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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





BUILDING THE LILY

At the age of 72, amateur artist Mary Delany invented her 'paper mosaick' technique, composing accurate botanical illustrations from hand-cut coloured papers. As a new exhibition shows, her position as a woman of fashion, royal confidante and friend of plant collectors opens up new insights into Georgian life. Text: Ruth Guilding

Mary Delany's collage of southern African *Geranium fulgidum* (1774). The plant is now classified under the *Pelargonium* genus



Eryngium alpinum, dated June 1776, is the first collage recorded from a Kew plant. Two months later Mary would show it to the king and queen at Bulstrode



This collage of *Catesbaea spinosa*, from the Bahamas, was made in 1780. Such American herbaceous plants contributed to lengthening the flowering season



In some collages, such as *Pyrus Cydonia* (1776), Mary Delany placed an actual leaf sample (here adjacent to the quince) alongside the representational paper slices



Mary Delany invented her 'paper mosaicks' in 1772 when a scarlet piece of paper reminded her of a geranium. This *Geranium macrorhizon* was made the year after



Mary Delany's 1776 collage of *Lathyrus sativus* was inspired by a specimen she gathered at Luton Hoo in Bedfordshire, the seat of Lord and Lady Bute



By 1778, Mary Delany had access to global imports such as this 'melon thistle' from Jamaica, which was probably part of the Duchess of Portland's collection



Sanguinaria canadensis, made in 1777 from a specimen at Kew, points to the importance of America as a major source of commercial and ornamental plants



Revd John Lightfoot, curator of the Bulstrode botanical collection, may have gathered *Papaver Cambricum* on an expedition to Wales. The collage is dated 1774



Detail of a petticoat panel, of silk embroidery on satin, designed by Mary Pendarves (later Delany) in 1740 as an item of court dress

THERE IS A CURIOUS conversation piece in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery called *George III and his Family at Windsor*. It is actually a Victorian genre painting by Henrietta Ward, featuring chocolate-boxy crinolines and oxtail-soup-coloured surroundings. It shows the uxorious old king romping with his children, watched by a bevy of ladies-in-waiting and an old woman in widow's black with whom Queen Charlotte is winding yarn.

The queen's companion in this painting is Mrs Mary Delany, a woman whose posthumous fame has ebbed and flowed, just as her own personal fortunes fluctuated. Her role as a royal intimate made her an object of fascination in the Victorian world, but she is more famous now for the detailed botanical collages, or 'paper mosaicks', with which she compiled her own *Flora Delanica* of superb scientific accuracy, some of which are now on show at Sir John Soane's Museum. Less well known are her earlier, exquisite designs for floral embroideries, exhibited here for the first time. This unassuming-looking woman, who numbered Handel, Hogarth, Horace Walpole and Jonathan Swift among her past acquaintances, was much more likely to be found botanising than winding wool.

Mrs Delany was born Mary Granville in 1700 into the poor cadet branch of an aristocratic family. Her best connections were through her uncle Lord Lansdowne, a courtier and minister to Queen Anne, and as a girl she was sent to live in Whitehall with an aunt, a former royal maid of honour, to be trained up in the same role. But with the queen's untimely death and her succession by King George I, Lansdowne acted instead to marry off his 17-year-old niece to a political crony and Cornish MP. Mary found herself Mrs Alexander Pendarves, an unwilling chatelaine of the country house of a man some 40 years her senior. Her life only began again when he died eight years later, leaving her childless but with a modest legacy which allowed her to foster her talents with more independence.

Mary had benefited from the expansion of education for women in the 18th century. She knew the classics and was accomplished in French, music and drawing. She read and tutored herself, acquiring a circle of like-minded female friends. In the 1730s, as a merry widow, she was receiving instruction from Hogarth, studying and copying from albums of landscape prints and travelling in Ireland. There she tried her hand at shell work and befriended Jonathan Swift and his friend the clergyman Dr Patrick Delany, who would become her beloved second husband. As she wrote happily to her mother then: 'I aim at everything.'

For a while the young widow was part of the London *bon ton*, living in another aunt's household in Somerset House and making the obligatory appearances at court. Dressing up to go out was an important, arduous, expensive business. Mary took care to dress well but as she put it, 'I keep within bounds', avoiding vulgar ostentation. Friends and sisters in the country were avid to hear of her doings, so in 1734 she wrote an account of the glossy silk fabric of her costume for the wedding of George II's daughter to the Prince of Orange: 'A brocaded lutestring, white ground with great ramping flowers in shades of purple, reds and greens.'

Court dress consisted of a mantua, or loose gown; a fitted bodice closed with a V-shaped stomacher, and a train that revealed a decorated petticoat draped over whalebone hoops to create a wildly exaggerated width over the hips.

In around 1740 she commissioned an unusual flowered black-satin petticoat of such fabulous quality that her sister's family preserved some individual panels. Painstaking new research has identified them as belonging to the costume that she wore to the birthday ball given by Frederick Prince of Wales in Norfolk House in 1741; their black ground had nothing to do with mourning, and much more with a fleeting moment of fashion.

But while Mary's ability to copy and colour from nature with stunning verisimilitude is not in doubt, the assumption that she stitched these embroideries herself has been overturned. Although she drew and designed the realistic poppies, roses, auriculas, lilies of the valley and wild flowers that are scattered across the silk, these would then have been worked by a highly skilled professional. Her design would have been transferred onto the silk ground in outline,

pricked with a needle and 'pounced' with chalk, then drawn with a pen, before being stitched with coloured silks.

Sometimes she borrowed jewels from richer friends, such as the Countess of Sutherland, to set off her outfit. She reported to her sister with some complacency: 'I was told by critics in the art of dress that I was well dressed.' Nevertheless a Hanoverian ball or royal 'drawing room' was often a boring anticlimax and horribly overcrowded, the vast, whaleboned hips of the ladies making manoeuvring and dancing ponderously difficult, while the men trampled upon and crushed their trains and hems.

Her second marriage, to Dr Delany, 12 years after their first meeting, took her into a staid world of garden design, painting and drawing at their country seat of Delville, near Dublin. Widowed again in 1768, she spent more and more

of her time with the Duchess of Portland among her collections of antiquities, minerals, shells and plants at her estate in Bulstrode. Here, in her seventies, she created the *Flora Delanica* as a tribute to her friend: ten volumes of life-sized botanical 'paper mosaicks' using the Linnaean system. Each was a collage made from hundreds of tiny pieces of cut and hand-coloured paper built up to represent petals, leaves, stamens, calyxes, stalks and veins with an exact realism. Each piece was cut by eye, using the silhouette technique then popular for portrait miniatures.

Her achievement brought her royal attention; Queen Charlotte commissioned a portrait of Mrs Delany from John Opie to hang in her bedchamber, and gave her a needlework pocket book, with tiny scissors and a knife of enamelled gold. Finally, she became an increasingly indispensable, grandmotherly presence in George III's household, imparting her genteel, bluestocking, botanising enthusiasms to the queen and princesses. Her place as a royal favourite was also her undoing, when she succumbed to a cold caught on a chilly spring visit to Kew in 1788 ■

'Mrs Delany and her Circle' runs at Sir John Soane's Museum, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2 (020 7405 2107; soane.org), until 1 May





Lobelia pubescens
Downy Cardinal-flower

MD

Mary Delany composed *Lobelia pubescens* at St James's Palace in 1781, just one year after the plant's introduction to Britain