main staircase, from the main elevators (opposite the reference desk), or the rare books elevator (to the right of the library entrance).

Guided exhibit tours

The library is providing guided tours to the exhibit in mid-May, on Tuesday, May 18, at 11 a.m. and at 2.15 p.m., and on Thursday, May 20th at 3.15 p.m. On-campus parking, either in front of the library or in the lower level of the new Bull Street Parking Garage (between Greene and Blossom), should be available at that time. For more information about the guided tours, or to reserve a place on them, please call 777-5564.

Thomas Cooper Library

The University of South Carolina, founded as South Carolina College in 1801, began collecting books in 1802. It opened the first freestanding college library building in America (now the South Caroliniana Library) in 1840, and it now ranks among the top 50 university libraries in the United States, with more than 2.7 million books.

The Department of Rare Books & Special Collections has special strengths in natural history, travel literature, the Civil War, English and American literature, and children's literature. Among its special collections are:

- * the Augusta Baker Collection of African-American Children's Literature

- * the Matthew J. & Arlyn Bruccoli Collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald

- * the Anthony P. Campanella Collection of Giuseppe Garibaldi

- * the James Dickey Library

- * the C. Warren Irvin, Jr., Collection of Charles Darwin

- * the Francis Lord Civil War Collection

- * the James Willard Oliver Collection of David Hume

- * the G. Ross Roy Collection of Robert Burns & Scottish Poetry

Further information about many of these collections, with illustrated exhibits, can be found at www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/rarebooks.

The Thomas Cooper Society

The Thomas Cooper Society schedules regular programs and speakers relating to the library's collections; for membership information call 803-777-3142.