

Story

NATURE PRINTING



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Scrolling, as you do, through Instagram one day, we happened across the marvellous work of Rachel Dein. Fascinated, Amy and I made the journey across town to Rachel's studio in her home in North London to meet her and discuss the possibility of her making some pieces for us to sell through the JamJar Edit, our online shop. We found her in the garden, looking for species to press on a fine spring morning. In her house, she was embarking on much bigger pieces and there were examples of her work everywhere. Whether it was a wavering line of grasses, a single snowdrop, or enormous branches of plane leaves with pendulous seedheads, everything was such a pleasure to look at. We particularly loved the casts of herbs and vegetables such as artichokes, carrots, and beetroot from Roland Blanc's gardens at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons.

Rachel's work has evolved from the early nature printers; she makes casts of plants and flowers in plaster and clay. She records the structure and shape of the plant in miraculous detail. In many ways, her work reflected our own adventures with pressing flowers; we found we had masses to discuss. The great difference between our work and Rachel's is that, once she has pressed the flowers into the clay and made her impression, the flower is completely lost, but it has left a permanent record. Like pressed flowers, the plant that would, in the natural way of things, be dead shortly after it has flowered, lives on, perfectly preserved, but in another form. We loved the fact that most of Rachel's work is monochrome, rendered in creamy plaster so the flower impressions are like beautiful, ethereal ghosts.

This technique is all about printing directly from nature. During the Middle Ages, nature prints were made by botanists and herbalists who wanted to record a plant and note its various properties. In its most simple form, a plant would be covered in ink then pressed down onto paper to produce an accurate, if rather crude, reproduction.

One of the earliest examples of nature printing was found in Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica*, an encyclopedia of plants and their medicinal properties. This text was widely used for 1,500 years after Dioscorides' death. The Islamic manuscript, dated 1228, had been copied in Anatolia or northern Syria by a scholar named Behnam the Christian. It contained an insert with the first known nature print of leaves and taproots. It is possible that this beautiful specimen was not contemporary to the manuscript, but it is, without doubt, very old and is generally accepted to be the first example of nature printing.

Leonardo da Vinci also made one known nature print of a sage leaf, with text explaining his method in mirror writing. It appears in Folio 197, verso *Il Codice Atlantico* (1478) and is singularly beautiful.

In 1737, in the USA, Benjamin Franklin cleverly used casts of real leaves printed on a copper press for bank notes. The unique structure of the nature-printed leaves meant that it was very difficult to copy the notes and produce counterfeit paper money.