

Mrs Mary Delany (1700-1788)

Mary Granville was the daughter of a younger son of the English peerage; well-educated and accomplished, she was groomed for a place at court but at the age of seventeen was pressed into marriage to the elderly Cornish MP, Alexander Pendarves. Four unhappy and lonely years later, he left her a widow and she returned to London and court life. At forty-three, against the wishes of her family, she married the modest Irish clergyman, Dr Patrick Delany, a friend of Jonathan Swift, who she had met several years earlier in Ireland. He was appointed Dean of Down the following year and they settled in his home in Dublin, Delville, where under his encouragement, she improved the house and gardens and followed her artistic pursuits in shell-work, fine needlework, plastering, drawing and painting.

After the Dean's death in 1768, Mrs Delany spent half her time at Bulstrode, the home of her close friend the Duchess of Portland. It was there that she made the acquaintance of three men who would have a strong influence on her most notable artistic work, her herbarium of cut paper flowers: the botanical artist George Dionysius Ehret, and, recently returned from their voyage to the South Pacific with Captain Cook, Sir Joseph Banks and the botanist, pupil of Linnaeus and British Museum curator, Daniel Solander. Around 1771, after visiting Bank's extensive collection, Mrs Delany invented a new way of imitating flowers and began to compile her celebrated *Flora Delanica* – not a herbarium of dried plants but a *florilegium* of images of flowers made of tiny pieces of cut paper. Due to her failing eye-sight, she was forced to end her production in 1783, at which time she wrote a poem of farewell to the flowers to which she had devoted the previous ten years of her life. She died on the 15th of April 1788, leaving behind an extraordinary production of drawings, embroideries, correspondence and nine hundred and eighty-five cut paper flowers.

Mrs Delany described her medium as 'paper mosaic,' consisting of a collage of a multitude of finely cut coloured paper glued on a black ink background. At times she cut entire leaves or petals from one piece of paper over which she would arrange smaller cuts in order to create shading and depth, sometimes enhanced with watercolours. There are some examples where one flower alone contains over 200 paper petals. Her work was not only valued for its artistic qualities but also for its scientific accuracy. Every collage includes a label with the plant's Linnaean and common names. Mrs Delany also affixed in red cut paper, in a corner, her monogram 'MD' and annotated, on the back of each work, the date and place she executed the collage, the name of the specimen's donor and its collection number.



Above: *Papaver Somniferum*, The Opium Poppy, 1776, collage of coloured papers, with bodycolour and watercolour, on black ink background.

The *Flora Delanica* was organized in ten albums which were bequeathed to the British Museum by the artist's great-niece, Augusta Hall, Baroness Llanover, in 1897 (register numbers 1897,0505.1-974). They have since become some of the most visited works in the Department of Prints & Drawings, the national collection of works on paper, where they can be seen by appointment. They are regularly sought out by admirers wishing to observe Mrs Delany's exquisite creations up close. As the paper mosaics are extremely fragile, visitors are only permitted to study a small selection. However, two examples of her work are always on display in the Enlightenment Gallery of the British Museum where one can admire Mrs Delany's remarkably detailed and beautiful reproductions of the natural world.

Other Collections of Works by Mary Delany (no other paper cuts of flowers by her appear to have survived)

UK British Library

Longleat House, Wiltshire

The Royal Collection

Ireland National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

USA Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington,

Further Reading

Hayden, R. *Mrs Delany: Her Life and Her Flowers*. British Museum Press, 1980, 1996

Laird, M. and A. Weisberg-Roberts, eds, *Mrs Delany & Her Circle*. Yale University Press, 2009

Llanover, A. ed. *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany*. 6 vols, Richard Bentley, 1861-2

Peacock, M. *The Paper Garden: Mrs Delany {Begins her Life's Work} at 72*. Bloomsbury, 2011

To make an appointment to view a box of Mrs Delany's paper mosaics, please write to prints@britishmuseum.org or telephone 0207 323 8408

The entire collection is digitized and available on line at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx

To order reproductions, visit www.bmimages.com