Public access description
Initially, taxonomy or the classification of plants was haphazard and inconsistent. In the 17th century there gradually developed a new system, based on the physical similarities between the reproductive features of plants. Thus illustration, which in the herbal tradition had been simply a means of distinguishing one plant from another, now took on the role of analytic tool. It was used to record the detailed physical character of the plant and show the similarity of characteristics.

Ehret presents this subject as a growing plant rather than a cut or uprooted specimen. This mode of representation really belongs to the florilegia tradition, as does the unseasonal butterfly. But his illustration also includes everything necessary for botanical analysis and identification, with flowers shown from several angles and at different stages of opening.

Descriptive line
Botanical study, Christmas rose (Helleborus niger L.) and Winter Aconite (Eranthis hyemalis (L.) Salisb.) by Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708-70); watercolour and bodycolour on vellum; ca 1745; London

Physical description
Botanical study showing Christmas Rose with white flowers and to the left the yellow Winter aconite. The image is displayed as though the plants are in the ground. Above to the right is a butterfly with brown and yellow markings.

Dimensions
Height: 53.2 cm, Width: 37 cm

Museum number
D.587-1886

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O618244/christmas-rose-drawing-ehret-georg-dionysus/