Public access description

William Curtis’s Flora Londinensis was a field guide to the wild flowers growing within ten miles of London. It was a serial publication that came out between 1777 and 1798. For the engraved, hand-coloured illustrations Curtis employed some of the most prominent botanical artists. Curtis was a botanist who worked at the Chelsea Physic Garden and then established the London Botanic Garden at Lambeth. He later found commercial success with the Botanical Magazine from 1787.

William Kilburn worked as a botanical illustrator. He produced most of the plates in the first volume of William Curtis’s Flora Londinensis. Kilburn had served an apprenticeship (a period of training for a trade) in a cotton-printing factory in Dublin in Ireland. When he moved to London he continued to sell designs to calico-printers. He gave up his work as a botanical illustrator to go back to the textile industry, where he could earn more money. Eventually he owned his own calico-printing factory, for which he designed exquisitely detailed floral patterns. A volume of his designs for textiles is in the V&A collection.

In almost every case, the plants in the Flora Londinensis were shown life-size on folio pages large enough not to restrict their subjects. Like the early herbals and especially the manuscript herbals, Curtis’s artists show the whole plant, complete with roots. The plant is an intact entity, not fragmented as was common in scientific illustration of the period.

Descriptive line

Physical description
Hand-coloured engraving of Senecio Vulgaris (Cotton Thistle), portrait, with white flowers.

Dimensions
Height: 41.2 cm trimmed, Width: 22.5 cm trimmed, Height: 35 cm platemark, Width: 17.1 cm platemark

Museum number
E.1381-2010

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1180816/cotton-thistle-print-curtis-william/