

Leonhart Fuchs' splendidly illustrated Renaissance herbal continues to inspire botanists, artists, and bibliophiles

Leonhart Fuchs, *De Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes*. Basel: M. Isingrin, 1542. 15 1/4 inches x 10 inches (387 x 254 mm), 896 pages, 511 full-page woodcuts.

Fuchs' great herbal, *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes* (Notable commentaries on the history of plants), was published in 1542. After nearly five hundred years, it remains one of the most beautiful scientific books ever published. Its appeal to gardeners, botanists, bibliophiles, and the casual viewer is immediate, while the clarity of its plant pictures continues to define a standard for botanical illustrators.

In 1530 Bavarian physician Leonhart Fuchs (1501–66) published his first book; it provided a list of prevalent errors in the names of drugs, treatments, and anatomy that misled apothecaries and doctors and endangered the lives of patients. That same year, Fuchs saw an herbal by fellow German Otto Brunfels with woodcuts that were so true to life that they could confidently be used to identify plants. This herbal gave Fuchs a model to surpass and helped direct his energies for the rest of his life.

Over the next decade, Fuchs began to prepare for the publication of his herbal. He stocked the garden attached to his house with rare specimens solicited from friends around Europe, and he assembled a large botanical library. He engaged three first-rate artists, one to make watercolor paintings of the living plants, the second to turn the paintings into outline drawings on the woodblocks, and the third to cut the blocks. These artists could — it is obvious from the portraits of themselves — employ all the tricks of Renaissance draftsmanship and blockcutting, but Fuchs insisted on a far more restrained style in the interest of clarity and botanical accuracy: Turn to any page of the herbal and Fuchs' success in getting the artists to share his goal is evident. The uncluttered lines of the woodcuts made it possible to set an unknown plant — or its picture — next to each woodcut and compare them, feature by feature.

For the rest of his life Fuchs worked on correcting and expanding his herbal; he compiled three huge manuscript volumes with accounts and paintings of some 1,500 plants — more than 400 of which were unknown to ancient authors. The new herbal was never published for lack of money.

This copy of Fuchs' great herbal from the Warnock Library is bound in modern vellum over boards with the title on the spine in sepia: 'fvchsio. de | stirivm' [sic] and a bottom-edge title in sepia: "de. hist. stirpivm." Any traces of earlier ownership of this copy of *De historia stirpium* vanished when the book was rebound in vellum within the last few decades. All that remains are a few anonymous early markings of censorship in the text, executed in accordance with the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church. Because Fuchs was a Lutheran, his herbal was placed on the *Index librorum prohibitorum* in 1559 where it remained until the early twentieth century.

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