

Forgotten Orchids of Alexandra Brun, by Cribb, Philip

For more than 150 years orchids have been the most beguiling of all horticultural subjects. Orchids had mysterious origins, arriving in Europe in the 19th century from the darkest reaches of Asia, Africa, and South America, to be auctioned for staggering prices to collectors who gathered by the hundreds to bid for the latest exotic variety.

In *fin de siecle* France, orchid rearing became a virtual obsession. Emile Libreck, creator of a prize-winning collection, commissioned artist Alexandra Brun to paint his outstanding specimens for posterity. Over a period of two years Brun set about depicting every frill, spiral, and streak of Libreck's voluptuous blooms. The finished paintings were later bound in leather volumes and locked away in a London bank vault. Only twice since the 1950s had they seen the light of day, and on one of those occasions, in 1981, they won the Royal Horticultural Society's Gold Medal.

Because Brun was not merely a botanical illustrator but a true artist of considerable ability, he was able to bring out the special character and beauty of each orchid in a manner that combine the prevailing artistic style of the 1890s with the exoticism of his floral subjects. Here, for the first time, are 59 of Brun's exquisite watercolors, reproduced in magnificent full-color prints that perfectly preserve the vibrancy and freshness of the originals.

The paintings are expertly identified by Philip Cribb, curator of the orchid herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, and fascinating captions rich with historical detail about the discovery of each orchid depicted and the collector who brought it to Europe. In an illustrated essay, Dr. Cribb explains the background of the refined art of orchid cultivation, and the cutthroat competitiveness of orchid collecting. He provides intriguing insights into the life history of these astonishing plants and their classification, and discusses the seductive allure of the orchid for artists through the centuries.

A genuine collector's album, produced to the most exacting standards, this unique volume offers an extraordinary visual experience and is sure to be a treasured addition to the libraries of all lovers of rare flowers and fine art.

Dr. Philip Cribb is an assistant keeper in the herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England, and the curator of the orchid herbarium. He is also a member of the Royal Horticultural Society's orchid committee and author of several books on orchids.

