

# THE COLOURFUL WORLD OF *NATURALIA* DRAWINGS

Florike Egmond, *Eye for Detail, Images of Plants and Animals in Art and Science, 1500-1630*  
(London: Reaktion Books, 2017), ISBN: 9781780236407, 280 pp.

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The field of visual representations of nature is very attractive for historians of art and science and it has recently gained remarkable attention. The early modern period is in this regard crucial because the production of *naturalia* pictures was increasing significantly during that time. Usually attention was paid rather to printed illustrations, that is, pictures figured together with published texts. When publications appeared on original drawings they focused only on individual collections or authors. Such a comprehensive work like *Eye for Detail* is exceptional. The book opens to the reader the whole miscellaneous and colourful world of *naturalia* drawings from the period 1500-1630. The publication originated from Egmond's long time interest and devotion to renaissance natural history and its visual representations. An example of her devotion among others is the rediscovery of two zoological albums created by Felix Platter with original drawings used for Gesner's *Historia animalium*.

The source material is defined clearly – Egmond focuses on sets, collections and albums of *naturalia* drawings, not on individual pictures. She is showing these drawings not only as representations, but as objects themselves as well. This is definitely one of the important contributions, since the analysis of whole sets and collections is carried out in their original place and (when it is possible) captures their original ordering. This gives us more complex information than a study of pictures as merely representations without context. On the basis of the analysis of this material, Egmond investigates the visual formats and what they can tell us about the interest in nature of that period.

Since pictures are the cornerstone of this book it is necessary to mention here the graphic form of the book. It is really a visual experience. Each picture has enough space, which is supported by broad margins. This space lets the picture speak for itself and enhances the reader's imagination. Descriptions of the pictures are placed in the margins, which resembles marginal notes in early modern books or remarks and comments written on the edges of the paper alongside early modern drawings.

As Egmond mentions in the introduction, the whole book is built like a picture – from the general panorama to focusing on the representation of details (p. 17). The first part (“Nature Captured”) therefore tells us about the context of the drawings and watercolours. It provides a large list of examples of particular courtly collections including information about patrons and collectors. Various functions of the pictures are described here as well – they could be forms of documentation, tools

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for entertainment and showing off, or study and research subjects. Some of the collections were also connected to publication projects. These purposes could mix and overlap and particularly influence the visual formats and techniques employed for the pictures in question. Individual visual formats and techniques are the subject of the second part (“Untrue to Life”): the increasing use of naturalism, lack of background (or the background becomes different layer of the image), flattering, truncating, using a representative part instead of the whole plant or employing a generic image, i.e. an image which stands for the whole species. All these techniques are described and compared to some later examples to show a continuity of visual formats. The technique of “zooming,” depicting enlarged parts of an object next to the picture of the object, brings us to the final third part (“Micro before *the* Microscope”), which focuses on a particular topic – depicting details and small creatures both without and with the aid of a microscope.

Through the gallery of drawings, watercolours and paintings Egmond is step by step revealing some more general characteristics of early modern natural history. Probably the most important claim concerns the continuity of interest in detail before and after the microscope. Although this final third part is significantly shorter than the previous two, it still provides a sufficient material background for Egmond’s fundamental point that there is a continuum of research questions as well as visual formats. Egmond emphasises the aspect of continuity in multiple places contrasting the usual practice of historiography, which “often pays too much attention to the breaks, ruptures, revolutions and other dramatic changes” (p. 233). She is challenging such historiographical breaks such as the transition from the emblematic to the non-emblematic world view (as suggested by Ashworth, pp. 68 and 74), or she is deemphasising the contrast between generic and specific image (as seen by Parshall and Landau, p. 161).

Continuity is important as well as multiplicity and diversity. What has often been emphasized in early modern naturalists were the strange and boundary facts (e.g. coral or barnacle tree). Egmond states that these were not driven by their boundary-breaking nature, but rather by the fact that they belonged to multiple categories and thus “accumulated multilayer significance” (p. 68, p. 235). Pictures in collections were often arranged according to associative logic and non-monotonic logic (as Mclean called it, p. 55), not according to one particular feature. Loose sheets enabled reordering – so there was not a strict order. The process of ordering was more important than the result.

The book itself stands in multiple categories and crosses borders between traditionally established subjects. It will be delightful reading whether the reader is interested in art, science or history.