

PhD placement/PIPS: Documenting Kew's South Asian Botanical Illustrations Collection

Placement supervisor:

Rosie Eddisford

Placement department:

Library and Archives

Placement overview and objectives:

Library and Archives hold RBG Kew's paper collections. We collect and provide access to knowledge about the diversity and uses of plants and fungi in written and artistic formats spanning 700 years. Our core strategic aims include opening all our collections to research, through documentation, cataloguing and digitisation.

We are currently offering two placements documenting Kew's Library and Archive collections, with this placement focusing on Kew's Illustrations collections. Details of a parallel placement Documenting Kew's Archive Collections will be found on our website.

The Illustrations collections held within the Library comprise an estimated 100,000-200,000 botanical illustrations, line drawings, photographs and oil paintings. The collection is currently uncatalogued.

One of the most significant collections of illustrations are around 7,500 illustrations from South Asia, made between 1790 and 1850. The works are botanical watercolours on paper, commissioned by European botanists, many but not all employed by the East India Company (EIC), and drawn by local artists. Most illustrations were created in modern-day India, but the collection includes works from across South Asia. These visually stunning works were created as scientific reference resources, documenting the flora and biodiversity of the Indian sub-continent.

We also hold wider Library and Archive collections relating to the botany of South Asia, including records and personal papers in our archives, and published books in our rare books collection.

A selection of RBG Kew's South Asian botanical illustrations will be shown in the first major exhibition of this work in the Shirely Sherwood Gallery opening in October 2025.

These illustrations collections have huge research potential. They can be studied as works of art, examining the techniques and style and used as sources for research in the humanities as well as for scientific research as botanical records. Future research will allow the links between collection here at Kew to be re-discovered, but more widely, to surface the links between collections, histories, and people worldwide.

However, in order to open the collection up to wider audiences the collections need to be catalogued onto a catalogue that is accessible to everyone. The placement offers an opportunity to learn about, and work closely with, this important and historic collection of illustrations. You will assist with initial

documentation of the collection, and undertake preparatory tasks to support future cataloguing, helping to ensure access for wider audiences and research.

Tasks to be undertaken/possible projects:

The project will include undertaking the following tasks:

- Inventory/databasing: creating new text-based data for collection items directly from the collection objects. This may include entering data into a collection management system or into spreadsheets.
- Checking and editing existing records and spreadsheets, updating and adding data and correcting inconsistencies in data entry, including ensuring use of standardised data terms. Checking for and adding links to digital images into existing records.
- Researching the provenance of illustrations and/or artist's biographical details for collections held by Library and Archives in preparation for accessioning and cataloguing.
- Collections rehousing: working alongside Paper Conservators to remove illustrations from current unsuitable storage and rehousing them into new purpose-made, conservation-grade packaging, folders and boxes, ensuring that the correct housing is used and new housing is labelled correctly.
- Undertaking wider research into the collection and related subject area(s), applying your own knowledge and skills to direct areas of research and outputs, with opportunities to input into departmental-wide activities including social media, visits and tours etc.
- Working in an interdisciplinary team including library, archive, records, museum and conservation professionals, with our paper collections – illustrations, printed books and archives - attending relevant meetings and assisting with day-to-day administrative tasks as appropriate.

Required skills and experience:

- Demonstrable interest in working with RBG Kew's South Asian botanical illustrations collection.
- Study in any relevant Science or Humanities subject, for example history, botany/plant science, illustration/art history, plant humanities, museum studies.
- Ability to work collaboratively as part of a team, with excellent interpersonal skills and a demonstrable willingness to listen and learn.
- Methodical approach and excellent attention to detail
- Interest in documentation and/or curation and/or collections work and knowledge of, or willing to learn, documentation and collection handling best practice.
- Good manual dexterity.
- Ability and commitment to perform routine and repetitive tasks.
- Ability to handle large objects and boxes and to work at height to retrieve collection items (training will be provided).

Skills and areas of knowledge that can be developed:

The placement will offer induction, training, support and shadowing to support development of knowledge and skills including:

- Knowledge about botanical illustration collections, including how to identify materials and techniques and record physical and content descriptions.
- Collections research skills using a range of printed, online and local sources.
- Using a collections management system for data entry and retrieval.
- Collections research experience using illustrations, printed and archive collections.
- Knowledge of collection care best practice.
- Collection handling skills.
- Practical experience of collection documentation to the UK Museum Collections Management Standard, SPECTRUM.
- Skills in using library and illustrations collections to develop engaging content for social media and/or visits and tours.
- Experience working in an interdisciplinary team alongside library, archive, museum and conservation professionals, with paper collections.

Location of work:

Kew, onsite.

Length of placement:

Usually, 3 months, with some flexibility to discuss shorter/longer placements.

Provisional start date:

February 2025, and ongoing start dates in 2025

Deadline for applications:

15 November 2024 for February 2025 start, and ongoing for future dates.