

Stroll through gardens with the most celebrated flower painter of all time in this exquisite botanical book

Pierre-Joseph Redouté, *Choix des plus belles fleurs*. Paris: privately printed, 1827–1833. 13 1/8 inches x 9 3/4 inches (333 x 248 mm), 30 pages, 144 color plates.

The *Choix des plus belles fleurs* (Selection of the most beautiful flowers) is the masterpiece of Pierre-Joseph Redouté's later years. This most celebrated of botanical artists (1759–1840) came from a Belgian family of painters, and served (under various titles) as drawing master to the queens and princesses of France for half a century. Among his pupils were Louise and Marie d'Orléans, to whom the *Choix* was dedicated: the latter became the first queen of the Belgians.

Over his eighty years, Redouté weathered the many changes in French society with remarkable ease, prospering under old and new regimes by adjusting to the times. The great multivolume folio scientific monographs of his middle period — the roses, the lilies, the succulent plants—were complemented in his later years by elegant quarto albums that featured selections of the more beautiful or striking plants. They were, essentially, luxurious art books of the highest quality and finish.

The finest of these, the *Choix des plus belles fleurs* was issued in 36 parts between 1827 and 1833, with 144 superb hand-colored stipple engravings of fruit as well as flowers. The plates include several plants recently introduced to Europe, among them one of the giant heathers from the Cape of Good Hope and a hybrid magnolia developed in France about 1820. The irises and the roses echo the contents of Redouté's two most celebrated books, *Les Liliacées* and *Les Roses*, for the same method of printing the engravings in color and expertly finishing them by hand was used. The book is notable, too, for its preface in which Redouté reflects on his long life and many noteworthy achievements.

Although the *Choix* was produced late in Redouté's career, it still displays many of the characteristics of his style: leaves often shown front and back,

reflecting their slightly different textures and colors; flowers — some half-open — with buds, giving an impression of the various stages of each plant; and the curling tendrils of climbing plants like the sweet pea or the convolvulus. The occasional butterfly around some of the flowers — such as the bouquet of hellebore and carnation — makes it clear that this volume was intended for a readership beyond that of professional botanists.

This is a superb copy from the library of the California Academy of Sciences, in a Boersch & Valentin binding of full red-brown crushed morocco lavishly tooled in gilt, with title panel “choix | des plus | belles fleurs | et des plus | beaux fruits. [sic]” and author panel “par | redouté.” As indicated in gilt lettering on the front cover (*Souvenir de reconnaissance et d'amitié à Mr Fafin de Valognes*), this copy was originally a gift. Neither donor nor occasion is specified. The former was unlikely to be Redouté himself: the artist frequently added inscriptions by hand, and none such is present in this copy. The recto of the first blank leaf bears the later stamp of the library of “G. de V.,” presumably a descendant, at the Château de Saint-Jean.

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