Botanical drawings exhibition

OH, WHAT A BEAUTIFUL PLANT

Botanical drawings are often even more attractive than the real thing. To demonstrate that, the Forum Library Special Collections department has put some wonderful works on show, including drawings by former WUR employee Wil Wessel. Text Roelof Kleis • Illustration Wil Wessel/Special Collections

The Forum exhibition is titled *Beautiful Botany, Illustrations by Berthe Hoola van Nooten and Others*. The drawings of Hoola van Nooten take centre stage. She was a nineteenth-century botanist and illustrator with Wageningen roots, and the subject of a recent biography. The library has a lot of her illustrations in its collection. However, this article is not about Hoola van Nooten; it is about Wil Wessel, one of the 'others' in the exhibition title. Rather a special 'other' in fact, as she was the last botanical artist to be employed by WUR. Wessel is now 78 but still working in her field. She spent more than 25 years employed in the Plant Taxonomy group, spread over a period of four decades. She joined the group at the age of 20 and took early retirement 40 years later.

There was a reason why her 25 years were spread over four decades. 'I got married and back then if you were a woman you had to give up your job,' she explains. 'I was allowed to stay on for a while as an exception. Until I got pregnant. I had to go then, because mothers were definitely not allowed to keep working. Young women now find that hard to imagine, but that was the way it was then.' We are talking about 1970. Wessel was in her early twenties and had spent two years working as a botanical artist at the Agricultural University. She returned to work in the same profession ten years later. In Wageningen again.

No training programme

It was more or less by accident that she ended up as a botanical artist. She enjoyed drawing but there wasn't a training programme for botanical illustrators. There still isn't. Anyway, she had to work to earn a living. She got a qualification in drawing through part-time courses at the art academy and local training college. 'Then I saw an ad for the Plant Taxonomy group. They were looking for an artist. So I quickly did some drawings of flowers, because of course I would have to show what I could do, and I applied for the job.'

There were four other botanical artists working in the group. She learned the ropes from fellow illustrator and mentor Gerrit Langendijk. The work consisted largely of producing illustrations for

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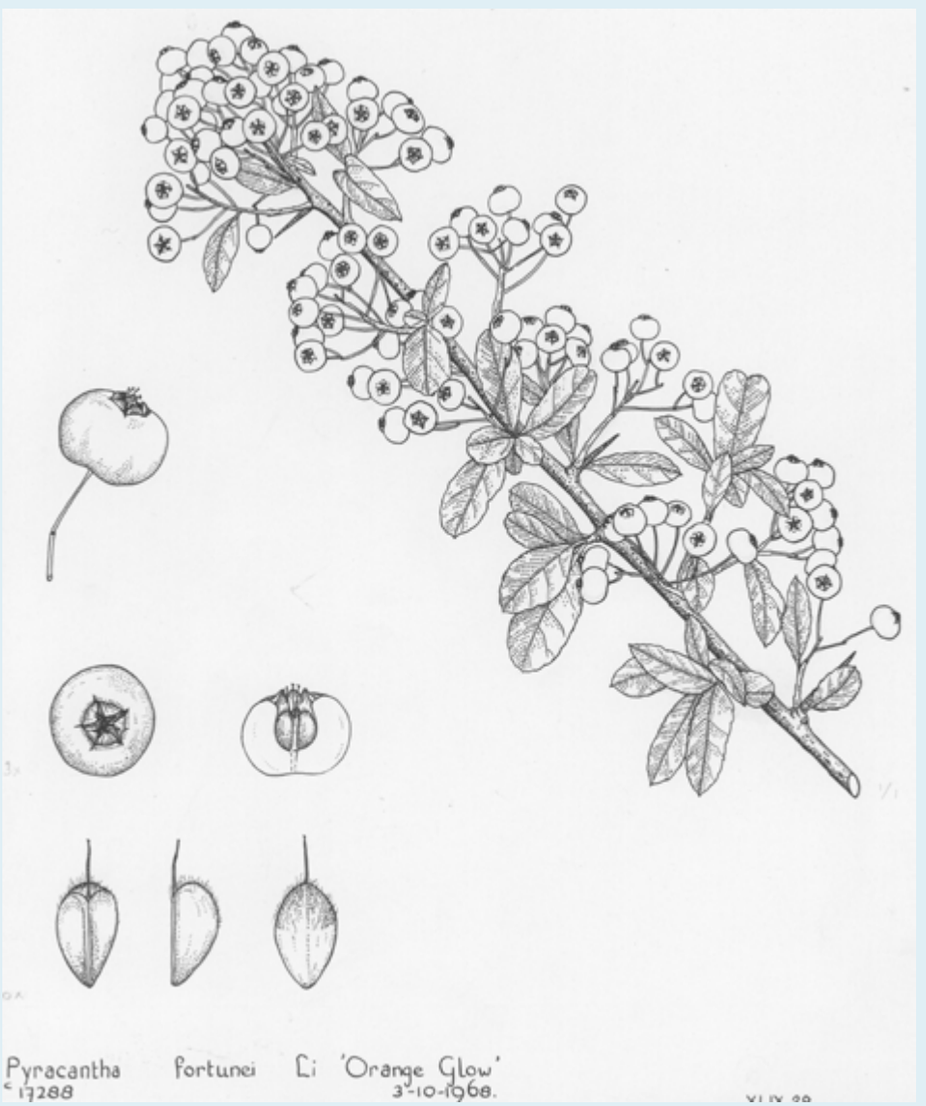
doctoral theses and teaching materials. She still has piles of theses with her illustrations. She knew nothing about plants to start with, but that was not a problem. 'It's not a prerequisite,' she says. 'If you're a good artist, the subject doesn't matter much. The scientist gives a detailed description of the plant, including the dimensions and the various parts. Then you get drawing.'

She doesn't see her work as art. 'It's a craft. The challenge for me was getting the image down on paper looking as attractive and clear as possible. The composition is really the only aspect where you can get creative. That's the little bit of freedom you have.' The composition is what sets the work apart from a photograph. 'In a drawing you can show all the stages of a plant. A stem with a flower, a leaf, the female and male flowers, the fruit. You can highlight the important details, magnify certain parts and show cross-sections. And you can do all that in a single illustration. That's not possible with a photo.'

Coloured in

The illustrations Wessel made for WUR were done in ink and not coloured in. 'First I would make a sketch in pencil. Then I got it checked by the scientist, after which I inked it in.' These days, she does colour in parts of her work. 'For exhibitions, for example. People always prefer colour.' Because she is still drawing, and teaching others to draw. Since retiring nearly 20 years ago, she has been busy as a teacher for the Society of Dutch Botanical Artists.

The society was founded by fellow artist Anita Walsmit from Naturalis, around the time Wessel left Wageningen. 'The society really hit the spot,' she says. 'We were just a small club to start with but now we have 300 members.' The society makes sure botanical illustration is kept alive as a craft, even if mainly as a hobby. It is almost impossible these days to have a career as a botanical artist, for example at a university. Wessel: 'It is very labour-intensive and therefore expensive. One PhD thesis might have up to 20 illustrations. For just one thesis! That's unthinkable these days.' ■



BERTHE HOOLA VAN NOOTEN

Berthe Hoola van Nooten (1817-1892), née Den Dolder, was born and brought up in Wageningen. She was a teacher, amateur botanist and illustrator. She lived in Bassecour, which later became the headquarters of the Agricultural University, in the centre of Wageningen. She married the lawyer Dirk Hoola van Nooten. She lived for a long time in the Dutch East Indies. A biography of her life and work by David Apollonius Coppoolse was published at the end of last year. The book was presented in the Forum.