

*The Garlands of the Gods. Wild Flowers from the Greek Ruins of Sicily*

Mary Taylor Simeti, Susan Pettee

Abstract

For visitors from Northern Europe making the Grand Tour during the 18th and 19th centuries, the encounter with the exuberant vegetation of Sicily had almost as great an impact, emotionally and aesthetically, as did the sight of the fallen temples of Magna Graecia. The average modern tourist tramps the excavation sites with little information offered that might enable him to share the experience of his predecessors.

Over twenty-five years in the making, and fruit of a collaboration between an American writer living in Sicily and an American botanical illustrator, the idea for "The Garlands of the Gods" has evolved from creating a simple tool for identifying the most common wildflowers growing among the ruins, to including a broader look at these plants in mythological, literary and historical terms, and a brief consideration of what the flower-decked remnants of the classical world meant to visitors over the last centuries.

The entire project will be published in Palermo in December of 2008 as a light and easily transportable volume that examines some one hundred plants together with an introduction to seven of the most frequented sites. It is the hope of the authors that their efforts may eventually provide some small stimulus towards the establishment of a program for the promotion of botanical tourism.

I have been very honored by Professor Raimondo's invitation to present our project to the Selinunte Symposium last June and to have this presentation in the Acts. I have absolutely no claim to membership in such

a distinguished group of botanical scientists, but belong, rather, to the long list of visitors from abroad who have become enamored of the beauty of the Sicilian flora. From Jean-Pierre Houel to Guy de Maupassant, from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Frances Elliot and Marianne North, travelers from northern climes have been astounded by the sheer exuberance of Sicilian vegetation, entranced by the aesthetic experience it offered, and increasingly drawn to romantic musings on the rapport between flowers and fallen temples

My own initiation into this coterie took place right here in Selinunte, as I celebrated my first Easter in Sicily, over fifty years ago. Here I had sat, dumbfounded, on a bit of column, staring at ruined temples floating on a sea of many-colored blossoms. I was later to learn that the ancient Greeks thought it useless to hunt with dogs in the Sicilian spring, when the scent of the wildflowers would overpower that of the prey, but at this first encounter, it was I myself who was overwhelmed. The seed for the project that I am presenting to you today was planted then, I believe, but the idea of celebrating this marriage between Flora and the gods has been slow to mature: decades of false starts and abandoned notes passed before it began to find its proper form, and before I chanced to reconnect with Susan Pettee, a college classmate who unbeknownst to me had become a botanical artist.

For the past nine years Susan and I have been exploring Sicily's principal archeological sites and researching and painting the flowers growing there, those that we have found most beautiful, most eye-catching, or most interesting. Our intention was to produce a handbook

for tourists, an agile tool for identifying the most common blossoms that the tourist would encounter when visiting the excavations. In our fieldwork we limited ourselves to seven of the most important and most visited of the classical sites: Segesta, Erice, Selinunte and the quarries at Cusa, Agrigento, Morgantina and Syracuse. Each of these is spectacularly beautiful, and each has its own botanical fascination: the giant fennel of Segesta, beloved by Goethe; the muted and resinous vegetation typical of the Mediterranean that proliferates at Selinunte and Cusa; the breathtaking variety of flowers—orchids, narcissus, hyacinths—that carpet Morgantina.

The research involved, the repeated visits with Susan to the sites at different seasons in the year, the hours spent first in libraries and then increasingly on the Internet, have taken us into unexpected quarters and posed novel questions. I began with the naive and uninformed notion that most of the flowers growing in Sicily today, especially those whose scientific names were derived from the characters of Greek mythology, were known to the classical world. I therefore expected that Greek poetry would be rich in quotable botanical allusions, but I was soon to discover that for the most part the classical poets draw upon a stock bouquet of roses, narcissus and hyacinths, and that even the exact identity of the plant they were referring to is still a matter for scholarly debate.

The Greek writers tended to restrict their attentions to plants that were useful, be it as ornament, as food or as medicine: Theophrastus, writing in the third century B.C.E., named five hundred in his *History of Plants*, but today there are more than three thousand different

wildflowers growing in Sicily alone. Some were obviously too useless or too insignificant to gain a place on the classical page, but some of the eye-stoppers must—I thought—have arrived more recently.

It has become trite to refer to Sicily as a palimpsest, yet it is nonetheless an accurate metaphor, not only for the art and architecture but, I discovered, for the island's botany as well: each invasion, each conquering people have brought new fruits and flowers that have taken root in Sicily's fertile soil. The prickly pear, staple in time of famine and iconic in the eyes of many Sicilian graphic designers, was introduced from the New World in the sixteenth century, while the omnipresent and exuberant yellow sorrel, *Oxalis pes-caprae*, has only flourished here for two hundred years, a brief moment in the millennia of Sicilian history.

To understand more of the evolution of Sicilian flora I turned to those sources which had greatly helped me years ago when I was doing research on the history of Sicilian cuisine, the ladies and gentlemen who visited Sicily on the Grand Tour and wrote home describing what they had seen. These tourists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were lavish in their praise of the island's exuberant vegetation: theirs was, in part, a northerner's genuine astonishment at the flamboyant generosity of the Mediterranean landscape, described by W.H. Bartlett as "the spontaneous prodigality of nature under the ripening sun of the south". In the later years, botanical curiosity becomes an expression of Romantic sensibility as well, an appreciation of what Ruskin called "the creatures whose office it is to abate the grief of ruin by their gentleness."

Some, enthralled by the vision of classical grandeur in decay, name only the more obvious plants, the almond trees that blossom about the temples of Agrigento or the dwarf palms that bristle throughout the ruins of Selinunte. Others note with surprise, and with occasionally uncertain identification, the cactus and the agaves and other Latin American imports that had run wild since their arrival with the Spanish *conquistadores*; still others methodically record a list of the wildflowers that grow so densely around the classical remains. The temper of their writings evolves through the decades, from the optimistic and almost light-hearted curiosity of the eighteenth-century travelers such as Houel or Goethe, to the judgmental and self-righteous prejudices of the late Victorians. Even within a narrow range of time, the tone of the diaries reflect their authors' personalities: the slightly oppressive note in Mrs. Frances Elliot's description of the flora in the Latomie of Syracuse echoes her conviction that the Sicilian people are born brigands, whose violent and lawless character is reflected with Lombrosian certitude in their dark coloring and sharp eyes, while Marianne North, a contemporary whose other writings reveal the imperialist racism of her time, describes the Sicilian people she encounters with the same detachment and delight that she spends upon the Sicilian vegetation.

The journey has been enriching, both intellectually and emotionally. Going back to the sites year after year and season after season brings both the satisfaction of instant recognition and the thrill of new discoveries. Although I cannot claim to have achieved more than a tenuous acquaintance with the science involved, I have greatly enjoyed the hours

spent with the diaries of earlier visitors. There has been something very satisfying in learning that the same excitement and wonder that Susan and I have felt today at seeing the classical ruins garlanded with blossoms has been part of the Sicilian experience for almost three centuries.

Alas, this is rarely the case today. If the Grand Tourists, like most cultivated ladies and gentlemen of the 18th and 19th centuries, had some sketchy acquaintance with botany and could identify or at least make an informed guess at the flowers that girded the classical ruins, very few of today's tourists are so equipped. Specialized groups coming under the aegis of garden clubs and horticultural societies bring their own experts to guide them, but the average tourist tramps through the ruins with no botanical baggage, and no help offered. At present the powers that be assign no importance to the identification and the appreciation of the flora as a facet of the "Sicilian experience", and no information is available at the sites.

It is our hope that *The Garlands of the Gods* will make a contribution, however minor, to altering this situation. In book form, to be published by the Palermo University Press in December of 2018, it will comprise some ninety-odd illustrations dedicated to an individual flower or a set of related flowers, each accompanied by a short text providing a minimum of information necessary for identification, and a short paragraph of observations, and of classical or literary references where available. A special section will be dedicated to the principal shrubs of the 'Mediterranean *macchia*', particularly evident in the archeological parks of Selinunte and Segesta. An introduction to the seven sites examined will be

integrated by a selection of descriptions taken from the accounts of the Grand Tour or from literary sources, as well as a sampling of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century drawings and engravings that show the classical sites as they appeared in the past.

A small number of the paintings by Susan Pettee that illustrate the book, and their accompanying texts, were exhibited at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University in May of 2017, and a larger exhibit will be hung at Palermo's Orto Botanico in December, 2018. Six samples of these paintings accompany this paper.

It is by no means certain to what extent future visitors to Sicily will find the botanical wonders that we have been privileged to behold. Sicily's biodiversity is under siege, both from climate change and from the Sicilians themselves. The use of herbicides is increasing, not only in the fields and the vineyards, but in the archeological parks as well, a trend driven by the rising costs of maintenance.

Ideally we would like to be instrumental in initiating a discussion about botanical tourism. Numerous groups are already coming, although they pass under the radar; still more would come if they were better informed and better facilitated, a development that could be significant in incrementing tourism revenues. This might, in turn, bring the people of Sicily to realize that their flora has economic as well as aesthetic value, and that it is yet another facet of the immense patrimony which is theirs to cherish and preserve.

All the illustrations are watercolor paintings by the botanical artist Susan Pettee.

Fig.1 *Lavatera trimestris*, *Malva sylvestris*

Fig.2 *Ferula communis*

Fig.3 *Ophrys lutea*, *Ophrys sphegodes*, *Ophrys speculum*, *Ophrys discors*

Fig.4 *Mandragora autumnalis*

Fig.5 *Laurus nobilis*

Mary Taylor Simeti, author and journalist

[mtsimeti@boscofalcoeria.it](mailto:mtsimeti@boscofalcoeria.it)

Piazza Europa 13

90146 Palermo

Susan Pettee, botanical artist

[su4pettee@earthlink.net](mailto:su4pettee@earthlink.net)

173 Castle Street

Great Barrington MA 01230, U.S.A.



Fig.1

*Lavatera trimestris*, *Malva sylvestris*



Fig.2

*Ferula communis*



Fig.3

*Ophrys lutea*, *Ophrys sphegodes*, *Ophrys speculum*, *Ophrys discors*



Fig. 4  
*Mandragora autumnalis*



Fig. 5

*Laurus nobilis*