MARY EMILY EATON, A GIFTED BOTANICAL ARTIST

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Introduction

As a botanical illustrator, Mary Emily Eaton's work is not well-known by succulent plant hobbyists. While some have seen her beautiful art work in the original edition of Britton and Rose's *The Cactaceae*, they often fail to recognize her as the artist. But in addition to *The Cactaceae*, her work also graces other publications. Actually, she produced a considerable body of work, and the quality of elegance in her watercolors is well-recognized. Indeed, the term plant portraiture could be justly applied to her paintings.

Eaton lead a modest artist's life. Like most women illustrators of the 19th century, her career was passed in relative obscurity, and only one picture of her is known to exist. But Eaton was a remarkable and accomplished person and what is known about her life story is worth sharing.

Mary Emily Eaton

She was born at Coleford, Gloucestershire, England, on November 27, 1873, eldest daughter of the Reverend Thomas Kerby Eaton. After attending private schools in London, she received formal training in art. While Eaton had no specialized botanical training, she was always attracted to flowers.

She was employed for a period as a painter for Worcester porcelain. In 1909, at 36, she went to stay with a brother in Jamaica, where she began painting moths and butterflies. She left there in June 1911 to visit friends in New

Fig 1. The only known picture of Mary Emily Eaton. (Courtesy of Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburg, Pa.)

Fig 3. *The Ark* is a compilation of whimsical verses and pictures. This one, “Three Tawny Tigers Taking Tea”, demonstrated her ability for painting animals.

York. The thoroughness to detail which she displayed in these paintings paved the way for her appointment as artist to the New York Botanical Garden, where she was employed from June 1911 to January 1932.

In 1915, the *National Geographic Magazine* launched an ambitious program to publish American wildflowers and hired Eaton as the artist. By 1925, she had produced some 245 full-page color illustrations in seven issues of the magazine. Additionally, she contributed most of the illustration to National Geographic’s esteemed *The Book of Wild Flowers* (1924).

She was the principal contributor to the New York Botanical Garden’s illustrated serial *Addisonia* and prepared over 640 of the 800 plates; many of her plates featured succulent plants. *Addisonia*: colored illustrations and popular descriptions of plants, New York: New York Botanical Garden, 1916-1964; publication ceased with volume 24.] Eaton did the vast majority of cactus paintings and line drawings used to illustrate Britton and Rose’s *The Cactaceae* (1919-1923), and these remain her best-known works.

At the New York Botanical Garden, Otto Degener shared the same office with Eaton. He was working *Flora Hawaïiensis: The New Illustrated Flora of the Hawaiian Islands*. The eminent Drs. Nelson Lord Britton, John Hendley Barnhart, and Per Axel Rydberg were his instructors. Degener worked on a table near Mary Eaton’s high slanting desk and high chair.

Recalled he: “Early in the morning a garden-

Fig 4. Eaton’s piece de resistance was Britton and Rose’s *The Cactaceae*. In her watercolors, she captured the essence of the plants. This plate of *Opuntia* spp. is from Vol. 1, Plate XIV.

Fig 5. Colorful species of *Echinocereus* and *Lobivia* from Vol. 3, Plate V.

Fig 6. The chollas *Opuntia tunicata* and *O.spinosis* make a colorful display, Vol. 1, Plate X.

Fig 7. Eaton captures the beauty of some *Weberocereus* spp. in Plate XXXIX, Vol. 2.
er would bring some flowering sprig gathered in one of the greenhouses for Miss Eaton. She would arrange it to her liking and, I believe without outlining anything with pencil, painted the specimen in water colors. Miss Eaton’s paintings were made incredibly fast, perhaps in little more than a morning.

"Miss Eaton was very English, very reserved and proper and, since we had not been formally introduced, I guess we worked at our respective tables for a week or more without speaking to one another! Miss Eaton was considered wealthy, with abundant stock in a famous Swedish match company. Years later, I visited her in the Bronx. At that time she was not financially well-off because of the Kruger Match Co. swindle.

"When Miss Eaton's National Geographic article appeared in print, she was very pleased, of course, and offered me a copy."

Her original art work is now in the permanent collections of the National Geographic Society (over 600 botanical watercolors); the New York Botanical Garden; the National Geographical Society, Washington; the British Museum of Natural History; and the Smithsonian Institution (most of the originals of Britton & Rose's The Cactaceae). The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation also has a few examples of her work, as well as plates on indefinite loan from the Smithsonian.

Mrs. Marjorie G. Hodgson, Winchester, England, was Mary Eaton's niece. In 1970 she wrote from her home: "Mary Emily Eaton was an extremely modest person and the records she left about herself and her work are rather threadbare. Her father was ordained a Deacon of the Church of England in 1871 and a priest in the following year.

"In 1911 she went to Jamaica, ostensibly to spend a holiday with her youngest brother, Clifford Kerby Eaton, who resided there as a banana planter, but she had already been there at least once before. Her eldest brother, Cranley Kerby Eaton, was my father. She lived with her brother Clifford until journeying to New York, probably at the invitation of Bronx Park Botanical Garden. She spent the next 36 years of life in New York, and although she never visited England during that period, she never renounced her British nationality.

"Among her works is Ark and Nonsense Lines for Animal Lovers published by George Allan, London, in 1901. This is a small, now obscure, nursery-rhyme book for children fashioned and illustrated by Eton. Without becoming an American citizen, she returned to England in May 1947. Eaton retained her faculties up to within a month of her death, when senility suddenly overcame her and she lost the will to live. She died at 88 on August 4, 1961, at Cossington, Somerset, England, and is buried at North Newton, Somerset."

In May 1914 Eaton received this letter from Andrew Carnegie: "Many thanks for the beautiful painting of the Giant Cactus of Arizona [Carnegiea gigantea] which bears my name given by some kind friend no doubt belonging to the Carnegie Research Commission which is doing great work. While I am unaware of the discoverer it is fortunate that I have the pleasure of knowing the artist, and of wishing her long and happy years among those who love her well. Mrs. Carnegie something of an artist herself has taken possession of the treasure and sent it to be framed."

Some events mentioned by Mrs. Hodgson: In May 17, 1932, an article in the New York Times referred to her exhibition of about 100 watercolors at the N. Y. Botanical Garden Spring Inspection... In April 30, 1946, Eaton received a letter from Lord Halifax, British Ambassador in Washington, appreciative of her war services... In May 1947, Mary returned to England. In January 31, 1956, she received the Royal Horticultural Society’s Gold Grenfell Medal award for her exhibit of watercolor paintings of American wildflowers.

The Book of Wild Flowers, National Geographic Society, 1924, featured 120 color plates of flowers by Eaton. Commented editor William Joseph, "She is regarded as the greatest of living wild flower painters. She painted the likeness of the flowers with the highest botanical accuracy."

From November 1976 to 25 March 1977, the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, presented an exhibition on American Wildflowers, featuring Eaton's watercolors. The National Geographic Society made its entire collection of her watercolors available for exhibitions, and furnished enlarged prints of National Geographic copyrighted photographic illustrations from its files. A quote from the magazine: "An artist's talent can be fairly ap-

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praised only on the basis of his or her original artwork. The exhibition offered a rare opportunity to study the originals of a richly gifted artist-illustrator."

**Known Publications**


**Additional Illustration Projects Before 1947**


**References**


Internet: [http://www.nmnh.si.edu/botart/eaton.htm](http://www.nmnh.si.edu/botart/eaton.htm)