Left **Sweet pea.** *Right* **Double flower peach.** Mrs Delany's work won approbation from Kew Gardens and the Chelsea Physic Garden

Art of scissors and paper

Matthew Dennison is captivated by a unique form of botanical art– the 'paper mosaics' of an aristocratic 18th-century widow

AT the beginning of the 18th century, in rural Wiltshire, a six-year-old daughter of Tory aristocrats was enrolled in a select school for girls run by a Huguenot refugee. Outside the ordinary lessons of the classroom, Mary Granville developed a fondness for cutting out: her preferred subjects were paper birds and flowers. Such a skill remained a favourite pastime for life and is the principal reason posterity remembers the girl who grew up to be Mrs Delany, now the subject of a new exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum.

In October 1772, Mrs Delany wrote to her niece, Mary Dewes Port: 'I have invented a new way of imitating flowers.' She was the same age as the century. Her second husband, an Anglican clergyman based in Dublin, had died four years earlier. Returning to England, the twice-widowed Mrs Delany had taken up residence with her long-term confidante, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Portland, at the latter's Buckinghamshire estate of Bulstrode. The two women shared wide-ranging and deeply held interests, among them conchology and botany. By serendipity, it appears, Mrs Delany happened upon the invention of which she wrote to her niece. Immediately aware of its potential, she set about exploiting it to create a lasting tribute to her friend and hostess, the Duchess.

> 'These flowers have both the beauty of painting and the exactness of botany'

Mrs Delany's invention was a form of paper collage, which both she and her contemporaries described as 'paper mosaic'.

Mrs Delany began creating her 'paper mosaics' at the age of 72, and continued until she was 84

The British Museum; The National Portrait Gallery

Every one of Mrs Delany's pieces was as close to life as possible

Mrs Delany's work required the most delicate of tools, kept in a needlework pocketbook that was a gift from Queen Charlotte

She employed the technique to create a series of botanical studies based on plants and flowers in the gardens and hothouses at Bulstrode and the surrounding country. Her approach was systematic. From the outset, she determined to create a 'herbal' of images, each of them executed from life with the maximum accuracy she could muster, and labelled and categorised according to the latest Linnaean principles. She frequently worked at her 'mosaics' in company at the Duchess's social gatherings, so that the undertaking gained publicity—with the result that the authorities at Kew Gardens and the Chelsea Physic Garden sent her specimens to 'imitate'—and renown. From the very beginning, Mrs Delany's cutouts won widespread admiration. 'These flowers have both the beauty of painting, and the exactness of botany,' William Gilpin recorded in 1776. 'What is the most extraordinary, her only materials are bits of paper of different colours.'

The present exhibition includes 10 of Mrs Delany's 'mosaics' imitating nature. Subjects range from spring bulbs—lily of the valley and pheasant's-eye narcissus—to hot-house exotics such as *Portlandia grandiflora*, a gardenia relative named after the artist's hostess. All the mosaics are similar in format: three-dimensional paper collages displayed against a black ground, with details occasionally highlighted in gouache and watercolour. The effect combines luminescence with painterliness, and visitors to this exhibition will marvel quite as much as the pictures' first audience at the skill and ingenuity with which, two centuries ago, a septuagenarian of failing eyesight assembled in less than a decade this glorious record of nature's bounty.

'Mrs Delany and her Circle' is at Sir John Soane's Museum, 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2 (020–7405 2107; www.soane.org), from February 19 to May 1

Early flowers of promise

In October 1777, Mrs Delany produced 30 paper mosaics, her own record. By the time poor eyesight forced her to retire in 1784, her 'herbal' included almost 1,000 images. Such fecundity was more than a late-in-life flowering. The little girl who, as Mary Granville aged six, enjoyed cutting out paper flowers, grew into a needlewoman of rare accomplishment.

The present exhibition includes a number of panels that were embroidered by Mary Granville during her period in attendance at the court of George II, floriferous panels of silk-embroidered black satin (*right*) that dazzle the eye and offer a thrilling foretaste of what was to come.

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Next week Henry Moore at Tate Britain

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