Breakout Session Record

Amanuensis/Student name: Paula Hung

Date: 13 July 2005

Institution: Natural History Museum

Title of Breakout session:

Competing reputations: specimens, drawings, and descriptions of the 'Tipitiwichet', by William Young and John and William Bartram

Name(s) of Breakout session leaders:

Judith Magee (Collections Development Manager, Zoology Library, NHM)
Amy Meyers (Yale Center for British Art)

General themes discussed at the Breakout session:

The history of the 'Venus fly trap' plant starts with its discovery in 1959, when the American Governor, Arthur Dobbs of North Carolina, who collected new plants for his garden, described the plant in a letter to Peter Collinson as 'catch fly sensitive'. Collinson was a Quaker merchant living in London, who acted as the agent for John Bartram, an American plant trader for Europe. Collinson immediately contacted Bartram (which took him six months) and insisted Bartram cultivate the seeds, grow the plant and send him specimen seeds as well as living plants.

In 1761 John Bartram got the seeds (probably from his son, William Bartram) and successfully cultivated the plant in the summer of 1762. He called the plant 'Tipitiwichet': The word is composed of two 18th century words — 'tipiti' and 'wichet', both represented the female sex organ. The Tipitiwichet's appearance and mechanisms appealed to the robust humour of the 18th century, and Bartram noted that everyone who saw it laughed. He achieved great success because the plant was extremely difficult to cultivate at that time, and no one else was able to do it. Collinson expressed his amazement in his letter to Bartram that 'not even Gordon could raise it from seed.' (Alexandra Gordon was the principal nurseryman as well as the gardener of Lord Peter in London at the time.) In 1765 Bartram sent the first example of a specimen of Tipitiwichet that he cultivated in his garden to Collinson. (See object A.)

The living plant was, however, introduced to Europe by a young German born man called William Young, Bartram's neighbour. Young was so impressed by the money Bartram had made in the plant trade that he decided to become a trader in seeds and went to Europe. In 1763 Young sent a box of seeds of American plants, along with a letter written in German, to the German born Queen Charlotte who was greatly touched and appointed him as her butler. In the same year, Young arrived in London to receive a two-year butler training and returned in 1766. In 1777, he went

(A) JOHN BARTRAM (1699-1777)

Droseraceae *Dionaea muscipula* Ellis : Venus Flytrap

Specimen

1765

375 x 130mm

This is the Type specimen sent by John Bartram to Peter Collinson in 1765.
without root system.

shown by the way it is presented.

Object information (B)

(B) WILLIAM YOUNG (1742-1785)

Droseraceae *Dionaea muscipula* Ellis : Venus Flytrap

Watercolour on paper

1767

378 x 234mm

Drawn probably sometime after the month of June as the plant is not in flower. William Young named this plant *Youngsonia* after himself but John Ellis was either not aware of that or choice to ignore it. The drawing, with that of William Bartram's, is the first known depiction of the plant. Also displayed are *Gleditsia* (fig.6) and *Mentha* (fig.7)

Object information (A)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

From the specimen, we can see fragmented descriptions of the plant without the root system. What they considered to be the central characteristics that defined this species is shown by the way it is presented.

Object information (B)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

William Young's style in drawing plant was similar to John Bartram's specimen (object A), was they both illustrated the simple plant part (opened, closed) to show the characteristics of the plant. In Young's drawing, he reintegrated what was familiar to him in a simple way, to try to create a combination of objects that would 'put the plant back together', but would also place it into the hierarchical classification system.

(C) WILLIAM YOUNG (1742-1785)

An Index to plants

Pen & ink on paper

1767

378 x 234 mm

A list of plant names to accompany the specimens and drawings of William Young. Note that Young named the Venus Flytrap, *Youngsonia*, after himself. → no. 8

Object information (D)

(D) WILLIAM YOUNG (1742-1785)

Droseraceae *Dionaea muscipula* Ellis : Venus Flytrap

Specimen

1767

330 x 245mm

Original specimen collected by William Young and sent as part of a collection to George III and Queen Charlotte but ended up in the collection of John Fothergill (1712 -1780)

Object information (C)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Object information (D)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

What questions did the audience ask about this object?

(E) WILLIAM BARTRAM (1739-1823)

Nymphaeaceae *Nelumbo lutea* Willd. : American lotus / water chinquapin

Droseraceae *Dionaea muscipula* J.Ellis : Venus Flytrap

Ardea herodias Linnaeus : Great Blue Heron

Pen & ink on paper

[1767]

398 x 300mm

This is considered the first known drawing of the plant *Dionaea muscipula* completed probably late summer or early fall. Bartram viewed the Venus flytrap as both wonderful and ludicrous and called it a "*sportive vegetable*" in reference to its carnivorous habit. Peter Collinson, to whom the drawing was sent, was delighted with it and commented, "*we disputed for some time whether it was an engraving or a drawing*". Indeed the influence of the engraved images in books that William was exposed to in his youth is visible here in this most splendid portrait of *Nelumbo lutea*.

suggesting the danger [illegible]

See attached supplement (in the back)

Object information (E)

Object Title:
Object Date:
Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

William Bartram's drawing was a very different kind of illustration from other drawings. He was commissioned by a British lady to draw this picture, and he sent this drawing to his best friend, Collinson, when finished. How the plant interacted with the environment is metaphorically illustrated by other creatures in the drawing. Moreover, the intimacy of two friends is deeply shown in the corresponding letters. (See supplement.) We can well imagine Collinson's excitement when he received the drawing and shared it with family under candlelight.

What questions did the audience ask about this object?

Is there any hidden erotic expression or relationship that lies under this drawing, which might have existed between Bartram and his patron?

There is a deep connection between the two families – the Bartrams and the Collinsons. Whilst William Bartram was struggling for his father's recognition to be able to work fully as a naturalist and artist, he sent the drawing to Peter Collinson, his father's best friend, who understood his language and appreciated it very much. Looking into this drawing reveals that there is an intimacy and dark side in it. The two water lilies, one fully bloomed and another one in bud, is a strong symbolization of primitive human instinct; yet, under the beautiful and bright flowers, there is the plant – the Venus flytrap, suggesting the danger hidden in this life cycle.

See attached supplement
(in the back)

I have been many years upon the enquiry after ye operation of plants & wrote to curious persons upon ye subject, that if thay had no absolute sence yet thay has such faculties as came so near to it that we wanted A proper Epithet or explanation.

John Bartram to Benjamin Rush 5th December 1767.

(E)

Supplement

But admirable are the properties of the extraordinary *Dionaea muscipula*! .... Those sportive vegetables –
Astonishing production! See the incarnate lobes expanding, how gay and ludicrous they appear! Ready on the spring to intrap incautious deluded insects, what artifice! There behold one of the leaves just closed upon a struggling fly, another has got a worm, its hold is sure, its prey can never escape – carnivorous vegetable!
Can we after viewing this object, hesitate a moment to confess, that vegetable beings are endured with some sensible faculties or attributes, similar to those that dignify animal nature; they are organical, living and self-moving bodies for we see here, in this plant, motion and volition.

Travels p.xx-xxi

Observed likewise in these Savannas abundance of the ludicrous *Dionaea muscipula*....
This wonderful plant seems to be distinguished in the creation, by the Author of nature, with faculties eminently superior to every other vegetable production; specimens of it were first communicated to the curious of the old world by John Bartram, the American botanist and traveller.

Travels p.472-3

Where is the essential difference between the seed of peas, peaches and other tribes of plants and trees, and that of oviparous animals?

Travels p.xxii.

"I and my son opened my ingenious fr[iend] WILLIAM'S inimitable picture of the Colocasia, So great was the deception, it being candle light, that we disputed for some time whether it was an engraving, or a drawing. It is really a noble piece of pencil work; and the skill of the artist is shown in following nature in her progressive operations. I will not say more in its commendation because I shall say too little where so much [is] due".

Peter Collinson to William Bartram 16th February 1768

(F) JOHN MILLER fl.1770s

Droseraceae *Dionaea muscipula* Ellis : Venus Flytrap

Watercolour and bodycolour on vellum

1772

330 x 232mm

One of the earlier drawings of Venus Flytrap. John Ellis who described and named the plant published an engraving in 1768, a year after Bartram and Young had completed their drawings. By 1772 English gardeners had succeeded in cultivating the plant and artists such as Miller were able to depict the plant in full flower.

Object information (G)

(G) WILLIAM BARTRAM (1739-1823)

Sarracenia flava L. (Sarraceniaceae) Trumpets or Yellow Pitcher plant

Sarracenia purpurea L. (Sarraceniaceae) Pitcher plant

Nelumbo lutea Willd. (Nymphaeaceae) Seed Vessel of the American Lotus

Triodopsis albolabris (Say) Snail

Unidentified snake possibly *Cemophora coccinea* (Blumenbach) Scarlet Snake

Pen & ink

[1767]

238 x 292mm

This is one of Bartram's more extraordinary and imaginative canvasses in the placement and disparity of scale of the subjects. It manages to capture one aspect of his view of nature as predatory and consuming while maintaining a balanced beauty.

Object information (F)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

Object information (G)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

The metaphorical drawing shows the patterns of nature, the never-ending circularity. These pictures reflect death and regeneration, and were highly self-consciously composed.

(H) **WILLIAM BARTRAM (1739-1823)**

Dendroica discolor **(Vieillot) : Prairie Warbler**

Various shells

Pen & brown ink

[1772]

305 x 186

Bartram calls this bird *Muscicapa*, flycatcher, which he lists in his *Travels* and describes as *"the little olive col[oure]d flycatcher"*. Bartram noted that it appeared in North Carolina at the beginning of April and continued northward to breed.

(I) **WILLIAM BARTRAM (1739-1823)**

Osmanthus americanus **(L.) A. Gray (Oleaceae) Devilwood or Wild Olive**

Cardinalis cardinalis **(Linnaeus) Cardinal (Possibly Northern Cardinal)**

Pyrus angustifolia **Aiton (Rosaceae) Crab Apple**

Micropogonias undulatus **(Linnaeus) Atlantic Croaker**

Pen & brown ink

1772

181 x 304mm

This is a wonderful example of an almost surreal drawing in which Bartram has very consciously framed the subjects within the beautifully curved Devil-wood and Crab Apple.

Object information (H)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

In trying to articulate the associated relationship, Bartram had to develop a language for himself, and he relied on visual metaphors. He drew birds and shells together all the time; the bird's flapping wings and shells reflect one another, showing not only the environmental relationships but also the connections between the behavioual movement of the bird and the shells.

Object information (I)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

What questions did the audience ask about this object?

(J) WILLIAM BARTRAM (1739-1823)

Scrophulariaceae *Linaria canadensis* (L.) Dumort. : Blue toad flax

Archilochus colubris (Linnaeus) : Ruby-Throated Hummingbird

Menippe mercenaria (Say) : Stone Crab

Donax variabilis Say : Variable Coquina

Pen & ink on paper

[1772]

176 x 301mm

This is one of a set of thirteen drawings that Bartram sent to John Fothergill in 1772. The images helped to persuade Fothergill to sponsor Bartram during his travels through the Southeast for the following four year.

Object information (K)

(K) WILLIAM BARTRAM (1739-1823)

Franklinia alatamaha W.Bartram Ex Marshall (Theaceae)

Franklinia

Watercolour

1788

478 x 354

This is a perfect example of a Linnaeus style botanical illustration that provides the scientist with all the information required to identify the plant.

Object information (J)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

What questions did the audience ask about this object?

Object information (K)

Object Title:

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

What questions did the audience ask about this object?

to the South Carolina Garden and started collecting specimens and doing correspondence drawings (see object B, C and D). Young named the plant 'Youngsonia' after himself (see object C – no 8 in the index). Young brought the living plant to John Alex, who described the plant and gave it a scientific name: *Dionaea muscipula* (mouse catcher).

By 1772 English gardeners had a long-lasting success in cultivating the plant and such artists as John Miller were able to draw the plant in the flowering stage. (See object F). William Bartram (John Bartram's son, a Naturalist and artist) was encouraged by Collinson to draw this plant, using the main style called 'mechanical illustration', which took the subject out of its context and environment and placed it on the sheet to assist the scientists about its botanical identification.
William Bartram was very capable of drawing the plant, and he had been praised as a 'living pencil'. His first depiction of Dionaea shows the perfect example of this style (see object E).

The fascination about the plant was that it behaved in a very different manner from other plants, since the 'mouse-catcher' fed on insects. It challenged the hierarchical and progressive of ideology of the chain-of-being theory, which was dominant view of the Enlightenment, particularly in England at that time. This plant, which folded when it was touched, appeared to have sensibility, and William Bartram called it a 'sportive vegetable'. His view of nature, which permeated his book (see supplement of object E), was that the chain of being is not necessarily hierarchical, and that nature was related to his understanding of the creation itself: everything was an expression of the Creator. For this reason, Bartram wondered, how could anyone, or any specie, be inferior or superior to another one. He thus rejected and challenged the idea of science being fragmented and specialized in many ways, and viewed the universe as one organic whole. This outlook was very similar to the romantic movement in the late 18th and early 19th century. The themes of proto-ecologist environmentalists, in fact, are the root of the Romantic period. This was also the reason why many 19th century poets and naturalists were attracted to and influenced by Bartram's ideas.

Any other information about the session:

One thing worth noticing about these materials is the notion of how they communicate with someone very far away. The confection of defining characters of a species was a challenge for people who had never seen or grown the plant. Very rarely would there be a drawing sheet of just a plant part; it might well be accompanied with extensive descriptive text and quite often with drawings.