



## Demystifying Descubes at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

By Maggie Southwick

The Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden (LGBC) holds some 2500 original watercolor botanical drawings by artist/ cartographer Alexandre Descubes. In January 1997, Lora Robins, LGBC benefactor, purchased 794 of Descubes' watercolors with the purpose of providing the Garden with art appropriate to its mission. Nothing, not even a first name, was known about the artist whose signature "A. Descubes" appeared (in ink) on almost every one of the 17.5x10.5" sheets. Research on the collection and artist was undertaken at this time but very little could be found. Correspondence from the period mentions a 1982 Sotheby's catalog of a sale of some works by A. Descubes and an album assembled by Lady E. T. Bourne around 1912 in Ootacamund, India in which a "Mons. Descubes" was listed as artist of two watercolors. Perhaps a small clue?

The collection was regularly used with botanical art classes but no further progress was made in discovering the artist's background until late 2003. Then, a Garden board member noticed botanical watercolors by "A. Descubes" in a gallery window in California. This dealer had over 1,000 pieces for sale along with the metal trunk in which they had been stored. Mrs. Robins generously agreed to purchase the entire group. The addition of so many new pieces made defining the Descubes collection a priority.

In 2001 I was pursuing a Master's in Art History, and the Descubes collection presented an intriguing puzzle. I had many questions and few clues. Was "A. Descubes" a man or a woman? Several volunteers were hoping for an intrepid Victorian adventuress as artist. What nationality was Descubes? Where was the artist born and when? The dated pieces were all late 19th or early 20th C, indicating a mid-19th century birth date. Why were *these* plants depicted? The work represents 164 families, and 1127 Genera suggesting a Flora, or an existing plant collection. How many pieces were actually completed? Although LGBC owns 2500 drawings, the numbers in the collection range from 3 to 5001. Were the plants drawn from live plants or from pressed specimens? Some of the work is aesthetically lovely and so dynamic that it seems certain the artist worked from nature

while others seem pallid and lifeless, yet all are signed by Descubes. Could we find a death date? The most recently dated piece is 1919, raising the possibility that our artist died in the influenza pandemic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The dearth of any published information about the artist and the collection required that we let the work speak. I designed a database to store the extensive botanical information that appeared on each drawing including: species identification with description of plant, plant distribution locales, vernacular names, and literature references.

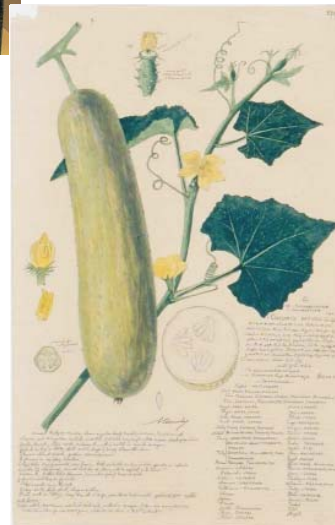
It quickly became apparent that the plants depicted were either natives of, or cultivated on, the Indian subcontinent: India (including specific regional names), Pakistan, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, the Himalayas, and the Malayan Peninsula. Only 38 of the works were dated, with dates ranging from 1875 to 1919. Eight of the dated pieces listed Ootacamund, India, as a location, and six were dated 1912. It seemed plausible that the artist in Lady Bourne's album (Mons. Descubes) was the same Descubes who signed the LGBC pieces. It was at least circumstantial evidence that our artist was a man!



Very much the picture of a treasure chest, the little metal box that housed 1000 artworks of Descubes is part of the LGBC collection too.



Acranthus, Alexandre Descubes, c 1875



Cucumis, paint and graphite on paper, Alexandre Descubes c 1875.

In late 2004, I turned up a reference to a Forest Survey map done by A. Descubes, located at the University of Pennsylvania. *Tooley's Dictionary of Mapmakers* had a single line reference to A. Descubes: "Descubes, A. Mauritius 1880-(1)." Mauritius, an island east of Africa, had piqued our interest. Twenty of our images listing Mauritius were dated, including the earliest date, 1875. The drawings from Mauritius tended to be among the more finished, more aesthetically pleasing.

Further evidence that Descubes was a cartographer and employee of the Survey of India was obtained from a search of map collections in the UK and Australia. The St. Pancras Map Library, The Edinburgh University catalog, and the National Library of Australia's catalog all listed Descubes maps. The signature "A. Descubes" is clearly identical to the signatures on LGBC.

Further research led us to Raymond d'Unienville one of the authors of *Dictionnaire de Biographie Mauricienne* (*Dictionary of Mauritian Biography*), who suggested that our artist was likely Alexandre Descubes, a cartographer who started his career as a draughtsman in the public works department in 1874. Descubes' 1880 map of Mauritius is a masterpiece still used by land surveyors. There are about a dozen maps he signed, all well known.

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# COLOR CURRICULUM

By Carolyn Payzant

**H**ere is a trick question. When I ask, what is the personality of the pigments yellow or blue or red? I am sure many of you will respond happiness, serenity, and danger. As a watercolorist, perhaps your answer should have been: how do specific pigments interact with another. Let's say that you have 10 friends (are you lucky or are you lucky!). There is no way you can treat any two of them the same: some are sweet, some kind, and some tough as nails. Each has a different life experience before becoming your friend. The same goes for pigments.

Now let's do an experiment. I know this one is extreme and you may think you are wasting paint. I assure you that you won't. This experiment is a perfect example of what you should learn/know about all of the pigments on your palette. You will also discover why I recommend that you find your own personal palette; a palette that you know like family and dear friends.

Let's talk a bit about starting a Color Diary (CD). **You all should have a CD and use it daily.** Your CD should be created on acid free watercolor – WC - paper identical to what you normally use for a final painting. Keep pages in a 3-ring binder or you can have WC papers professionally bound in a spiral binder (services available at Kinko's and other repro companies). Bring acid free watercolor papers you want them to bind so you get exactly the surfaces you want.

Now let's get started. **As you complete each step please make careful observations and write down these observations on the acid free paper.** You'll need a clean palette, cerulean blue, lemon yellow, distilled water, two paint brushes (be sure to use your normal brushes that are old and won't hold a point), and a CD.

On opposite sides of a clean palette squeeze a dab of cerulean blue (CB) and lemon yellow (LY). Carefully add water to each until you get a creamy consistency. Don't accidentally mix the two together. Clean your brush thoroughly between colors. Now, note, which took more water to get to that creamy state? Write down the approximate amount. These puddles will eventually dry to a pigment skin that is – as you will find out - great to work with.

Now for the fun of it, with two brushes, quickly (please don't play with these pigments – let them interact naturally) make an X in your CD – one arm CB and the other LY. What happened when these wet paints met? Write down your observations.

If your pigments have dried to a pigment skin carefully rewet to your original creamy consistency and paint a perfect 1x2" gradient wash in CB and then LY. What is the difference between the two? Write down your observations.

Wash and dry your palette.

Squeeze a nice size dab of LY onto your cleaned palette and bring this dab to the creamy stage. In a far corner of the palette squeeze a dab of undiluted CB.

With the tip of your brush pick up a tiny bit of CB and thoroughly mix this bit into the creamy texture. In your CD paint a perfect 1x2" gradient wash. Do these exercises over and over until you have washes from pure LY to pure CB.

This is your first exercise in your Color Diary. You will have about 15 to 20 different shades of flocculating green. Now, you can have fun and experiment with other colors, so that your CD is a standing reference on how *you* mix color.



Citrus limon, *Lemon*,  
7.5x11",  
Watercolour, ©Hazel  
West-Sherring 2010

## Descubes..., continued

(Continued from Page 1) In 2006, review of Mauritius Blue Book 1881 to 1885, states he was born in Mauritius in July 1850, May 23, 1874, he was appointed as draughtsman in the Public Works Department and in 1882 he resigned. Scans of the relevant pages of the Colonial Blue Book of Mauritius were obtained from The British Library. The High Commissioner of India in Mauritius gave Descubes' birth date as July 17, 1854, and his date of "Commencement of Service for Pension" as January 18, 1887.

And so, it is likely that our artist was of French colonial descent. His piece No.4403 *Saccharum officinarum* gives plausibility to this speculation. It is a portrait of sugar cane, with the notation on the back: "List of the different varieties of sugar cane growing in the Mauritius." Eighty-three different variety names follow.

We have yet to determine why Alexandre Descubes created these works. Because the pieces have extensive writing on them, they were clearly not intended to be engraved, or published. The connection with Lady Bourne suggested to us that Descubes might have been illustrating the Bourne's collection. However, in January of 2009, it was disappointing to discover that the Descubes ID numbers did not match the Bourne accession numbers.

Now that our database is searchable on the internet, I'm hoping that someone will find us, and be able to answer our lingering questions.

Due to space constraints, many details of this fascinating search for an artist's origins were edited. To find out more, or if you have clues or questions about this treasure trove of botanical art, Contact Maggie Southwick, Librarian, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, [maggies@lewisginter.org](mailto:maggies@lewisginter.org)