

Basil Besler's *Hortus Eystettensis* (1640)

One of only 28 remaining copies, this lavishly illustrated botanical work can be viewed in the Sibbald Library.

On 7 March 1768, John Stuart, third Earl of Bute, an honorary Fellow of the College and the first Scottish-born British Prime Minister, wrote to his family friend, the distinguished College Fellow and botanist John Hope:

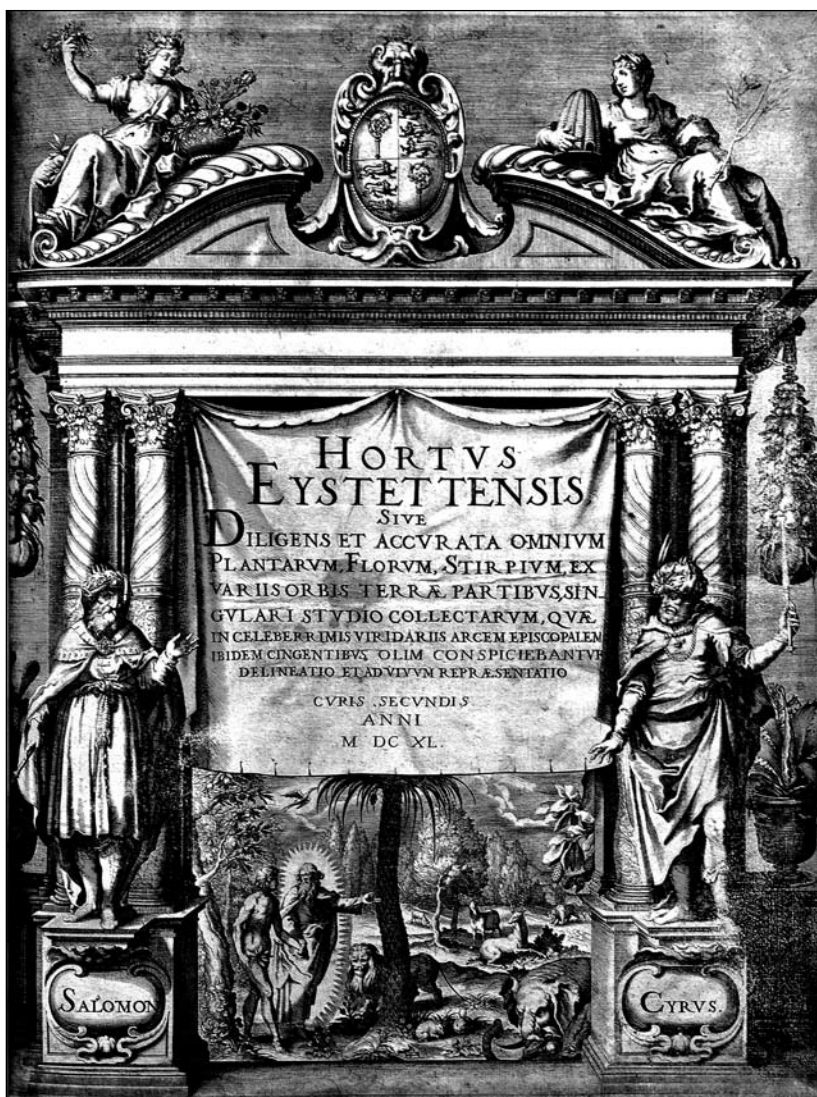
I have sent by the carrier *Hill's Vegetable System* and some fine editions of books of botany, that did not appear to me to be in the catalogue you sent me, may I desire them to be placed with the *Vegetable System* in the Library. I enclose the list consisting of 7 articles and shall be glad to hear they arrive safe, as paintings are subject to be injured by damp.

Bute then refers to the subject of this piece: 'The *Hortus Eystettensis* is entirely faded, so is another copy I have by me, and indeed I never saw one otherwise, owing to the badness of the paper & improper choice of colours.'

Most modern observers would feel that Bute was being overcritical and downplaying his considerable generosity, for he had just given the College one of the greatest illustrated botanical books ever made.

The creator of the book, Basil Besler, was a Nuremberg apothecary and botanist. Besler cared for the garden of the archbishopric of Eichstätt in Bavaria, Bishop Johann Konrad von Gemmingen, an enthusiastic botanist who had laid out his garden to celebrate the diversity of creation. Around 1600, the bishop commissioned Besler to create a work describing the Eichstätt plants.

Backed by a large budget, Besler worked for 16 years on the drawings. Copperplate engravings were then produced by at least six engravers, including the famous Wolfgang Kilian of Augsburg. There are two versions of the



The engraved title page of the *Hortus* features the Bavarian bishop Johann Konrad's coat of arms. King Solomon and the Persian King Cyrus are seen pointing towards the Garden of Eden, where God can be seen with Adam.

work, one printed on special paper suitable for hand-colouring and another printed on more ordinary paper and including some explanatory letterpress text. Only 28 of the hand-coloured copies still exist, including the one in the College's Sibbald Library.

The book is arranged by seasons and there are 367 unusually large plates illustrating more than 1,000 specimens. For some examples, see the illustrations on the inside front cover of this issue. Readers can enjoy more illustrations from the

Hortus at <http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/library/history/besler>.

Bishop Konrad's successor was less interested in horticulture and the garden was neglected. However, there is now a modern reconstruction: the Bastion Garden of Willibaldsburg Castle, which opened in the 1990s. The flowers are planted according to their blooming seasons, as described in Besler's book.

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