PLANT CULTURE

Symbolism of plants: examples from European-Mediterranean culture presented with biology and history of art

Riklef Kandeler1 and Wolfram R. Ullrich2,*

1 Institute of Botany, University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Gregor Mendelstr. 33, 1180 Wien, Austria
2 Institute of Botany, Darmstadt University of Technology, Kirchbergweg 6, D-64287 Darmstadt, Germany

EPILOGUE

We close the year by looking over our series and by reflecting, with some observations, on creativity, reductionism, and diversity.

In the contributions on plant symbolism of this past year only a few examples could be given. They show that, over the millennia, many more relationships between humans and plants have existed than just their use for food, technical purposes, and decoration. It applies to all the plants discussed in these 12 short articles that they were regarded as helpers for the conservation, strengthening, and renewal of life. Their magic forces were believed to offer help for the individual, to increase vitality, and to enable the transition to eternal life. In many cases, medicinal application and the belief in metaphysical forces were closely related to each other. Formal similarity played a role in the belief in healing effects, as for example, with Hepatica triloba and the human liver or the lichen Lobaria pulmonaria with the structure of the lungs. Trust in metaphysical forces led to the belief that symbolism had protective (apotropaic) power. Since the 16th century, but mainly in the time of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, the scientific background of botany and of the enormous diversity of the plant kingdom markedly increased and with this the concept of medicine. The arrival of modern medicine and pharmacology finally led to a loss of the transcendental background of symbolism within the 20th century. During the period of Romanticism in the early 19th century some of the mystic ideas were captured into elements of culture which continue to play a role in spiritualistic and esoteric movements to this day. The development of the biological sciences in the 20th century went so far in the direction of reductionism that the biologists’ sense of diversity became suppressed. Diversity and the equilibrium between all living organisms worldwide are again regarded as being very important for biology. Pharmaceutical research is again looking for natural substances in endangered species and habitats. Nevertheless, most of us still know the symbolic implications behind some of our beautiful flowers when we communicate with each other: red roses, yellow flowers, white lilies etc., a symbolism that, of course, will vary with people’s cultural background.

In a last and, to some extent, summarizing picture of this series, a pretty combination of many symbolic flowers is shown in the ‘Garden of Paradise’ (hortus conclusus) painted by an unknown artist in about 1410 (Fig. 1). The Christian context is obvious: Mary with a book is sitting in the upper centre, in front of her the Christ child is playing a psaltery, held by St Catherine, while St Dorothy is plucking cherries in the upper left and St Barbara is ladling water from a basin. At the right-hand side, Archangel Michael is sitting behind St George, who is characterized by a small dragon lying at the lower edge of the painting, and St Oswald is gripping the trunk of the tree between them. As a possible interpretation of the painting, some authors consider it as showing the reception of a knight with his page in paradise, guided by the Archangel Michael who is the usual

Fig. 1. ‘Little Garden of Paradise’ with Mary and the Child in the centre and various saints and many symbolic flowers surrounding them (Master of the Garden of Paradise, 1400–1420 AD, Städel Museum, Frankfurt/Main, loan from Historisches Museum). For details see text.

* To whom correspondence should be addressed: E-mail: ullrichcw@online.de

© The Author [2009], Published by Oxford University Press [on behalf of the Society for Experimental Biology]. All rights reserved.
For Permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org
guide of souls (Vetter, 1965; Wolters, 1932). The list of symbolic plants in the painting is long, most of them shown growing around the saints. Among them are: columbine (Aquilegia), speedwell (Veronica), lady’s mantle (Alchemilla), daisy (Bellis), wallflower (Cheiranthus), periwinkle (Vinca), clover (Trifolium), white lily (Lilium), spring snowflake (Leucojum), lily-of-the-valley (Convallaria), strawberry (Fragaria), mallow (Malva), tansy (Chrysanthemum), carnation (Dianthus), peony (Paeonia), rose (Rosa), cowslip (Primula), iris (Iris), mustard (Sinapis), dead-nettle (Lamium), violet (Viola), and plantain (Plantago). For us in the 21st century most of them may appear as decoration rather than as the hidden language of flowers of earlier centuries.

References
