

Plant Blindness



From landscape paintings to ceramics of myths and legends, wildlife has inspired artists in many ways throughout our timeline. Art has helped artists explore relationships with wildlife and has helped think about how to care for animals and the environment, becoming the backbone for our economy, our society, and human existence as we know it. Our forests, rivers, oceans and soils provide us with the food we eat, the air we breathe, and the water we irrigate our crops with. We also rely on them for numerous other goods and services we depend on for our health, happiness and prosperity. Despite this dependency on wildlife and their resources, mistreatment by mankind led to a lifelong issue with climate change.



Plants are key elements in many cultures and religions and often serve as a metaphorical symbol for a person because they have no emotive face. A plants' role within a work of art can provide a sense of empathy or displaced feelings of connection with other living beings. Red flowers such as carnations, cherries, and poppies are known to represent blood and white flowers such as blossoms, lilies, and jasmine are known to represent purity (Il, Aloï). This is famously demonstrated in Christianity as Christ's blood and Virgin's purity. Cain, a man growing fruit, seems to be rejected or at least ignored by the God of the Bible, while Abel, who is a herdsman, is embraced (Fizner). Another example is 18th century artist Mary Delany whose medium is of botanical recreation, stressing her attempt at a most life-like rendering of the plants themselves through paper art. She also makes it clear that she considers them a comprehensive collection. Using her own name as an adjective, she attaches the flowers to herself as a scientist and artist; flowers being without roots or soil. Where there is beauty and importance in the art of symbolism and feeling represented, there is also danger in that we seek to find and relate ourselves within them without seeing and appreciating plants for what they truly are. Our lack of interest in experiencing the reality of plants as they are contributes to plant blindness and environmental deterioration.

Climate change is a battle mankind has been fighting since its recognition in the 1950s. In reality, this concept originates over 500 years ago on canvases and walls, through the symbolism of flowers and plants. Our representation and lack of appreciation of plants and animals in art is directly relative to the way that we perceive nature. Plants are placed at a lower regard than animals due to mankind's bias towards similarity. Even within just the category of animals, people tend to show more empathy and compassion for animals that are similar to humankind, such a koala bear rather than a cockroach. When it comes to plants, they are usually grouped together and are less likely to be distinguished apart due to their lack of movement, similarity in color, and tendency to grow in clusters. Because of this uniformity, the brain will fail to retain the specific details to differentiate the flowers. People tend to overlook plants as living organisms, which is why they are typically illustrated and viewed as a background noise instead of being the main focus. Plants tend to be underrepresented not only in art, but also in biology school curriculum, despite being indispensable to all other life on Earth and are prevalent in the biosphere. Along with the decline in plant conservatories (Ro), this leads to a phenomenon known as "plant blindness", where there is a large underappreciation for the flora around us, which can be detrimental to our environmental health. This is dangerous as it disables one to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs (McShea). Less exposure to plants provides little opportunity to remember and retain, resulting in an increase in plant blindness.



The future of botany is bright as long as we continue to maintain and push for exposure in classrooms, media, and art to decrease plant blindness for a healthier environment than where we stand today. We must change the narrative and discontinue utilizing plants as background noise or symbols, and instead set wildlife up to be the main focus to appreciate. We are the planet's pollinators. It's time to stop plant blindness.

ESSAY AND ILLUSTRATIONS
BY TRANG LE



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