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A bouquet of botanical delights: The life and art of Mary Delany at the Yale Center for British Art

Paper mosaics, natural history specimens, embroidered textiles, drawings, garden designs, and live floral displays

MRS. DELANY AND HER CIRCLE

September 24, 2009–January 3, 2010

Press tour: Tuesday, September 22, 11 am, Yale Center for British Art

At the age of seventy-two, Mary Delany, née Mary Granville (1700–1788), a botanical artist, woman of fashion, and commentator on life and society in eighteenth-century England and Ireland, embarked on a series of one thousand botanical collages, or “paper mosaics.” These were the crowning achievement of a life defined by creative accomplishment. The delicate hand-cut floral designs, made by a method of Mrs. Delany’s own invention, rival the finest botanical works of her time.

An ambitious exhibition, *Mrs. Delany and her Circle*, opening September 24 at the Yale Center for British Art, will be the first to survey the full range of Mary Delany’s creative endeavors, revealing the complexity of her engagement with natural science, art, and design. Her prolific craft activities served to cement bonds of friendship and allowed her to negotiate the interlinked artistic, aristocratic, and scientific networks that defined her social world. A range of approximately 130 objects, including drawings, collages, embroidered textiles, shells, botanical specimens, and manuscripts related to her interest in landscape gardening, will reflect the variety of her activities. The exhibition will also feature a floral display inspired by Mrs. Delany’s designs, as well as a site-specific installation by London-based artist Jane Wildgoose. *Mrs. Delany and her Circle* has been co-organized by the Yale Center for British Art and Sir John Soane’s Museum. The Center is the only North American venue for the exhibition.

While Mrs. Delany is best known for her botanical collages, she created bold new garden designs, decorated her home and garden with shell decoupage, fashioned paper silhouettes, and was an accomplished embroiderer who produced elaborate designs for dresses and furnishings. The exhibition will reunite a significant number of Mrs.



Delany's textiles. Among her most extraordinary designs was a court dress embroidered with a cascade of naturalistic flowers on black satin, ca. 1739–40. This garment was disassembled and preserved by Mrs. Delany's heirs and represents a marriage of art and nature that vividly foreshadows her later accomplishments. Pieces of the dress, reunited here for the first time, will be accompanied by didactic material that allows visitors to understand the garment as a whole and explains the equally interesting story of its survival. Also on view will be embroideries by Mrs. Delany and her circle that demonstrate the importance of the art of the needle to eighteenth-century female society.

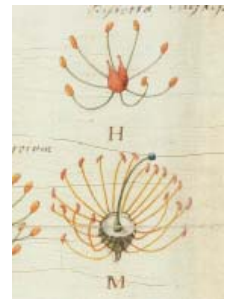


The exhibition will show thirty of Mrs. Delany's "paper mosaics," generously lent by the British Museum, which houses nearly one thousand of her works. Unlike most botanical illustrations, these collages were created from hundreds of tiny pieces of cut paper. Horace Walpole called them "precision and truth unparalleled," and Sir Joshua Reynolds admired their "perfection and outline, delicacy of cutting, accuracy of shading and perspective, and harmony and brilliance of color" (Ruth Hayden, *Mrs. Delany: Her Life and Her Flowers*, London: British Museum Press 2000).

Through comparison with the works of her contemporaries the exhibition will explore the context of Mrs. Delany's striking collages and the relationship between her close attention to the natural world and the visual culture of natural history. *Mrs. Delany and her Circle* will feature works by professional botanical artists, including Georg Dionysius Ehret and Barbara Regina Dietzsch, as well as amateur botanical artists such as Mary Capel Forbes. Also on view will be objects representing the wider world of eighteenth-century collecting and classifying, ranging from mineralogy to conchology (the study of shells). Through drawings, maps, and topographical paintings, the exhibition will evoke the design and experience of gardens Mrs. Delany knew well, including those at Kew and Bulstrode, the remarkable estate of Margaret Cavendish Holles Harley Bentinck, Duchess of Portland (1715–1785), with whom Mrs. Delany lived and worked. The Duchess was one of the most important collectors of naturalia of the eighteenth century. Their friendship was one of the defining relationships of Mary Delany's life.



Horace Walpole, influential eighteenth-century antiquarian and a man of letters, was another friend and correspondent of Mrs. Delany. Walpole owned one of Mrs. Delany's collages and designed the frame for the portrait by John Opie that opens *Mrs. Delany and her Circle* (please see the image on page one of this release). This portrait forms a hinge between *Mrs. Delany and her Circle* and *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill*, an exhibition also on view this fall at the Yale Center for British Art. *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill* will analyze the history and reception of Walpole's collections as he assembled and displayed them at Strawberry Hill, his Gothic Revival house at Twickenham. Together, these two exhibitions and the captivating personalities they illuminate will vividly reveal the brilliance and variety of eighteenth-century life.



ART INSTALLATION AT THE YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART:
PROMISCUOUS ASSEMBLAGE, FRIENDSHIP & THE ORDER OF THINGS

Accompanying the exhibition will be an installation entitled *Promiscuous Assemblage, Friendship & The Order of Things*, created by London-based artist Jane Wildgoose. The installation will celebrate and commemorate the friendship between Mary Delany and the Duchess of Portland. The Duchess's magnificent "Portland Museum" – a collection of natural history specimens and curiosities with which Mary Delany was intimately familiar – was sold in 1786 in a spectacular auction comprising more than four thousand lots that took place over thirty-eight days. Working in close association with curators at the Yale Center for British Art, the Peabody Museum of Natural History, the Yale University Art Gallery, and Sir John Soane's Museum in London, Ms. Wildgoose has developed site-specific installations for the Center and the Soane Museum. The installations will combine a wealth of exotic and curious natural history specimens reflecting the range of lots at the sale, from "Shells, Corals, Minerals" to "Curious Exotic Insects" to the eggs of the "Alligator, Turtle, Lizard & Snake," as well as china and rare books selected in response to descriptions of the domestic settings in which the Duchess housed her museum. Evoking the "promiscuous assemblage" described in the preface to the catalogue that accompanied the auction, written by the botanist John Lightfoot, the installations will also incorporate objects specially devised and made for the project that take their inspiration from accounts of Mary Delany's handiwork made as gifts for her friend, and as decorations for her own home. The design will point to ways in which natural history displays from the eighteenth century may be understood to reflect something of the manners, taste, and material culture of the people who assembled them. It also will offer a tribute to the two women's enduring, productive friendship, which was informed and sustained by shared interests in the fine and decorative arts, as well as natural science.



FLORAL DISPLAY AT THE YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

The Yale Center for British Art will also feature a floral display in its Entrance Court evoking the relationship between Mrs. Delany's work with living plants in the garden and her representations of botanical subjects in her collages and embroideries. The display, designed by Jason Siebenmorgen, will consist of a "theater" of plants in three tiers and a curtain of preserved flowers of species depicted by Mrs. Delany. "Theater" was a key motif of eighteenth-century horticulture and planting design and Mrs. Delany was among the first in Britain to create an outdoor stage for the display of plants, an "auricula theater" at Delville in 1746. After 1750, the theatrical planting of shrubberies and flower beds became the hallmark of English gardens. The garden at Delville, the eleven-acre estate near Dublin to which Mary moved upon her marriage to Dr. Patrick Delany in 1743, was the subject of poetry and commentary by notable members of Anglo-Irish society including Jonathan



Swift and Thomas Sheridan. In displaying the plants that she illustrated in her collages, this living collection at the YCBA will summon up a virtual theatrum botanicum, the basis of all attempts at encyclopedic botanical collecting and cataloguing.



MARY DELANY, 1700-1788

Mary Granville (later Delany) was born at Coulston, Wiltshire, into an aristocratic and well-connected family. She was married at the age of seventeen to Alexander Pendarves MP, who was forty years her senior. The unhappy union, arranged by her uncle, Lord Lansdowne, ended with the death of her husband in 1724. Mary moved to London where she took painting and drawing lessons with Joseph Goupy and Bernard Lens, who also tutored members of the royal family. She was a lifelong friend and supporter of the composer George Frederick Handel and the satirist Jonathan Swift. Through Swift she met Patrick Delany, a protestant Irish clergyman, whom she married in 1743. They lived at Delville, near Dublin, where Mary developed the fashionable skills of shell decoration, cutting silhouettes, and needlework.

After Dr. Delany's death in 1768 she spent a portion of each summer with the Duchess of Portland at Bulstrode in Buckinghamshire. It was here that she began the remarkable series of flower collages that were bequeathed to the British Museum by her descendant Lady Llanover in 1895. Late in life, Mary Delany became an intimate friend of George III and Queen Charlotte, who provided her with a house at Windsor in her last years.



CREDITS

Mrs. Delany and Her Circle has been organized by the Yale Center for British Art and the Sir John Soane's Museum, London. The curators are Alicia Weisberg-Roberts, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Yale Center for British Art, and Mark Laird, Senior Lecturer, Department of Landscape Architecture, Harvard Graduate School of Design. Elisabeth Fairman, Senior Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the Center, has served as the organizing curator for Jane Wildgoose's installation, *Promiscuous Assemblage*.

PUBLICATION

A groundbreaking publication, entitled *Mrs. Delany and Her Circle*, will accompany the exhibition. The book, published by the Yale Center for British Art and Sir John Soane's Museum in association with Yale University Press, will be the first publication to survey the full range of Mrs. Delany's creative endeavors and to examine her complex engagement with natural science, fashion, and design. Through their essays, an international team of distinguished scholars will address many aspects of Mrs. Delany's life, craftwork, and letters in the wider context of eighteenth-century culture.



TOUR

Yale Center for British Art: September 24, 2009–January 3, 2010

Sir John Soane’s Museum: February 18–May 1, 2010

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest and most comprehensive collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the University by Paul Mellon (Yale College Class of 1929), the collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, rare books, and manuscripts reflects the development of British art, life, and thought from the Elizabethan period onward. The Center offers a number of opportunities for scholarly research, such as residential fellowships. Academic resources of the Center include the Reference Library and Photo Archive, Conservation Laboratory, and Study Room for examining prints, drawings, rare books, and manuscripts from the collection. An affiliated institution in London, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, awards grants and fellowships, publishes academic titles, and sponsors Yale’s first credit-granting undergraduate study abroad program, Yale-in-London.

THE BUILDING

One of the Center’s greatest treasures is the building itself. Opened to the public in 1977, the Yale Center for British Art is the last building designed by the internationally acclaimed American architect Louis I. Kahn. The structure integrates the dual functions of study center and gallery, while providing an environment for works of art that is appropriately elegant and dignified. The building stands across the street from Kahn’s first major commission, the Yale University Art Gallery (1953).

GENERAL INFORMATION

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Location:	1080 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut
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Admission:	Free and open to the public
Center Hours:	Tuesday–Saturday, 10 am–5 pm Sunday 12–5 pm Closed Mondays and major holidays
Reference Library:	Tuesday–Friday 10 am–4:30 pm Extended hours during the academic year 203 432 2818
Study Room:	Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–4:30 pm 203 432 2841
Museum Shop:	Open during museum hours 203 432 2828
Membership:	For information call 203 432 9658
Group Tours:	To schedule group tours Tuesday–Friday call 203 432 2858