Fast Boats and Flowers: Ancarrow’s List

This project was awarded the 2018 Esther M. Plotnick Artist Grant at the ASBA Annual Meeting and Conference in St. Louis.

PICTURE THE SCENE: NEW YORK CITY, 1964. Newton Ancarrow sits in a deck chair at the National Motor Boat Show, talking to reporters, guests, boaters, and onlookers who have come to see his famous Ancarrow Speedboats. In the 1960s and ’70s, his hand-crafted boats were considered the height of luxury and among the fastest boats made. His clientele included kings, sheiks, and the business elite. Ancarrow seems an unlikely candidate for a botanical art inspiration. A native of Richmond, Virginia, he had “a need for speed.” An indifferent and problem student when young, he nevertheless majored in chemistry and physics at the University of Richmond. But his desire to build fast boats led him to open Ancarrow Marine, located in Richmond along the James River. Unfortunately, a huge problem arose: Ancarrow’s boats, dock, and business property on the James were being fouled by oily pollution. He could not allow his famous clients to visit the boatyard. When oily pollution began to peel the paint off his beautiful wooden boats, his disgust turned to activism and he began in earnest to force the city to clean up the James.

Ancarrow explored the riverbanks and documented where pollutants were being dumped to provide evidence to the city and, later, courts. What he found appalled him. At this time, the city of Richmond was dumping raw sewage into the James River, along with heating oil and industrial chemicals. But what else did he notice as he explored the river banks?

Wildflowers. River banks and lowlands can be rich in flora, and the James River is no exception. We can guess that Ancarrow experienced the same joy botanical artists experience when we discover a plant new to us. Ancarrow taught himself some botany and photography to document native plants. Eventually, he would photograph over 400 species. Along the way, he realized that these photographs could be a powerful tool to inspire support for cleaning up the James. Ancarrow developed a strategy: he created a slide show of wildflowers and presented it to garden clubs around the state, which produced a growing chorus of voices that eventually led to cleaning the James. Today, 1.8 million annual visitors to the James River Parks System demonstrate Ancarrow’s success while they picnic, hike, and shoot the rapids, yet few of these visitors remember the man.

Interest in this project has grown. To date, we have hosted two family events for which we produced all-ages, botanical coloring books (on invasive and native plants). Local environmental organizations are using our illustrations in their outreach. In the fall of 2019, we are hosting a juried botanical art exhibition open to regional artists. Ancarrow’s List: Native Plants at the River’s Edge at Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens (LGBG) and VCU’s Branch Cabell Library. In this process, we developed the germ of an idea, and found, at our doorstep, a great tool to help us achieve it. What do you have in your community?

Judy Thomas and Paula Blair are the co-founders of the Plants of the James River Project. They thank Anne Wright of VCU’s Life Sciences Environmental Studies and Janet Woody (retired) of the Luna Robbins Library at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden for consultation, assistance with this article, and for sharing the Ancarrow materials.

The Ancarrow collection is available at: https://digital.library.vcu.edu/digital/collection/anc

Ancarrow artifacts are archived at Lewis Ginter https://www.lewiscirugten.org/learn/library/special-collections/ancarrow-digital-archive/

Jay Tyler and Rousseau "Shoolpa" Blair. The Ancarrow collection is available at: https://digital.library.vcu.edu/digital/collection/anc

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